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Introduction to Robert Frost

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As much as we may have prized Robert Frost's poems for their technical dexterity, enchanting images, apt tropes, and deft turns of phrase, we have very imperfectly understood the ideas and beliefs that inform his work. This situation is partly of his doing. Unlike such other modern poets as William Butler Yeats, Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and T. S. Eliot, Frost generally refrained from formal self-commentary. He did not produce a significant body of criticism or auto-criticism that invited and facilitated the interpretation of his thought. "I write no prose and am scared blue at any demand on me for prose," he tells John Freeman in an undated letter from the mid-1920s. Likewise, in 1962, the year before his death, he declines a request for an article about the Cold War, saying that "articles seem nothing I can undertake. . . . My limit seems to be verse and talk." To be sure, Frost wrote a handful of short essays, but, by and large, these pieces are occasional—public addresses, prefaces for books, and the like. Although they bristle with wit and insight, they do not elaborate a personal mythology, develop a theory of the imagination, announce a literary movement, advocate a novel prosody, or mine the literary past for materials to energize the poetic present.

Even if Frost had written more prose than he did, it is uncertain whether we would have gained a surer purchase on his ideas since his background and education had encouraged him to be cautious, tactful, and reticent. He adhered to the Yankee code that it is as unwise as it is unmannerly to parade our deepest feelings openly or to force our convictions on others. One suspects that he agreed with the protagonist of “The Generations of Men,” who, discussing with a cousin their common ancestors, observes,

But don't you think we sometimes make too much
Of the old stock? What counts is the ideals
And those will bear some keeping still about.

Frost's intellectual guardedness also reflects his belief that much in life is unknowable and his alarm at people who demand easy answers to complex questions. Like Emily Dickinson and Herman Melville, he felt that nature itself resists assaults on its ultimate secrets. In “For Once, Then, Something,” he describes looking down a well and being on the verge of identifying, beneath the water's surface, a shiny object—“a something white, uncertain/Something more of the depths”—when a droplet strikes and blurs the pool, as if to preserve its modesty and privacy: “Water came to rebuke the too clear water.” Similarly, in “A Passing Glimpse,” he remarks, “Heaven gives its glimpses only to those/Not in position to look too close.” No one welcomed more than Frost perceptive and open-minded curiosity, but he was at pains to distinguish this quality from the grasping, exhaustive scrutiny that endeavors to milk every last drop of meaning from a relationship, an experience, or a poem. “Easy does it,” he says of his work while reading it to an audience in Berkeley in 1956. “Don't get any more out of it than you

have to. Don't press it. Let it do it to you." And again: "I never want to be thorough with anything as delicate as a poem. Close. I get as close as I can to it. But not thorough."

Frost's reserve is also connected to his view of the function of poetry. Frost believes that poetry, though possessing traits that link it to philosophy, history, and science, has its own way of encountering and making sense of the world. For him, the truths poetry communicates are human and comprehensive, not partisan and dogmatic. To use the example he adduces in his preface to Edwin Arlington Robinson's *King Jasper*, poets have less to do with grievances than with grief. And so far as Frost is concerned, the purpose of the individual poem is not to expound fact or doctrine, but to attempt a fluid, existential engagement with experience. "It begins in delight and ends in wisdom," he says in "The Figure a Poem Makes." "Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting." A poem may ultimately produce, no less than a work of religion, economics, or chemistry, "a clarification of life." But even then, the poetic clarification will be, according to Frost, "not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but . . . a momentary stay against confusion." (It is significant that the only times Frost's muses desert him are when he goes against his Aristotelian principles and native inclination, and, in such poems as "Build Soil," ventures to be didactic. He had many talents, but, his excellent "Lesson for Today" notwithstanding, he was not suited for public satire in the way that, for instance, Martial and Juvenal or John Dryden and Jonathan Swift were.)

