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Robert Frost: Bridgewater State Teacher's College, 1959

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I love poetry for the fun of it, and because it is an antidote to the helter skelter of my everyday life. I turn off the scary and limited TV news and pick up my page-worn, cover-taped Untermeier anthology of poetry. I am looking for a new poem. Well, new to me, at any rate. More and more these days I find that poetry is a necessary addition (antidote?) to the everyday prose that I am asked to read, the popular magazines, the newspapers or “information” in countless formats that is “required” reading in my professional life. I am not expected to read poetry for my profession, nor am I an expert about the poetry I read. Poetry-as-a-hobby is the work I love to add to my normal workload. I dredge up from my college days the limited skills of scansion I learned then and find that counting the stresses of a line is a great deal more fun than looking at a line of stock market information.

I travel to a local “poetry slam” to relax after a hard day of listening to people present ideas in classes and at meetings. Professionally I am both a teacher and a faculty union leader, and, though I have not studied the issue systematically, I can fairly reliably report that in these positions I do not normally hear ideas delivered in poetic form. It is hard to imagine that centuries ago poetry was an important means for dealing with everyday affairs. Poetry lost its value because it’s effectiveness was questioned. I’ve spent enough time in classrooms and meetings to question the effectiveness of our normal ways of presenting our ideas. Yes, imagine those responsible for the next faculty meeting speaking poetically to make their points, and imagine teachers teaching social studies in the poetic form.

I appreciate poetry because it gives me a chance to connect with my past experiences. Having developed a career in this careerist oriented society, I use the knowledge that I know best to do what I do to make a living. Because of this I have forgotten lots of knowledge that was important to me. Poetry is there to provide me the means to recall subjects that established my early world view. When the poetry is of high quality then I recall the past with inspiration. Robert Frost said, “poetry makes you remember what you didn’t know you knew.” Is there a better reason to love poetry?

The idea of reading, reciting and writing poetry for the love of it appears to be more popular than ever. Poet and poetry writer Donald Hall reports that all indications are that poetry is in excellent shape.

For Hall, the idea that poetry is dying is a big lie. He even titled a recent published book *Death to the Death of Poetry* in which he writes eloquently why he doesn’t “accept the big lie.” Hall points out that more than a thousand poetry books appear in this country each year and that more people read poetry now than ever did before. Poetry readings, he states, picked up in the late 1950s, avalanched in the 1960s, and continue unabated in the 1990s. Poetry journals are published and subscribed to in larger numbers than ever. Hall is an enthusiast for quality poetry that intends artistic excellence. His supporting evidence for the strength of poetry doesn’t include support for anything less than the “diverse, intelligent, beautiful, moving work that should endure.”
Bridgewater Review

Hall points out that the public is confused by the sheer volume of poetry and by some partisanship in the world of criticism for specific poets. There are relatively few national journals to keep up with the volume of poems being produced, and there is a need to discriminate among the good and bad ones. And the "either this poet or that one is the correct one for the day" syndrome leads to partisanship at the expense of the overall well being of poetry. However, there is ample evidence to show that poetry is still strong in America, and that these problems are having limited effect.

For Hall, the poetry readings with "rows of listeners" make him feel wonderful. He states, "In the 1990s the American climate for poetry is infinitely more generous. In the mail, in the row of listeners, even in the store down the road, I find generous response. I find it in magazines and in rows of listeners, even in the magazines and in rows of listeners in Pocatello and Akron, in Florence, South Carolina, and in Quartz Mountain, Oklahoma."

The first poetry reading I ever went to was given by Robert Frost at Bridgewater State Teachers College on December 1, 1959. I was a seventeen year old freshman. The great poet-philosopher, at that time 85 years old, traveled from his home in Cambridge to speak to the college community. The college made attendance compulsory for both students and faculty, but this meant little to those of us who looked forward to hearing this cultural icon whose poetry and ideas were known throughout the world. Here, for me, was a chance to see the person responsible for some of the most creative literature class where my final grade depended on my interpretation of "The Death of the Hired Man." Frost wrote that "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." I took it seriously then, and I still do.

I understood that Frost was a great poet. But I also knew that he was a noted commentator on the subject of baseball. He had written a significant baseball piece in Sports Illustrated which, three years earlier, was the basis for my tenth grade social studies report on the history of baseball. His capacity to write on baseball and to be a great poet increased my appreciation of the man to great heights. (I have read since that when he was 12 it was his dream to become a professional baseball player).

Appearing before me that day was this gentle man who at 85 was traveling and working with endurance and enthusiasm.

Frost advised:

Such a fine pullet ought to go All coiffured to a winter show, And be exhibited, and win.
The answer is this one has been- And come with all her honors home. Her golden leg, her coral comb, Her fluff of plumage, white as chalk Her style, were all the fancy's talk.

What I knew about poetry in general, and the poetry of Frost in particular, was acquired through the required formal learning exercises of my schooling. Like many other students, any favorable attitude on my part toward poetry had more to do with appreciation of the rhymes found in nursery rhymes, music lyrics and the poems that were known by everyone such as "Casey at the Bat." Sadly, the idea of poetry appreciation for me was probably eliminated by forced, formal learning of poetry. As well, the growing popularity of television had its bad effect. The lack of poetry appreciation wasn't missed by Frost that day in December. He stated, "Never force a child to like poetry. Too many teachers tell their students they should or must like poetry." His advice offered to me, the future teacher, was profound and never forgotten.

What I didn't know about the life of Frost that day would, of course, fill the eventual volumes of biographies written since his death in 1963. Now available is the knowledge that the themes in his poetry were rooted in Frost's family relationships. Frost lived with the tragic early loss of children to illness, depression in several family members, and sickness that nagged him throughout his life. For some critics, Frost's use of these themes in his poetry was alarming to the extent that earlier in 1959, at his 85th birthday party, he was referred to by Lionel Trilling as a "terrifying" poet. Trilling observed that Frost's radical work "is not carried out by

What Fifty Said

When I was young my teachers were the old. I gave up fire for form till I was cold, I suffered like a metal being cast, I went to school to age to learn the past.

Now I am old my teachers are the young. What can't be moulded must be cracked and sprung, I strain a lessons fit to start a suture, I go to school to youth to learn the future.

Frost had to be one of the oldest persons that I ever had seen. My professor of math, George Durgin, was the oldest person I knew at the college. My grandfather, Willy, who was then in his late seventies was the my oldest relative. Grandfather Willy, who looked like Frost to me, was known to spin a yarn and was something of a punster. Seeing Frost that cold December day reminded me of my grandfather and the December days I spent as a young boy helping him raise his Wyandotte chickens.

Perhaps Frost, also an expert in raising chickens, had some influence on my grandfather's early chicken-raising skills. Frost had written on the subject in the magazine Farm-Poultry. And I imagine that grandfather Willy read Frost's "Blue Ribbon at Amesbury," a poem for anyone who loves chickens.

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reassurance, nor by the affirmation of old virtues and pieties. It is carried out by the representation of the terrible actualities of life in a new way. I think of Robert Frost as a terrifying poet. Call him, if it makes things any easier, a tragic poet” (quoted in Robert Frost by Jeffrey Meyer, 1996).

I doubt that anyone in the audience that day thought Frost was in any way terrifying. I remember that I didn’t. Perhaps, Trilling’s serious critique of Frost a few months before was one reason why at Bridgewater he said what he did about the intentions of his critics. He remarked, “that in one of his poems he mentioned the hemlock and some critics went on to deeply analyze its meaning and reached the conclusion that it must refer to the poison hemlock juice by which Socrates met his death.” Laughingly, Frost commented that he meant only the simple hemlock shrub that grows in the field of New Hampshire where he spent much of his early life.

