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Source: *South Atlantic Bulletin*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Nov., 1972), pp. 61-65

Published by: South Atlantic Modern Language Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3197367>

Accessed: 03-01-2019 20:44 UTC

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## THE VALUE OF SOCIAL CONSERVATISM ACCORDING TO ROBERT FROST

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A writer seldom deals frequently with a subject unless he feels that it has some value. Robert Frost is no exception. His poetry expresses social conservatism. At the same time his poetry displays his belief that this social conservatism has value.

Frost feels that “. . . life is often lived at a point where powerful forces meet. Either of these forces taken alone will warp or sometimes even destroy life. Holding these forces in equilibrium gives the most satisfactory life which this world can offer. . . .”<sup>1</sup> Frost seems to say that this indispensable equilibrium is achieved with social conservatism.

Throughout his poetry Frost demonstrates his belief that disasters result when a balance between opposing forces is not maintained. Social reformers, he says, often become so concerned with new things that they forget the potentiality of anything that is old. The effect of this type of procedure is that there is a large amount of waste. “The Wood-Pile” illustrates this point. In this poem a pile of cut wood has been left unused by “Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks.”<sup>2</sup> This wood could be used to provide warmth for some family during the cold days of winter, but it has been left “To warm the frozen swamp as best it could/With the slow smokeless burning of decay.”<sup>3</sup>

Frost also contends that too much concern for newness can cause the destruction of things (individualism, self-reliance, and personal creativeness) that are needed in any age. He expresses this idea in a letter to Louis Untermeyer: “In the general rush of change with almost everything going, I should think there would be danger that some things would be carried away that even the wildest revolutionary would be sorry to see carried away.”<sup>4</sup> In the same letter Frost states explicitly the value of social conservatism by contrasting his position concerning social affairs to Untermeyer’s position: “You want to blow the candle so you can give all your light. All right, let me hold the candle so you can give all your attention to blowing it carefully so as not to blow it out. And let me hold the matches too so that if you should blow it out we could form a society to relight it.”<sup>5</sup>

The danger of allowing the process of reform to get out of hand and sweep away things which no one wants to destroy is

actually similar to the situation found in "Rose Pogonias." The speaker of the poem and his companion have found a meadow of flowers and tall grass. They hope

That in the general mowing  
That place might be forgot;  
Or if not all so favored,  
Obtain such grace of hours,  
That none should mow the grass there  
While so confused with flowers.<sup>6</sup>

Beautiful flowers, like individualism, self-reliance, and personal creativeness, are things that make any age more pleasant; tall grass is a nuisance. If one were to rush into the meadow to cut the tall grass without first observing where the flowers were, he could destroy these flowers in the process of indiscriminately mowing.

Frost does not like socialism, scientific progress, and educational specialization. One major reason for his dislike is his belief that in each of these areas the balance between two extremes has been lost. Reformers offer socialism as a way of improving man's condition, but Frost maintains that socialism destroys the equilibrium between man's self-reliance and his reliance on other human beings by making it less disastrous to abandon self-reliance and by actually encouraging this abandonment. Scientists give the world the destructive power of nuclear weapons, but they do not have the ability to control the use of these weapons. Consequently, life itself is in danger. The world "Will find relief in one burst. You shall see. / That's what a certain bomb was sent to be."<sup>7</sup>

The area of education offers, I think, the best example of Frost's belief that allowing one of two extremes to get the upper hand warps or even destroys life. In "The Ax-Helve" one finds objects which are comparable to the product of educational specialization and the creative, thoughtful individual. Magoon of "A Hundred Collars" and the ant of "Departmental" cannot stand up to any test that is outside their specialties. They are like the ax-helve which the speaker of the poem was using when Baptiste came upon him: "You give her one good crack, she's snap raght off."<sup>8</sup> But an ax-helve that was made by Baptiste was different:

He liked to have it slender as a whipstock,  
Free from the least knot, equal to the strain  
Of bending like a sword across the knee.  
He showed me that the lines of a good helve  
Were native to the grain before the knife  
Expressed them, and its curves were no false curves  
Put on it from without. And there its strength lay.<sup>9</sup>

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The individual who is creative enough to think for himself is like one of Baptiste's ax-helves: he is capable of bending, of dealing with various aspects of life. His life is not warped by being confined to one narrow section of life.

