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The Frost of Prose

SINCE ROBERT FROST'S DEATH AT NEARLY 90 in January 1963, the fruitful ground of his poetry and life has been ploughed over many times, chiefly by a following of intensely divided American academics. Frost's poems, of course, always and seemingly forever popular, have been reprinted in edition after edition, especially in the USA. The outpouring of memoirs, critical studies and biographies, however, is the more fulsome for having been enlivened by controversy. In his splendid literary biography, *Robert Frost: A Life* (London: Heinemann, 1998), Jay Parini outlines three main waves of Frostian contention. The first began in about 1927 with two or three short, complimentary studies presenting views of the genial farmer-poet and philosopher-sage the poet himself promoted. This homespun image survived Lionel Trilling's astounding pronouncement at Frost's eighty-fifth birthday dinner that Frost was, in his best poems, "a terrifying poet"; yet in the 1960s, with a few exceptions, critics and biographers alike confirmed popular opinion. Then, in the late '70s, the bombshell fell. Sometime in the 1940s, Frost had appointed Lawrance Thompson, a young Princeton professor whom he thought understood him, as his official biographer—surely the most self-damaging calculation the poet ever made. For when Thompson's three-volume life of Frost appeared in full, it turned the amiable image of its subject inside out, presenting Frost as a "monster" of egotism and selfishness, a careless husband, a bad father, a man of unlimited ambition, eaten up, behind a public mask of bucolic wisdom, with envy, misery and vindictive anger.

Thompson's biography naturally provoked a reaction, and a third wave of Frost criticism soon appeared, written by friends, students and descendants determined to defend him. One of the clearest, most detached of Frost's defenders was William H. Pritchard, whose *Robert Frost, A Literary Life Reconsidered* (1984) presented Frost as a great artist in the New England tradition whose volatile, very complex mental life (rather than the details of his personal life) had nourished his poetry. Pritchard's study of Frost's independent "play of mind", together with Parini's fair and sympathetic portrait, have done much to restore Frost's reputation—although further accusations were forthcoming in 1996 with the publication of Jeffrey Meyers' *Robert Frost*, a volume that relies heavily on hearsay about the poet's close relationship, after the death of his wife, with his secretary and friend Kay Morrison.

The biographical wars that at the end of the last century threw up so much dust have little to do with the two critical studies here under review except as they have enlarged the field of Frost studies enough to make such studies worthwhile.

The Collected Prose of Robert Frost, ed. Mark Richardson, (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts/ London, England), 2007, \$39.95.

Robert Frost: The Poet as Philosopher by Peter J. Stanlis, (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books) 2007, with an introduction by Timothy Steel.

Frost notoriously resisted writing and publishing prose. Mark Richardson admits as much in his Introduction to *The Collected Prose*, recounting with some amusement the poet's reluctance and final refusal to write out for publication his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, delivered at Harvard in 1936. "I thought I was about ready to let [the lectures] set when I accepted the Harvard invitation to deliver them in writing after delivering them by word of mouth," Frost wrote in 1938. "Something in me still fights off the written prose." In 1941 he promised to produce a book of prose for his publisher, Henry Holt & Company. This, likewise, never materialized. Trial runs for such a book are kept in manuscript in the Dartmouth College Library, providing texts for two of the principal essays in Professor Richardson's collection: the 1931 'Education by Poetry' and an undated essay (1941?) called 'The Last Refinement of Subject Matter: Vocal Imagination.' Still, although Frost never wished to publish his lectures, his acolytes have left no manuscript unturned in their eagerness to make books. Frost's *Selected Letters* (Lawrance Thompson) appeared in 1965; his *Notebooks* (Robert Faggen) in 2006. Now, with the publication of the present volume of *The Collected Prose*, the Frost canon looks to be complete.

At first glance, Mark Richardson's gleanings look a bit thin. Frost's two famous prefaces to different editions of his *Collected Poems* – 'The Figure a Poem Makes' (1939) and 'The Constant Symbol' (1946) – are not enough to give even this slender volume the appearance of completeness. The real value of this collection of lectures, tributes, essays and recorded speeches is to be found in the copious and meticulous notes that fill nearly half the volume at the end. Not only is every prose item dated and given a context in the poet's history, but in each case comparisons – called collations – are made between all the extant drafts. It is in some ways unfortunate that, in order to arrange the notes by number, Professor Richardson felt obliged to number every paragraph of Frost's text, thus making reading it feel unnatural. However, the notes, together with a fine explanatory introduction, are so often the gold in Mr. Richardson's ore that on the whole I would say that no student of Frost, and certainly no scholar who proposes to write about him, can afford to miss this book.

It's perfectly possible, of course, to enjoy Frost's poems without looking into his prose, for no poet was ever more completely and stubbornly a poet than he was. The character of the man behind the poems is detectable as early as 1891 in a high-toned editorial contributed to the Lawrence (Massachusetts) *High School Bulletin* by its newly elected editor: "... this chair, when not acting as a weapon of defense, will be devoted to the caprices of its occupant. Properly speaking it will be an easy chair, sufficiently roomy for practicing the divine art, 'abandon.'"