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Tatiani G. Rapatzikou



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REFERENCES

Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2011. Pp. 162. ISBN: 9781571134998

David Sanders in his monograph entitled *A Divided Poet: Robert Frost, North of Boston, and the Drama of Disappearance* (2011) sheds light on the dilemmas, doubts and personal conflicts Frost confronted while composing his poetic collection *North of Boston* in which some of his most well-known lyrics, such as “Mending Wall,” “After Apple-Picking,” and “The Wood-Pile,” are contained. This book should be considered alongside a number of other publications either in monograph or essay form that appeared in 2011 with an interest in Frost’s Derry farm years, New England landscape and poetry in addition to pastoral and twentieth-century American poetry.¹ In his quite accessible and informative book, Sanders meticulously analyzes all the poems in Frost’s *North of Boston* by also bringing to the attention of the readers the hardships of rural life and the socio-economic decline in New England at the turn of the twentieth century. This is exactly what makes this book interesting: the close attention it pays to the writing process Frost followed and the obstacles he had to overcome so as to achieve literary merit, to bring his work to the attention of a wide audience and to do justice to the moral values and way of life of the people who feature in it. This constitutes the main argument in Sanders’ volume which is gradually revealed to us in each one of the chapters contained in it. Although the way his argument develops may be repetitive at times, it actually manages to bring to light a number of interesting details deriving from Frost’s own correspondence and communication with other writers, publishers, reviewers and friends. It is important to mention that Frost finalized *North of Boston* during his stay in England where he arrived with his family in 1912. His residence there

forged his literary reputation and made his work much more widely known in the literary circles on both sides of the Atlantic. By avoiding to laden his commentary with theoretical references, Sanders carefully unfolds all facts and events in front of his readers' eyes by making each chapter of his book a chronicle of Frost's poetic craft and emotional conflicts as these resulted from the kind of poetic material he used and the subjects he drew into it.

- 2 In the first chapter, Sanders focuses on Frost's move to Derry, New Hampshire, after having spent some time in the family farm in Lawrence, Massachusetts. This transition coincides with the decline of rural New England due to industrialization, urbanization and immigration. After working as a farmer and being acquainted with the hardships that such a life entails, he decides to move back to teaching so as to be able to meet the financial demands of his growing family, although he knew that poetry writing was his true vocation. The period between 1906 to 1911 Frost takes the part-time teaching post that had opened at Pinkerton Academy. It was during this period of time that Frost in addition to his teaching responsibilities would start establishing connections with his colleagues and the local community through his poetry writing and readings. The conflict however that arises here is that the material Frost would use in his poems would derive from his rural life experiences and acquaintances he had now decided to leave behind. This would trigger, as Sanders notes, a kind of tension due to the uneasiness Frost experienced that his own literary success would be based on the unhappiness of the characters that populated his verses.
- 3 In the second chapter, Sanders focuses more intensely on the formation of Frost's poetic aspirations as well as on his viewpoints as regards poetic writing, as these were formulated during the period before *North of Boston*. Being caught up between different mentalities with regard to working rather than writing in order to make a living, Frost attempts through his writing practice to challenge certain beliefs, as for example the fact that poetry is an occupation for the social elite only, by forming a kind of writing that would bring to the fore the habits and mentalities of common people which had been overlooked for the sake of modernization. With reference to Frost's poetry collection *A Boy's Will* (1913), Sanders manages to highlight the transition to a much more mature poetic style that no longer attempts to follow the trends already set by other practitioners. The commentary Sanders includes of poems, such as "Reluctance" or "In Neglect" included in *A Boy's Will*, provide an insight into the idealized tone, phrases and antiquated expressions that Frost had adopted from other well-known American poets, such as Henry W. Longfellow, which also marks his gradual transition to a much more personalized writing style that would be evidenced a few years later in *North of Boston*. What makes this poetry collection interesting though is the fact that Frost, as Sanders notes, is both an insider and an outsider of the culture and habits he records in it since the experience distilled in his poems comes directly from real life as well as personal experience. This is where the originality of his poetic practice resides, in viewing his own literary seclusion in his pre-*North of Boston* years hand in hand with the marginalization the New England farmers and mill workers had experienced at the turn of the twentieth century.
- 4 In the third chapter, Sanders provides an in-depth analysis of the poems "The Death of the Hired Man" and "The Self-Seeker" which constitute the dramatic narrative core of Frost's *North of Boston*. In both poems, the poet introduces his readers to two embittered personas that take on a symbolic significance as they both represent a value system

which is now fading away. In the first poem, the persona is out of work since hired employment seems to be no longer the case in the industrialized New England, while in the second poem the persona has been crippled due to a factory accident. In both cases, the personas are lured by the economic opportunities the new, capitalist-driven reality offers but they are unable to follow or accept any them due to their own personal drama. Their denial or resignation highlights the feeling of loss New England workers or farmers had to come to terms with which would gradually lead to the waning of their rural lifestyle and life choices. The persona featuring in “The Self-Seeker” seems to be taking autobiographical dimensions, as Sanders argues, since it is molded on Carl Burrell’s personality, Frost’s high-school friend and mentor during his farm years. What Sanders highlights here is that Frost’s poems are intertwined with the fate of people he knew which further intensifies his dilemma of building his literary career on the suffering or the declining fate of others.