Social conservatism has value, Frost says, as a force which serves to balance the recklessness of the social reformers. Reformers want to improve the age in which they live, just as the speaker of "The Grindstone" wanted to assist his companion in improving the sharpness of a cutting tool. But reformers must remember what the speaker of "The Grindstone" has remembered:

The thing that made me more and more afraid  
Was that we'd ground it sharp and hadn't known.  
And now were only wasting precious blade.  
And when he raised it dripping once and tried  
The creepy edge of it with wary touch,  
And viewed it over his glasses funny-eyed,  
Only disinterestedly to decide  
It needed a turn more, I could have cried  
Wasn't there danger of a turn too much?  
Mightn't we make it worse instead of better?<sup>10</sup>

The importance which Frost attaches to holding opposing forces in equilibrium, whatever these forces may be, is maintained with remarkable consistency throughout his poetry. In "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," two contending forces, duty and desire, are held in balance. The woods represent that which could divert one from performing his duty. The man in the poem stops to watch these woods fill with snow, to obey a desire to be impractical for a moment, as Pike of "From Plane to Plane" was when he hoed only one way. Yet the man in the poem does not allow desire to dominate his outlook on life:

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.<sup>11</sup>

This man is able to take life as a whole, to live with desire (impracticality) on the one hand and duty (work) on the other. Because he is capable of holding these two forces in equilibrium, he can enjoy both of them. He is like the husband of "Home Burial," who does not allow grief to destroy life. In contrast to this man and the husband of "Home Burial" is the wife of "Home Burial," who does not maintain a balance between the joy which life offers and the grief which life offers.

Another example of Frost's sense of balance is the view which he takes concerning the relationship between some divine power and man. One can only describe it as a "... middle-ground position of skepticism without relinquishing faith, on the one hand, and denial, on the other hand."<sup>12</sup> In "Sitting by a Bush in Broad Sunlight," Frost says that

We must not be too ready to scoff.  
God once declared he was true  
And then took the veil and withdrew.<sup>13</sup>

And in "Accidentally on Purpose," even though evolutionists explain man as an accident, as the modification of a former generation, even though such explanations make life appear purposeless,

Never believe it. At the very worst  
It must have had the purpose from the very first  
To produce purpose as the fitter bred:  
We were just purpose coming to a head.  
Whose purpose was it? His or Hers or Its?  
Let's leave that to the scientific wits.  
Grant me intention, purpose, and design—  
That's near enough for me to the Divine.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time that one finds these expressions of faith in a divine power, skeptical as they are, he also discovers poems, like "Design" and "The Strong Are Saying Nothing," in which Frost expresses some doubt that there is something in man that endures after death: "There may be little or much beyond the grave, / But the strong are saying nothing until they see."<sup>15</sup>

Frost's poetry is concerned with social conservatism, and Frost assigns a specific value to it. Frost himself provides the brief description that one needs to summarize what kind of poetry he offers:

I could give all to Time except—except  
What I myself have held. But why declare  
The things forbidden that while the Customs slept  
I have crossed to Safety with? For I am There,  
And what I would not part with I have kept.<sup>16</sup>

#### NOTES

1. John Doyle, Jr., *The Poetry of Robert Frost: An Analysis* (New York, 1962), p. 238.

2. Robert Frost, "The Wood-Pile," in *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York, 1949), p. 127. Hereafter cited as *Complete Poems*.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Robert Frost, *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer*, ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York, 1963), p. 97.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
6. Robert Frost, "Rose Pogonias," in *Complete Poems*, p. 19.
7. Robert Frost, "Bursting Rapture," in *Complete Poems*, p. 568.
8. Robert Frost, "The Ax-Helve," in *Complete Poems*, p. 228.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
10. Robert Frost, "The Grindstone," in *Complete Poems*, p. 234.
11. Robert Frost, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," in *Complete Poems*, p. 275.
12. Lawrance Thompson, *Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost* (New York, 1942), p. 182.
13. Robert Frost, "Sitting by a Bush in Broad Daylight," in *Complete Poems*, p. 342.
14. Robert Frost, "Accidentally on Purpose," in *In the Clearing* (New York, 1962), p. 34.
15. Robert Frost, "The Strong Are Saying Nothing," in *Complete Poems*, p. 791.
16. Robert Frost, "I Could Give All to Time," in *Complete Poems*, p. 447.

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Donald G. Wing is Associate Librarian, Emeritus, of the Yale University Library.

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