

Prof. David Lee Robbins, Ph.D., thesis opponent

Simona Schröderová

Emersonianism, American Nationalism, and Nature in the Poetry of Robert Frost

B.A. thesis evaluation

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The aim of Ms. Schröderová's thesis is to analyse three major aspects of Robert Frost's poetry: first, his relationship with Emersonianism; second, that with American nationalism; and, third, that with the natural world. These three aspects, Ms. Schröderová posits, are to a great extent characteristic of Frost's poetry, recurring in many of his poems.

In the first chapter, on Emersonianism, Ms. Schröderová's analysis is based on close readings of Frost's poems, available critical material, and comparisons with other authors who deal with the same aspects and have influenced Frost's work. With Emersonianism this includes, besides Emerson's essays, the works of Thoreau and Whitman.

The second chapter deals with U.S. nationalism and the poet's role (including Frost's) in forming it. Given that it often overlaps with individualism, U.S. nationalism is something with which the Emersonians deal in great detail. Thus the works of Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau are again important influences on Frost's poetry.

In the last chapter, Ms. Schröderová analyses what she regards as perhaps the most dominant theme of Frost's poetry: nature. For Frost, she argues, nature is a force with which the humans are in constant battle. As opposed to the Romantics and the Transcendentalists (among which she includes Emerson), she argues, Frost does not find the divine, or the always present goodness in nature. Rather through its imagery he explores human psychology.

Particularly in the first chapter, but also throughout the thesis, Ms. Schröderová has wisely chosen to rely heavily on—and appropriately to acknowledge—the work of Richard Poirier, whom I regard as one of the most insightful and reliable authorities on and guides to Emerson's work and the resulting/related "Emersonian" tradition(s) in U.S. culture, thought, philosophy, and literature (including, of course, poetry). Poirier has also written what in my judgment, is one of the best studies of the poetry of Robert Frost, whom he characterizes as clearly within the "Emersonian" "tribe." Ms. Schröderová has clearly well understood the content and spirit of Poirier's studies; she applies their guidance well in the first chapter, although less so subsequently.

Chapter 2, on Frost, U.S. nationalism, and the influence of Emersonianism in their relationship, while insightful and illuminating in many regards, is, on the whole, less effective than Chapter 1.

Chapter 3, on Frost, Emersonianism, and Nature, and the subsequent Conclusion, I regard as problematic and contradictory, for most of the reasons outlined below.

Ms. Schröderová's bibliography is extensive for a B.A. thesis, and well-advised, and her analysis of Frost's poems throughout the thesis is accurate (as much as one can be about poetry), illuminating, and encourages the reader to further consideration of the poem(s).

While I do, in general, evaluate Ms. Schröderová's perspective and approach favorably, I have some significant (and some less significant) disagreements with her interpretations, especially in the context of Chapter 3. These include:

1) Matthiessen did not "coin" the term "American Renaissance" (27, line 19; 28, line 1); it was Emerson's formulation (in his journal) which was then, presumably, adopted by Matthiessen. Ms. Schröderová does, however, get the meaning of the concept, both for Emerson and for Matthiessen, exactly right (28, lines 1-4).

2) On page 10 (line 17, note 1) Ms. Schröderová notes the strong influence of William James (who saluted Emerson as his "master") on Frost, a most valuable and promising insight, and added that "the influence James had on Frost will be analysed in chapter two." But in chapter two, we find only a couple of brief paragraphs (13, lines 7-20; 14, lines 1-3) merely skirting that influence. This is a disappointing and unfortunate omission.

3) There is clearly confusion in Ms. Schröderová's mind, and in her writing/presentation, regarding the relationship of several key terms in her thesis, resulting inevitably in confusion for the reader. Most prominently, Ms. Schröderová defines; "Emersonsonian" as "sa[ying] one thing while meaning another" (41, lines 9-10); "Metaphor" as "saying one thing while meaning another" (26, line 7); and "Singing not to sing" as "saying one thing while meaning another" 51, lines 4-5).

4) The concept of nature in Emerson's work is undeniably a complicated one; but Ms. Schröderová seems to have fallen victim to the complication without even becoming fully aware of it. Nature, for Emerson, was not only physical (external) nature, but also internal nature, the make-up of the unique perceptual and constructive faculties/capacities in any given individual, which were then projected by that individual to constitute (his/her unique construction of) external nature. In this, Emerson, despite his early enthusiasm in *Nature* (1836), came very soon to regard the human consciousness not as a "transparent eyeball" that could attain an unobstructed view of external nature, but rather as a "chamber lined with mirrors" in which the consciousness's projection of its own internal nature's constructions were reflected back to it as "external nature." Emerson did not distinguish (at least consistently or reliably) between nature (internal or external) and the consciousness/soul. Ms. Schröderová appears to get caught between the "transparent eyeball" and "chamber lined with mirrors" interpretations without apprehending the collision/contradiction of the two, because she on several occasions quotes (or cites) passages affirming the contradictory views as though they supported and clarified one another: "Emerson [she says on page 42, lines 19-20, and page 43, lines 1-2], as Richardson notes, divides the universe into 'nature and the soul, or nature and the consciousness.' In other words, everything is nature except the soul or the consciousness which perceives and is affected by it"; but follows it immediately (page 44, lines 10-11) by the confident (apparently supportive) characterization of "Emerson's uncelebrated union between self and soul, body and spirit, mind and world." Then, on pages 54-55 (54, line 22; 55, line 1), she endorses the view that "unlike Emerson, Frost does not take nature as merely the externalization" of the soul"; but then continues seamlessly to assert (on page 57, lines 12-15) first that "Frost's nature is a completely separate entity, often times indifferent or even hostile," and then, in the next sentence, that "What Frost sees in nature is most of the time some form of human-self. It can mirror his feelings...or be a projection of himself as a poet."

These confusions/shortcomings, however, persist even in advanced students of Emerson. Ms. Schröderová's BA thesis is only a first dip in a very deep body of opinion, and so her stumbles, in a frequently well-understood and well-articulated study of Emersonianism and one of its most prominent disciples, is both understandable and forgivable. Therefore, based on the overall scope and accuracy of coverage, style, bibliography, and general interpretative competency (despite my obvious disagreements with her interpretations in several areas), I would evaluate Ms. Schröderová's thesis as worthy of a grade of "1, vyborne."

Thesis evaluation: "1, vyborne."

Signed:

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If the reader has any questions or needs additional information, please contact me at [David.Robbins@ff.cuni.cz](mailto:David.Robbins@ff.cuni.cz).