



FROST'S "NORTH OF BOSTON": A DIALOGIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

North of Boston is Robert Frost's second volume of poetry, published in 1914. If his first volume *A Boy's Will* (1913) is an expression of his lyric genius in his next anthology he shows his skill in composing dramatic narratives or verse tales. They give a picture of the people living in the north of Boston in New England as seen by the poet. Each poem (with a few exceptions) seems to be a self-sufficient episode of a novel written in verse form. The episodes may be unconnected but they are held together by one common thread- the setting being in the northern part of Boston. In form thus it is akin to the novel, a super genre as envisaged by the Soviet critic Mikhail Bakhtin. From a Bakhtinian concept of dialogism, a variety of social class finds their voices in this book. And again almost each poem contains more than one voice and the poem becomes a space for interaction of these voices that represent their social class, their professions and other defining features. Some poems are engaged in a dialogue with the poetic traditions of the Roman Virgil, Wordsworth, Emerson and Thoreau. Frost's poems have modern ambiguity and he is never conclusive. So the voices of his characters here get some validity and destroy the possibility of a monologic truth that attempts to disregard the 'other' and universalize the individual idea of truth. The ideal of pluralism is here fully realized.

Key Words: Narrative, super genre, variety, dialogism, voices, class, space, interaction, pluralism.

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INTRODUCTION

Robert Frost is a leading American poet of the twentieth century. Popularly known as the farmer poet of New England, his poetry combines the terrifying reality of doubt, anxiety and indifference of the modern era and a respect for tradition. Torn apart by these contradictory pulls, his poetry is inconclusive and it defies fixity. But unlike Eliot, who is more objective and deals with the urban wasteland, Frost is basically and instinctively a lyric genius and his poetry depict the countryside reality. His first collection of poems *A Boy's Will* (1913) contains poems that are lyrical to the core.

The lyrics of this volume portray the scenes of New England with a view to give them a local color and a name. The volumes that came after his second volume *The North of Boston* (1914) continue the lyrical tenor. *Mountain Interval* (1916) containing the famous lyric 'The Road Not Taken', *New Hampshire* (1923) containing the prestigious 'Stopping by Woods On a Snowy Evening', *West Running Brook* (1928) containing the sonnet 'Acquainted with the Night', *Further Range* (1936) containing the short lyric 'Come In' are varied expressions of his lyrical impulse. Louis Untermeyer, a renowned Frost scholar and a lifelong friend of the

poet, feels that 'Robert Frost began with lyrics and after many successes in blank verse monologues and talking narratives, he returned to the singing line. When his work is viewed as a whole, it will be seen that he never left the lyric for long' (*Frost as Lyric Poet*).

Untermeyer's comment points us to an untraveled land where Frost left the trodden path and took the one less travelled by. '... he never left the lyric for long'- this suggests that he left it and that was for a brief period of time. Untermeyer is obviously referring to Frost's second anthology *North of Boston*. It is here he deviates from the lyric into the experimental blank verse monologues and dramatic narratives. In the entire Frost *oeuvre* it stands out as a different thing, in the sense that here he 'says' the poems of any social significance. Louis Bogan in his article 'Achievement in American Poetry' puts it rightly: 'In *North of Boston* Frost briefly possessed himself of a humane realism and insight...' (*Nitchie, Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost 122*)

The Tool of Dialogism

The present paper is an attempt to view from a dialogic perspective Frost's second collection of poems, *North of Boston*, which, as has been suggested, carries some speciality. Dialogism is a socio-linguistic theory, first proposed by the Soviet critic Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin. An eccentric and a philosopher of language, he considered the novel as the greatest of all genres such as the lyric, the epic or the novel. According to him all other genres are already completed, but the novel is still developing. The novel is polyglot. Bakhtin posits novel as a site for interaction of many classes of people that constitute our society. There is no single voice, but a plurality of unmerged voices. The genealogy of such concept goes back to a theory of language that Bakhtin proposed and still further back to the Zoroastrian idea that a clash is ever existent in nature and it is transmitted to the human culture. Michael Holquest, an authority on Bakhtin, writes:

At the heart of everything Bakhtin ever did- from what we know of his very earliest (lost) manuscripts to the very latest (still unpublished) work- is a highly distinctive

concept of language. The conception has as its enabling a priori an almost Manichean sense of opposition and struggle at the heart of existence- ceaseless battle between centrifugal forces that seek to keep things apart, and centripetal forces that strive to make things cohere. This Zoroastrian clash is present in culture as well as nature, and in the specificity of individual consciousness; it is at work in the even greater particularity of individual utterances. The most complete and complex reflection of these forces is found in human language, and the best transcription of language so understood is the novel (Introduction, *The Dialogic Imagination XVIII*).

Holquest's comment throws light on the fact that no single force governs the universe. There is at least one opposite force that maintains the balance. The resultant effects of these two pulls keep things stable. So a plurality characterizes the constitution of our existence. Bakhtin maintained that as the society is constituted of a variety of social classes, and as these social classes are engaged in a variety of dissimilar activities, the voices in the novel should never merge into a single voice of the writer. He was suspicious of such merger and sensed a foul play behind all this. He pleaded for a dignified co-existence of all, not one forcibly suppressing or marginalizing the other. He called this phenomenon *heteroglossia*.

Bakhtin's position contradicts Formalist idea of Aristotle as expressed in his *Poetics*. M.H. Abrams very clearly explains this in the entry Dialogic Criticism:

Bakhtin explicitly sets his theory against Aristotle's *Poetics*, which proposed that the primary component in narrative forms is the plot that evolves coherently from beginning to an end in which all complications are resolved. Instead Bakhtin elevates *discourse* (equivalent to Aristotle's subordinate element *diction*) into the primary component of a narrative work; and he describes discourse as a medley of voices, social attitudes, and values that are

not only opposed, but irreconcilable, with the result that the work remains unresolved and open ended. (63)

The open ending defies the single voice of the author and paves the way for 'many voicedness' in the narrative. Bakhtin preferred the novels of the Russian author Dostoevsky for being open-ended, dialogic and polyphonic to the novels of Tolstoy that imposed the author's opinion arbitrarily in the resolution of the plot.

Discourse, for Bakhtin, refers to the language uttered by the characters engaged in a dialogue. His narrative theory is based on the idea of 'inherent "addressivity" of the language, the fact that the language is addressed to someone, never uttered without the consciousness of a relationship between the speaker and the addressee.' (Guerin et al 362) Hence it is suggestive of a plurality and an otherness. He takes 'language not as system of abstract grammatical categories, but rather language as ideologically saturated, language as the world view...'. (Bakhtin 271). To his view language is an arena of irreconcilable social conflict.

Ideally, Bakhtin wants a narrative to validate all the voices or social classes they represent. No voice is permitted to dominate and thus suppress the other. But in the society there is a hierarchy, a question of the master and the slave, the reality of domination and being dominated. But in the folk festival of the carnival Bakhtin found a new underlying social meaning. In many cultures during the time of carnival, all classes participate, and they all are allowed to violate social codes, flout authority, invert social strata and to profane what one ordinarily regards as being sacrosanct. He finds this in the classical, medieval and Renaissance culture and literature. He claims that the literary parallel to the carnival is best represented in the Renaissance writer Rabelais' work.

In *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin develops the concept of the *canivalesque*. The narrative that resembles the carnival in spirit and mode, he designates or describes as the *canivalesque*. The rise of the novel, he maintains, can be traced back to the design of a carnival. As Guerin and others write:

Out of the primordial roots of the carnival tradition in folk culture... arises the many-

voiced novels of the twentieth century...Just as public ritual of carnival inverts values in order to question them, so may the novel call closed meanings in question... the people of a community express both their sense of being victims of power and their own power to subvert institutions. As a carnival concretizes the abstract in a culture, so Bakhtin claims that the novel carnivalises through the diversities of speech and voice reflected in its structure. Like carnival's presence in the public square, the novel takes place in the public sphere of the middle class. Carnival and novel make power relative by addressing it (Guerin et al 364).