A final reason for Frost's circumspection is that, as much as he may have wished to be understood, he felt the natural human disinclination to open up to a world that is not

always sympathetic or supportive. As he puts it in the first two stanzas of “Revelation,” a lyric from his very first book:

We make ourselves a place apart
 Behind light words that tease and flout,
But oh, the agitated heart
 Till someone really find us out.

’Tis pity if the case require
 (Or so we say) that in the end
We speak the literal to inspire
 The understanding of a friend.

Although the feeling Frost describes is virtually universal, it pierced him with special poignancy. The early death of his bright but unstable father, and the family’s consequent dependence on the charity of his paternal grandparents, appear to have created feelings of personal and social insecurity that never entirely left him. Even in his later years, long after he had become a literary celebrity, he confessed he could not enter a bank without trembling, for fear of being found out. Further, if most of us are sometimes loath to “speak the literal to inspire/The understanding of a friend,” such a course is doubly problematical for poets, who trade less in the literal than in the metaphoric. Frost was a poet. The furthest he could or would go was to plant his ideas and beliefs in his poems, blending them with image and dramatic context, where they might work quietly and indirectly on the sensitive and unhurried reader.

Yet Frost's poems are wonderfully accessible, and if we misconstrue him, the cause cannot simply be his reluctance to digest for us his aims, ideals, and motives. For a fuller explanation, we must look to another quarter—a quarter Peter J. Stanlis brilliantly illuminates. As Stanlis shows, Frost was a dualist, and a key reason we have misunderstood him is that we have not sufficiently appreciated how deeply this philosophical outlook pervades his writing and thinking. (Dualism, we will remember, refers to the theory that reality is constituted of independent principles, or pairs of independent principles, such as good and evil, spirit and matter, particularity and wholeness. Monism, in contrast, posits that reality is explicable in terms of a single principle; and monism commonly takes one of two forms—idealistic or materialistic—the first holding that mind or spirit is the ultimate principle, the second that matter is the ultimate principle.)

Such is the strength of Stanlis's thesis that many of us will find it compelling even before we peruse the impressive analysis and meticulous documentation with which he supports it. No sooner, that is, do we consider the proposition that Frost is a dualist than we think of all those poems of his involving, to use a phrase he employs in his introduction to Sarah Cleghorn's *Threescore*, "things in pairs ordained to everlasting opposition." We think of "After Apple-Picking" and "Birches," which juxtapose the claims of earth with those of heaven. We think of "The Death of the Hired Man," where the husband Warren argues, in the interest of strict justice, that he and his wife are not obliged to shelter the feckless Silas, while the wife Mary pleads that they should do just that in the name of mercy. We think of "Love and a Question," which contrasts personal

desire with charitable self-sacrifice. Or we think of “Mending Wall,” in which communal engagement debates protective isolation.

Moreover, such poems are dualistic not only in structure, but in spirit. They do not raise and resolve questions. Instead, they explore problems which most of us must address at one time or another, but for which we will probably never find answers that are true or just under all circumstances. Such poems examine alternatives rather than take sides between them. They dramatize conflicts between opinions or outlooks that are, though sharply opposed, more or less equally valid or comprehensible.

Frost is apparently thinking of this aspect of his work when, in his *Paris Review* interview, he objects to critics who—citing lines from his poetry without referring to the dialectical context in which they may be embedded—mistake provisional statements for expressions of absolute belief. Illustrating this misguided procedure, he speaks of critics who assume that he is anti-New Deal on the basis of things like the bitter definition of home that Warren gives in “The Death of the Hired Man”: “Home is the place where, when you have to go there,/They have to take you in.” While not gainsaying the legitimacy of Warren’s opinion, Frost stresses that it is, in the poem, immediately balanced by Mary’s more clement definition: “I should have called it/Something you somehow haven’t to deserve.” As Frost says of Mary’s statement, “That’s the New Deal, the feminine way of it . . . Very few have noticed that second thing; they’ve always noticed the sarcasm, the hardness of the male one.”

