AN ANALYSIS THROUGH THE GREEN LENS OF ROBERT FROST'S POETRY

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Abstract:
This article analyses Robert Frost's poetry through the ecocritical lens, it discovers in a large number of poems similar structures as scenes or monologues, all with a moral, which tries hard not to be elusive.
Greg Garrard's ecocritical tropes ("Wilderness", "Apocalypse", "Pastoral", "Animal", "The Earth") are all identifiable in Frost's poetry...
Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's 'material ecocriticism', 'beings', 'porosity' and 'storied nature', coexist with Stacy Alaimo's 'transcorporeality' of nature in these works.
It discovers a number of hyperobjects corresponding to Timothy Morton's work on the matter.

Key words: ecocriticism, porosity, transcorporeality, hyperobject, trope

No other American poet was so honoured during his lifetime, being the only poet who was awarded four Pulitzer Prizes, the Congressional Gold Medal in 1960 and being named poet laureate of Vermont in 1961. His fellow poet Randal Jarrell wrote:

Robert Frost, along with Stevens and Eliot, seems to me the greatest of the American poets of this century. 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 (Jarrell, 1999).

In his 1939 essay "The Figure a Poem Makes", Frost presents his ars poetica:

No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader. For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew... [Poetry] must be a revelation, or a series of revelations, for the poet as for the reader. For it to be that there must have been the greatest freedom of the material to move about in it and to establish relations in it regardless of time and space, previous relation, and everything but affinity (Frost 1939, p 176)

Frost has often been called "the farmer poet". However, few people know who caused him to do farming as a long-term occupation, instead of teaching (like his mother) and alongside with writing poetry, which he had been doing continuously since his high school years. Actually, it was his grandfather, William Frost, who paid for Frost's university tuition, but the grandson's university studies at Harvard University lasted only for two years. Shortly before his death, the grandfather bought a farm for Robrt and Elinor Frost in New Hampshire, but in his will, he conditioned the inheritance on the grandson's living on the farm and working the land there for ten years, which the poet actually did for more than nine years : he worked on the farm during the day and wrote poetry in the evenings. After observing the will condition, he changed his farming job for a teaching one, which he had learnt from his mother and which he preferred as a bread earning way, while he continued to write poetry, which was his great vocation and passion.

When reading Frost's volumes of poetry through the ecocritical lens, some of Greg Garrard's tropes specified in Ecocriticism (2004) are easily identified: "The Pastoral," "Wilderness", "Apocalypse", "The Animal", "The Earth".

In addition, Frost alternates anthropocentrism with ecocentrism throughout his volumes, which can be demonstrated by analysing a number of his poems. To Frost, the

human is porous to nature's transcorporeality, as it is described in Serenella Iovino's "The Bodies of Naples" (2014), Jane Bennett's 'vibrant matter' (Bennett, Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things, 2010) in instances of 'vital materialism' and animism, in Stacy Alaimo's transcorporeality (Alaimo, Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self, 2010). In Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's 'material ecocriticism', nature is sentient, and agentive (Iovino, Oppermann, Material Ecocriticism, 2014).

On reading Frost's scenes and monologues, we remark that they are short parables, each with a moral, and we are tempted to associate them with a Buddhist Samsara, a repeatable cycle of sufferance, dying, rebirth. One can figure the rebirth as a reincarnation. For instance, "Nothing Gold Can Stay", expresses the sad wisdom that luminous hopes of beginnings never lead to endurable achievement, in any kingdom (either animal or vegetal, or in human life). Through this tragic condition of limited life, perfection and happiness in any kingdom is a feature that unifies the universe, and its death brings after universal apocalypse.

"Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower:
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay." (Frost p. 228)

This union between kingdoms appears to be proved by the wordless dialogue between a crow and a human. When the crow shakes on him some "dust of snow" changes his mood and "saves some part /of the day [he] had rued." ("Dust of Snow" p. 227). It looks like a holy benediction, or baptism, or like some knightly ennoblement performed on man by the animal with the snow, conferring to geological elements mythical powers and to a bird a clerical power, a transcorporeal communication between the two species, birds and humans, through the dust of snow gesture.

