

# The Critics and Robert Frost

BY BERNARD DEVOTO

MR. RICHARD THORNTON'S anthology, "Recognition of Robert Frost,"\* will be useful to admirers of Mr. Frost's work and to everyone who is interested in the generation of American literature of which that work is the highest achievement. It is most useful in that it brings together a representative selection of early notices and reviews and many biographical details and personal sketches never before collected. It is less useful as criticism. Intended as a tribute on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of "A Boy's Will," it naturally omits the derogation which two groups of critics have written in obedience to fashion, and what it contains is a miscellany of opinion, rather than an articulated attempt either to examine Frost's poetry or to judge it in relation to its time. Nevertheless, this shapelessness works out usefully in the end. If it makes indifferent criticism it makes excellent archeology, and it enables the reader to contemplate in tranquillity the fetishes and mores of literary thinking over a generation.

Not all the criticism in the book makes sense to anyone who tends to keep his mind fixed on poems and let theories go, who thinks of what Mr. Frost has written rather than what this or that theory would have preferred to have him write. Probably only Mr. Undermeyer, Mr. Lewisohn, and Mr. Kreymborg would appear in an anthology which set out to describe what Mr. Frost's poetry really is. The rest is divided unequally among Ph.D. analysis, the cosmically vague, and various kinds of nonsense. Of the last, Amy Lowell's review of "North of Boston" is easily the first—though Ezra Pound's presbyopia would have run it close if Mr. Pound had used as much space as he was currently giving Latvian and Estonian geniuses in *Poetry*, or as he had given Rabindranath Tagore a year or so before. When Miss Lowell reworked her piece



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in "Tendencies in Modern American Poetry" she brought it down from the higher to the middle strata of the inane, but in the review you get the pure stuff and it is one of the most idiotic pieces written about poetry in this generation. It is screamingly silly. Nothing approached it until the publication of "A Further Range" impelled a group of muddled minds to tell us about Mr. Frost without bothering to read him. At that time Newton Arvin and Horace Gregory crowded Miss Lowell hard, only to lose in the end to Mr. Blackmur. His piece in the *Nation* may not be quite the most idiotic review our generation has produced, but in twenty years of reading criticism—oh, the hell with scholarly reservations, Mr. Blackmur's is the most idiotic of our time. It is one of the most idiotic reviews since the invention of movable type. The monkeys would have to tap typewriters throughout eternity to surpass it, and Mr. Blackmur may regard his immortality as achieved.

But already I am falling into the habits of criticism. It is not true that Messrs. Blackmur, Gregory, and Arvin did not

read "A Further Range." They read it carefully, but interposed between their eyes and the page were systematic theories about the nature of poetry. They could not see what this poetry is because they knew in advance what it ought to be. That has been the principal trouble with the criticism of poetry throughout our generation. All literary criticism is basically an exercise in autobiography, but poetry provides far fewer restraints than prose to keep it in touch with the objective world. In the criticism of poetry, the abstract and systematic theory is usually everything; what a poet actually writes becomes nothing more than a solution into which the critic thrusts his litmus paper. Less than that, even, for critical theory is not like litmus paper which, after all, is capable of rendering two colors, but a mathematical scheme something like the benzene ring. Usually a critic finds in poetry just what mathematical prediction has told him he ought to find

there, or he verifies a mathematical prediction that he won't find there what he ought to find. The striking thing is that not honest human prejudices or preconceptions but mathematical processes have told him. He has not got to his judgment by instinct, he has worked it out: he knows by logic, which is far stronger than experience, what poetry ought to be, and so it doesn't much matter to him what poetry actually is.

This subjective absolutism is abundantly illustrated in Mr. Thornton's book. Something like a third of the critics quoted see Mr. Frost escaping from reality into nature or idea or distance or the unknown. Another third assert that

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MEDICAL MAGIC

By DAVID DIETZ

Reviewed by Mabel S. Ulrich

WINTER IN APRIL

By ROBERT NATHAN

Reviewed by William Maxwell

\* *RECOGNITION OF ROBERT FROST.*  
Edited by Richard Thornton. New York:  
Henry Holt & Co. 1937. \$2.50.

