Titel des Proseminars: Democracy ma femme. Looking for liberty in American letters

Thema des Referats: Robert Frost - “Mending Wall“

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Essentially a pragmatist, Frost was less concerned with chronicling the spirit of his age or with constructing a philosophical system than with working out a practical modus vivendi, a way of making something out of the facts that life presented to him. His central subject portrayed in his poetry is humanity. While other poets have written about people, Robert Frost’s poems are the people - vital, living people seen in a momentary section of their life; they tell their stories with the freedom of common speech.

Since Frost was concerned with philosophical questions only in a random way his poems’ basic impulse is meditative; their focus is on the resolution of a problem which is usually formulated in terms of a human situation. His meditative poems always deal with complex and important issues - central problems of existence: man’s identity and freedom, his relation to the natural world, his defenses against chaos, his suffering in which the possibility of salvation lies. Pragmatism is the general philosophical premise behind most of Frost’s poetry. He was searching for a philosophy that would justify itself in purely human terms and yet would satisfy the spiritual and intuitive in him; so he put special emphasis on three main moral commitments: courage, will and effort.

The basic premise consequently is a conscious, pragmatic acceptance of life as it is. In 1930 Frost wrote to a young poet: “I wouldn’t give a cent to see the world ... made better ...“ . However, the question of whether life is worth living can only be answered subjectively: it is up to oneself. He held the view that life is both given and made - what we make of what we are given is the only important issue. As part of his tough, pragmatic acceptance of life as it is, Frost accepts the limitations of human knowledge and capacity.

At a time when naturalism, with its philosophy of pessimistic determinism, reached its peak in American literature, Frost refused that our fate might be determined by such factors as
heredity or environment. Thus his concepts of individualism and self-reliance were very strong and founded and had their root in the notion that people not only improve themselves but actually create - or better define - themselves through taking on a trial. His ideal human attitude is one that is balanced between a pragmatic acceptance of life as it is and a sense of dissatisfaction with it.

Robert Frost saw both art and life as “a bursting unity of opposites”; so he insisted on holding contradictions in a deliberate tension - without seeking to resolve that tension. He was convinced that ambiguities and contradictions not only cannot be resolved but they ought not to be. Thus he wants his readership to understand the tension of contraries rather than to simply accept it as a way of life.
Robert Frost - the poet’s life

Though Frost has been born in San Francisco (in 1874) he is widely regarded as a deeply-rooted New England poet. His father, William Prescott Frost, Jr., was a New Englander. Robert Frost once described him as “a bad boy who never stopped being one”. He usually worked as a newspaperman and sometimes in saloons or casinos. Frost’s mother, Isabelle Moodie Frost - an emigrant from Scotland, was a schoolteacher. They named their first child after the famous Southern general, Robert E. Lee.

In 1876 Isabelle Frost fled her improvident husband for the first time and went with Robert across the continent to her husband’s parents in Lawrence. When Robert’s sister Jeanie was born they moved away again and by the time he was eleven, he had crossed the United States three times. Until he was twelve years old Frost refused to read any book by himself. But when he entered high school in Lawrence he discovered a taste for study and learning and proved an excellent scholar.

In 1892 he graduated as class poet and formed an attachment with a girl of his graduating class - Elinor White - whom he married soon. She very much supported his composing poetry and only two years after graduation, his first commercially published poem, “My Butterfly“, appeared in the Independent magazine. During the next few years he had various jobs such as teaching, newspaper reporting etc. while in his spare time he was occupied with writing poems. Then he went to Harvard university but broke up before his first year was completed feeling that the academic world did not suit his temperament; additionally his own family had grown in the meantime and he suffered from various illnesses with psychosomatic origins. However, he then learned poultry farming which he did not continue for long. His distrust of academic knowledge was to be carried through his entire life and he liked to set up a contrast
of the smart knowledge of the college boy and the wise common sense of the self-reliant countryman. One of his favorite poses was that of the philosopher-farmer who uses the wisdom of nature.

So he decided to gamble everything on poetry and went with his family to Beaconsfield, England. There his first volume, *A Boy’s Will*, was published in 1913. England had a catalyst effect on his writing. Here he could discuss his poetry with people that were interested and this gave him the confidence and exitement of being able to find his individual poetic mode - his theories about poetry became clear. So it was in England where he composed *North of Boston* which proved one of his greatest successes and was probably the single most influential volume in establishing his career as a major poet; his friend Edward Thomas - a young British poet - reviewed it as “one of the most revolutionary books of modern times”.

