

Local Environs as seen in the Poems of Robert Frost

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Regional art is an art which deals with the physical features, people, life, customs, habits, manners, traditions, language, etc., of some particular locality. However, this does not mean that regionalism is mere factual reporting or photographic reproduction. The regional artist emphasizes the unique features of a particular locality, its uniqueness as well as the various ways in which it differs from other locality. But as in all other arts, so also in regional art, there is a constant selection and ordering of material. In other words regional art is also creative. Through proper selection and ordering of his material the artist stresses the distinctive spirit of his chosen region and shows, further, that life in its essentials is the same everywhere. The differences are used as a means of revealing similarities, from the particular and the local, the artist arises to the general and the universal. Beneath the deafening chorus of praise for Robert Frost which began with the publication of *A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston* and deepened as the poet grew older, lone voices can be heard chanting their own tune, one of discord with the general eulogy. These nay-sayers, if indeed they are noticed at all, are not often heeded; but what they have to say merits an ear. Frost, they protest, was not of the modern age. Rather than looking forward, blazing fresh trails, and indicating new paths between reality and the soul, he leaned to the past, peered back longingly to an order, more idyllic time and place.

The vital impression created by Frost as a topical figure in the 1950's and in the early 1960's may cause one to forget that of course he does belong to an earlier era. One who recalls Frost visiting Soviet Russia and conferring with Premier Khrushchev must stop for a second to reflect. It comes as something of a jolt to realize that when Frost was born in 1874 William Cullen Bryant was still writing; Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell, and Holmes still had the better portion of two active decades yet before them. So did Walt Whitman, who had broken ground for new times to come but was still misunderstood and unappreciated. Emily Dickinson, another modern rebuffed in her own day, was adding to her secret lode of verse in an upstairs bedroom in

Amherst. His long innings as a poet gave Frost the unique position of being in touch with both yesterday and tomorrow. If he gained by the unique literary contribution of the poets above mentioned, he also gave to coming generations a treasure trove of poems that exalted, exhilarated and enthralled. Frost is popularly known as a New England poet because of the images in his poetry—snow scenes, stone walls, country roads, woods, farm houses—those images most easily associated with the calendar art of Currier and Ives, sentimental scenes of the poor delighting in their romantically nostalgic rusticity. The 'Public Frost' has long traded on such images. Like Mark Twain with his boyhood Mississippi, Frost publicly has associated himself with the simpler New England, his public image blurring the bleaker truths that North of Boston, displayed. Yet Frost did not use such 'sentimental' images sentimentally. Beneath the positively assertive 'thrust' of his poetry—'The Vantage Point', 'The Road Not Taken', 'Revelation', 'The Tuft of Flowers' and the popular nostalgia-tinged images of that poetry, Frost expressed a reality less certain and assuredly less popular. The 'interiority' of his poetry discloses a more bleakly realistic encounter with his world. Often in his remarks, he dissociated himself from the very images he was using in his poetry avowing that his method was far different from his popularly conceived form. Thompson quotes: '.....there is nothing but me. And I have all the dead New England things held back by one hand.....where, many as they are though, they do not flow together by their own weight.....I hold them easily-too easily for assurance that they will go with a rush when I let them go.'¹ 'Poetry is more often of the country than of the city. Poetry is very, very rural-rustic. It stands as a reminder of rural life-as a resource-as a recourse. It might be taken as a symbol of a man, taking its rise from individuality and seclusion..... We are now at a moment when we are getting too far out into the social-industrial, and are at the point of drawing back-drawing into renew ourselves'²

Such a belief finds its natural expression in the New England scene as Frost came to know it and is very much a product of that scene. The ‘distilled’ quality of Frost’s verse, his emphasis stylistically on order and restraint in both thought and expression and his emphasis upon the struggle of the human soul against a bleak, dark background (very much an ethical or ‘religious’ stance) link Frost to the New England mind American poetry—the ordered stanzas of Emily Dickinson, the natural landscape of Edwin Arlington Robinson, the ‘iron metres’ of Robert Lowell. A distinct race for order, as Wallace Stevens called it, characterizes the best of Frost’s poetry, aware as he was of the dialectical, Manichaeic quality of the New England mind, the struggle between order and chaos, light and darkness. He celebrated ‘any small man-made figure of order and concentration’ when viewed against ‘the background in the hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos’ as he would celebrate the star ‘since dark is what brings out your light.’

