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## AN INTRODUCTION TO ROBERT FROST

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There exists a strange little essay by Pablo Neruda, called "The Prose of Robert Frost". It is only a few pages and resembles less an essay than a notebook entry. I first saw it years ago in a bookstore, in a collection of Neruda's prose, and was immediately fascinated. I was struck by three facts. The first was Neruda's almost total incomprehension of Frost. The second was his attitude towards him, which seemed a mixture of slightly patronizing admiration and deep, perhaps unconscious dislike. And the third was Neruda's attempt to explain away his discomfort, by means of some rather unconvincing generalizations about "the prose of poets".

He calls Frost a "great man" and says that he has always loved his verse because of its rough, rural texture; its smell of New England barns, fields and kitchens; its conversational style; its attentive portraits of half-imaginary people—in short, its "poetry of the earth"—and also its solitude. This abnormally earthy, abnormally solitary poet had always reminded Neruda of a former time when America, a "spacious country" of mountains and "inexhaustible rivers", had been "sufficient unto itself" and had not tried to purify the world by bathing it in blood.

And for just that reason, Neruda says, he was recently rather shocked to find a book of Frost's prose (translated into Spanish) which seemed distinguished above all by its "intellectuality"—and also by its nastiness. Frost's prose "leads us down roads of metaphor". Every such road ends in the same strange battleground, on which a war is being waged by Frost against many good people, including other poets.

Naturally Neruda finds this repellent. He tries to explain it by the hypothesis that the prose of all poets (himself included) tends to be too clever, anti-poetic, unreal. In fact, the prose of poets is nothing but "ashes" and simply ought to be ignored. The wind will blow it away.

Well, the trouble with this hypothesis is that the prose of Robert Frost is in fact great prose. It is language so condensed, and so playful, that often every

sentence is an aphorism. Also it is not in the least "intellectual". It has the tone and timbre of Frost's living voice. It cannot be separated from his verse, which it does not betray, but always clarifies. The disagreement—or incomprehension—between these two poets is not explained by any defect in the medium of "prose"; nor is it even caused by the fact that every good poet is, on some level, hostile to every other.

No—the disagreement goes much deeper. I will quote from the essay that Neruda particularly disliked. It is not one of Frost's best but it will serve us here. It is an appreciation of the verse of Edward Arlington Robinson. Robinson's verse, though pithy and strong, is distinguished by its sadness; and Frost praises him for being a poet of "griefs" and not of "grievances". Frost writes:

But as for me, I don't like grievances. I find I gently let them alone whenever published. What I like is griefs and I like them Robinsonianly profound. I suppose there is no use in asking, but I should think we might be indulged to the extent of having grievances restricted to prose if prose will accept the imposition, and leave poetry free to go its way in tears.

Robinson was a prince of heartachers amid countless achers of another part. The sincerity he wrought in was all sad. He asserted the sacred right of poetry to lean its breast to a thorn and sing its dolefullest. Let weasels suck eggs. I know better where to look for melancholy. A few superficial irritable grievances, perhaps, as was only human, but these are forgotten in the depth of griefs into which he plunged us.

Frost then says: "Grievances are a form of impatience. Griefs are a form of patience." Grievances in other words demand social action; and it is obvious why Pablo Neruda, a socialist and also a revolutionary, should have scented danger here. I am sorry to say that he even accuses Frost of being a defender of the "Establishment"—a "conservative"—a preserver of the status quo, in all its petrified evil.

Now, it is not my intention here to overdramatize a few stray remarks by Neruda. Also, I would gladly avoid this ancient quarrel—this ancient dialogue of the deaf—about the nature of a creative writer's "commitment" to society. Basically I incline to agree with W. H. Auden, who said:

By all means let a poet, if he wants to, write *engagé* poems, protesting against this or that political evil or social injustice. But let him remember this. The only person who will benefit from them is himself; they will enhance his literary reputation among those who feel as he does. The evil or injustice, however, will remain exactly what it would have been if he had kept his mouth shut.

But I allow for exceptions to this, and think that perhaps Neruda was one. His

commitment to the poor of his country benefited, perhaps, not so much his reputation as his own rich life, and is a part of his poetic greatness. I am here concerned not with that but with his radical misreading of Frost. It seems not unjust to introduce Frost in this way. A great many people share Neruda's misunderstanding, both of Frost the man and of the nature of his very strange art. The error concerns not only his politics and his "prose", but also his world-view, and his vision of the human condition.

### (I) FROST'S VISION OF NATURE, OF THE EXTERNAL WORLD

You offered sacrifices to demons....  
 Better to carve suns and moons on the joints of crosses  
 as was done in my district. To birches and firs  
 give feminine names. To implore protection  
 against (nature's) mute and treacherous might  
 than to proclaim, as you did, an inhuman thing.  
 Czeslaw Milosz ("To Robinson Jeffers")

Unlike either Walt Whitman or Pablo Neruda—but like many rural inhabitants of New England—and like farmers everywhere—Robert Frost was not a lover of "Nature" in the abstract. Most often nature—which in English is not feminine—seemed to him a very austere and subtle machine ("the whole goddam machinery" he once called it) that cares nothing for man. Sometimes, as in his famous little poem "Design", it seems even malignant, or mocking. Nature rarely awakens love in Frost—more often fear and awe. Nature's beauty—as in the famous, slightly ironical line, "The woods are lovely, dark, and deep"—is only a siren-song to which, like Odysseus, he must stop his ears. He might perhaps have agreed with Rilke, who said: "For beauty is just the beginning of a terror, that we can hardly endure. And we admire it so, because it calmly disdains to destroy us".

