

IN THE NAME OF GOD

A STUDY OF THE CONCEPT OF NATURE IN
ROBERT FROST'S POETRY

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*To My Dear Parents,
My Husband And My Two Brothers,
Whose Great Helps And Encouragements
Are The Source Of
My Success*

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ABSTRACT
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The concept of nature in the poems of Robert Frost has been a debatable subject for many readers and critics alike. Early critics generally agreed that Frost was a Romantic in his approach towards nature and its subcategories, such as its relation to man and God. However a close analysis of his work shows that the scope of his vision goes beyond pure Romanticism. In some respects, as portrayed in his poems, one can even label him an anti-Romantic. There are instances when his poems can be read under a traditional and classical glow, while at others he appears close to the Romantic view, and then there are times when in approach and outlook he becomes a complete skeptic.

This change of attitude which is very well portrayed in his poems, and the fact that he never allowed himself to sway towards any particular group concerning his outlook, are the factors which have contributed to his popularity, among both the general public and the literary society.

Nature in Frost's poems represents different things at different times. Sometimes it is the outside, physical nature and at other times it is the human nature. But what is significant in Frost, is that he puts a lot of emphasis on man and his abilities in changing nature or giving order to it. Frost does not always praise man's interference in nature, and in some of his poems the destructive effects of man and his manipulation are clearly shown. Yet for Frost, man is very important in giving meaning to nature and taking it under his control by using his mind, hands and heart.

Frost's stance towards the Creator of nature, God, is also very important. Once again, Frost does not sway to any extreme ends. He does not believe in established religions but he also does not deny the existence of the supernatural and the presence of a mighty, invisible power which controls and gives order to the world.

It can be deduced that important feature in Frost is his maintaining a middle place and not being inclined towards any extremes. This, and his belief in man's will and determination to improve his own nature and the outside nature under the influence of a great, mysterious power or God, are what the bulk of Frost's poetry have implied through the years, keeping him popular for a range of audience.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Study

“Nature” and what it exactly refers to have been an ancient concern for man, traced back as far as Homer, Hesiod, Plato and Aristotle who are among the first writers whose ideas about nature have reached us up to this day. Throughout the literary history there have been different notions of nature held by different literary figures. Sidney, for example, believes that the principal object of any art is nature, but he holds that, “the poet, . . . lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow in effect, into another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature” (Sidney 97).

In the Neoclassical age, “we have Alexander Pope with his three notions of nature: first, a Platonic and stoic universal order and superior reality;” secondly, “the universal order,” assimilating “readily with man’s effort to enforce or increase that order in his own affairs—that is with his civilization and all its parts,” or the “socially ordered human conduct;” and thirdly, his idea of nature having “the distinction

of residing in a state of great harmony with the idea of the classical models" (Wimsatt and Brooks 237); that is, "modern reason" and "classical authority." Although Pope's reputation may not have outlived the Augustan age due to the drastic change of taste in the eighteenth century, he did regain high regard later, especially in the twentieth century. As Wimsatt and Brooks state, Pope and his contemporaries believe that the literary rules do not "supplant" but "methodize" nature (318). Therefore, "the reconciliation of reasonable rules and ancient authorities" are not, in fact, so difficult and, thus, "what is permanent is bound to have been known to the ancients, and vice versa" (318).

Man in the eighteenth century found out that such a concept of nature had a social aspect, one of cities, temples, palaces, anything created by man. Of course, this does not mean that it does not include the outside nature of trees, flowers, and the wilderness, but these are not its main source. Deviation from a norm was considered unnatural for Pope, whereas, later, for the Romantics such as Wordsworth, the restraint imposed by a norm is unnatural. In a poem called "Lines written on Early Spring"(58), Wordsworth views nature as the norm of conduct itself. Wordsworth believes that the spirit of nature can only be found among the uncivilized, where man's artificial inventions have not disturbed nature. He also believes that nature exerts a benevolent force towards everything, including man. The relation between God and nature and that of man and nature are also

important for Wordsworth and other nature poets who tend to substitute nature for God as the source of benevolence. Since they believe man to be the child of nature, they hold that nature acts upon the instincts that she has implanted in man.

In contrast to the Romantics, when one looks at the leading English men of letters such as Samuel Johnson, it is interesting to see the antithesis to the Romantics, especially in its indoor-outdoor or city-country aspects. It is standard procedure, according to Wimsatt and Brooks, to “quote Samuel Johnson’s preference for the vista of Fleet Street over any rural landscape or his meditation at Anoch in the Western Islands”(319).

Another group in whose views and works nature plays an important role are the naturalists. As Abjadian explains, the term naturalism, “is chiefly used to designate a movement in the novel in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in France, England, and America”(155). The naturalists are mainly interested in the physical and biological aspects of human existence.

According to naturalists, man is a product of natural forces and they try to show the physical essence of man and the environment in which he lives. In Abjadian’s words,

The naturalist’s fundamental view of man is that man is an animal in the natural world, responding to the environmental forces and internal stresses and drives

over none of which he has any control or full knowledge. (155)

In naturalism there are two kinds of determinism. The biological determinism portrays man as an animal struggling endlessly for his survival. The economic determinism shows man as victimized by environmental forces, and a product of the social and economic factors that he cannot control or even fully understand. Naturalists usually try to be objective in their outlook and presentation of material. They neither praise, nor condemn man for the actions that he cannot control. Naturalists see life and nature as a vicious trap and a cruel game, and their portrayal of human actions is deterministic (Abjadian 156).

