

ROBERT FROST FROM HIS GREEN MOUNTAIN

By ROBERT FRANCIS

"Yes," said Mr. Frost, starting down the path, "I take the world pretty much as it comes. I only give it a kick and a touch now and then."

He stopped and turned. "It's like steering a car. You don't grip the wheel, you keep your hand on it lightly."

Keeping his hand lightly on the wheel has long been an art and a philosophy with Robert Frost. Whether as poet or farmer or political cogitator, he has practiced and preached the light touch, when he was not declaring "hands off" entirely. He has celebrated the virtue of letting things take their course, both when it couldn't be helped and when it could. He has been a consistent opponent of meddling—local, national, international, and cosmic.

Now nothing is more out of fashion today than such a philosophy. Most of us do not disagree as to whether something should or should not be done; we disagree only as to what and how. We disagree as to how much the state should interfere in business and in our private lives, but we agree that it must inevitably interfere far more than it used to do in the Eighteenth Century. The freedom of free enterprise has become, as everyone is forced to admit, a very relative freedom.

But the state is only one interferer. It interferes with business far less than business interferes with everything else. If the state is Scylla, business is Charybdis. The gentlemen who taught and practiced the original doctrine of *laissez faire* a century or two ago applied it only to government, not to themselves. As bankers, ship-owners, manufacturers, they were not to be interfered with in the accomplishment of their vast interferences. Their freedom was the pure freedom to exploit, with the concomitant freedom of other people to be exploited. The purity of that freedom has long ago vanished, yet the power of the business man grows greater rather than less. He finds ever more ingenious ways to interfere with us at the same time that government finds new ways of interfering with him. Indeed the American system, if system it may be called, might be described as the maximum interference of government and busi-

ness, each with the other, and both with the common man.

What Robert Frost seriously pokes fun at is not so much government in business or business in government as the universal and incessant busyness of everybody with everybody else. From his point of view it is not very different whether we are too busy doing good (philanthropy) or too busy doing harm (war); whether we are too busy acquiring knowledge (education) or too busy adding to it (scholarship and science). He stands on a sort of Green Mountain and banters us about our inability to sit still for five minutes. He laughs at our "guild of social planners," our "greedy do-gooders," our "global missions," our contemporary chariots of speed. Of course, if he were absolutely *laissez-faire*, he would be indifferent to our failure to be. He wouldn't care how care-full we were. But he does not go that far. In this, as in all else, he is no extremist.

Among the varied and vivid people found in his poems are some notable non-meddlers—country people, and perhaps a little dated. There is Brown the farmer, for instance, out doing chores before daylight in such slippery weather that he lost his moorings and slid two miles downhill over the snow crust before reaching a stopping place. So long as he resisted his descent he had a hard time of it; but when "he bowed with grace to natural law. . . he came down like a coasting child." And there is another farmer, the hired one in the hayfield with a thunderstorm threatening, who refused abruptly and with finality to be told something that nobody had any business or need to tell him. In "Mending Wall" the man who doesn't write the poem is ironically on both sides of *laissez-faire* at the same time. He will not go behind his father's saying that good fences make good neighbors; he will not meddle with or question that; but he will everlastingly meddle with the old unnecessary wall. The other man (who writes the poem) is all *laissez-faire*. He is willing for nature to do whatever she wants to the wall. But since his neighbor is of a different mind, he is willing to go along with him too, going along with him in the mending though not in the reasoning.

Perhaps the most engaging exponent of the attitude is the travelling agent for a certain country journal, amiable brute of a man, whom the city intellectual encounters one night in a small-town hotel, and whose expansive offer of a hundred outgrown collars is not appreciated, much less accepted. Frost might be speaking, a little figuratively, of himself.

And I lie back and ride. I take the reins
 Only when someone's coming, and the mare
 Stops when she likes: I tell her when to go.

I never dun.

I'm there, and they can pay me if they like.
 I go nowhere on purpose: I happen by.