But perhaps he would not have agreed with that, for the simple reason that, as to any hard-headed farmer, to him it would have seemed absurd to "admire" a thing so empty. He liked nature best when it had been tamed a little, humanized a little. He might have appreciated Milosz's lines which I just quoted. For him a plowed field with its stone wall and farmhouse was more comely than a virgin forest. He wrote,

Let chaos storm!  
 Let cloud shapes swarm!  
 I wait for form.

For without "form" nature is nothing, is merely a painting's "background" of which he said:

The background is hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos; and against the background any small man-made figure of order and concentration.

It is just to speak of nature as "black chaos" since, after all, it is our extinction. The "small man-made figures" may be either prayers (as in Milosz) or simply the walls of a farmhouse. But at times these "small man-made figures"—and even the God-made "figure" of man himself—are not enough to counterbalance the darkness. Then a fearful thing happens: the picture's background begins to invade its foreground:

All out-of-doors looked darkly in at him  
Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars,  
That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.

That is from "An Old Man's Winter Night"—a famous poem which Neruda, in the little essay I mentioned, especially praises. It is one of the most somber of Frost's poems. In that poem nothing happens except that an old man, the lone inhabitant of a solitary farmhouse, visits a cellar room, sits by the fire, and falls asleep. His sleep is an obvious metaphor for death and even while he is still awake Nature thuds, scratches, knocks at the windows of the silent house. He is "looked at" by the stars. And nature is not called nature; it is called "the outer night",

Which has its sounds, familiar, like the roar  
Of trees and crack of branches, common things,  
But nothing so like beating on a box....

Neruda understands that Frost is speaking of death. Yet he imagines that the piece is dramatic and sees in it a portrait of mellow, pithy old age, rich in being. In fact, the poem is a vision of non-being: of nothingness. The old man's most familiar things—walls, windy windowpanes, icicles, etc.—are sensed by us to be a kind of mirage, a brief, very thin film on the surface of darkness.

Aside from extreme isolation, the only trait specific to old age is forgetfulness. After going down to the cellar, the old man forgets where he is and what he came for. But as Frost says, in a different poem, about all of us:

Get down into things,  
It will be found there's no more given there  
Than on the surface. If there ever was

The crypt was long since rifled by the Greeks.  
 We don't know where we are, or who we are.  
 We don't know one another, don't know (God),  
 Don't know what time it is. We don't know, do we?  
 Who says we don't? Who got up these misgivings?  
 Oh, we know well enough to go ahead with.  
 I mean we seem to know enough to act on.  
 It comes down to a doubt about the wisdom  
 Of having children—after having had them,  
 So there is nothing we can do about it  
 But warn the children they perhaps should have none.

These lines are not from a pure lyric but from a dramatic poem; they are spoken by a certain "Job" who is not identical with the poet. But the despair, or near-despair, that they express is never far off in Frost's poetry. Constantly he searches in nature—constantly he tries (in spite of his own advice) to "get down into things" in the hope the Love itself will answer, or send him a sign. But usually, as he stands wating on the little shore, let us say, of a forest stream,

...nothing... came of what he cried  
 Unless it was the embodiment that crashed  
 In the cliff's talons on the farther side,  
 And then in the far distant water splashed,  
 But after a time allowed for it to swim,  
 Instead of proving human when it neared  
 As a great buck it powerfully appeared  
 Pushing the crumpled water up ahead,  
 And landed pouring like a waterfall,  
 And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread  
 And forced the underbrush—and that was all.

— with the result that he feels even more alone than before.

This loneliness in nature has religious implications, and this brings us to Frost's idea of God.

## (II) FROST'S CONCEPTION OF GOD

Curiously, it seems to me, Frost had, in a certain way, despite his near-despair in the face of an empty "external world" which did not resemble the Creation, a more sharply defined and more real religious faith than Neruda did. Like his master, Whitman, Neruda was a pantheist for whom God was not transcendent but immanent. God is in the world, present not only in the human heart but also in the stars, trees, even the humble pebbles, like a sort of infinite primal energy. As Joseph Brodsky said, not unjustly, "Neruda was in love with

life and he thought that was enough." The poet's vocation is to be an especial lover of all existence, with the result that he has an especial kinship with this God, this cosmic Spirit which he can find anywhere:

Un amador  
Del cuerpo enorme del ausente Amor  
Jamás vé lo que vió Narciso: siente  
En todo extraño ser su propia fuente,  
Llena del otro, que es su Creador.

That is why (like Whitman) Neruda can calmly enjoy the beauty of things that frighten Frost, and can regard even death itself as a dimension of life. Here it is not unfair to quote his words about sexual desire:

Hembra condor, saltemos  
sobre esta presa roja,  
desgarremos la vida  
que pasa palpitando  
y levantemos juntos  
nuestro vuelo salvaje.

Or to quote Milosz again:

...God the Terrible, body of the world.  
Prayers are not heard. Basalt and granite.  
Above them a bird of prey. The only beauty.

