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POETRY AND THE AGE

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The Other Frost

BESIDES the Frost that everybody knows there is one whom no one even talks about. Everybody knows what the regular Frost is: the one living poet who has written *good* poems that ordinary readers like without any trouble and understand without any trouble; the conservative editorialist and self-made apothegm-joiner, full of dry wisdom and free, complacent, Yankee enterprise; the Farmer-Poet—this is an imposing private rôle perfected for public use, a sort of Olympian Will Rogers out of *Tanglewood Tales;* and, last or first of all, Frost is the standing, speaking reproach to any other good modern poet: "If Frost can write poetry that's just as easy as Longfellow you can too—you do too." It is this "easy" side of Frost that is most attractive to academic readers, who are eager to canonize any modern poet who condemns in example the modern poetry which they condemn in precept; and it is this side that has helped to get him neglected or depreciated by intellectuals—the reader of Eliot or Auden usually dismisses Frost as something

inconsequentially good that *he* knew all about long ago. Ordinary readers think Frost the greatest poet alive, and love some of his best poems almost as much as they love some of his worst ones. He seems to them a sensible, tender, humorous poet who knows all about trees and farms and folks in New England, and still has managed to get an individualistic, fairly optimistic, thoroughly American philosophy out of what he knows; there's something reassuring about his poetry, they feel—almost like prose. Certainly there's nothing hard or odd or gloomy about it.

These views of Frost, it seems to me, come either from not knowing his poems well enough or from knowing the wrong poems too well. Frost's best-known poems, with a few exceptions, are not his best poems at all; when you read (say) the selections in Untermeyer, you are getting a good synopsis of the ordinary idea of Frost and a bad misrepresentation of the real Frost. It would be hard to make a novel list of Eliot's best poems, but one can make a list of ten or twelve of Frost's best poems that is likely to seem to anybody too new to be true. Here it is: "The Witch of Coös," "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," "Directive," "Design," "A Servant to Servants," "Provide Provide," "Home-Burial," "Acquainted with the Night," "The Pauper Witch of Grafton" (mainly for its ending), "An Old Man's Winter Night," "The Gift Outright," "After Apple-Picking," "Desert Places," and "The Fear."

Nothing I say about these poems can make you see what they are like, or what the Frost that matters most is like; if you read them you will see. "The Witch of Coös" is the best thing of its kind since Chaucer. "Home-Burial" and "A Servant to Servants" are two of the most moving and appalling dramatic

poems ever written; and how could lyrics be more ingeniously and conclusively merciless than "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" or "Design"? or more grotesquely and subtly and mercilessly disenchanting than the tender "An Old Man's Winter Night"? or more unsparingly truthful than "Provide Provide"? And so far from being obvious, optimistic, orthodox, many of these poems are extraordinarily subtle and strange, poems which express an attitude that, at its most extreme, makes pessimism seem a hopeful evasion; they begin with a flat and terrible reproduction of the evil in the world and end by saying: It's so; and there's nothing you can do about it; and if there were, would *you* ever do it? The limits which existence approaches and falls back from have seldom been stated with such bare composure.

Frost's virtues are extraordinary. No other living poet has written so well about the actions of ordinary men: his wonderful dramatic monologues or dramatic scenes come out of a knowledge of people that few poets have had, and they are written in a verse that uses, sometimes with absolute mastery, the rhythms of actual speech. Particularly in his blank verse there is a movement so characteristic, so unmistakably and overwhelmingly Frost's, that one feels about it almost as Madame de Guermantes felt about those Frans Halses at Haarlem: that if you caught just a glimpse of them, going by in the street-car, you would be able to tell they were something pretty unusual. It is easy to underestimate the effect of this exact, spaced-out, prosaic rhythm, whose objects have the tremendous strength—you find it in Hardy's best poems—of things merely put down and left to speak for themselves. (Though Frost has little of Hardy's self-effacement, his matter-

of-fact humility; Frost's tenderness, sadness, and humor are adulterated with vanity and a hard complacency.) Frost's seriousness and honesty; the bare sorrow with which, sometimes, things are accepted as they are, neither exaggerated nor explained away; the many, many poems in which there are real people with their real speech and real thoughts and real emotions—all this, in conjunction with so much subtlety and exactness, such classical understatement and restraint, makes the reader feel that he is not in a book but in a world, and a world that has in common with his own some of the things that are most important in both. I don't need to praise anything so justly famous as Frost's observation of and empathy with everything in Nature from a hornet to a hillside; and he has observed his own nature, one person's random or consequential chains of thoughts and feelings and perceptions, quite as well. (And this person, in the poems, is not the "alienated artist" cut off from everybody who isn't, yum-yum, another alienated artist; he is someone like normal people only more so—a normal person in the less common and more important sense of *normal*.) The least crevice of the good poems is saturated with imagination, an imagination that expresses itself in the continual wit and humor and particularity of what is said, in the hand-hewn or hand-polished texture of its saying. The responsibility and seriousness of Frost's best work—his worst work has an irresponsible conceit, an indifference to everything but himself, that appalls one—are nowhere better manifested than in the organization of these poems: an organization that, in its concern for any involution or ramification that really belongs to its subject, and in its severity toward anything else, expresses that absorp-

tion into a subject that is prior even to affection. The organization of Frost's poems is often rather simple or—as people say—"old-fashioned." But, as people ought to know, very complicated organizations are excessively rare in poetry, although in our time a very complicated disorganization has been excessively common; there is more successful organization in "Home-Burial" or "The Witch of Coös"—one feels like saying, in indignant exaggeration—than in the *Cantos* and *The Bridge* put together. These titles will remind anyone of what is scarcest in Frost: rhetoric and romance, hypnotic verbal excitement, Original Hart Crane. Frost's word-magic is generally of a quiet, sober, bewitching sort, though the contrasts he gets from his greyed or unsaturated shades are often more satisfying to a thoughtful rhetorician than some dazzling arrangements of prismatic colors. Yet there are dazzling passages in Frost.

Frost has written, as everybody knows: "I never dared be radical when young/ For fear it would make me conservative when old." This is about as truthful as it is metrical: Frost *was* radical when young—he was a very odd and very radical radical, a much more interesting sort than the standard *New Republic* brand—and now that he's old he's sometimes callously and unimaginatively conservative. Take his poems about the atomic bomb in *Steeple Bush*; these amount, almost, to a very old and a very successful man saying: "I've had my life—why should you worry about yours?" The man who called himself "the author/ Of several books against the world in general"; who said that he had learned from Marlowe's Mephistopheles to say his prayers, "Why this is Hell, nor am I out of it"; who said to Henry Hudson, drowned or frozen somewhere in Hudson's Bay: "You