

ROBERT FROST : A Stay Against Confusion.

by Cana Maeda.

When Robert Frost was born, the nineteenth century of ever-expanding prosperity and unlimited opportunity in America was gradually coming to a close. In New Hampshire where the poet was to spend most of his formative years, the patriarchs of New England's "aristocracy" were dying in their beautiful but abandoned homes and science was beginning to jostle out faith which had been for them the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things unseen. With the coming of harder and more complex times, a restless fog-like bewilderment was creeping over the land and men were beginning to grope for greater freedom and newer values. The generation of Emerson, Longfellow, Lowell, Whittier, and Whitman was going to its grave and another was being born.

Frost was barely out of high school when Whittier who loved "the old melodious ways" died during a visit to New Hampshire. In the same year, the prophet-poet, Whitman also left the world leaving massive nebulae of poetry to come and bringing the era of idealism and romanticism to a rather tumultuous close. These men had lived and written in an age for poets, a period not unlike the Elizabethan era in England. Frost, on the other hand, was to live and write in a period of economic and spiritual upheaval spanning two world wars.

When, as a fifteen-year-old boy, he had his first poem. "La Noche Triste" (The Sad Night) published in the "Bulletin" of the Lawrence (Massachusetts) High School, American literature was on the threshold of realism. By the time he had reached his maturity, the literary sky was a confused medley of new constellations born of Whitman's nebulae.

It was a period of bold experimentation not only in science, politics, education and other related fields but also in all the branches of the arts including poetry. The experiments came more or less of necessity, for, at the turn of the century, the remaining vestiges of feudalism, known as Victorianism, were all but washed away by time's relentless tide. Poets who, like all artists, reflect in their work the spirit of their age, sought to break away as completely as possible from old tunes and conventional forms. Freedom became the watchword of the moderns and novelty, the goal.

Frost, a serious student of the classics, surveyed the flurry of experiments around him, and instead of joining this or that group of enthusiasts in the new poetry, sat back and decided to work alone. He was pretty sure of himself but not without cause. In one of his early lyrics, "Into My Own", he gave voice to his confidence in the truth of his convictions. The faint note of loneliness haunting the rhythm of the poem suggests that the confidence was born of no ordinary presumption but of the quiet convictions of an unusual talent:

"One of my wishes is that those dark trees,
So old and firm they scarcely show the breeze,
Were not, as 'twere the merest mask of gloom,

But stretched away unto the edge of doom.

I should not be withheld but that some day
Into their vastness I should steal away,
Fearless of ever finding open land,
Or highway where the slow wheel pours the sand.

I do not see why I should e'er turn back,
Or those should not set forth upon my track
To overtake me who should miss me here
And long to know if still I held them dear.

They would not find me changed from him

they knew —

Only more sure of all I thought was true.”⁽¹⁾

The emphasis of the poets striving for the new was on new forms. This was natural for freedom of material has, for the poet, always existed together with certain unavoidable limitations in method. In the name of “free verse”, “pure art”, and others, poetry was tried in all manner of untried ways. Frost, soon enough, saw that the “new ways to be new” consisted for the most part merely in eliminating old restrictions and he felt that the seekers after liberty were ironically bound by the very necessity of having to eliminate the restrictions. He mused with somewhat sarcastic humor, “Poetry, for example, was tried without punctuation. It was tried without capital letters. It was tried without any image but those to the eye…… It was tried without content under the trade name of poesie pure. It was tried without phrase, epigram, coherence, logic and consistency. It was tried without ability…… It was tried premature like the

delicacy of unborn calf in Asia. It was tried without feeling or sentiment like murder for small pay in the underworld. These many things was it tried without, and what had we left? Still something.”⁽²⁾

Frost decided to accept the restrictions for, in poetry as in everything else, freedom and restraint go together. He chose the “old ways to be new”. The restrictions that Frost accepted have to do with form. The freedom is of his material. However, it was not to the various forms of traditional poetry as such that he committed himself so much as to the contention that a poem in order to be a work of art must have an appropriate form. For this reason, familiar stanzaic and metrical patterns have served as the basis for many ingenious forms of Frost’s contriving. This essay attempts to show how a deft and wise exploitation of time-tried elements in the moulding of the raw material of the poet’s life, age and land has contributed to the creation of a lucid, and simple yet great poetry that is the offspring of the old but new and untrammelled.— “a stay” against the confusions of the new art and the times.