By upbringing, Frost is a Protestant New Englander. He is not a pantheist but the frustrated lover of a very elusive, personal God, who—if He exists—is nowhere present in nature but is beyond the stars. There is no certainty of making contact with Him; and no way of knowing for sure that He loves us. From this, and from the fact that nature in its utter emptiness can seem even malignant, came Frost's preoccupation with the Book of Job. And thus, too:

We have to stay afraid deep in our souls  
Our sacrifice, the best we have to offer,  
And not our worst or second best, our best,  
Our very best, our lives laid down like Jonah's.  
Our lives laid down in war and peace, may not  
Be found acceptable in Heaven's sight.  
And that they may be is the only prayer  
Worth praying.

Or in other words one cannot assure oneself of salvation, not even by

devoting oneself heart and soul to a noble social cause. For Heaven might reject it or—still more strangely—ignore it.

### (III) FIVE "PROOFS" OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE

In view of all this, the question naturally arises: how then, in a world so apparently empty of Him, can Frost know of God's existence at all? According to the poem "Sitting by a Bush in Broad Sunlight" there seem to be at least two proofs—two signs—of divine Providence, the one natural, the other supernatural. The poem ends thus:

God once spoke to people by name.  
The sun once imparted its flame.  
One impulse persists as our breath.  
The other persists as our faith.

The meaning of the first line is that we know of God's relation to us because we have historical records of it in the form of Scripture. God does not manifest himself, merely, in the majesty of the Creation, as a pantheist believes, but addressed certain people each by his own proper name, just as He is said to have spoken to Job and to Elijah out of the whirlwind, and to Moses from the Burning Bush. Record was kept of these unique encounters. And even though God perhaps no longer addresses people thus ("Remember how final a hush / Descended of old on the bush")—still, we remember what He is said to have said to our forefathers; and we hang our very precarious, very problematical faith upon this thread of memory.

The meaning of the second line is best illustrated by a late poem of Frost's called "Our Hold on the Planet" in which he points that Nature cannot, after all, be quite indifferent to man, since "our hold on the planet" has steadily increased:

It must be a little more in favor of man,  
Say a fraction of one percent at the least,  
Or our number living wouldn't be steadily more.

But for Frost there also exists perhaps a third kind of "proof", one which is also given by Nature. For in spite of everything that I have said about the emptiness, for Frost, of the external world, there are certain intensely strange occasions when Nature does, as it were, speak to man, and when her message is love.

Here I should guard against being misunderstood. In the world of Robert

Frost there are (aside from a few "tall tales") no miracles. Nothing violates common sense. He is careful to write of no phenomenon that a scientist would scoff at. But in some half a dozen poems—notably "Two Look at Two", "Directive", "West-Running Brook"—Nature offers as if on purpose an odd isolated image—a kind of meaningless "pure parable" (like that of a dream)—which is so sudden, so steady and clear, so intimate, and so many-layered, that it makes the poet's hair stand on end.

In "Two Look at Two", for example, a boy and girl are walking at twilight high up on a wooded mountainside, tired, about to go home, feeling, in the immobile dusky silence, that nature has nothing more today to offer.

'This is all', they sighed,  
 'Good-night to woods'. But not so; there was more.  
 A doe from round a spruce stood looking at them...  
 ...The difficulty of seeing what stood still  
 Like some up-ended boulder split in two  
 Was in her clouded eyes: they saw no fear there.  
 She seemed to think that two thus they were safe....  
 .... A buck from round the spruce stood looking at them  
 Across the wall as near the wall as they.  
 This was an antlered buck of lusty nostril,  
 Not the same doe come back into her place.  
 He viewed them quizzically lwith jerks of head,  
 As if to ask, 'Why don't you make some motion?  
 Or give some sign of life? Because you can't.  
 I doubt if you're as living as you look.'  
 Thus till he had them feeling almost dared  
 To stretch a proffering hand—and a spell-breaking.  
 Then he too passed unscared along the wall.  
 Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from.  
 'This *must* be all.' It was all. Still they stood,  
 A great wave from it going over them,  
 As if the earth in one unlooked-for favour  
 Had made them certain earth returned their love.

We come now to a fourth "proof" of Providence and that is the proof by love. All lovers feel that their love is stronger than death, and is eternal. As Simone Weil once said, "I know perfectly well that God does not exist, since, by definition, God cannot correspond to any image or concept I can have of him. But I also know, perfectly, that my love exists." In Frost's sonnet called "The Silken Tent" he tries to analyze our frequent feeling of Love's absence, as well as our rarer feeling of Its omnipresence, by an extraordinarily beautiful metaphor:



She is as in the field a silken tent  
 At midday when a sunny summer breeze  
 Has dried the dew and all the ropes relent,  
 So that in guys it gently sways at ease,  
 And its supporting central cedar pole  
 That is its pinnacle to heavenward  
 And signifies the sureness of the soul,  
 Seems to owe naught to any single cord,  
 But strictly held by none, is loosely bound  
 By countless silken ties of love and thought  
 To everything on earth the compass round,  
 And only by one's going slightly taut  
 In the capriciousness of summer air,  
 Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

And perhaps a fifth and final "proof" of God consists of the mere fact that we pray to him, the fact itself that prayer exists, as a necessity of the soul. That was the gist of Milosz's lines which I quoted earlier. As Frost puts it in another late epigram:

What if it should turn out eternity  
 Is but the steeple on our house of life  
 That made our house of life a house of worship?  
 We do not go up there to sleep at night.  
 We do not go up there to live by day.  
 Nor need we ever go up there to live.  
 A spire and belfry coming on the roof  
 Means that a soul is coming on the flesh.

