

[Robert Frost: The Poet as Philosopher, Peter J. Stanlis, 151, 400 pages]

The Poet as Conservative

By W. Wesley McDonald

ALTHOUGH ROBERT FROST was one of the most popular poets of the 20th century, he remains something of an enigma. His official biographer, Lawrance Thompson, plainly disliked him and presented a cruel, lonely, and angry misanthrope. More sympathetic biographies have appeared since this act of “deliberate character assassination,” as Stanlis describes it, but the adverse image created by Thompson persists.

Moreover, even Frost’s admirers have paid insufficient attention to the philosophy that informed his work. The purpose of this extensive and detailed study is both to rescue the poet from his detractors and to provide a profound analysis of the unifying ideas that underpinned his work.

My earliest recollection of the four-time Pulitzer Prize winner was at John F. Kennedy’s inauguration in 1961. On that bitter, blustery January day, Frost struggled vainly to read his poem, “Dedication,” composed especially for the occasion. Blinded by the intense glare of the snow-reflected sun, he eventually gave up and instead recited “The Gift Outright” from memory.

As a rabid 14-year-old Republican, I presumed Frost was a liberal Democrat. Of course, my opinion had nothing to do with what he said on that memorable day. Yet Frost, though an ardent Democrat, was no liberal. No president since Grover Cleveland had pleased him. He defended localism, custom, prescriptive institutions, individual self-reliance, and social hierarchy against the collectivizing and centralizing orientation of the Roosevelt administration. He was fond of Edmund Burke and harshly critical of progressivism, utilitarianism, Social

Darwinism, and every kind of collectivist ideology. As he wrote in his poem “Build Soil—A Political Pastoral,” he was a “states-rights free-trade Democrat,” a predilection, he observed elsewhere, inherited from his father and grandfather. Such Democrats today have gone the way of the dodo.

Peter Stanlis met Frost in 1939 at the Bread Loaf Graduate School of English in Ripon, Vermont. Their relationship continued for 23 years, and Stanlis came to know Frost as a mentor and friend. In this book, Stanlis draws liberally from their frequent conversations. In 1941, the young student promised his teacher that he would write a book about his poetry and philosophical beliefs. Little did Stanlis suspect that it would take 60 years to fulfill his promise.

Frost was inadvertently responsible for the long delay. Stanlis mentioned to his professor Louis I. Bredvold of the University of Michigan that he had heard Frost praise Burke. A widely published Burke scholar, Bredvold persuaded Stanlis to write his dissertation on Burke. A revised version of Stanlis’s work was published as *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* (1958), a seminal book, now in its fourth edition, that has substantially influenced Burke scholarship.

Stanlis rejected studies of Burke that had depicted him as a conservative utilitarian. He argued that Burke’s thought was rooted firmly in the Classic Natural Law tradition. “In practical politics,” Stanlis said elsewhere, “this counter-revolutionary interpretation of Burke became the basis for the conservative movement in modern American politics, first advanced by Russell Kirk in *The Conservative Mind* (1953), until it was subverted by the self-styled neo-conservatives.”

For decades, Stanlis’s work on Burke distracted him from his promise to Frost. For 13 years he published and edited a journal, *Studies in Burke and His Time*. He also wrote 23 articles, edited or wrote seven books on Burke, and co-authored an annotated bibliography of everything written by and about Burke. He remains the foremost living Burke scholar. “It is

incongruous,” he admits, “that Frost’s high praise of Burke’s politics in the 1940s should have resulted in my commitment to so much scholarship on Burke that it led me to consistently postpone my promise to Frost that I would write a book on his art and philosophical beliefs.”

The focus of *The Poet as Philosopher* is the dualism in Frost’s poetry and teaching. “My subject is Robert Frost’s philosophy,” he explains, “and my thesis is that dualism provides the whole basis of his total unsystematic philosophical view of reality.” Dualism is essential to comprehending Frost’s views on religion, science, and poetry. “Dualism as the basis of Frost’s philosophy,” Stanlis stresses, “is the foremost single element that scholars and literary critics need to consider in any study of his life and thought, including the themes of his poetry.” Most scholars have either ignored or failed to grasp this vital element of Frost’s work.