But it is no simple matter to tell how a poet has produced poetry of one kind or another. The poet probably doesn’t know exactly himself and Frost of all poets has said mighty little about his own art. The most that can be said will never tell the whole story for, as it is with philosophy, so it is with art:

“We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows”⁽³⁾.

Nevertheless, from a study of most of Frost’s poems and of his

few essays, one is able to glean certain clues to the mystery of his poems being old yet fresh, traditional yet original. One of these is that a Frostian poem is a growing thing as regards form and metaphor and another, that the speaking voice in all the richness of its multicolored tones rings through the rhythm of almost any poem. Still a third is that Frost looks to the people and the land and the events to which he himself belongs for his material. He is as much a farmer as he is poet and no menial laborer is too common for a respectable place in his poetry. Democracy, unfortunately, has become a trite word in this country, but this is surely democracy practiced in poetry with an edge on the way it is practiced in society. And since a true democracy is what the world is looking to, such poetry must be considered to be very modern indeed.

To get back to the first point, what Frost has made clear in more than one instance is that a poem may not be thought out beforehand. "The freshness of a poem", he says in "The Constant Symbol", "belongs absolutely to its not having been thought out and then set to verse as the verse in turn might be set to music". Again, in "The Figure a Poem Makes", he counsels, "A poem may be worked over once it is in being, but may not be worried into being. Its most precious quality will remain its having run itself and carried away the poet with it. Read it a hundred times: it will forever keep its freshness as a metal keeps its fragrance. It can never lose its sense of a meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it went". These statements suggest that the restrictions Frost contends with are not the set restrictions of a predetermined form but the restrictions that he

creates as he goes along because of a will to bring into being a form in the larger sense. In his words, "Every poem is an epitome of the great predicament, a figure of the will braving alien entanglements".⁽⁴⁾ So Frost has come out with sonnets that are not quite Shakespearian, nor Miltonian, nor yet Italian, and other familiar forms that are not altogether what they used to be. And the result has been that the time-worn forms have taken on a new freshness like the radiance of morning dew.

His sonnets range from the somewhat regular "The Vantage Point" with its Italian form octave and sestet to the "most advanced and original" "Mowing". The latter shows a shrewd economy of rhyme scheme, a-b-c-a-b-d, e-c-d-f-e-g-f-g which in the number of rhymes is the same as the Shakespearian sonnet, but in the cumulative development of a single meditative incident, is like the Miltonic sonnet. No line is a strict iambic and the anapaests, trochees, and spondees make for flexibility:

"There never was a sound beside the wood but one,
 And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.
 What was it whispered? I knew not well myself;
 Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,
 Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound —
 And that was why it whispered and did not speak.
 It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
 Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:
 Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak
 To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,
 Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers
 (Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.
 The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.
 My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make."⁽⁵⁾

Having committed himself to the general form of the sonnet, Frost seems not to have cared about rhyme schemes so long as the rhymes helped to knit the poem into a pleasing sound pattern. As for the rhythm, he had other things to think about besides trying to keep to the regular iambic, and about this, something will be said later in connection with the sense sounds of the speaking voice.

The sonnets, about sixteen in all, are only a small part of a wide variety of poems in iambic pentameter, Frost's dilection. There are the many dramatic dialogues and monologues in blank verse, the twenty or more poems in heroic couplets, the stanzaic pieces variously rhymed and as many as fifty separate poems including epigrams in quatrains and sestets, and dramatic and reflective lyrics, parables, fables and satires in tercets, quatrains and sestets. In each of these groups, the poems range from the fairly regular forms of the earlier years to the highly original forms of the period when Frost is complete master of his own technique. In a truly Frostian poem, the form is no longer a shadow of conventional patterns but something transformed and fused with the "figure the poem makes".