We might note, as an aside, that no statement in Frost’s poetry has been more frequently misappropriated from its dualistic context than “Good fences make good neighbors.” A recent and striking instance of this was provided by United States Senator

Jeff Sessions, who used the statement to advocate the construction of a colossal barrier along the border of Mexico and United States. Admittedly, good fences can promote neighborliness, but one wishes that the senator had given more thought, as the narrator of “Mending Wall” recommends, to what he was proposing to wall in or wall out, not to mention to whom he was like to give offense.

So immediately persuasive is Stanlis’s thesis that we may ask ourselves why we have not perceived Frost’s dualism more clearly before now. The obvious explanation is that few of us bring philosophical training to our reading of poetry, such training being irrelevant to our appreciation of most of the essential beauties and benefits of fine verse. There is, however, another and deeper answer to the question.

Poetic theory and practice, from the eighteenth century forward, are largely involved with or expressive of monism, and we expect, without necessarily being aware of our expectation, that our poets will be monists. Romantic and modern aesthetics are themselves monistic, to the extent that they derive from the transcendental idealism that Immanuel Kant articulated and that writers like Friedrich Wilhelm von Schelling and Samuel Taylor Coleridge developed with special reference to the arts. This tradition infuses the poetry of our nation, which was itself founded in the Romantic era. We receive the tradition in the poetic theory of Ralph Waldo Emerson—whose pantheistic transcendentalism emphasizes the spiritual unity of all creation—and in the poetic practice of Emerson’s chief disciple, Walt Whitman. The tradition is subsequently extended, in different ways, in the work of Pound, Eliot, Williams, and (most influentially) Stevens in his post-*Harmonium* phase. Granted, our literature has produced a trenchant critic of monistic philosophy in general and monistic idealism in particular.

This is William James, under whose spell Frost fell while a special student at Harvard in the 1890s and whom Frost described as his “greatest inspiration” there, despite never taking an actual class from James. But on the whole, we have tended to agree with Emerson’s assertion in “The Transcendentalist” that our intellectual options are those offered by monism: “As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists.”

This, in any case, is the mindset we have brought to bear on Frost. We have regarded him as either a transcendental (idealist) monist or a materialist monist. For the most of his career, he was cast in the former role, largely because his stage presence suggested an avuncular bard who embodied the values of the literary New England of Emerson and Thoreau. Late in Frost’s life, this situation changed when many began to recognize what thoughtful readers had all along known: he was more complicated than his public image suggested, and currents of anguish, loneliness, and self-doubt ran beneath the beautiful surfaces of his poems. With this shift, critics refigured Frost as a materialist monist, a poet acquainted with desert places and desolate nights devoid of spiritual presence or transcendence. This reinterpretation was epitomized by Lionel Trilling’s famous address at a celebration of the poet’s eighty-fifth birthday. “The universe that he conceives,” Trilling said on that occasion, “is a terrifying universe. Read the poem called ‘Design’ and see if you sleep the better for it. Read ‘Neither Out Far nor In Deep,’ which often seems to me the most perfect poem of our time, and see if you are warmed by anything in it except the energy with which emptiness is perceived.”

As Stanlis explains, Frost tried to counter these monistic interpretations and to affirm his dualism. Although he admired and generously praised Emerson’s poems, he

believed Emerson's transcendentalism to be ethically naïve. Frost's reservations are evident in his remarks on receiving in 1958 the Emerson-Thoreau Medal from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Having affectionately characterized Emerson as "a cheerful Monist, for whom evil does not exist, or if it does exist, needn't last forever," he adds, "A melancholy dualism is the only soundness." And although Frost appreciated that the materialist interpretations of his work were corrective, he did not think they were correct, and he rejected them along with the idealist interpretations. This twin rejection is implicit in a letter he wrote to Lawrance Thompson, his official biographer, in the wake of Trilling's address. Citing a phrase from "Uriel," one of his favorite poems by Emerson, Frost says,

Did Trilling have something the other night? . . . At least he seemed to see that I am as strong on badness as I am on goodness. Emerson's defect was that he was of the great tradition of Monists. He could see the "good of evil born" but he couldn't bring himself to say the evil of good born. He was an Abominable Snowman of the top-lofty peaks. . . . I couldn't go as far as that because I am a Dualist.