Altogether, the regionalism of ‘A Boy’s Will’ was persuasive enough to set the Yankee farmer-poet image going among his reviewers. But without the hindsight advantage of knowing Frost to be a New England bard, these echoes do not seem much more telling than others from ‘the worn book of old-golden song’ mentioned in another poem (doubtless Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury of English poetry*: Frost’s favorite anthology, which as a teenage he had read ‘literally to rags and tatters’) a poem whose rhetoric is redolent of Keats and even the premonitory William Collins. So Frost’s pilgrimage toward regional identification entailed a double movement: from one form of ‘naivete’ to another from more-or-less ungrounded romantic aestheticism of the ‘I dwell with a strongly aching heart/In that vanished abode there for apart’ variety to another (affectionate-satirical regionalism of the ‘trust New Hampshire not to have enough/of radium or anything to sell’ variety). The typical weaknesses of his mature repertoire, both of which mar ‘New Hampshire’, are sententiousness on the first wavelength and triviality on the second. In short, Frost believed, as for the most part did the Fireside group as a whole, in a species of poetics colloquiality which would be locally nuanced, but which would also, and by the same token, take its place in an Anglophonic symposium to which Yeats and Hardy and Robinson, Emerson and Longfellow and Arnold, Shakespeare and Wordsworth and Keats, all rightfully belonged. The assumption of a shared Anglophone poetic and the goal of a publicly accessible poetic communication were the two most basic coordinates of Frost’s conception of what the historical and social position of posies should be. This ethos of cosmopolitan localism or localist cosmopolitanism may not, as doctrine, sound particularly striking or glamorous; but its best poetic results have been admirable, and in a deeply divided but intractably global world it merits a fresh look.

Frost focuses on the independent individual as a prerequisite for a creative exchange between individuals, regions, nations, or cultures: “Poetry is written first for the person that writes and then going out into its social appeal and use..... I should expect life to be back and forward.....now more individual on the farm now more social in the city- striving to get the balance.”⁴ Going to Europe, the poet experienced cultural differences first hand which opened his eyes to the peculiarities of the respective cultural identities. It was there that Frost grew aware of his American identity and claimed that he ‘never saw New England as clearly as when he was in old England’. A similar combination of the local and the universal reappears in an address on ‘American Literature and the American Language’ delivered by Eliot at Washington University in 1953. In this lecture, Eliot tried to define American literature by selecting three authors whom he considers ‘landmark.....for the identification of American literature’, namely Poe, Whitman, and Twain. Despite an initial disclaimer, condemning any attempts at defining their common American characteristics as ‘folly’, Eliot proceeds to explain why he singled them out: “Here we arrive at two characteristics which I think must be found together, in any author whom I should single out as one of the landmarks of a national literature: the strong local flavour combined with unconscious universality.”⁵ In other words, Eliot considers them truly American authors because their work reflects a strong sense of locality while at the same time dealing with universal themes. In this way, Eliot offers a definition of national literature which carefully avoids any specific statement about national characteristics. At the same time, however, he explicitly rejects Frost as a possible landmark, thus ignoring that Frost’s poetry wants to combine both a ‘strong local flavour’ and ‘universality’. Calling Frost one of ‘the last of the pure New Englanders’, Eliot views him exclusively as the poet of a region that has ‘its own particular civilized landscape and the ethos of a local society of English origin.....representative of New England, rather than of America’, thus denying what Frost so emphatically insists upon: the possibility to see New England as a *pars pro toto* for America. Being convinced that Frost’s work appeals mostly to people of New England origin.....for whom it possess a ‘peculiar nostalgic charm’.....Eliot cautions against ‘overvaluing the local product just because it is local.’⁶ Eliot’s views may not find argument with many as Frost’s work did not appeal only to people of New England, he found admirers among all Americans and even those from other countries of the world. The local milieu in Frost’s poetry is just a means to address the general populace all over the world to give them a peep into his beloved New England, to familiarize them with the Yankee temper and speech. In no way can it be called on overvaluation of the local flavour in his poetry.

