

FROST IN LITERARY HISTORY

Robert Frost

(1874-1963)

“He was writing poetry before modern literature had really begun to happen. In fact, Frost grew up in a time when there was no commanding poetic voice in America. Whitman was still alive, still writing, but the force of his career was spent and he had become the Good Gray Poet. Emily Dickinson, the one vital spirit in American poetry, was significantly enough unheard and unknown, having chosen to write her poetry to posterity instead of addressing it to a contemporary audience. In the wake of the Schoolroom Poets, who were dying one by one, there simply was no poetic audience to listen and no voice to speak during the twenty-six years Frost spent in the nineteenth century....

Frost's New England is not the alien virgin wilderness occupied by savages and subdued by Puritans; instead it is second growth timber come back to claim land which has been lived over and left behind within the memory of living men; it is thus a grand metaphor for all the past which man throws aside as being at once unpromising and unprofitable. The poet literally enters this abandoned landscape--human because it has been not only explored but also experienced, still retaining the domestic scars beneath its wilderness--and reclaims it for us all. The result of this imaginative enterprise which converts space to property is a relentless self-possession, bringing into the full range of consciousness as much of that half-remembered life as possible....

At the precise moment when the nineteenth-century political order was collapsing into the violence of the twentieth century, Frost emerged from obscurity into the foreground of American poetry, where he has remained for almost fifty years.... While Frost came to be praised and published by the very editors against whom Pound had railed, Pound pursued his embattled way to become one of the chief forces of modern literature. As Frost became more closely identified with a large and relatively unsophisticated audience, Pound increasingly alienated himself from his American origins and by dint of effort and imagination helped create a relatively small but highly disciplined and articulate audience of his own. What Pound, and particularly Eliot after him, succeeded in doing was to create a poetry which aroused new attitudes toward poetry itself. By being critics as well as poets, they inspired a generation of new poetry and new criticism....

Eliot became the figure around whom the force of the new poetry mobilized. Both his poetry and his critical pronouncements had about them an authority which by 1930 dominated the literary scene. Though Frost wrote steadily and reached a wider and wider range of listeners, he remained outside the passionate ring of new believers. Unlike Eliot, who seemed to undergo evolution and reorganization with each new poem, and unlike Pound who concentrated all his disparate self in a devotion toward a single poem of epic scope, Frost seemed to harden into a static figure. Though every one of his poems might be a new creation of himself, it was always the same self being created--the old 'character' who had first appeared in 'Mending Wall,' the opening poem of *North of Boston*. It is not surprising that this character who emerged, but who could not develop and who seemed curiously untouched by the drift of modern poetry, should have come to seem almost quaint and old-fashioned by 1930.

During the Twenties, Eliot--creating the illusion that he was moving through stages on a journey toward some kind of truth--had left the emptiness of Prufrock's world, passed through 'The Waste Land,' and turned from the poetry of 'despair' toward the poetry of 'belief.' In the same period, Frost, in *New Hampshire* (1923) and again in *West-Running Brook* (1928), began to create the illusion of a New England farmer poet writing the poetry of opinion. While Eliot was discovering symbols for his age in the ancient myths of creation and fertility, Frost was creating the myth of Robert Frost.

When, during the Thirties, poetry discovered a whole new reality in the political liberalism of the time, Frost became even more removed from the intellectual center of things. He seemed stubbornly--even querulously--conservative [politically incorrect], going so far as to raise a dissenting voice against Franklin

Roosevelt and the New Deal, sounding in 'Build Soil' (1932) like a member of the Republican Party [rather than the Democratic Party], and directing more and more Yankee wit against socialism in government. At the very moment when the New Criticism gained enough momentum to achieve a distinct identity, Frost seemed farthest from the wave of the future.

This divergence between Frost and the intellectuals in the years before World War II resulted not so much in harsh criticism of Frost's work as in complete absence of criticism. He was simply ignored or dismissed as being unworthy of serious consideration. There are many survivors of that era who still have difficulty believing that he is a poet, insisting that he is really nothing more than a cracker-barrel versifier speaking with a pronounced New England accent. They remember with a resentment which the years have not assuaged the hostile attacks upon modern poetry launched in the name of Frost's poetry--and indeed Frost's defenders did incline to use his poetry as a defense perimeter within which to find solace. Not without reason, many who had failed to fall under Frost's spell did come to see the Frost contingent as a cult of unreasoning worshipers seeking protection from an indulgent god...when Richard Thornton in 1937 made the first collection of Frost criticism he wisely entitled the volume *Recognition of Robert Frost*."

James M. Cox, ed.

Introduction

Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays
(Prentice-Hall/Twentieth-Century Views 1962) 1-5