50 CRITICS DISCUSS

Robert Frost

(1874-1963)

"[*A Boy's Will*] is the best American book in a long time."

W. B. Yeats to Ezra Pound (1913)

"An achievement much finer than Whitman."

Ford Madox Ford to Ezra Pound (1913)

"David Nutt publishes at his own expense *A Boy's Will*, by Robert Frost, the latter having been long scorned by the 'great American editors.' It is the old story. Mr. Frost's book is a little raw, and has in it a number of infelicities; underneath them it has the tang of the New Hampshire woods, and it has just this utter sincerity. It is not post-Miltonic or post-Swinburnian or post-Kiplonian. This man has the 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 circumspectious polysyllable….One reads the book for the 'tone,' which is homely, by intent, and pleasing, never doubting that it comes direct from his own life, and that no two lives are the same."

Ezra Pound
The New Freewoman (London)
(September 1913)

"It is a sinister thing that so American, I might even say so parochial, a talent as that of Robert Frost should have to be exported before it can find due encouragement and recognition….Mr. Frost is an honest writer, writing from himself, from his own knowledge and emotion; not simply picking up the manner which magazines are accepting at the moment, and applying it to topics in vogue. He is quite consciously and definitely putting New England rural life into verse. He is not using themes that anybody could have cribbed out of Ovid….Frost has been honestly fond of the New England people, I dare say with spells of irritation. He has taken their tragedy as tragedy, their stubbornness as stubbornness. I know more of farm life than I did before I had read his poems. That means I know more of 'Life.'…

Mr. Frost has dared to write, and for the most part with success, in the natural speech of New England; in natural spoken speech, which is very different from the 'natural' speech of the newspapers, and of many professors. His poetry is a bit slow, but you aren't held up every five minutes by the feeling that you are listening to a fool; so perhaps you read it just as easily and quickly as you might read the verse of some of the sillier and more 'vivacious' writers….Mr. Frost's people are distinctly real. Their speech is real; he has known them. I don't want much to meet them, but I know that they exist, and what is ore, that they exist as he has portrayed them….You do not confuse one of his poems with another in your memory. His book is a contribution to American literature, the sort of sound work that will develop into very interesting literature if persevered in."

Ezra Pound
Poetry V,3
(December 1914)

[Frost's less successful poems have] "the artlessness that conceals artlessness."

Conrad Aiken (c.1916)
quoted by Malcolm Cowley
The Portable Malcolm Cowley, ed. Donald W. Faulkner
(Viking/Penguin 1990) 387

"'Yankees is what they always were,' sings Mr. Frost. His New England is the same old New England of the pilgrim fathers—a harsh, austere, velvet-coated-granite earth….To present this earth, these people, the poet employs usually a blank verse as massive as they, as stript of all apologies and adornments. His poetry

is sparing, austere, even a bit crabbed at times; but now and then it lights up with a sudden and intimate beauty; a beauty springing from life-long love and intuition."

Harriet Monroe
Poetry
(January 1917) 203-04

"The Frostian humor is peculiarly important for America. No other of our poets has shown a mood at once so individual and so neighborly. Moreover, the comparative thinness of American literature, its lack of full social body and flavor, is due to the extraordinary interval between our artistry and our national life. Our nation is widespreading and unformed, tangled in raw freedom and archaic conventionalities. Our poetry, now responding to and now reacting from our national life, tends to be rather banal, or rather esoteric—in either case, thin. Mr. Frost's work is notably free from that double and wasting tendency. His own ambiguity is vital: it comes from artistic integrity in rare union with fluent sympathy. His poetic humour is on the highway toward the richer American poetry of the future, if that is to be."

G. R. Elliott
Virginia Quarterly Review
(July 1925) 214-15

"He is a poet of the customary in man and nature, not the exploiter of the remarkably arresting and wonderful. Nor does his feeling for decorous proportion require argument beyond saying that he does not commit the mistake of the neo-classicists who have been properly accused by Professor Babbitt of confusing the language of the nobility with the nobility of language. Frost's people are humble, but they speak a language and utter feelings appropriate to them: they are restrained by conventions which are inherently worthy of respect, and the result is decorum in the true sense."

Gorham B. Munson
Robert Frost
(Doran 1927) 108-09

"Robert Frost is as near English 'as makes no difference.' So English is he, in fact, that if one had to name the poet whose work is most like his, one would inevitably instance that most English poets, the late Edward Thomas. The likeness between their poetry is quite extraordinary; and it is no wonder that Frost counted Thomas among his best friends and dedicated to his memory the *Selected Poems* which appeared in America some two years ago. Both loved the same things in life; and (by one of those miracles that unite men over seas and centuries) both found much the same way of expressing in poetry their delight."

C. Henry Warren
Bookman (London)
(January 1931) 45-6

"Old patterns of speech appear, in the familiar Yankee rhythms, unobtrusive and slow; old voices are heard…and bits of regional remembrance. Character is drawn in the habitual Yankee fashion, almost always with an indirect beginning, scant emphasis, a slow unraveling. 'Never show surprise!' says one of the characters in *North of Boston*, 'this book of people.' Frost has kept the native humor, often deepened to a bitter irony, but delicately infused; most of his humor, like that of the early Yankee tradition, is so deeply inwoven with his further speech as to be almost inseparable from it. There is no touch of frontier coloring here, only furtherance of a tendency which had been implicit in the Yankee monologues, that toward soliloquy. Frost's lyrics are soliloquies, as are his drawings of people. This is a poetry which is acutely and sensitively self-conscious, turning to deep account the old self-consciousness that had been constant in the American mind and character, finally moving beyond the local."

Constance Rourke
American Humor
(Doubleday/Anchor 1931) 217

"'Poetry burns out of it,' said an English reviewer of Frost's first volumes (*A Boy's Will*, 1913; *North of Boston*, 1914), 'as when a faint wind breathes upon smoldering embers... In this and in succeeding poems Frost wrote of New England, carrying on the tradition of Bryant, but in strong, simple words endowed with

mysterious depths of humor and passion. The casual reader is apt to dismiss Frost as merely a skilful photographer upon whose sensitive mind is registered the usual scenes of New England…It is easy, without intimacy with his work, to miss his mastery, not of dialect—which he abhors—but of the inflections of daily New England speech, and to overlook, in particular, the connotative power in his reticent verse. Behind, for example, the simple sentence: 'Good fences make good neighbors' lies an indelible mood of the speaker and of New England.

Frost's face, so suggestive of his New England traits, lights up with amusement at reading too literally into his poetry ulterior meanings. Yet such overtones haunt us…Frost sets down the facts, but these facts stir in us poignant trains of thought, unanalyzable, but penetrative of our deepest memories, of, perhaps, our subconscious minds. Emotion is profound; form is restrained. There is no articulated synthesis. For each instant we are identified with the New Englander, sharing his intense, personal reaction to the universe and his momentary union with the experience of humanity. Each poem is granite, concealing the fiery lava beneath. It is, indeed, romantic poetry, extracting, with the utmost frugality of phrase, magic from a load of hay, a stone wall, or a pane of frosted glass, but it is romantic poetry of 'the middlin' way'—a phrase which defines by implication the aims of Frost as a poet."

Stanley T. Williams
American Literature
(Lippincott 1933) 152-53

"Upon the eve of Robinson's fame, some people spoke of Frost in the same breath; and now Robinson is dead, Frost is our leading poet. His fame shall rest upon a firmer basis. Robinson, like MacLeish, can be judged not so much by his work as by why people like it, whereas with Frost the audience counts less than the good work. He has never been able to be as boring, as Robinson's most boring; his best is beyond Robinson's best."

John Wheelwright
Poetry
(October 1936) 45-6

"Mr. Frost's place is and always has been singularly central. He has nothing to do with the extremes where most of our shouting has been heard….There is an ignoble way of avoiding extremes. It is the way of being nobody and saying nothing; or never, at any rate, being or saying enough to count. But there is another way which, difficult through it may be to define, is the only way worth considering. It consists in occupying or touching both extremes at once, and inhabiting all the space between. It consists in being capable of excess while actually achieving more than excess achieves. It consists in finding the golden mean which, far from signifying that the extremes have been avoided, signifies that they have been enclosed and contained."

Mark Van Doren
American Scholar (1936)

"[Frost's] qualities of irony and understatement, his distrust of fine writing, are those of the practical man. His poems on natural objects…are always concerned with them not as *foci* for mystical meditation, but as things with which and on which man acts in the course of his daily gaining of a livelihood."

W. H. Auden
Recognition of Robert Frost
ed. Richard Thornton (1937)

"Mr. Frost's poetry was first awarded critical approval because it was thought to be in revolt against something at a time when poetry must be in revolt…. Poetry must now not be anything like Imagism and must not even revolt, but must be the kind of poetry that Mr. Pound or, more purely and quintessentially, Mr. Eliot wrote…. It is quite true that Frost does not write like Eliot, Pound, Auden, or Spender. Fools may conclude that he is therefore a bad or an unimportant poet, but intelligent people look at the poetry he has written. When you do that, unless your nerves are sealed with wax, you immediately and overwhelmingly perceive that it is the work of an individual and integrated poet, a poet who is like no one else, a major poet not only in regard to his age but in regard to our whole literature, a great American poet."

Bernard De Voto
Saturday Review
(1 January 1938) 4, 14

"He demanded that his verse be as simple and honest as an axe or hoe…marked by an intense but restrained emotion and the characteristic flavor of New England life…..showing brilliant insight into New England character and the background that formed it….brilliant observation…shrewd humor and Yankee understatement…warm lyric quality…lifelong continuity in its rhythms, its clear focusing on the individual, and its observation of the native New England background….In both emotion and language he was restrained, and conveyed his messages by implication. Although his blank verse is colloquial, it is never loose, for it possesses the pithy, surcharged economy indigenous to the New Englander. His genre pieces, in the form of dramatic idylls or monologues, capture the vernacular of his neighbors north of Boston."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

"The secret of Frost's wide appeal seems to have been that his poetry, from the beginning caught fresh vitality without recourse to the fads and limitations of modern experimental techniques….The restrictions of the experimentalists, ironically seeking liberation, amused Frost. With pleasant banter he has teased his contemporaries by jesting about their desperate 'quest for ways to be new'….Frost implies that he finds himself impelled forward as if by faith, so that the poem is somehow believed into existence….Robert Frost's poetic theory, quite at odds with Puritan aesthetics, is nevertheless colored by his Yankee heritage of Puritan teaching. His own belief in poetry as 'a clarification of life' seems to have close relation to the ideas of that other New England individualist who was not ashamed to find certain virtues in Puritan concepts, provided they could be inspired with flexible vitality….

