

The New Criterion

Books

June 1996

The rehabilitation of Robert Frost

by [James Tuttleton](#)

I don't mind being made controversial. No sweeter music can come to my ears than the clash of arms over my dead body when I am down.

—Robert Frost to Lionel Trilling, June 18, 1959

It was Frost's custom to prefix to successive issues of his collected poems "The Pasture," an invitation—originally published in *North of Boston*—into his pastoral world of bucolic delights:

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):
I sha'n't be gone long.—You come too.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf
That's standing by the mother. It's so young,
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
I sha'n't be gone long.—You come too.

This charming and seductive little poem I have always felt to be misleading. It promises something very interesting to see, without any labor; it guarantees a diversion, but one not overlong in its attraction; and it offers us the companionship, even the protective beneficence, of a kindly speaker who seems to know both what his work is and what our limits are in watching him do it. It is on the basis of poems like this—and there are a great many of them—that Frost attained the reputation of being a genial farmer-poet. Most readers of poetry in his time did not tire of watching Frost at his upcountry work. For remarkable poems came to record his rural chores: "Mending Wall," "After Apple-Picking," "Mowing," "Putting in the Seed," "Going for Water," "The Grindstone," and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

But Frost's pastoral world, once we are in it, can get as murky as the leaf-strewn spring, as full of risk as the field of the fragile calf that must be rescued from the coming winter blast. His pastoral verse always has a simple surface, compared to that of Eliot and Pound, but it clears suddenly into unsuspected depths. To get to the bottom of Frost requires a great deal of work and can easily become an occupation in itself. And, as Lionel Trilling remarked at Frost's eighty-fifth birthday banquet in 1959, he is hardly the benign grandfatherly figure we sometimes suppose him to be.

Brought up on the verse of the Romantic and Victorian writers, as well as the New England

“Fireside Poets,” Robert Frost (1874–1963) was well-trained in the classics and found the matter of Lucretius’s *De rerum natura* to be as contemporary as that of Wordsworth and Emerson. The conventional Romantic view was that nature is a symbol of spirit, the manifestation of the divine—that the world, as Goethe put it, is “the living garment of God.” Emerson and Whitman were convinced that man’s soul had its counterpart in the oversoul and that nature was the manifest of this benignant spiritual energy irradiating the phenomenal world. The great task of the Romantics was to find the linked meaning between the facts of nature and the world of spirit. The “doctrine of correspondences,” as it was formed by Wordsworth and Coleridge, Emerson and Whitman, generated an explosion of symbolic poetry in which the elements of nature—the daffodil, the rhodora, the humblebee, the song of the nightingale, and the elemental leaf of grass—all opened a mystical doorway into a transcendent state of being.

Frost at times seems to share in this Romantic faith in nature’s beneficence. In “Dust of Snow,” the speaker’s depression is suddenly lifted when a crow, up in a tree, shakes down on his head a branchload of snow. Through such absurd events, nature seems to perform its unexpected therapeutic ministrations. In “For Once, Then, Something,” the speaker sees something through and beyond mere phenomenal appearance, an object at the bottom of a well—“a something white, uncertain,/ Something more of the depths.” Then the clear, lucid object at the bottom of the well is blurred and blotted out when a drop falls into the well and ripples the water. “What was that whiteness?/ Truth? A pebble of quartz?” The poet is not sure. But what in fact was seen— a material stone or the metaphysical rock— remains a matter of ambiguous certitude: “For once, then, something.” Finally, in “Two Look at Two,” a man and woman— nearing the end of their nature-walk—come upon a pair of deer (a doe and buck) who stand and look back at them, over a stone wall. The deer gaze at them with an intensity that matches their own dawning understanding. Although the deer and the couple are divided by the wall, the exchange of glances makes the couple feel “As if the earth in one unlooked-for favor/ Had made them certain the earth returned their love.”

Does earth return our love? Frost was the child of Darwin’s age, and the scientist’s description of the struggle for survival and nature red in tooth and claw showed him, as well as Tennyson, intimations of a darker and more sinister force at work. It was this that provoked what Frost called his “lover’s quarrel with the world.” In “Storm Fear,” the enormous destructive power of a howling snowstorm produces such fear that the speaker seems emotionally overpowered and is nearly lured out into it, to his own destruction. Frost projects the storm as a “beast” that says “Come out! Come out!” And he observes that “my heart owns a doubt/ Whether ’tis in us to arise with day/ And save ourselves unaided.” Perhaps the most terrifying of all his nature poems is the brilliant sonnet “Design,” where he writes about a small achromatic threesome: a white heal-all (the flower is usually blue), a white spider, and a white moth that the lurking spider has just killed. If Christian theologians—like William Paley in his *Natural Theology* (1802)—had argued that the attributes of the Deity can be inferred from the design of His creation, Frost finds in His creation evidence of a terrifying pattern of death-dealing. What steered these three white objects to their fateful rendezvous?