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THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
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Philosophical dualism entails the view that all reality "consists of two distinct, absolute, and all-inclusive elements, most commonly identified as matter and mind, or as Frost preferred, matter and spirit." Accepting the God-given condition that all things are endlessly paired in everlasting opposition, Frost was convinced of "the difficulty or impossibility of resolving complex religious, moral, intellectual, and social problems through well-intentioned but simple monistic assumptions, methods, or conclusions." Examples of opposites include rights-duties, hot-cold, God-Devil, woman-man, war-peace, day-night, fact-fiction, motion-rest, whole-part, and so forth endlessly. Frost believed, Stanlis elaborates, "that all sound thinking was essentially metaphorical ... involving comparisons, contrasts, parallels, conflicts, contradictions, ambiguities, and so forth, within a vast range of interactions between matter and spirit." His dualistic view of reality was the link between his poetry and teaching.

The opposite of dualism is monism. For the monist, reality consists of just one element. The pre-Socratic thinkers, Plato and modern ideologists are monists. They seek "to harmonize, reconcile, integrate, and synthesize those apparent opposites and unify them into an organic whole." Modern ideologists

beings, in other words, were divinely created out of animal life. He went beyond Darwin's purely biological account to stress the importance of culture and tradition in shaping man. Rather than being a slave to the impersonal forces of nature, man plays a significant role in his own evolution. Man

FROST AND KIRK HELD SIMILAR VIEWS ON THE SOCIAL NATURE OF MAN AND THE INDISPENSABILITY OF CUSTOM AND TRADITION FOR CIVILIZED EXISTENCE.

employ reason as an instrument to acquire knowledge for the purpose of guiding mankind toward a single world government. Frost thought their pernicious influence ineluctably led to absolutism and fanaticism.

The chapter on Frost's views about biological evolution is of particular interest. Frost's insights on this controversial issue could be a useful addition to the debate about "intelligent design" and evolution. He saw no real conflict between religion and science. Charles Darwin is often perceived as an atheist who thought that reality consists of matter alone. Social Darwinists such as Herbert Spencer, pseudo-Darwinists, and the scientific materialist Thomas Henry Huxley, have spawned such distorted versions of Darwin's theory of evolution. But Darwin was, in fact, a theist who never accepted the materialist concept of reality. He did not believe that natural selection alone was responsible for the modifications of species. The impersonal, phenomenal forces of Nature do not explain evolutionary change. The creative power of both God and man plays a role. Frost had a highly favorable opinion of Darwin and blamed Huxley and Spencer for misrepresenting the theory of evolution. He preferred what he called "creative evolution" as an alternative explanation to the materialistic and atheist theories that claimed evolution was driven by laws of natural selection and "survival of the fittest." "You say, God made man of mud, and I think God made man of prepared mud," he often said. Human

is not driven purely by the biological lust to reproduce; he possesses the free will to choose with whom he mates. This capacity to choose, what Frost called "passionate preference," involves "man's social, moral, and religious conception of love in a divinely ordained institution of marriage."

One striking characteristic of Frost's social, moral and political thought is how closely it resembles that of Russell Kirk. Frost and Kirk held similar views on the social nature of man and the indispensability of custom and tradition for civilized existence. They also shared a distaste for collectivizing and egalitarian ideologies, a preference for the agrarian way of life, an appreciation of Burke, and an opposition to most of the innovative trends in college and university instruction.

They both abhorred what Kirk called "defecated reason," which entails the belief that all things can be understood and all problems solved through mathematical and scientific process. Frost and Kirk saw that the most important things, such as God and moral norms, lie beyond the power of reason. People act independently of any empirical evidence or mathematical method. They cannot prove what they believe. Prejudice, by necessity, precedes judgment. Like Burke, both Frost and Kirk recognized the value of prejudice for social life. Frost stressed that the inherited wisdom of our ancestors, embodied in our prejudices, favors family, community, church and state. "Prejudice is part of every person's entailed inheritance," he main-

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tained, criticizing the tendency to dismiss prejudice as superstition.

On questions of educational reform, Kirk and Frost called themselves “radicals.” They deplored the replacement of the traditional college curriculum based in the classics and humanities with mere vocational training. Both detested the progressive educational theories of John Dewey, which, Frost believed, undermined the discipline and sense of tradition essential to effective instruction, and rendered students’ minds into empty vessels to be filled with their instructor’s ideological preferences. They believed that colleges offered little of value to the truly talented mind.

