CHAPTER ONE

FROST IN THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The history of American literature, like all other literatures of the world is unsurprisingly unique and common at the very same time. History testifies the fact, that, great literature emerges out of many years of silence and oppression. Being a British colony till 1776, America was struggling for its distinctive cultural and literary identity. The country is marked by a long list of writers who were called novelists and who popularised the genre of the American novel. But as Aristotle says, “poetry is something more scientific and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts.” One must surely turn to poetry to know more about the origins of its literary tradition. And in this regard America is a very poetic nation. It has undoubtedly produced poets of extraordinary repute. But it did not begin suddenly. A person had to struggle very hard in America “to justify his existence as a poet”, says Roy Harvey. Ezra Pound, T.S.Eliot, Gertrude Stein and many other poets, who are considered giant figures in modern American poetry, left their country for England and rose to fame there. Christopher Beach writes:

The years from 1880 to 1910 were something of a dark age for American poetry. During a time when the novels of Mark Twain, Henry James, William Dean Howells, Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, and Edith Wharton established the undeniable importance of American fiction, poetry was pushed to the margins of the literary world. Indeed it was a dark age. Poetry as a career was not much sought after by the youth and people who wrote poems out of passion, were few. The poetic culture of America began with many continuous efforts of the writers to add their voices to the main stream English poetry of the seventeenth century:

On the whole, the development of poetry in the American colonies mirrors the development of the colonies themselves. The early poetry is dominated by the need to preserve the integrity of the Puritan ideals that created the settlement in the first place. As the colonists grew in confidence, the poetry they wrote increasingly reflected their drive towards independence. This shift in subject
matter was not reflected in the mode of writing which tended to be conservative, to say the least⁴.

Though this was often taken as an imitation of the British models of form, diction and style, very soon a distinctive American poetic tradition started to emerge which was marked by a freshness of language.

American poetry has a complex legacy which traces itself from the hymns in the Bible to the emergence of Romantic Literature. The poets found their inspiration in the Upanishads, in the mythologies, the newspapers and from their surroundings, without confining themselves to the already established patterns and ideals in poetry. The American poets had no heritage with them like the British. They had no Shakespeare and Wordsworth to follow or to include in a canon. Beach points that:

Writing in an inherited language but on a new continent, American poets have always been forced to make difficult decisions about language, form and subject matter. The poet in England, France, Germany or Italy had a lineage established throughout the centuries by the corpus of great works that constitutes the canon of national literature.⁵

This fact however could not stop them from following their distinctive way of writing poems. Of those innumerable poets who gave their voices to the canon of American poetry, Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82), H. W. Longfellow (1807-82) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-62) are some prominent names. Emerson and Thoreau’s philosophy of Transcendentalism or a distinctive form of American Romanticism popularized the American genre of poetry in the world. It was after the publication of Emerson’s “Nature” (1836) that Transcendentalism started gaining its pace to be identified as a major cultural, intellectual and philosophical movement:

The English philosopher, Locke, had maintained that intellectual action is limited to the world of the senses. The German metaphysician, Kant, claimed that the soul has ideas which are not due to the activity of any of the senses: that everyone has an idea of time and space although no one has ever felt, tasted, seen, eaten, or smelled time or space. He called such an idea an intuition or transcendental form. The transcendentalists, therefore, endeavoured to
transcend, that is, to pass beyond, the range of human sense and experience. We are all in a measure transcendentalists when we try to pierce the unseen, to explain existence, build a foundation of meaning under the passing phenomena of life.\textsuperscript{6}

The definition is large, and has layers of meanings associated with it, on a deeper level, like the phenomenon itself. The movement emerged as a rejection to the ideas of Unitarianism which laid emphasis on the value of intellectual growth and reason. Emerson’s “Nature” which became an initiator of the movement, ended with a call for a revolution, not only in the society but in the mind-set of people, a revolution which would make them self-reliant and bring them closer to Nature. The movement never really ended and inspired a legacy of writers who wanted to write about nature and to challenge the already existing myths about English language. Amidst this, Walt Whitman (1819-1892) and Emily Dickinson (1860-86), are two prominent poets, who with their daring originality and vision, marked the birth of two major American poetic idioms- the free metric expression and gnomic obscurity. But as mentioned by W.G.O’Donnell, no American poet of the modern times could come as close to “fame”\textsuperscript{7} as Robert Frost (1874-1963).