Considering this background to "nature" and the different ideas about it, we can now more effectively focus our attention on the subject of this study, that of the notion of nature in the works of a contemporary American poet, Robert Frost.

When speaking about the native traditions in American poetry, one must, according to C. Brooks, always consider some sort of distinction between poets from Edwin Arlington Robinson to Robert Frost, on the one hand, and those including Amy Lowell, Pound, Eliot, and some others, on the other (1827). The former are those in whose works we mainly see the portrayal of American settings and experiences; the second group includes those who got their inspiration mainly from European origins and abroad, and in some cases such as

Pound, even Oriental sources. Of course, it should be noted that the main concern in this study is with the first group and chiefly with Robert Frost.

Robert Frost is considered as one of America's most celebrated and widely read poets, and, according to Stewart and Bethurum, it is significant that "in an age notorious for a diminishing response to its poets among readers generally, one poet should be able to carry on the valuable and historic tradition of poetry for many"(197). In Frost's poems we see rural New England life depicted in traditional verse and a seemingly simple style. The secret of Frost's great fame, according to Lawrence Thompson, is the fact that his poetry, "from the beginning, caught fresh vitality without recourse to the fads and limitations of modern experimental techniques"(18). While most of Frost's contemporaries took sides in the literary controversies of his time, Frost stubbornly refused to do so. Frost has been amused at his contemporaries for their desperate "quest for new ways to be new"; he himself believes that there are "old ways to be new"(Brooks *et al* 1864).

One should not assume that Frost has disregarded experimentation altogether; he, in fact, has his own distinct experiments carried out with his emphasis on "speech rhythms" and "the sound of sense"(Thompson 19). However, Frost, perhaps here very much similar to Alexander Pope and his idea of "modern reason" and "classical authority," believes that limitations can actually be of

advantage rather than disadvantage to the production of the new and lively poetry. Frost also has Edwin Arlington Robinson as an example who, according to Brooks, was very strict in matters of rhyme and meter (1828). In fact, the most important factor which contributed to Frost's status as America's most admired and widely read poet for such a long period of time is the very fact that he remains strict in being loyal to some of his predecessors' conventions which he believes to be not only not a hindrance to poetry but actually quite developmental.

It is a known fact that Frost read widely the works of those before him and certainly far beyond the scope of American literature. According to Cleanth Brooks, he was "an inveterate reader of the older fiction" (1857). He was also

. . . an accomplished classicist, with a particular mastery of Latin, which he studied at Harvard, along with philosophy and literature . . . There is a more pronounced Latin strain in Frost's poetry than has usually been observed—not only in its frequent echo of Horace and his odes to the Sabine farm, but in the very texture and cadence (a kind of packed and rhythmic gravity) of some of the verses. (1857)

We cannot, therefore, be mistaken in assuming that he had read Alexander Pope and was familiar with his idea about "what is permanent is bound to have been known to the ancients and vice

versa” (Wimsatt and Brooks 318) or, as we see in Pope’s own words, “These rules of old discovered, not devised / Are nature still but nature methodized”:

When first young Maro in his boundless mind
A work t’outlast immortal Rome design’d,
Perhaps he seemed above the Critics law,
And but from Nature’s fountains scorn’d to draw.
But when t’examine ev’ry part he came,
Nature and Homer were, he found, the same.

Essay on Criticism, I. 130-35

Frost found the road to permanence through his admiration for the good traditions of the past and his own careful experimentation and addition of new ideas put always under limits. To prove the point further we may refer to Elizabeth Jennings’ statement that

Frost has never belonged to any literary movements; he never took part in the great modernist battles in the search for new forms and new language . . . Frost has never been in or out of fashion, but always respected . . . Frost has no place in the great poetic experiments of this century; his development has been entirely his own. (1-2)

Robert Frost has been considered a nature poet by many readers and critics alike. Many people after being confronted with trees, birds, stars, wild flowers, springs, etc. think that there is no doubt about it.

Some critics also have quite the same belief. George W. Nitchie, for example, is a representative of this view. He claims

That Robert Frost is, in some sense, a poet of nature is hardly a debatable position, birches and wild flowers, woods and stone walls . . . and the snow of Northern New England—these things provide, not merely locale, but substance. Remove them from Frost's poetry and something more than symbol or exemplum is gone. (3)

Whether or not the casual readers or some of these critics are completely right is a debatable point. Hearing the words "nature poet," one's attention is usually directed towards Wordsworth, or his American counterpart Emerson or Thoreau. It is true that nature is the subject of most of Frost's poems, but, according to Marion Montgomery, nature to Frost "is never an impulse from a vernal wood. His best poetry is concerned with the drama of man in nature, whereas Wordsworth is generally best when emotionally displaying the panorama of the natural world" (138). In her essay Montgomery quotes Frost as having said in a television interview in the fall of 1952, "I guess I'm not a nature poet, I have only written two poems without a human being in them" (138). The question one is confronted with, then, is the nature of Frost's conception of the natural world (which for Wordsworth was a place of devotion and benevolence) and also man's relation to this world.