But there are nice differences between the Puritan desire to redeem the individual from his human depravity, the Emersonian desire to interpret 'harmonies' as proofs of human divinity, and the Frostian desire to make poetry 'a clarification of life.' The Puritan argument is as debatable as the Emersonian argument. Frost prefers to leave to prose those questions suitable for debate; he finds poetry at its best when its statements and observations touch realms of spiritual values where there is no room for argument: sorrow, aspiration, loneliness, love."

Lawrance Thompson
"Robert Frost's Theory of Poetry"
Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost
(Holt 1942)

"Robert Frost has been heaped with more official and academic honors than any other American poet, living or dead. Although he was never graduated from college, having left Dartmouth after two months and Harvard after two years (and more credit to his dogged independence), he holds by the last count seventeen honorary degrees…. *A Witness Tree.*..and the one that preceded it—*A Further Range*, published in 1936—also contain bad poems that have been almost equally admired: long monologues in pedestrian blank verse, spoken as if from a cracker barrel among the clouds, and doggerel anecdotes directed (or rather, indirected) against the New Deal; but a poet has the right to be judged by his best work, and Frost at his best has added to our little store of authentic poetry….

Some of the honors heaped on him are less poetic than political. He is being praised too often and with too great vehemence by people who don't like poetry. And the result is that his honors shed very little of their luster on other poets… His common sense and strict Americanism are used as an excuse for berating and belittling other poets, who have supposedly fallen into the sins of pessimism, obscurity and yielding to foreign influences; we even hear of their treachery to the American dream. Frost, on the other hand, is depicted as loyal, autochthonous and almost aboriginal. We are told not only that he is 'the purest classical poet of America today'…but also that he is 'the one great American poet of our time' and 'the only living New Englander in the great tradition, fit to be placed beside Emerson, Hawthorne and Thoreau….

Frost in England had done what Hemingway would later do in Paris: he had raised his own idiom to the dignity of a literary language….In spite of his achievements as a narrative and pyric poet…there is a case against Robert Frost as a social philosopher in verse and as a representative of the New England tradition. He is too much walled in by the past. Unlike the great Yankees of an earlier age, he is opposed to innovations in art, ethics, science, industry or politics. Thus, in one of his longer blank-verse monologues, he bridles when he hears a 'New York alec' discussing Freudian psychology, which Frost dismisses as 'the new school of the pseudo-phallic'…New ideas seem worse to him if they come from abroad, and worst of all if they come from Russia….

The poet is more conventional than convinced, more concerned with prudence than with virtue, and very little concerned with sin or suffering; you might say that he is more Puritan, or even prudish, than he is Christian. All the figures in his poems are decently draped; all the love affairs (except in a very late narrative, 'The Subverted Flower') are etherealized or intellectualized; and although he sometimes refers to very old adulteries, it is only after they have been wrapped in brown paper and locked away in cupboards. On the other hand, there is little in his work to suggest Christian charity or universal brotherhood under God. He wants us to understand once and for all that he is not his brother's keeper…What Frost sets before us is an ideal, not of charity or brotherhood but of separateness…. Frost…makes no distinction between separateness and self-centeredness….And Frost does not strive toward greater depth to compensate for what he lacks in breadth; he does not strike far inward into the wilderness of human nature….He displays the sense of measure and decorum that puts him in the classical, or rather the neo-classical, tradition….

The woods play a curious part in Frost's poems; they seem to be his symbol for the uncharted country within ourselves, full of possible beauty, but also full of horror….Frost, even in his finest lyrics, is content to stop outside the woods, either in the thrush-haunted dusk, or on a snowy evening… If he does not strike far inward, neither does he follow the great American tradition (extending from Whitman through Dos Passos) of standing on a height to observe the panorama of Nature and society. Let us say that he is a poet neither of the mountains nor of the woods, although he lives among both, but rather of the hill pastures, the intervales, the dooryard in autumn with the leaves swirling, the closed house shaking in the winter storms (and who else has described these scenes more accurately, in more lasting colors?). In the same way, he is not the poet of New England in its great days, or in its late-nineteenth-century decline (except in some of his earlier poems); he is rather a poet who celebrates the diminished but prosperous and self-respecting New England of the tourist home and the antique shop in the abandoned gristmill. And the praise heaped on Frost in recent years is somehow connected in one's mind with the search for ancestors and authentic old furniture."

Malcolm Cowley
"The Case Against Mr. Frost"
New Republic
(11 September 1944) 345-47

"Frost was always, as any textbook will declare, a regional poet; and his region was New England, more particularly New Hampshire, 'one of the two best states in the Union,' the other being Vermont….Unlike Masters and Faulkner, Frost never sought to bring his characters into a regional unity. The mean and women of his poems are isolated, like their farms and wood lots, or they are caught in a net which tragically or ironically encloses at most the fate of only two or three. His regionalism, in short, resembles that of Emily Dickinson and Sarah Orne Jewett….

Politics he shunned, except to have his fun with the political poets of the thirties who reproached him for retreating from the problems of the day. He is not a religious poet, not even a nature mystic, in spite of all that nature meant to him. His verse is in the great tradition of pastoral poetry from Theocritus to Wordsworth, though his pastoralism is never, like Virgil's or Milton's, decorative or political….Frost is a metaphysical poet in the tradition of Emerson and Emily Dickinson, with all that term implies of the poet's desire to go beyond the seen to the unseen, but his imagery is less involved than that of the older metaphysicals. Most of his poems fix on the mysterious moment when the two planes cross….As in all great metaphysical poetry, the tension increases between the simple fact and the mystery which surrounds it, until the total meaning flashes in the final words. As one critic has observed, Frost's art consists in 'his careful and deliberate laying of the material for a poetic bonfire.' It has been noted often enough, and Frost

commented on the fact, that poetry was to him essentially dramatic. Whatever his theme may be, he works to dramatize it for the reader….The most dramatic moment in a Frost poem is the…denouement when the mundane fact achieves its full metaphysical significance.

Though Frost seldom strayed to alien country beyond the sight of his New England upland pastures and back meadows, his poetry widened in content and technique from book to book. Each volume disclosed a particular facet of his genius, some new attitude or tone or approach. Few modern poets have shown such a capacity for growth, on into old age….

The marvel is that Frost could have so quickly mastered a genre which only E. A. Robinson had excelled in since Browning invented and perfected it….In his early verse one feels the joy in the sensuous pleasure which Nature has given most modern poets; but Frost always knew where to find the line which separates Nature from man….In the end the bond between man and Nature loosened, as Frost looked on. What had been strength and indifference in Nature became for him brute force and hostility; what once was balance was now seen as struggle….

He [set] the traditional meters against the natural rhythms of his speaker's sentences. The spoken word and the verse pattern must fight out the issue between them. But the struggle when supervised by a skillful poet will end in reconciliation. As Frost said: 'Meter has to do with beat, and sound posture has a definite relation as an alternate tone between the beats. The two are one in creation but separate in analysis.'… At its best it would be extremely complex, though always seeming to be simple, and capable of carrying a variety of tones, ironies and emotional gradations….

The reader's excitement is aroused by the slow unveiling, the inevitable approach of the moment of complete disclosure. He soon finds his comprehension advancing on more than one level as he recognizes that physical objects are changing into symbols, and that these are clues to the deeper meaning of the poem. Though Frost held with the Romantics that a poem is an expression of an experience, his best poems are marvels of construction, the more exciting to the reader because their form seems to evolve before his eyes and ears. The conversational tone and the dramatic manner of Frost's poetry strike one first. More than a second glance is needed to appreciate his expertness as a prosodist. He handles, as few modern poets except Yeats and Auden have done, a great number of English meters. More remarkable still is what he makes of the 'strict iambic' and 'loose iambic' in which most of his verse is written. One would not have supposed there was so much blood-pulse left in this ancient meter in which English rhythms most characteristically flow."

Willard Thorp
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1190-92

"Robert Frost is one of the most talented poets of our time, but I believe that his work is both overestimated and misunderstood…he is an Emersonian Romantic…Frost writes of rural subjects, and the American reader of our time has an affection for rural subjects which is partly the product of the Romantic sentimentalization of 'nature,' but which is partly also a nostalgic looking back to the rural life which predominated in this nation a generation or two ago…Frost has said that Emerson is his favorite American poet, and he himself appears to be something of…a Romantic pantheist....Frost believes in the rightness of impulse, but does not discuss the pantheistic doctrine which would give authority to impulse; as a result of his belief in impulse, he is of necessity a relativist, but his relativism, apparently since it derives from no intense religious conviction, has resulted mainly in ill-natured eccentricity and in increasing melancholy. He is an Emersonian who has become skeptical and uncertain without having reformed…having taken the easy way and having drifted with the various currents of his time…

'The Road Not Taken,' for example, is the poem of a man whom one might fairly call a spiritual drifter; and a spiritual drifter is unlikely to have either the intelligence or the energy to become a major poet…his poem is good as far as it goes; the trouble is that it does not go far enough, it is incomplete, and it puts on the reader a burden of critical intelligence which ought to be borne by the poet….Frost by a process of devious evasions has convinced himself that he is a wise and virtuous man, and he is regarded as a kind of embodiment of human wisdom by hundreds of thousands of Americans from high school age to the brink

of senility….Here are several familiar Romantic attitudes: resentment at being unable to achieve the absolute privacy which Frost names as a primary desideratum in *Build Soil,* the sentimental regard for the untouched wilderness (the untouched wilderness would provide absolute privacy for the unique Romantic), and the sentimental hatred for the machine….

