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Catherine de Ortiz-Vargas

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ROBERT FROST*

A. Ortiz-Vargas

Translated by Catherine de Ortiz-Vargas

OUTSIDE my window in the wintry New England afternoon, snow covers the landscape. Through the frozen branches of a pine tree the lingering twilight filters. A bell sounds crying the hour. Yonder across the rugged hills lie the farmlands clothed in white. Beyond the hills, homely chimneys, telegraph posts, tall steeples, thick black smoke of the factories speak of cities that tempt, teeming with life. But here, outside my window in wintry New England, all is still, pensive, sad. And the soul of the waning twilight blends in my spirit with the soul of the book I read, a book of Robert Frost.

Robert Frost, born in California, is New England's poet. From the unyielding soil he drew his pastoral, lyrical harvest seasoned with the odor of the threshing-floor, new-mown hay, and apples. Though like Francis Jammes in his love of the earth, animals, the simple things which to be beautiful with perfect beauty need only the singing voice to awaken them from their workaday lethargy and inspire them to flight, the Yankee poet has the advantage over the French poet of a less studied naturalness, a more refreshing and native *gaucherie*.

At the hour of the Angelus both of them trod at length over the heavy tapestries of old gold that autumn spreads over country trails. They paused at the road's edge to study the crimson lace that sunsets weave over the cobalt sky; they listened to the wind sigh in the flowing tresses of the willows, and they both sang a humble prayer:

*An interesting example of a Latin American's approach to a North American poet, reprinted (in translation) from "Perfiles Angloamericanos," *Revista Iberoamericana*, November, 1941, pp. 163-176, with permission of the editors.

Mon Dieu, faites qu'avec ces ânes je Vous vienne.
 Faites que, dans la paix, des anges nous conduisent
 Vers des ruisseaux touffus où tremblent des cerises
 Lisses comme la chair qui rit des jeunes filles,
 Et faites que, penché dans ce séjour des âmes,
 Sur vos divines eaux, je sois pareil aux ânes
 Qui mireront leur humble et douce pauvreté
 A la limpidité de l'amour éternel,

says Francis Jammes in his *Prayer to enter Paradise with the donkeys*, with the gentle donkeys, brothers of Juan Ramon Jimenez and of Francis of Assisi. And Frost in his *Prayer in Spring* feels no less the pastoral enchantment nor does he express it with less tenderness:

Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers to-day;
 And give us not to think so far away
 As the uncertain harvest; keep us here
 All simply in the springing of the year.

Oh, give us pleasure in the orchard white,
 Like nothing else by day, like ghosts by night;
 And make us happy in the happy bees,
 The swarm dilating round the perfect trees.

To be beautiful poetry does not need to be distorted. To be felt it does not need to be encumbered with images. To be original one does not need to be grotesque, as these two poets from lands so unlike have aptly shown us. Never has a work of art been created out of such homespun material as woven by these two. A work of art never had more freshness, more sensitiveness, more moving simplicity, or more humanness than theirs.

In the endless succession of lives, Francis Jammes and Robert Frost roamed through lands where art does not die, and more than once, following the furrows in the hottest days of summer, among the myrtle as the cicadas sang, they paused to drink from earthen pitchers the wine of Hesiod and Virgil. Not that they disdained the beautiful cup made by Hellenic artists for Ovid's bacchic feasts, but the wine in the earthen pitcher tasted more of the grape and the earth from which they drew their strength.

In the portrait of the poet done by Doris Ulmann on the frontispiece of Frost's *Collected Poems*, his history, a life devoid of worldly experience but rich in inward life, can be read as in an open book. Eyes with a faraway look, aquiline nose, a fine, sensitive mouth, and

hair graying on a head that has dreamed dreams that torture until the moment that words set them in musical form. There is a serenity and dignity about him.

Robert Frost was born in San Francisco, California, in 1875, the city like Homer's Troy, whose towers rise high above the crystal blue of the sea. An orphan at the age of ten, he moved to Lawrence, industrial center of Massachusetts in the heart of puritanical New England where his grandfather and the long line of Frosts had lived for many years. Imagine him in the public school struggling over his dull assignments, the child's poet vision ever brighter, yet each time more sad as he felt the rude shocks of reality.

He entered Dartmouth College and studied there for a short time, then at Harvard for two more years. Afterward he was a laborer, shoemaker, news reporter, schoolteacher, and a farmer, because the land called him and ancestral voices willed him. And one day, his breast swelling with the lark's lyrical emotion, a strong wind filling the sails of ships anchored at port, Robert Frost sold his farm in Derry, the gift of his grandfather, and with his wife and sons set sail for England.

There in 1913 he published *A Boy's Will*, his first book of verse. His second book, *North of Boston*, was also published in England a year later, establishing his fame as a poet in Europe and in America. Upon return to his native country in 1915 he made his home in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Without haste—"Art is long"—in twenty-two years of residence in New England, Robert Frost has produced three more books of perfect poetry, *Mountain Interval*, *New Hampshire*, and *West Running Brook*, which place him among the greatest contemporary poets of the United States. All honors which a democracy can bestow upon the disinterested labors of the spirit were brought to this artist in his mountain retreat. Universities and colleges recognized in the great poet a national value. In honoring the poet, they honored themselves.

