



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 30 | Spring 2020

Title	Robert Frost's <i>North of Boston</i> : A Poetry of Resistance
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Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	30
Issue Date	Spring 2020
Publication Date	22/07/2020
Editor	Debangana Mishra

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Robert Frost's *North of Boston*: A Poetry of Resistance

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This article explores the idea that Robert Frost's North of Boston can be interpreted as a poetry of resistance in terms of methodology and subject matter. The methodological thread pertains to Frost's poetics whilst the subject matter pertains to the historical and socio-political beings which Frost dramatises and records.

Robert Frost's *North of Boston* is a poetry of resistance. That is not to say, of course, that it is the same resistance poetry or resistance literature which we readily associate with authors such as Ghassan Kanafani or Chinua Achebe. *North of Boston* is not the literary product or ally of "[t]he struggle for national liberation and independence on the part of colonized people" (Harlow 16). Yet, there is something of resistance about it. It constitutes, first and foremost, the turning point in Robert Frost's poetry as he began to pursue and fashion his own poetics, his own voice – or what he had come to conceptualise as the poetry he wished to pursue and put into words – moving from the near scientific descriptions of nature found in *A Boy's Will* to a poetry increasingly interested in language and the human condition in relation to the natural world. Amongst other things, it was a conscious decision to resist the pull of the Eliot-Pound pole of modernism, a pole which we can describe for the sake of brevity as being largely Symbolist in mode, and effectively to set himself apart in style and substance from this group. To some extent, it is also a poetry of resistance insofar as it preserves and crystallizes a way of life that was facing extinction as many parts of the United States were being urbanised. "Frost's people are distinctively real," wrote Pound about the people portrayed in *North of Boston*, "I don't want much to meet them, but I know that they exist, and what is more, that they exist as he has portrayed them" (129). It is precisely Frost's accurate and unadulterated portrait which gives his writing the quality of resistance: to write so truly about a subject that is itself resisting, necessarily means that the writing will express the same. I want to suggest, therefore, that *North of Boston* resists on two planes: a methodological plane, devised on a theory of poetry which Frost elaborated in some of his letters and public addresses and which he, in turn, developed and practised in his poetry, setting him on his own path; and in its subject matter, in its portrayal of the folks of the New England countryside.

Robert Frost's relationship to the literary Modernist circle in London and its usual suspects – especially Ezra Pound – is a complicated one. After selling his farm in Derry and debating whether to move to Canada or England, Frost, his wife Elinor, and their four children finally sailed to England from Boston in the summer of 1912. A year after arriving in England,

though he “was conscious from the beginning of being an outsider to literary London” (Introduction 7), Frost published his first collection of poetry, *A Boy’s Will*, which probably made him even more of an outsider since that work differed greatly from the work of the literary London he was revolving around, but he nevertheless met some of the city’s leading literary figures such as W. B. Yeats, Ford Madox Ford, and Ezra Pound. Yet “[w]hatever Frost’s motives, he did not appear overeager to ingratiate himself in the London literary scene” (7). Frost, however, did make important and lasting friendships in London; he simply made them outside of this circle, on a different literary scene. Instead, he developed more genuine and meaningful friendships with Georgian poets Wilfred Gibson, Lascelles Abercrombie, and particularly Edward Thomas with whom he shared more in common. Case in point, after her husband’s death, Helen Thomas wrote of Robert Frost that “[h]e believed in David [Edward Thomas] and loved him, understanding, as no other man had ever understood, his strange, complex temperament” and further acknowledged that “in Robert Frost Edward found a man after his own heart, and being deeply interested and sympathetic to Edward’s intellectual life, he certainly gave Edward the confidence and belief in himself for this great enterprise” (qtd in Cubeta 153). This is a sharp contrast to what Frost felt about the Modernists: Yeats, he thought, “engaged too much in a masquerade in and out of his poetry,” and as for Pound, he had little patience for his “cosmopolitan championing of literary rebellion, [and] the cult of making it new” (Introduction 7,8). Regardless of these differences, “no man had been more helpful to him than Ezra Pound” in terms of seeking publishing opportunities; and “despite the egotism he sensed in Yeats, he was delighted to meet the great poet and was grateful to Pound for having been a guide and a supporter in literary London” (Sokol 521, 527). Over time, the cost of this help would become clear on a personal level: it came with Pound’s condescending and patronizing attitude towards him and his work, which eventually led Pound to think that Frost was something of “a backwoods, even a barnyard poet” (528). In the grand scheme of things, this might have been unfair criticism given “Frost’s dramatic and metric sophistication” and the fact that “his knowledge of Roman and Greek poetry in the original was a classism that Pound could at best only fake” (Introduction 8). Nevertheless, it took “an aesthetic revolution and an emotional upheaval before Frost had the nerve to break off with the useful Pound” (Sokol 528). This aesthetic revolution came in the form of *North of Boston*, for which, ironically, Pound took “enormous credit from friends for having encouraged Frost to publish this book of eclogues and georgics” (Introduction 8). Pound’s influence on *North of Boston*, if there is a discernible one, is limited to the legwork it required for it to be published, as the collection spelt out Frost’s resistance to the Modernists on at least three, interlinked levels: in concept, mode, and loci.