He believes that impulse is trustworthy and reason contemptible, that formative decisions should be made casually and passively, that the individual should retreat from cooperative action with his kind, should retreat not to engage in intellectual activity but in order to protect himself from the contamination of outside influence, that affairs manage themselves for the best if left alone, that ideas of good and evil need not be taken very seriously. These views are sure to be a hindrance to self-development, and they effectually cut Frost off from any really profound understanding of human experience…Yet Frost has a genuine gift for writing, as I have pointed out…

Frost's confusion is similar to that of the public, and most readers of poetry still regard poetry as a vague emotional indulgence: They do not take poetry seriously and they dislike serious poetry. Frost…may be described as a good poet in so far as he may be said to exist, but a dangerous influence in so far as his existence is incomplete. He is in no sense a great poet, but he is at times a distinguished and valuable poet….His weakness is commonly mistaken for wisdom, his vague and sentimental feeling for profound emotion, as his reputation and the public honors accorded him plainly testify. He is the nearest thing we have to a poet laureate, a national poet; and this fact is evidence of the community of thought and feeling between Frost and a very large part of the American literary public.…The principles which have hampered Frost's development, the principles of Emersonian and Thoreauistic Romanticism, are the principles which he has openly espoused, and they are widespread in our culture. Until we abandon them in favor of better, we are unlikely to produce many poets greater than Frost."

Yvor Winters
"Robert Frost, Or the Spiritual Drifter as Poet"
Sewanee Review (Autumn 1948)
reprinted in *The Function of Criticism*
(Alan Swallow 1957) 159-87

"Among our contemporaries generally accepted as poets, Robert Frost probably comes closest to fame. A few of his writings, at least, are known to a fairly large number of people…Frost happens to possess great gifts aside, if not wholly separate, from his poetry. Outstanding to those who have talked with him privately is a personality of extraordinary charm and integrity….Although the anthologists have always represented Frost extensively, they have no choice but to give undue prominence to the briefer lyrics at the expense of the longer pieces in blank verse….The procedure eliminates some of Frost's best poems and obscures the changes in thought and style that have taken place in Frost's writing since his earliest efforts in the 1890's….

Frost's first volume, *A Boy's Will,* published in London in 1913, is a failure as a collection. At its best it can stand comparison with the later volumes. But the book lacks unity of tone; it represents the first gropings of a writer in search of a personal idiom….In spite of this weakness, however, *A Boy's Will* had a genius of its own that announced to a small circle of discerning critics the arrival of a new voice in poetry….Not since Thoreau had anyone responded so sensitively to the particularities of a rural landscape….The book contains brilliant phrases in isolation and delicately etched aspects of the New England country, but it fails to utilize these resources so as to disclose the mind of the poet or the character of the people who made the scene what it is.

Not until subsequent volumes did Frost's genius for portraying the landscape become a functional part of his writing. *North of Boston,* the second volume, is by all odds the major achievement of Frost's career…. Abnormal people abound…One gets an insight into what had gone wrong in certain sections of New England. Hard work and a stony soil had combined to bring about nervous prostration instead of heroic response to the challenge of difficult circumstances. The integrity of an older age had deteriorated into an attempt to maintain a false self-respect, and everything had conspired to make the disaster of insanity a lasting corrosion. Frost saw that these morbid disorders cropped up somewhat too frequently in

the remote rural districts, and he suggested that something in the land and the way of life seemed to breed such diseased minds….

Democracy and America find representative voices in both Frost and Whitman; both writers are concerned with brotherhood and fellowship, although each approaches the problem in an individual fashion. Whitman responds to the question of the attainment of democracy by writing the vague and formless song of the open road, by spreading out his arms in a universal embrace… Robert Frost…looks at the world more realistically than Whitman does, he knows that if alienation could be overcome by the repeated affirmation of fellowship, it would have disappeared a long time ago….Frost recognized the failures and defeats that Henry James noted on his leisurely tour through New England in 1904, but he was one of those who decided to come back and resist the supposed verdict of history. Frost described the record of failure with uncompromising realism because he knew from first-hand experience the conditions that Henry James could only observe at a distance."

W. G. O'Donnell
"Robert Frost and New England: A Revaluation"
The Yale Review
(Summer 1948) 698-712

"Creatively, there are at least three Frosts—the actual artist, the legendary public character, posed and professed, and the latent, potential poet that might have been….Frost himself all through his work, more or less, offers clues as to the kind of thing he might have done, the line of a frightful and fascinating interest that he almost dared to follow. The road not taken….One wishes he had been a little less fearful of evil tidings, less scared of his own desert places. One wishes he had wasted less time being sane and wholesome and gone really all out, farther than he did beyond the boundaries of New England's quaintness into its areas of violence, madness, murder, rape, and incest….It is this night side of life and nature that Frost's art has, I think, scamped reporting, and not because he did not know it; no American poet, nor Poe in his stories, has come closer to Baudelaire."

Rolfe Humphries
Nation
(23 July 1949) 92-3

"The controlled development of his talent, and the finality and grace of statement in his best poems, are of moral no less than artistic value, exemplary for all who practice this art….His vein of Romantic triviality and perversity is not hard to distinguish, and it may be indulged. That stern critic, Yvor Winters, considers Frost an Emersonian and therefore untrustworthy sage; but he would probably concede that on occasion Frost has had a harder edge and eye than Emerson, more humor, and more of the fear of God. It would be going too far to think of him as a religious poet, but his work tends towards wholeness, and thus towards a catholicism of the heart."

Robert Fitzgerald
New Republic
(8 August 1949) 18

"His cheerfulness is the direct opposite of Mr. Babbitt's or even of Mr. Pickwick's. It is a Greek cheerfulness. And the apparent blandness of the Greeks was, as Nietzsche showed in his *Birth of Tragedy* the result of their having looked so deeply into life's tragic meaning that they had to protect themselves by cultivating a deliberately superficial jolliness in order to bear the unbearable. Frost's benign calm, the comic mask of a whittling rustic, is designed for gazing—without dizziness—into a tragic abyss of desperation…. In the case of this great New England tragic poet, the desperation is no less real for being a quiet one, as befits a master of overwhelming understatements."

Peter Viereck
Atlantic Monthly
(October 1949) 68

"Frost's later work never completely realized the tragic power that *North of Boston* promised. In *West-Running Brook* (1928) he began to play with the role of self-conscious homespun philosopher. He began to give reasons for his innate, countryman's conservatism, and not only reasons, but arguments which were

half apologies. His own native shrewdness began to get the upper hand…He reinforced his stoicism, which in itself had a certain dignity, with an active insistence upon burrowing under and digging safely in. We see in this attitude the ancient conservatism of the man who depends upon the earth for his living, but Frost's later work seems to base its skepticism less upon intelligent common sense than upon unthinking timidity. The appeal Frost makes to large numbers of people began to be attached to a series of refusals rather than to a set of affirmations."

Louise Bogan
Achievement in American Poetry, 1900-1950
(Regnery 1951) 49-50

"Frost is that rare thing, a complete or representative poet, and not one of the brilliant partial poets who do justice, far more than justice, to a portion of reality, and leave the rest of things forlorn. When you know Frost's poems you know surprisingly well how the world seemed tone man, and what it was to seem that way: The great Gestalt that each of us makes from himself and all that isn't himself is very clear, very complicated, very contradictory in the poetry. The grimness and awfulness and untouchable sadness of things, both in the world and in the self, have justice done to them in the poems, but no more justice than is done to the tenderness and love and delight; and everything in between is represented somewhere too, some things willingly and often and other things only as much--in Marianne Moore's delicate phrase--'as one's natural reticence will allow'."

Randall Jarrell
Kenyon Review
(Autumn 1952) 560-01

"Back in the days when 'serious readers of modern poetry' were most patronizing to Frost's poems, one was often moved to argument…In these days it's better—a little, not much: the lips are pursed that ought to be parted, and they still pay lip-service, or little more. But Frost's best poetry—and there is a great deal of it, at once wonderfully different and wonderfully alike—deserves the attention, submission, and astonished awe that real art always requires of us…Frost has limitations of a kind very noticeable to us, but they are no more important than those of other contemporary poets; and most of the limitations, less noticeable to us, that these poets share, Frost is free of….

Any of us but Frost himself (and all the little Frostlings who sit round him wondering with a foolish face of praise, dealing out ten monosyllables to the homey line) can by now afford just to wonder at his qualities, not to sadden at his defects, and can gladly risk looking a little foolish in the process….No poet has had even the range of his work more unforgivably underestimated by the influential critics of our time."

Randall Jarrell
"To the Laodiceans"
Poetry and the Age
(Knopf 1953)

"The poetry of Frost was influenced…by…Virgil, the Latin poet of the Georgics and the Ecologues… Frost's work is in the tradition, too, of New England predecessors such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Emily Dickinson….Much of the verse is read best when the reader uses the tight-lipped way of talking characteristic of farm folk in New Hampshire and Vermont. Frost himself, a stalwart, rough-hewn figure of a man with the weathered face of a farmer, so read them to perfection. Although at first reading or hearing, the poems may seem to be lucidly simple, after better acquaintance they turn out to be, in many instances, rich in hidden meanings.

Some words which Emily Dickinson applied to herself apply to Frost; like her, he 'thinks New Englandly.' There is a certain reticence, a teasing indirectness, in his way of telling his thought….He avoided explicit formulations partly, at least, because he did not want to commit himself to any solution which ran the danger of being simple-minded. Life, as he saw it, is full of apparent paradoxes. It is tragic and hilariously comic, beautiful and ugly, chaotic and unified, and he refused to take an extreme 'either-or' position….A careful study of the poetry of Robert Frost will show that, for all his appearance of rustic

simplicity, he had more of significance to say than many of the contemporaneous poets among whom he holds a high position."

Walter Blair
The Literature of the United States II, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 916-17

"Frost came to demand that his verse be as simple and as honest as the tools he handled, as directly related to experience as were the actions of the millmen, shoemakers, and farmers that he knew. His attitude toward poetry was that of the woodchopper toward his axe, as later described in 'The Axe-Helve'…He prefers individuals of laconic integrity, most of whom live close to the earth and whose customs and points of view have been shaped by long tradition. For Frost as for his characters—the hired man with his code, the neighbor with his belief in stone fences—life is expressed in moral terms. But despite this typically New England attitude, Frost's poetry is not merely regional. Behind their deceptive simplicity or apparent localism his lines conceal a further range of meanings. The regionalism of Frost's deceptively simple lyrics is more apparent than real, for they reach beyond the everyday into the universal….

In his later years Frost became more outspoken, bitter, and satirical. What was once connotative turned into definite statement as he inveighed against social planning, the dominance of science, and American entanglement in internationalism….Yet the earlier magic is not lost; Frost can still raise the tone and rhythm of the spoken word to a level of quiet intensity. Never captivated by the writing of free verse…Frost has shown himself a master of blank verse, heroic couplets, the sonnet, and other established forms. He handles them all with an art that conceals their use from the unwary reader."

James D. Hart & Clarence Gohdes
America's Literature
(Holt 1955) 825-26

"No working farmer is Romantic—not about Nature, at any rate."

C. Day Lewis
Introduction
Selected Poems of Robert Frost
(Penguin 1955)

"The bulk of his poetry is a dialogue in which the two speakers are Robert Frost himself and the entity which we call nature or process. It is a dialogue in which Frost puts a variety of questions to the natural world that lies just beyond his doorstep and receives a variety of answers….This is Frost's problem: to be responsive to the pressures of nature or process, man must live with the pressures that come from other men (modern society, traditional culture) reduced to a minimum. Thus, to have a flexible dialogue with process, man must have a fixed (and negative) response to whatever in society passes beyond the simple, 'natural' social relations of the rural community. Frost must work to assert the discontinuity of natural process and human society…. Man's experience of man-in-society is a second-rate sort of experience. And so, by easy extension, is man's experience of God-in-society a poor substitute for whatever divine traces of purpose one can isolate in process….

When Frost is forced to turn his attention from process to society, he feels that he is in the presence of material that is of little intrinsic interest and of even less authority over his own spirit…. Since the social pressures and the decay of political morality and the algae-growth of planned societies keep—like humanity itself—breaking in, he takes up themes that he neglected in his earlier poetry….Frost does not bring to bear on our troubled society the kind of attention he gives generously to process. Instead, he begins a *new* dialogue. The dialogue appears with frequency in *A Witness Tree* and *Steeple Bush* and in the two plays which Frost calls 'masques': *A Masque of Reason* and a *Masque of Mercy*….I insist on more than this: that whenever Frost turns to a consideration of man in society, he eschews the profits of his earlier conversation with Nature. Nature or process is out of touch with the task of reckoning with man in society, man enduring the agonies that society involves him in….

Frost shows skepticism for all human effort, or he may offer some human effort an as-if acceptance. The skepticism appears in the sort of poem that appears in *A Witness Tree* and *Steeple Bush*; the as-if acceptance appears chiefly in the two 'masques.' Neither attitude represents more than endurance of a necessary evil. (The dialogue with process was a pursuit---a very great pursuit—of a possible good.)… Metaphysics of some sort—and I do not mean anything authoritative, ambitious, and systematic—could have annealed the far too clean break between natural process and social development that Frost early made….The masques' do not indicate that Frost is at last following up and consolidating the metaphysical flashes that process sends out. The 'masque' must, in the 'Frost story,' stand for a sad acceptance of traditional stereotypes rather than for some kind of insight that, if not new, is felt as new….

Instead of listening to and watching human society as sharply as possible (it would seem to us to deserve at least as much attention as the new apple-tree or the dried-up brook), we are to listen to society, to watch it, with only a careless and detached indulgence. This attitude is sufficient to reveal to us the contradictions and ambiguities that will sanction amused tolerance….The avenue of retreat to the better dialogue must be kept clear; and Frost can retreat along it if human agony and complexity press too close….Birth and death and the process-conditioned tensions between couples isolated on run-down farms: These are the human themes that Frost can take up. And they are not contemptible. But they are all concerned with sustaining a dignified stance in the face of natural process….

There is, in Frost, no societal piety. We have already shown this by our glances at his stereotypes for factory and city. (The city, for example, is simply in a state of unconscious war with the waters over which it has been built….We must note here Frost's estimate of that barely tolerable efflorescence of city life and factory: national government. Frost would intensify Lord Acton's apothegm and say that that government is best which governs not at all, which makes no demands on our attention. Frost holds against the United States government of the thirties and forties not only its interference in human affairs. He resents its pervasive propaganda for this interference….

His choice commits him to a humanism that is sensitive and, in its own way, compassionate. But it is also a humanism which seeks to put the poet and his talents only obliquely in the service of a mankind in which the poet has a distinctly limited and ironical trust. The limitation and irony are not well-founded unless one grants Frost's assumption: that a part of the machine that is the universe really works and that another part—society, thought, history—grinds emptily, century after century."

Harold H. Watts
"Robert Frost and the Interrupted Dialogue"
American Literature XXVII
(March 1955) 69-87

"Much of Frost's poetry is a new kind of pastoral. Versed in country things, with sense alert to the object, he builds slowly from observation to symbolic meaning. 'Birches,' starting with a lonely boy's diversion, tells of the charm of escapism and the needed return to earth…He is a regionalist I the best sense: his loving care for the local leads to the universal. His dramatic monologues and dialogues round off a picture of the barren farms and tough-grained people North of Boston…. Frost aimed at recording 'tones of voice,' the translation of living speech into poetry. His more subjective poems keep to this low-keyed conversational level. From the start Frost was a lyrical as well as a dramatic poet. The personality that he reveals opposes romantic self-pity, scoffs at 'literary tears,' is that of a ruminative, quizzical stoic, an individualist kin to Thoreau. Aware of the evil of the world, he still will take his chance…He is no joiner, satirizing the doctrinaire and the departmentalized. He dislikes industrialization but decries futile rage against it; he is a lonely striker, a 'West-Running Brook' in contrast to the many running eastward….a Yankee Socrates rather than…a Jonathan Edwards."

Lillian Herlands Hornstein, ed.
The Reader's Companion to World Literature
(Dryden/Mentor 1956) 175-76

"Among the American poets of stature since Whitman, Robert Frost is the most universal in his appeal. His art is an act of clarification, an act which, without simplifying the truth, renders it in some degree accessible to everyone….His good foundation in the classics is apparent in his extraordinary word sense, in

the disciplined forms of his poetry, and in his pagan delight in Nature. His reading of science and philosophy has been influential throughout his poetry. But he had a deep-rooted fear: 'They would have made me into a professor…'

Soon *A Boy's Will* (1913) was hailed in England as a work of genuine merit. It was followed in 1914 by *North of Boston*, one of the great volumes of the century….Frost had magnificent qualities as a public reader; his reading tours during many years made him and his poetry household property and stimulated a popular interest in poetry….Few major poets have shown such remarkable consistency as Robert Frost--the whole poet is the whole man, and he captures the reader as much by the grandeur of his personality as by impeccable rightness of form and phrase. 'Art strips life in form,' he has said, and the substance and the words of his poems coexist in one identity. In language, he has sought to catch what he has called the 'tones of speech,' but even more successfully than Wordsworth he has pruned the 'language really used by men' to achieve a propriety that spontaneous speech cannot attain.

For all his descriptive realism, Frost was temperamentally a poet of meditative sobriety. The truths he sought were innate in the heart of man and in common objects. But people forget, and poetry, he says, 'makes you remember what you didn't know you knew.' A poem is not didactic, but provides an immediate experience which 'begins in delight, and ends in wisdom'; and it provides at least 'a momentary stay against confusion.' Of man alone or man in society Frost demands a responsible individualism controlled by an inner mandate, and thus his views remind us of the Transcendentalism of earlier New Englanders. Like Thoreau and Emerson, Frost is willing to become a rebel in this cause."

Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, eds.
The American Tradition in Literature II, 3rd edition
(Norton 1956-67) 1063-65

"It was Robert Frost's function to mediate between New England and the mind of the rest of the nation. In him the region was born again,--it seemed never to have lost its morning vigour and freshness; and one felt behind his local scene the wide horizons of a man whose sympathies and experience were continental. He had discovered New England after a boyhood in California… A true folk-mind, Frost was a mystical democrat, compassionately filled with a deep regard for the dignity of ordinary living; and he was an artist as well as a poet, a lover of goodness and wisdom, who found them, not by seeking them, but rather along the path of gaiety. At home, like Hawthorne's snow-image, in the frosty air of polar nights, he felt the wild and the strange in the low and familiar…Frost invested with his white magic the woodpile, the log-road, the blueberry patch, the birch tree, the barn and the orchard; and through his gnarled poems, twisted and tough, a still music ran, like the music Thoreau heard in the poles by the railroad."

Van Wyck Brooks & Otto L. Bettmann
Our Literary Heritage: A Pictorial History of the Writer in America
(Dutton 1956) 235

"Mirth has always been attendant on his moral. He will not, for earnest half-truths, stay completely reverent. He has to keep the door ajar for the other half of the truth. Even in his caperings that irk the solemn and embarrass the earnest, wisdom is usually implicit. Trifling is pertinent, though often it seems pesky, when dealing with inflated trifles. And even with God, the fear of not pleasing whom is the beginning of wisdom, Robert Frost sets his soft hat on one side of his head and looks Him in the eye."

Sidney Cox
A Swinger of Birches
(NYU 1957) 2-3

"When Robert Frost nears a university campus in this country there is a bustle of interest and activity extending beyond the confining borders of the English department….It has been a cycle repeated in one place or another for almost thirty years, expanding with the passage of time as Frost has established himself securely in the position which Mark Twain created in the closing years of the last century--the position of American literary man as public entertainer. Frost brings to his role the grave face, the regional turn of

phrase, the pithy generalization, and the salty experience which Twain before him brought to his listeners. He is the home-spun farmer who assures his audiences that he was made in American before the advent of the assembly line, and he presides over his following with what is at once casual ease and lonely austerity….To observe this insistent regional stance is to realize that Frost has done, and is still doing, for American poetry what Faulkner has more recently accomplished in American fiction….

Frost is, for his audience, a 'character' simply because he represents both in language and outlook a vastly familiar figure to them, a kind of traditional stage Yankee full of gnomic wisdom and prankish humor, carrying his history in his head and centering cryptic comment upon all experience in a sufficiently provincial manner to remind them of a preconceived caricature. It is Frost's ability to be a farmer poet which distinguishes him most sharply from Wordsworth, with whom he is often compared. Wordsworth played the part of the Poet concerned with common man, but Frost has persistently cast himself in the role of the common man concerned with poetry….He goes to great length to disarm his audience with colloquial familiarity and whimsical parentheses….