In another conversational piece, "The Black Cottage," the village minister out walking with a friend stops at a deserted cottage to look in through the windows and tell how the old woman who once lived there had, quite without suspecting it, kept him from tinkering with the creed. Rather than risk marring her peace of mind, he had let the old creed stand, trusting that whatever truth in it had gone out of fashion would in due time come back. It was this old lady who, after her children had grown and gone from home, "valued the considerate neglect she had at some cost taught them after years."

We find the doctrine most explicit in a couple of shorter poems. The argument of "Something for Hope" runs thus. If your rocky pasture becomes overgrown with weeds, don't try to plow them out. Do nothing of the sort. Do nothing at all. Simply wait for trees to come in. After they are grown, cut them for lumber, and your land will be ready for grass again. A hundred years is provided for the full cycle. Any botanist or forester, I dare say, would vouch for the accuracy of the forecast. If waiting a hundred years for pasture improvement seems a long time to wait, be careful not to conclude too easily that the poet is merely joking. He is joking and being very much in earnest at the same time, leaving to us to decide in what proportions.

In another poem, "In Time of Cloudburst," the cycle is vastly longer. Instead of waiting a mere century for trees to grow, we wait a geological age for our eroded farm to sink out of sight and for a new farm of rich alluvial soil to rise from the sea. If again you protest that this is too long a wait, Frost might reply that this is what is actually happening whether you wait or not. If you ask where the harvests are coming from in the meantime, he may elude you with something as insubstantial as a wish: "May something go always unharvested."

Who cares what they say? It's a nice way to live,
 Just taking what Nature is willing to give,
 Not forcing her hand with harrow and plow.

II

How nice a way the non-aggressive way to live can be is beautifully shown in Frost's own life. He is his own best proof of the fruits of some of the less obvious varieties of *laissez-faire*. He has said that he never lifted a finger to advance his career. A refreshing fact to contemplate in a day when almost everyone—poet as well as political candidate—lifts so much more than a finger. His self-restraint and self-trust brought him almost total lack of recognition until early middle age; since then, the same restraint and trust have not prevented his being as well known and as highly honored as any living poet. Indeed, the quality of honor in which he is held could not be what it is if he had cultivated a fondness for lifting a finger. Worshipers as we Americans are of the fighter, including the fighter for self, we are still disposed to rate higher the man who without fighting achieves a difficult goal.

The vitality he has not expended in self-advancement has been available for the poetry itself. He gives the impression of one who at any time of day or night would be free to sit down to a poem if the mood were on him; and who at almost any other time is free for the infinite flow of reading, musing, and talk, out of which the poems crystalize. Wherever he goes he takes that freedom with him, the freedom to write and the equally confident freedom not to write. His leisure to do whatever the hour proposes is a little fabulous.

If he were a conventional man of letters, if he carried on a wide and meticulous correspondence, if he were engrossed in detailed duties on boards of trustees, if he sponsored this and founded that, if he entertained formally and wrote his memoirs, he might still be a good poet, even a great one. But his poetry could scarcely have the rich, earthy substance that, like a fine loam, is the residue of a vast scattering and wasting. For into his poetry has poured all that he has escaped doing and being over the years as well as all that he has done and been.

Do not expect such a poet to go out to meet his poems; he will wait characteristically till they come of their own accord. The thought of trying to write a poem on assignment, even on self-assignment, is so distasteful to him that he cannot believe anybody could do it successfully. He is even unwilling to get ready to write a poem. Instead of saving up particular experiences as likely material, he is content to throw all experience away ahead of him, confident of catching up with it in the natural course of events.

And when the poem does arrive and demands to be written, the important thing is to let it run its course with as little interference as possible from the poet. This is not the method of divine dictation whereby the poet lets Heaven have its unimpeded say and himself supplies only hand, pen, and paper. It is not Heaven that is running its course, but the particular poem; and since the poem comes out of Mr. Frost's head, he takes full credit for it. It is not an extreme *laissez-faire*. Effort is applied, but no unseemly effort. One sitting generally suffices, with only minor revision left till later. Here are the swift strokes of the water-colorist rather than the painstaking reworking of the painter in oils. Here is the flow of a Mozart rather than the slow struggle of a Beethoven.