Frost began to trace sketches of this poetic concept some time before he left England in February of 1915, shortly after publishing *North of Boston* in London, leaving behind Pound and

the Modernist literary scene, but also leaving behind some of his old poetic compasses. These previous guides came in the form of “the singing harmonies of Tennyson and Swinburne that [had] remained part of *A Boy’s Will*” (Sanders 99), and which Frost avoided in *North of Boston*, to turn instead to a language that was more familiar to him: the language of the neighbours he had left behind in Derry when he sailed for England. Indeed, though “he was glad to be rid of the farm, he was still perfecting the art of talking like a farmer,” deliberately imitating the way his neighbours “unconsciously slurred words, dropped endings, and clipped their sentences” (Thompson 371) rather than imitating the polished language of Tennyson and Swinburne. However, this turning point had been a long time coming. Whilst *North of Boston* was still at the embryonic stage, even some time before *A Boy’s Will* was published, his “interest in sound as ‘pure form’ came to dominate his thinking about poetics” (Introduction 26). Frost, as it were, was evoking Wordsworth and was beginning to share his creed, trying to reproduce in his poetry not only the words as limited as they are in the common speech but principally for their sound. Frost’s poetry, one could argue, was beginning to affirm itself along different lines, making strides in a new direction. Yet it did not simply comply with Wordsworth’s undertaking as expounded in the Preludes, it also found a new resolve. Frost was formulating what he coined in some of his letters as the “sound of sense” – one of the concepts he elaborated which would eventually govern his poetics. “Unlike Eliot, Pound, and, to some extent, Stevens,” Faggen reminds us, “Frost deliberately avoided deflecting attention away from his poetry by the enterprise of literary criticism or critical theory” (25). Therefore, we must rely on his poetry and his letters to find definitions or sketches of these concepts. Indeed, the most elaborate explanation of the concept of the sound of sense can be found in a letter written to an old student of his, John Bartlett, dated July 4, 1913. The passage in question reads:

I am possibly the only person going who works on any but a worn out theory (principle I had better say) of versification. You see the great successes in recent poetry have been made on the assumption that the music of words was a matter of harmonised vowels and consonants. Both Swinburne and Tennyson arrived largely at effects in assonation. But they were on the wrong track or at any rate on a short track. They went the length of it. Any one else who goes that way must go after them. And that’s where most are going. I alone of English writers have consciously set myself to make music out of what I may call the sound of sense. Now it is possible to have sense without the sound of sense (as in much prose that is supposed to pass muster but makes very dull reading) and the sound of sense without sense (as in *Alice in Wonderland* which makes anything but dull reading). The best place to get the abstract sound of sense is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words... It is the abstract vitality of our speech. It is pure sound – pure form. One who concerns himself with it more than the subject is an artist. But remember we are still

talking merely of the raw material of poetry. An ear and an appetite for these sounds of sense is the first qualification of a writer, be it of prose or verse...But if one is to be a poet he must learn to get cadences by skillfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre. Verse in which there is nothing but the beat of the metre furnished by the accents of the polysyllabic words we call doggerel. Verse is not that. Neither is it the sound of sense alone. It is a resultant from those two. (CPPP 664–5)

In this rather long excerpt, we have a clear explanation of Frost's new poetics. He makes his opinion about Tennyson and Swinburne and the influence he felt he could derive from them in this new poetry known and suggests that it has been exhausted: the compasses that guided *A Boy's Will* were not going to guide *North of Boston*. Moreover, he sets himself apart from his contemporaries and stresses that he is focusing on something different than they are. His new, definite aim is "to capture the sense of living speech within a metrical frame" (Sanders 97). In doing so, he was also aiming to take common speech much further than Wordsworth or, for that matter, "almost any poet before him, bringing as much as he could of the *crudity* of remote New England into poetry" (my italics, Introduction 28), at once advocating something different from the Victorians and resisting the Modernists' "show of learning," which he accused both Pound and Eliot of succumbing to, in a letter to his daughter (Letters 776).

Frost's interest in common speech, the subsequent development of his concept of the sound of sense, and his aversion to ostentatious erudition led his poetry to find expression, for the most part, in the pastoral mode – another aesthetic act of resistance which set him apart from the majority of the Modernists he had kept company with in London. Certainly with Eliot and with Pound, it seems we have become accustomed to certain "obscurities of style in modern poetry – fragmentary sentences, irregular verse forms, abrupt shifts from subject to subject, and an elliptical mode of reference" (Lynden 2), and not the metered line and crude, conversational tone of Frost's poetry. More generally the Modernists – at least those who gravitated around the Eliot-Pound pole – also indulge in a mode, one that could be understood as Symbolist inasmuch as it relied on elliptical reference to make meaning through art. Indeed, even today it is the "Symbolist verse of Pound, Eliot, and Yeats [that] represents the dominant mode of modern poetry, one which seems even more characteristic of the age in that its basic techniques are reflected in the major contemporary novelists" (167). By 'Symbolist mode' I mean the way in which these references become symbols of the individual's place in history whereby continuous appeal to literature and mythology so removed from the present context demonstrates how applicable, relatable, and perhaps similar these works are to the present situation: that human experience, over time, is more of a difference of degrees than anything else. Lynden supports this and adds:

The imaginative logic of symbolism would seem to go as follows: Symbols are an historical reality, that is, we know them as actual works of art, and every society, past or present, has produced symbolic representations of some sort... The symbol transcends time. While it was made in a particular time, its meaning continues to reside in it and is available to men living in many centuries thereafter. Furthermore, symbols indicate a universal pattern in experience, for anthropology tends to show that in the art of many diverse communities there are certain common symbolic patterns. (168)

In Symbolist poetry, then, there is a paradoxical expression of time where the past is celebrated through an acute awareness of literary tradition, history, mythology, and etymology, emphasising the distance between the elliptical references and allusions emblematic of the mode that are found in the works of Modernists, whilst at the same time erasing that gap by juxtaposing the past and the present to underline, in the words of Eliot, “not only the pastness of the past, but its presence” (44). There are more ways than one to achieve this, of course, but it seems to be a dominant characteristic of the Symbolist mode that one must signal the manipulations of historical and contemporary material one is performing. It is this show of learnedness which Frost objected to. Though he accepted and cherished these traditions as a way to exercise his own mind and poetic practice, he did not wish to force this upon his readers or characters. He saw that pastoral was a way of looking at the current world just like the exercises in the style of his contemporaries were, but that the machinations behind the poem did not need to be advertised, so to speak.