- 5 The same argument is pursued in the fourth chapter of Sanders’ book through the close reading of two more poems from *North of Boston*, that of “A Hundred Collars” and “The Black Cottage.” Attention is closely paid to the beliefs and convictions of each one of the personas in these poems which also highlights Frost’s own stance as to the messages his poetry attempts to communicate in addition to securing a profitable career for him. The first poem revolves around the juxtaposition between Magoon, the scholar, and Lafe, a subscription-payment collector, while the second poem brings to the forefront a protestant minister whose monologue refers to the now-dilapidated cottage which was once inhabited by a Civil War Widow. Each one of the personas stands for a particular mentality and frame of mind as well as moral code which determine their acts and values in an emerging competitive reality. In the “New Hampshire” subsection of the chapter, which focuses on a post-*North of Boston* poem, Sanders further highlights Frost’s ambivalence as to the New England ideals he felt he had to abandon but at the same time preserve in his poetry.
- 6 The same ambivalence is evident in the poems to be discussed in the fifth chapter of Sanders’s volume. In the first set of poems, Frost inserts his personas in various locations which serve as a backdrop to the emotional and moral dilemmas they face: in “A Servant to Servants” action takes place in Vermont’s Lake Willoughby, while in “The Mountain” in the nearby mountain Hor. In both instances, the local farm personas appear to be confined in their daily activities, while their visitors are free to roam in the countryside. This attitude exemplifies Frost’s own wavering outlook towards farm or close-to-nature life as he was torn, before he decided to move to England, between the family responsibility to become a farmer and his personal vocation to become an accomplished poet. In the second set of poems to be discussed in this chapter, Sanders concentrates on the doomed relationship of John and Estelle, as presented in Frost’s “The Housekeeper,” and on the distant cousins’ hopeful courtship in “The Generations of Men.” In this case, a number of perspectives are brought together enabling Frost to shed light on the socio-economic forces that often pull people apart or bring them together. In the third set of poems, that of “Blackberries” and “The Fear,” Sanders explores the idea of trespassing and violation with regard to everyday habits, language use and ways of looking at the surrounding environment that Frost himself had to come to terms with during the early stages of his poetic career. Similarly to his poetic personas, Frost also oscillated between the restricted and outmoded way of life his New England friends and acquaintances had to lead and the outgoing one that his art had secured for him. In all the cases mentioned, Sanders meticulously analyzes each poem

by paying careful attention to each one of the personas appearing in them, the way language is used, the titles Frost employs, the allegiances he sought in other writers, as is the case of Robert Burns, and the letters he wrote to close friends, in an effort to bring to the surface not only Frost's grievances and ambitions, but also the techniques that would later become the *North of Boston* trademark.

- 7 In the final section of his book, Sanders deals with the way Frost's poems in *North of Boston* were arranged, fifteen in total, and the role his long lyrics—"Mending Wall," "After Apple-Picking" and "The Wood Pile"—played with regard to the formation of his own personal poetic style. These poems appear at the beginning, middle and end of the collection, each one highlighting a different phase in the way thinking develops throughout. As Sanders writes, readers enter rural New England with the "Mending Wall," then they explore different surroundings via their acquaintance with a series of characters, and finally depart from it with "The Wood Pile." Each one of the poems and its characters take an emblematic and dramatic dimension since they stand for a different facet of the vanishing New England rural world as well as of Frost's own life choices. As for the lyric poetic mode used in *North of Boston*, Frost retains first person narrative without emotionally siding with his personas. According to Sanders, Frost lets his personas' subjectivity emerge through their own reflections and perceptions of reality as shown in the way the vernacular and local idiom are used which is what makes these lyric poems special.
- 8 Sanders finishes his commentary by taking a look at the two poems, "The Pasture" and "Good Hours," which respectively work as the prologue and epilogue to Frost's *North of Boston*. Attention is paid to the conflicting emotions each one of the poems triggers, that of nostalgia and decay or high expectation and pain as well as to the relationships Frost tried to establish with his poetic subjects and audience. Sanders' discussion is enhanced by Frost's own views about his poetic practice which come at a later stage in his poetic career where he takes a retrospective glance at the losses and gains that the production of *North of Boston* is entangled with. Sanders concludes his book with reference to other writers Frost was influenced by, such as William Wordsworth, Henry David Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, and to literary traditions, as is the case of the pastoral, he challenged with the *North of Boston* collection.
- 9 Overall, Sanders' book is a good read for everyone interested not in a mere literary, theoretical or close textual analysis but in what goes on in the background of a major American poet's writing practice. It should be noted that this book challenges the expectations of a conventional academic book reader. Frost's dilemma formed by the pain he experienced for his New England people and the desire he felt to move on with his poetic career can be found in every chapter in the current volume which may put readers in an ambivalent position as to how the argument progresses. However, Sanders manages in this way to make his readers really appreciate Frost's dilemmas not by being mere observers and passive readers of what he writes about in this book, but by being active participants in what was going on in Frost's life at the time he composed *North of Boston*. The real care Sanders takes of Frost's poems and the explanatory and well-informed footnotes he provides in each one of the chapters make this book a well-documented study of Frost both as a poet and an individual.

NOTES

i. For more information, see *New England Landscape History in American Poetry: A Lacanian View* (Cambria Press, 2011) and *Pastoral, Pragmatism, and Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Palgrave Macmillan 2011).

AUTHOR

TATIANI G. RAPATZIKOU

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece