

“Outdoor Game”: The Invention of Boundary in Robert Frost’s Poetry

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Abstract: Being one of the most renowned American poets, Robert Frost has paid much attention to the interplay between humans and nature, and this interplay usually takes place at a boundary – a wall, a fence, or a house. To examine the human-nature relationship and respond to the existing studies, the article delves into the theme of boundary in Frost’s poetry through close reading of Frost’s poems, interviews, and notes. Because of the development of natural science in Frost’s time, the image of landscape undergoes metamorphosis, switching from a mirroring of the human spirit to a living entity with agency. Therefore, nature is depicted as a counterpart of human beings with an attempt to cross over limits. Nevertheless, Frost emphasizes on coexistence and interdependence between two realms by deliberately leaving the boundary unsettled. Moreover, figures in Frost’s poetry bear two opposite impulses: to destroy and recreate limits, which reveals the floating and playful nature of boundaries; in this regard, the images of houses, walls, and fences are a metaphor for the contradictory human attributes. The article further argues that the feeling of limits reappears in poems displaying emptiness. In Frost’s poetry, a boundary is regarded as a protection both physically and mentally, yet it fails in a state of consolation.

Keywords: Robert Frost, poetry, nature, boundary

1. Introduction

Robert Frost, one of the most publicly celebrated American poets, gains popularity especially for his concern for nature and country life. Among Frost’s works, poems on nature and wildlife take a prominent place and many encourage such an outlook, for example, *Mending Wall*, *After Apple-Picking*, *Birches*, *The Oven Bird*, and *Desert Places*. The complexity of nature shown in Frost’s poetry is rooted in his childhood experience when he spent a short period with his grandparents in Lawrence after the death of his father in 1885 [1]. At that time his lifelong affection and intimacy for the landscapes and the residents grew: “I’d sometimes complain or run off to go swimming, but on the whole I guess I liked to try myself out in a job – helping a man load a wagon, pile firewood, rake or hoe. It was all odd jobs in those days. I liked working with the characters, listening to them, their stories, the way they had to tell a story - the country was full of characters [2].” Given the above, the repetitive images of wildlife, landscape, and the men who confront them are an echo from Frost’s childhood.

Concerning the role of man as well as nature in Frost’s pastorals, critics have offered different insights. Some argue that a man is essentially different from the objects in the world. While nature

imposes limitations on him, man shall refuse to give in and even dominate natural facts, employing the autonomy of imagination [3]. Human exploration into nature is a journey into his mind, similarly, the central fact in nature is about humans. As Montgomery notes, “Whenever Frost talks directly to or directly of natural objects or creatures, we feel that he is really looking at man out of the corner of his eye and speaking to him out of the corner of his mouth.” However, other critics oppose the view because it approaches Frost’s poetry through an ideology preconception, that is, there must be a teleology behind the inquiry into nature. Furthermore, they hold that human is part of the natural order that undergoes waste and decay, instead of the opposite of nature. Human’s action depicted in the poem is an everlasting battle against the flux of relentless nature, which, in Frost’s apt phrase, is “a momentary stay against confusion” [4]. Despite their divergence in human-nature relationships, both groups agree that Frost’s attempt to portray humans against nature is to assure the significance of the human race in a nonhuman world.

However, Frost’s true interest lies in the subtle interplay between humans and nature rather than nature itself. That is why Frost denied the label of “nature poet” from many critics; he claims that the display of landscape is a background of his work, and stresses the depiction of “something else” in his poetry [5,6]. In his letter to Untermeyer, Frost further emphasized the importance of human beings over the surroundings: “Not even in the most natural of nature poetry was nature ever anything but the background to the portrait of a lunatic, a lover, or a farmer” [7]. As Harold H. Watts concludes, Frost’s poetry forms a dialogue where two speakers exist – Frost himself and the landscape. On the other hand, the landscape is not merely a backdrop, but the medium where truth and beauty could be found [8]. The close but antagonistic relationship between humans and their surroundings has always been a topic in the spotlight in Frost’s poems on nature. In *The Old Man’s Winter Night*, an old man attempts to guard a farm against the danger of a winter night, but ends up “consigning” “his snow” and “his icicles” to the moon; in *Desert Places*, the antagonist is caught by a sense of loneliness at the scene of a snowy night, but at last, he returns to his “own desert places” and breaks away from the immensity of woods; in *The Sound Of Trees* the narrator “talks of going” to escape the noise of trees, but he “never gets away”. Nature, neither an antagonist nor a companion, is depicted as a counterpart of humans in Frost’s pastorals.

