Robert Frost as a Self-Seeker

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Robert Frost has been labeled chiefly, if not solely, as a nature poet. But this is a gross mistake. Perusal of his poetry will make you realize that he is a poet of that kind in no wise. His greatest concern is with man and life. True, he sings of nature, but it is simply because man lives in nature. Read his poetry in its entirety, and you will form a clear picture of a poet going his own way, telling you what man is and what life is. Frost lives his own peculiar life, seeking all the while for the soul, which is, in his mind, the only entity to distinguish man from other animals, and which is now vanishing out of human interest.

Now let us see what the Frostian way of living is like. Robert Frost never expects anything from life, as we usually do. In one of his most typical poems, “Build Soil,” he writes:

Life may be tragically bad, and I
Make bold to sing it so, but do I dare
Name names and tell you who by name is wicked?

He admits at the outset that “Life may be tragically bad,” and he never complains about it. He would rather “sing it so” in his poetical works. In another poem called “Birches” he declares:

And life is too much like a pathless wood.

Frost considers human life to be “like a pathless wood,” in other words, to be a place full of risks and perils. He suggests in this line that it is man’s destiny to live confronted with all manner of hazards. For this American poet, living means running risks as when we go into unfrequented woods. But he says no-
thing mawkish about it; on the contrary, he goes so far as to think that the greater one's risks in life are, the more brilliant are one's successes.

As to nature, Robert Frost affirms in "Our Hold on the Planet":

There is much in nature against us.

And about the earth he says in "The Lesson for Today":

Earth's a hard place in which to save the soul.

Many things are against the human soul in this collectivistic and materialistic world. Frost emphasizes that the soul, and the soul alone, makes our life really worth living. One of the main causes of this crisis for the soul is that we are so gregarious today that we are afraid to be alone even for a moment. We are so dependent upon material things that we feel helpless when we find them out of our reach. Left alone with nothing to help us, we are quite at a loss. We should remember that it is only when we are left alone that we can really be aware of our soul. Therefore, the poet cannot help but give warning in the first poem quoted, saying thus:

Keep off each other and keep each other off.

In Frost's eyes, this world of ours is one suffering from what might be called a "space-disease." Let us hear his own words in "The Lesson for Today," a poem I have already mentioned:

Space ails us moderns; we are sick with space.

The "space" here connotes bigness, and also "outer space" in the context of our "scientific" age. In this line he points out that we moderns are going further and further away from ourselves. This tough-minded poet, like us, would sometimes like to bid farewell to our hard earth to go to some better place. He shows
a weakness that is common to us mortals when he writes in his poem, “Birches”:

I'd like to get away from earth a while.

But soon afterward this desire leaves him, for he knows only too well that he has no place to choose but this very earth of ours. He recognizes a few lines later in the same poem:

Earth’s the right place for love:
I don’t know where it’s likely to go better.

You will be mistaken if you conclude that these lines betray concession or resignation on the part of the writer. For the expression “the right place for love” comes merely from his positiveness. In his case, to love is the most dynamic and worthwhile of all man’s acts. Thus, the poem “Wild Grapes” contains a vigorous line like:

I hold uncomplainingly for life.

In order to “hold uncomplainingly for life” it is imperative that we should, first of all, accept anything and everything in life, accept life as it is. Frost is willing to take things as they actually are. His “Astrometaphysical,” for instance, says:

Lord, I have loved your sky,
Be it said against or for me,
Have loved it clear and high,
Or low and stormy.

Again, the last line of his “Hyla Brook”—“I love the things for what they are”—shows the same attitude. Here we must just stop to think. He uses the verb “love” instead of the verb “accept.” As you may gather from what I have said before, to love is more positive than to accept; the former presupposes the latter. Any-
way, nothing will come unless you accept.

In this connection something must be said of Frost's poem entitled "Out, Out—." This is a dramatic work describing a scene in which a boy working at a sawmill happens to have one of his hands cut off and die a miserable death. The grownups there, when they witnessed the accident, said nothing sympathetic or condolatory but left the spot with a kind of cruel unconcern. The poem ends with these words:

And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

A casual reader of this poem may well misunderstand the lines above. We must know that they really indicate the poet's attitude toward life. The scene depicted in the poem is pathetic and even tragic indeed, but Frost is saved from lapsing into sentimentality by his extreme restraint. This restraint is the very outcome of his acceptance of the fact. His attitude to life appears in the form of such restraint. (By the way, from the literary point of view, such a restrained way of description impresses the reader all the more profoundly.) No doubt, when he faces a sight like that, the poet, being a human, ought to be moved, or rather to be more deeply moved than ordinary people. But he only accepts the fact. In the behavior of the grown-up workers is suggested Frost's own attitude. It is an undeniable fact that the boy is dead, and there is no choice for the adults but to accept the fact. In this sense, we can say, the poem "Out, Out—" is particularly Frostian.

As a natural result of his willing acceptance of the reality, Robert Frost values the present most of all. To worry about the future tends to render it less fruitful. In his poem named "Acceptance" he sings:

Let the night be too dark for me to see
Into the future. Let what will be, be.

And in "A Prayer in Spring" he prays in his own way:
Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers today;
And give us not to think so far away
As the uncertain harvest; keep us here
All simply in the springing of the year.

These lines remind us of Henry D. Thoreau, who writes in his Journal: “I must live above all in the present.” Like his New England predecessor, Frost endeavors to live with the present time in view, his feet firmly fixed upon the earth.

Then, Robert Frost goes the whole length of wishing life and nature would be harsher and severer with him. Such a situation is, he thinks, conducive to the human soul. In “Pertinax,” for example, he exclaims:

Let chaos storm!
Let cloud shapes swarm!

Again, in “In Time of Cloudburst” he cries out:

Let the downpour soil and toil!

Or again, in a poem called “To Earthward” he even writes:

The hurt is not enough:
I long for weight and strength
To feel for earth as rough
To all my length.

A mental attitude like this could not be described otherwise than as heroic and noble.

Frost’s tough-mindedness cannot be seen so clearly as in his poem called “Come In.” The last two stanzas of the poem are as follows:

Far in the pillared dark
Thrush music went—
Almost like a call to come in
To the dark and lament.

But no, I was out for stars:
I would not come in.
I meant not even if asked
And I hadn’t been.

In his Beyond Criticism Karl Shapiro remarks: “Acceptance of the situation for the poet is the sign of sincerity to self. This acceptance implies less rather than more involvement in the outside situation. The scene is where he is. He does not seek out the scene. Of the poet who goes out into the scene we always ask the question: Is he sincere?” “Sincerity to self” is certainly what Frost esteems more than anything else and asks for most patiently. This self, however, is on the verge of being lost. He always seeks for the survival of our self. He is a self-seeker to the bone. Such being the case, a world he does want to build up is a small, self-sufficient one. We must needs look in before we can look out. To put this another way, only those who can look in or have their own selves can look out or understand others. “Build Soil” contains Frostian lines such as:

My friends all know I’m interpersonal.
But long before I’m interpersonal
Away ’way down inside I’m personal.

It would be very well here to cite in full a poem titled “The Road Not Taken.”

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood.
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no steps had trodden black,
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence;
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The courage to take the road "less traveled by" is exactly what we lack at present. Frost decides to take a solitary road of his own, and it is the only one he can take. He tries to look deep into himself and bring out whatever is inside him. This is why he admires *Robinson Crusoe* and *Walden*, both of which describe men living in solitude by means of their own thought and action, namely resources. In the mode of life led by the heroes Frost detects an ideal model of life. He himself writes in his *Books We Like*: "*Robinson Crusoe* is never quite out of my mind. I never tire of being shown that the limited can make snug in the limitless. *Walden* has something of the same fascination. Crusoe was cast away; Thoreau was self-cast away. Both found themselves sufficient. No prose writer has ever been more fortunate in subject than these two."

*Robinson Crusoe* and *Walden* are, in fine, records of the two men who succeeded in realizing a desire to build up a self-sufficient world by dint of their own contrivances and actions in completely isolated circumstances. In solitude, man is forced to survive all by himself. There is no one to come and help him.
He discovers with no small surprise that he has within himself various sorts of ability hitherto hidden and unnoticed, and learns what self-reliance is. Then, and then only, he can see how powerful the human soul or spirit proves to be. Some of us may protest that such a way of reading these two classics is nothing but romantically erratic. But Frost likes them not because of romantic tones, if they have any, but because Crusoe and Thoreau, who lived in their surroundings to the best of their faculty, making the most of their inner potentials, present noble examples of those who try to live a full life through their own exertions. The Frostian way of life is, accordingly, one typified by the two heroes, that is, one in which you live without any help whatsoever from anyone or anything, putting forth your inner strength.

Now, it is quite easy to see that Robert Frost sets store by human "resourcefulness", to employ the apt term of Lawrance Thompson, an American authority on the poet. This resourcefulness is clearly shown in the following poem:

The Armful
For every parcel I stoop down to seize,
I love some other off my arms and knees,
And the whole pile in slipping, bottles, buns,
Extremes too hard to comprehend at once,
Yet nothing I should care to leave behind.
With all I have to hold with, hand and mind,
And heart, if need be, I will do my best
To keep their building balanced at my breast.
I crouch down to prevent them as they fall;
Then sit down in the middle of them all.
I had to drop the armful in the road
And try to stack them in a better load.

In this poem the very quintessence of the Frostian manner of doing is concretely and significantly expressed. The lines "With all I have to hold with, hand and mind,/And heart, if need be, I will do my best" imply that Frost tries to bring his whole power
into full play so as to overcome all kinds of hardships, instead of calling for assistance from the outside. He places absolute confidence in man’s inner strength, which enables him to tackle things with success. He believes that if a man learns to use such resourcefulness, or practical intelligence, if you will, he should be successful in life. Every obstacle he encounters will do him more good than harm. For example, his unique sonnet, “On a Tree Fallen across the Road,” assures us:

The tree the tempest with a crash of wood
Throws down in front of us is not to bar
Our passage to our journey’s end for good.

Robert Frost, with such belief, never flinches from any cumbersome situation. Thus he can asseverate in a long poem with the title of “New Hampshire”:

Why, this is Hell, nor am I out of it.

In brief, Frost accepts all the world’s contradictions and conflicts without being crushed or overwhelmed by any of them and, furthermore, positively wishes for more, greater troubles in life. Hence his own proper powerfulness as man and poet. It is anyway advisable for us to learn at least to “live/Just taking what nature is willing to give,/Not forcing her hard with harrow and plough,” as Frost says in his poem, “Blueberries.”

By way of conclusion, I quote Robert Frost singing in “The Lesson for Today”:

And were an epitaph to be my story
I’d have a short one ready for my own.
I would have written of me on my stone,
I had a lover’s quarrel with the world.

Now he “sleeps” the sleep of one who has faithfully fulfilled many promises and has steadily covered many miles, and no competent critic could not sum up his life so succinctly as can his own “I had a lover’s quarrel with the world.”