Prof. Panchappa R. Waghmare, in the article *Mikhail Bakhtin's Dialogism and Intertextuality: A Perspective* claims that Bakhtin's conception of 'polyphony' is equivalent to 'intertextuality' and that 'Bakhtin's theory proposes that all discourse is in dialogue with prior discourse on the same subject....'(2). He bases his analysis drawing upon Kristeva's concept of intertextuality and her study of Bakhtin's Dialogism in *Word, Dialogue and Novel*. Kristeva's theory of intertextuality postulates that 'any one literary text is made up of other texts, by means of its open or covert citation and allusions, its repetitions and transformations of the formal and substantive features of earlier text...any text is... the site for an intersection of numberless other texts, and existing only through its relation to others.' (Abrams 317) But Bakhtin's primary focus is on language or discourse as used in the text. Language used in a novel is a combination of echoes from many languages – literary, religious, commercial, formal, colloquial, legal and from the languages related to the spheres of human activity that the author chooses to draw upon. Bakhtin's own observation in 'Discourse in the Novel' is very much pertinent here in our analysis of the conversational poems in Frost's second anthology:

...an illiterate peasant, miles away from any urban centre...lived in several language systems: he prayed to God in one language, sang songs in another, spoke to his family in a third and , when he began to dictate petitions to the local authorities through a

scribe, he tried speaking yet a fourth language (the official literate language). All these are different languages, even from the point of view of abstract socio-dialectological markers...these were not only various different languages but even internally variegated languages...the ideological systems and approaches to the world that were indissolubly connected with these languages contradicted each other...(Bakhtin 295).

Thus if we take the peasant's language as a text, it is obviously made up of other languages or texts and it is constituted of many voices.

Novelistic Features in *North of Boston*

After the emergence of the novel as a genre, the distinction between genres has blurred, for as Bakhtin shows that the novel may subsume all other genres. Contrarily novelistic features may be found even in poetic compositions. He cites the example of 'Eugene Onegin' of Pushkin as a case in point. He proposes the term 'novelization'. The features of novelized text are, as Bakhtin writes in the essay 'Epic and the novel':

They become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extra-literary heteroglossia and the "novelistic" layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally-this is the most important thing-the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic open-endedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the open-ended present) As we will see below all these phenomena are explained by the transposition of other genres into this new and peculiar zone for structuring artistic models (a zone of contact with the present in all its open-endedness), a zone that was first appropriated by the Novel. (Bakhtin 6-7)

Here we come to a point where the novel and the dramatic narrative of Frost meet. A host of features that are proper to the novel may be found in *North of Boston*. Taken together the poems in the

anthology resemble a novel in its variety of themes. (It comes very close to the genre popularly known as the verse novel. In a verse novel the story is told in verse instead of prose). Frost's is the story of the people of the countryside engaged in an interaction with Nature and society in the Northern part of Boston. 'Mending Wall', the first poem of the collection, takes us to a rural world where two people contradict over the need of a boundary wall to maintain the property. We are introduced to the problem that engages two people. The scene moves to a farm house in 'The Death of the Hired Man', the second poem of the book. Here the tragedy of the hired man Silas is depicted with grim reality. Next poem 'The Mountain' which contains a number of brilliant passages describing the surrounding nature, presents the encounter of a local peasant with a traveler. The reality of the household matters gets reflected in 'Home Burial', 'A Servant to Servants' and 'The House Keeper'. 'Home Burial' narrates the quarrel between the husband and wife over the untimely death of their little child. The problem of women who perform drudgery in the household like a slave is the theme of 'A Servant to Servants'. The episode revealing the unhappiness of family life finds reflection in 'The Housekeeper'. The agrarian reality is projected in 'Blueberries.' Thus they narrate the slices of life of the rural area, which when put together, make a story. The events, which apparently seem unconnected, contain an underlying unity, (like Eliot's 'Preludes') Thus it comprises of the elements of the Bakhtinian super genre.

