

The Personal Heresy

by Peter J. Stanlis

"Every great man nowadays has his disciples, and it is always Judas who writes the biography."

—Oscar Wilde

Robert Frost: A Biography

by Jeffrey Meyers

New York: Houghton Mifflin Company;
424 pp., \$30.00

In 1978 I published "Acceptable in Heaven's Sight: Robert Frost at Bread Loaf, 1939-1941," an account of three of eight summers of conversations with the poet in which—probably for the first time in print—he summarized the many serious flaws in the deliberately warped and repulsive portrait of Frost presented in Lawrance Thompson's "official" three-volume biography. Six years later, William H. Pritchard's *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered* corrected some of the more grievous faults in Thompson's work, while covering only a few selected portions of the poet's life. In a review-article of Pritchard's book, I emphasized that a new, accurate, complete, and balanced biography of Frost was badly needed.

The specific grounds of Thompson's mean-spirited biography were revealed in 1986 by Donald G. Sheehy in an excellent article, "The Poet as Neurotic: The Official Biography of Robert Frost." Examining the approximately 2,000 pages of Thompson's "Notes from Conversations with Robert Frost" in the Manuscripts Department of the University of Virginia Library, Sheehy discovered that Thompson had radically revised the first two volumes of his biography to fit his psychological portrait into the neo-Freudian psychiatric theory of Karen Horney's book, *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self-Realization*. Sheehy noted that Thompson had made "a chapter-by-chapter outline of Horney's work" and then

Peter J. Stanlis is professor emeritus of Rockford College in Illinois. His most recent book is *Edmund Burke: The Enlightenment and Revolution* (Transaction).



Igor Kopelnitsky

applied her theory to Frost, thus "unmasking" the real or nasty private poet behind the deceptive figure of public myth so admired and loved by his readers. Sheehy's revelations were confirmed and extended by Stanley Burnshaw, Frost's last editor at Holt, Rinehart and Winston, in *Robert Frost Himself* (1986), particularly in the chapter "The Fabrication of the 'Monster' Myth."

Two years later, John Evangelist Walsh published *Into My Own*, a favorable biographical view of Frost as a man and poet during his years in England, 1912-1915. This study was reinforced by *The*

Frost Family's Adventure in Poetry (1994), Lesley Lee Francis's accurate and balanced portrait of the poet's warm and close-knit relationship with his wife and children in their life together during the years on the farm in Derry, New Hampshire, and in England. Both of these books picture Frost as a devoted family man, generous with his time in educating his children at home, playful in the spirit of sheer morning gladness at the brim in spite of strains brought on by poverty and his lack of recognition as a poet. These biographical studies covered a limited timespan, however important, in Frost's life, so that a complete biography remained a pressing need.

Jeffrey Meyers' *Robert Frost: A Biography*, dealing as it does with the poet's entire life, needs to be examined not only in light of the recent state of biographical studies on Frost, but through an understanding of the poet's own conception of biography and his philosophy of life, including especially his aesthetic theory, creative practice, and view of the nature of poetry as an art form.

Perhaps the most important statement Frost ever wrote regarding how a reader, critic, or biographer should (or should not) approach a poet's work occurs in a letter to Sidney Cox (April 19, 1932), replying to the expressed wish of his Dartmouth College friend to write a personal, Boswellian biographical study of him:

You are getting out of hand. . . . I grow surer I don't want to search the poet's mind too seriously. I might enjoy threatening to for the fun of it just as I might to frisk his person. I have written to keep the over curious out of the secret places of my mind both in my verse and in my letters to such as you. A subject has to be held clear outside of me with struts and as it were set up for an object. A subject must be an object. . . . My objection to your larger book about

me was that it came thrusting in where I did not want you. 'The idea is the thing with me. It would seem soft for instance to look in my life for the sentiments in the "Death of the Hired Man."

There's nothing to it believe me. . . . The objective idea is all I ever cared about. Most of my ideas occur in verse. . . . But I never reckoned with the personalities. I keep to a minimum of such stuff in any poet's life and works. Art and wisdom with the body heat out of it. . . . To be too subjective with what an artist has managed to make objective is to come on him presumptuously and render ungraceful what he in pain of his life had faith he had made graceful.

Less than three years earlier, Frost had cautioned Cox, also by letter, in a way that should have prevented him from "getting out of hand": "I'm never so desperate for material that I have to trench on the confidential for one thing, nor on the private for another, nor on the personal." These statements are further reinforced by Frost's frequently voiced aesthetic principle that there is no fallacy greater than that art is self-expression.

In condemning what C.S. Lewis called "the personal heresy" in art Frost was not objecting to biography as such but only to the presumptuous methods and objectives of subjective-oriented biographers, such as Freudians and others with a doctrinaire ideology, who were bent *a priori* upon exploring "the secret places" of his mind and emotional life while ignoring or minimizing the objective "art and wisdom" in his poetry and philosophical ideas. Frost believed that the most important consideration for a biographer was his philosophical principles ("the idea is the thing with me") and his poetry as an art form, not his subjective emotional nature or condition.

