ROBERT FROST

by Tyler Hoffman

Born on 26 March 1874 in San Francisco to Isabelle Moodie and William Prescott Frost Jr., Robert Lee Frost gained distinction not only as one of the most accomplished poets of the modernist period but also as one of the most popular poets in American history. Although born on the West Coast, he is closely tied to New England, where he lived most of his life, and his poetry takes stock of the people and places of that region in a combination of bold new colloquial rhythms and traditional forms; indeed, his method could be called "the old-fashioned way to be new," a phrase that Frost used to praise his fellow New England poet Edwin Arlington Robinson. Along with his regional focus, Frost wrote poetry that responds directly (if metaphorically) to national and international political cultures and events during his lifetime. The surface ease of his poetry allowed him to reach a general public that many other modernist poets did not; however, beneath the surfaces of his poems are murky depths without a clear bottom. Indeed, it is the ambiguity that surrounds much of his greatest poetry that makes it so challenging and rewarding, and the critical and popular success he achieved as a poet is unprecedented. By the time of Frost's death in 1963, he had been awarded four Pulitzer Prizes and the prestigious Bollingen Prize for Poetry, and his recital at John F. Kennedy's presidential inauguration in 1961 symbolized his apotheosis into America's beloved poet-sage.

EARLY YEARS

Frost's childhood was spent in San Francisco until his father, city editor of the San Francisco Daily Evening Post, died of tuberculosis when Robert was eight years old, at which time his mother returned with her children to Lawrence, Massachusetts, to teach school (they were supported financially by Robert's paternal grandparents). In 1890 Robert published his first poem, "La Noche Triste," based on his reading of William Prescott's History of the Conquest of Mexico, and also published poems in the Lawrence High School Bulletin. Frost was co-valedictorian of his high school class, an honor that he shared with his future wife, Elinor. He became engaged to Elinor in 1892 and matriculated as an undergraduate at Dartmouth College in the fall of the same year. In his few months at Dartmouth, Frost ran across an issue of the New York newspaper The Independent, the first page of which was dedicated to a new poem by Richard Hovey (a recent graduate of Dartmouth) entitled "Seaward: An Elegy on the Death of Thomas William Parsons." The editorial in that issue announced that Hovey's poem was one of the finest elegies ever written in English, and Frost's reading of the poem and the accompanying editorial encouraged him to write an elegy of his own, which he sent to Susan Hayes Ward, the literary editor of The Independent, with whom he began a correspondence. The poem was published by her as "My Butterfly: An Elegy"
as those in previous books, they indicate his continued concern for the emotional and ideological contours of our world. The final lyric, "In winter in the woods alone," is perhaps most typical of Frost, as it presents a lone individual readying for assault, fully cognizant of his kinship to the natural world:

I see for Nature no defeat
In one tree's overthrow
Or for myself in my retreat
For yet another blow.

In "Escapist—Never," though, he makes clear that the retreat of which he speaks is not an escape from life but instead a gathering of forces for the direct confrontation with life that he—and all of us—eventually must make. There are some dark poems here too, including "The Draft Horse," which stages a random act of violence when a man jumps out of the woods and stabs to death the horse that is taking the speaker to his destination. As Jay Parini (1999) has shown, the poem becomes a metaphor for the failure of poetic vision; depression, or lack of imagination, is the agent responsible for the crippling of the poet's creative force. His thoughts still on mortality, though with more humor, Frost's "Away!" plays with tone and with the notion of his demise (much as in the earlier "Birches") as he comes to the conclusion that

I may return
If dissatisfied
With what I learn
From having died.

Finally, in his long poem "Kitty Hawk," Frost is the most overtly autobiographical, tracing his flight into the Dismal Swamp of North Carolina after Elinor's initial rejection of him during their courtship and meditating on the flight of the Wright brothers, "the supreme merit" of "risking spirit in substantiation." Indeed, the question of the interpenetration of matter and spirit lies at the heart of Frost's poetry and is something that Frost puzzled over all his life.

In addition to this personal terrain, Frost traverses the political as well, making his case variously for capitalism ("Pod of the Milkweed"), isolationism ("Does No One At All Ever Feel This Way in the Least"), and American democracy ("The Bad Island—Easter," "America Is Hard to See," and his preface to "The Gift Outright" written for Kennedy's inauguration). In his long poem "How Hard It Is to Keep from Being King When It's in You and in the Situation" he further details his politics, linking his desire for a system of democratic checks and balances to the counterpointing of rhythm and meter in a poem. These figures of Frost's poetry and poetics have had a profound influence on successive poets, not only on American poets but on poets throughout the postcolonial world, as he has sought through them to negotiate the conflicting impulses within himself and in the world around him.

[See also Nature Writing: Poetry.]

SELECTED WORKS

A Boy's Will (1913)
North of Boston (1914)
Mountain Interval (1916)
New Hampshire: A Poem with Notes and Grace Notes (1923)
Selected Poems (1923)
West-Running Brook (1928)
Collected Poems (1930)
A Further Range (1936)
A Witness Tree (1942)
A Masque of Reason (1945)
A Masque of Mercy (1947)
Steeple Bush (1947)
Complete Poems (1949)
In the Clearing (1962)

FURTHER READING