Taken as a whole, the characters speaking the dialogues here are as varied as in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. The cautious landowner concerned over maintaining the boundary wall ('Mending Wall'), the hired man Silas, the sympathetic housewife Mary, businesslike Warren ('The Death of the Hired Man'), the traveler from town, the ignorant rustic farmer ('The Mountain'), a great scholar and Professor Maggon and the shrewd democrat politician Lafayette ('A Hundred Collars'), the raving mother Amy losing her child, the cool and reasonable father ('Home Burial'), the minister telling the narrator the story of a resolute lady who lost her husband in the

American Civil War('The Black Cottage'), the lady sick with his household scores and wanting rest as her only medicine,('A servant to Servants') the housekeeper, her marriageable daughter Estella and her old master and suitor John('The Housekeeper')and the lonely husband whose wife has fled with another man('The Fear') – all these characters tell their own tale in the lines of the volume. Their voices do not merge with the voices of the various speaking personas. The speaking personas also represent various classes. These voices are voices from people of different social ladder.

Plurality of the Speaking Voices

Each poem in the anthology is spoken by a persona or the narrator. A poet and a poetic persona are not one voice. The poet may not hold the same view of things as the persona. Very often the poet maintains a distance from the speaker who is a created character. It is true in the case of Frost. Moreover, the speaker addresses the poem to someone present or absent. The characters that interact also speak in voices that are ideologically saturated. In 'Mending Wall' the speaker is a young man full of ideals but lacking in experience. He represents the voice that tells that 'there is something that doesn't love a wall' (Frost 33). But the man whom he addresses is a traditionalist and firmly believes in his father's saying that 'Good fences make good neighbors (Frost 33). The poem does not give any definite conclusion. The poet leaves it open ended. The voices of the poet, the persona and that of the savage farmer do not merge. 'The Black Cottage' has two narrating voices- one that introduces the poem, the first person 'I', and the minister who narrates the life of the lady who lost her husband in the Civil war. The lady represents the ideological voice of a group of American people who strongly believed in the principle that '...all men are created free and equal (Frost 57). The poetic persona and the minister maintain a critical distance from the lady's view of the civil war. Thus the narrative validates four voices- the lady's, the first narrator's, the second narrator's and that of the poet who leaves the tale inconclusive. 'The Code' and many others (except the monologues such as 'A Servant to Servants',

'After Apple-picking', 'The Wood Pile' and 'Good Hours') in the volume also follow the same mode. Commenting on multiple voices in this anthology the Frost scholar Robert Faggen observes: ' Those voices are numerous and conflict; the attempt to find a monolithic Frostian voice misses the subtlety of the many.' (*Frost and the Questions of Pastoral* 53)

Carnivalisation

'The Code' enacts the concept of the carnivalesque in its narrative. Here are two stories, one within the other. The narrator takes us first to the meadow where three people are 'piling cocks of hay' (Frost 69). One is a town-bred farmer and obviously the owner. The other two are hired men. Suddenly one helper named James thrusts his pitchfork on the ground, marches himself off the field and goes home. The other helper explains the shocked owner that 'He thought you meant to find fault with his work'. It was going to shower, and the owner said that they should take pains to cock the hay. He took it as an insult and this was sufficient to anger the man because, as the other says: 'The hand that knows his business won't be told /To do work better or faster- those two things'(Frost 70).It was a form of revolt against the owner's dominating and rebuking words, though addressed indirectly.