In the use of the heroic couplets, for example, the metrical regularity and the slight jerkiness of the end-stopped lines in "The Tuft of Flowers" give way to a greater variety of rhythm, enjambment or run-on lines and feminine endings in "The Cow in Apple Time". Similar developments are noticeable in "The Valley's Singing Day", "Our Singing Strength" and "Once by the Pacific". In "The Prayer in Spring", the couplets are arranged into quatrains emphasizing the dramatic progression of

the thoughts and imagery, while in "The Onset", a dramatic lyric, the couplets are divided into two stanzas of unequal length, the first part with its mood of despair and the second part with its mood of philosophical optimism. In "Moon Compasses", Frost exercises a great deal of freedom and tries a unique unfinished ending although the effect is debatable. For an illustration of Frost's mastery of the heroic couplet, "Once by the Pacific" is conveniently short and shows the way he makes superlative use not only of the end-stopped line and the enjambment but the anapaestic and spondaic substitutions in the rhythm. With its mood of foreboding developed in fourteen lines, it could well be called a sonnet in heroic couplets:

"The shattered water made a misty din.
 Great waves looked over others coming in,
 And thought of doing something to the shore
 That water never did to land before.
 The clouds were low and hairy in the skies,
 Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes.
 You could not tell and yet it looked as if
 The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff,
 The cliff in being backed by continent;
 It looked as if a night of dark intent
 Was coming, and not only a night, an age.
 Someone had better be prepared for rage.
 There would be more than ocean water broken
 Before God's last *Put out the Light* was spoken."⁽⁶⁾

The blank verse is brought to perfection in the dramatic dialogues and monologues in "The North of Boston", and in later poems such as "Out, Out", "Snow", "New Hampshire", "The Gift Outright", "Build Soil — A Political Pastoral" and many

others. "The Gift Outright" with its pleasing repetition of words, alliterations, feminine endings and enjambment, and the effective variations of the iambic rhythm, reveals Frost's powers perhaps at their best in this form :

"The land was ours before we were the land's.
 She was our land more than a hundred years
 Before we were her people. She was ours
 In Massachusetts, in Virginia,
 But we were England's, still colonials,
 Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,
 Possessed by what we now no more possessed.
 Something we were withholding made us weak
 Until we found it was ourselves
 We were withholding from our land of living,
 And forthwith found salvation in surrender.
 Such as we were we gave ourselves outright
 (The deed of gift was many deeds of war)
 To the land vaguely realizing westward,
 But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,
 Such as she was, such as she would become."⁽⁷⁾

The fact that the third, fourth and ninth lines have only four stresses is another proof that Frost feels free to deviate from the general form according to the dictates of the mood, the emotion, or the atmosphere.

Of the five-stress poems variously rhymed, "Storm Fear" is perhaps the most irregular and shows what Frost can do to old forms to suit his own purposes. The poem is basically iambic pentameter but the lines are split to create the atmosphere of tension and nervousness in a farmhouse in the face of a winter storm.⁽⁸⁾ At a glance, the poem looks like free verse :

"When the wind works against us in the dark,
 And pelts with snow
 The lower chamber window on the east,
 And whispers with a sort of stifled bark,
 The beast,
 'Come out! Come out!' ——
 It costs no inward struggle not to go,
 Ah, no!
 I count our strength,
 Two and a child,
 Those of us not subdued to mark
 How the cold creeps as the fire dies at length, ——
 How drifts are piled,
 Dooryard and road ungraded,
 Till even the comforting barn grows far away,
 And my heart owns a doubt
 Whether 'tis in us to arise with day
 And save ourselves unaided."⁽⁹⁾

Frost uses practically every form that has ever been tried in English poetry so that there are, besides the pentameters, over sixty poems in quatrains and not a few in trimeters and dimeters. All of these are marked by substitutions in the rhythm and new rhyme schemes. One or two examples will suffice to show what wonders Frost has performed with the often monotonous tetrameter verse. In the famous lyric, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", he has not only succeeded in creating the atmosphere of a person thinking to himself but has introduced a very tricky rhyme scheme (a-a-b-a, b-b-c-b-, c-c-d-c, d-d-d-d) that gives a peculiar unity to the thoughts that unfold. It could hardly be imagined that Frost had the last

stanza up his sleeve when he began to write the poem :

