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Alienation in Robert Frost's Poetry

A Study in Theme and Technique

With Special Reference to

A Boy's Will (1913)

North of Boston (1914)

An M.A. Thesis
submitted by

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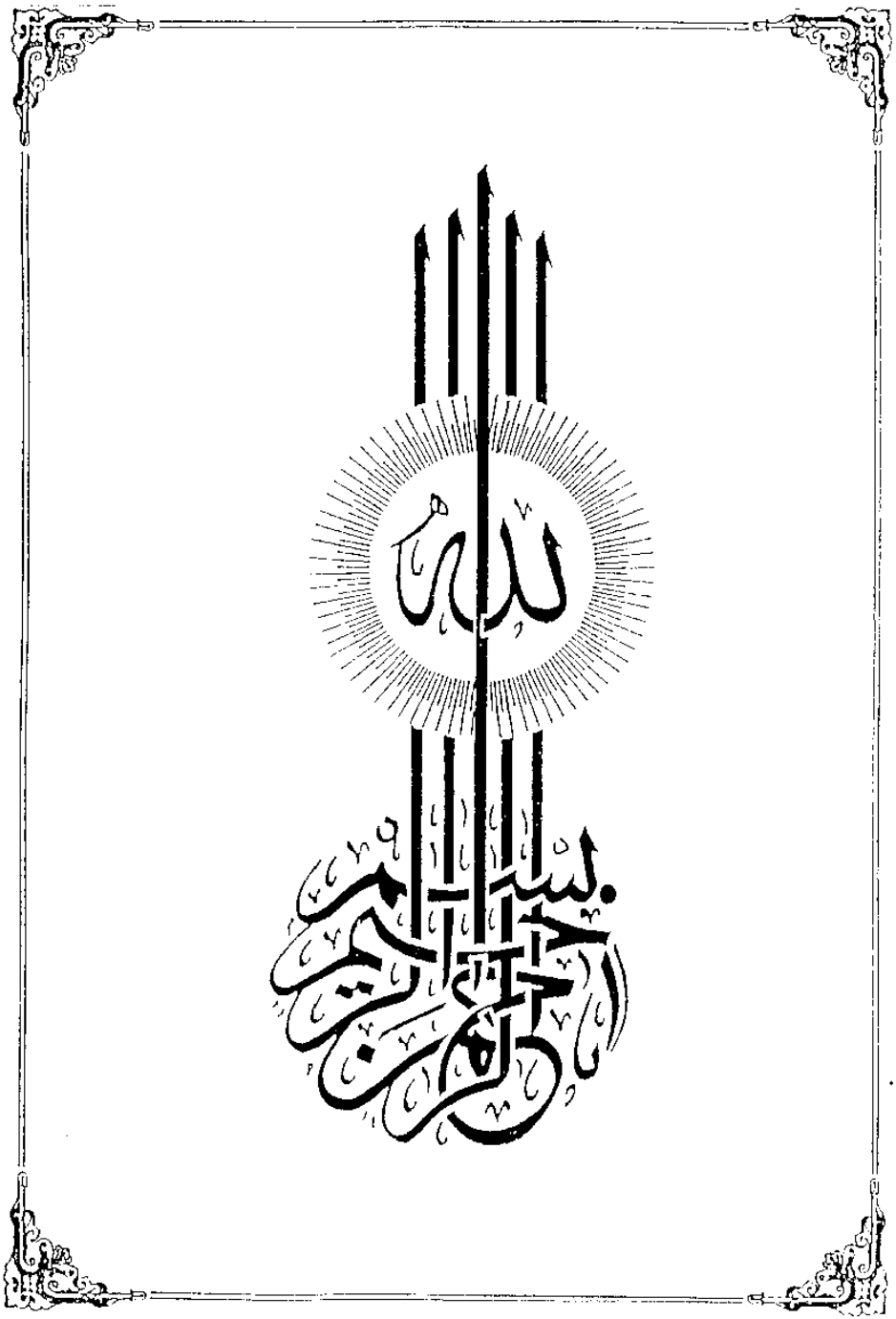

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Introduction

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Robert Lee Frost (1874-1963) has been acknowledged sinee the 1920s as one of America's greatest poets. Many critics believe that he and Walt Whitman, whose poetry is so very different from Frost's, are two of the greatest poets the United States has ever produced.

It is difficult to comprehend just how deep his roots go down in time. When he published "My Butterfly" in the Independent in November 1894, Henry James had not yet entered his major phase and Stephen Crane had not published The Red Badge of Courage. A year earlier Yeats had published The Celtic Twilight, but his poems had not yet appeared, and Conrad had closed his career in the merchant service and began his career as a professional writer. The careers of Lawrence, Joyce, Eliot and Pound had not of eourse begun by then. Fitzgerald, Faulkner and Hemingway had not even been born.