To further clarify his point the second helper cites his own case with another farmer Sanders in Salem. Sanders was an old farmer who tirelessly worked in his farm. One reason behind his working was that by doing so he would encourage the workers and thus get more work done out of his hired help, obviously with no extra wages. So 'no one liked the boss' (Frost 70). The worker here felt insulted as his employer asked him to work harder when he was already doing his best. The result was that the worker unloaded the entire wagon of hay on his master. He thus gave a befitting lesson to him who questioned his integrity and wounded his sense of self-respect. These two people who hail from working the class community, a lower social stratum, flout the authority of their employers who nurture a pre-conceived idea that the workers are lazy and averse to do work hard. The second worker relates the grim episode with Sanders in a light and casual manner. This comical representation of his dishonor to his boss and thus his temporary

displacement or deposition from the social rank resembles the comic subversion of rank and authority in a carnival. The actions of these two workers would raise them to the eyes of the employers and inversely, the employers would stoop to treat them with honor. So when the second worker asked if Sanders discharged him, he answers: 'Discharge me? No! He knew I did just right (Frost 73). A new social relation thus takes shape.

Echo of the Classical Muse and the Originality

In form and content Frost's poetry is engaged in dialogue with the literary traditions of the ancients and moderns on the both sides of the Atlantic. He writes in the pastoral tradition but also deviates from it. His is thus a continuation and an addition to the pastoral discourse. It is nowhere more evident as in *North of Boston*. The structural device of all the poems here is the dialogue. A poem in the form of a dialogue is found in the pastoral poetry. It is known as the eclogue, a term first applied to the pastoral poems of Virgil, the ancient Roman poet. Frost draws on the eclogues of this legendary ancient poet while composing the poems. Robert Faggen in his influential essay '*Frost and the Questions of Pastoral*' writes: "Frost himself said that 'he first heard the speaking voice in poetry in Virgil's *Eclogues*'...Frost was conscious of Virgilian models when he assembled *North of Boston*"(53). He cites 'Mending Wall' as an example and claims that this poem '...reanimates a kind of poem found in Virgil's ten *Eclogues*, known as amoebaeon dialogue, a type of competition between shepherds'(53). The same is true in the case of 'Home Burial' where the competition or conflict is between the husband and wife over their dead child and of 'The Death of the Hired Man' where the Amy and her husband argue over the retention and removal of the old hired man Silas.

But one should keep in mind that Frost's poems are not a servile copy of the Virgilian form. He modifies the ancient form to suit his purpose. The Virgilian form is usually a conversation between two or three rustic characters in verse, and rarely is it a monologue. The authorial intervention in between is found but it is not pervasive. But in the Frost poem there is a narrator who takes the reader to a certain place in the rural world and introduces

the characters. It involves both Telling and Showing, as in an omniscient fictional narrative. Virgil's pieces were written to be performed on the stage but a poem in *North of Boston* is more of a narrative than a drama. While Virgil used the classical meter, (Dactylic Alexandrine) Frost uses the blank verse. The eclogues are more politically saturated. There is a constant reference to and commentary on the political turmoil in Rome after the breakout of the civil war around 40 BC between Octavian Caesar and the joint forces of Antony and Cleopatra. For example in Eclogue I, Meliboeus complains of his misfortune as he was exiled from home. Tityrus, the other speaker, enjoys bliss under the shade of a tree, as he was restored to his possessions in his old age. Except for a few political touches in 'A Hundred Collars' and 'The Black Cottage', Frost is far removed from the political arena, but by using rural setting and images, he explores the complex modern psychology that is an offshoot of the political atmosphere of his time.

