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JOEL WESTERDALE

Fiat homo: Redeeming Frost via Nietzsche

ROBERT FROST'S most famous poem—perhaps America's most famous poem—has lately undergone a makeover. “The Road Not Taken” (1916) has long inspired self-help gurus, Madison Avenue ad agencies, and graduating valedictorians who read its closing lines as a celebration of rugged individualism and the hearty pioneer spirit. But recent years have seen a shift in the poem's popular reception. In a 2013 episode of the Netflix comedy-drama *Orange is the New Black*, an inmate invokes the poem to justify her unconventional approach to earning parole, only to be chastised by another for her naiveté: “Everyone thinks the poem means to break away from the crowd and, like, do your own thing, but if you read it, Frost is very clear that the two roads are exactly the same. He just chooses one at random, and then it's only later at a dinner party when he's talking about it that he tells everybody he chose the road less travelled by, but he's lying.” The speaker may be on to something: according to the poem, the one road is “just as fair” as the other; they are worn “really about the same”; they each lay “equally.” Met with only vacant expressions, the speaker continues: “So the point of the poem is that everyone wants to look back and think their choices matter, but in reality, shit just happens the way that it happens and it does not mean anything.” Smugly unleashing her liberal arts education, our privileged inmate echoes interpretations of “The Road Not Taken” that have long circulated among scholars of American poetry. Decades ago Frank Letricchia pronounced the poem “a wolf in sheep's clothing,” arguing that while it may on the surface seem to celebrate the autonomous self, it actually points to the ultimate irrationality of the choices that define us. Frost himself called it a “tricky poem—very tricky,” claiming in public readings to have based it on his friend, the Welsh writer Edward Thomas, with whom he would take long walks while living in England, and who, regardless of which path he took, would lament he did not go the other. If the only thing distinguishing one road from the other in the poem is simply the fact that one is taken while the other is not, the choice of one over the other hardly seems

evidence of the speaker's nonconformity, and representing it as such, as he imagines he will one day do, would appear to be disingenuous.

Though the fictional jailhouse crowd may prove unreceptive to this reading, it has found purchase in the outside world, largely with the help of David Orr's 2015 book, *The Road Not Taken: Finding America in the Poem Everyone Loves and Almost Everyone Gets Wrong* (Penguin). Orr, a poetry columnist for the *New York Times*, distinguishes between the naive reading of the poem that has long dominated the poem's popular reception and which bills it as a paean to individualism, and the cynical reading, which sees it as a study in self-deception. As per the book's title, the popular reading "gets it wrong." Getting it right, however, comes at a cost. While cynical readers, like the astute inmate, may revel in their cleverness, their reading largely reduces the poem to a melancholic parody. Neither the naive nor the cynical reading is particularly appealing; nor is either on its own particularly compelling. Noting this, Orr promotes an interpretation that suspends the poem's audience between the two readings. You go down one road, and the poem is a naive celebration of individualism; you go down the other, and it becomes a cynical denunciation of self-deception in retrospection. By suspending itself between these two possibilities, the poem instantiates the quandary it portrays—situating the reader in the position of the lyrical subject who must choose one road or the other but cannot pursue both. For Orr, the conflicting interpretations reveal much about the American psyche and the way it understands itself as a product of the choices we make, even when those choices are not as sovereign as we like to pretend. Such a reading accommodates both the naive, starry-eyed nonconformist as well as the cynical inmate, all in a manner palatable to college professors weaned on irony and lyrical performativity.

And yet, even if scholars reading the poem as a symptom of American culture may want to keep this poem suspended, such a reading both relies on and belies the desire of individual readers—who want the poem somehow to land. The poem itself may reproduce the quandary it describes, but any reader who keeps its meaning suspended refuses to do precisely that which the poem says must be done, that is, to make a choice. A reading which would suspend judgment already tacitly acknowledges that neither option on its own is particularly compelling.