Pastoral is as a mode of poetry that is rich in tradition and in variations. However, it is widely agreed that it originated from the Greek poet Theocritus’ depictions of shepherds. Despite Theocritus being heralded as the originator of the mode, the enduring model of pastoral is derived from Virgil’s *Eclogues*, an imitation of Theocritus, which established the traditions of pastoral that many subsequent poets themselves imitated. In pastoral we often find an urban poet longing for the peaceful and idyllic life of shepherds, safeguarded by rural surroundings which nostalgia casts in a pleasant light. The conventions, as it were, “include a shepherd reclining under a spreading beech tree and meditating on the rural muse, or piping as though he would ne’er grow old, or engaging in a friendly singing contest, or expressing his good or bad fortune in a love affair, or grieving over the death of a fellow shepherd” (Abrams 240). Yet Frost does not write only of shepherds or stage singing contests – far from it; actually, it appears that all “the conventions so characteristic of this genre are not to be found in his verse” (Lynden 13). That is because simply put, there is “at the center of his work a characteristic design which pastoralism most effectively defines... [and] which in varying degrees has determined the form of his verse” (7). It is a subtle but important difference.

As it stands, if we are to understand Frost’s pastoralism – and pastoralism as a mode – we must understand that “the conventions, while typical of the genre, are not part of its poetic

structure” (13). Indeed pastoral is a complex and adaptable tradition: it is not only a set of conventions which the poet follows or applies, but “a mode by which authors from Theocritus and Virgil to Dante and Milton as well as Wordsworth and Thoreau have explored questions of human equality, man’s place in nature, and the nature of faith” (Faggen 49). It would be a mistake, in other words, to believe that “conventions are at the very core of pastoral” (Lynden 14). Confusion arises from the fact that:

Pastoralism requires an established myth of the rural world, and the conventions gradually developed through tradition belong to the myth of Arcadia. They are formalized symbols whose function is to evoke an imaginative vision of this world. But Arcadia is not the only version of rural life, and it is possible for a poet to write pastorals within the context of some other mythic rural world. (14)

In this light, however, it becomes clear that the poetic structure of pastoral is adaptable to the modern or contemporary world. The remaining pockets of rural life, far from city centres, can be substituted for Arcadia, and although they might not be as enchanting or may not carry the same historical or literary value, they are nonetheless vantage points from which to observe modern life.

Frost found his mythic rural world in New England and it is by virtue of the pastoral mode that he avoided the “most typical of Modernist arenas, the city, and the urban world in general” (Cooper 88), distancing the setting of his poetry as he had distanced himself aesthetically and physically from the Modernists. That is not to say, however, that he distanced himself from the problems of his age or that he distanced his poetry from some of the themes his contemporaries were engaging with. Though pastoral is largely the retreat from the city and all of its implications in search of a space for contemplation, it is not by any means an escape from that world. On the contrary, as W. W. Greg insists:

What does appear to be a constant element in the pastoral as known to literature is the recognition of a contrast, implicit or expressed, between pastoral life and some more complex type of civilization ... only when the shepherd-songs ceased to be the outcome of unalloyed pastoral conditions did they become distinctively pastoral (4–5).

There is a sense therefore in which the pastoral mode measures or clashes with the world in which the poet uses it by taking a step back from it rather than stepping into it. Instead of weaving history and mythology into the fabric of the world at hand, pastoral finds the contrast between the two more fruitful and perhaps more didactic. And Frost is no different. The varying degrees of Frost’s pastoral, to use Lynden’s formulation, are regulated by the subjects he depicts and the situations they find themselves in, and sometimes directly compared or in opposition to their conventional roles. For instance, if we measure Frost’s pastoral besides its Virgilian model, we find that he

“definitely appears out of place: [for] his landscapes are often barren, his shepherds seem to be rather tough farmers, and contemplation always appears threatened and mingled with hard labor” (Faggen 50). He uses this mode to reveal instead the “brutal and sinister qualities of country folk, deflating romantic fantasies of natural innocence and virtue” (51) he finds in northern New England. These deflations appear, for example, in poems such as “A Hundred Collars” where two men – one from the city and one from the country – come into contact. Though the speaker of the poem briefly describes the country, the place where the two men meet, as an ideal, carefree get-away from the city where the children can run a little wild, there is nonetheless an underlying fear of that ideal, carefree retreat and of the people living there. This much is expressed as tensions between the two men rise to a stifling level during small talk and as every word from the country man comes across as though it bore understated threats. “The Fear,” as its title might suggest, also quashes fantasies of natural innocence and peace: it gives the sense that, during the couple’s absence from their summer house in the country, malignant spirits seep into the house, occupying it until their return, and that harm is always within touching distance. In essence, Frost juxtaposes these conventions with the more Modern concepts and realities of work, play, class, gender, and poetry, as well as the realities and hardships of country living against its portrait drawn from an outside perspective, letting tension and separation build between the two.