Born on 26th March, 1874 in San Francisco, California, he was taken to New England by his mother Isabelle Moodie after the death of his father in 1885. Isabelle was a Scottish descendant whereas Frost’s father William Prescott Frost. Jr belonged to New England, but was raised in Lawrence, Massachusetts. There was a sharp temperamental difference between his parents which Frost inherited. When Frost was born, William decided to name him Robert Lee Frost, in honour of a general who opposed the Union Army in the American Civil War.\textsuperscript{8} The name perhaps tremendously affected him, as he happened to be a rebel since childhood. His distrust towards school education compelled him to leave school at Harvard in 1898. This vagabond attitude towards life and love for ‘country things’ forbade him from earning any degree all through his life. It is strange that a man who was awarded more than forty honorary degrees for his unparalleled contribution to poetry did not bother to earn a degree himself. His early life was full of dissatisfied circumstances which even as an adult Frost could never forget. The sudden shift of location from the ‘Gold Rush’ city to a sombre countryside area of New England left the young poet awestruck. The stone walls, the rocky mountain cliffs and the abandoned woods appealed his eyes. He liked the farms and the
grasslands but never could forget his acquaintance with the City of Skyscrapers, San Francisco, which is visible in his poem, “Once by the Pacific”.9 Amidst this constant change of places and apartments in New England, New Hampshire and Lawrence, an artist was in the making. Every small or seemingly unimportant thing left a mark on the young poet’s mind. Apart from reading Latin and Greek verses he enjoyed farming and roaming about in the wilderness of the abandoned houses and forests. James M. Cox writes about Frost’s first poem “My-Butterfly- an elegy” and says “When he published “My Butterfly” in the Independent in 1894, Henry James had not entered his major phase and Stephen Crane had not published his Red Badge Of Courage…The careers of Lawrence, Joyce, Eliot and Pound, had not yet begun and Hemingway had not even been born” 10 These facts show that he was writing poetry before the onset of Modernism. He was writing at a time which can be called as a period of transition in America. The editor of The Independent, Mr Ward and his sister introduced Frost to some influential people including a minister in Lawrence, Reverend William E. Walcott11. Frost already knew Walcott and was elated when a man of considered literary genius agreed to advise him on the art of writing poetry. Walcott commented that Frost’s poems were too close to the speaking voice. The comment was taken positively by Frost, who chose to write in a “speaking voice”12 unique to him. Frost had already tried his hand at teaching and farming apart from writing and he could not be successful in both but somewhere in his heart he knew that, he was meant for verse, that his senses responded to nature. And he decided to follow his heart. But the journey was difficult. Whenever disappointments overshadowed his spirit, his childhood friend and life partner Elinor inspired him to move on. They married in 1895 and remained together till death separated them in 1939, when Elinor died. They faced some worst financial situations which led to many shifts of places and finally they bought a farm at Derry, a place which was going to change Frost’s perception about life altogether. It was at Derry when Frost came close to the language of the rustics and started discovering the flora and fauna of countryside living. In a letter to Louis Mertins, he writes:

To a large extent the terrain of my poetry is the Derry landscape, the Derry farm. Poems growing out of this, though composite, were built on incidents and are therefore autobiographical. There was something about the experience at
Derry which stayed in my mind, and was tapped for poetry in the years that came after."^{13}

The years spent at Derry (1901-11) are considered those crucial years in the life of an artist which mature him finally and give him an insight into things which earlier might have seemed useless. Derry inspired him to write many masterpieces which he would include in his collections of poems. The unique colloquial voice of Frost is the gift of this farm, which he cherished all through his life and which brought him his due as a distinct American poet. He wrote a good deal of poems till 1911 but was not satisfied with the response he received from his people. He was not contented with ordinary appreciation and knew that he was meant for bigger ones. He decided to leave the limited circles of New England and explore the world. The publication of some of his poems in magazines and the sale of the Derry farm provided him enough funds with which he could leave his country and take a chance. ^{14} He says:

I must have been asked once years ago what I was doing in England, and I had forgotten what I was doing… I said to somebody… that I had come to the land of *The Golden Treasury*. That’s what I went for. One of my theories was that I went to live under thatch… I’m guessing at myself, you know; guessing at ourselves. The beauty of it is the lambent way the mind plays over that guessing.^^{15}

There was in him a strong fascination for England, a country which gave the world a legacy of poets and poetic culture to cherish. He sailed for England on 23rd August 1912, unaware of the fortune which awaited him there. Frost took no time to settle and started writing on whatever themes appealed to him. He worked hard to write a considerable number of poems which he could include in, *A Boy’s Will* which was soon going to be his first collection of poems. The title came from H.W. Longfellow’s famous poem “My Last Youth”^{16}