"The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree
Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued." (Frost p. 227)

Frost's vision of the "Apocalypse" trope is expressed in "Home Burial" and "The Death of the Hired Man", two stories of tragic death, the first of a baby, the second of an old poor labourer. The witnessing people's dialogues in dramatic scenes express the common sense of tragedy they feel at both deaths

In "Fire or Ice," uncertainty about the earth's ending in either fire or ice determines the poet to declare that his human limited resistance to evil extremes does not allow him to choose either. He knows the pain of fire from passion, but he thinks that ice is a consequence of man's hate, which makes it great enough, to "suffice" to end the world. Thus, both extreme notions, either too much fiery passion or too much glacial hate, can bring about a human's mind and a human world destruction.

"Some say the world will end in fire
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.

But if I had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice." (Frost p. 227)

Therefore, snow and ice can have with Frost opposite values, they can be both beauty and nobility or wickedness and death. In its former acceptation, the snow-covered scenery of a travelling evening by the woods makes the horse's master stop to admire its beauty, and linger too much to make the horse impatiently remind him of "promises to keep/and miles to go before [he] sleep[s]". Maybe the sleep is merely that night's end of the journey, or maybe it is death, and he has other duties in his worldly destiny to fulfil and cannot afford spending too long contemplating beauty in nature. The wordless dialogue with his horse shows the animal's understanding for his master's sensitivity and whims. Frost is definitely an aesthete and an eco-lover, but also a man educated in the strict spirit of duty to his peers.

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep. " (Frost p. 228)

"The Bear" is another instance of comparing and contrasting the human and the animal, this time the man and the bear. Frost speaks about man's adaptation to and acceptance of his condition and the bear's ones, finding that the bear is better adapted to the span of its allowed room in the universe, while man is never satisfied with his place on the earth. The bear is personified all throughout the poem. At the beginning, he has a lover's attitude towards the tree, hugging it and kissing its chokecherries. Then he travels free through nature, like a free human wanderer. He loves liberty and nature, which offers him enough room to feel happy.

"The world has room to make a bear feel free.
The universe seems cramped to you and me.
In contrast, man acts like a poor bear in cage
That all day fights a nervous inward rage,
His mood rejecting all his mind suggests.
He paces back and and forth and never rests. " (Selected American Verse p. 69)

Whether analysing the micro-world or the macro-world, a human is equally dissatisfied.

The telescope at one end of his beat
And at the other end the microscope,
Two instruments of nearly equal hope,
And in conjunction giving quite a spread.

Man, like the bear, both "when sedentary and when peripatetic" is an "equally pathetic figure".

The bear is personified to such an extent that it is said to be looking "almost religious, but he's not."Instead, he is philosophical and thus, it comes under contradictory influences :

At one extreme agreeing with one Greek,
At the other agreeing with another Greek,
Which may be thought, but only so to speak" (Selected American Verse p. 69)

In "Choose Something like a Star", mystery and brightness contrasted to dark make a star loftier and more attractive to the looker. Humans are attracted to the mysteries of the universe just because these seem unsolvable, and their efforts to understand them "to stay our minds on and be staid", to give their lives meaning, purpose and discipline. Astronomy, talking about "Fahrenheit or Centigrade" (Selected American Verse p. 75), about chemical

elements, is the practical technical aspect of the talking to a star. The poet may not be answered by the lofty star, but its silence and mystery enhance the charm of his attention focus and make the heavenly body a more interesting life purpose to be accomplished by the star gazer.

Therefore, Frost's love for the natural world ranges from astronomical dimensions to flora and fauna, from Garrard's "Earth" to his "Animal", tropes mentioned in Ecocriticism (2004).

In "The Road Not Taken," destiny choices are compared to two forked road itineraries. A non-conformist hiker, "sorry [he] could not travel both and be one traveller," the poet chooses the untrodden grassy one, full of undergrowth and requiring more time to be travelled by. Even if regret ("a sigh") accompanies the traveller forever after, he knows that his choice of "the less travelled by" road "made all the difference", giving his life both meaning and trouble (Frost, pp. 222-223). Thus, a trodden road can tell a different story from an overgrown untrodden one. Anyway, nature is always a

In "Birches", such trees are a starter of dear childhood memories, of a sporting taming of birches by a boy who used to climb them and master them by swinging and bending them. He felt like a king of the forest, an owner of exquisite pieces of a treasure of precious gems, hidden in the birch bark after the night ice had got broken in the morning.

