

“EARTH’S THE RIGHT PLACE FOR LOVE”. ROBERT FROST AND UTOPIA

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Although Robert Frost’s poetry recounts practical activities (mowing, apple-picking...), the characters often indulge in utopian dreams, many of them based on the American notion that a better future lies on the other side of the hill (or fence). This essay explores the clash between utopian visions and harsh realities that characterises his poetry.

Keywords: Robert Frost, Utopia, Pastoral Poetry

“La terra è il luogo giusto per l’amore”. Robert Frost e l’utopia

Sebbene le poesie di Robert Frost parlino di attività pratiche, i suoi personaggi spesso si concedono il lusso di sogni utopistici, molti dei quali si basano sulla nozione americana che un futuro migliore si trovi dall’altra parte della collina (o del muro). Questo saggio esplora lo scontro tra visioni utopistiche e realtà dure che caratterizza le sue poesie.

Parole chiave: Robert Frost, utopia, poesia pastorale

American Utopias

Does it make sense to talk of Robert Frost in connection with utopia? The poet who wrote of the «design of darkness to appall» (Frost 275) and who said «I have it in me so much nearer home / To scare myself with my own desert places» (269) is not the most obvious writer to choose as a focus of study on this topic, and I don’t intend to make any claims for him as a writer who bequeathed a vision of a glorious future for the human race. However, throughout his life utopian visions featured, fleetingly but persistently, in his poetry – and not only to be dismissed. Frost understood the allure of such visions and took them seriously, even if he mostly seems to have rejected them. His attention to such phenomena grew even as the political and economic prospects of America darkened – and this is no surprise. I will therefore conclude this essay by

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considering some of his later poems, written during the years of the Depression and the Second World War; this was also a period of personal suffering for the poet, with the deaths of two of his children (one of them by suicide) and of his wife, Elinor.

It is best to begin by considering what utopian visions he was drawn to – or, more accurately, which visions struck him as worthiest of consideration. We can tentatively distinguish two broad categories of utopian future that prevailed in North America: one can be described as the pastoral dream of a new Eden and the other the vision of a glorious technological future for society.

The latter is arguably the more important in terms of its practical effect on American society but has had less of an impact on American literature (and the arts in general). Probably the most important literary work connected with this kind of utopian vision is Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), which sees the problems of American society as deriving from its economic and class system, rather than from industrialism as such (as was the prevailing view of the literary world, greatly influenced by the Romantics). Bellamy's vision of a machine-based utopia anticipates the "technotopias" of such later optimists as R. Buckminster Fuller and Bill Gates. However, if we are considering such a utopian vision purely as a literary phenomenon, it is probably more interesting in terms of the reactions it provoked than as a work of art in itself; the earliest and strongest reaction to Bellamy came from across the ocean, with William Morris's utopian novel *News from Nowhere* being written as a direct response. But this was only the first of many polemical counterviews, some of which took the form of satirical dystopias, with machines being cast as tyrannical oppressors, a tradition that continues to the present day, in both literature and cinema. Robert Frost made his own contributions to the genre, in such poems as "The Self-Seeker", "The Egg and the Machine" and "A Lone Striker", not to mention the dark narrative of "Out, Out...".

Shepherds and Noble Savages

The pastoral or Edenic vision has, instead, a long literary history, traceable all the way back to the poetry of Theocritus and Virgil, even though its American variant depended more on the Bible as a source. This pastoral vision in part lay behind the political thinking of Thomas Jefferson and can also be found in works like Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*. However, in literary terms it achieved its greatest force when it was infused with ideas from English Romanticism. This implied the adoption of the cult of nature, seen as the great personal healer. And so Thoreau stepped aside from society and "went to

the woods", where he could "simplify" his life. This choice involved an identification with the "former inhabitants" of the land, whose pathetic remnants (broken arrow-heads and beads) Thoreau collected with respectful melancholy. The great classics of 19th-century American literature, by writers like Cooper, Melville and Twain, are full of similar gestures of rejection of society, on the part of lone heroes who flee the advance of civilisation, escaping into the fast-disappearing wilderness. The tradition continued into the 20th century, with Hemingway and Faulkner describing the activities of solitary fishermen and hunters, and later nature writers like Barry Lopez, Gary Snyder and Edward Abbey, recording their own personal escapes from society.

Even though the writers described these escapes as individual gestures, the very fact of presenting them to the reading public as actions worthy of praise and – implicitly – of imitation, gave them a social rather than a merely personal significance. American society could perhaps be saved if each member made his (in this literary tradition it was rarely "her") own retreat from the pack. The American pastoral utopia could be brought about by numerous separate acts of withdrawal from the community.