Since Robert Frost and eight generations of Frosts before him lived close to the New England soil, it is natural that his verse should have the smell and taste of the surrounding region. Thus, gently, the last of the Yankee poets has completed the song of the land that Whittier began. The lyrical inheritance of Frost goes back to the anonymous ballad in which flourished poetry's most exquisite flower, reborn on English soil with Burns and Wordsworth, as in our days the ill-fated Garcia Lorca brought to new birth the ballad of Castille. In the fur-

rows opened by Bryan, Emerson, and Whittier, Frost planted the best of his seed and brought forth the richest harvest. And it was in his daily association with his good friends the farmhands that he learned the wisdom that books do not teach, and wrote his poetry in the home-spun speech of his people. And because his song was rooted in the soil, it entered and stayed in the hearts of his listeners.

Neither preacher, nor moralist, nor romantic, nor classic, although he feels intensely the sensual joy of beauty, Frost has limited himself to the painting of a picture of his native soil as he has felt it from his long familiarity with it. The painting is not always so tender as it was in Emerson and Whittier, nor is it the New England of the old masters. The New England in Frost's vivid poetry is like a violent whirlwind which leaves the impression of a house abandoned on the rough, rocky coast of Maine. Nor does romance flower always in the life of the village people like the daisies at the side of the road in Vermont. There are bitter, sad lives, lives undernourished spiritually and physically. In the indifferent peace of the landscape oftentimes human tragedy throbs. The space of time that separates Whittier and Frost is as great as the contrast between "Snow-Bound" and "The Death of the Hired Man." In Whittier's poem there is faith, *a tumultuous solitude*, meekness, and a swelling of internal music. The dog and cat together by the fireplace, the jug of cider, the bowl of nuts, the old man smoking his pipe, filling the air with designs of smoke, the child listening while the old lady reads and rereads the story of hunters and Indians lost in the primeval forest. All this is like a Flemish interior escaped to New England. Outside in the freezing night, the lowing of the oxen echoes the verse; snow falls on the long road, and the snow and the moon blend into a long whiteness.

Frost, on the other hand, presents in the same New England a quite different picture of the mean soil and the hard hearts of the men who till it. The death of Silas the farmer, who, ailing and old, returns one night in which

Part of a moon was falling down the west,
Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills

to the house of his employers which he had deserted in search of better fortune and dies alone in the cornloft, makes an oppressive and brutal portrayal. Both aspects of New England, as seen by two different poetic temperaments equally emotional, are true. The idyll and the elegy go

hand in hand not only on New England roads but on all roads. Whittier preferred the idyll. Frost, more experienced in things of life, remained halfway between the idyll and the elegy. Neither an optimist, nor a pessimist, Frost sees life as it is, a monochrome in which light and shadow blend, part of a drama with an entr'acte of comedy. But his tonic note is the sweet sadness of autumn afternoons, when the rain on the dead leaves grieves and the tree beside the road is a soul that thinks:

My Sorrow, when she's here with me,
Thinks these dark days of autumn rain
Are beautiful as days can be;
She loves the bare, the withered tree;
She walks the sodden pasture lane.

Small as the plot of land his grandfathers tilled is the lyrical scope of Frost. But within this scope the highest flights have been attained. There is the ballad, tender as Heine's *lieder*, of the wandering breeze falling in love with the flower:

Lovers, forget your love,
And list to the love of these,
She a window flower,
And he a winter breeze.

When the frosty window veil
Was melted down at noon,
And the caged yellow bird
Hung over her in tune,

He marked her through the pane,
He could not help but mark,
And only passed her by,
To come again at dark.

Exquisite conception that reminds one, vaguely, of that other poet of the sea and the moon, of a romantic Colombian, now almost forgotten, Julio Flores:

Ruge el mar y se encrespa y se agiganta,
La luna—ave de luz—prepara el vuelo,
Y en el momento en que su faz levanta
Da un beso al mar y se remonta al cielo.

Y aquel monstruo indomable que respira
Tempestades, y sube y baja y crece,
Al sentir aquel ósculo suspira
Y en su cárcel de rocas se estremece.

The strident *isms* of the moment in literature and in politics have made us forget the good music of yesterday, nor do we know how to carve, in the demolishing and innovating rush, new thoughts in old marble.

There was the profound concept that ripened in the long reflection; there the faithful design of a personage seen with acute perspicacity; there the humorous tale embroidered on the cloth of a love story; there the tragedy that flowers in a vision of witchery. And all this, soberly told, in stanzas of rural simplicity, without rhetorical excesses, nor witty boastings, but pregnant with feeling.

It would be vain to seek in Robert Frost the impassive gift of Parnassian art that can, as in the unforgettable couplet of Valencia,

sacrificar un mundo para pulir un verso,

nor the musical secret of the phrase, delight and torment of Poe.

Ezra Pound, inventor of new rhythms and pontiff of the Imagist school, did not succeed in making the intellectual heir of Burns a disciple of his. The voice of the sirens knew not how to retain the ship of this Ulysses, because there on the other shore a cicada sang, and its melody was sweet.