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The title of this book makes clear its focus on rhetoric but does not signal to the reader its equally important engagement with philosophy and literary criticism focused on Modernism, nor its revisionary reading and championing of the poetry of Robert Frost as an example of “Low Modernism.” As Jost discusses, the canonization of “High Modernism” by the New Critics in the years following World War II, elevated writers such as Eliot, Pound, Joyce and Woolf into the pantheon while dismissing more accessible writers like Frost as lacking the linguistic sophistication and philosophical complexity which would make them worthy of serious study. Jost argues that there is as much to unpack in the texts of populist writers like Frost as there is in the more arcane texts of the High Modernists, proposing that, rather than see the camps of High and Low Modernism in “opposition” to each other, we should conceive of Modernism as a “continuum of possibilities” and view the different approaches which fall under its umbrella in “aposition,” in complementary juxtaposition.

Beginning in the 1970s, when feminists began to challenge the exclusion of many women writers from the Modernist canon, there has been a slow breaking apart of those rigid criteria which once excluded much of the rich and plural production of the Modernist period from serious consideration. Since then, Modernism has been defined and redefined against definitions of Romanticism, of Realism, Postmodernism, and the Avant Garde. Some have questioned whether it is even a useful term for describing the full range of literary and artistic production of the period. This book engages in this ongoing discussion by seeking to expand the definition of Modernism, not by focusing on issues of gender, race, or class, as has often been done, but by seeking to rehabilitate the literary value of that “ordinary” language first devalorized in the textually-focused analyses of the New Critics and then ignored in those poststructuralist readings which glamorously associated the hermetic or experimental language of the High Modernists with “subversion” and “revolution.” For Jost, this resulted in a skewed critical accounting of the period which continues to require redressing: “the low now requiring greater theoretical definition, and the high a more practical reassessment.”

Writing like Frost’s, he argues, is clearly Modernist because of “its irony, its multiple perspectives, its ironic lack of controlling authorial

authority, its troping of traditional subjects and materials, its 'darker mood,' and so on." But since it is neither experimental nor concerned with the issues of cultural alienation typical of High Modernist texts, Frost and writers like him are better seen as "Low Modernists." In contrast to the difficult language often considered a hallmark of High Modernism, "Low Modernism makes language deceptively easy and pleasurable in order to entice us into tripping over connections we had habitually overlooked."

Instead of employing familiar postmodern or poststructuralist approaches, the author seeks to rehabilitate rhetorical theory as a tool for reading the function of this ordinary language in Frost, arguing that, despite criticisms levied by those in literary studies, "rhetoric is neither anachronistic or naively presumptuous on the one hand nor incipiently nihilistic (radically skeptical) on the other." Rather, that which he terms "rhetorical thought" in the poetry of Frost is "an instrument for disseminating information in a modern world" and "a means of taste and judgement of the *sensus communis* (Cicero) or the 'ordinary' (Wittgenstein) in an increasingly postmodern world."

A key concept Jost uses to define how Low Modernist texts function rhetorically is "epideixis," which he contrasts with "epiphany." Whereas Romantic literature privileged a transcendental "epiphany of being," High Modernist literature has been said to substitute for this an "epiphany of form." However, a persistent critical fascination with those illuminating moments of revelation and intense personal experience in this literature that have been defined as epiphanic, he argues, has resulted in the neglect of the "epideictic" function characteristic of Low Modernist texts. These latter foreground not the exceptional moment but rather the accumulation of patterns, premises, and rhetorical strategies that compose the fullness of everyday experience, and continuously come into play in our interpersonal relations and dealings with the world. Unlike the epiphanic, the "epideictic presupposes a fundamental identity of values and beliefs with one's interlocutors, so that it is not an adversarial relationship but a cooperative understanding." It is "the activity not of the nervous or enervated but of the energetic, not of the alienated but of the ambulant and ambitious." In Frost, speakers typically situate themselves epideictically in the world and with respect to others in the kinds of homely conversations which take place between husbands and wives, neighbors, or co-workers. In contrast to that literature which foregrounds alienation and exceptionality, the "unsystematic rhetorical metaphysics" that unfolds in these poems concerns itself with how speakers, despite their differences and disagreements, engage in the mundane task of creating meaning together.

Close readings of selected poems serve to illustrate characteristic rhetorical elements which are the building blocks of Frost's poetry: his tendency to focus on conversation rather than on oratory or soliloquy; his use of the first person singular and, particularly, of the first person plural; his exploration of the nuances of how we employ the rhetorical functions of naming, calling, saying, retrieval, reminding, and playing to continuously situate ourselves in our worlds and make sense of them; his emphasis on the importance of cultivating practical judgment, taste and *kairos*, the Greek principle of moderation, as tools for successfully negotiating life; his affinity for strategies of wit and inventiveness reminiscent of seventeenth century metaphysical poetry over the seriousness of much High Modernism; and his interest in the dynamics of everyday discursive forms like gossip, arguments, and jokes.

Rhetorical Investigations slowly advances its arguments via densely woven engagements with rhetorical theory, philosophers from Aristotle to the present, and literary criticism. This is not a book for the casual reader, nor will it be an easy read for literary critics steeped in the more usual debates about Modernism but unfamiliar with the body of rhetorical theory and the critical apparatus applied here. It *will* be useful for those interested in considering how this critical approach opens up alternative approaches to reading and interpreting texts like Frost's, and how, via its reconsideration of Frost's work, it participates in the ongoing debate about exactly what it is that constitutes a Modernist text.

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