Despite these similarities between Kirk and Frost’s conservatism, I can find little evidence of mutual influence. Frost’s ideas were fully formed decades before Kirk began his active writing. During my long association with Kirk, I don’t recall him ever mentioning Frost. Although he quotes Frost’s poetry once in *The Conservative Mind*, he was not deeply read in it. In his memoirs, *The Sword of Imagination* (1994), Kirk mentions Frost only three times, and then only in passing. He praised the poet for remaining a man of letters rather than venturing into politics. Moreover, he noted that Frost “exercised a subtle influence for political sound sense that will endure” while in *The Conservative Mind* he declared that Frost’s “political conservatism is undeniable.”

Stanlis’s magnificent and admiring study of his teacher corrects Thompson’s distorted image of Frost as a “moral monster.” Like Edmund Burke, T.S. Eliot, and Kirk, Frost embraced the “permanent things” in an age of ideology. He was, as Stanlis has demonstrated in this impressively documented examination of Frost’s philosophy, one of the principal champions of the moral imagination in 20th-century American letters. ■

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MUSIC

Stuffing the Jukebox

By A.G. Gancarski

ACCORDING TO THE *New York Post*, “As [Barack] Obama and his wife, Michelle, strolled triumphantly into his victory party in Des Moines, Iowa, on Jan. 3, Jay-Z’s ‘99 Problems’ was blaring. In it, Jay raps, ‘I got 99 problems, but a b-tch ain’t one.’” Obama’s campaign denied the dig, but took care to maintain their candidate’s coolness quotient: “I’m sort of hip to the younger stuff,” Obama told CNN. “You know, like Beyoncé’s ‘Crazy in Love.’ That’s a good song to dance to.” The same can’t be said of Pearl Jam’s painful recycling attempt, “Rock Around Barack.” It’s as brutal and artless as the title suggests.

From the early days of the Republic, the right stump music has been essential for aspiring presidential candidates. At first, campaigns simply adapted well-known melodies to fit their slogans. But by the time ditties such as 1912’s “We’re Ready For Teddy Again” surfaced, political operators were originating jingles as slick as the popular songs of the time.

Then campaigns reverted to the old practice of borrowing familiar tunes. Truman’s “I’m Just Wild About Harry” was an update of a song written for the 1921 musical “Shuffle Along.” Frank Sinatra’s “High Hopes,” so strongly associated with Jack Kennedy’s campaign of 1960, was a knock-off of the crooner’s chart single from the year before. Same song, different lyrics: an apt metaphor for the American political process.

In recent decades, campaign music has declined even further. With a few exceptions, the current fashion is uninspiring, amiable pop. Most candidates employ music cynically. They divest

the form of power and turn it into something comparable to their speeches: bland pabulum for the credulous masses.

During the 1988 cycle, the Bush/Quayle operation employed Lee Greenwood’s execrable “God Bless the U.S.A.”—an apt expression of the Southern strategy of the campaign: ersatz patriotism over a soporific background of New Country schmaltz. Conservatives of later campaigns, observing that Greenwood’s slush had worked for Bush, used it again and again at GOP rallies, long after the song had first topped the charts.

Candidates continue to search for the sonic Holy Grail to encompass the vision, atmosphere, and values of their campaigns. Sometimes they strike the right note, as when the Clinton campaign of 1992 adopted Fleetwood Mac’s “Don’t Stop Thinking About Tomorrow.” The fact that members of the group, such as John McVie, were by then Republicans didn’t matter. The major chords and the unabashed optimism of the chorus suggested, at least for ’70s nostalgia-junkies, that “yesterday’s gone” and the Clintonian world would be “better than before.” It’s easy to heap opprobrium on this soundtrack choice, but it played well enough with voters.

Most candidates don’t get that lucky. Many rely on tracks already used by casualties of earlier campaigns. Mitt Romney walked out to the Junkie XL remix of Elvis Presley’s “A Little Less Conversation,” which had been used in the last presidential election by Howard Dean. The song was a dancefloor stormer in a certain type of club a few years back, yet its undeniable energy obviously failed to translate into electoral success.

As unsuccessful Romney’s campaign was, at least his team was able to make a decision about what tunes to play, which is more than can be said about Hillary Clinton’s advisers. Gearing up for her campaign, Senator Clinton posted a blog on her website asking the public to help her pick a song. The exercise showed exactly what is wrong with