Of course, it must now be admitted that, strictly speaking, none of these "proofs" of God prove anything, except, perhaps, that Frost was sometimes wistful. The poems in which they occur form only a small part of his oeuvre. In conversation, half joking, he called these matters "the higher uncertainties", and we have, of course, no way of knowing whether he died in faith or despair.

Therefore as a counterbalance to all proofs of Eternity, I quote these rather grotesque, naturalistic lines which Frost himself loved to recite:

The witch that came (the withered hag)  
 To wash the steps with pail and rag  
 Was once the beauty Abishag,

The picture pride of Hollywood.  
 Too many fall from great and good  
 For you to doubt the likelihood.

Die early and avoid the fate.  
Or if predestined to die late,  
Make up your mind to die in state.

Make the whole stock exchange your own!  
If need be occupy a throne,  
Where nobody can call *you* crone.

Some have relied on what they knew;  
Others on being simply true.  
What worked for them might work for you.

No memory of having starved  
Atones for later disregard,  
Or keeps the end from being hard.

Better to go down dignified  
With boughten friendship at your side  
Than none at all. Provide, provide!

#### (IV) HUMAN SOCIETY

I now turn very briefly to certain social, and political, aspects of Frost's world-view. This subject is extremely complicated and I confess I am not in love with it. And if here, again, I refer to Neruda by way of contrast, I do it chiefly for the sake of finding a human path in a forest of abstractions.

Now, Neruda was a communist of the "fellow-traveller" type. He was also, as I said, a pantheist, and those two things, I suspect, go together. For both assume that Being is not personal and transcendent, but impersonal and immanent; or in other words, that Goodness itself is not in Heaven, to be contacted only privately, by prayer and divine grace, but is, rather, in the world, and is realizable, as a social ideal, by concerted human activity. Private property—the boundaries between countries—all old concrete social institutions—even historical time itself—are 'unnatural' and oppressive to man. They seem absurd, because they distinguish man from nature; whereas in fact he is part of nature—or would be, if only he could shed that folly.

To this vision Robert Frost was strongly, quite consciously opposed. About his moral life I say nothing here, but in the structure of his thought he was unmistakably a Protestant Christian who believed in a personal God whom only prayer could reach (if anything could); located Paradise only in the next life (if

there was one); mistrusted the longing for social Utopias of any type; believed that "good fences make good neighbors", and that we suffer today from being "too unseparate"; and was, both in his verse and in his prose, inclined to stress each person's—or each family's—or each small community's—mere utter, vertiginous solitude in the face of God and nature.

Hence, his dislike of social "grievances"; hence too, the solitariness, the wildness, of his images of Humanity.

It is not that Frost believed that social change for the better was impossible. Nor was he a "reactionary" who finds it undesirable. But as a good Yankee, he was so extremely sceptical of it that he liked the old joke about the circular meaning of the word "revolution". About an American revolutionary he wrote:

He's Puritan Yankee through and through.  
 He dotes on Saturday pork and beans.  
 But his mind is hardly out of his teens:  
 For him the love of country means  
 Blowing it all to smithereens  
 And having it all made over new.

And surely, the actual concrete events of our naive century have proven the worth of his scepticism.

Frost was not wilfully blind to poverty, and his verse contains images of acute social misery. These images bear not the slightest trace of condescension. Usually the evil does not seem able to be corrected, but I will quote from a poem in which he considers the possibility. In "A Roadside Stand" he writes of a little old farmhouse near a new highway. The farmer has put up a sign advertising his fruits and vegetables—but the passing cars ignore this. The house itself is so sad-looking that Frost—feeling a pang of pity which is not normal with him—wonders whether it might not be best to move its inhabitants into the city:

Sometimes I feel myself I can hardly bear  
 The thought of so much childish longing in vain,  
 The sadness that lurks near the open window there,  
 That waits all day in almost open prayer  
 For the squeal of brakes, the sound of a stopping car,  
 Of all the thousand selfish cars that pass,  
 Just one to inquire what a farmer's prices are....  
 ... I can't help owning the great relief it would be  
 To put these people at one stroke out of their pain.

And then next day as I come back into the sane,  
 I wonder how I should like you to come to me  
 And offer to put me gently out of my pain.

Or as he puts it (in the mouth of a very cautious agnostic Socialist) in "A Masque of Mercy":

I'm no more governed by the fear of Hell  
 Than by the fear of the asylum, jail, or poorhouse,  
 The basic three the state is founded on.  
 But I'm too much afraid of God to claim  
 I have been fighting on the angels' side.  
 That is for Him and not for me to say.  
 For me to say it would be irreligious.

#### (V) ETHICAL VALUES

This brings us to the ethical values of Frost. And curiously enough, in spite of his scepticism about social action, the virtue that his verse admires most (after the religious virtue of mercy) is precisely "commitment" and the courage necessary to it.

