



COMMENDABLES

Behind the Pogonias

by Brian Murray

William H. Pritchard: *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered*. Oxford University Press; New York.

In 1922 *The Literary Digest* asked selected American poets and novelists to name "the most important" living American writer: Joseph Hergesheimer finished first and Eugene O'Neill second; Sherwood Anderson edged out Willa Cather for third. For fifth place James Branch Cabell tied Robert Frost, who first gained wide attention in 1915 with the American publication of *A Boy's Will*, his first book of poems.

In the decades that followed, Hergesheimer and Cabell plunged into obscurity, and Anderson—whose *Winesburg, Ohio* was described by Susan Sontag as "dogged and pretentious"—became, in some quarters, something of a joke. O'Neill and Cather remained widely respected, but neither came close to achieving the enormous popularity and acclaim of Robert Frost. By the late 1950's, Frost was America's unofficial poet laureate—the regular recipient of testimonial dinners, honorary degrees, and senatorial proclamations.

Frost deserved the accolades. He produced solid, often indisputably first-rate verse for close to five decades. Consider "The Gift Outright," "The Black Cottage," "Two Tramps in Mudtime," and "The Death of the Hired Man." As these poems remind us, Frost steered clear of self-pity and morbid introspection. He combined precise diction, careful phrasing, and a brilliant narrative sense; on occasion he frankly celebrated time-honored American values: work, thrift, self-reliance. Indeed, as David Perkins has noted, Frost was "one of the few significant writers of the 20th century whose work seems to preserve poise and sanity of mind."

Of course, some American critics—particularly those with leftist inclinations—found much of Frost's work most unpalatable. Edmund Wil-

son, who cut his teeth on Rimbaud and Mallarmé, thought Frost's neo-Georgian style and New England settings "excessively dull." Granville Hicks complained that there were no factories in Frost's poems and no allusions to the theories of Sigmund Freud. Rolfe Humphries suggested that the older Frost got, the more he sounded like Edgar Guest. Horace Gregory insisted that he detected, in Frost's *A Further Range* (1936), the voice of Calvin Coolidge.

After his death in 1963, Frost's reputation did suffer a more general decline, but not principally because the objections of the likes of Humphries and Hicks had begun to take their toll. It was Lawrance Thompson's biography—published in three volumes between 1965 and 1976—that prompted many to reexamine not only their sense of Frost's poetry, but their admiration for Frost the man. As William Pritchard points out, Thompson portrayed a generally venal and vindictive Frost, and many American reviewers—like gossip matrons in a beauty salon—eagerly repeated the charge. Helen Vendler, for example, proclaimed Frost "a monster"; Howard Moss dubbed him a "mean-spirited megalomaniac." Another reviewer decided that he simply could not imagine a human being more "hateful" than the cagey old fraud who hid behind "Birches" and "Rose Pogonias."

As Pritchard notes, making one's way through Thompson's biography is a bit of a chore. The book is filled with important dates and not irrelevant domestic details, but it also displays a flat and overweight prose style that Vendler aptly described as "doughy." It is, moreover, badly skewed. Thompson, Pritchard suggests, was obviously earnest and well-intentioned, but he simply failed to appreciate Frost's sense of irony, theatricality, and play. He was "overeager to fix Frost in explanatory categories," and thus was quick to find in virtually every one of Frost's actions "another example of retaliation, or vindictiveness, or arrogant 'spoiled-child' behavior." The "particularly unattractive" Frost whom Thompson portrays is then—according to Pritchard—"much at variance" with the real-life Frost whom many still remember with vivid-

ness and some affection.

Pritchard, who teaches at Amherst, made the pages of *USA Today* some months back when he publicly protested the cancellation in his viewing area of *Search for Tomorrow*—one of the hoarier afternoon soaps. He is not, however, a lightweight. He is invariably perceptive and fair; he is—as his 1968 study of Wyndham Lewis also proves—a reliable guide to the difficult works of complicated and often cantankerous authors. Pritchard's well-written and balanced life of Frost is short on scandal and long on intelligent exegesis; all who attend to it will find it worth their while. cc

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A Vibrant Voice

by Jane Greer

Stevie Smith: *A Selection*; Edited by Hermione Lee; Faber and Faber; London and Boston; \$16.95.

Voice, it is called: that quality of certain poets' accumulated poems which stamps their singular metrics or syntax or vocabulary onto our personal sound-system. *Voice* makes us unconsciously imitate the music of a good poet we've been studying. *Voice* lets us recognize the author without peeking at the cover.

Now, it's true that every second slim little poetry volume on the "market" today carries, zipped up snug in its jacket, a blurb by some other famous or infamous poet who claims that *this* new poet possesses a "tremendous sense of voice." In this usage, *voice* means . . . well, I'm not sure. I would challenge all such jacket-quoted literati to identify other, unsigned poems by their protégés from a pile of similar—and equally insignificant—others. It should be worth a hefty grant if they can do it.

But the *voice* in Stevie Smith's poetry is genuine. So, too, is the intelligence, grand and pointed enough to understand human vulnerability to arrogance, cruelty, doubt, sin. Together, these two gifts *should* be enough to overcome the sometime disapproval of strict formalists (Smith is shocking and

relentlessly playful and quite sacrilegious—one might even say *capitalistic*, she uses them so—toward the twin gods of meter and rhyme) or strict free-versifiers (even her prosier poems and prose works are far from prosaic, which must distress devotees of the cult of Just Write What You Feel). In fact, Smith, a student of classical English poetry and a highly talented metricist with a faultless ear, is “strict” about little else but making us see ourselves as we are. Only she does it with vastly more wit and affection than your basic modern clergyperson.

Smith felt driven, in many of her poems, to expose the ridiculous, complacent, snobbish, unduly complicated side of modern established Christianity, the side that is highly fortified not against the Devil, but against newcomers to the communion. “Was He Married?” is a cynical, wistful litany of the ways in which Christ did *not* share in the earthly sorrows of real humans; yet the poem’s ending hints at Smith’s philosophy: “To choose a God of love, as [Man] did and does, / Is a little move then? // Yes, it is. // A larger one will be when men / Love love and hate hate but do not deify them? // It will be a larger one.” “The Airy Christ” couches in its charming musicality some bull’s-eye theology: “Whatever foolish men may do the song is cried / For those who hear, and the sweet singer does not care that he was crucified. // For he does not wish that men should love him more than anything / Because he died; he only wishes they would hear him sing.”

“The Airy Christ” and “The River Deben” (which, like many of Smith’s poems, explores a longing for death) are as *organic* as any poems in modern English literature—perfect, memorable matings of content and form. Songs as poetry is meant to be song, they speak of humankind’s oldest and deepest sorrows. Yet this organic quality is present in nearly all Smith’s poems, even the silly ones. Her rhyme is at once artificial (like Ogden Nash, she sometimes goes to great lengths to get there from here) and absolutely natural (her lines are seldom unconversationally metered, which only shows how metrical human conversations really are). Nothing could be more “natural” than the half-rhymes, internal rhymes, alliteration, and tight metrics crammed into the inconspicuous two-line “To an American Publisher”: “You say I must write another book? But I’ve just written this one. / You liked it so much that that’s the reason? Read it again then.” Her rueful recipe for ceasing to long for death, stated in

“Thoughts About the Persons From Porlock,” is, “Smile, smile, and get some work to do / Then you will be practically unconscious without positively having to go.” Robert Lowell had it right when he wrote about Smith’s “cheerfully gruesome voice”; her poems are dark as Charles Addams’ cartoons, but softened with a tenderness lacking there.

The poems in *Stevie Smith: A Selection* were picked from *The Collected Poems of Stevie Smith*, published in England in 1976 and in the U.S. in 1983 (Smith died in 1971). The prose was extracted mainly from Smith’s novels and other works. If, as Lee says, “The suspicion that [Smith] is an over-rated minor English comic writer is likely to persist,” what has she done to alleviate the problem? How, for instance, does Lee’s *Selection* stand up against the *Selected Poems* compiled by Smith herself and published in 1962?

Very well, thank you. There are a few small poems in Smith’s selection which perhaps should have been included in Lee’s, but the omissions are not grave, and all the best poems in the former—50 or so of them—appear in the latter. In addition, of course, the best of the poems Smith published between 1962 and her death, and representative excerpts from her equally highly voiced prose, are offered in this new selection. Hermione Lee’s book, “designed especially for students but also for the general reader,” is slender and strong enough to astonish a few Lit. 202 classes and, together with Smith’s original kinky drawings, leads provocatively to the larger, complete works of this underrated poet. cc

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They Were the World

by Gary Jason

Miron Dolot: *Execution by Hunger: The Hidden Holocaust*; W.W. Norton; New York; \$16.95.

Most people are unconcerned about the plight of the very poor because they have their hands quite full enough providing for the health and safety of their own families. But then there are “the fashionably concerned,” those who are very concerned that they *appear* concerned about the poor. One thinks of certain entertainment person-

alities, religious leaders, and (of course) academics.

In such circles, public indifference is now considered bad form. Professors ritualistically bemoan poverty (and oppression and other bad things), but rarely reach into their own pockets. Similarly, entertainers who enjoy feeling publicly guilty of being American rarely do penance by donating the princely sums their countrymen pay them for mediocre work. Instead, they keep their fortunes and make themselves highly visible in fund-raising efforts—like the rock video *We Are the World*. Truly helping the needy, however, requires more than goodwill and generosity. It requires an arduous study of what caused the hunger and of what actions will eliminate these causes.

Anyone genuinely concerned about those now suffering in Ethiopia should read Miron Dolot’s powerful new book, *Execution by Hunger*. Dolot eloquently describes the famine that the Soviet government inflicted upon the Ukraine and other areas in 1932-33. Dolot rightly calls the Great Famine a holocaust. Five to seven million died in the Ukraine alone, along with half the population of Kazakhstan. These people were killed as part of the official government policy set by Stalin. They died not because of anything they had done as individuals, but because they belonged to the wrong social groups.

Stalin committed this genocide to complete his ruthless campaign of collectivization. Agriculture, which had recovered from the ravages of the revolution and civil war, was deliberately devastated by a campaign to force peasants off their own land and drive them into the communes. Former serfs were to be landless once again. The property of 25 million peasant households was to be combined into 250 thousand collective and state farms. The kulaks (i.e., all successful farmers) were to be liquidated as a class—and that meant killing millions of people.

Statistics cannot convey the real horror of such an event. Dolot vividly describes what he witnessed, much as Solzhenitsyn did in *The Gulag Archipelago*. The result is a vivid but frightening account of how a village filled with decent, closely knit, quiet religious folk can be put through hell. Dolot conveys his insights through fascinating vignettes. Those who sympathize with liberation theology would greatly profit from the story of the Marxist priest (affectionately known to the villagers as “Comrade Judas”), who helped destroy the village church during a government-staged riot. His description