Like his great New England antecedents, Emerson and Thoreau, he casts his own shadow upon the landscape he surveys. Skeptical in his cast of mind, Frost inclines away from their tendency to abstract doctrine, but he retains much of the method and many of the attitudes they left behind them, nor is it surprising that Walden is one of his favorite books….The clearing he has wrought is his own, and he works constantly at its edge, laying claim to the marginal world between the wild and the tame…. Although critics have lamented [his] departure from the earlier lyric and dramatic vein, Frost's penchant for bald statement followed as necessarily from his earlier poems as self-assurance follows self-possession. Moreover, out of this almost brash assurance comes 'Directive,' surely one of Frost's highest achievements….The disparaging remarks which may be, and have been, leveled at Frost's mode of delivery--at his flatness of voice, his frequent pauses, and his halting delivery--are dwarfed by the essential victory achieved on every poem. And much of his success as a reader of his poems stems from his ability to convey this sense of achievement and repossession."

James M. Cox
"Robert Frost and the Edge of the Clearing"
The Virginia Quarterly Review XXXIII (1957) 378-94

"Perhaps the most eminent, the most distinguished Anglo-American poet now living…The relation of Dante to Florence…of Robert Frost to New England…"

T. S. Eliot
Toast at the English-Speaking Union
London (1958)
(in 1922 Eliot had called Frost "unreadable")

"The casual reader of Frost's poetry is likely to think of Frost as a nature poet in the tradition of Wordsworth. In a sense, nature is his subject, but to Frost it 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. 'I guess I'm not a Nature poet,' Frost said in a television interview in the fall of 1952. 'I have only written two poems without a human being in them'…. Always, to Frost, man differs essentially from other features and objects…The natural world is impersonal, unfeeling…To Frost, the mindless world, despite its laws and patterns of cause and effect, lacks completeness....Man's hands and mind bring order to himself and to the world around him. Having all kinds of feelings for this all kinds of a world, he is able to bring order to the natural world by making a garden and building a wall. That garden is art.' And the man who erects the wall and makes the garden is in the world for that purpose, not that he may expect to bring permanent order but that he may work out his own salvation….

God will not let man see completely into the life of things. To this barrier are added the limitations imposed on man by his reason, or mind, and his desire, or heart….This concern with barriers is the predominant theme in Frost's poetry. The barriers fall into several categories. First of all there is the great natural barrier, the void between man and the stars, a barrier which man continually, and sometimes

foolishly, tries to bridge in his attempt to escape his limited haunt. What is more disturbing to man than the barrier of space is the barrier between man and the immediate natural world, for it is in this realm of desert places that most of man's 'gardening' takes place….This war between man and the natural world did not exist for Wordsworth so positively as it does for Frost….Despite the necessity of maintaining one's garden against Nature and of advancing it, there are certain limits which man cannot overstep, and one of them is the nature of physical existence…. Each man is, in a sense, a stranger in this world, and so he remains."

Marion Montgomery
"Robert Frost and His Use of Barriers: Man vs. Nature Toward God"
The South Atlantic Quarterly LVII
(Summer 1958) 339-53

"I am sure that anyone standing in my place tonight, charged with the happy office of greeting Mr. Frost on his birthday, would be bound to feel, as I do indeed feel, a considerable measure of diffidence….The archaeologists of a few milleniums hence…will observe…how, in the time of the vernal equinox, feasts were held to celebrate the birth of this personage, and how, at a later time in the spring, at that ceremony which the ancient North Americans, with their infallible instinct for beauty, called by the lovely name of *Commencement*, it was customary to do him honor by a rite in which it was pretended that he was a scholar, a man of immense learning...doctor--and no American university was thought to be worthy of the name until it had duly performed this rite, which was quaintly called *conferring a degree*.

The time of year at which these ritual observances took place makes it plain to the archaeologists that they are almost certainly not dealing with an historical individual but rather with a solar myth, a fertility figure. They go on to expound the subtle process of myth which is to be observed in the fact that this vernal spirit was called *Frost*, a name which seems to contradict his nature and function. In their effort to explain this anomaly, they take note of evidence which suggests that the early North Americans believed that there were once two brothers, Robert Frost and Jack Frost, of whom one, Jack, remained unregenerate and hostile to mankind, while the other brother became its friend….

We do not need to wait upon the archaeologists of the future to understand that Robert Frost exists not only in a human way but also in a mythical way. We know him, and have known him so for many years, as nothing less than a national fact. We have come to think of him as virtually a symbol of America, as something not unlike an articulate, an actually poetic, Bald Eagle. When we undertake to honor him, we do indeed honor him as a poet, but also as a tutelary genius of the nation and so as a justification of our national soul."

Lionel Trilling
"A Speech on Robert Frost: A Cultural Episode"
Partisan Review XXVI
(Summer 1959) 445-52

"For Frost, Nature is really an image of the whole world of circumstances within which man finds himself. It represents what one might call 'the human situation.'…Modern poetry may be said to have begun as a fresh attempt to solve the problem posed by science. Imagism, for example, represents an attempt to confront the physical facts of reality in the most direct way. The Imagists tended to advocate an abandonment of overtly stated ideas and sentiments, because these stand between the poet and the actual things of his experience. Yet for the Imagists the proper content of poetry was not really things described but the sensations of perceiving them, and so, in an important way, Imagism represents a retreat. It limits poetry to the narrow range of sense impressions and thus concedes that the autonomous material beige with which science deals is outside the poet's range…It was to be Symbolism rather than Imagism which would provide the more satisfactory answer, and the Symbolist verse of Pound, Eliot, and Yeats represents the dominant mode of modern poetry, one which seems even more characteristic of the age in that its basic techniques are reflected in the major contemporary novelists….

Both Frost and the Symbolists tend to view reality through the perspective of contrasting levels of being. In Frost's nature poems this technique quite obviously results from his desire to recognize the validity of science. Thus, despite his indebtedness to Romanticism, he must be seen as essentially anti-Romantic. By

insisting on the gulf separating man and Nature, he directly opposes the Romantic attempt to bring the two together. While the Romantics sought a place for sensations, feelings, and values within physical nature, he conceives of the physical world as a distinct level of being. And just because of this, he is able to avoid the assumption that the physical world comprises the whole of reality. He can accept Nature as the limited, purely physical world which science depicts and yet place it within a larger context which includes the realities of purpose, feeling, and value. His method is to unify scientific Nature and the realm of human experience, not by blending them, but by viewing reality as a vista of distinct but parallel planes….

Where Frost juxtaposes rural and urban life, the regional and the cosmopolitan, the human and the natural, Eliot contrasts the social classes and holds up disparate historical periods for comparison. In both, too, the contrasting planes are not only different but parallel. They are held together and made to interpret each other by a dominant sense of analogy. Thus is *The Waste Land* one finds ranges of correspondence similar to those evoked by Frost's symbols….In Frost's poetry the regional world is kept quite separate from the everyday life of urban society, and Nature from the level of human experience; yet the separate contexts, though never allowed to merge, are held together by the contrast between them, which creates a constant reference from one to the other and an awareness of ironic parallels….

In his pastorals, Frost's dominant motive is to reassert the value of individual perception against the fragmenting of experience resulting from modern technology. They thus deal with one of the most fundamental concerns of twentieth-century thought. It is an issue which has had no small effect on Eliot's and Pound's efforts to develop a concept of culture. One sees it too as a motive in Yeats' thought. It is the central theme of countless modern works of social criticism. It is true that Frost's solution to this problem involves a withdrawal from the modern city to an agrarian world which belongs to the past. He has, in effect, found a retreat in one of those out-of-the-way places where technology has not yet complicated life by separating man from the land….

He does not turn his back on the world of today, nor does he advocate a 'return to the soil.' There is in his regionalism no call for action or program for social reform, and as a matter of fact he insists over and over again that no program will ever resolve the basic conflicts in human life. His withdrawal must be distinguished from agrarianism. It is the adopting of an artistic perspective. Regional New England--just because it is primitive and remote from modern life--is for him a medium for examining the complex urban world of today, a standard by which to evaluate it, and a context within which to discover the order underlying experience that modern life has obscured and confused….

Although it was under Georgian influence that Frost first began to write of regional life, the sentimental rusticity of their verse is quite unlike his vision of New England. The Georgians do no more than paint the rural scene; Frost discovered how to shape it into a mythic world within which he could express symbolically other ranges of experience. The Georgians retreat to the country is *only* an escape; Frost's is a fresh approach to reality….Frost's apparent lack of concern for the modern world as most readers know it is, then, a consequence of the indirection normal in pastoral and more broadly, in all poetry….

Trilling shows us that the terror Frost expresses is the terror which comes and must come with the birth of something new. It is the mark of a genuinely modern poetry….Failure to recognize the modernity of Frost's thought is largely due to the fact that his verse lacks the traits of style which seem characteristic of modern poetry. There is what one may call in a very general way a modern style, and although the more one compares poets--Eliot with Yeats or Auden with Cummings, for example--the more differences one sees, nevertheless they do share certain common qualities. Admittedly Frost's manner is different, but it would be absurd to claim that style (in the narrow sense) is the only standard. It is possible to write in the modern idiom and yet show little newness or originality in one's response to the contemporary world. And even among unquestionably fine modern poets one often finds the style a good deal more contemporary than the thought….

Frost's view of conceptualization and the role of symbols in human life reflects important strands of thought in modern philosophy, anthropology, and psychology. One feels that the poem could not have been written before the present century….While one must concede that Frost's style does not involve certain obvious, characteristically modern techniques, this does not mean that it is not modern in a fundamental

way. Style is the extension into language of a poem's basic structure, and Frost's style, growing as it does from the pastoral design of his verse, displays an indirection and analogical mode of thought which are much more fundamental to modern poetry than any combination of purely verbal devices. The question is not whether his style is modern in precisely the way that…Eliot's or Cummings' is, but whether it is modern in its own way--whether it reflects the temper of the age and serves as an idiom for dealing with its most urgent concerns….

The idea of Frost as a poet of the nineteenth century who has somehow got into the twentieth seems absurd when it is brought out into the open, but this phantom image of the poet persists, even in the minds of experienced readers, and it has done much to prevent an intelligent reading of his poems….The attempt to remake him as a metaphysical or Symbolist poet is perverse…It shows how desperately intelligent readers wish to escape from the distorted image of Frost foisted on us by popularizers and sentimental gentlemen who view modern poetry with horror. It is time to exorcize the phantom by recognizing Frost as the major figure in contemporary literature that he is. Whatever Frost's relation to his own age may be, his achievement, in the end, will be measured by the intrinsic value of the poems rather than their relevance to the contemporary world.