"I let my neighbor know beyond the hill..."

Frost's contribution to this tradition is, appropriately enough, highly individual. His best-known poem about a decision to take the road «less travelled by» (103) is, of course, notoriously ironic, and, for attentive readers at least, satirises rather than celebrates the American desire to appear (if not actually to be) courageously self-reliant. In other poems that describe acts of deliberate abandonment of the community he goes against the traditional attribution of gender-roles. As already suggested, in most literature of this kind the rebellious act of "lighting out for the territory" is reserved for adventurous males. But in Frost's poetry it is the women who feel the urge to break free from social and familial ties. Amy, in "Home Burial" (an ominously significant title), is desperate to get past the solid body of her husband into the world outside, even to the extent of ignoring all social rules and going out without her hat, while the speaker in "A Servant to Servants" wistfully contemplates the lives of her fern-loving listeners who «let things more like feathers regulate / [Their] going and coming» (66). In "The Hill Wife" the eponymous protagonist, as if deciding to become quite literally what her name suggests, actually yields to such insubstantial solicitations from nature; we are told that a certain point «She stood, and then she ran and hid / In the fern» (124), abandoning her husband to merge mysteriously into the wild. The alternate short lines of the final stanza

have a bleak finality, leaving no room for reason or explanation; there is nothing to understand – only the sudden yielding to irrational but irresistible caprice: if not “The Call of the Wild”, the call of the fern.

In general, such tendencies seem to have a dangerous side to them. While Frost’s poems often indicate a sympathetic understanding of the plight of women trapped in a world of unending domestic chores («doing / Things over and over that just won’t stay done» (66)), the urge simply to break free is clearly not the answer. That way, quite literally, madness lies, as the ominous cage of hickory poles in the attic serves to remind the speaker of “A Servant to Servants”. Far better is the response of Mary in “The Death of the Hired Man”, who, in her gesture of spreading her apron to the moonlight that «poured softly in her lap» (43), reveals an ability to blend her domestic role with her yearnings for a wider and a wilder world.

The same is true for those male figures in his poetry who show the occasional tendency to share in a desire for less constrained ways of living. In the most famous case, the speaker in “Mending Wall” appears to express a utopian desire for a world without artificial boundaries. However, even if he is apparently not convinced by his neighbor’s curt slogan, «Good fences make good neighbors» (39), it is actually he who instigates the annual ritual of repairing the wall («I let my neighbor know beyond the hill...», 39), which they then carry out together; even if it is apparently pointless – «just another kind of outdoor game» (39) – the fact that they play it together contributes to the harmony of their communal life. And even if the natural world appears to be against them («Something there is that doesn’t love a wall»), it is important that they make a mark on a world that in winter has the ability to cancel out all human traces, leaving, as a later poem puts it, «A blanker whiteness of benighted snow / With no expression, nothing to express» (269).

“Earth’s the right place for love”

Frost’s poetry tends to distrust any excessive claims of utopian perfection. As he put it in a letter to Bernard De Voto: «One of the greatest changes my nature has undergone is of record in *To Earthward* and indeed elsewhere for the discerning. [...] I began life wanting perfection and determined to have it. I got so I ceased to expect it and could do without it. Now I find I actually crave the flaws in human handwork» (Thompson 482). The poem he refers to here gives a powerful account of his mid-life shift from heavenward yearnings («I lived on air // That crossed me from sweet things...», 209) to a craving for the «pain / And weariness and fault» of the things of this earth, a longing for «weight and strength / To feel the earth as rough / To all my length» (210).

In one of his best-known poems, after describing the boyhood longing to climb a birch tree «*Toward* heaven», he tells us that the tree will eventually dip its top «and set me down again», since «Earth’s the right place for love» (118). In the same poem, as Richard Wilbur has shown, Frost engages in a veiled dispute with one of the greatest Romantic propounders of utopian visions, Percy Bysshe Shelley. The image of the shattered shards of «many-colored» ice, like “heaps of broken glass to sweep away» (117) as if «the inner dome of heaven had fallen», unmistakably gestures towards these lines in Shelley’s great elegy for John Keats, *Adonais*: «Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass / Stains the white radiance of eternity» (438). As Wilbur puts it, the poem is «an answer to Shelley’s kind of boundless neo-Platonic aspiration; [...] Frost is speaking not only for his own temper but for the practical idealism of the New England spirit» (Wilbur 113-114).