In "The Figure a Poem Makes," those marvellously pithy four pages of prose that serve as preface to *The Complete Poems*, Frost tells us explicitly and unforgettably. "Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting. A poem may be worked over once it is in being, but it may not be worried into being. Its most precious quality will remain its having run itself and carried away the poet with it. Read it a hundred times; it will forever keep its freshness as a metal keeps its fragrance. It can never lose its sense of meaning once unfolded by surprise as it went."

Like a piece of ice on a hot stove—the melting will of course be fairly rapid. Frost's scarcely-concealed scorn for poets whose melting rate is not rapid and whose poems strive to ride into being on a stove insufficiently hot is understandable. His scorn is not concealed at all for such piddling poets as dutifully save the scraps and shavings of evidence of their slowness, as if the greater the labor the greater the value. That the test of a poem is its effect on the reader or hearer, not the experience of the writer in writing it, Frost would doubtless concede. But he insists that the experience of the writer and the experience of the reader are inseparable. What he would say I do not know to the stubborn fact of a poem that out of long labor had achieved spontaneity and a permanent power to delight and surprise. But whether or not his prescription for writing poetry is universally applicable, there can be no question of the consistent success with which he himself has followed it.

When Mr. Frost appears on the lecture platform, we can see and hear for ourselves his gift for letting things take their course. For here is no calculated and rehearsed performance, but a spontaneous conversation. Though Frost does all the talking,

the audience is not without its means of making itself felt. What it says "in all but words" helps the speaker with his next sentence. Neither audience nor speaker can see very far ahead. Each is sensitive to the risks the other is taking, and risks they are, even if they always turn out to be lucky ones. Compared with this unpredictable and dramatic interplay of minds, the most faultlessly prepared and delivered speech must sound a little cold and lifeless. Furthermore, how else can a speaker prove his utter honesty except by speaking on the inspiration of the moment, yet with his whole past substantiating each word?

On the platform Frost is a sort of parable of himself. For though he has spent most of his life with people and is endlessly interested in and involved with them (as all his poems testify), he has still kept a certain distance, as the platform now implies. It is not aloofness. It is not critical detachment. It is not other-worldliness. Whatever it is, it has made it possible for him to give himself abundantly to people without letting them interfere too much with him.

He tells in one poem of a small girl's getting caught up into the air by a birch tree. Wild grapes were growing on the birch, and the child's older brother had bowed the tree over for her to pick from. When he let go and she didn't, her weight was not enough to hold her to the ground. Recalling the experience years later, she remarks that the trouble was she had not at that age learned to let go with her hands. Letting go with the hands she contrasts with letting go with the heart, and she concludes that the latter is a lesson she need never try to learn. Frost's letting go is with the hands. His hold on life with heart and mind is tenacious.

III

Standing on his Green Mountain, he asks us seriously, tauntingly, why do we not stand there too. If we who hear him and read his poems choose to discount his stand as the over-extension of a congenial way of life into a universal philosophy, he will probably not be greatly offended or surprised. To stand alone is no hardship if the stander is not made to suffer for his aloneness. With Frost the unpopularity of his doctrine has contributed to the popularity of the man. His heresies are a refreshing change from the orthodox. An audience may love to be stroked; it also loves to be teased. But if we chuckle over his thrusts and then forget them, may we not be the losers?

Strenuousness is something we Americans inherit. Our ancestors were disagreeers, iconoclasts, pilgrims, pioneers, crossers of oceans, mountains, plains. The Puritan creed, which could have been taken to justify a spiritual *laissez-faire*, since its Predestination was a kind of fatalism, actually and ironically produced men and women who have never been surpassed for their capacity to meddle with themselves and with everyone else.

Today the Puritan and the Frontier strenuousness is gone, but another strenuousness takes its place. In sport, in business, and in politics no other people has attained to quite such a frenzy. And though others have been as strenuous in war, we at least excel in war's efficiency.