The kind of poetry he writes can best be understood by observing the method by which he has sought to make the present moment represent all other times, and the particular place he describes, the human situation as it has always existed. His essential technique is that of pastoral. He has explored wide and manifold ranges of being by viewing reality within the mirror of the natural and unchanging world or rural life. Pastoralism, whether in Frost or in the poets of the Arcadian tradition, will always at first appear to involve an escape from the world as we know, it, but actually it is an exploration upstream, past the city with its riverside factories and shipping, on against the current of time and change to the clear waters of the source."

John F. Lynen
"Frost as a Modern Poet"
The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost
(Yale 1960)

"As Frost suffers by comparison with Yeats, so does he suffer by comparison with Eliot…Frost rarely convinces us that for him the need for theme operates in a context larger than that of the single poem, that there is any real necessity for themes of wider extension than those provided by luck, by bent, by the bardic instinct. Again, we may detect a sense in which Frost is not really serious about his convictions, a sense in which he is finally unwilling really to follow his thought to a sustaining conclusion. He leaves himself outs--the drumlin woodchuck's 'strategic retreat'--and the result is that the tragic potential of *North of Boston* is never realized or repeated in the later books….

Frost will not commit himself. And without such commitment, Frost offers us not tragic acceptance--only the drumlin woodchuck's canny adjustment. It would be absurd to blame Frost for not being something that he is not, a man with a wholly coherent message. (The two masques look as though they have such a message, but, as we have seen, the message is more equivocal than it looks.) Yet Frost's apparent inability to find or invent a myth that would permit the development of sustained and sustaining themes, themes with a tragic potential, has had, I think, two unfortunate consequences for his art. On the one hand, there is the thinning out of his later writings, after North of Boston--the scattering of effects, the accelerating tendency to editorialize, to play the Yankee character, to destroy straw men, to be querulous or cranky or arch--the gestures of one who is not sure where he stands and who finds it increasingly difficult to make adequate compensation for the fundamental uncertainty. On the other hand, and complementary to that uncertainty, there is the tendency to value Frost as the author of certain good poems rather than as one who offers a body of work, an embodied vision of man…

Frost is important as a kind of American culture hero, as an index of certain persistent American characteristics…He expresses the chronic American belief that there exists an opposition between reality and mind and that one must enlist oneself in the party of reality.…Distrusting intelligence, emphasizing will, he offers us a world in which those difficulties that cannot be resolved by an exercise of the will

simply cannot be resolved, and had better be left alone…Frost's work is uneven. And yet in his best poems, his touch is sure."

George W. Nitchie
"A Momentary Stay Against Confusion"
Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost: A Study of the Poet's Convictions
(Duke 1960) 202-23

"It is most important to note that Frost allies himself with Emerson, not Whitman, thereby demonstrating that he has resisted the temptation (so fatal because so self-assuring) to take a way of poetry that only a person as tremendous as Whitman could take without losing his identity as poet. Even better than Emerson, Frost knows the dangers of too much inwardness…'Traditionalists' flee from the modern world because they have been there before.) Frost has no interest in being a specifically 'contemporary' poet—which is what Emerson felt *he* had to be, or perish. Moreover, in his poems Frost is master of all he surveys in a way Emerson would never allow himself to be. Frost knows himself as person so well, he can record the knowledge in such exacting detail, that he never has occasion to celebrate the more general and inclusive concept of self which is everywhere the efficient cause of Emerson's poetry….

At the heart of Frost's achievement lies his ability to consolidate the Emersonian mode, to adopt it on his own terms, and so make it a means whereby a certain stability and certitude, however limited, might be achieved….He has come to be a large poet (in a way, our most 'complete' poet), because he knows how small man is when he acknowledges the limitations within which he labors. Frost has been able to perfect his work as have none of his contemporaries….Reading Frost, many of us--finding ourselves in the end unable to go along with him and deny the world in which we live--must deny the world of a poet who will not live in ours with us. It is not so much that he does not speak or language, but that we do not, cannot, speak his….What finally gives the best poems their tremendous effectiveness is a sense of local detail so sharp, so fully controlled, so wholly the poet's own, as to make us know once and forever the gulf between his world and all others. Above all, Frost can call up a sense of place and of the working of an individual sensibility when limited by and therefore complementary to it….

Society does not exist as an immediately conditioning factor in Frost's poems....Frost addresses the urban reader most directly: the condition of survival is strategic withdrawal. And Frost's work is meant to occasion it. The sense of withdrawal in Frost is intensified in the generally anti-political poems which he began to write after the publication in 1923 of 'New Hampshire.' It culminates in the wry *Masque of Reason* and *Masque of Mercy*, published in 1945 and 1947….He has no need for the after-the-fact Transcendentalism toward which such a faith drove Emerson and Whitman. What is granted is a sense of the concrete, particular, bounded 'I,' anticipated only in the work of Emily Dickinson."

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 272-74, 279, 281-83

"If a great poet can be associated with a region, Frost must be placed in New England; but the fullest meaning of his poetry speaks for the nation and for mankind as a whole….He finds meaning through experience in New England, but that meaning is not purely local; he speaks of the individual yet universal concerns of man's role in the world and of the spiritual and physical demands made upon him. His attitude toward the world puts him in the tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Emily Dickinson; all three try to penetrate the veil of natural fact for the spiritual truth which it reflects. It is not surprising that his most frequent themes in his attempt to deal with this nature-spirit dualism are the juxtaposition of man and nature….

The need of balance between the outer world of experience and the inner world of vision is manifest in 'Birches,' in which the poet desires both to climb toward heaven and to be swung back to earth as the birch dips with his weight. This tension between ascent and descent, inner and outer is again present in 'West-Running Brook': a contrary thing in itself in a region where brooks run east to the sea, the west-running brook becomes a symbol of man and of all natural things that have a tendency to turn backward upon themselves, throwing, like the brook, a white wave back in the direction of their source. Frost's poetic

development is seen as early as *North of Boston*, in which all the poems are on New England themes and the dramatic cast of his verse is clear….As Frost entered old age, his concerns became more abstract and his metaphysics more obvious. The tendencies which were submerged in his earlier verse came to the surface…Frost began to ask ultimate questions in an outspoken manner; he became less the poet of nature and more the poet of mind.

Technically, Frost's poetry is built on what he calls 'sentence sounds' derived from colloquial speech; the accents and tones of the sentence sounds, combined with the beat of a metric pattern, create a tension within the line that is the structural counterpart of the metaphysical tension of ideas found in his best poems. Although he is equally at home with the short lyric, much of his poetry resembles the dramatic monologue perfected by Browning…Unlike most serious poets, he has found a wide popular audience, possibly because of the rustic and simple-seeming appearance of his work. His poetry, however, like Emily Dickinson's, is full of subtle ironies, terse, immediate images, and many levels of meaning."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"The famous poet…was prominently displayed at the inauguration of [President] John F. Kennedy. And although many of us who admire Robert Frost's poetry and enjoy Robert Frost's conversation and have not shared his political views may well be surprised to hear that he has *returned* to the Democratic fold, Frost's enthusiasm says a good deal about Kennedy's charm for some of the most interesting minds in the United States. During the campaign and afterwards, Kennedy certainly never hid his allegiance to the fundamental principles of the New Deal--which Robert Frost has always detested. Yet no sooner did the New Frontier get itself named (somewhat mechanically) than Robert Frost heralded 'an Augustan age of poetry and power, with the emphasis on power.' For Robert Frost to even think of himself as Virgil to Kennedy's Augustus in this new age of American power shows how deeply Kennedy not only affected some writers but encouraged them to feel a new confidence about America's role in the world."

Alfred Kazin
Contemporaries
(1924; Little, Brown/Atlantic Monthly 1962) 448

"Like the 'good Greek' that he is, Frost enjoyed forty years of obscurity; and he has now enjoyed more than forty years of fame….As for Frost's development as a poet, the bulk and the achievement of his *Collected Poems* (1949) should not be permitted to conceal three facts: that for two decades he wrote, discarded, and held onto the best of what remained until he was sure of it; that his rate of production has been sure, but slow, perhaps ten poems a year; and that one must speak cautiously of development because certain poems published later have been re-worked early poems. Nonetheless, one may distinguish certain progressions in Frost's themes, language, and form.

Though *A Boy's Will* takes its title from Longfellow's 'My Lost Youth' and echoes Shakespeare, Shelley, Keats, and Tennyson in diction that is often conventional…The lyrics are varied in form and the voice is often distinct and unmistakable…In *North of Boston*, Frost's most compact and intense volume…'The Death of the Hired Man,' 'Home Burial,' 'The Housekeeper'--are most of them tragic, and, as in 'Out, Out--,' with an element of 'revolt from the village' Naturalism, renew the whole tradition of pastoral poetry. Frost's characters are real, largely by virtue of their speech, and their conflicts within themselves, between each other, and with the New England world are intensely dramatic. Employing both monologue and dialogue forms, Frost might at this time have been saying to himself, as Henry James did, 'Dramatize! Dramatize!'…

Like Emily Dickinson…Frost is a 'synecdochist.' That is, the poet is a metaphor-maker, and possesses the 'freedom of unexpected connections.' He is also, though the fact is little recognized, an experimenter and expert in various poetic forms--odes, eclogues, satires, dramatic monologues and dialogues, masques--employing ballad meters, sonnets and sonnet variants, terza rima, heroic couplets, blank verse, and free invented forms. Perhaps this virtuosity has been partly concealed by his devotion to and success in the

'renewal of language,' his ability to turn his readers into listeners and speakers. He often uses words in their root-sense and makes serious puns, but it is his phrasing and sentencing idiomatically--not any use of dialect--that makes the poems speak on the page. His lines hover between regular meter and speech-rhythms, and he has distinguished in his own verse poems based on talk and poems based on incantation. His goal is Emerson's: 'Cut those words, and they would bleed.' Another element of this theory and practice is that, unlike Eliot or Yeats or Pound, he has often sought summations in particular poems, such as 'The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows…' Such summings-up, because they are memorable, like his distinctive humor, have led to Frost's popular acceptance, but they resemble the conclusions of Shakespeare's sonnets rather than the 'messages' from popular newspaper poems."