“Whose woods these are I think I know
His house is in the village though ;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.”⁽¹⁰⁾

Another four stress poem, “The Demiurge’s Laugh”, has been discovered to be almost exactly like Wordsworth’s “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” but Frost has achieved an entirely different effect through his frequent substitutions of the anapaest for the iamb. The first verse of the poem is as follows :

“It was far in the sameness of the wood ;
I was running with joy on the Demon’s trail,
Though I knew what I hunted was no true god.
It was just as the light was beginning to fail
That I suddenly heard — all I needed to hear :
It has lasted me many and many a year.”⁽¹¹⁾

While all the forms cannot be discussed here, it may be

well to mention Frost's use of one other conventional form, the ballad. Variations of the time-old pattern are found in such diverse poems as "The Oft-Repeated Dream" of "The Hill Wife" sequence, "The Line-Storm Song", "Now Close All the Windows", and "A Leaf Treader". But Frost also knows when he can best use the form unvaried and according to Thompson an example of the proper effect of metrical regularity, is the timely ballad, "The Peaceful Shepherd":

"If heaven were to do again,
And on the pasture bars,
I leaned to line the figures in
Between the dotted stars.

I should be tempted to forget,
I fear, the Crown of Rule,
The Scales of Trade, the Cross of Faith,
As hardly worth renewal.

For these have governed in our lives,
And see how men have warred.
The Cross, the Crown, the Scales may all
As well have been the Sword."⁽¹²⁾

Regular or irregular, each form of Frost's poetry seems to be exactly that which the piece requires. This is because it grows shoulder to shoulder with the metaphor which is the substance of a poem. Frost places great importance on metaphor. "There are many things I have found myself saying about poetry", he relates, "but the chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority. Poetry is simply made of metaphor..... Every poem is a metaphor inside

or it is nothing.”⁽¹³⁾ Again, a poem is born of an enthusiasm but it is “taken through the prism of the intellect and spread on the screen in color, all the way from hyperbole or overstatement at one end to understatement at the other end. It is a long strip of dark lines and many colors. I would be willing to throw away everything but that : enthusiasm tamed by metaphors”⁽¹⁴⁾. Yet again, in “The Figure a Poem Makes” he tells how with him, the metaphor grows: “No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader. For me, the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn’t know I knew. I am in a place, in a situation, as if I had materialized from cloud or risen out of the ground. There is a glad recognition of the long lost and the rest follows. Step by step the wonder of unexpected supply keeps growing.”

In Frost’s poems, the metaphor grows, as it were, in concentric circles. He throws a pebble into the stream of his creative mind and it eddies into a metaphor. An excellent illustration is the already quoted “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”. It begins with the speaker recognizing the woods where he has stopped his horse for a rest and muses that the owner of the woods will not see him stopping “to watch his woods fill up with snow” because his house is in the village. Then in the second stanza, his thought goes to his horse which “must think it queer” to stop in such a place “without a farmhouse near” on a dark and snowy evening. (Concerning the first line of this stanza, Frost says in “The Constant Symbol”, “There’s an indulgent smile I get for the recklessness of the unnecessary commitment I made... I was riding too high to care what trouble I incurred. And it was all right so long as I didn’t

suffer deflection.”) In the next stanza, his horse, as a horse will, shakes its harness bells “to ask if there is some mistake” and the sound of the bells leads his mind to an awareness of the quietness of the place :

“The only other sound’s the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.”

This causes him to become enchanted by the beauty of his surroundings but no sooner does he realize that the woods are “lovely, dark, and deep”, than he remembers that he has “promises to keep” and the metaphor expands with the concluding lines,

“And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.”

What was a little incident has become a reflection on a whole lifetime of toil and as one reads the poem a second time, the metaphor may lead one into the whole field of philosophy where entirely new vistas are opened.