In March of 1959 Frost was quoted in the Boston press as predicting that the next president of the United States would come from Boston and that his name would be Kennedy. Never would I have imagined that he would be the first poet to read a poem at a presidential inauguration when he read “The Gift Outright” in honor of John F. Kennedy. When asked by Kennedy to participate in the inauguration, Frost replied by telegram:

"IF YOU CAN BEAR AT YOUR AGE THE HONOR OF BEING MADE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, I OUGHT TO BE ABLE AT MY AGE TO BEAR THE HONOR OF TAKING SOME PART IN YOUR INAUGURATION. I MAY NOT BE EQUAL TO IT BUT I CAN ACCEPT IT FOR MY CAUSE--THE ARTS, POETRY, NOW FOR THE FIRST TIME TAKEN INTO THE AFFAIRS OF STATESMEN"

As for a man and his contributions and awards, here was the only person to have been awarded four Pulitzer honors (1924--New Hampshire; 1931--Collected Poems; 1937--A Further Range; 1943--April). And more awards were to come including a Congressional Gold Medal presented by President Kennedy in 1962, (it had been originally been awarded to him by President Eisenhower). In return he gave Kennedy a copy of In the Clearing, a volume published the next day when he was 88 years old.

The poetry “said” by Frost that day meant much to the country, partly because of its creativity, but also because of the familiarity of his themes. Frost’s poems were conversational in style, and focused on the natural and the pastoral. They were poems about the practical the difficult aspects of life. Frost had the ability to discuss life’s difficulties while at the same time showing us the beauty of nature. This aesthetic of Frost left an impression that continues to affect me.

My appreciation of humanity’s connection with nature can be attributed in no small way to Frost reciting “Birches.” I think we all can agree with the line from the poem that states, “Earth’s the right place for love.” Frost’s poetry that day, and much of what I’ve read since, has showed me the possibility of the grand design for all things great and small. For example, in “Design,” Frost questions whether design is what makes the best of apparent chaos in nature.

**Design**

*I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,*  
*On a white heal-all, holding up a moth*  
*Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth-*  
*Assorted characters of death and blight*  
*Mixed ready to begin the morning right,*  
*Like the ingredients of a witches broth-*  
*A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,*  
*And dead wings carried like a paper kite.*

*What had the flower to do with being white,*  
*The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?*  
*What brought the kindred spider to that height,*  
*Then steered the white moth thither in the night?*  
*What but design of darkness to appall?--*  
*If design govern in a thing so small.*

That day in 1959 Frost questioned the renaming of the college (enacted earlier in that fall) when the state legislature caused the word “Teacher” to be dropped from the title “Bridgewater State Teachers College.” Frost remarked “it was as though we were ashamed of the word teacher.” Maybe here was Frost living up to his alleged contrariness. His poetry raised contradictions. The lines in his “Mending Wall” -- “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall” and “good fences make good neighbors” raise the perennial conflict of old and new ways.
Mending Wall

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing;
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made;
But as spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
“Stay where you are until our backs are turned!”
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another outdoor game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, “Good fences make good neighbors.”
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
“Why do they make good neighbors? Isn’t it
Where there are cows? But there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I’d ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
That wants it down.” I could say “Elves” to him,
But it’s not elves exactly, and I’d rather
He said it for himself. I see him there,
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father’s saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, “Good fences make good neighbors.”

Like Frost, I have spent a good part
of my life working in education. I think
my experiences with education have been
more rewarding than what seems to be
the case for Frost. His biographers have
described numerous occasions when
Frost and formal education didn’t connect
positively. He wrote and said good and bad
things about schools. I think the poem
“What Fifty Said” states an educational
philosophy that gives meaning to the role
of teachers—those younger and those
older.

The chance to see the best while
being a college freshman nearly forty years
ago helped establish my continuous
connection to poetry. The special occasion
of listening to a great poet read his poetry
had an inspirational value that helped me
think there was more to life than I could
have imagined. An awesome thought
perhaps, but one that all college freshmen
deserve.

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