William M. Gibson & George Arms, eds.
Twelve American Writers
(Macmillan 1962) 652-53

"Soon after A Boy's Will appeared, Frost met Ezra Pound. Pound's own career was beginning to expand into many areas. Already for some years established in London, with several books to his credit, the young Pound was beginning to take on his role of instigator and innovator, and in 1913 was actively engaged in formulating rules for the Imagists--a 'school' with more experimental aims and interests than those of the Georgians, and he had already appointed himself foreign advisor to Harriet Monroe. Pound's review of *A Boy's Will* appeared in *Poetry* in May, 1913. Pound discovered, in Frost, a salutary attention paid to the truth, as well as compression and clarity of expression….Another American poet was helping to clear away the falsity and fustian of Victorian verse.

Pound's friendship with Frost was short-lived; the young enthusiast soon found that his older compatriot was intent on going his own way. But Pound expressed his admiration for Frost's rendering of 'the natural speech of New England' in a review of *North of Boston.*..Frost, in a period of extreme experimentation with form, continued to write conventionally, and in a manner which presented to the reader no prosodic difficulty of any kind. Again, Frost's poetry, at a time when symbol and myth had become important carriers of meaning, was allusive only in a restricted way; it offered few leads into elaborate subtlety; it did not encourage 'close' reading or fine-drawn explication. It stood outside those currents of avant-garde poetic theory which restlessly absorbed diverse ideas from many adjacent fields--those of anthropology, medical psychology, history, and religion. Finally, Frost's popularity with a large audience--a popularity, it is true, based on a very limited selection of his work--rendered the quality of his appeal suspect to those who believed with Edwin Muir 'that the imaginative writer today can be widely popular only by writing falsely.'

Frost's diction has none of the 'richness and virtuosity' characteristic of modern writing at large. But Frost's very limitation of means often leads the reader into the poet's most striking effects, and an inspection of his general poetic practice brings to light a very real power and control over language which is one basis of his incontestable originality. His mastery of formal poetics is remarkable from first to last; he is attained and meticulous craftsman. His lyric style is flexible, musical, and completely natural. His form, moreover, is remarkably varied and never seems in any way to have been cut to fit the emotion. Each poem, from short lyric to longer dramatic blank verse, has its own 'given' form, and the authenticity of the poet's gift is everywhere apparent….

Frost has put down, in 'The Figure a Poem Makes,' one of the most interesting and intelligible summations ever made by a poet of the genesis and progress of poetic composition. He describes the poet's ready passivity, open to the initial subconscious impulse, which must be undeviatingly followed and only lightly controlled, at the outset, by conscious ways and means. It is clear that Frost served a long technical apprenticeship. Actual influences, however, even in his early work, are difficult to trace. He had read, and admired, Edward Arlington Robinson…But there is a great difference between Robinson's occasional approximation of the colloquial and Frost's final success in fitting the 'cadences' of common speech to a regular verse pattern—perhaps his central contribution to modern poetic procedures…

He had worked in complete separation from the feeble and genteel American literary tendencies of his time, in the ten years from 1902 to 1912. His choice of blank verse proved to be exactly right for his special

purposes. Through this unrhymed five-beat iambic line--which, since the sixteenth century, had been established as the most workable long carrying-line in English--the American poet was given a measure of freedom. The New England manner of speech--at once laconic and meandering--could be caught into this pattern without distortion, and with completely natural emphasis. Frost had, indeed, instinctively put into practice an Imagist tenet ('the natural words in the natural order') before that tenet was formulated (around 1913) by the Imagists themselves. Certainly, at the time, a new, direct, and truth-telling attitude toward reality, as well as a complete refreshment of poetic diction and use of form, was in order, in poetry in English. The Romantic tradition--which had begun with Blake and ended with Keats--had become threadbare….

Frost's dialogues and monologues often resolve into talk so disarmingly natural that it seems to be overheard. This simplicity is by no means naïve, it involves a highly trained ear as well as the utmost probity of choice. 'The Pasture,' the lyric which served as an epigraph to *North of Boston*, written with a controlled and stilled simplicity, is a love song, among other things--surely one of the loveliest in the language….Frost's power of close and accurate description, in which all the senses are involved, at times approaches clairvoyance…Frost's experience implanted in him not only a dislike of supervised mechanical tasks, but a nightmare image of the machine as menace--an object to be viewed with fear and dread. The locomotive, the buzz saw, even the stones of the primitive grist mill, become, as it were, centers of evil force which override, kill and maim ('Out, Out--,' 'The Self-Seeker,' 'The Vanishing Red'). 'The Lone Striker' is the single poem which brings a textile mill into sight (with certain of its processes meticulously described)—but only as a trap which the young man in the poem must escape from at all costs. Frost is never concerned (as many poets and men of letters have shown themselves to be, since the beginning of the industrial revolution) with the blighting results of industry upon human beings in general. His is a personal feud, with the machine as adversary. 'The Egg and the Machine,' for example…

It is true that Frost's conservatism--a natural trait in those who live on the land, 'closely bound to the wheel of the seasons'--became more marked with the passage of the years…. Many of the poems written in these crucial years [the Great Depression of the 1930s] are bitterly opposed to the main tenets of the liberal thought of the time--particularly to collective action, of which even the extreme individualist, Thoreau, approved….Frost's apotheosis in his middle eighties--his final emergence as an ideal manifestation of American character as well as of American poetic genius--has resulted, on the whole, in a happy and beneficent relation between the poet and the population at large."

Louise Bogan
Major Writers of America II
(Harcourt 1962) 646-52

"The best of his poems are neither indulgences in homely philosophy nor wanderings in Romanticism. If anything, they are antipathetic to the notion that the universe is inherently good or delightful or hospitable to our needs. The symbols they establish in relation to the natural world are not, as in Transcendental poetry, tokens of benevolence. These lyrics speak of the hardness and recalcitrance of the natural world; of its absolute indifference to our needs and its refusal to lend itself to an allegory of affection; of the certainty of physical dissolution; but also of the refreshment that can be found through a brief submission to the alienness of Nature, always provided one recognizes the need to move on, not stopping for rest but remaining locked, alone, in consciousness."

Irving Howe (1963)
quoted by Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 294

"The theme of withdrawal from society into an idealized landscape is central to a remarkably large number of…the American books most admired nowadays…Again and again, the imagination of our most respected writers--one thinks of Cooper, Thoreau, Melville, Faulkner, Frost, Hemingway--has been set in motion by this impulse….It is difficult to think of a major American writer upon whom the image of the machine's sudden appearance in the landscape has not exercised its fascination….Jefferson points toward the work of Henry Thoreau, Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, and Robert Frost--all of whom would write 'versions of pastoral' in a distinctively American idiom….The difference between Gatsby's point of view

and Nick's illustrates the distinction, with which I began, between sentimental and complex pastoralism. Fitzgerald, through Nick, expresses a point of view typical of a great many twentieth-century American writers. The work of Faulkner, Frost, Hemingway and West comes to mind."

Leo Marx
The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America
(Oxford 1964) 10, 16, 132, 362

"This letter [from Frost to Louis Untermeyer in 1920] suggests a conflict in the marriage of RF and Elinor Miriam Frost: the sharp contrast between their religious views. RF regarded his wife's atheistical denials in a defensively light and jocose manner; but they troubled him deeply. He had heard her make such denials repeatedly, starting soon after the death of their first child on 8 July 1900. (See hints in 'Home Burial.') In later years, as she experienced other painful losses, she became more skeptical, more intensively bitter. For a brief time around 1900, RF was inclined to similar notions; the poem 'Stars' (published in A Boy's Will with the gloss, 'There is no oversight of human affairs') was written that year. But he did not maintain that attitude long. Even while his recurrent moods of skepticism and denial gave picturesque colorings to his heretical beliefs, he came to express profound religious affirmations with more and more frequency."

Lawrance Thompson, ed.
Selected Letters of Robert Frost
(New York 1964)

"On the whole his strength obviously lies in…themes of which the essential loneliness of Man, the juxtaposition of Man and Nature, the polarity of emotions and values, and the transitoriness of things in general, are possibly the most frequent and the best developed…Frost shifts the emphasis…from the subject to the object, that is, from the perceiver to the perceived; thus confronting a section of a landscape, an animal, or a plant, with a thoughtful observer in a way that precludes any superiority, sentimental or otherwise…makes for a feeling of definite togetherness….

This capacity for distributing thought and emotion equally between subject and object is, of course, inwardly connected with what may be called Frost's polarity, i.e., his power of holding opposing states of mind in union when evaluating an emotional or spiritual experience…. Polarity in movement, if that phrase does not appear too self-contradictory, is also the theme of the poem 'West-Running Brook,' where it appears in the twofold image of a brook in the east of the continent, but, contrary to the geographical situation, running west, and of the white wave flung backward on the black steam by a sunken rock. The two images become a symbol of existence in itself…

A very fine specimen…is the well-known poem 'Mending Wall,' in which the value of being alone and separate to oneself is set side by side with the wish for closer fellowship. The fact that the poet here adopts the communal attitude in the famous sentence: 'Something there is that doesn't love a wall,' as against the individualistic one of his neighbor: 'Good fences make good neighbors,' is only a further sign of the complexity of the fundamental problem. But the attraction of this kind of poetry springs largely from the unobtrusiveness with which opposed conceptions are interwoven and juxtaposed."

Heinrich Straumann
American Literature in the Twentieth Century
(Harper Torchbooks 1965) 161-62, 164

"He attained personal and poetic maturity before the revolution of 'modernism' set in, lived and wrote through and beyond it, and died early in 1963 as a sort of semiofficial poet laureate. Comment since his death has tended to follow one or the other of two quite different approaches to conclusions that have in common a scaled-down estimate. If the critic likes Frost and wants to save him as a major poet from being destroyed by the inanities and duplicities of the popular image Frost himself labored to create, he is likely to discover that Frost wrote some of the darkest poems ever written by any American….