The First World War forced him back home in 1915; when two of his good friends - Edward Thomas and Rupert Brooke - died in battle Frost recognized that the time had come for him to return home. Meanwhile in America he was beginning to receive critical attention; but farming and poetry still could not provide him with an adequate income. However, in 1916 Frost was given the position of poet-in-residence or visiting professor at many of the leading colleges such as Amherst, Dartmouth, Harvard or the University of Michigan. Now he was not only famous for his poetry but also for his public readings and lectures, yet the poet habitually assumed a cynical attitude toward colleges in order to keep with his already established rural image. Nevertheless in 1917 Amherst offered him a full professorship which he accepted. Soon Frost found himself showered with lucrative offers also from the University of Michigan as Poet in Residence, honorary degrees and various prizes for his poetry - among them the Levison Prize awarded by *Poetry* magazine and Pulitzer Prizes. By the time he died he was the most widely honored writer in the world, lacking only the Nobel award.

Frost’s private life, however darkened as his public image grew brighter. His sister, Jean who spent most of her life in mental institutions died in 1929. His son Carol commited suicide - he fancied himself to be a poet, but his verses were rejected by the journalists to which he submitted them. Probably the most devastating effect of Carol’s life was his own father, by whose shadow he was dwarfed continually. The marriages of two of his daughters ended in
divorce. His youngest daughter, whom he loved most of all his children, died after giving birth to her first child. The climax of all his personal tragedies was the death of his wife in 1938. Surprisingly little of this dark side of his life is reflected in Frost’s poetry, except in a general way in themes of loss or arbitrariness of fate. He once told a friend that “you must confine yourself to everything else in the world but your own personal experience”.

The fresh surge of activity and optimism, which seemed to be a typical feature of Frost, was reinforced by the publication of *A Witness Tree* in 1942 for which he was awarded his fourth Pulitzer Prize. The coming twenty-five years until his death in 1963 were filled with increasing public recognition. He was one of the few authors to receive the Gold Medal from the National Institute of Arts and Letters. These honors did not affect the man or his work. The quiet strength, the deep convictions, remained unshaken in the person as well as in his poetry.

In his last years Robert Frost’s fame even crossed literary borders. In 1960 he supported John F. Kennedy’s election campaign; he wanted the next occupant of the White House to be a literate individual, “one who reads books and quotes poetry” and Kennedy often quoted the final lines of Frost’s poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” to close his campaign speeches. So when in November Kennedy was elected over Richard Nixon, the President-Elect invited Robert Frost to compose a poem for his inauguration.

The famous speech in Moscow in 1962 was Frost’s last public gesture. He was sent on a good-will mission to Russia under the auspices of the U. S. State Department, accompanied by the Secretary of the Interior, Steve Udall. At a literary evening Frost recited his poem “Mending Wall” as an allusion to the building of the Berlin wall, which had increased the tension between the two powers of the cold war.

In January 1963 Robert Frost died almost as a folk hero - an individualist affirming the old-fashioned values of traditional faith and pride. Messages of condolence poured into the national news media, not only from fellow writers and citizens but from the world’s capitals: London, Paris, Moscow, Stockholm. His poetry indeed had and still has universal and permanent appeal.
“Mending Wall“ as a typical example of modern American poetry

The poem “Mending Wall“ is part of Frost’s second volume North of Boston published in 1914 in London. Its general mood is sombre and it shows striking changes in style - especially Frost’s appliance of a novel blank-verse narrative form resembling common human speech is remarkable. North of Boston is basically a portrait of New England life - a description of isolation and fractured human relationships as well as proud local identity. The stone wall in “Mending Wall“ is a part of the realistic New England landscape. The poem has been applauded as one of his most successful and representative compositions. It links paradoxical themes: neighborliness and isolation, open-mindedness and prejudice, dependence and independence. In this volume Frost’s deep interest in psychology becomes evident. The contradiction is the heart of this descriptive or reflective poem. It answers itself in the paradox of people, in neighbors and competitors, in the contradictory nature of man.

“Mending Wall was written during a crucial phase of Frost’s career, in1913. With its forty-five lines it can be classified as a medium-length dramatic narrative; it centers on a regional object - the wall - involving a country ritual - the repairing of a wall separating two field of different owners - that provokes a conflict of values between the speaker and a second character. The central symbol of the wall acts as a focus for two conflicting attitudes and thus concentrates the poem’s theme. The poem describes how each spring two farmers - the narrator and an older neighbor - meet at their property boundary to repair their common stone wall after the ravages of winter. The narrator or speaker calls the need for a wall in question
for he has an apple planting and his neighbor pine trees. To this rationalizing, the other farmer simply replies: “Good fences make good neighbors”. So they continue with reconstructing the damaged barrier between them.