Among the poems, a subtle and fuzzy boundary frequently occurs and stands for the bittersweet relationship between humans and nature. In *Directive*, the narrator deliberately blurs the distinction between landscape and man-made order: “If you’re lost enough to find yourself”, “then make yourself at home”; in *An Old Man’s Winter Night*, the winter night scares and threatens the old man, yet the latter engulfs himself in the vast entity of nature at the end of the poem [9]. A boundary, by definition, stands for the limitation of both the human and nature, thus serving as a microcosm of the behavior pattern concerning how human approaches nature and vice versa. Given the above, the article investigates the boundary between man and the surroundings in Frost’s poetry with the hope of examining the human-nature relationship, as well as responding to the existing studies.

2. A Paradox about Rivalry and Interdependence

Before delving into the theme of boundaries, the article needs to define the scope of Frost’s poems. The feeling about boundary not only appears in poems about walls and fences, but also about houses. In Frost’s poetry, a house undergoes metamorphosis: it is expected to be a fixed location one settles, however, Frost refuses to recognize such a dwelling as a “home” that indicates certainty and civilization, but calls it a “belilaced cellar hole”. In other words, houses are reduced to walls as their key feature is the same – to divide space and provide shelter. Therefore, Frost turns the perception of housing: it falls in the same category of fences and walls, creating many limits and showing little humanity.

A house does not mean safety and protection, nevertheless, Frost conveys a strong need for these attributes and consigns them to various kinds of boundaries in his poems. The shared theme behind walls, houses, and fences is “boundaries” – to separate space into parts and isolate them from one another. In a reminiscence in which Frost wrote of his time in Derry Farm, he claimed the necessity of “a dead space around”, “a quitter” which creates a private space and places his ego. As Nabokov commented, “Man exists only insofar as he is separated from his surroundings... It may be wonderful to mix with the landscape, but to do so is the end of the tender ego” [10]. Frost’s insistence on partition manifests his need for a clear division between the self and the world.

However, as Nabokov’s note indicates, well-being is hard to achieve as the surroundings – nature tends to invade personal space. There is usually a certain amount of rivalry on the boundary between two sides in Frost’s poetry. The surroundings, instead of a backdrop behind humans, are a vivid entity that bears human instincts; the animate environment poses a threat to the hero, resulting in a love-hate relationship between them. For instance, in *An Old Man’s Winter Night*, Frost depicts the subtle relationship between the old man and the winter night: on the one hand, Frost emphasizes the distinction between outside and inside, on the other hand, he seeks “interdependence” rather than “independence” despite his need for fences.

At the beginning of the poem, the winter night is made an opponent to the old man. The space outside the house spies on the old man as it “looks darkly in at him” and creeps on “the pane in empty rooms”, for which the old man intends to fight back but fails. In the twelfth line, by calling the sound of trees “its sounds”, the poet indicates that the sounds outside are possessed by the night, and thus stresses the agency of the winter night. Besides, the noun “roar” which often refers to the sound of beasts, is used for the sound of trees to breathe life into the winter night. In the closing line, the old man consigns his properties to the moon and enters into sleep. When he rests, it is the moon that replaces the old man to be on guard of his dwelling. Throughout the poem, the night is pictured as a being with agency and capacity for engagement rather than a motionless background.

However, the poem closes with a rather peaceful image that the old man sleeping in the embrace of the night instead of claiming the winter night’s triumph, demonstrating the love-hate relationship between humans and nature. The old man engulfs himself in the vast darkness rather than repel her. The old man is even acknowledged as a success in keeping his house, despite pieces of evidence of his flabbiness. Meanwhile, the boundary in between continues to exist: he consigns “his snow” and “his icicles” with repeated emphasis on the genitive “his”. As Seamus Heaney comments: “his defenses, his fences, and his freedom were all interdependent.” Robert Frost displays a contrast between the old man and the winter night but he further makes the boundary subtle and fuzzy, leaving room for negotiation; what Frost seeks is not absolute freedom, but “interdependence”.

The mixed feeling toward landscape in Frost’s poems also mirrors the zeitgeist of his time. Frost attempts to tackle some of the most difficult intellectual problems in the early 20th century, that is, natural science in whole and Darwin in particular. The natural selection theory raised by Darwin has a profound impact on the image of nature in poetry. Before the prevalence of Darwin’s theory, romantic writers, especially Wordsworth, Emerson, and Thoreau regarded nature as a reflection of the mind and depicted the collision between man and nature as moments that shed light on the human spirit. However, natural science threatens this thinking pattern by unveiling the fluidity, uncertainty, and violence of nature. Even though Frost is influenced by Wordsworth, Emerson, and Thoreau – he responds to Wordsworth in *The Mountain* and *The Black Cottage*; and to Thoreau in *The Demiurge’s Laugh*, the breakthrough of natural science inevitably shapes Frost’s insight into nature [5]. In an interview, Frost claimed he was not interested in “the Thoreau business”, neither was he a “back-to-the-lander” [6]. In Frost’s poetry, nature did not remain the token of the soul as his predecessors suggested.

3. A Game Around Boundaries

It is worth noting that, human's struggle for the self against landscape is not devastating, but in a game-like manner. *The Lockless Door* narrates a man who lives in a lockless house for years and escapes at a knock on the door. As mentioned above, houses are reduced to an analogue of walls and fences, a symbol of the enclosure. The house in *The Lockless Door* supports such a notion: it is constructed by images including "door" "window" "floor" and "sill", all markers of boundary but none of content. However, as there is no lock on the door, the house fails to switch from openness to closeness and becomes a "cage" for the antagonist.

The hero is seized by panic at the knock, however, his behaviour indicates the opposite. Before the knock, he has lived in that lockless house for years, and the phrase "at last" in the second line reveals an anticipating overtone. At the end of the poem, the antagonist jumps out from the sill: "I emptied my cage/ To hide in the world". Even though he builds up the boundary for himself, as it is he who settles in the lockless nook for years, he goes beyond the border and searches for the next shelter, in other words, the next boundary. As Frost once said to his friend and fellow poet Charles Foster, he plays both "wall-builder and wall-destroyer". Similarly, the narrator in *Directive* claims: "If you're lost enough to find yourself", "then make yourself at home". The shared tone in the poems shows two sides of the human instinct – to make and cross borders.

Just like what the antagonist in *The Lockless Door* does – to play a game of hide-and-seek and venture out for new frontiers, the creating of boundaries is also playful and even childish. As *Mending Wall* indicates, the progress of building a wall is completed in a both cooperative and competitive way, according to Frost, this is just "another kind of outdoor game". Moreover, there is no need for a wall between the narrator and his neighbour. Although he doubts the sense behind it, questioning "What I was walling in or walling out/ And to whom I was like to give offense/ Something there is that doesn't love a wall", the narrator still joins his neighbour in mending walls. Despite the narrator appearing to be unwilling to build a boundary, his account indicates the opposite: he uses an ambiguous pronoun – "something" to show his disapproval. "Something" may refer to "elves", faerie creatures, and he soon denies that as "it's not elves exactly". In other words, the narrator is not as opposed to building walls as he seems to be. In fact, Frost said at a talk in 1931 that he wrote the poem when he was experiencing homesickness for his "old wall in New England"; and in another 1961 interview, he admitted that he stands for "both fellows" in the poem [11]. The analogy between "mending wall" and "game" not only implies the shakeable feature of a boundary, but it further points out that a border is nearly separated from the real situation; that is, it is constructed and even invented.

Robert Faggen points out that, although Frost shows two human instincts that seem to contradict each other, they cannot and do not have to be resolved [5]. As Frost writes, "Life is that which beguiles us into taking sides in the conflict of pressure and resistance, force and control. Art is that which disengages us to concern ourselves with the tremor of the universal deadlock [12]." The mending wall serves as a metaphor for "deadlock" where contrariness happens but does not need to dissolve; the junction of two worlds is an epitome of human nature: chaotic yet tolerant.