Revolutionary intoxication, good will, infinite erotic longing, noble intentions, did not greatly impress this pessimistic, hard-headed New Englander. Frost was much less often a purely *lyric* than a *dramatic* poet because he liked to contemplate, not so much the ecstatic vision, as its fate in time. How different from Neruda, or Jorge Guillén, or even—a Hispanic poet much closer to him—Borges! He loved to show the relentless pressure of time against the stubborn, wild heart. His imagination was caught not by the raptness of two people falling in love but by the consequences of their commitment to each other (for better and worse) in marriage; or by a farmer's commitment to his poor, stony acres; by another farmer's commitment to an absurd third-rate little telescope for the sake of which he sacrifices his house; by a traveler's "commitment" to a snow-storm, which he could avoid if he liked; even by a poet's sudden, bold commitment to a complicated rhyme-scheme. Thus:

There's an indulgent smile I get for the recklessness of the unnecessary  
 commitment I made when I came to the first line in the second stanza of a poem  
 called "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening". I was riding too high to care  
 what trouble I incurred. And it was all right so long as I didn't suffer deflection.

And thus in a late epigram he prays, rhetorically, to a star, that it might keep him from "deflection":

Use language we can comprehend.  
 Tell us what elements you blend.  
 It gives us strangely little aid  
 But does tell something in the end.  
 And steadfast as Keats' Eremite,  
 Not even stooping from its sphere,  
 It asks a little of us here.  
 It asks of us a certain height,  
 So when at times the mob is swayed  
 To carry praise or lame too far,  
 We may choose something like a star  
 To stay our minds on and be staid.

And thus too:

One of the lies would make it out that nothing  
 Ever presents itself before us twice.  
 Where would we be at last if that were so?  
 Our very life depends on everything's  
 Recurring till we answer from within.  
 The thousandth time may prove the charm.

And thus too, in the most beautiful of all his epigrams, he finds the simplest possible image of commitment:

The heart can think of no devotion  
 Greater than being shore to the ocean  
 Holding the curve of one position,  
 Counting an endless repetition.

Of course commitment can be perverse and evil. It can be a commitment not to a love or a vision of grace or goodness but to hatred; to the destruction of vision; the mere cold, pretentious "logic of an idea"; to the destruction of the soul. For Frost the category of the Demoniactal was no less real than it was to Dostoyevsky or Soren Kierkegaard. In a poem called "The Lovely Shall Be Choosers" this strange work of killing a soul is performed by demons; but men also love to do it. A poem called "The Vindictives" is about the enslavement of South America by the Spanish conquistadors who put the Incas to work in the gold mines. The Incas resisted this lust for gold and bravely, stubbornly committed themselves to hiding every last, tiny piece of it. Not even under torture would they be helpful. Curiously, Frost does not appear to sympathize with them. The poem ends with these words, presumably spoken in triumph by an Inca:

"The best way to hate is the worst.

'Tis to find what the hated need,  
 Never mind of what actual worth,  
 And wipe that out of the earth.  
 Let them die of unsatisfied greed,  
 Of unsatisfied love of the high,  
 Unvulgar, unsoiled and ideal,  
 Let their trappings be taken away.  
 Let them suffer starvation and die  
 Of being brought down to the real."

But of course, commitment is seldom so calculated, so far-sighted; and for Frost, indeed, such far-sightedness was often precisely a sign that the cause was evil.

And this brings me to a truth often stressed by Frost, which is so important that I shall end my analysis with it. The truth is that historical reality itself (unlike every interpretation of it, every "ideology") is always strange and unexpected. *Reality itself, by definition, is unforeseeable.* Far-sighted ideologues of every type, therefore, impoverish the human soul by making it coarse, stupid and inattentive; and this always ends in sheer meanness of spirit. The meanness of the lines quoted above resembles Hitler's meanness, or Stalin's meanness, or Lenin's meanness, as he foresaw the fate of the Russian aristocracy. If Lenin had been slightly more intelligent, and if he had been able to speak great verse, the Inca's words could have been spoken exactly by him. Evil is monotonous.

According to Frost, true vision is never "brought down to the real" because it never leaves the real. What he says of the poet's work might apply to any great deed:

It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and 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. It has denouement. It has an outcome that though unforeseen was predestined from the very first image of the original mood—and indeed from that very mood.

Those words about art surely apply to other activities, including politics. A mood or an image may seem a strange, flimsy thing to commit oneself to. That is why we are tempted by ideology. An ideology is defined as the logic of an idea. But according to Frost a poem, or a country, cannot be planned because

logic is backward, in retrospect, after the act. (During the act) it must more be felt than seen ahead like prophecy.

And thus I shall end this section not with fierce, penetrating verses like those spoken by that ideologue, the Inca, but with a subtler vision. According to Frost his beloved United States, despite the lucky far-sightedness of its Constitution, did not begin with logic but with a "course of lucky events"; and even the great poem of his country's Constitution itself, with all its many amendments, came only gradually "as a revelation, or a series of revelations" to a people who hardly knew, at first, who and where they were:

The land was ours before we were the land's.  
 She was our land more than a hundred years  
 Before we were her people. She was ours  
 In Massachusetts, in Virginia,  
 But we were England's, still colonials,  
 Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,  
 Possessed by what we now no more possessed.  
 Something we were withholding made us weak  
 Until we found out that it was ourselves  
 We were withholding from our land of living,  
 And forthwith found salvation in surrender.  
 Such as we were we gave ourselves outright  
 (The deed of gift was many deeds of war)  
 To the land vaguely realizing westward,  
 But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,  
 Such as she was, such as she would become.