THERE IS, HOWEVER, another avenue of interpretation—one that, like Frost's poem, recognizes the impulse to reinterpret the past, but does so without yielding to cynicism or resorting to irony. This mode of reading

finds precedent in a figure with little connection to Frost beyond a shared regard for Emerson; a figure whose own self-representation has aroused suspicion; a man who proclaimed “I am not a man—I am dynamite!” For all his eccentricities, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) offers a positive mode of reading one’s past that recognizes the perspectival nature at the root of any account of the self and sees this not as a liability, but as an opportunity. The approach Nietzsche takes to his own past furnishes a way to read Frost’s poem that enables the work to retain the empowering declaration of autonomy espoused by the naive reading, while taking into consideration and moving beyond the cynicism that informs the poem’s recent reception.

IN THE THREE YEARS before the collapse that ended his productive life, Nietzsche entered into a sustained phase of self-reflection at least partially informed by material concerns. In 1886, E. W. Fritsch of Leipzig had purchased from Ernst Schmeitzner the rights to and, importantly, the many unsold copies of Nietzsche’s earlier works, including *The Birth of Tragedy*; *Human, All Too Human*; and *The Gay Science*. While C. G. Naumann was publishing his current writings, such as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and *The Genealogy of Morals*, the purchase and promotion of the earlier works by Fritsch presented Nietzsche with the opportunity to revisit them anew. Based on Nietzsche’s correspondence with Fritsch and the many emendations to be found in the author’s personal copies of these earlier works, Nietzsche clearly would have preferred to revise them, but much to his dismay, the publisher would not allow it until the remaining printed copies were sold. What he could do was write new prefaces or append new material. The body of the texts, however, were already printed and could not be altered.

This presented Nietzsche with a quandary, for the philosopher’s thought had undergone significant transformation in the years since he had written these works. No longer was he the Romantic Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy*, who saw the promise of redemption in the works of Richard Wagner, nor was he any more the scientifically-inclined aphorist of *Human, All Too Human* and *The Gay Science*, whose ability to topple temples outstripped his capacity to erect alternative architectures. Now he was the philosopher of the Will to Power and the Eternal Recurrence of the Same, the author of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and father of the *Übermensch*. The earlier works, while still recognizably by Nietzsche’s hand, stood on the other side of a conceptual watershed. Still, Nietzsche would not renounce them. He would, however, reinterpret them for his

readers. Thus arise the new prefaces for *The Birth of Tragedy*, *Human, All Too Human I* and *II*, *Daybreak*, and *The Gay Science*. There were other amendments (for instance, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* became *The Birth of Tragedy, Or Hellenism and Pessimism* through the addition of a new title page; and *The Gay Science* gained an entire fifth book of aphorisms), but with the new prefaces, Nietzsche did not alter his earlier works so much as resituate them from the perspective of his later philosophy. This exercise in self-representation would culminate in Nietzsche's last completed manuscript, *Ecce homo, Or How One Becomes What One Is*.

Completed in late 1888, shortly before the collapse that would end his productive life, *Ecce homo* marks what should have been a turning point in the middle-aged philosopher's career. In it he pivots from all but his most recent works and prepares the ground for his upcoming yet ultimately unrealized grand project, *The Revaluation of All Values*. Even as he moves beyond them, he does not altogether abandon these earlier publications. This is clear from the unambiguous title of *Ecce homo's* third section, "Why I Write Such Good Books." As with the new Fritzsche editions, he does not set out to change these works, but to find a way to affirm them. This enthusiastic affirmation is the hallmark of *Ecce homo*, and is also apparent from the titles of the book's other three sections: "Why I Am So Wise," "Why I Am So Clever," and "Why I Am a Destiny." Such titles easily arouse suspicions of megalomania, appearing to be early indications of the philosopher's pending mental breakdown. Yet what may seem a symptom of oncoming madness is in fact entirely consistent with the method of self-reflection and self-portrayal Nietzsche lays out explicitly at the outset of *Ecce homo*, and which accounts for the affirmation with which he greets all his works, however superannuated.

Nietzsche launches *Ecce homo*, which he began writing on his forty-fourth birthday, with a statement that reveals the method he will pursue in this self-study:

On this perfect day, when everything is ripening and not only the grapes are turning brown, a shaft of sunlight has just fallen on my life: I looked backwards, I looked ahead, I never saw so much and such good things all at once. . . . *How should I not be grateful to my whole life?* And so I tell myself my life.

Thus begins the account of a man compelled to retire early because he was plagued by migraines and nausea, a transient whose ceaseless search for relief from somatic distress separated him from friends and family and

colleagues, a scholar whose deteriorating eyesight threatened his chief occupations of reading and writing, a writer whose unsold books lay gathering dust. This man is grateful not only for the good life brought him, but for his *whole* life: his ill health, his loneliness, and even those earlier books that he would at this point actually rather revise, but may not.

This is not just a statement of affirmation; it is a declaration of method. Such is evident in the passage's final, somewhat odd statement: "And so I tell myself my life"—"*Und so erzähle ich mir mein Leben.*" Others have read this "so" sequentially (as in, *next* I'm going to tell myself about my life) or conclusively (and *therefore* I'm going to tell myself about my life). But the more natural reading of the original German is unambiguous: "And *in this way* I tell the story of my life to myself." Read thus, Nietzsche makes it clear from the outset that *Ecce homo* is quite deliberately written to reflect a spirit of gratitude derived from this single moment. Here Nietzsche exemplifies the concept he claims lies at the heart of *Ecce homo*, namely the unconditional affirmation he calls *amor fati*, the love of fate. His "formula for human greatness," as he calls it, is this: "not wanting anything to be different, not forward, not backwards, not for all eternity. Not just enduring what is necessary [...] but *loving* it." By embracing his own past, including those works he has effectively put out to pasture, Nietzsche affirms even that which he might otherwise be tempted to want to change; he renounces the desire to alter a past over which he has no power.

This notion of *amor fati* has its roots in one of Nietzsche's more notoriously perplexing concepts, the Eternal Recurrence of the Same. The latter finds its most concise formulation in the penultimate aphorism of *The Gay Science's* original edition, where he presents the following hypothetical situation:

What if a demon crept after you into your loneliest loneliness some day or night, and said to you: "This life, as you live it at present, and have lived it, you must live it once more, and also innumerable times; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and every sigh, and all the unspeakably small and great in thy life must come to you again, and all in the same series and sequence . . ."—Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth, and curse the demon that so spoke? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment in which you would answer him: "You are a God, and never did I hear anything so divine!" . . . [H]ow would you have to become favorably inclined to yourself and to life, so as to long for nothing more ardently than for this last eternal sanctioning and sealing?

Immediately thereafter Nietzsche introduces the figure of Zarathustra into his writing, closing the first edition of *The Gay Science* with the appearance of the mage.

In the course of the book to follow, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche has his title-figure present the affirmation of the past as one of the greatest challenges confronting the Will. It is where the Will “gnashes its teeth”; it is its “loneliest affliction,” for the Will is “powerless against that which has [already] been done.” Past choices cannot be unmade. Redemption, so preaches Zarathustra, can only be achieved through affirmation. He says, “To redeem the past and transform every ‘it was’ into a ‘thus I willed it!’ – that alone would be redemption to me.” Through such affirmation of the past, through the ability to assert “thus I willed it,” one redeems oneself from the desire that the past be otherwise. The Will no longer experiences the past as a limitation on its power, but rather as an extension of itself.

One finds traces of this logic in Nietzsche’s most famous statement, “What does not kill me makes me stronger.” Surely the source of the sentiment’s popularity cannot lie in its actual veracity—it is demonstrably false. Rather, the maxim’s appeal stems from the attitude it expresses. It fortifies one’s ability to cope with adversity, both present and past, and enables one to draw strength from all eventualities. Such an approach arms one against the inexorableness of what has gone before, not by actually altering the past, but by recasting it as, if not fatal, then inevitably empowering.