Traditionally a pastoral poem has for its theme the country things in their ideal colors. It presents an Arcadia with all its attending beauty and innocence. It involves a retreat to a forest or countryside in search of a world of perennial happiness and perfection. Frost's characters inhabit the rural landscape, and naturally they turn to the pastoral world in pursuit of pleasure, happiness and perfection, unlike the courtiers in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* who retire to the Forest of Arden under compulsion and find life there as problematic as in the court. But like the courtiers, the Frost characters' search for perfection is frustrated and they are disillusioned. 'After Apple-Picking' (a lyric poem, not a verse tale) praises the delight of work in the gardens that produce apples. Apples bear a biblical suggestion that the garden is the 'paradise' and so there is an urge in the speaker to move to a world of perfection, a craving for enjoying heavenly bliss as enjoyed by the first man Adam. But the hope of attaining the perfection raised in the first part of the lyric is belied by the exhaustion, waste and limitation at the end. The speaker says: 'I am overtired/ Of great harvest I myself desired' (Frost 69). In 'The Self Seeker', the country mill owner gets his legs crushed in the wheel pit. This self-seeking man

had not much love for the people around him and was blind to their needs. He rather made a fetish of the orchids that grew in his property. This undue attention to the orchid, an element of pastoral beauty and innocence, produced an indifference to life that resulted in his accident. Here too is the lost ideal.

'The Blueberries' begins with a description of blueberries in Patterson's pasture:

Blueberries as big as the end of your thumb,
Real sky-blue, and heavy, and ready to drum
In the cavernous pail of the first one to come!
And all ripe together, not some of them green
And some of them ripe! You ought to have
seen! (Frost 59)

It smacks of the ideal pastoral beauty and so a thing worth seeing. Moreover, the owner does not bother about the pasture or the berries and so people enjoy freedom to pluck them. Loren's and his children always pluck them and they pluck 'What Nature is willing to give'. But this idyllic physical and ethical beauty is undercut when one of the characters says: 'If he thinks all the fruit that grows wild is for him/He'll find he's mistaken' and finally when we hear that 'To people they look on as having no right/ To pick where they're picking (Frost 61).

The rural world with all its negative colors is to be seen in some of the poems of this book. In 'A Servant to Servants' the wife's tireless toiling to maintain the hired men has made her a sort of a servant to her husband Len's slaves. Moreover, her uncle's frustrated love for a woman that resulted in his insanity is a grim reality. The death of a child and the grief that possessed its mother making her behave in an irrational way in 'Home Burial', the tragic death of a noble slave Silas in 'The Death of the Hired Man', the scene of decay of 'the cord of maple- cut and split/ And piled...' (Frost 101) a product of human activity, point out the seamy aspects of the country side. One cannot find here the bliss that Amiens sings of in Shakespeare's pastoral play *As You Like It*:

Under the greenwood tree
Who loves to lie with me,
And turn his merry note
Unto the sweet bird's throat,

Come hither, come hither, come hither.

Here shall he see

No enemy,

But winter and rough weather. (Act 2, Sc 5,
1-9)

Here one faces many enemies in addition to winter and rough weather.

Frost uses the classical form and the rural setting, but the country things come out as images for complex psychological reality of the modern era. Faggen's comment also justifies the stand: 'If by pastoral one means a mode that emphasizes the beauty and simplicity of country life, then Frost's poetry seems decidedly dissonant. But Frost's dissonant renewal of the ancient tradition allowed him to explore complex, modern attitudes about democracy, science and faith.' (Frost and the Questions of Pastoral 49) Thus in *North of Boston* Frost is invariably in dialogue with the ancient Muse Virgil.

The Intertextual

The intertextual elements or the voices of Frost's predecessors are most clearly discernible in 'The Black Cottage' and 'The Wood Pile'. The voice of the predecessor that is most prominent in 'The Black Cottage' is Wordsworth in his early poem 'The Ruined Cottage', the opening book of his long poem *The Excursion*. Though Frost is very often hailed as an essentially American poet, in his early years between 1913 and 1914, he briefly stayed in England and became associated with the Georgian poets, who held Wordsworth as their poetic precursor and wrote in the romantic tradition of his. Frost turned to Wordsworth as a guide. The pastoral and the ideal in the British sage had appealed Frost as it appealed his English friends, but the realism the American context demanded, he found there lacking. In 'The Ruined Cottage' a wanderer tells the poet the gruesome story of a woman, Margaret. The woman inhabited the cottage and represented an ideal commitment to her husband, who left her one night leaving all his wealth to her to join the war. Unfortunately he never returned and she died a tragic death in the cottage. The poet overwhelmed with grief at the sad tale of the wanderer. The old man proposes a communion with nature as a way to ease his despair as he himself found solace in the

various forms of Nature. The wanderer tells Wordsworth:

My friend, enough to sorrow have you given,
The purposes of wisdom ask no more;
Be wise and cheerful, and no longer read
The forms of things with an unworthy eye.
...
I well remember that those very plumes,
Those weeds, and high spear-grass on that
wall,
By mist and silent rain drops silvered o'er,
As once I passed I did to my heart convey
So still an image of tranquility,
So calm and still, and looked so beautiful
Amid the uneasy thoughts which filled my
mind,
That what we feel of sorrow and despair
From ruin and from change, and all the grief
The passing shews of being leave behind,
Appeared an idle dream that could not live
Where meditation was. I turned away
And walked along my road in happiness.
(The Ruined Cottage, Part II)

The wise poet would certainly get tranquility and peace of mind as he himself believed in the healing power of Nature. He clearly states how the beautiful forms of Nature could be a balm and how they could lift the spirits of a depressed man in the final stanza of his well-known poem 'The Daffodils':

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills
And dances with the daffodils.
(The Golden Treasury 259- 260)

'The Ruined Cottage' and 'The Black Cottage' have many things in common. First, the title of the Frost poem is an echo of Wordsworth's, the dissonant word being only the word 'black'. Second, both the poems have structural similarity. Both are spoken by a person to another on a tour through the countryside. They follow a conversational mode and they are written in blank verse. Both relate the story of a woman whose husband joined the war and never came back. Both the women embody some ideal and both of them die a miserable death in their

cottage. But the differences between them are striking. Frost deliberately makes the difference and does so with a design. In the former the cottage is all but ruined and exists in a disordered state but in the latter the cottage is 'Fresh painted by the shower of a velvet black' and 'Everything's as she left it when she died.' The first is spoken by a wanderer to the poet, but the second is spoken by a minister to an important visitor. While Margaret in Wordsworth's poem represents the homely virtues without any direct political commitment, the lady in the Frost poem combines virtues like devotion to her husband and her devotion to a social ideal. She considers her sacrifice and suffering worth only in the light of her own idea:

... she thought
Whatever else the Civil War was for,
It wasn't to keep the States together,
Nor just to free the slaves, though it did
both.
She wouldn't have believed those ends
enough
To have given outright for them all she
gave.
Her giving somehow touched the principle
That all men are created free and equal.
(Frost 57)

Finally, the English romantic poet ends his poem with a note of hope and consolation that nature is believed to offer, but Frost, like a modern man with divided purposes, finds no such respite. Nature is present in the form of bees and the sun, but while the bees looked out with 'fierce heads' making the minister and the visitor start the return journey, the sun looked fierce as it 'blazed on the windows.' Thus Nature here does not offer any solace nor does it stand for an ideal like Wordsworth's poem. The poems are engaged in a conversation with each other, but they take different paths. Jonathan N. Barron's observation in his essay 'A Tale of Two Cottages' beautifully illustrates this engagement between Frost and Wordsworth:

Frost's 'Black Cottage' takes its structure, and even much of its diction, from Wordsworth's 'Ruined Cottage'...These allusions...allow Frost to engage Wordsworth's poem on three levels. First,

they make of Wordsworth's poem a predecessor... Second, they foreground the idealism latent in Wordsworth's natural world and so better prepare readers for the destruction of that idealism. Third, by foregrounding the conversational elements of the poem, these allusions present a far more skeptical, far more social Wordsworth than is often recognized. (*Wilcox and Barron, Roads Not Taken* 138-139)

In 'The Wood-Pile', Frost addresses a subject that some of the New England poets treated earlier. Henry David Thoreau, a Romantic and Transcendentalist, in his epoch-making book 'Walden' (that gives an account of his two years' stay in a cabin in a wood near the Walden pond) touched upon the subject of the wood pile. He writes: 'Everyman looks at his wood pile with a kind of affection.' He also observed that the logs of wood in a pile would make him warm twice, one when he put them to size by cutting them down, and the second when 'they were on the fire' (Monteiro 67). Frost was all praise for his work 'Walden' and once said that it contributed to his making. But here he has a feeling different from that of Thoreau. Frost sees the pile of wood during his walk and it interests him for it makes him forget the bird that flew before him: 'And then there was a pile of wood for which/ I forgot him' (Frost101). He feels the Thoreauvian affection, but it does not warm him or its maker twice. Thoreau sees the woodpile in all its positive implications, suggesting an ideal. But Frost sees the maker of the wood pile as someone who 'forget (s) his handiwork on which/ He spent himself' and who has a habit of 'turning to fresh tasks'. Moreover, he 'leaves it there far from a useful fireplace' that can warm a human being. Rather he lets it 'warm the frozen swamp as best as it could/ With the slow smokeless burning of decay' (Frost 102). In the vision of Frost the woodpile tells a tale in which the human effort successfully brings order and beauty but they live only temporarily and fall prey to the decaying process of nature. In 'The Wood-Pile' the Thoreauvian voice and the Frostian voice are involved in a dialogue.

Language As a Mosaic of Social Voices

Finally, we need to analyze the diction or language in these poems. It is in the language that the various voices find their expression and the Bakhtinian dialogism foregrounds this element as opposed to the plot in Aristotle. It is the site the Manichean opposition between the forces that make things cling and the forces that make things disintegrate. The poems, as has already been mentioned, here are either monologues or narrative in the form of dialogues between rustic characters. But their most striking feature is that they have a markedly oral quality, a thing that is rarely found in the poems of the other anthologies. Rather than using dialect, Frost makes use of the regional vernacular of the rural New England territory. It is not a refined, sophisticated language filtered through the poet's consciousness- but actual reproduction in lines of verse the speech of the rustics. The colloquial with its sudden breaks, pauses, dashes and discontinuities is aptly illustrated in 'The Death of the Hired Man'.

Frost is here akin to Wordsworth, who held that the speech of the rustics who live in close contact with nature is the vehicle of good poetry. Frost even stooped below Wordsworth, for the latter did not often practice what he preached. In choosing a diction for his poetry Frost is also indebted to Emerson's stand on 'the vernacular wellsprings of good regional poetry' (Buell 115) as expressed in the twenty-two line passage in his poem 'Monadnoc'. It gave Frost a mandate for developing a 'grainy vernacular' and also a model for more 'distilled, distanced celebration of vernacularism (Buell116). But Frost, at least in his early poetry followed him in the first. Frost here speaks in a voice that echoes the voices of these two literary models. *North of Boston* uses the harsh colloquial utterances in a metrical form. Such diction is a truly social element here, as it allows the country people to tell their own tale in the language of their own. But it is a language that is made of languages from other sources and is ideologically saturated. It provides them a space to represent themselves in all their varieties.

Conclusion

North of Boston shows Frost in his true social concern. This is unique in Frost for as he advances in years, he moves away more and more from the social and crawl towards the personal. Frost once said that the world of his poetry, as the world of nature, is not circular with one centre i.e. good, but it is an oval with two centres – good and evil. It is an overthrow of monism in favour of dualism, a more complex relation between the two forces. If we discard the moral paradigm of good and evil and analyze *North of Boston* in the light of the social and cultural paradigm, we will find as many centres as there are representative voices in the poems and voices of the poetic predecessors interacting among themselves. We will find a work of Frost that is 'open-minded ,polyvalent and dialogic'(Roads Not Taken, Introduction 2).

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