“A Boy’s Will is the wind’s will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, lost thoughts”

The book was accepted by David Nutt and Company and was published in 1912. It was mostly autobiographical, which Frost admitted. According to him, the poems were “pretty near being the story of five years” of his life.^{17} It was reviewed by poets like
W.B.Yeats and Ezra Pound, who praised the use of language and aptness of themes. Pound wrote in his review of September 1913 in *New Freeman* that, “The man has good sense to speak naturally and to paint the thing, the thing as he sees it. And to do this is a very different matter from gunning about for the circumpletious polysyllable”\(^\text{18}\). Frost’s friend and one of the famous poets of England of the nineteenth century, Abercrombie, warned the literary circles to stop considering the book as simple, because it had themes which are far beyond the understanding of the lesser sensitive. \(^\text{19}\) These reviews were more than enough for the poet, who had always sought for appreciation and was denied it, in his own country. Frost was overwhelmed to see these reviews in literary magazines. In a famous American Magazine and Transcendentalist Journal, *The Dial*, William. M. Payne (1858-1919), wrote, “A dream world of elusive shapes and tremulous imaginings is half revealed to our vision by the subdued lyrics which Mr. Robert Frost entitles ’A Boy's Will ’.”\(^\text{20}\)

It was a pleasant surprise for an American poet to receive such a warm welcome in a country which was different from his own. It encouraged him so much that in eight months he was ready with another collection, *North of Boston*. He had started to realize that the decision to leave America had been tremendously favourable. W.B.Yeats (1865-1939) and Thomas Hardy(1840-1928) were two popular poets of England at that time apart from Rudyard Kipling(1865-1936), Chesterton (1874-1936), Robert Bridges (1844-1930), Walter De La Mare(1873-1956), Abercrombie (1881-1938), Wilfred Gibson (1878-1962), W.H.Davies (1871-1940),Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) and Robert Graves (1895-1985)\(^\text{21}\) who too were tremendously popular. Amidst these already established poets of the day Frost was afraid to be lost and rejected. But his work was appreciated by the literary circles. Though he was writing in England but was not following the way of the world. His heart still did beat for New England, which had remained his sole source of inspiration throughout his life. He did not follow any established principles for writing poetry apart from following his heart, which rested with the ‘language of the people’. His dialect was colloquial and he was charged of using simple communicative language in his poems. The rustics who inhabit his poems usually speak plainly and with an insight into their daily monotonous lives. However it does not mean that his poems were simple. He was a witty trickster and always enjoyed as he said “saying one thing and meaning another”\(^\text{22}\). It makes his verse difficult to understand. His attitude should never be confused with what Allan Tate calls,
“aggressive provincialism”. Though he uses the simple colloquial technique, it does not limit him to the boundaries of New England in particular and America in general. He is a regional poet as much as he is universal. In his attempt to rise above the bounds of ornamental language he has definitely escaped the parochial and the provincial in the most philosophical of ways. New England becomes the microcosm of the macrocosm world of Frost who had always something to teach to the world.

Frost was never biased towards things which came his way. He would not wait for a perfect time of the year to write something - a rose to bloom, a thrush to sing or a river to come up to its brim, but he would accept nature in its raw forms. Everything which involved the natural processes be it the change of seasons, a crow laden with the ‘dust of snow’, a ‘roadside stand ‘or a dried up river, inspired him. He wrote in “Hyla Brook”, “We love the things; we love for what they are”. Sidney Cox, one of Frost’s famous biographers, writes:

He cherishes no ideal image of what person, bird or brook should be. He is therefore hospitable to discrepancies. He welcomes variations. He continues to look, long after he sees what to call a thing, and often finds something to love. If the actual brook has dried up he keeps looking and takes notice of the

Jewel weed,

Weak foliage that is blown upon and bent,

Even against the way its waters went.23

In May 1914, Frost published his second book of poems, *North of Boston*. Though it was his second book of poems but the first book where he experimented with dramatic monologues. The book was reviewed by Amy Lowell in ‘The New Republic’, introducing Frost to the literary world of America, revealing to the world, the voice of a New Englander who was soon to become famous for his unique use of vernacular language and style. Though the book has been praised as an American classic and received a lot of critical appraisal but it was never appreciated for its reinvention of modern narrative poem. Presenting earthy characters mainly in blank verse narrative and dialogue, it reveals the lives of working people in New England. The book established Frost as a poet of the people, who presented earthly characters with utmost ease and simplicity. It is evident from the moment one reads the dedication on the book,
“to E.M.F. This Book of People” The title North of Boston, not only suggests a particular area or region in America, but it also suggests the coldness associated with the word “North”. The ‘coldness’ which had become a part of the lives of people who lived there. The word, “North”, stands as a metaphor to the people of New England who were slowly drifting away in a world (America) which was moving towards modernization.

