

Syracuse University

SURFACE

The Courier

Libraries

7-1971

The Satirical Rogue Once More: Robert Francis on Poets and Poetry

Syracuse University Library

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/libassoc>



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

"The Satirical Rogue Once More: Robert Francis on Poets and Poetry." *The Courier* 8.4 (1971): 36-39.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Libraries at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in *The Courier* by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.



The old Phillipsburg, New Jersey passenger station on the
Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad. 1913

THE COURIER

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY ASSOCIATES

VOLUME VIII, NUMBER 4

JULY, 1971

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Geddes, New York, 1829-1935: Letters of George Owens Richard G. Case	3
“I Am Satisfied With What I Have Done”: Collis P. Huntington, 19th Century Entrepreneur Alice M. Vestal	20
The D.L. & W. – A Nostalgic Glimpse	35
The Satirical Rogue Once More: Robert Francis on Poets and Poetry	36
Belva Ann Lockwood, Feminist Lawyer Sylvia G. L. Dannett	40
Open for Research . . . Notes on Collections	51
News of Library Associates	54

The Satirical Rogue Once More: Robert Francis on Poets and Poetry

The Disposable Poem

A distinction should be made between the disposable poem and the poem that time has disposed of. Of all the poems written and published throughout the ages (or written and unpublished), the overwhelming preponderance have been disposed of, in one way or another, by time. Yet from internal evidence—after a little archeological probing on our part—it is clear that these poems didn't want to be disposed of. They wanted to go on shining in use. They hoped for immortality.

By contrast, the disposable poem, so common today, does not hope for immortality, does not look forward to prolonged use, but with a charming modesty and disarming lack of ambition is content to be discarded—or so it seems—after a single reading—like the disposable napkin, the disposable handkerchief, the disposable diaper.

— Robert Francis

Robert Francis, American poet resident in Amherst, Massachusetts, has chosen a bit from *Hamlet*, “The satirical rogue says here that old men have gray beards,” as a springboard for his brief observations on poetry and poets. His book titled *The Satirical Rogue* appeared in 1968 and was followed by “The Satirical Rogue Again” in the *Massachusetts Review* of Autumn 1969 and “The Satirical Rogue Returns” in *The Virginia Quarterly*, 1970.

When “The Satirical Rogue Once More,” a collection of ten new roguish comments (of which “The Disposable Poem” quoted above is one), came to the hands of the *Courier* editors, it sparked new interest in the writer, who describes himself as “walking round and round Poetry on its pedestal and taking shots at it from every possible angle. Shots with a light gun, a water pistol, a pea shooter.” This reawakened interest led directly to another look at the Robert Francis Papers, presented to the University by Mr. Francis from 1967 to 1969, in the manuscript collection of the George Arents Research Library.

Born in Upland, Pennsylvania, Mr. Francis is a graduate of Amherst College with a master's degree from Harvard. He has done some teaching, at the American University in Beirut, Lebanon, at Mt. Holyoke College and the University of Massachusetts, and at writers' conferences among other places,

but his time has been devoted to writing since 1945. He lives alone at "Fort Juniper," his house in Amherst, doing his own chores, but the correspondence among his papers reveals that poets and lovers of poetry have been finding their way to Fort Juniper over the years as though Mr. Francis had invented the better mousetrap. The correspondence tells much more: letters for the most part from college and university professors of English, with a fair representation from fellow poets, show appreciation, affection and respect for both the person and the work of Robert Francis. Among correspondents whose letters appear in the Syracuse collection are the late author and professor John Holmes; Theodore Morrison, Harvard professor; Samuel French Morse, then of Mt. Holyoke's English department, and the late David Morton, "resident poet" at Amherst at the time of the correspondence.

Volumes of Francis' poetry include *Stand With Me Here*, 1936, *Valhalla and Other Poems*, 1938, and *The Sound I Listened For*, 1943, all published by Macmillan, *The Face Against the Glass*, privately printed in 1950, *The Orb Weaver*, Wesleyan University Press, 1960, and *Come Out Into the Sun*, published by the University of Massachusetts Press in 1965. The University of Massachusetts also published two of Mr. Francis' prose works, *The Satirical Rogue on Poetry*, 1968, and *The Trouble with Francis*, an autobiography, 1971. *We Fly Away*, a work of prose fiction, was published by Alan Swallow and William Morrow in 1948. Francis is one of America's most anthologized poets, especially in volumes prepared for college and high school youth, and his poems have also appeared in some twenty journals.