«Practical idealism» puts it neatly. We can find similar engagements with Shelley’s utopian yearnings in such poems as “The Aim Was Song”, in which Shelley’s desire to become one with the West Wind («Be thou me, impetuous one! », Shelley 574), in order to become a «trumpet of prophecy» to the «un-awakened earth», is recast in terms of a mutual collaboration between civilizing man and the “untaught” wind; this harmonious collaboration is brought about, he specifically states, “by measure” (207) – which implies both the metrical restraints of verse and the tempering restraints of political moderation.

In this poem, as in several others (“Never Again Would Birds’ Song Be the Same”, for example), he makes use of the Adamic mythology that has played such a crucial role in American utopian thinking. However, Frost’s vision of the world is based on the fundamental acceptance of the fact that it is a fallen world and that therefore all notions of a possible Eden or Golden Age are grounded in desire rather than in reality. As he put it in his most succinct lyrical statement: «Nothing gold can stay» (206). Like the oven-bird, now that «that other fall we name the Fall» has come, we have to «make the most of a diminished thing» (116).

Making the gold stay...

These anti-utopian tendencies in his poetry took on a political resonance in his later volumes. As the recent edition of the third volume of his *Collected Letters* has shown, containing his correspondence from 1929 to 1936, Frost was sceptical about President Roosevelt’s New Deal. However, as the editors point out, this was not simply knee-jerk conservatism on his part but was based on a profound scepticism about the perfectibility of social arrangements. His poem

“Desert Places” in his 1936 volume *A Further Range*, which ends with the lines «I have it in me so much nearer home / To scare myself with my own desert places, » is described by the editors of the letters as «privatiz[ing] ‘nameless fear,’ even as FDR sought to dispel it by socializing national losses» (Richardson 2021: 23).

Although *A Further Range* contains some very dark poems (“Design” is another example), it includes one in which Frost seems momentarily to suspend his scepticism about “golden visions”, and to indulge in a moment of pure dreamlike fantasy, while recalling a moment from his past. This is the poem “Iris by Night”, which recounts an episode he shared with his friend, the British poet Edward Thomas. Frost here adopts one of the commonest themes of Thomas’s poetry – the English weather – and transforms it into something enchanting; Thomas’s oft-described mists and rain here become a mystic symbol of their closeness.

His account of the experience begins with «a moment of confusing lights», which he relates to ancient history. However, after this one gesture to classical learning, which appears an attempt to confer dignity or order on their confusion, he then resorts to a language of utter simplicity: «And then there was a moon and then a scene / So watery as to seem submarine» (288). The narrative proceeds from this point on in this unashamedly simple – almost simplistic – style, with the repeated use of the most basic conjunctive links, «And then... then... » The event itself is so wondrous that it needs no poetical “dressing”.

The simplicity even has something childish about it, as seems appropriate when he later refers to the «pots of gold» hidden at the rainbow’s end. The account of the phenomenon combines naturalistic explanation («Its airy pressure turned to water weight»), homely similes («a small rainbow like a trellis gate») and clear visual descriptions, as if the «paste of pigment» referred to in line nine has now been sorted out into separate colours in the palette of the narrator’s eyes, and he is using them to depict the scene lusciously: «It lifted from its dewy pediment / Its two mote-swimming many-colored ends» (288)¹.

What happens is a miracle «That never yet to other two befell / And I alone of us have lived to tell» (288). The poem thus also serves to commemorate Thomas’s early death in the First World War. Here Frost presents himself as a witness, and as one who has kept the memory alive all these years. The miracle is one of transformation: the rainbow – a symbol *par excellence* of remoteness, of unattainability (as in the legend of the pot of gold) – ceases

1 It may be no accident that this last adjective recurs; Frost is perhaps revising his ironic take on Shelley’s neo-Platonic aspirations in *Adonais*.

to beckon as an archway or «trellis-gate» and becomes a circle, gathering its «mote-swimming, many-colored ends [...] in a ring». The two men are held together, «softly circled round». The language and the imagery – the gentle sibilants, the watery, lunar light – all suggest evanescence and impermanence, and yet the circle stands to symbolise an eternal bond, protecting the men «from all division time or foe can bring / In a relation of elected friends» (288).

Eden seems to be achievable – and it is a shared Eden, not an individual escape, as usually seems to be the case in American dreams of the place. For once we have a poem celebrating a climb “*toward* heaven” without the inevitable return to solid earth. The poet commemorates his friend, Thomas, by celebrating a Thomas-like moment, the kind of transcendental experience recounted in such poems as “The Glory” and “Haymaking”. The episode recorded in “Iris by Night” captures a moment of magic that occurred on the road home, on the borders of England and Wales (we recall that Thomas was literally a border poet, being as Welsh as he was English), as day turned to night, as mist turned to light, and an arch became a circle. By definition such a wealth of experience can only last a moment – «Nothing gold can stay» – but the poem has preserved that moment.