What but design of darkness to appall?—
If design govern in a thing so small.

Like Melville’s meditation on the white whale in *Moby-Dick*, “Design” is a reflection on the ghastly and sinister implication of whiteness. It is hard to imagine which is more appalling (that is, likeliest to turn *us* pallid or white with fear): a providence that intended such destruction as befalls the moth; or an absence of all purposive agency in the world—sheer chaos (on at least the microlevels of life).

Such inner tensions and contradictions in the man highlight the new portrait of the poet by Jeffrey Meyers. He has very little to add to previous biographies of Frost, it seems to me, but he does have a

pronounced point of view about Frost the man, and he does make some claims about Frost's private life that have not heretofore been elaborated. To these I shall turn in a moment.

Meyers offers a straightforward account of the facts of the poet's life, which are in little dispute. Born in San Francisco in 1874 to a pair of transplanted New England journalists, Frost was brought back East at age eleven, after the death of his father, and the family lived for a time with his grandfather. His mother was a school teacher, and Robert was excellent in his studies, graduating in 1892 from the Lawrence (Massachusetts) High School as co-valedictorian. His chief academic rival, Elinor Miriam White, was also his high-school sweetheart; and, after a somewhat rocky courtship, they were married in 1895 and had a robust family of several rowdy youngsters. Frost was admitted to Dartmouth in 1892, then dropped out to teach; then he entered Harvard in 1897 but dropped out in 1899. There was never enough money, especially as fatherhood came on. He finally settled down on a thirty-acre farm in Derry, New Hampshire, that had been willed to him by his grandfather. After some years of farming, teaching school, and professing psychology at the State Normal School in Plymouth—while writing his poems by night—the unknown, struggling poet, at thirty-seven, took his family off to England.

This move in 1912 had a decisive effect on Frost's career, bringing him to the attention of Pound, Yeats, Edward Thomas, and a great many English and American writers and editors of verse. Pound described Frost to Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry* magazine, as “VURRY Amur'k'n, with, I think, the seeds of grace,” and he sponsored the publication of his work. Frost's first two volumes, *A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston*, were likewise very well received in England, and he returned to the United States in 1915 as something of a celebrity. John Evangelist Walsh has engagingly described this phase of Frost's life in a narrowly focused but very readable biography called *Into My Own: The English Years of Robert Frost, 1912–1915* (1988). In any case, Frost's public reputation grew year by year: during his lifetime he was awarded four Pulitzer Prizes in poetry; schoolchildren memorized his poems; his readings were usually sold-out; and in 1961 President-elect John F. Kennedy asked Frost to write a poem for the inauguration. He was the first American poet to be so honored, and it has been downhill at presidential inaugurations ever since.

Walsh's *Into My Own* is not the “definitive life” of Frost. That term (however doubtful) is usually reserved for Lawrance Thompson's three-volume *Robert Frost* (1966–1976). This book was based on thirty years of intimate acquaintance with the poet. Thompson was in continuous correspondence with Frost and often stayed with him for long stretches of time. In fact, in one of his letters Thompson told Frost that “the simple truth is that I love you.” But truth is never simple: Thompson's biography is an appalling instance of the old saw that familiarity breeds contempt. Far from being the friend Frost thought him, Thompson actually detested Frost, felt chronically put upon, and paid off every single slight in a savage hatchet job on the poet.

Thompson's Frost is given to childish tantrums, paranoid fears, jealous outbursts, murderous envy of other poets, and suicidal melancholia. If, as many thought at the time, the genial Frost was America's greatest poet, for Thompson the poet was a nasty piece of work needing a ruinous exposure. Many readers took Thompson's work at face value, as he was a respected Princeton professor. So, on the basis of the Thompson life, Helen Vendler pronounced Frost a moral “monster”; David Bromwich remarked that “a more hateful human being cannot have lived”; and the egregious Harold Brodkey claimed that Frost's “demonic vileness” actually “showed in his face.”

Frost's friends were of course appalled at Thompson's virtual assassination of the poet's character. Many of them complained vociferously, arguing that they could not recognize in this life the man they knew. But, since Thompson's life rested on such a solid research base, including a large collection of letters that Thompson controlled (it was he who produced the *Selected Letters* in 1964), their protests were dismissed as mere cronyism.

