

LEFTISTS ATTACK FROST (1930s)

Robert Frost

(1874-1963)

“Skepticism and individualism did not sit well with the new breed of leftist critics in the 1930s, for the most part men much younger than Frost and [Wallace] Stevens. Both poets brought out new volumes of verse during the Depression: in 1935 Stevens’s *Ideas of Order* and in 1936 Frost’s *A Further Range*. These books set the critics railing against everything they perceived as irrelevant to the current crisis in the world... Robert Frost’s *A Further Range* came in for even severer criticism from the leftist critics [than Steven’s book]. The attack had begun even before the book’s publication when Newton Arvin reviewed Edwin Arlington Robinson’s posthumously published *King Jasper*, for which Frost had written an introduction, in the 8 January 1936 issue of the *New Republic*. Criticizing Frost’s praise of Robinson’s refusal ‘to use poetry as a vehicle of grievances against the un-Utopian state,’ Arvin found in Frost’s attitude ‘a cant of skepticism, a complacency of the pessimist.’ Arvin and other leftist critics were calling for a literature that would voice its support for revolutionary class struggle and speak up for the rights of the masses.

When *A Further Range* came out the following June these critics--led by Arvin--were prepared. Writing for the *Partisan Review*, Arvin asserted that Frost was not, as many had said, the voice of all New England but only that of ‘the New England of nasalized negations, monosyllabic uncertainties, and non-committal rejoinders.’ Rather than representing the New England that had given birth to the militant reformers of the nineteenth century, Frost was the ‘laureate’ of ‘Yankee renunciation.’ Horace Gregory, in the *New Republic*, carried the attack still further, asserting that Frost was not the inheritor of the great New England tradition of Emerson and Whittier, because he refused ‘to carry an unwelcome load of social responsibility.’ When Frost did venture into political commentary in his poems, Gregory said, ‘his wisdom may be compared with that of Calvin Coolidge.’ R. P. Blackmur, in the *Nation*, wrote that Frost was at heart, an easygoing versifier of all that comes to hand, and hence never lacks either a subject or the sense of its mastery’--not a true poet but a ‘bard,’ who promises escape, not confrontation. The harshest criticism came from the *New Masses*, where Rolfe Humphries, in a review titled ‘A Further Shrinking,’ wrote, ‘There is an aspect of Robert Frost which criticism can dismiss with objurgation; where you call him a reactionary ----, or a counter-revolutionary ---- ---- ----, you have, in essence, said it all.’

Frost’s reaction to such criticism was rage and anxiety. But he was not without his defenders, most notably Bernard DeVoto. In January 1938 DeVoto published ‘The Critics and Robert Frost’ in *Saturday Review of Literature*. He began by thumping all of Frost’s detractors, from Amy Lowell onward. He called Blackmur’s assessment ‘one of the most idiotic reviews since the invention of movable type. The monkeys would have to tap typewriters throughout eternity to surpass it, and Mr. Blackmur may regard his immortality as achieved.’ Then DeVoto defended Frost against the attacks of the left-wing critics by asserting that he was ‘the only pure proletarian poet of our time. His is the only body of poetry of this age which originates in the experience of humble people, treated with the profound respect of identification, and used as the sole measure of the reality and value of experience.’ DeVoto also accused the critics of misconstruing Frost’s comic mode: ‘Much of the impatience that one kind of critic feels for him comes from his antic willingness to make jokes about the verities. The pure literary thinker will permit truth no handmaiden but solemnity.... It is besides a traditional habit of Yankees to say less than they mean, to say it lightly, and to let any fool go uncorrected who therefore takes them for fools’.... Neither Frost’s nor Stevens’s reputations can be said to have suffered much as a result of the attacks of the 1930s.”

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