

The Paradoxes of Robert Frost: A Meditation on “Discordant Elements”

Anastasia Vahaviolos Valassis

After Robert Frost sailed to England in 1912, he settled in Beaconsfield, “a little cottage in the suburbs,” and was determined to devote himself to writing. He collected pieces he had composed over a period of twenty years, only a couple of which he had actually published. Initially, Frost worried that the volume would be too “obviously inconsistent and self-contradictory” (Thompson and Winnick 159). This was an understandable concern; the lyrics collected in *A Boy's Will* reflected tumultuous times in his young life and traced the developing talent of a maturing poet. Frost had already endured bewildering doubts about his relationship to his wife, Elinor, serious vacillations in his life's scope and direction, and deep depressions that tried the unwavering faith his mother attempted to pass on to her children. Later Frost wrote to Ernest Silver that the book was “a study in a certain kind of waywardness,” further propagating his theme and embracing the volume's manifold directions (quoted in Thompson and Winnick 162). Frost is a far cry from the American poet who declared boldly and directly in 1855, “Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself” (1324-25). And yet, although Walt Whitman embraced contraries in “Song of Myself” (among other poems) to reflect an expansive poetic personality, and to level democratically all people and ideas in his very self-fashioning, Robert Frost sees inconsistency and paradox not in any modern notion of individuality or prophetic vision of an egalitarian America but as an eternal and natural form, modeled by the Earth herself.

Randall Jarrell, who first acknowledged a darker poet in Robert Frost than most critics of his time could see, notes that “the limits which existence approaches and falls back from have seldom been stated with such bare composure” (28). This comment testifies to the poet's deep metaphysical concerns and almost deceptively simple lan-

guage. The “bare composure” Jarrell sees as unique to Frost is indeed remarkable. The speaker’s steady voice recounts stories of aging, domestic trouble, loneliness, and death with a blunt evenness. A picture is placed quietly and almost unemotionally before a reader whose sympathies are aroused and who is left to grapple with faith or reason and possibly to mourn. Like Jarrell, Lionel Trilling was interested in Frost’s unqualified delivery of difficult observations and occasionally capricious truths. He said that Frost is “not carried out by reassurance, nor by the affirmation of old virtues and pieties” (quoted in Meyers 318). For this reason he called Frost a “terrifying” and “tragic” poet. Frost himself seemed aware of how his candid view might shock an audience and made allowance for human sensitivities that would be too affected by his rawness: he refrained from reading “Out, Out—” and “Home Burial” to audiences because these poems were simply too shocking.

Diminishing Things: Seasonal Change

Frost’s poetry gestures toward both a reluctance to embrace the course of nature or human events and a staunch acceptance of changing seasons and heartbreaking human destinies. Like Whitman, Frost reveals an honesty in his varied moods, and perhaps he presents a more accurate portrait of the complexity of human experience. Whitman, too, is frank by not defining himself in one way or committing himself to a single narrow ideology. Ralph Waldo Emerson, an influence on both Whitman and Frost, had written in “Self-Reliance” that “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds” (24). In other words, great minds are pliable and capable of changing opinions in order to arrive at mature thought. However, Whitman approaches hyperbole by insisting on being everything and everyone, becoming omniscient and omnipresent—something more than human. He includes the diversity that makes him an increasingly expansive paradox. Frost, whose feelings and perceptions betray the mutability he captures in spring blooms,