Much of the serious work about Frost in the past two decades has been devoted to the rehabilitation of Frost the man. Perhaps the most important volume in this regard has been William H. Pritchard's *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered* (1984), which originated in the recognition that Thompson's unattractive portrait is "so much at variance with what many who knew him (including myself, briefly) remembered of him." Pritchard is exceptionally generous to Thompson, even while pointing out Thompson's manifest failure to explain how a moral monster could have elicited such loyal friendships, produced such beautiful poems, or attained such an international following.

Something of this same wish to rehabilitate Frost animates Jeffrey Meyers's new life. As he remarks in the preface:

Like most readers, I accepted the conventional view, mainly propagated by Thompson, that Frost was a mean old bastard and that his nature poetry was accomplished but superficial. But I was dissatisfied with Thompson's mass of facts, which I had never been able to finish, and was convinced that Frost, a handsome and vigorous man, must have had a sexual life after his wife's death. I thought Frost deserved a more concise, lively, balanced, honest and perceptive treatment.

Balanced the book is. In this it is quite unlike Meyers's *Scott Fitzgerald* and *Edmund Wilson*—two "pathographies" that overstressed the novelist's alcoholism and the critic's sex-obsessed foot fetishism. Meyers finds much to admire in Frost the man, while not blinking at his dark mood swings and periods of elemental personal torment. Even the writer's occasional anxieties over mental illness, which afflicted a great many members of the Frost family, are treated more compassionately here than in *Manic Power*, Meyer's life of the deranged poet Robert Lowell and his circle. We come away liking Frost much more than Thompson will let us. But, as usual, the Meyers book is a rush to judgment, and the perfunctory treatment of the great poems—"Mending Wall," "Birches," "After Apple Picking," and "The Road Not Taken" among them—fails to make plain why we should care about Frost the man and the verse he produced.

As the quotation above suggests, however, Meyers was in search of Frost's sex life as a widower; and naturally he finds a love affair to flaunt and a mistress to name in Kay Morrison, Frost's personal secretary, who was "his manager, mistress and muse for the last twenty-five years of his life." A quarter-century younger than the poet, and married to boot, Kay Morrison is here presented—on very scant evidence—of simultaneously sleeping with her husband Ted Morrison, Frost, the literary critic Bernard DeVoto, and even biographer Lawrance Thompson. Meyers observes of the bed-hopping secretary that "Kay, I believe, felt great power by manipulating a number of distinguished men while assuring her place in literary history."

But aside from her *Robert Frost: A Pictorial Chronicle* (1974), whatever place Kay Morrison has in literary history seems largely to have been supplied by Jeffrey Meyers. There is not a great deal of documentation in support of Meyers' remarkable claim that the poet, then in his mid-sixties, commenced a secret love affair that extended into his seventies and eighties! Lawrance Thompson had little to say about Kay Morrison in his biography. But for Meyers this is proof that her affair with Thompson gave her power over him, and made it possible for her and her husband, Ted, to gut all references to her affair in the Thompson life. But that hardly makes sense if, as Meyers claims, she wanted to assure herself a place in literary history. Still, although very few pertinent communications of hers survive, Meyers has pieced together a baroque tale of multiple sexual intrigues that is bound to sell copies of the book.

But much more unfortunate than the gossipy tone of this life is Meyers's coarse reduction of Frost's verse to a reflection of some biographical event with which it has no evident connection. There isn't space here to note the many instances of this dismaying treatment of the poems, but perhaps one will do—the striking little couplet "The Secret Sits" from *The Witness Tree*:

We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

Frost packed into this comic little verse an intellectually serious comment about our religious rites and doctrines, the vanity of our confident theological suppositions, the enigmatic mystery of God (the central fact in our lives), and the divine omniscience that eludes human understanding. But what, for Meyers, is this poem about: you guessed it—the secret love affair with Kay Morrison.

Frost was a popular writer, and his verse was printed and reprinted in scores of editions and anthologies. He himself supervised the printing of his individual volumes, as well as the *Complete Poems* of 1949, which contained most of the verse he had composed in eleven volumes over more than three decades: *A Boy's Will* (1913), *North of Boston* (1914), *Mountain Interval* (1916), *New Hampshire* (1923), *West-Running Brook* (1928), *A Further Range* (1936), *A Witness Tree* (1942), *Steeple Bush* (1947), *An Afterword* (1949), *A Masque of Reason* (1945), and *A Masque of Mercy* (1947). At seventy-four most poets are finished, but after the appearance of the *Complete Poems*, Frost continued to write, producing *In the Clearing* in 1962, with that wonderful couplet:

It takes all sorts of in and outdoor schooling
To get adapted to my kind of fooling.