In these lines, which I have seen attacked as racist, Frost in fact idealizes nothing. The people of the United States, in their gradual, lucky commitment to a noble vision of justice, have committed many great evils. Among the "many deeds of war" some, such as the worst against the Indians were not noble; and today this has become so obvious that one is tempted to lose heart, and to surrender (in mind, if not in deed) to ideology. A country like a person stands in fear of God's judgement—and the United States now more than ever before. But until now, as Frost might say, we have not

lacked the courage in the heart  
 To overcome the fear within the soul  
 And go ahead to any accomplishment.  
 Courage is what it takes and takes the more of  
 Because the deeper fear is so eternal.

These lines are not those of a chauvinist but of his country's greatest, strangest, best, most truthful poet.

## (VI) FROST'S PROVINCIAL MUSIC OF WORDS

To a fellow countryman like myself, Frost seems a great yet untranslatable poet, whose best verse might puzzle or even bore a foreigner. The fact that, in many countries, he is better known than any American poet except Walt Whitman is thus surprising. I shall presently try to analyze the reasons for that; but I must first convince you that his popularity abroad is, indeed, somewhat paradoxical and that this verse was not, my friends, written for you.

His art's most obvious feature, of which Frost himself was proudest, is its extremely idiomatic, conversational style, which is an imitation of his own speaking voice. He did not *chant* his lyrics as did, for example, Neruda, but sharply spoke them. Thus, in order to hear "music" at all in this verse, a foreigner's ears have to be very subtle. The laconic dryness of Frost's style, which often subtly imitates a certain rustic American speech, is such that even Englishmen fail to value it. Even W. H. Auden, whose essay on Frost is full of admiration, failed to notice what any North American notices at once, that Frost was a poet with a razor-sharp ear. Any example will do. For example:

You can come down from everything to nothing.  
All is, if I'd a known when I was young  
And full of it that this would be the end,  
It doesn't seem as if I'd had the courage  
To make so free and kick up in folks' faces.  
I might have but it doesn't seem as if.

Now, Auden said of passages like this, which mimes an old woman's speech, that "it could almost have been written in prose". In fact, it is a wonder of craftsmanship; but several factors make its music hard to hear. First, from a European viewpoint, the idiom itself is that of a remote province. Of this passage's fifty-six words, fifty-five are pure Anglo-Saxon. The sole exception is "courage"; apart from that, it is as if the Normans had never conquered England. Secondly, this is the celestial music of English monosyllables. The "music" of French, Italian, or Spanish verse relies on ripples in its polysyllabic Latin and Greek derivatives. This passage by Frost has but one trisyllabic word, four disyllables, and fifty-one monosyllables. Thirdly, partly on account of those monosyllables, the meter, though to native Americans delectable, must seem to a foreigner practically nonexistent. Robert Graves said that English has the "meter of the tugged oar and the marching footstep"—well, this is that with a vengeance. It is as far from song, or dance, or daydreaming, as possible.

Fourthly, Frost, who knew very well that his art excelled in this, often



deliberately emphasizes what I would call chaff-words. That is, he stresses a sort of mere syntactical machinery, that most poets, even in English, carefully avoid or cover up. In the perpetual war between syntax—that is, a word's mere function in the sentence—and semantics—that is, each word's historical resonance—he often sides so firmly with syntax—and with its drabbest elements—that whole lines are nothing but language withered into pure syntax. For example, "I might have, but it doesn't seem as if". The still of "poésie pure" tried to distill that sort of dross right out of language; but Frost befriends it—and not only when he speaks with the voice of an old woman. His greatest poem "Directive" begins with chains of adverbs, adjectives, and prepositional phrases. They are mere "stage-directions"—yet they are not there for the sake of a contrast with some semantic splendor, to which they are leading. What they lead to is nothing but the verb "is", and to three bald paradoxes:

Back out of all this now too much for us,  
 Back in a time made simple by the loss  
 Of detail, burned, dissolved and broken off  
 Like graveyard marble sculpture in the weather,  
 There is a house that is no more a house,  
 Upon a farm that is no more a farm  
 And in a town that is no more a town.

Scarcely translatable too, finally, is in Frost's imagery. It is often extremely concrete but based on small peculiarities of the New England landscape and of New England social life. For example:

The road there, if you'll let a guide direct you  
 Who only has at heart your getting lost  
 May seem as if it should have been a quarry—  
 Great monolithic knees the former town  
 Long since gave up pretence of keeping covered.

This sort of wild yet exhausted landscape and exhausted, wild, grim social awareness, seems so peculiar to New England that I cannot imagine what it could mean to an African, a German, or a Polynesian. To help them see the pithiness of these lines one would have to enter into lengthy explanations; and perhaps the effect would be like that of "explaining" the funniness of a family joke.

Naturally, I will not here explain the joke; but I should say, in passing, that in these lines Frost is speaking of himself and his own art. For he is a kind of guide, taking you to a strange place, who wants you to be lost. That is, he is glad

to be untranslatable. The road which is so filled with ruts and stones that it seems "as if it should have been a quarry" is that of Frost's verse. His coarse yet subtle, his earthy, too American verse is actually proud of its provincial wildness. More so than any other American poet, he was not afraid to be untranslatable.