According to Tristram Coffin, author of “New Poetry of New England” Frost is himself the best reader of his own poems and those that he likes best, he always reads twice in succession. This is like the reading of the Japanese haiku which is always read twice, in order to give listeners the opportunity to catch the deeper meaning of the poem for like Frost’s poetry, it is all metaphor. It would seem that Frost, too, (although, of course, he is not following the custom of the haiku poets) wishes his audience to grasp the metaphorical significance of a poem on the second reading.

The implication of a poem as a metaphor is a “surprise” even

to the poet so that a suggestion of it usually occurs towards the end of a poem. In "Mowing", it is revealed in the line, "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows"; in "The Tuft of Flowers", in the last couplet; in "For Once, Then, Something", on the last line, "Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something". And so on with the others. With poems that give no such indication, the reader is free to interpret a poem as he pleases. This is so with the simple love lyric, "The Pasture", with the poems, "Going for Water", "October", and others. It is best, however, not to strain for a meaning beyond what is suggested in the poem since Frost usually says all that he wishes to tell.

Although the development of form and metaphor is an important factor that makes for freshness and originality in Frost's poetry, what is of greater significance is the presence in the metric rhythm, of the sense sounds of conversational speech, the entelechy as it were, of Frost's poetry. It is this reconciliation of the capriciousness of conversational rhythm with the rigidity of meter that gives a special quality to each poem.

According to Thompson in his "Fire and Ice", an analysis of Frost's poetry reveals in brief, that he aims for the reconciliation and unification of three planes of sound. The first of these is the basic meter which Frost reduces to virtually the "strict" and "loose" iambic. The second plane of sound is derived from the dictionary pronunciation of each word without regard to their meaning or content while the third derives from the tone of voice which gives particularly intended shades of meaning to the words when they are phrased in reading. The three planes of

sound which Frost himself is willing to reduce to two, the basic meter and the "sound posture of meaning", are separate in analysis but one in creation.

Shakespeare whose plays Frost is said to have read with great care was a genius in the art of setting to the iambic rhythm of blank verse, the sense sounds of conversational speech, thereby producing rich tones of meaning. His plays possibly owe their immortality partly to this characteristic which contributes to their being great poetry no less than great drama and it may well be that Frost owes more than is apparent to the master bard.

First, one may consider the highly emotional passage from "King Lear" in which the grief-stricken Lear pours out his anguish over the body of Cordelia upon the overwhelming realization that his daughter is dead and will never come back:

"No, no, no, life!

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never!"

In these lines, the sound posture of hysterical anguish is made apparent by the narrative context and by the richness of the connotation of the words but the dramatic tones are intensified by the play of the metric accent upon the word sound. The famous line, "No, no, no life" has four strong accents creating a high note of tension while in the next two lines the rhythm subsides to the regular iambic with the accents on each of the short connotative words. This change in the rhythm increases the feeling in sound of despair and agony and then the sudden

reversal of the iambic in "Never, never, never, never, never", has the effect of giving to the words the "nervous crescendo" in perfect corroboration with Lear's maddened grief. Here as elsewhere Shakespeare keeps away from the extremes of monotonous regularity and persistent irregularity.

In Frost's poetry there is the same fine integration of the rhythms of speech and of meter. This may best be seen in his dramatic narratives, monologues and dialogues which are, for the most part, written in blank verse. The words are so aptly chosen that the "dramatic tones of meaning" play upon the metric pattern with ease and freedom. Perhaps in contrast to the illustration from "King Lear", it would be fitting to consider a passage from "Home Burial", Frost's sensitive study of a grief-stricken woman. Here, the grief expressed is the hysterical but stubborn and deliberately persevering grief of a woman who has lost her first-born. Her husband is also grieved but he tries to dissolve his grief in the daily tasks and the usual remarks about the weather. For this, the woman who cannot contain her sorrow, accuses her husband of brutal insensitivity. She can hardly control herself when she sees that he could bury the child with his own hands. When he tries to make her understand him, she refuses :

"You *couldn't* care! The nearest friends can go
With anyone to death, comes so far short
They might as well not try to go at all.
No, from the time when one is sick to death,
One is alone and he dies more alone.
Friends make pretence of following to the grave,
But before one is in it, their minds are turned