The unqualified affirmation that motivates *Ecce homo* stands at odds with Frost’s depiction of the friend who ostensibly inspired “The Road Not Taken.” Given Edward Thomas’s pervasive second-guessing, the poem’s title would suggest an element of regret. This is compounded by the irreversibility of the speaker’s choice: “knowing how way leads on to way / I doubted I should ever come back.” But what the lyrical subject actually claims to regret is not the particular road he chooses, but rather the fact that he has to choose at all. The formulation is as clear as it is odd: “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,” the poem famously begins, “And sorry I could not travel both / And be one traveler, long I stood.” In this peculiar formulation, it is not the splitting of the roads that vexes him, but that he cannot split himself—he must “be one traveler”—that is why he “could not travel both” and therefore must make a choice. The *individuum* here longs to be a *dividuum*. The poem thus harnesses the quandary of choice to the issue of self-identity. Being an individual

demands choice, while at the same time, making choices is the stuff of individual identity. It is precisely that which makes “all the difference,” regardless of how comparatively well the road is travelled. When the lyrical “I” pauses — “And I — / I took the one less traveled by” — the subject splits and multiplies, dramatizing this moment of decision. The decision here, however, is not which path to take—he made that choice at the beginning of the second stanza—but rather how to interpret and describe that choice. In this moment, he asserts his interpretive autonomy, that is, he determines the manner in which to interpret his own choice, and thereby that which derives from and defines our individuality.

The subtitle of *Ecce homo*—“how one becomes what one is”—makes this intellectual autobiography not so much a chronicle of historical events as an explanation. Such would also seem to be the anticipated objective of the lyrical subject’s future self, looking back on this moment at the splitting of the road: not to provide an objective account of events without interpretive intervention, but to explain how he became the person he became. The lyrical subject foresees himself interpreting this moment from a very particular perspective in the future in order to make sense of the present, not to preserve the past. Frost’s poem distinguishes between the lyrical subject who stands at the crossroads from the proleptic projection of the lyrical subject looking back on this moment. As Michael Orr would have it, the fourth stanza offers “a projection into the future [that looks] back upon the present as the past.” But there is actually no “present” in this poem, as there is no present tense — “two roads diverged”; “long I stood,” “I shall be,” etc. The lyrical subject does not actually stand at the crossroads; he is already looking back at the moment when he *was* standing at the crossroads. Why does this matter? Because what we have is not a true account of events compared to which the projected future account is merely an interpretation. The use of the past tense establishes a temporal distance between the speaker and the figure at the crossroads. This distance may be small, but Frost’s poem itself demonstrates how quickly perceptions can change: he claims he “took the other, as just as fair / And having perhaps the better claim, / Because it was grassy and wanted wear.” But then he seems to correct this impression: “Though as for that the passing there / Had worn them really about the same.” The adverb “really” emphasizes the shift in perception. What we don’t know is when this shift occurs, at what point the two paths become indistinguishable from one another. Is it at that moment of decision, or only later when the speaker looks back? With this in mind,

the speaker for whom the two paths are interchangeable himself may be the outlier, where the future self's reading of one road being less traveled aligns felicitously with the lyrical subject's initial impression. Indeed, without this alignment, the reader could not understand what is meant by the phrase "the one less traveled by."

It would seem the poem presents not a conflict between truth and self-deception, but a tension between diverse interpretations of an event: the lyrical subject's interpretation of a past event followed by his speculation regarding a possible future interpretation of that same event. The lyrical subject anticipates that from some future perspective this choice will serve as an explanation for events he has yet to experience and which cannot be foreseen. But even so, the future self he imagines will own that decision and affirm it by integrating it into his identity. If this poem leaves its audience with a choice, it need not be between a naive reading and a cynical one, between a celebration of rugged individualism and a mockery of self-deception. It is a poem about choice, a choice not just between two roads, or between two ways to interpret a poem, but between two ways to interpret one's own past. It is a choice not between naiveté and self-deception, but between a nihilistic worldview, in which "shit just happens," and the potential to make the "it was" of history into a "thus I willed it."