In perhaps one particular we are disposed to agree with Frost. The doctors have been telling us for years that our rapid pace is not good for our health. They assure us that it leads to high blood pressure, to gastric ulcers, to eye-strain and defective vision, and to nervous breakdown. We are impressed by the diagnosis, but our pace does not slacken. The possibility that the same strenuousness and speed and tension may be accountable for some of the high blood pressure, gastric ulcers, defective vision, and nervous breakdown in international relations, is a thought that few of us are as yet prepared to consider.

Of all the contemporary varieties of meddling, I think Mr. Frost would put Science at the top of the list, for Science is by far the most thorough and the most ominous. It is the business of Science to touch everything. "Never leave well enough alone." In the eyes of Science there is no "well enough." If there is one assumption that modern man seldom questions, it is that Science must go on, and go on as she pleases to go. For she plays a two-handed game and is in no mood to be interrupted or called to account. The game is to see how many human beings she can kill with her right hand and with her left how many she can save.

Who are we to call her to account? Has she not now the twin mysteries of locking and unlocking, of fission and fusion? Does not her enormous eye peer ever deeper into outer and utter space? Like the Divine King, she can do no wrong; like Superman she is beyond good and evil; and like the Corporation she is faultlessly impersonal. Whether she is gathering cosmic light or making a big dazzle of her own, we bow down to her. Meddlers that we are, we will not meddle with her colossal meddling.

Now a distrust of Science, a defiance of Science, might

imply a correspondingly great trust and dependence in Religion. But not with Frost. He would be as much against too much theology as he is against too much anything else, if theology still lorded it over us as it used to do. "Something has to be left to God," concludes his orchard-owner at the edge of winter. But note that it is "something," not "everything." The God who appears in Robert Frost's poems is a *laissez-faire* deity, not disposed to meddle much with men and not disposed for men to meddle much with him. Someone in one of the poems remarks pointedly: "One thing: he didn't drag God into it."

He is a God whose symbol might appropriately be X. He is beyond. Beyond the "sigmas and taus of constellations." He is residual: when man is bereft of all others, he remains. Far, far it would be from him to pursue a soul like a Hound of Heaven. When the fugitive Jonah of "A Masque of Mercy" at the end of the Complete Poems, "hatless in a whirl of snow," bursts into the bookstore and into the poem with the cry: "God's after me!" the effect is startlingly comic. Clearly this God of Jonah is not Deity X. "God's after me!" cries Jonah; and Jesse Bel aptly retorts: "You mean the Devil is."

The word "God" is protean; it changes shape and color, and even changes from the visible to the invisible and back again according to the will of the speaker. Now it is the child's enlarged Daddy, and now the daring abstraction of the philosopher. The bloody and arbitrary Jehovah is "God" and equally so the Primum Mobile of Aristotle and the cosmic Mathematician of Spinoza. The Arab's Allah, the Algonquin's Great Spirit, the Bushman's stone idol, and the Quaker's Inner light—all are "God."

And every color and hue, every form and formula, that God ever assumed he can still assume today. But if the main course of his career be plotted, we find a steady displacement—from the concrete to the abstract, from the particular to the general from the known to the unknown. From being a God that one could talk to face to face (Abraham) or even wrestle with (Jacob) he becomes a God that one can only pray to, at first about such tangible things as crops and weather and the destruction of one's enemies, and later about pure imponderabilia. Ultimately, as with the God of Alfred North Whitehead, he cannot easily be prayed to. It is as much as the believer can do to grasp him with the conceptual mind.

By locating God on the fringes of the universe, it seems to me that Frost has made a sound move. God is still available for

something to be left to. He is not too far away to be called on in great emergencies. But he is too far off to meddle with us. He is at a safe distance, as he could not be were he either nearer or farther. An interventionist God could, in this scientific age, be a power more terrifying than Science itself. A God whose will it was for more and more bombs to be dropped on more and more sinful millions might finally be a God with no one left to annihilate.