It is sadly characteristic of the misinterpretations that have pursued Frost that Thompson could not or would not absorb the poet's explanation of his philosophical orientation. Re-reading Thompson's biography today, one is struck as much by his misunderstanding of Frost's thought and work as one is by his malice toward Frost himself. Further, reading between the lines, one sees that Frost and Thompson fell out in the later years of their acquaintance partly because the poet came to realize that the biographer did not grasp his poetry or comprehend his intellectual background and

religious beliefs. (Although the picture of Frost that Thompson presents in his biography is too confused and blinkered to characterize easily, it can perhaps be described as a compound of the two monistic interpretations: he appears to see Frost as a transcendentalist driven by moral-psychological disturbances over to The Dark Side.)

Thanks to the work of a number of recent scholars, many of Thompson's misrepresentations of Frost the man have been rectified, and we now have Stanlis's splendid book, which gives us a rich and revelatory analysis of Frost's poetry and thought. Frost says in his address on Emerson, "Emerson's name has gone as a poetic philosopher or as a philosophical poet, my favorite kind of both"; and Stanlis, drawing on a lifetime's study of Frost and on his long friendship with him, shows us the poet as a philosopher in the true sense of word—a lover of wisdom. Here we encounter a Frost who was not only a superb writer, but also a man deeply and intelligently engaged with the larger scientific, social, political, educational, and religious issues of his time.

Stanlis's discussion of Frost's dualism will lay to rest many myths, chief among them the one, generated by Thompson and others, that Frost was politically or socially reactionary. The truth is that Frost simply believed, as a dualist, that evil existed and probably would always exist; and he was therefore skeptical of the utopian movements of the first half of the twentieth century, and resisted their calls to commit all our resources, including the arts, to the service of new political or spiritual dispensations. He believed passionately in liberty, and his work contains some of sharpest and most sympathetic portraits of the working poor in all of modern poetry; but—again, as a dualist—he believed liberty was meaningless or even vicious without the stability and order of statutes and institutions. His politics, which mix liberal and conservative elements, may

be best suggested by that stirring passage in the second stanza of Katherine Lee Bates's lovely hymn "America the Beautiful":

America, America,
God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law.

In this respect, Frost resembles, as Stanlis indicates, Edmund Burke. Like Burke, Frost was a meliorist in that he thought it possible for us, with effort, to increase our hold on the planet. But, also like Burke, he doubted that collective action could ever entirely eradicate the various ills that beset our species, and he was fearful that radical change might make those ills worse. When in 1962 Frost told a gathering at the Kennedy White House, "I've been a Democrat all my life—but I've been a little unhappy since 1896," he was, in a sense, expressing the Old Whig position: one must resist arbitrary power and privilege, but one must remember as well that popular will can turn ugly if manipulated by demagogues and that social engineering and departmentalization sometimes patronize and diminish—and sometimes end up tyrannizing—the people they profess to aid.

In the course of illuminating Frost, Stanlis sheds oblique but revealing light on other American poets, particularly Frost's fellow philosophical poet, Wallace Stevens. Like Frost, Stevens was a special student at Harvard in the 1890s and took James's pragmatism as a philosophical stimulus or starting point for his own thinking. Stevens was especially impressed by James's critique of philosophical idealism and of the era's genteel Christianity—a Christianity that confidently and monistically identified God with his Creation even though this identification was rendered doubtful and repellent by the

discoveries of the new science and by the appalling conditions under which much of the human race was obliged to live. As Margaret Peterson points out in her *Wallace Stevens and the Idealist Tradition*, Stevens's great first book, *Harmonium*, not only draws on James's ideas, but also contains verbal echoes of James's prose.

