

Robert Frost, An Authentic Voice in Modern American Poetry

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Although best known as the chief interpreter of the new New England, Robert Frost was born in San Francisco, California, March 26, 1875. At the age of ten he came East to the towns and hills where, for eight generations, his forefathers had lived. After graduating from the high school at Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1892, Frost entered Dartmouth college, where he remained only a few months. The routine of study was too much for him and, determined to keep his mind free for creative work, he decided to earn his living and become a bobbin boy in one of the mills at Lawrence. He had already begun to write poetry; a few of his verses had appeared in *The Independent*. But the strange soil-flavored quality which even then distinguished his lines was not relished by the editors, and the very magazines to which he sent poems that today are famous, rejected his verse with amazing unanimity. For twenty years Frost continued to write his highly characteristic work in spite of the discouraging editorial apathy, and for twenty years he remained unknown to the literary world.

In 1912, after fifteen years, during which time he had gone to Harvard, farmed, made shoes, taught school, and other things, Frost moved to England. For the first time in his life Frost moved in a literary world. London was a hot-bed of poets; groups merged, dissolved, and separated over night; controversy and creation was in the air. Frost took his collection of poems to a publisher with few hopes, went back to the suburban town of Beaconsfield and turned to other matters. ¹ A few months later *A Boy's Will* (1913), his first

collection, was published and Frost was recognized at once as one of the few authentic voices of modern poetry. ²

Little information on critical opinion of Frost's first volume may be gleaned from reviews, since this volume seems to have not "made" American reviewers' columns. Those few reviewers that did recognize *A Boy's Will* made a further recognition of Frost as being original in outlook and idiom in spite of certain reminiscences of Browning. Chiefly lyrical, this volume, lacking the concentrated emotion and feeling of Frost's later volumes, serves in its best capacity as a significant introduction of his next book, *North of Boston*. ³

North of Boston, like its successor, contains much of the best poetry in power of character and symbolism of our time, according to most critics. Rich in actualities, richer in its spiritual values, every line moves with the "double force of observation and implication."

It is by this "observation and implication," sometimes more briefly and tersely termed the synecdoche that Frost likes to be known. The lines of *North of Boston* betray an extensive use of synecdoche, and it is through the use of this device that Frost achieves such subtle variations in tone of speech. The delicate shades of emphasis of *North of Boston* are almost indiscernible in their changes because of the way in which Mr. Frost presents an entire scene by giving only a significant detail.

All Frost's characters illustrate this power of character and symbolism. Like the worn-out incompetent in "The Death of the Hired Man,"

the country boy in "Birches" who, Frost suspects, has been swinging on the birches that "bend to left and right," or the positive, tight-lipped old lady in "The Black Cottage," his people are always intensified through the poet's circumlocutory but precise psychology. They remain close to their soil. Frost's monologues, written in a conversational blank verse, establish a link between vernaculars and the language of literature, and imbue his characters (especially those in *North of Boston*) with much desired realism.⁴

Mountain Interval, Frost's next volume which had the ever evident New England background, consisted of five long poems in the narrative style of *North of Boston*, in addition to many shorter poems in the manner of a *Boy's Will*.⁵ Here the sifple and naive colloquialisms of his "backwoods" characters, which are presented with almost classical restraint by the author, bring out an essential spiritual quality in the subjects' lives. This spirituality must have been felt by Frost to be a quality of the land that bore them.⁶

In the production of *New Hampshire* (1923), which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for the best volume of poetry published during that year, Frost produced a thing which was at the same time local and universal.⁷ This holds true on any point on any criticism. His characters are New Englanders and non-New Englanders, young and old, all types; his locales, though usually New England, have refreshing exceptions; he includes heat and humor, passion and cold reason; he displays both biting observation and wise tolerance. All in all, *New Hampshire* served to synthesize all those qualities that Mr. Frost had previously shown; it combines the stark unity of *North of Boston* and the diffused geniality of *Mountain Interval*.⁸

It has been said that Frost gives us poetry without the delight of the

senses, without the glow of warm feeling, but this—when confronted with *New Hampshire*—is to utter an absurdity. Frost, in spite of a superficial under emphasis, does not hesitate to declare his close affection. Such poems as "Two Look at Two" with its tremendous wave of love, "To Earthward," with its unreserved intensity, even the brilliantly condensed "Fire and Ice," with its candidly registered passion—all these brim with a physical radiance, with the delight and pain of the senses.

Nor is the whimsicality, so characteristic of Frost, absent from *New Hampshire*. Who but Frost could put so whimsical an accent into the farewell to an orchard entitled "Goodby and Keep Cold;" who but he could picture with so few strokes, the frightened colt "with one forefoot on the wall, the other curled at his breast" in "The Runaway." It was the prize-winning volume that confirmed Frost's possession of a definite niche among great American poets.⁹

When reviewing "West Running Brook" it seems no disrespect to Frost to say that it shows no change, perhaps no advance, over his previous volumes. The ripe response, the banked emotion, the nicely blended humor and tenderness are all there. But Frost is not a poet in whom one looks for a change. *A Boy's Will* clearly forecast his later volumes, and *North of Boston* marked the development of his own idiom and an outlook on life, neither of which he has ever altered in essentials.¹⁰

A premonitory couplet written before 1900 seems to foresee this lack of change:

"They would not find me changed from
him they knew—

Only more sure of all I thought was
true."¹¹

Footnotes

1. Untermeyer, Louis, *American Authors*, p.215-216
2. *Ibid.*, p. 215-216
3. *Ibid.*, p. 214-215
4. *Ibid.*, p. 217
5. (B.W.S.), *Boston Transcript* p. 4
6. Anonymous, *Review of Reviews*, Vol. 54, p. 674
7. Untermeyer, op. cit. p. 216
9. *Ibid.*, p. 218
9. Anonymous, *Outlook*, Vol. 134, p. 521
10. Anonymous, *Springfield Republican*, p. 7
11. Anonymous, *Saturday Review of Literature*, Vol. 5, p. 533

Bibliography

- B.W.S. "Review of Mountain Interval," *Boston Transcript*, Dec. 8, '23, p. 4
- Untermeyer, Louis. *American Authors*, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1921
- Boston Transcript*, Dec. 8, '23, p. 4
- Anonymous, "Review of Mountain Interval," *Review of Reviews*, Dec. 8, '23 p. 4
- Anonymous, "Review of New Hampshire," *Outlook*, 134:521
- G.H., "Review of West Running Brook," *Springfield Republican*, p. 7

Man's Opinion Of Himself

Hilton B. Atherton

Hail, fellow worm!

Now wait a moment. Don't be alarmed, gentle reader, and take no offense. The rather startling salutation is only a figurative greeting to the human race in general. I do not mean to classify the peruser of this manuscript as a member of Annelida, or any of the related phyla of the uninspired angleworm, but I do intend to give some idea of the great conceit of the bi-pedal inhabitants of the obscure little chunk of matter we refer to so confidently as "the earth."

Of course, there are several things about man which are highly commendable. His body itself is a stupendous miracle. His mind (the source of even these idle scribblings) is colossal in its import. He has advanced a little during the few moments he has existed geologically, and his future is bright. However, he remains an amoeba, and in the early embryo stage at that, as far as the age and extent of the universe are concerned.

For that matter, he isn't even complete king in his own goldfish bowl, so to speak. For instance, did you ever look for any length of time in the face of an old, passive, bored elephant at a circus? Scorn bred through the ages is expressed in every movement and expression of the pachyderm. Though I have never been on intimate terms with an elephant-trainer, I should think one would become rather humble in the prolonged presence of these old fellows. Men are generally humble when they deal with anything large enough to dwarf the petty hurryings and scurryings with which mankind is so