It may seem exaggerated to describe a poem that recounts a recalled experience from his past as a utopian vision. It is possible that the temptation to do so comes from the placing of this poem of personal memory in a volume in which so many of the other poems are responses to the political climate of the time. The poem stands out by its difference in imagery and mood – but at the same time gathers greater force from the company it keeps. As Frost put it in “The Figure a Poem Makes”, a successful poem «ends in a clarification of life – not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion» (777). This poem constitutes just such a stay, which can be described as a momentary utopian vision, recalled in a time of political darkness.

“I mean the Golden Age”

The final poem I will consider appeared in even bleaker political times; “The Lost Follower” was published in *A Witness Tree*, which came out in 1942. This volume contains a mixture of passionate poems, many of them triggered by the death of Elinor, and ones that address social questions (including the famous and controversial poem on America’s destiny, “The Gift Outright”) and reflect on literary matters. “The Lost Follower” is probably Frost’s most direct

treatment of the subject of utopian poetry, and his stance is made clear in the opening stanza:

As I have known them passionate and fine
 The gold for which they leave the golden line
 Of lyric is a golden light divine,
 Never the gold of darkness from a mine (325).

In the title of the poem Frost is playing on Robert Browning's "The Lost Leader", in which Browning castigated Wordsworth (not actually named) for his conservative politics and, as Browning perceived it, his base mercenary aims:

Just for a handful of silver he left us,
 Just for a riband to stick in his coat—
 Found the one gift of which fortune bereft us,
 Lost all the others she lets us devote; (Browning 410)

The target of Frost's satire is not guilty of quite such a venal betrayal. Rather, this poet has left the golden line of lyric poetry (we recall that Frost's favourite anthology was *Palgrave's Golden Treasury*) for "the golden light divine" – presumably the false allure of visions of political utopia. The poem continues to play on the words "gold" and "golden", describing in stanzas three and four the doomed attempts by the misguided poet (here specifically compared with Shelley) to achieve in reality what literature can in fact never bring about:

Some turn in sheer, in Shelleyan dejection
 To try if one more popular election

 Will give us by short cut the final stage
 That poetry with all its golden rage
 For beauty on the illuminated page
 Has failed to bring – I mean the Golden Age (325).

As Mark Richardson points out, the emphatic rhyming scheme of the poem and the deliberate use of such artifices as carefully placed chiasmus (see the play on "gold – golden – golden – gold") in the opening stanza serve to reinforce the point that «the promise of a 'golden age' can exist only in art, never in history» (Richardson 2001: 193). The speaker in this case realises, however, that he will never succeed in persuading his friend that «the millennium to which you bend / In longing» is only to be found «right beside you book-like on a shelf / Or even better god-like in yourself» (326).

Although this poem is not one of Frost's strongest, it testifies to the enduring power that utopian visions exerted over him. His friend is not derided for his belief in a Golden Age; indeed, much of the melancholy in the poem (which, like many of Frost's later poems, combines wit and pathos) derives from the understanding he shows for his friend's yearning for «a kingdom in the sky / (As yet unbrought to earth)» (326). The final rhyme is on the word "try", which is what his friend will continue to do, even though, as Frost sees it, his attempts are in the wrong direction.

Perhaps the best way to conclude this essay on Frost's diffidence towards utopian dreaming is to quote from his last truly ambitious poem, the long work "Kitty Hawk", in which he reflects, in a mixture of personal reminiscence and philosophical meditation, on the heavenward aspirations of mankind, finding consolation in the role that art plays in giving meaning to life. This poem, which deserves fuller attention than I can give it here, brings together many of the themes that his earlier poetry has reflected on (including Shelley and utopian thinking, the role of the machine, the relationship between the spirit and the flesh), with a surprising Emersonian optimism. As the critic Robert Hass puts it, «We can defeat our cosmic loneliness and reclaim nature only by projecting onto it the saving structures that infuse it with meaning and order» (Hass 182). What could be a more utopian project than that?

But the comfort is
In the covenant
We may get control
If not of the whole
Of at least some part
Where not too immense,
So by craft or art
We can give the part
Wholeness in a sense.
The becoming fear
That becomes us best
Is lest habit ridden
In the kitchen midden
Of our dump of earning
And our dump of learning
We come nowhere near
Getting thought expressed (452).

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