And making the best of their way back to life
 And living people, and things they understand.
 But the world's evil. I won't have grief so
 If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't!"⁽¹⁵⁾

The proximity of the accented syllables in "couldn't" (italicized for special emphasis) and "care" together with the alliteration of the hard "c"s gives the sound posture for the hysterical contradiction. Then the tone of complaint and cynicism established in the phrase, "with anyone", runs through the next eight lines of philosophical consideration in more or less smooth iambic. Then as one begins to expect that she may, after all, reconcile herself to her husband's attitude, she persists in womanly fashion, "But the world's evil". The sudden change in the rhythm brought about by making the first foot an anapaest and the second a trochee, produces the change in the sense sound to corroborate with the rekindling of the woman's attitude of stubborn grief. This is further emphasized by the persistence of the long "o" sounds in the last two lines. As in Shakespeare, there is a constant play of "the dramatic tones of meaning" on the "rigidity of meter" and pertinent variations to prevent monotony but not so much as to make for extreme irregularity.

It is not only in the dramatic poems that Frost achieves the tone of conversational speech, but also in the lyrics, the sonnets, the narratives and in fact, all his other poems. In this regard, also, Shakespeare affords a prior example. Conversational tones are equally prominent in passages that are more poetical than dramatic. A good illustration of this is a passage from "The

Tempest", the famous speech of Prospero to Ferdinand :

"You do look, my son, in a movèd sort,
As if you were dismayed. Be cheerful, sir.
Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air.
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself —
Yea, all which it inherit — shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep."

The rhythmic pattern is that of blank verse, but anapaests, spondees and trochees are so interspersed as to vary the lengths of the over-all waves of iambic. Feminine endings of the third, fourth, sixth, seventh and tenth lines have the effect of producing sound postures of meaning that corroborate with the thought of insubstantiality and transience. Words with the "f" and "v" sounds are exploited to the full for similar effects. The crowding of the hard consonants in the seventh and eighth lines contributes by means of contrast to the fading sound effect of what follows. There is thus a careful discrimination in the choice of words for their sound but the sound effect always so accords with the meaning that instead of resulting in "pure poetry", it makes for down-to-earth conversational speech that is at the same time, good poetry. The elasticity of meaning tones has been reconciled to the metric pattern.

Frost's poem, "The Master Speed" which incidentally has the

form of the Shakespearian sonnet, reveals a different effect, that of giving the sense of stability in the "rush of everything to waste" but the technique employed is the same. Here is the poem:

"No speed of wind or water rushing by
 But you have speed far greater. You can climb
 Back up a stream of radiance to the sky,
 And back through history up the stream of time.
 And you were given this swiftness, not for haste,
 Nor chiefly that you may go where you will,
 But in the rush of everything to waste,
 That you may have the power of standing still —
 Off any still or moving thing you say.
 Two such as you with such a master speed
 Cannot be parted nor be swept away
 From one another once you are agreed
 That life is only life forevermore
 Together wing to wing and oar to oar."⁽¹⁶⁾

This poem among, many others, is an excellent example of what Frost can do with the iambic rhythm. The almost perfect regularity of the first four lines coupled with the easily read sequence of the words creates a swiftness of pace, a tone of sweeping speed. Then in the fifth line, the pace is slowed down by the extra syllable of the anapaest in the third foot and also by the juxtaposition of the consonants between the words which necessitates a slower reading of "given this swiftness not for haste". The spondee towards the end of the next line gives the same effect. The tone of speed returns in the sixth line with its short prepositions and its scarcity of strongly accented syllables. The tone of stability in the next line is supported by the alliteration of the "s"s and the juxtaposition of the "g" and

“s” sounds in “Standing still”. The following end-stopped line prepares the reader for the denouement. Here, the long vowel sounds bestow a tone of philosophic calm while the repetition of the words in the concluding couplet reinforces the staying sound posture of meaning. With all these considerations for sound, however, the poem is, above all, pleasantly conversational and the reader can be totally unaware of the appurtenances of form. What remains in the mind is “the figure the poem makes” of the “master speed” that can breast the relentless rush of all things to decay.