"When I see birches bent to left and right,
[…..] I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
[….] Often you must have seen them
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
After a rain. They click upon themselves
As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel." (Frost p. 223)

Soon, the sunlight accomplishes incredible masterwork with these birches and their cracked ice:

"…shed crystal shells
Shattering and avalanching on the snow crust-
Such heap of broken glass to sweep away
You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen. " (Frost p. 223)

When he sees bent birches like bowing girls, the poet likes to imagine they have not been broken by the snowstorm, but by a poor boy going to the woods with his father's cattle and having as his only play and game the bending of the birches.

"Summer and winter and could play alone.
One by one, he subdued his father's trees
By riding them down over and over again
Until he took the stiffness out of them.
And not one, but hung limp, not one was left
For him to conquer. " (Frost p. 223)

The poet was "once a swinger of birches "

And "so [he] dreams of going back to be".

This remembrance often raises his morale when

…life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having lashed across it open […]
I'd like to go climbing a birch tree,
And climb back branches upon a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,

But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back.
One could do worse than a swinger of birches." (Frost p. 223)

Thus, pleasure mingles with power over nature, in an ecophobic portrait of childhood's cruel games. The swinging birches tell a story, their story, as Serenella Iovino's nature always tells a story, a detective one, a memoir one, and others, stories of nature told, biographies of birches.

In "The Oven Bird", Frost sadly acknowledges maturity's lack of joy as compared to childhood.

"There is a singer everyone has heard,
Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,
Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.
He says that leaves are old and that for flowers
Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten" (Frost p. 225)

The "oven bird" is mute, and it no longer expresses the joy of life, but is content with a diminished portion of happiness,

"The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing." (Frost p. 225)

Again, the tantamount of human experience is an animal, here a bird that used to sing in spring, and now it is mute in the fall, there is a story-telling nature in the mature bird and in the mature farmer, they are so similar in their small portion of possible happiness.

The counterpart of this poem is the sensitive and optimistic "Putting in the Seed", telling the reader about the farmer's burying white petals from the apple tree blossoms, mingled with seeds of "smooth bean and wrinkled pea", to give these seeds power to struggle their way up to life of new plants, in a miracle of spring as a time of birth and rebirth.

"…through the watching for that early birth
When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,
The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs. " (Frost p. 225)

Seeds rebirth unto new plants makes it a hyperobject gloriously celebrating the never stopping beginning of new vegetal lives from dead seeds, and the human lives transcorporeally gaining life from the plants, in a celebration of universal rebirth in springtime.

In "The Wood Pile", "on a grey day" probably in winter, the farmer poet walks through the forest guided by a friendly bird, who hops and flies before him, to a pile of maple wood, perfectly sized and arranged, standing forgotten for a year or two, abandoned by its author to degrade slowly in the wood, instead of being put to use. The farmer makes detective guesses about the wood pile, but leaves it and the bird, without telling goodbye, which seems an impolite attitude to him, who can converse with birds, be guided by them and enjoy their company.

In "After Apple-Picking", at the end of a long day of apple picking and throwing into the drinking trough, in a rich abundance

"There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall. " (Frost p. 218)
"All the apples
That struck the earth, even if not bruised,
Went to the cider-apple heap
As of no worth. (Frost p.218)
No, overtired, the farmer will sleep and dream of apples
Magnified apples appear and disappear,

Stem end and blossom end.

And every fleck of russet showing clear." (Forst p. 218)

This ensuing sleep after apple picking cannot be defined as either human sleep or any kind of universal sleep.

"The woodchuck could say whether it's like his

Long sleep, as I described as coming on,

Or just some human sleep. " (Forst p. 218)

There are identifications between the human and the woodchuck, between the apples and the round russet objects in the dreams. By transcorporeality, the thousands thousands apples pervade the porous human dreams, as they have pervaded his day of work and his premises, and make of his home and life a kingdom of the apples.

Robert Frost's poetry is a elusive mingling of apparent simplicity and profound wisdom, contained in rural scenes or dialogues of farmer characters, who love nature, live, work and die in nature. They identify with animals and plants, ecocentrism and anthropocentrism alternate

in Frost's poems. These poems observe all the tropes mentioned in Garrard's Ecocriticism and are cases of Iovino's nature telling stories and being told in stories. Frost's work cannot exist outside nature, without nature, it ceases to be literature.

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