The backgrounds of many of his poems are documented in the Robert Francis Papers at Syracuse. Among them are series of "worksheets," showing the evolution of a poem from first jotting to the version finally marked by the poet as "suitable for publication." Asked by Lester G. Wells, former Rare Book Librarian at Syracuse, for some indications of his writing methods to share with poetry students at the University, Mr. Francis sent him five worksheets on his poem, "Burial," with the comment that they show how he "goes at a poem." The collection now includes many such sets of worksheets for individual poems.

Another section of particular interest in the papers preserves complete histories of all the poems in *The Sound I Listened For* and *The Orb Weaver*. These include for each poem the date of composition and state of completion of the worksheets; when the poem was sent to a particular publisher and when it was accepted and published; when it was rejected and whether by letter, cordial or otherwise, or by a rejection slip; and records regarding reviews, letters received and other pertinent papers.

The personality of this "rogue," whose satire seems so gentle until the slightly delayed backlash takes effect, emerges subtly but unmistakably from his papers: a quiet man, a man of thought, one whose love of friends and love of solitude seem not at all inconsistent, a man who can turn down an

invitation with the most gracious of letters, who can even say no-thank-you to a prestigious fraternity's invitation to membership and give his reason for declining—a suggestion of racial discrimination among the brotherhood—all without offense.

Mr. Francis has been receiving awards since 1938 when he was co-recipient of the Shelley Memorial Award. The Golden Rose Award of the New England Poetry Club followed in 1942 and the Jennie Tane Poetry Award of the *Massachusetts Review* in 1962. Phi Beta Kappa Poet at Tufts in 1955 and at Harvard in 1960, Rome Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, 1957-1958, he also won the Amy Lowell Poetry Traveling Scholarship in 1967-1968.

Mr. Francis is a serious poet who takes poetry seriously while having fun with its side effects. These he continues to satirize in his fourth and previously unpublished collection of “bite-size essays,” seven of which appear below.

The Satirical Rogue Once More

To Wield the Pen

If the Poet Laureateship were made hereditary, how many headaches could be avoided.

Surely inheritance, which has succeeded century after century in producing rulers of the British Empire, could be trusted to write a few verses.

Why shouldn't the present Laureate even now be grooming his eldest son or daughter to wield the pen?

A Wide Wide World

“Alps beyond Alps arise,” sang Pope, and the same thing could be said of poets. They keep rising into view—beyond the Alleghenies, beyond the Mississippi, beyond the Rockies. Only today I learn of a certain peak that has been looming in the poetry world these many years. Where have I been? And who am I?

Golden Edith

She was, in roughly equal proportions, the actress and the abbess, the queen and the witch.

Scores of her contemporaries rivaled or surpassed her as poet; but no one could touch her as a figure.

In an age when poets were uniformly drab, she was as gaudy as a peacock.

But her triumph was not her costume. Her triumph was to make that costume indigenous and inevitable.

She carried about with her the spaciousness of history. She was high gothic and modern.

If she made an art of arrogance and insult, it was only as an aristocrat can. Her touch was as golden as Midas's. In her *Collected Poems* you can count the word *gold* 280 times and the word *golden* 94. In anyone else this might have seemed too easy.

Without her poems we would be appreciably poorer, but without herself we would be defrauded.

Horticulture

"He was a poet, but no more concerned with poetry than a plant is concerned with horticulture," says Wallace Fowlie of Cocteau. Alas! how much concerned with horticulture many a modern plant seems to be.

The Reversible Dictum

"It begins in delight and ends in wisdom," says Frost of a poem. I was going to call this a good example of the reversible dictum. Turn it around and it is equally true. It begins in wisdom and ends in delight.

That's what I was going to say. But then I thought how few poems today begin in either wisdom or delight, end in either, or have either in the middle.

Theophilus Again

"Do you remember," I asked my poet friend Theophilus, "your telling me some time ago about your experience in being introduced to audiences and of your technique for defending yourself against the exuberance of your introducer?"

"I do," said Theophilus.

"What I want to ask is why a poet needs any introduction at all. Why doesn't he simply get up and begin? Why does he need someone to explain him, to defend him, and to praise him? Why does the audience need a pep talk before the poetry? Even the introducer often has the sense to say that the poet of the evening needs no introduction. Why doesn't he abide by his own good sense?"

"A very good question," said Theophilus. "A very good question indeed."

Invoice to Go With a Gift Copy of My Poems

A box of homemade cookies is a safer gift than a book of homemade poems. But if you will feel not the least obligation to read this book, or if you read it, to like it, the danger of burdening you may not be too great.

Let it sit in the chimney corner like Cinderella or in some obscure nook in your library, and when your eye happens to fall on it from time to time, let it bring a smile to your lips as you remember its author.