According to the poet himself the line “Good fences make good neighbours“ is the formula of the poem’s antagonist whereas the protagonist - the so-called speaker - reflects on forces that don’t love walls. Frost declared that he was on both sides of his poem’s wall. At first sight the men seem to enjoy the outdoor task but the narrator keeps asking himself and his neighbor about the possible uselessness of the wall. He even ridicules the idea of the trees on either side of the wall threatening one another as the speaker’s “… apple trees will never get across and eat the cones under his [the antagonist’s] pines …“ (lines 25 and 26) and goes on with referring to the fencing up of cows, which neither man owns to underline his statement above. It is indeed true that the acidity of pine trees and their seeds would prevent apple seeds from taking root. Here is another contrast to be found: apples are edible, pine trees are not. However, the speaker goes even further by comparing his neighbor with a stone-age primitive - “… an old-stone savage …“ (line 41) - whose mind seems darkened as “he will not go behind his father’s saying“ (line 43). Here again is a hint for the reader to become aware of the conflict between individual and social values.

The protagonist’s or persona’s main idea is to make his neighbor think of good reasons for what they are doing. He possesses a fine sensitivity to detail which is for example expressed in his description of the hunters who actively tear walls apart in search of rabbits. Moreover his arguments are practical and not at all complex since his common sense is based solidly on visible facts. Twice does he suggest: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.“ (lines 1 and 35). But what is the “something? Is it an anthropomorphic force of nature that denies any human attempt to impose limits on it? It almost seems to serve as a third figure in the poem - a kind of inner voice trying to gain a certain impact on the conflict. The syntactical inversion applied here combined with the indefinite pronoun “something“ adds some vagueness additionally.

This first line is also notable because it functions effectively as a counterpoint to the farmer’s “good fences make good neighbors“-wisdom which appears once in the middle of the poem
(line 27) and then again in the final line. The farmer’s reiteration of it is an appropriate ending to the poem because it completes a cyclical pattern to which the speaker has no rejoinder and from which he cannot escape. The subject “good fences“ matches very well with the object “good neighbors“ through the symmetrical balance as well as the rhythmic similarity; this together with the repetition of the adjective of “good“ has a reinforcing effect on the sententious character of the farmer’s statement.

The redoutable, wall-loving neighbor seems to dominate the poem though he only appears in twelve of the forty-five lines. One easily can identify with his simple thinking; he is a laconic, sententious, obstinate and down-to-earth countryman firmly rooted in family and regional traditions. He has inherited his country wisdom unthinkingly. The speaker only reacts and responds to the regional spirit of his antagonist. The opposition between observer and observed - and the tension produced by the observer’s awareness of the difference - is decisive to the poem. Eventually, the awareness of this opposition becomes itself a kind of barrier which the speaker, though disapproving of walls, finds himself confined. While attacking his neighbor’s lack of open-mindedness, the persona is the one who shows antisocial tendencies: whereas the former expresses his interest in being “good neighbors“, the latter looks down on him, despises his attitude and criticizes; he is the less communicative and the more hostile of the two. But this antisocial tendency is in a way mutual: the farmer is unwilling to debate or explain his position which implies that he feels there won’t be any positive result of exchanging ideas; if fences are desirable then to much closeness between neighbors is not. So he keeps on repeating the aphorism he learned from his father. The poem’s closing lines suggest a victory of the farmer but in fact the persona has mended the walls of his own personality and instead of combating his opponent he adopts the role of a mere observer. With this poem Frost does not moralize but demonstrates and thus sets free the powers of imagination in his readership.

The two attitudes respectively the two modes of thinking - the reasonable purely empirical one and the traditional - clash and Frost deliberately left the conflict unresolved which - on the one hand - is certainly meant to make the reader reflect upon an own possible solution. On the other hand he did not believe that absolute harmony was possible or even desirable. For him the consciousness of individuality - the human ability to find own solutions, the constructive
tension between disparate elements and the intuitive interaction are the only viable premises for human action and creative thought. So the function of the wall as a symbol lies in the fact that it focuses the constant tension of opposing elements, which the poet saw as the essence of the human condition. Consequently it is not of any importance at all whether the wall divides people from each other or whether it serves a certain purpose.

The meaning of our human lives finds definition through a constantly maintained balance between opposing tensions. The small but in a way brave resistance of the speaker to the general flow - the upholding of his father’s traditions by the old farmer - becomes a symbol of independence, of positive assertion, of everything that gives meaning to life and that is the source of deepest creativity. It is a part of our human identity to disengage oneself from the overwhelming flow of existence and asserting its independent meaning. Nevertheless Frost does not judge the antagonist and his wish to repair the wall - every attitude has its right to exist, there is no black-and-white theory in his poetry. A human being should be responsible for his own life: that is his challenge, his glory - the task of his life. “Mending Wall“ does not encourage the reader to regard either the speaker or his neighbor as an absolute source of wisdom.