Although it has been seen that Frost uses old forms and that there are similarities in the aims and technique of Shakespeare and of Frost, the latter is as different from the former as the twentieth century is from the seventeenth. The reason for this is that Frost never imitates but merely allows himself to be disciplined by the old restrictions in the development of his poetry and that he selects his material from his own simple environment. His poems are not of the romance of princes nor of the exploits of the great but of the artless love of a country lad or of the mundane affairs of hard-working people. In his poetry, he treats with deference, not only people from all the ordinary walks of life but birds and animals as well.

Most of the titles are eloquent enough of the materials he draws from “the vast chaos of all I have lived through”: “The Pasture”, “Mowing”, “Mending Wall”, “The Death of the Hired Man”, “A Servant to Servants”, “After Apple-Picking”, “The Housekeeper”, “The Wood-Pile”, “An Old Man’s Winter Night”, “Birches”, “Putting in the Seed”, “The Hill Wife”, “A Soldier”,

“Immigrants”, “Two Tramps in Mud-time”, “To a Moth Seen in Winter”, and a great many others. In a review of “A Further Range”, James Stephens has paid tribute in verse to Frost’s individuality and his power to give meaning in his poems to the smallest element in nature and in life:

“Good news! The poets are not dead;
Not sleeping nor malingering:
Have still a place to rest the head,
And space to spread a lovely wing.
Within this book as much is said;
Here Frost and snow and rain do sing;
Pity is told for all that’s sped,
And love is sung for everything.”

Frost writes of unhonored and unsung people not from any didactic motive but from the natural interest of the realist in what lies at hand for they have been the men and women of his environment and he belongs to them. It is said that at twelve years of age, he began to earn money with all sorts of jobs and that all through high school he spent his vacations either in a shoeshop as a cobbler or on a farm as a hired hand. At sixteen, he went to work in a textile mill and subsequently made his living as a teacher, a journalist or a farmer. During all these years the artist in him must have kept observing and noting what would have escaped the eyes of less interested people and when a professional poet, the philosopher in him helped to mould each little incident, each particular character into a metaphor whose implications have universality.

During his long and eventful life, Frost has often met with human sorrow, grief, and pain as they strike the weak and

helpless but his sense of humor and wisdom have prevented him from becoming bitter. His poems are relieved of ugliness and vulgarity but never at the expense of reality and truth. His characters speak their own language and go about their own unsullied ways almost exactly as they would in real life. No solutions to social or metaphysical problems are suggested but the poems as they grow from "delight to wisdom" offer a "clarification of life" -- "a stay against confusion" in an age of change and instability. Such is the fruit of Frost's independence as much for subject matter as for form:

"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference."⁽¹⁷⁾

Notes

- (1) From "The Poems of Robert Frost" ; The Modern Library, New York, 1946, p. 4.
- (2) From Robert Frost's "Introduction" to Edwin Arlington Robinson's Posthumous *King Jasper* ; New York, 1935 ; (Quoted from Lawrance Thompson's *Fire and Ice* ; Henry Holt and Company, 1942.)
- (3) From "The poems of Robert Frost", p. 422.
- (4) Ibid. : "The Constant Symbol", Robert Frost's introductory prose essay, p. xvii.
- (5) Ibid., p. xvi.
- (6) Ibid., p. 272.
- (7) Ibid., p. 399.
- (8) Thompson, Lawrance : "Fire and Ice", p. 82.
- (9) "The Poems of Robert Frost, p. 11.
- (10) Ibid., p. 238.
- (11) Ibid., p. 238.
- (12) Ibid., p. 277.

- (13) *Ibid.*, p. xvi.
- (14) From "Education by Poetry : A Meditative Monologue" given by Robert Frost at Amherst College ; Published in the *Amherst Graduates' Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (February, 1931), pp. 75—85. (Re-quoted from Lawrance Thompson's *Fire and Ice*.)
- (15) "The poems of Robert Frost", p. 63.
- (16) *Ibid.*, p. 345.
- (17) *Ibid.*, p.134

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