These facts reveal more than Frost's age. They emphasise that he was writing poetry before modern literature actually began to appear. In fact, Frost grew up in a time when there was no commanding poetic voice in America. Whitman was still alive and was still writing poetry, but the force of his career was spent and he became the Good Gray Poet. Emily Dickinson, the one vital spirit in American poetry, was significantly enough unheard and unknown, having chosen to write poetry to posterity instead of addressing the contemporary audience. In the wake of the Schoolroom Poets, who were dying one by one, there was simply no poetic audience to listen and no voice to speak during the twenty-six years that Frost spent in the nineteenth century.

However, the remoteness of Frost's beginnings is no more striking than the decisive twentieth-century chronology of his career. Although he had published fugitive pieces in magazines, his first volume of poems did not appear until 1913, when he was thirty-nine years old. It is not an extraordinarily late age to begin a career, even in America — where Emerson,

In Chapter Two, the researcher will study the man-God relation and the barriers between the individual and his Creator. It is perhaps paradoxically easier to examine Frost's attitude to rather vague concepts such as fate and free will than to be sure precisely what his concept of God is. There is little doubt that he believed in God, but there is also no doubt at all that his own faith scarcely conformed to any of the orthodoxies that most of us are familiar with. Frost, particularly in his early poems, often invokes God and in his two masques one sees that this God is a personal deity with whom man can enter into some sort of relationship.

In Chapter Three, Frost's conception of nature, the researcher discusses the barriers between man and the surrounding natural objects. In fact, Frost gave great attention to nature and this reveals his realism and naturalism. His attitude is different from that of Wordsworth and the other Romantic poets. Nature for Frost is not a kindly mother, watching benevolently over man, neither does she have any "holy plan" of her own for the good of mankind. Thus, Frost's concept of nature and his attitude encourage the researcher to discuss thoroughly this point in his work.

Chapter Four deals with the man-man relationship and the barriers between man and his fellowmen. The best example of this is "Mending Wall", the opening poem of his second volume book of people, North of Boston (1914). Such barriers stand on the way of establishing human relationships; they also generate tension, which results in neurosis and emotional imbalance verging on insanity. This is the topic of this chapter.

It is also one aim of the present thesis to figure out whether Frost is an objective poet who produces things external with an immediate reference to the common eye and apprehension of his fellowmen or a subjective poet who writes not for "the many below" but for the one above him who sees the absolute truth.

Chapter One

Robert Frost and the Zeit-geist

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For centuries, *alienation* in language has had three main meanings. First, it indicated the transfer of rights or property; second, it refereed to the act or result of turning away from friends (estrangement); and third, it sometimes meant insanity. The word alienation has a long history, but an uneventful one. In the 1940s and 1950s this word became very popular. Since the mid-1940s the word has seemed to express best the mood or the predicament of many people and to convey the message of such widely read and discussed authors as Kafka and Camus.

According to many definitions of alienation, it is as old as man or almost as old. This statement is true if under the term alienation one also includes the continuous and unavoidable estrangement from persons, ideas, and things which man experiences during his life. It is also true if one believes with Thoreau that "tedium and ennui" are as old as Adam or thinks that (existential) alienation is caused by the separation between actuality and potentiality in human existence. Therefore, it can be said that no society, culture, historical period nor any human being can be free of alienation.

Alienation started according to Rosseau and his many followers as soon as man separated from his natural condition. Some even hold that to be human means to be alienated. Man is an eternal stranger on this planet. He became a stranger when he cut himself off from the rest of creation and became human.

One can deduce the age of isolation or of alienation from the reinterpretations of the very old biblical tales. The story of Adam and Eve could be viewed as a story of alienation from God; alienation through conscience and reason, alienation from home or from nature, alienation from family, from God and from others.

The roots of alienation are not visible; instead, it is an intraspychic process but in the societal and political structure.

The third restriction Schacht suggests is to exclude using the term as a "critical and polemical term" denoting something undesirable. This 'non-evaluative use of the term" is, he thinks, most consistent with the restriction concerning the feeling of alienation.

This assumption, however, is hardly correct. The three suggested limitations are not consistent with each other. The objectivity which Schacht excludes in the second limitation becomes a must in the third one. More importantly, where the feelings of alienation are involved, the term may not be used polemically, but far from being natural, it is mostly critical and expresses something undesirable. After all, the feeling of alienation often stands for pain, grief, despair and anger.

Thus, according to critics and philosophers, alienation seems to be as old as man or at least as old as a primeval fall, whether this fall is seen from a religious point of view as a fall from innocence and divine grace or from a psychological point of view as a leap or crawl into life as a thinking and social being.

Indeed, alienation frequently seems to be a mere slogan without weight or substance, a phoney escape from reality and responsibility, a fashionable make-up of a dull face, a glib answer to difficult questions, a flight into a non-existent sickness or into the sickness of existence.

When the term alienation is used without any modification, it often denotes alienation from society, especially in America, while in Europe it often means alienation from others, one's fellowmen. The reason why the word alienation often stands for social alienation is that alienation from society in the judgement of many is most important, most obvious and most frequent. Quite a few would subscribe to a statement made by a critic who says that the alienation of man from God, or man from nature, ought not to preoccupy us, and that the only alienation that matters is that of man from his society.

the heart of the matter, any interpretation of this relationship must begin with his concept of "belief": how he acts as poet and how his conduct as a poet is interrelated with the workings of his poetry.

One of the central things about his poetry is that it reflects the experiences of everyday life: its ironies, delicacies, joys and sorrows. They are not derived from any formal study of philosophy but from life itself. He has the practicality of Matthew Arnold and Thoreau; yet he is not as one-sided in his beliefs as they are. His experiences with hard reality have made him basically a teacher through metaphor, and even his simplest couplets depend on this technique for their success.

Unlike Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, who were contemporaries to him, Frost made no effort to develop a consistent or coherent theory of his poetic art. He did not write any single essay on the function of poetry, nor did he write much critical commentary on the practice of the poets which might elucidate his own. It is possible, however, to discover his basic views of art from fragments of his lectures, his readings, his introductions to his own poetry, and his conversations and letters.

The reader of Frost's few essays finds it hard to isolate the poet's principles since he talks of many things at once. Unlike T.S. Eliot, he never explains his own remarks, and his basic principles seem not to have gone through any developing process. His thought may be said to be synthetic rather than analytic; and the analytic reader, not in possession of Frost's mind, will often find himself like the character in "The Armful", who loses everything by trying momentarily to cling to the past. Since Frost consistently uses metaphors in discussing poetry, his remarks will disappoint those seeking a prose clarification. For him his explanation of the poetic process does not achieve its end; while for those who already know the poetic experience, his explanation seems redundant.

Such failure to bow to the ordinary analytic approach can understandably create resentment in those who try to interpret his views on

aware of his own special gift, he identifies three beliefs as basic to his poetic life: *"self-belief, love-belief, and art-belief"*.

> The person who gets close enough to poetry
> is going to know more than anybody else knows
> about the word belief. . I happen to think that
> these three beliefs are all closely related to the
> the God-belief.[2]

The poet's duty is to live according to the first three to bring about the fourth. This particular poet's "way of life" is a sequence of these three progressive faiths. He must first know and trust himself and recognise his own loneliness and isolation in the midst of life. Second, he must know himself as a social being: as a lover, a friend, a teacher. He must be willing to share what he knows with his fellowmen. Finally, he must believe in his creative endowment as an artist and see himself as form-giver.

Frost is aware of the fact that his "beliefs" are metaphoric and hard to pin down; this is their glory and their pleasure of exploration for him. His poetry contains both the instantaneous flashes of insight that may glitter momentarily in lines as well as the constant glow of wisdom that seems reflected from life itself. It is the balance and tension between the insight and wisdom that makes poetry keenly interesting to him.

His "self-belief" may lead the man poet into frequent sorrows, and Frost would not have him seek any easy escape if he would really know himself. In his struggle for independence, he will have to yield when reason conquers emotion, but the majority of Frost's poems celebrate this very conflict and exult in the evenly-matched elements which he recognises within his own spirit.

Second only to his love of human independence in "self-belief" is his awareness of his human dependence. He knows the precarious condition of the human being in his world and acknowledges that his very humanity depends on such a condition of conflict, tension and balance.

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[2] Lawrence Thompson, Robert Frost: University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers. No.2. (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1959), p. 53.

as "lover" in society and feels the obligation to convey what he has learned in his earlier stage. Once again, the poet-philosopher uses his art to speak for his love of life and to reflect his life in his poetry. It has long been Frost's theory that his poems are "only as good as they are dramatic", and critics find him at his best when his poems "talk back and forth to each other", so that each one becomes a kind of metaphor of his "love-belief" in society. It is this social, dramatic belief in communication that sends Frost across the country still at an advanced age literally preaching his doctrine of his poetic life like an evangelist. He once said that the sensible and healthy live somewhere between self-approval and approval of society. His own lover's quarrel with the world urges him to talk and write about his experiences as a living poet. So in many capacities — as father, friend, lover, teacher, lecturer — in the social pattern, he is always bard of this "love-belief" in himself and his poetry, and he is compelled to share this belief: a dramatic necessity.

Frost's conviction of his dignified position as poet-in-society places him in the tradition of other poets with this "love-belief" in communication: the bard, the prophet, the soothsayer. Frost claims for the poet of today the right to aspire to the place of Plato's ideal poet, who sang "not by art but by power divine", though his power as poet banished him from the Republic. While Frost could hesitate to claim divinity as his inspiration, he admits to a certain "madness". In a discussion of reason versus imagination, Frost said to a friend, "Imagination comes first". The friend replied, "Oh no, I'm mad about reasoning!" Frost concluded dryly: "That's what I mean!"[3] Frost would certainly agree with Plato as to the poet's role in moving men closer to divinity as their "love-beliefs" make them missionaries for their cause.

Frost uses the Platonic image of a driver of a team of horses to symbolise his ideal poet's precarious position as he accepts the responsibility

[3] Edson Arthur, "News Conference with Robert Frost", The Illinois State Journal, (Oct. 16, 1958), p.5.

its creation, its variety and its service. Through his own seeking of understanding, he comes finally to the creation of a poem whose fact is his own momentary act of consciousness. This is the god-like artist's greatest moment, and Frost recognises it as the human form-giver's highest achievement:

> When in doubt, there is always form for us to go on with. . . I think it must stroke faith the right way. The artist, the poet, might be expected to be the most aware of such assurance. But it is really everybody's sanity to feel it and live by it. . . The background is hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos, and against the background any small, man-made figure of order and concentration. What pleasanter than that this should be so?[6]

With such a question the poet reaches his complete aesthetic pleasure in the process of creation out of that confusion. He becomes the god-like figure as he creates a form, however simple that is, and he gives shape to a faith. He becomes heroic as he lives by it and uses that form for the destiny of others. Such a poet achieves life and faith in action at the moment without worrying about any final understanding of the mysteries of God and the universe. "The fact is the sweetest dream. . ."[7] and it is the visible form of the artefact that the artist has created out of his own virtue for that of others if they will read him knowledgeably.

Using the themes of his poems to educate and convert, Frost retains a certain quality of his Puritan heritage: non-conformist, self-disciplined, vigorous, pioneering — he would bid his readers to all of these daring tortures by the use of the didactic "fact" of the poem.

Self-belief, love-belief and art-belief are all closely related to the God-belief. They all mean that you may enter into a relationship with God to bring about the future. The final goal of Frost's way of life is to bring about a future.

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[6] Robert Frost, "Open Letter to the Amherst Student". The Amherst Student. (March 25, 1935), p. 318.

[7] Elizabeth Isaacs, op. cit., p. 47.

interrelation with his life and with each other. Each poem you read throws light on all the others. Every one you understand adds real meaning to life.

If a poem offers even a "momentary stay against confusion" — however small and temporary a "clarification of reality" — it has been worthy of the bard who created it. This art-belief in form-giving is for Robert Frost a high religious satisfaction. More than this, he can not and will not say categorically that he continues to "look out for and in deep" with a shrewd and growing sense that affirmation is somehow stronger in the balance than denial. But he is modest enough to remember that "the strong are saying nothing until they see". This has been his "way of life" from the beginning; he continues through his self-belief, love-belief and art-belief to approach — humbly yet proudly — a God-belief as his life draws to its close. In a television programme in which he participated, Frost made some succinct statements regarding the modern battle between scientists and poets. One particular quotation seems to sum up Frost's entire religious attitude of simple faith as he watches the frenzied race for space that characterises the last decade of his life:

> I'm only too willing for science to go her whole length; I'm not afraid of her. Let her go as far as she can to domesticate the moon, my bathroom, or my kitchen. She'll never really touch the "human" in me. Mine is an awe that science can't create.[10]

Refusing to arrange his observations into any kind of systematic theory, Frost mentiones several specifics and factors which seem important to him. Rejecting the hard and fast boundaries of definition as too dangerous, he refers to certain elastic principles which seem not only sensible and salutary but also deeply rooted in the experience of poets in any age. Cautiously, he begins by finding the initial impetus of the poet to rise out of intensely perceived experiences which are given expression, in the Emersonian sense of the word. But he qualifies his use of the word "expression" with some care. How

[10] Robert Frost, "Small World" NBC TV, (October 11, 1959).