Stevens, however, eventually moved back to the idealist camp, endeavoring to substitute a theory of Imagination in place of the Christianity and the traditional God in which he no longer believed. Unfortunately for Stevens, he could never fully believe in the metaphysical efficacy of the Imagination, and in consequence his later work ping-pongs between idealist monism and materialist monism—between assertions of the unifying and ordering power of Imagination (as in “The Idea of Order at Key West”) and bleak visions of a wintry universe of non-transcendence (as in “The Course of a Particular”). Stevens's poetry also offers a third species of monism—we can call it “momentary monism”—which denies permanent grounds for idealist faith, but which records intuitions of a Wholeness we can transiently experience. (“The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm” and “The Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” are two poems that treat this state.)

If Frost and Stevens shared an early esteem for James, they diverged in their opinions of James's colleague George Santayana, and this divergence, it is interesting to observe, reflects some of the philosophical differences between the poets. Frost's keen interest in and knowledge of science prevented him from imagining it conflicted with the fundamental concerns of religion. He never considered dismissing religion in general or Judeo-Christianity in particular merely because the doctrines and practices of temporal ecclesiastic institutions had grown enfeebled or intellectually bankrupt. For these and

other reasons (some of which Stanlis examines), Frost regarded Santayana's thoroughgoing skepticism as factitious and unpersuasive and, in its relativism, unhelpful as a guide to living. Stevens, in contrast, admired Santayana greatly, and the two men became friends during Stevens's time at Harvard. Santayana's argument that poetry and religion express the same imaginative impulse affected Stevens's ideas on the subject, and Santayana's theory of essences influenced themes Stevens developed in such late poems as "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" and "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," his tribute to Santayana. Further, Stevens doubtless recognized that Santayana, who repeatedly expressed attachments to both atheism and the institution of the Catholic Church, embodied a condition he, too, experienced—a nostalgia for and preoccupation with an abandoned faith.

We cannot know, this side of the grave, whether monism or dualism (or pluralism, or some other position) is the best explanation of reality and being; but Stanlis's discussion of Frost supplies a fascinating account of a road less traveled by American artists and thinkers. If Stevens's monism offers a moving picture of some of the dilemmas into which Romantic philosophy and aesthetics have led us, Frost's dualism suggests fruitful avenues of escape.

A related and more specific observation might be made with reference to our nation's poetry. There are no absolute rights and wrongs in aesthetic matters, any more than there are in philosophical ones. But looking at American verse of the last 150 years, we may well feel uneasy that we have so thoroughly (and, often, so unknowingly) committed ourselves to the tradition of Emerson and Whitman and to the Romantic idealism or monism that underlies that tradition. We assume that our poets will sing of

themselves, and we trust that their songs—no matter how obscure, slapdash, solipsistic, or windy—will partake of an organic wholeness of things and will, in some vague way, express or fulfill our deepest needs and concerns. We do not have to choose between the poetics of Frost and those of Emerson and Whitman. Yet we need some balance between them for the sake of our literary sanity. Reading Stanlis on Frost’s dualism, we may conclude that it would be to our advantage to explore, or at least to admit into discussion, a position that preserves for poetry both reason and instinct, both part and whole, both objectivity and subjectivity, both freedom and constraint, both nature and artifice, both regular meter and personal rhythm.

Whatever our individual opinions about this matter, we can all enjoy Stanlis’s study of Frost for its rewarding discussion of the intellectual adventure of the poet’s life. If monists must, in some manner, explain and account for the particulars of our beautiful and bewildering universe, dualists must endeavor to show us how the particulars, and the principles that govern them, are related. Frost was profoundly religious as well as philosophical. From first to last, he thought hard and affectionately about life, nature, and the universe; and as is evident from his late poems, he took seriously the story of the Incarnation and pondered the strange, miraculous co-existence of spirit and flesh, of consciousness and matter. He always tried to harmonize, while respecting equally, the polarities he perceived. As the final stanza of “Two Tramps in Mud Time” indicates, he never lost the sense that, in our attempts to reconcile the conflicting claims we face in our brief lives, we enter into the ultimate and mysterious duality of time and eternity:

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite

My avocation with my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sake.