The book comprised seventeen poems, both long and short, including three of his masterpieces- “Mending Wall”, “After Apple Picking”, and “The Woodpile”. In “Mending Wall” he wittily portrays the temperaments of two neighbours who belong to different generations. The poem begins by announcing, “Something there is which doesn’t love a wall”. This ‘something’ remains undiscovered till the poem ends. The reader is bound to question his conscious self, what is that “something” ‘which doesn’t love a wall’? The poet’s old neighbour doesn’t want to challenge the existing beliefs in the society and says, “good fences make good neighbours” whereas the poet is concerned about these man-made barriers. Frost regretted later in life that his poem was spoilt by over analysing. It was subjected to political interpretations and this ruined the innate quality of the verse. Frost himself read the poem publicly in Russia and Jerusalem and said, “I have had lots of adventures with the poem. People are misunderstanding it or misinterpreting it. The secret of what it means, I keep”.24 This statement lays bare the playful mischievous mind of the poet, who is watching his poem being interpreted, knowing that it is misinterpreted, and still enjoying the moment for the sake of poetry. Because he was of the view that poems should be opened to varied interpretations. One must not lock himself into a room of ideas or already established guidelines before reading a verse, because it kills the essence of the work.

North of Boston, was appreciated on a larger scale by the literary circles in London, and received a number of favourable reviews from writers like Pound, Abercrombie, Gibson, Ford Madox Ford and Richard Aldington. Unfortunately the time collided with the Second World War and situations started becoming grim day by day. Frost had no choice other than leaving for America. The thought of leaving England depressed him because of the unexpected warmth and hospitality the country rendered. He bade goodbye to his close friends and left for his home in February 1915. It was like a dream which had finally come to an end. On his return he was pleasantly surprised to find a review of his book North of Boston in the “New Republic”. The review was written by
Amy Lowell who praised the style of the poems and called it ‘the most American book of verse written so far’. This was followed by many more reviews in newspapers and magazines which finally gave him the idea that things have changed now. The neglected countryside Yankee who aspired to be loved and appreciated as a poet, was welcomed back. Things seemed to have taken a drastic change since his return from England and Frost’s spirit were higher than before. In 1916, his third Volume of poems Mountain Interval was published by Henry Holt and Co., the publication house which continued its association with him till his death. But despite of some favourable reviews, its sales were disappointing. But this reduction in the sales, had nothing to do with the quality of poems in this book, which were appreciated as usual. Paul Muldoon calls this volume as “the finest book of poems of the past century”. It comprised, some of Frost’s famous poems like, “Birches”, “The Road Not Taken” and “The Oven Bird”. The poems included in the collection carry serious themes like all other Frost’s collection but with a subtlety and bleakness of form. As Harold Bloom notes:

This is the world of Mountain Interval (1916), where “the broken moon” is preferred to the dimmed sun, where the Oven bird sings of “that other fall we name the fall,” and where the birches:

shed crystal shells
Shattering and avalanching on the snow crust—
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
You’d think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.

Mountain Interval abounds in images of the shattering of human ties and of humans, as in the horrifying “Out, Out—.”

After the publication of Mountain Interval Frost did not publish a book for almost seven long years and this depressed him. He blamed his teaching assignments at Amherst for his inability to pay attention to his passion. But it was the sheer necessity of the time to be able to earn something. Writing for the sake of interest and creativity was acceptable but it was not going to give him his daily bread. Good times were no more accessible and Frost had to find some other modes of earning apart from writing poems. He joined Amherst College as a temporary faculty member. In the fall of
1917, Amy Lowell published a book called *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, and included the name of Robert Frost with other poets like Sandburg, Robinson, H.D\(^{28}\). Though Frost was happy to find his name among other celebrated poets of America, he disliked the way Amy labelled him as a regional poet. Though he always drew inspirations from New England and from his own surroundings, his themes were universal. Outraged he wrote to Amy Lowell:

Mother Scotch immigrant. Father oldest New England stock unmixed. Ten years in West. Thirty years in east. Three years in England. Not less than six months in any of these- San Francisco, New York, Boston, Cambridge, Lawrence, London….Twenty Five years in cities, nine in villages, nine on farms. Saw the south on foot. Dartmouth, Harvard two years. Shoe worker, mill hand, farm hand, editor, reporter, insurance agent, agent for Shakespearean reader, reader myself, teacher in every kind of school public and private including psychological normal school and college…Presbyterian, Unitarian, Swedenborgian, Nothing.\(^{29}\)

This letter portrays Frost dislike on being called ‘only’ as a regional poet. He was a regional poet but only in terms of the surroundings which inspired him to write. But those landscapes became for him, a stairway to explore varied themes, common to ‘everyman’. He was too walled in by the past. He did not follow the great American tradition started by Whitman, which involved praising of their country, its vastness and its natural beauty. He had seen negligence of his countrymen regarding his poetic skills before going to England and he did not want to return into that same forgetful state and hence was eager to get his work published again. As he wrote in “Birches”:

I’d like to get away from earth awhile,
And then come back to it and begin over

The wait was worth it and in 1923 came his another collection of poems, *New Hampshire*. The book received the Pulitzer Prize in the same year. This was the first of the other three Pulitzer Prizes which he would be receiving for his *Collected Poems* (1931), *A Further Range* (1936) and *A Witness Tree* (1942). He is also the only
American poet to have received the award four times in his life. *New Hampshire*, combines some best poems of the writer, including- “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”, “Fire and Ice”, “Nothing Gold can Stay”, “The Aim was Song” and many more. Critics believe that there is perhaps no book on American modern poetry which does not include “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” in it. The last two lines of the poem, give an echoing effect, which by the end had already spell-bounded the reader. In “Fire and Ice”, a poem of only nine lines, he talks about the end of the world.

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Some say the world will end in fire,
    Some say in Ice.
From whatever I have tasted of desire
    I hold with those who favor fire.
    But if it had to perish twice,
    I think I know enough of hate
To know that for destruction ice
    Is also great
    And would suffice
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Within these seemingly insufficient lines, Frost had something greater to say. Something about the world which is so full of hatred. There is perhaps no way out, to put an end to this hatred except the “end” itself.

Maxim Gorky (1868-1936), the famous Soviet writer, once wrote about Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) that :

> He loved everything simple, genuine, sincere, and he had a peculiar way of making other people simple”

Superficially “Gorky’s statement seems to fit Frost. If by simple we mean natural, he was his own man, attracting both believer and innocent, approached often humorlessly by the former as though he were a secular saint and more thoughtfully by the latter as wise counselor.”

His later collections of poems, which include, *A Further Range* (1936), *A Witness Tree* (1942), *Steeple Bush* (1947), *You Come Too* (1959), *In the Clearing* (1962), are equally creative and naively woven as the earlier ones. But we might as well pay attention to
the mortal man living between the poems, too, for he is a moving image: human, that is, fallible, and, when in the midst of discovering a bending birch tree, or a thaw or a thrush or a crow, when he is suddenly hit by an idea of a poem, he acclaims with delight:

Earth is the right place for love
You don’t know when it is likely go better.33

At that point of revelation, we feel one with the poet, whose heart beats for nature, who with his utmost sincerity shares his sorrows and happiness with his readers. He never disguises himself as a philosopher or a seer like Whitman, but prefers the rustic ways of life, to live and to share. And when still hoping to live another hundred years, the poet breathed his last on 29th January 1963, the world had lost, “the most American of American poets”- 34Robert Frost. “His death impoverishes us all, but he has bequeathed his Nation a body of imperishable verse, from which Americans will gain forever joy and understanding”35 said President John F. Kennedy paying his last tributes to the poet of the people. Though he could not succumb to his hope anymore, and finally bade a goodbye, but his “reluctance” to leave is evident everywhere:

“Ah, when to the heart of man
Was it ever less than a treason,
To go with the drift of things,
To yield with a grace to reason,
And bow and accept the end
Of a love or a season?”36

He continues to inspire those who find themselves lost in the pathless woods, reminding them that they indeed have “miles to go” before succumbing to death. His poems have not lost themselves into the plethora of criticisms that they come across. As he himself said:

a poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place… Read it a hundred times: it will forever keep its freshness as a metal
keeps its fragrance. It can never lose its sense of a meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it went.\textsuperscript{37}

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