Frost was aware of all these facts. He felt himself and his verse as something so North American that he defined poetry itself as "what gets lost in translation". In a letter to a friend he once made an even more extraordinary statement. His friend had sent him some Chinese poems. Frost writes, first, that he dislikes and avoids all translations of poetry; second, that he also dislikes reading any language he doesn't know well. And third, that he doesn't know any language well, except English. In other words, he dislikes world literature itself and sends it to the Devil. Such is his chaste, manly contempt for translators, those panders of foreign muses!

I have written all this in order to show a certain strangeness in the fact that Frost has been called a great poet by Neruda, by Andrei Sinyavsky, by Joseph Brodsky, by W. H. Auden, by Eugenio Montale, and by Borges. It must be that these untranslatable elements are outweighed by something.

#### (VII) ABOUT THE NATURE OF FROST'S IMAGES

Frost is not a pure poet like Mandelstam—the greatest poet of our time—who worked directly with the Word, that is, with language as dense with images as were the crystals of his dreams, from which that language came; nor is he a metaphorist like Neruda, Pasternak or Joseph Brodsky; nor an aphorist and librettist like Auden; he is a writer of what I shall call exact, opaque parables. In this he resembles several other modern poets, notably Borges, Cavafy and, often, Montale. He begins a poem, most often, with a phrase that evokes a drab concrete image—"Old Davis owned a solid mica mountain...." "Look down the long valley and there stands a mountain..." "By June our brook's run out of song and speed...."—or with an image not only "concrete" but also unique; something that happened only once:

A lantern light from deeper in the barn  
Shone on a man and woman in the door  
And threw their lurching shadows on a house  
Nearby, all dark in every glossy window....

A bird, half-wakened in the lunar noon,

Sang halfway through its little inborn tune....

I let myself in at the kitchen door.  
'It's you,' she said. 'I can't get up. Forgive me  
Not answering your knock.'

Her teacher's certainty it must be Mabel  
Made Maple first take notice of her name.  
She asked her father and he told her 'Maple —  
Maple is right'...

She stood against the kitchen sink, and looked  
Over the sink out through a dusty window  
At weeds the water from the sink made tall.  
She wore her cape; her hat was in her hand.  
Behind all was confusion in the room....

So he begins with a concrete event, or at least an image, which haunts him, the significance of which he does not understand. And perhaps he never does come to understand it. It is true that every good poem is an act of analysis; that is, in particulars it seeks the universal. But whereas, normally, analysis achieves this by relating concrete images to a concept, Frost does not. Instead he simply allows the image itself to unfold as sharply, as three-dimensionally as possible—just as you would do in trying to recount a dream. But because the thing depicted has smell and texture, and sometimes even the sound of someone's voice, it is more strange—more resistant to thought—even than a dream would be.

Consider exactly what we are doing, when we try to tell a dream faithfully. We are trying to subject elusive, iridescent images to grammatical and logical laws. Now the dreamed events do partly obey those laws—for language does condition experience, even in dreams. Thus, some elements of a dream are easy to capture. But part of it defies those laws; for example, we are in two places, or two times, simultaneously. There are two ways of coping with this. The first is to say, "I was in two places simultaneously"—then describe one place, then the other. This way uses concepts, and has the virtue of conceptual clarity, but the defect of remoteness to the experience. The second way, which needs a poetic gift and is much rarer, is to mime the dream's doubleness, by using words, phrases, images, that have a double meaning. Each word or image refers to both places. This method is closer to the dream, but has a defect of physical obscurity—we never see clearly where we are—and a second defect of conceptual obscurity. It is hard to state the dream's moral—its lesson—its "message".

The most perfect expression of a dream would be a pure parable. That is, a story perfectly clear in its sequence of events, yet dream-like in that every detail, every word, seems to refer to another story, which is equally complete and perfect. That second story is not stated (if it is, clarity is lost) but constantly sensed.

Now, we too easily overlook the fact that an exact moment in time, a moment of waking reality itself, is even harder to capture in language than a dream. For example, try to describe exactly the room in which, and exactly the moment in which, you are hearing my voice. You find at once that its reality is so many-sided—so far outside the pitiful generalities of the common language—that whatever you write, you miss nine-tenths of it.

An exact waking moment has this, too, in common with dream: the plainer, the barer your description of it, the more it has the quality of a pure parable. Whenever we isolate some moment in time, and honor it with a certain simple music of words, we sense that moment to be full of "sacramental signs, messengers from the unseen". For example, Alcman's description of the world asleep at night; the magical opening lines of Xenophanes' poem about a symposium, which simply names objects in the hall; many quiet passages in Vergil, in which he describes the night (e.g. Aeneid 5, 835 ff.); the first stanza of "Poverty" by Thomas Traherne; Coleridge's snapshots in "Frost at Midnight"; a hundred places in Borges, that do nothing except describe the passing hour. These places, which I love above all others in literature, are those that most embarrass analytical criticism. As for Frost, take, for example, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening". It contains no "allusions" and nothing needs explanation. Even children can grasp absolutely all of it:

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though.  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
 But I have promises to keep,  
 And miles to go before I sleep,  
 And miles to go before I sleep.

