

THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST-
AN UNSTATED SEARCH FOR PROOF

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There is a great deal of "journeying" in the poetry of Robert Frost. While most of the "journey" poems do not conform to the narrowest sense of that label, as for instance "Birches" does, they are still representative of a basic characteristic of much of Frost's work, the search for meaning. "When most confiding, he admitted that the primary goal of his experience-poetic and non-poetic- was the quest for psychological and spiritual salvation."¹ Given this general tendency, we first have to state that Frost does not openly admit to such a pursuit. But in spite of the "resolved" stance which he affects, the searching goes on. Again, such a journey or search would seem pointless, because as one of his first poems points out, nature is a "mask of gloom" which reveals no answer. Nature is only a physical fact, and not the manifestation or key to some higher spiritual reality. But the searching goes on. And even if he could penetrate the gloom, says Frost, it would only corroborate conclusions that he has already reached by instinct, "Only more sure of all I thought was true." While he never explicitly states these conclusions, the tone of most of his poetry would seem to indicate that they are positive rather than negative.

Yet despite this instinctive knowledge, Frost does, repeatedly, probe the mask. While he does not admit to this search, his actions demonstrate man's basic need to be assured of his suspicions, whatever the cost. Wouldn't it be logical to assume that a man who felt he knew the answer wouldn't press his luck? But such is not the case with Frost, nor with most men. From the very beginning he claims that penetration is impossible, and seems to be resolute in his decision to make his own way. But he is compelled to find truth

at its source. He flies into the blank face of nature when he knows it won't do any good because underneath there is an urge that will not let him rest, that hopes beyond hope to find an answer. "Revelation" demonstrates Frost's need for a response from the universe which mutely confronts him.

But with all, from babes that play
 At hide-and-seeK to God afar,
 So all who hide too well away
 Must speak and tell us where they are.

But why "must" God speak?

So far I have assumed two things, first that the contradiction between Frost's instinctive knowledge (as a child he did know) and his searching is more of a truism than a contradiction, and second that it is a matter of course for man to probe physical nature for the answer to his philosophical and religious questions. The first assumption, I think, is true for most men, and the second one is especially pertinent to a discussion of Frost. It may be a contradiction for a man with instinctive faith to need proof, but men have to see things in person, even though they already know the truth. As a child Frost knew God, and didn't need proof then. But as a man, instinct no longer satisfies his psychological needs, and he must have evidence. This need to have evidence would be most crucial in religion. The contradiction, the need to support instinctive faith with proof, is probably true of most men.

The answers to Frost's personality and to his religious beliefs lie in the interaction of several factors in his early life. Early religious training, a basic insecurity, cowardice, self-deception, egotism, and a natural human need to be sure of God all contributed in the production of Frost's religious beliefs. This discussion will not attempt to present a chronolo-

gical record of his philosophic development because that development was finished when Frost was young. At different times various colors of the picture achieved ascendancy, but the picture itself does not change shape. Much of his poetry is a record of his attempts to prove what he knew instinctively as a child.

Frost's religious training, or better, his religious indoctrination came at the hands of his devoutly religious mother, a Scotch-Presbyterian-Unitarian-Swedenborgian. "As soon as Robbie and Jeanie were old enough to be interested, their mother combined storytelling with devout moralizing for the purpose of teaching them the fundamentals of religious and theological truth."² Much of his early education was received at home. From his mother he got a strong instinctive belief in God. It must be stressed; as a child he knew God. As a child he accepted his religion at face value, but with maturity and the full growth of his rational powers he needed demonstrable proof to support his faith. For the rest of his life he sought to prove what he already knew, what had been his by training and by human instinct- the knowledge that God exists.

The next question to be answered is why Frost did not admit that he was searching. To admit that you're searching is to admit that you've lost something. The number of rigidly assertive poems he wrote would indicate that he was not about to admit uncertainty, at least not about the most basic part of his belief. Poems like "In a Vale", "A Prayer in Spring", "The Vantage Point", "Sitting by a Bush in Broad Sunlight", "Our Hold on the Planet", "Skeptic", and "Birches" express satisfaction rather than philosophical uncertainty. "He clung to his religious beliefs, desperately, because he needed them as protection, particularly against his fear of death. At the same time, he was ashamed not only of his fears but also of his compensating religious beliefs, and