

CONCLUSION

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.¹

Indeed, the poetry of Robert Frost made all the difference, striking the chords of simplicity and naivety. His poems speak to us in a voice which is natural yet specific in its own ways. His short lyrics or long narrative poems running into several pages reveal to us the complex working of the poet's mind who was fond of enchanting his readers with his simple yet meaningful verses. When Frost read his "Mending Wall" at a public gathering in Soviet Russia in 1962, people felt that the poet was commenting sarcastically on the Berlin wall. Perhaps Frost wanted to create a doubt among the listeners, because he liked his poems to be understood and anticipated in different ways. He said, "I have had a lot of adventures with the poem. People are frequently misunderstanding it or misinterpreting it. The secret of what it means, I keep"² Though "Mending Wall" happens to be a very simple aphoristic poem which warns the reader about neighbours by mentioning, "Good fences make good neighbours". Still, Frost invented ways where he could puzzle his readers into wondering whether the poem was as simple as it appeared to be in the first glance. It is commendable that an event of repairing a wall by two people of opposing beliefs in New England became an event of universal significance after this poem came into scene. His fascination with New England, its landscape and people projected him as a regional poet, but his poems never spoke of regionalism in any sense of the word. He talked about his surroundings and derived inspiration from the simplest of things around him, but his poems always universalised them. His characters belonged to New England, but they were residents of the world, with their own sorrows and happiness.

Frost's long and tedious life was full of tragedies, be it the death of his alcoholic father or of his children, and suicide of his only son. There was also a temperamental difference between his parents which he inherited. His God-fearing mother and reckless father did not make a good home. This binary in their attitudes is manifest in the poetry

of Frost. The pessimism in his life makes an important part of his poems, but his optimistic spirit overshadows his pessimism. In "Birches", he wishes to "get away from earth awhile" because he is "weary of considerations and life is too much like a pathless wood". But he corrects his statement in the very next line and says, "May no fate wilfully misunderstand me and half grant my wish". He wishes to leave the earth and also wants to remain here because, "Earth is the right place for love". The tendency to love and hate, to be bonded and be free, to find solace in nature and a desire to stay away from it, are seen prominently in his poems. He wishes to climb a hill in order to descend; he wishes to accept the end of love or a season but with reluctance. His poems are pregnant with meanings which are contrary to each other. The visible darkness in his poems is balanced by the poet's attitude towards life, which is light. In "Desert Places" the darkness of the night is counter balanced by the presence of snow, which is white. Here the emptiness in the poet's heart is contrasted with the void in the universe. Both the voids are equally scary and dark, but the deserts in the poet's heart are much bigger and deeper as compared to the universe. Similarly in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" the mysterious attraction of the woods is contrasted with the subtle reminder that he has "miles to go" before succumbing to death or sleep. The world of the woods and the world of the poet are binaries, one is full of adventure and the other full of promises.

Jay Parini feels that "In many of Frost's better poems, one finds him musing on his art surreptitiously, keeping the focus elsewhere. "You don't want to say directly what you can say indirectly" he once remarked, echoing Emily Dickinson's injunction to, "Tell the truth but tell it slant"³ This is true for most of his poems. In "The Tuft of Flowers" he talks about the act of mowing and clearing grass. But as the poem ends, we realise that it deals with lonely workers united by the act of working. There might be different alienated workers, labouring day and night to make their both ends meet but there will be others in different parts of the world, with similar issues. They might not work together, but their work unites them. There is a similarity within the distinction:

"Men work together" I told him from the heart,

Whether they work together or apart.

In another poem, "The Mountain", the title is deceptive because it is about a brook which is "cold in summer and warm in winter". The brook is located on the top of the mountain but it is the mysterious quality of the brook which caught the poet's attention

and not the mountain. Still he chose to name it, “The Mountain”. Perhaps this is a typical Frostian trait to play with images, symbols and metaphors. In an essay “The Constant Symbol” he writes, “There are many other things I have found myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority.⁴ This was what he liked and this was what he meant, “saying one thing and meaning another”. Peter. J. Stanlis, writes:

As early as the summer of 1939, after several meetings and conversations with Frost, I was made aware in general of his philosophy of dualism through his belief in “the two-ness of everything” on earth and his comments on pairs of opposites and his distinction between apparently unresolved “contradictions” and “contrarities” that could be harmonised in some degree of unity...I thought I understood the nature and importance of dualism in Frost’s philosophy. But I didn’t know of the full range and complexity of Frost’s thought”.⁵