he never escapes but instead holds fast to the fact which is the sweetest dream that labor knows. Mr. Freeman says that he has a larger share of the English tradition than any other American of his time; Mr. Untermeyer says that "North of Boston" is one of the most intensely American books ever printed. Miss Lowell says that he has no sense of humor: half the essays say that humor is part of the cell-structure of his work. (Miss Lowell also says that he has no imagination, that his New England is decadent, that he is incapable of subtle undertones of expression or meaning.) To Mr. Munson he is the purest classicist of our time, to Mr. Lewisohn a pure specimen of the naturalistic revolt; Mr. Blankenship calls him a pure realist; Mr. Freeman finds no rebellion in him. Mr. Pound finds his poetry a bit slow, and Mr. Newdick finds it strained to the bursting point with dramatic tension. Mr. Pound says it is not "accomplished"; Mr. Muir decides that it is as deeply, severely, and intricately wrought as one of Plato's dialogues. (But Mr. Munson says that Frost lacks the common sense deliberately aimed at that Socrates achieved, whereas three or four find that he elevates common sense into metaphysical vision.) And so on: he has practically no emotion but he has intense and passionate emotions, there is no color in him save only black and white but he has a magnificent color sense, he is minor but major, he is all on the surface but you have to look for him in the depths. . . . Meanwhile Mr. Frost has remarked that he thinks of poetry as the renewal of words and that a complete poem seems to him one where an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found its words—and has gone about his business. You can get out of that just as much as you can get out of it. Thoreau also spoke in such phrases, and critics have succeeded in identifying the hound, the bay horse, and the turtle dove to which he once alluded. As you might guess, it turns out that the turtle dove is a girl who threw him down.

Mr. Thornton's book omits the two fashions in mathematical analysis which rejected Mr. Frost's poetry some years after its first full fame, but does contain the four essays from the English battle line that so embarrassingly repealed the rejection. Those two fashions were mutually contradictory but yet mystically one, and a glance at them will be instructive.

Mr. Frost's poetry was first awarded critical approval because it was thought to be in revolt against something, at a time when poetry must be in revolt. (To be sure, the best way was to revolt as Imagism, while Amy Lowell was active and Mr. Pound—who has invented many

of the fashions and most of the theories that rationalize them—was still an Imagist.) A period of anarchy followed, when poetry must be so many different things that it could be practically anything and criticism could still accept Mr. Frost, but order was again imposed with a metamorphosis of Mr. Pound and the rise of Mr. Eliot. Poetry now must not be anything like Imagism and must not even revolt, but must be the kind of poetry that Mr. Pound or, more purely and quintessentially, Mr. Eliot wrote. This kind of poetry took a lot of explaining—about a hundred pages of theory to one page of text—but a brief statement of its imperatives was contained in Mr. MacLeish's "A poem should not mean, But be." A poem, that is, must not crudely carry "meaning"; it must communicate by direct experience. To be sure, Mr. MacLeish presently doubled on his theory and has ever since done his damndest to make his own poems mean rather than be; and at the height of the imperative Mr. Eliot supplied footnotes and explanatory treatises on his work which showed that it was at least intended to mean a lot, whereas Mr. Pound has published glosses on his work which prove it so full of meaning that you are lost unless you are

equipped with anthropology, philology, half a dozen other sciences and pedantries, a half-knowledge of half the ancient and modern tongues, Major Douglas's economics, and the theory of Fascism.

Obviously Mr. Frost's poems neither looked nor sounded like Mr. Eliot's and Mr. Pound's. If Mr. Eliot's way was the right way to write poetry, then it followed that Mr. Frost's poetry must be pretty bad or pretty minor, and with that mathematical demonstration his decline among the theorists began. But just when a new crop of critics bottled on Mr. Eliot's theories (which, happily, have had little effect on his poetry) had mastered this mathematical integration of a new phase of symbolism, another imperative suddenly shattered it to bits. Mr. Eliot was discovered to be not only an antique esthete approximately on a level with Richard LeGallienne, Lionel Johnson, Austin Dobson, or the Sweet Singer of Michigan, but also decadent, Catholic, and dangerously fascistic as well. The only right way to write poetry now was to revolt in it against private ownership of the means of production and saturate it with the emotions, experience, and aspirations of the workers of the world, though you

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## On Hearing a Bach Fugue

By MERLE G. WALKER

TAKE hence the sound, but leave the counterpoint.

The anatomy of music is more strictly made

More stern than tone. Here is a pattern laid

More intricate than the union of the joint

With sinew, and more accurate than bone

Set in its socket. The separate note

Alone is vague, and each a monotone

Hung in its vacuous nonentity,

Until the bond of law and symmetry

Welds it to music like a world of stars,

And the great sweep of sound

Is fettered and is bound.

Thus Chaos brooded on itself and slept

A timeless sleep within the arm of space,

Till slowly on immensity there crept

The Word, articulate, and there was grace,

And love, that goes precisely, seeking its own,

Seeking a region it may circumscribe,

And faith, that hears behind the monotone

The theme repeated, and the cadence known,

Hearing the word spoken

And the law, unbroken.

All things indefinite find necessity,

The earth, its sun,

Ulysses moves toward his Penelope,

And no day done,

But some bright star beholds its satellite.

The note remembers its fugue, and sleep its night.

And the soul of man discovers a private place:

This is its planet, this its appointed space.