Robert Frost turns to nature for moral and emotional elevation; the anecdote is absorbed into symbol and he works with the method of indirection. The sense of realistic detail is employed to build up and intensify a serious effect. He does not interpret the scene he presents himself - instead he uses it as the medium through which to view reality. Very little of the poem is very simple, yet it immediately yields something of the intended message to the most casual reading. The language is simple but always a part of highly sophisticated art. It is pure, direct and conversational but what he has to say is extremely complex. Frost’s tone is decisive but never over-intrusive.

The so typical feature of his early work - the anthropomorphisms as a tendency to impute human beings attributes and sensations to apparently inanimate objects - appears also in “Mending Wall“. It is part of his subtlety. In a sense even the wall is as alive to Frost as his persons, trees, etc.. Yet there is no nature mysticism in Frost’s work and little reference to the transcendent. He observes without wanting to alter; he meditates without interfering and
produces in his poem a perfect balance between the natural objects observed and the thoughts and feelings of the observer. He uses the pastoral mode as a vehicle of his inquiries into the nature and meaning of life. His stylistic devices - his irony in particular - serve this purpose. It is his direct manner and his calm tone and his simple language that have made him the most popular and most loved of all American poets. So he used in this poem like in most of his poetry the iambic pentameter as a natural and conversational rhythm.

His poems in general - “Mending Wall” included - chart his inner world as he is very much an inward poet. His poetic development has been entirely his own and he never took part in the great poetic experiments of his time; his style remained individual. Frost is in a way also a fugitive poet distrusting large words and grandiose claims. In his poems he strikes an extremely delicate balance between the world he sees and works in and the processes of thought and emotion which he is always aware of himself. Consequently his poems communicate an almost visionary quality - a vision which is immanent, not transcendent.
Epilogue

Robert Frost is probably the most popular and least criticised of all the well-established and much venerated American poets. His poems have a deceptive simplicity of style, but they dig deep into human psychology and personal feelings. They are timeless and his writing always remained unaffected by the influence of other poets. The pulse of his verse is timed to the heartbeat of the workaday world - poetry and action, love and need, are united. Frost was never subject to the fluctuations of literary taste and fashions and he never belonged to any literary movement. He escaped both the assistance and the dangers of literary alignments. So Frost is neither a modernist nor a traditional writer. Nevertheless he has never been in or out of fashion, but always respected. His poetry should mostly be understood as intellectual debate.

Frost reflects the universal in the common things about us, he exchanges everyday life with us all and never loses the common touch in reaffirming the permanent values in an everchanging and rather confusing world. He has studied humanity in stony pastures and academies of art and science. Frost represented the ideal regional figure whose dealing with nature purified him
and raised him to the status of a wise prophet, but who never lost contact to the people and always seemed approachable despite all his fame. He also represented in many important respects the ideal American leader, combining sharpness of mind with the indispensable common touch, regional identity with national appeal. In his poetry wit and wisdom are joined.

Frost once declared in an interview: “... I haven’t led a literary life. These fellows, they really work away with their prose trying to describe themselves and understand themselves, and so on. I don’t do that. I don’t want to know much about myself. ... I walk and I live with other people. ...“. He has formed a solitary movement of his own, a strong but isolated element in modern American poetry. His work tends to resist clever definitions and easy interpretations but the messages he wants to get across arise out their pure lyric contexts so aptly and beautifully. Yet he was and still is widely regarded as the lonely farmer-poet, the communer with nature, the observer of wild things - a farmer who worked as a professor only to despise the academic life, while profiting from the freedom and intellectual excitement which such a life can offer, a poet who on the one hand longed for solitude willingly to enter the market-place on the other hand. However, he has never been to eager to discuss his poetry.

Robert Frost died early in 1963 at a great age. He started publishing his poetry during the First World War and he continued publishing through all the literary movements and experiments in Britain and the United States. By the early nineteen-twenties, he had consolidated his ideas to some extent and had found his own voice. While Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot - who established an modern tradition of difficult poetry, full of symbolism, quotations from Shakespeare, and allusions to the classics - were forging a new language of poetry; while Wallace Stevens was making the study of imagination the very subject of his verse, Frost was steadily perfecting his own methods.

Robert Frost’s quiet struggles with words and music undoubtedly had a purifying effect on the American poetic language. It is almost impossible to read a formal poem by a young American poet these days without being aware of the presiding influence of Frost. His humour, the gentle irony, his absolute simplicity, his careful use of abstractions - all this can
often be felt in the works of younger poets, and it is from him that those qualities largely derive.

For Frost life is a mystery; poetry may clear up that mystery but it will never discover the whole truth. So Frost’s poems are only partial revelations, notes on the way taken from one man’s experience. Frost, however, is not an autobiographical or introspective writer. His first look is always outward - he starts always from a particular instance, a certain scene, a single man working, or a group of people - and he turns inward to examine his own mind to discover how our human mind works. Frost has remained faithful to his own dictum that “poetry begins in delight and ends in wisdom” throughout his life.

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