The assessment of Stanlis is very important because it is not based upon an analysis of Frost’s work or life but is taken directly from the poet’s conversations with his friends and students. However, it must be noted that the use of binary oppositions in poetry is not a very new development. Poets had been using it to heighten the symbolic and thematic concerns of their poems. John Donne, William Blake and many others used conceits and binaries as a medium of expression. William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, are perfect examples to depict the use of binaries by other poets. Each poem in the *Songs of Innocence* has a contrary in the *Songs of Experience*. The former dealing with the innocence and simplicity of childhood whereas the latter portraying the chaos of adulthood. The former has references to flowers, wreathes, birds, grasslands and rivers while in the latter one finds the use of artificial incense, predator birds, thorns etc. On the one hand the *Songs of Innocence* are introduced by a Piper, who enjoys the moment and plays his music, on the other the *Songs of Experience* are introduced by a Bard, who is aware of the past, present and future of things around. Blake’s contribution to the duality of things is unique and commendable. However, in the poetry of Robert Frost, binaries do not appear to be a part of a poetic device or a wilful attempt towards creating metaphoric overtones, rather it comes out naturally. In some poems the juxtaposition is present in the title itself as in “Bond and

Free”, “Fire and Ice” and “Meeting and passing”. But in most of his poems binaries are present in the form of contrasting images. For instance, the use of the word “snow” against the word “dark”, or the use of two different roads to signify choices in a person’s life or the image of a man-made wall to highlight the differences between the approaches of a young and old person towards life. There are instances when a single word has been contrasted with multiple words. Like earth has been used against heaven, moon and sky. Man has been juxtaposed with God, beast and woman. This shows that Frost’s attempt to highlight the binaries was not a rigid effort towards establishing a form of poetry but his inherent temperamental attitude to admit and negate at the same time.

In his early poems, clear images of binaries occur in the form of two roads, day and night, summer against winter and the fire against ice. Whereas in his later poems, the images appear to be more complex and philosophical. In the first poem of his first book, “Into my Own”, he wishes to be lost in the wilderness of the trees. This desire to be lost is juxtaposed by his willingness to be searched by someone. Similarly in “The Vantage Point” he likes to move away from nature because he is preoccupied with “trees” and wants to turn towards mankind. But he contradicts his statement because he realises that at the end of the day he would miss looking “into the crater of the ant”. This desire to be lost and found, to move away and come back, shows an enigmatic approach of the poet towards life. Poems like “Desert Places”, “Come In”, “Directive” and “Too Anxious for Rivers” belong to his later collection of poetry. In “Desert Places” he compares the void in his heart to the emptiness of the universe. “Come In” echoes with similar mysterious elements as in “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”, which allures the poet to explore the hidden depths of a wood. In another poem, “Directive” the poet adopts the role of a guide who himself is lost. He describes, “a house that is no more a house”, a farm that “is no more a farm” and a town that is “no more a town”. George. W. Nitchiewrites :

In “Directive” we are invited to make a symbolic journey to an abandoned house on an abandoned farm in an abandoned New England hill town, into a different and simpler order of time, beyond that in which ledge, woods and silence have come back into their own. In making that journey, we are to experience a kind of ordeal of initiation by responding emotionally to the life that was once there and that has vanished, to the children’s games of

housekeeping and to the real house, reduced now to an almost vanished cellar hole, its human function over and done with.⁶

The poem is based upon binaries, which has references to things which exist in memory and not in reality. The poem reminds us of *The Wasteland*, by T.S. Eliot where the sun beats and “the dead tree gives no shelter”. Frost’s lost traveller moves towards a vague destination. He is about to reach a place where two cultures fused but none remained. The house that is no more a house, farm that is no more a farm shows the binaries between the past and present nature of things. The past exists in the present but in the form of memory. This takes us back to “Hyla Brook” which was “A brook to none but who remember long”. Robert Hass remarks, “Although the brook has literally disappeared, one can find it again if one is willing to accept the proposition that the brook survives in sustained moments of imaginative reverie, where all of the particulars of transience can be subordinated to an abstract permanence of continual change”⁷ The brook too, like the strange town in “Directive” belonged to the past. The present only has a memory of it. Since “Hyla Brook” belongs to *Mountain Interval* (1916) and “Directive” belongs to the later poems, still there lies a connection between the two. Indeed the poems in the later books of poetry are much more complex, as compared to the early ones, but this does not mean that his early poems lack depth. While throwing light over the limitations of tracing Frost’s development as a poet, Parini writes:

Frost is not a poet who developed in any obvious ways from book to book, as did Yeats or Eliot or Stevens. Instead he grew by accretion. His peculiar method of hoarding poems (going back to them, often decades later, to revise) only adds to the difficulty of discerning “development”. In a sense, Frost achieved his vision early, and he restates, re-creates, refigures this original vision in book after book. There are no great leaps forward only deepenings, confirmations, and subtle extensions.⁸

There is a kind of uniformity in this distinction. Each poem is different, yet it is connected to a stream of thought. This eventually makes it difficult to trace the development and growth of Frost’s use of contrasts, because there is no linear development in his poems when it comes to the use of binaries, but a consistency from the first poem to the last one.