In the three decades since Frost's death in 1963, the standard edition of his verse—at least for most readers—has been *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (1969), edited by Edward Connery Lathem. This is the Holt, Rinehart and Winston text that has dominated the scene and been so often excerpted in such anthologies as *The New Oxford Book of American Verse* and *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. Lathem was a long-time friend of Frost, a Dartmouth College librarian, and the co-editor of *The Selected Prose of Robert Frost* (1966), as well as other works connected to the poet. In any case, his devotion to Frost was so well known that the Thompson biography was dedicated to him.

But the Lathem edition of the poems has provoked constant grumbling and sporadic textual criticism since it first appeared. The recurrent complaints at length led the poet Donald Hall to produce a detailed collation of all the printed texts of Frost. And in "Robert Frost Corrupted," published in the March 1982 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Hall pointed to ample evidence showing that Lathem had corrupted the texts of Frost's poems by arbitrarily adding commas, removing commas, adding and removing hyphens, compounding words, altering dashes, adding question marks, removing and adding parentheses, etc. Some 1,117 of Lathem's changes in the "accidentals" (or punctuation of the poems) had no relation whatsoever to the poet's known final intention.

Lathem justified his alterations as necessary to clarity and correctness. But their effect in fact was to alter the meter and rhythm of the poems and, in some cases, to obscure or even change their meanings. Such changes were disastrous for a poet who insisted that he achieved his distinctive cadences "by skillfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre." As he remarked in a letter to John Cournos in 1914, he liked to get into "strained relation" the "very regular preestablished accent and measure of blank verse" and "the very irregular accent and measure of speaking intonation": "I like to drag and break the intonation across the meter as waves first comb and then break stumbling on the shingle." Given the poet's view of the relation of syntax, punctuation, and meter, Hall rightly argued that "a responsible literary scholar should be commissioned to edit a variorum edition of Frost's poems" that would "re-establish Frost's intended punctuation." He may have had in mind Richard Poirier, whose *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (1977) had established Poirier as one of Frost's most perceptive critics.

It would be pleasant to report that the new edition of Frost's poetry in the Library of America, edited

by Mr. Poirier and Mark Richardson, undertook to offer such a variorum, but this is not the case. It would be even better to report that the Library's Frost volume was a complete re-editing of the text of the poems prepared according to the copy-text principles of the Center for Scholarly Editions. (After all, in mangling the Richard Wright volume, the editors—evidently including Mr. Richardson—felt fully justified in abandoning the principle of reprinting the standard text. Instead they re-edited Wright's work so as to include manuscript passages Wright had rejected in the final printed texts.) But the Library's Frost is not re-edited from the ground up either.

What we have in the Library of America volume is in fact merely a reprint of the 1949 *Complete Poems* and *In the Clearing* (1962). We must be grateful for small favors, however, for these texts are more trustworthy than those of Edward Connery Lathem. Here the Library of America also gives us some ninety-four uncollected poems, including seventeen printed here for the first time. Frost's three plays—*A Way Out*, *In an Art Factory*, and *The Guardeen*—are also included. And the volume is rounded out with eighty-eight pieces of prose—most of them based on the texts in Mr. Richardson's 1993 Rutgers doctoral dissertation, "The Collected Prose of Robert Frost: A New Critical Edition." These include essays such as "The Figure a Poem Makes," lectures, introductions to collections, and passages about the art of poetry found in the letters. The result is a rich compendium of Frost materials.

There are no gems in the unpublished verse, and it goes without saying that Frost was not a playwright. But Frost's characteristic wit and humor, his distrust of politicians, his interest in science and other such topics do come through in the unpublished material. Here is "The Seven Arts" (1917), an uncollected little limerick on politically correct critics in the era of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, and *The Seven Arts* magazine (which had lost its funding over its left-wing pacifist line in World War I):

In the Dawn of Creation that morning
I remember I gave you fair warning.
The Arts are but Six!
You add Politics
And the Seven will all die a-Bourneing.

Notes

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1. *Robert Frost: A Biography*, by Jeffrey Meyers; Houghton Mifflin, 424 pages, \$30. [Go back to the text.](#)
2. *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays*, edited by Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson; Library of America, 1,036 pages, \$35. [Go back to the text.](#)

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 14 June 1996, on page 65

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