Upon closer examination, we can see that Frost’s characters are “disillusioned by both fear and the interminable chain of longing; no landscape provides innocence or happiness” (51) despite their retreat or isolation from the city. No doubt part of this has to do with the fact that the loci of *North of Boston* – rural New England – was a place threatened by urbanisation. Therefore, the fears and disillusionments that Frost’s characters experience are both real and a result of his diagnostic of his age and world through the pastoral mode. He at once records their experience and dramatises it. As it were, *North of Boston* is “a powerfully realized depiction of New England rural and village life” and “was published, we must remember, in a cultural climate deeply conflicted over the vitality and values of such a way of life” (Sheehy 217). This concern was so pressing that it led to an abundance of “editorials, sermons, magazine articles, and books addressed to the problems of the countryside” (217). Questions about rural and country living were not only confined to regional literature but also found political expression: Theodore Roosevelt, in 1908, went so far as to appoint a Commission on Country Life to help farmers develop more profitable businesses and better living. The fact that the concern about rural life reached the higher echelons of government should be an indicator of the severity of the problem. With the problem of rural and country living so widespread in the social imagination and in public discourse, “[r]esponding to this challenge across the shifting grounds of American politics and social policy became one of the abiding and defining motions of Frost’s career” (218). In response

to this threat, people either moved to city centres or stayed put, resisting these changes, and Frost recorded their resistance.

Resistance in *North of Boston* comes under many forms but the most prevalent is that of simply insisting on living life as it has always been lived in these parts. In “Mending Wall,” for example, the neighbour of the narrator lives according to an old idiom, that good fences make good neighbours, passed down to him by his father, even though the aptness of this idiom remains questionable – at least questionable enough to cause the speaker of the poem to doubt it and to compare it, obliquely, to elves, implying that both are just as inapplicable to the current situation. The sense that his idiom is outdated or simply out of step with the times is reinforced by the image which the speaker of the poem paints of his neighbour: that of an old-stone savage. The following poem, “Death of a Hired Man,” sets country work and city work side-by-side and places Silas, the hired man, between them. The poem makes the case that though work in the city, untethered by the whims of the four seasons, might be more remunerative and stable, it lacks the personal and familial aspect of working on the farm, and though the city offers might be attractive, in the long run home is where one wants to be. “The Black Cottage,” similarly, contrasts city and country. The cottage, which remains as it was before the old lady who lived there passed away, remains full of memories, but ultimately useless. The sons who now own the cottage, passed down to them from their mother, don’t care for it and yet cannot seem to make up their minds to get rid of it. Perhaps like Silas, they are of two minds and caught between two worlds. Throughout *North of Boston*, rural and urban life are contrasted in poignant situations, competing, as it were, for the privilege of being ‘right’. Yet what seems more important both in subject matter and in poetic structure is the act of contrasting them and allowing for the reader to experience the distance between them and their incommensurability.

North of Boston records a turning point on an aesthetic level for Frost but also for America. Though this might sound like somewhat of a sweeping statement, Frost’s second collection of poetry is part of a movement which preoccupied itself with rural life – a way of living which was facing extinction at the time of its publication. The turning point for America then is its ushering into modernity understood as urbanisation and increased industrialisation. Such a process takes considerable time and effort, of course, but despite its apparently slow progress, its effects are discernibly real and lasting on the people who most experience it. *North of Boston* records the people who were threatened by these changes and does so in a style which itself resisted a trend that was infiltrating literature and especially literary London.

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