Frost carried forward the tradition of Nature poetry which was initiated by William Wordsworth, Coleridge and other Romantic poets in England and by Thoreau and Emerson in the United States of America. Frost's name comes among the famous nature poets in English but he believed that he was a poet of man rather than a poet of nature. His poems often revolve around people at work, farmers, lonely wanderers and tramps. He talks about them with ease and honesty. There is exactness in his description which records even the minute details of his subject. Pastures, woods and the countryside form as much a part of his poems as people involved in household chores, or workers in factories or couples in argument. According to Nitchie:

Nature, one is most persistently aware of in his poems is expressed in terms of mountains and brooks, woodlots and pastures and small farms. Such phenomenon do not require an elaborate philosophical apparatus for their apprehension; they are simply there, and though we are free to define our relationship with them in philosophical terms, we are not compelled to. Eliminating the necessity for complex intellectual formulations or social adjustments, they enable Frost's characters to demonstrate a simplicity, a clarity of attitude, sometimes luminous and sometimes stark, that for Frost is more difficult of attainment in other surroundings.⁹

This makes his poems close to reality. He talks of things as common as the Birch trees, Snow, Blueberries, Seasons, Brooks etc. and as unusual as a home burial of a child, a woman who fears being attacked by a tree, and a monkey's perception about life and human beings. His mastery lies in the fact that he can turn an object of commonplace into a reminder of man's existential dilemma. In "Acquainted with the Night" the lonely wanderer roams on deserted streets in the night without any purpose. He suddenly looks up towards "the luminary clock", perhaps to find answers to some unanswered questions. The speaker portrays the rootless wandering of the modern man in the world. After spending a life, travelling without a destination, when man looks up to search for an answer, he meets with disappointment. While highlighting the existential dilemma portrayed by Frost in his poems, Elaine Barry writes, "Exploratory and speculative, they represent a lonely pondering on the central problems of existence: man's identity and freedom, his relation to the natural world and the flux of time, his

defences against and engulfing chaos, the place of human suffering and the possibility of salvation”¹⁰

Frost’s life and poetry has been subjected to many interpretations, be it in the form of biographies or critical analysis of his poems. But there has not been a single work till date which focuses on the trait of duality or the use of binaries by the poet. Writers like Jay Parini, Sidney Cox, Elaine Barry, to name a few, had talked about the contradictions in the poet. But still a full length study is lacking in the area. Peter. J. Stanlis is perhaps the only writer to have discussed at length, the dualities in the poetry of Robert Frost. He writes:

Frost’s dualism accounts for his view of God, man and nature, that it permeates much that he said about science, religion, art and poetry, society and politics, and education and finally, that it provides the characteristic qualities in his brilliant and witty conversation. Dualism as the basis of Frost’s philosophy is the foremost single element that scholars and literary critics need to consider in any study of his life and thought, including the themes of his poetry.¹¹

A Boy’s Will, begins with the poet’s fearless retreat into the world of trees. He desires to lose himself in nature to discover the hidden layers of his inner self. He sets afoot on a journey of self-discovery and by the end of the poem he finds his answer. He anticipates that if his journey ends, he will be “more sure of all” he “thought was true”. The young poet wavering between confusion and freedom finally succumbs to confirmation. He knows that now there is no turning back. Book by book, this confirmation is strengthened. By the time his last book was published the undying unwavering spirit of the poet found a resting place. “In Winter in the Woods”, which is the last poem of his last book, he stands amidst tall trees only to realise how uncertain man’s life is. He finds in them an echo of Nature’s unconquered will, something which can never die. The poet on the other hand waits for the final blow of death. His collection of poetry thus makes a full circle, beginning with a journey and ending with the confirmation that death spares none. The poet travelled long and wide, through oceans of uncertainty with his optimism, struggling with the contradictions in his soul, to reach the end. The world had always been lovely, dark and deep. But Frost’s life was promising and so was his poetry. The enchantment in the woods, could not stop the

poet from fulfilling his promises, because he had “miles to go” before succumbing to death.

¹Robert Frost “The Road Not Taken” *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem, St. Martin’s Griffin. New York, 1979,p.105

² Warren Hope, *Student Guide to Robert Frost*, Greenwich Exchange London, 2004,pxi

³ Jay Parini, *Robert Frost: A Life*, Henry Holt &Co.New York,1999, p.86

⁴Edward Connery Lathem and Lawrence Thompson.ed.*The Robert Frost Reader* , Holt,1972,p.446

⁵Peter.J.Stanlis, *Robert Frost: The Poet as a Philosopher*, ISI, Wilmington, Delaware, 2007, p.314

⁶ George. W. Nitchie, “Robert Frost : The imperfect Guru” *Frost: Centennial Essays*, University Press of Mississippi, 1974, p.46

⁷ Hass, Robert. *Going by Contraries: Robert Frost’s Conflict with Science*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002, p.81

⁸ Jay Parini, *Robert Frost-A Life*, (Henry Holt&Co.New York,1999),p.248

⁹ George W. Nitchie, *Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1960,p.13

¹⁰ Elaine Barry, *Robert Frost*,FredrickUngar Publishing Co. New York, 1973, p.101

¹¹Peter.J.Stanlis, *Robert Frost: The Poet as a Philosopher*, ISI, Wilmington, Delaware, 2007,p.1