He crystallized at the last into the amiable Yankee of 'A Tuft of Flowers' and 'Birches'. Nature appeared almost to be copying art. The flowering of nature that he saw in abundance in his beloved New England seemed to have entered his personality too and leaving the grim, solemn persona of his earlier poems he became the sunny good-natured farmer Yankee poet of his later poems and that have become the abiding image of Frost to this day. Frost was a self-declared environmentalist and he showed this concern in most of his poems. Frost's works with details of environment drew specific statements and conclusions at the end of every poem. He did not tend to become a total philosopher like Emerson or a robust optimist like Browning. He always walked on a middle path. Frost combined all these attitudes to nature and more. He was appreciative of New England's assets and liabilities. Like Thoreau, he concentrated on both the beautiful and the awful aspects of nature. New England is the Wessex of Robert Frost. He finds in New England the clue to his poetry. It is from here that he draws his poetic characters. W.H. Auden is of the opinion that it is difficult to find any other poet who uses language more simply than Frost. Frost loves frugality in the use of words and understatement. The words he uses and the poetic diction which he employs are of New England mode and hence do not command extra-ordinary linguistic skill on the part of the readers as is needed in the case of many modern poets.

Robert Frost lays an emphasis upon the need of being versed in the country things. It came to him on account of the result of his close identification of nature as an instructive agent like Marvel and secondly because of the intimate interaction between man and nature, each tending to mirror the other. His poetry being pastoral, he deals with rural life and nature always provides the background. In 'Pasture' Frost uses the symbols of 'spring' and the 'calf' which came to mean the simple, pure, innocent beginning of things. Frost portrays in the poem the rural life with reference to the great world beyond. By employing the above-said symbols, he is able to establish a comparison between the pasture and the outside world which as a pastoral poet, he ought to do. Frost uses in the poem pastoral analogy, this is why it is hard to tie down his symbolism to specific and particular things. He nourishes his thoughts on Man's relationship to natural order of the world. He is convinced that the human being belongs to the animal kingdom and that his initial behaviour is regulated by instincts. Man is endowed with a mind, which leads to a choice between either yielding to his instincts, especially to the sixth sense, or establishing the victory of his reason. Frost's personages live in the countryside and turn to the exterior world of nature for an understanding of their inner conflicts. Frost's concern with nature sprang from his childhood and periods of his adult life spent in the lap of New England's natural world where he grew aware of the activity beauty and mystery of the exterior world. Frost has often been termed a New England poet because of his vivid

portrayal of the New England countryside, its flora and fauna, and above all, its people. Frost has been called the best interpreter of the New England temperament, as 'one versed in country things'. However, he was not quite at ease with this appellation.

Robert Frost himself declared that his ultimate goal was that of any serious poet: 'to lodge a few poems where they will be hard to get rid of.' This he had already done long before he died. Whether in making the great effort his salesmanship had also lodged a reputation which would be hard to get rid of is yet to be seen. 'There seems little doubt that Frost will be remembered. But only time will tell whether he is to be recalled as a physician who distributed placebos to his troubled age, or as a good Greek out of New England who drew back the dark curtain of eternity and directed men's eyes into the realm of final mysteries.'

The local milieu is so well reflected in the poetry of Robert Frost that it finds instant recognition and gratification in the reader. Granted, what many critics have claimed that there may have been other poets and writers who displayed the New England ethos more authentically than Frost but who reads them today? Frost is read the world over and will continue to do so till there are lovers of poetry. The New England depicted by Frost may have changed today after more than four decades yet the old world charm still lingers on and creates a nostalgia and emotional rapport with the reader whenever he reads the poems written by Frost. Pictures depicted by him of a horse carriage in the woods, or a swinger of birches or a wood cutter or tramps roaming the countryside spring alive in the mind's eye as soon as one thinks of the environs of New England. No American can remain unaffected by it and readers in faraway lands like us can vividly imagine and visit the beautiful sights that he recaptures through words. It is this knack that gives Frost the unique distinction of having created such life-like images in his poems of the area that he loved and enjoyed being in. There can be no more befitting end to this work than a poem in which he brought the sights and sounds of a rustic activity so alive to the readers that one seems a part of it. Therefore we end with the famous poem *After Apple Picking*, an early lyric of Frost's that has charmed readers with a rich vision of an idyllic New England harvest.

Frost had the knack of taking the mundane to the extraordinary, the local to the universal and thereby he was able to create a macrocosm from a small microcosm. Generations have studied and the coming generation will read his works and find nuances of meaning in them far beyond what he might have intended. It goes to define his greatness as a poet and the universality of his message that given him the status of a sage poet who passed wisdom into his poem.

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