Frost is an Emersonian, we are told, but an Emersonian with no faith in the Soul, so that 'self-reliance' becomes in him mere stubbornness and idiosyncrasy resting on a willful narrowing of the sympathies. Lacking a coherent view of Nature, he is unable to tell us why he finds it so important. He keeps hinting

that has some secret source of strength, but he refuses to let anyone else in on the secret. In him Transcendental vision is reduced to a canniness and the Emerson metaphysic of growth to a shrewdly calculated strategy aimed at survival….Frost's world gets its special characteristics from its unique combination of closeness to and distance from Emerson's world….In a great many of Frost's poems, particularly in those published before his wife's death in 1938--that is, up through *A Further Range*--we find ourselves in a diminished version of an Emersonian world. The familiar Emersonian emphases are here--the concentration on the individual searching for himself and for meaning, on Nature as a resource, on immediate experience as a way to some kind of truth. But the mood is autumnal, the tone ironic or noncommittal, and the very categories of thought that are being played with have been scaled down in size. Emerson's 'Woodnotes' for instance becomes Frost's 'The Need of Being Versed in Country Things.'…

There is so much Emerson in Frost that it would seem very curious that it has not been more widely noticed--were it not for two considerations: Frost's masking proclivities, and the fact that most readers of Frost today, including some of his best-known critics, 'know' Emerson only at second hand, know only somebody's idea of Emerson, or an essay or two read many years ago….Emersonian of sorts though he was on so many matters, Frost felt obliged to take the totally non-Emersonian tack of working out his own version of the 'impersonal' view of art that Pound and Eliot had popularized by the time Frost began to be widely recognized….

To keep his verse objective and graceful, the poet would give his verse the sound of sense, and speak through a variety of masks—the mask of the literate back-country farmer, the mask of the detached observer of his own emotions, the mask of the touch realist who knows too much to be taken in by any romanticisms, and then, in the latter third or so of the career, the mask of the shrewd, wisely cynical, but at the same time cherishing, sage. These were Frost's equivalents of the Prufrockian mask of the early Eliot…. Late in life, when the recognition for which he had had to wait so long, so very long, had become world-wide fame with a large admixture of adulation, Frost dropped his masks more and more frequently. There was no longer the need to guard the secrets of the heart when everywhere he was recognized as *the* American poet, and more than a poet, the embodiment of the best in the American character and a sage of the first rank. His last volume, *In The Clearing*, dispenses with masks entirely. He had no need for them anymore….

Meanwhile, from *West-Running Brook* (1928) onward, what Frost was *against* had become clearer and clearer. He was against scientific positivism or 'scientism' ('The Bear,' 'The White-Tailed Hornet,' 'At Woodward's Gardens'), against philosophic rationalism ('It's knowing what to do with things that counts'), against Naturalism as a philosophy, especially in its reductive forms with its 'downward comparisons' ('The White-Tailed Hornet'). He was against liberals and planners and New Dealers of all stripes. Modern society was a kind of hell ('In Dives Dive') in which both the true artist and the sensitive man could endure only by exploring to the limit the possibilities of disaffiliation and disengagement ('One Step Backward Taken').

Frost's conservative--'reactionary' would be the more accurate term if it did not carry for most people so heavy a load of disapproval--his conservative views on social, political, and economic matters were even more pronouncedly conservative in private than in the verse, but a good many of the poems written between 1930 and 1950 speak out clearly enough ('Build Soil,' 'On Our Sympathy with the Under Dog,' 'An Equalizer,' 'On Taking from the Top to Broaden the Base,' 'The Planners'). While none of those I have cited, or the many others like them, is among the great poems, those who think of themselves as 'liberal' ought to try to resist the temptation to use these poems to belittle Frost. It is worth remembering, for one thing, that Frost's individualism, which so often is hard to distinguish from heartlessness, has a long tradition behind it…Are we quite sure that we can have a redeemed society without a majority of redeemed individuals?

In the last decade of his life Frost moved closer to the New Testament in his religious thinking. Now, far from wishing to hide the light he had found in the clearing, he took pains to give it the greatest prominence….But by the time of 'The Figure a Poem Makes' in 1939 he was blending Emersonian terms like 'revelation' and 'wisdom' with such apparently Modernist ideas as that the initial image predestines the final outcome of the poem, controlling every movement in it. But the concession to newer fashions of

thought were not so much a masking as they were an adaptation of Emersonian thinking to the new situation. Emerson had spoken of the artist as building better than he knew, and Frost spoke of the 'outcome' of the poem as 'unforeseen' but 'predestined.'… [With Frost] we have a body of poetry that belongs with the best ever written by any American, a body of work perhaps as permanent as, and certainly very much like, Emily Dickinson's.

Frost must have been hard to live with, but he was tough and crafty, and he and his talent endured. We are the richer for the poems he forged in pain and loss and fear--and in determination to survive. In an age hostile to almost all that he most deeply believed and felt, he not only continued to write but won outstanding success, first with the anthologists who reflected the public taste, then at last, at the end of a very long and very difficult life, even with critics of the left, who found a part of his work 'great' despite his politics; and with New Critics of the right, who thought 'masks' essential in poetry and found his use of them admirable poetically. Both left and right, of course, deplored his 'Emersonianism,' which, as a poet hoping to be as tough and enduring as an ovenbird, he had long hidden and disguised as best he could."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 293-96, 300, 305, 314-21, 327

"Robert Frost is the best known of our modern American poets: His poems find their way into high school textbooks and into popular memory far more quickly than do the poems of his contemporaries. In part, Frost's popularity may be due to the apparent simplicity of his subject matter, but it is surely more profoundly due to his uncanny feeling for what he called 'sentence sounds,' the sounds and syntactic patterns into which the American language naturally falls. Frost's lines are remembered without effort…. Frost's gift for an intimate lyricism was learned in part from Whitman…Whitman's patriotism, too, finds a kindred echo in Frost's faith in the continuity of American principle…And Emerson, the ancestor of both Whitman and Frost, stands behind Frost's resolute Transcendental confidence that we can stay--anchor--our minds on something like a star….

Frost's poems tend to fall, formally speaking, into two groups: the long blank-verse poems like 'Home Burial,' often embodying some form of New England rural suffering, and the short, exquisite, rhymed lyrics, including philosophical sonnets like 'Design.' The narratives, which reopen a vein already worked by Edwin Arlington Robinson, represent the strains of life lived under pinched, emotionally thwarting conditions. They are a powerful corrective to the European pastoral tradition that represents Nature as bountiful and gracious and man's life in Nature as healing and joyful. They are also a corrective to the optimistic Emersonian view of Nature as an authentic teacher. After reading the harsh accusations in 'Home Burial,' no reader can continue to think Nature or domesticity merciful. The troglodytic farmer in 'Mending Wall' is more a savage than a noble savage.

Frost's songlike lyrics ('Reluctance' or 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening') stem directly from the most musical of English poems (Shakespeare's songs, Keats's odes, Shelley's choruses); his more philosophical lyrics are given their sternness by Horace and Lucretius. Frost's long reading in the Latin poets is visible not merely in his use of hendecasyllabics (eleven-syllable lines) in 'For Once, Then, Something,' but more powerfully in his pre-Christian view of nature. In repudiating the Christian tradition of a sacramental Nature in favor of a Nature enigmatic ('The Most of It'), elusive…or unreadable ('Time Out'), Frost adds to his Nature poetry a metaphysical element of philosophical commentary….

Frost represents a powerful antithesis to the Modernist poetic represented by Pound and Eliot. As they face Europe, he faces America; as they assume and display learning, he is only obliquely allusive; as they write free verse, he writes in meter; as they lament a fragmented culture, he records a culture that can still muster a living, if forgotten, tradition. No one has better incorporated American speed into verse….In his grimly comic, sometimes even mischievous poetry, Frost preserved a vein of American humor that we are more likely to associate with prose like Twain's. And in his essays on poetry--aphoristic, pithy, and profound--Frost is one of the best theorists of a skeptical, questioning modern poetry that settles for no easy answers."

David Minter

The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper 1987) 1501-03

"He too made ruthless and sometimes childish attacks on anyone who seemed to threaten his primacy. In reviewing Lawrence Thompson's biography of Frost, James Dickey said of him, 'No one who reads this book will ever again believe in the Frost Story, the Frost myth, which includes the premises that Frost the man was kindly, forbearing, energetic, hardworking, good neighborly, or anything but the small-minded, vindictive, ill-tempered, egotistic, cruel, and unforgiving man he was until the world designed to accept at face value his estimate of himself.' Bernard DeVoto, who had worshiped him, put all that into simpler words. 'You're a good poet,' he said after Frost had carried jealousy to the point of setting fire to a fistful of papers in order to disrupt a poetry reading by his rival Archibald MacLeish--'You're a good poet, Robert, but you're a bad man.' Frost agreed with him in a letter to De Voto that tried and failed to effect a reconciliation…. In his work he was the opposite of a scoundrel."

Malcolm Cowley
The Portable Malcolm Cowley
ed. Donald W. Faulkner
(Viking/Penguin 1990) 542

"He was invited to read a poem at John F. Kennedy's inaugural ceremonies. Because of this popularity and because of his many public readings, where he invariably presented himself as a sagacious patriarch, some of Frost's admirers were upset by Lawrence Thompson's definitive, three-volume biography, published between 1966 and 1976, which revealed that the poet had been a vain, vindictive, inordinately ambitious, and frequently cruel man in his private life who had caused great suffering to his family and friends. Thompson's biography also emphasized that Frost's public and poetic stoicism had sometimes masked acute depression, self-doubt, and guilt and that he had suffered many personal miseries and tragedies--the insanity of his sister Jeanie, the deaths of his daughter Marjorie and his wife in 1934 and 1938, and the suicide of his only son in 1940….

He was able to communicate both the limitations and virtues of this rural, isolated, older America to the urban and academic Americans who read his poems and attended his readings. Poetically, also, Frost can be considered a link between an older era and modern culture, and his relationship to literary Modernism was an equivocal one. His early poems in *A Boy's Will*…are similar to those of nineteenth-century American fireside poets such as Longfellow…And many of his mature poems have more in common with works of William Wordsworth or Robert Browning than they do with those of his contemporaries T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, or William Carlos Williams.

Frost eschewed free verse and wrote his poems in traditional rhymes and metrical forms like blank verse. Moreover, like his popular New England contemporary, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Frost wrote many poems which are dramatic narratives and can be appreciated, like prose fiction, for their characterizations and plot development. On the other hand, Frost did share the Modernist respect for spoken language. His poems are free of the ornate, poetic diction which was so common in nineteenth-century poetry, and one of his most impressive achievements as a poet was his ability to combine colloquial speech patterns with traditional verse forms.

Intellectually, Frost was the heir of the nineteenth-century Romantic individualism exemplified by Emerson and Thoreau. Like those writers he assumed it was possible for the lone individual to question and work out his or her own relationships to God and existence--preferably in a natural setting and with a few discrete references to Christianity and Transcendentalism."

James Guimond
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D. C. Heath 1990) 1100-01

Michael Hollister (2015)