So in a world where God refrains from doing too much, it befits man not to do too much either. And not to believe too much, whether that belief be religion or science. Too much believing will result in too much doing. Too much belief and we would be "down burning skeptics in the cellar furnace." According to the poems, there are several categories of knowledge that we do well not to worry about: (1) what we already know without science telling us, (2) what is more than we can use to think with, and (3) what can't be known anyway.

We've looked and looked, but after all where are we?
Do we know any better where we are,
And how it stands between the night to-night
And a man with a smoky lantern chimney?
How different from the way it ever stood?

Who will say that this confession of ignorance, this submission to uncertainty, is not as religious as all the pronouncements of all the oracles? "Let the night be too dark for me to see into the future. Let what will be, be."

IV

"It must be I want life to go on living," says Frost as the concluding line of "The Census-Taker." The scene is a lumbered-over waste of tree stumps and brush, with only one tar-paper shack in the whole landscape, and even that now empty and deserted. What fills the observer with melancholy is not the trees that are no longer there, but the people. He has come to take the census and finds not a soul to count.

We shall not comfort him by reminding him that the desolate countryside is now under the beneficent sway of *laissez-faire*. Man, having stepped in and interfered sharply with nature, has stepped out and given nature her own way again. In time, with normal luck and not too much further interference from man, the trees will come back. And men will come back too, if they want to and need to—other men if not those who

once chopped and sawed and ate and slept here. ^{Nothing, that is} argue that there is nothing to be sad about. ^{is taken account} unless the disappearance of a few human beings is taken account of how to stand for greater and irreparable losses.

Here is one clear limit to Frost's *laissez-faire*: it must not be at the expense of human life and its fulfillment. To another observer the gradual taking over by trees of all man's little tragic enterprise might seem a consummation devoutly to be wished. Not so Frost. However little he himself might do to halt the actual process, he would be against anything whose result was

To close a road, abandon a farm,
Reduce the births of the human race
And bring back nature in people's place.

How could life have emerged from the inanimate (or what we perhaps too easily call the inanimate), how could mind have emerged from matter, and art and literature from mind, ^{are} by the very antithesis of *laissez-faire*? What but a never-ending effort against the flow of things, a force counter to the current, as Frost sensitively describes it in "West-Running Brook"? The stream is Time, "the universal cataract of death that ^{is} sped to nothingness," and the small white wave formed by a jutting branch (opposing, interrupting, and disturbing the current) is life, human life, and what is best in human life. "It is from this in nature we are from."

Frost's quarrel with our meddling goes deep, ^{yet it is} lover's quarrel after all. Fundamentally he is with us, he is on the side of the human venture. If he ever feels the lure of a solute drift, of stopping and resting and not going on, of losing himself among dark trees of night and winter

As one who overtaken by the end
Gives up his errand, and lets death descend
Upon him where he is, with nothing done
To evil, no important triumph won,
More than if life had never been begun

his human commitments, his "promises to keep," defend him from the lure.

Letting things take their course, up to a certain point in life, sanity, wisdom, and the flowing and flowering of ^{spirit} beyond that point it is mere drift and sleep and death. Frost places the point a little nearer the passive end of the scale than many of us do. But the problem for all of us is how much to

ROBERT FROST FROM HIS GREEN MOUNTAIN 127

to God. And the God, for some of us, could be a theologically simple deity: the God-to-whom-things-that-have-to-be-left.

We are accustomed to say that one cannot stand still: he goes ahead or he falls behind. But the difficulty of standing still may be a measure of its value. Standing still is the thing to aim at, the right reconciliation of the active and the passive. To oppose the current just enough to keep from being swept downstream. At that point of poise and balance are contemplation, ecstasy, art. "Metaphysics, long the world's reproach for standing still in one place true for-

And you were given this swiftness, not for haste
Nor chiefly that you may go where you will,
But in the rush of everything to waste,
That you may have the power of standing still—
Off any still or moving thing you say.