Of course, the beautiful repetition of the last line may seem to smell of metaphor. It is often said that "sleep" means death. I shall return to that in a moment. But first I will just tell you that according to Frost himself this device was unforeseen, a result of the fact that he was growing tired and feared to begin another stanza. The poem is rhymed A A b A, b b C b, C C d C, d d d d. The third rhyme of each stanza determines the first rhyme of the next. He had intended to write a fifth stanza; but suddenly, as he said, "with a sense of what a good boy I was" he struck out the next-to-last line, whose rhyme demanded another stanza, and simply used the last line twice, ending the poem unexpectedly.

So, as we might say, he was on the edge of thinking too much about his little forest, and stopped just in time. He compares it with nothing. He does not explain his image. In simple musical language, the poem honors a moment in time by letting it unfold all by itself. The second "sleep" does suggest death; yet the line means only, exactly, what it says, and the "miles" will differ with each reader.

I chose to quote this extremely simple—too simple—poem, which in some ways is not typical of Frost, because it has one striking characteristic, which is that there are, almost, no metaphors in it. Listen again to its opening: "Whose woods these are I think I know. His house is in the village though. He will not see me stopping here, To watch his woods fill up with snow." For me, this is clear proof of poetic excellence. Frost himself used to say that poetry, and even language itself, is metaphor, but he was mistaken. The importance of metaphor is often exaggerated terribly, especially in our time. A poet has other tools more essential. For example, that of simply reproducing the exact path of his thought, and of relating that, by meter, with the rhythm of heartbeat and footstep. "Write imageless poems if you can, if you know how," said Mandelstam. Milosz, though of course he used metaphor, often reacted against it, and has even said that there is something obscene, something unchaste in it.

Metaphor is the representation of one thing in terms of another; as when, for example, I say that the wind "sweeps" as if it were a broom, or that a snowflake is "downy". Such a "synthesizing" of two things—breeze and broom, or feathers and snow—gives an impression, which thrills both me and my

listener, that these are pieces of a puzzle. Individual objects are but bits and pieces of a higher, cosmic reality.

But for that thrill we pay a heavy price, which is that metaphor tends to betray the particular. It betrays the opaque strangeness of the concrete object, which excites a baby's or a lover's wonder. It betrays uniqueness, which is greater than the Cosmos itself, because only uniqueness awakens love. That is why the love poems of Pablo Neruda, for example, though extremely beautiful, are always a bit embarrassing. In describing his love cosmically—in comparing a woman with the ocean, in comparing her breasts with wild deer, or her waist with the new moon—he invites the reader to see exactly what he sees—but with this she ceases to be unique. Frost, who basically is not a metaphorist, and not a lover of Nature, is a chaster, purer poet. His half-enchanted, dark little forest, for example, he compares explicitly with nothing. He too senses the Cosmos, the Universal, in each image that haunts him. But instead of, so to speak, boasting of this—instead of advertising it, with fireworks of comparisons—as if the poet were Nature's representative, he offers us, often in drab threadbare language, the mere thing itself as if, like Borges, he felt that the image itself had more wisdom than he. Much more common than lines like "the sweep / Of easy wind and downy flake" are lines like, "She stood against the kitchen sink, and looked / Over the sink out through a dusty window", or lines like "I might have but it doesn't seem as if". Anyone wishing to arrive at a really sound poetics should begin by studying lines like those, which are devoid of metaphor.

And Frost himself, even if without knowing it, was on my side in this. I can quote his own words against him. His sonnet called "Hyla Brook" is about a rather sad little stream that dries up in summer. It is not an archetype of a brook like "West-Running Brook". There is nothing impressive about it. No doubt, there is a message in it, just as in West-Running Brook, but the only ones who can hear that airy message are its lovers. The poem ends thus:

Its bed is left a faded paper sheet  
Of dead leaves stuck together by the heat—  
A brook to none but who remember long.  
This as it will be seen is other far  
Than with brooks taken elsewhere in song.  
We love the things we love for what they are.

We love things "for what they are"—not for the many things they resemble. Love itself is nothing but attentiveness—mere gazing. Love cannot "digest" the beloved object; true lovers suffer from indigestion: they feel a tightness in the

stomach, and always fast. In this a lover resembles the poet who eschews metaphor. For metaphor is the stomach of the soul, and it can digest absolutely everything.

Now, love is a greater, more nearly divine thing than poetry. As any real poet knows, poetry is only love's servant. And the *artistic* result of love's indigestion is a pure, opaque parable. There, *art lies not in comparing but in isolating*. Art lies in the attentiveness of the gaze, and also in the faithfulness of the poet's ear, that mimes the speech arising from that gaze. Any child will like these "dead leaves stuck together by the heat", yet their meaning is inexhaustible. Give me a pencil, paper, and thirty minutes, and I can extract a dozen meanings from it. As Brodsky said once, apropos of a Romanian peasant poet, extreme simplicity is not at the bottom of the pyramid, it is its apex.

Frost, then, like Borges and Cavafy, is a writer of very exact, very opaque parables and this, I suspect, is the secret of his popularity, which extends even to people who perhaps miss his subtle music, and even his message when he has one, and the nuances of his imagery. Academics love metaphors, because those always conceal a message, that has to be explained conceptually. But the honoring, by the bare description of it in musical language, of a single moment in time, pleases every human being, even children. For the moment is where time intersects with eternity.