4. The Need for Boundary

The feelings about limits not only appear in images related to enclosure such as walls and houses, but also in the opposite – silence and emptiness. Boundaries are closely related to a need for belongingness; in the absence of limits, figures in the poem get stuck in a sense of disorientation. As mentioned above, Frost craves "the protection of a dead space" around him, which refers to safety and privacy. Even if he is not focusing on walls or houses, he tends to locate the figures on one side of a delineation. A limit is both a constraint and a surety. In *Desert Places*, a need for boundaries emerges when the narrator is exposed to the expanding winter night:

The woods around it have it – it is theirs,
All animals are smothered in their lairs,
I am too absent-spirited to count;
The loneliness includes me unawares.

The juxtaposition of woods, wildlife, and the hero forms a stark contrast between the hero and the landscapes. While weeds are of woods and animals are of lairs, nothing is left for the narrator. Even though the snowy night appears to be vast and empty, it is filled with hidden connections. In comparison, it is the narrator who appears naked in social relationships, “absent-spirited”. As “absent” indicates being away from the right place, the hero is in a state of displacement not only physically but mentally: neither does he belong to the natural kingdom in front of him, nor does he hold membership in something. If the relationship between weeds and woods, animals and lairs could be interpreted as individuals and their protections, then the state of the narrator denotes a loss of limit.

When the narrator suffers a spiritual vacuum, he is occupied by loneliness. Paradoxically, “loneliness” – the state of being excluded offers a sense of belonging: Frost likens the blankness of that snowy night to the hero’s “own desert places”, striking a responsive chord between the hero and the surrounded landscape and thus dissolving the torment of his soul. In other words, by creating an experience of being enclosed, an emotion mimics the building of walls and thus provides belongingness, even though the emotion seemingly refers to isolation. Similarly, in *The Most of It*, the hero tries to exclude the universe but it turns out that he excludes himself. Through the display of interdependence between man and nature, Frost conveys the notion that exclusion lies in the pursuit of absolute freedom and the avoidance of boundaries. As he wrote in *Birches*, even though “Life is too much like a pathless wood”, it remains “the right place for love”. Frost craves emotional bonds—especially with a certain space - in the chaotic world, and embraces limitations and boundaries.

However, Frost’s need for boundaries raises another problem: Are limits available when the poet is confronting himself? *For Once, Then, Something* implies the ultimate failure of boundaries by describing the antagonist’s reflection upon himself. He looks into the water in the well and gets “a shining surface picture/ Me myself in the summer heaven, godlike”, illustrating the outer space as a mirror of the hero’s state of mind. However, as he is bare of the boundaries he created for himself, he enters into a situation where he is so “godlike” that he falls into the trap of so-called ultimate liberty. The making and breaking of boundaries is a game Robert Frost creates for himself, it works effectively on the journey outward, but may fail on the journey inward.

5. Conclusion

Among Robert Frost’s poems, an encounter with the natural or artificial realm is a frequent occurrence. When the hero is placed between the self and the surroundings, outside and inside, a wonder of boundary – whether “good fences make good neighbors”, and whether a boundary is benevolent, comes to the surface. The theme of boundary occurs not only in images of walls and fences, but also in images of dwellings. In Frost’s poems, a boundary closely relates to protection and privacy. On the other hand, as a boundary is where two realms confront, nature threatens human well-being and rivalry happens; the landscape is depicted as a vivid entity rather than a backdrop of civilization. In other words, Frost demonstrates a love-hate relationship between each side of a limit. Besides, Frost constructs the enclosures in a game-like manner. Figures play both “wall-builder” and “wall-destroyer” which are opposite human instincts. However, such a paradox around boundaries does not have to be solved, and stands for a metaphor of human nature. Furthermore, the feeling about limits also appears in poems concerning emptiness, mirroring Frost’s emphasis on safety and privacy, and indicating an ultimate failure to meet belongingness needs.

Frost’s depictions of boundaries reflect his message on the human-nature relationship: instead of viewing nature as a mirroring of the human spirit as romantic writers do, Frost considers nature as a

living entity with agency. In this regard, a boundary is needed to provide a sense of safety and place human spirit. While nature poses a threat to human by invading borders, human enjoys the freedom to cross and remake boundaries, indicating the symmetrical structure between the two sides. Frost recognizes the interdependence between the two realms by deliberately making the boundary subtle and fuzzy, and leaving room for negotiation. The new image of landscape in Frost's poetry is rooted in the emergence of natural science at his time: Frost wrestles with the relationship between poetry and science, and thus acknowledges an uneasy relationship between the two realms.

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