In a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Emily Dickinson denied the validity of a purely autobiographical interpretation of her poems: "When I state myself, as the representative of the verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person." Frost always held to the same principle of aesthetics. Implicit in his denial that "the sentiments in the 'Death of the Hired Man'" could be found in his personal life are two of Frost's cardinal principles of aesthetics: that during the creative process the poet

discovers the theme in his subject and experiences a revelation, and that the completed poem is essentially an objective, autonomous, fictional product of the poet's imagination, skill in technique, and passion for form—not a projection or record of his personal history or disguised autobiography. As early as 1915, in a letter to Louis Untermeyer, Frost wrote, "Let us never take a poet as a subject."

Throughout his life Frost objected strongly whenever anyone tried to interpret one of his poems as disguised autobiography. In 1939, during the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference when a woman conferee asked what *he* meant by his poem "Fire and Ice," Frost quoted the poem and said, "It means that." The woman looked baffled. To underscore the objective self-sufficiency of his poem Frost added, "If I had wanted to say anything more I would have included it in the poem." When the conferee persisted in assuming that the poem was merely Frost's personal self-expression, he put her down with a withering rhetorical question: "When I use the word 'I' in a poem, surely you don't think I mean me?" In his poem "Iota Subscript," Frost underscored his aesthetic principle that art is not primarily self-expression: "Seek not in me the big I capital." To Frost, poetry was not adjunct to psychology, science, religion, grammar, history, or any other subject, it was an end in itself. Whatever poetry contributed to a better understanding of these subjects was derivative, a by-product of the poem as an art object. Neither the confessional-type of poetry nor a tabloid press sensation-seeking type of biography was acceptable to Frost.

Large portions of Meyers' biography necessarily deal with basic empirical facts of Frost's life that have been long established by previous biographers, particularly Thompson. Meyers has assimilated these facts well and presents them in a chronological principle of arrangement, so that he provides much essential information in the unfolding important developments in the poet's life. But his heavy dependence upon Thompson suggests a scissors-and-paste job that sometimes lands him in errors. For example, he follows his predecessor's false statement that Frost willed the Homer Noble farm to Kay Morrison, whereas it was willed in fact to Middlebury College, with the provision that the Morrisons

might occupy it for ten summers after his death. A year before the decade was up, I visited the Morrisons on the farm and heard them complain bitterly that Frost should have left them the use of the farm for their lifetime.

Others of Meyers' errors are of his own making, the result of carelessness or haste. During the summer of 1962 I invited Frost to give a poetry reading and receive an honorary degree at the University of Detroit. Meyers describes this event:

In November 1962 Frost read to his largest audience, 8,500 at the University of Detroit, and showed astonishing resilience and energy. He spoke for 90 minutes without sipping water or missing a line, and answered all the questions with clarity, liveliness and wit. When he finished the stunning performance and came off the stage, Kay was waiting for him in the wings.

There are at least four errors in Meyers' statement. First, the audience was closer to 10,000; 8,500 people sat in the athletic arena of the Memorial Building, but an additional 1,500 were under the arena stands in a gym equipped with closed-circuit television reception. Second, Frost, who was quite ill while in Detroit, did not display "astonishing resilience and energy." Third, he read and commented for slightly more than an hour, but owing to the size of the audience, there was no question period afterward. Fourth, during Frost's visit Kay Morrison was in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Meyers has fused Frost's poetry reading in Detroit with one he gave at Dartmouth College after he returned to Cambridge from Detroit. This type of error does not provide much grounds for confidence in the biographer.

But a far more serious flaw in Meyers' biography is his total lack of awareness and knowledge of or concern for Frost's philosophical beliefs and life of the mind. In a letter to Thompson (July 11, 1959), Frost identified his philosophical and intellectual nature beyond dispute: "I am a dualist." Whereas Thompson garbled Frost's philosophical dualism and failed to understand its crucial importance, Meyers totally ignores it. As a consequence he has no comprehension of the philosophical basis of Frost's views on science, religion, aesthetics, poetry, education, society, and politics. His sub-

ject's whole intellectual life is set aside as irrelevant by Meyers, who seems to share the common belief that since Frost was a poet, not a philosopher, no consideration should be given to his abilities as a thinker.

Yet Frost's intellectual genius, far greater than that of most poets, should be obvious. Certainly he was not a philosopher in the sense that Plato, Aristotle, or Kant were philosophers, abstract systematic thinkers. Yet many persons who knew Frost well have testified to his brilliance as a profound thinker and conversationalist. Wilfred W. Gibson noted how Frost dominated his fellow poets in England with his "rich and ripe philosophy." In *Robert Frost: A Pictorial Chronicle* (1974), Kay Morrison noted how Frost's "remarkable mind could cut through trivialities and come up with a deep understanding of matters not ordinarily considered within the scope of poetry." His brilliance in this respect was based upon a tremendous erudition, so that "he astounded scientists by his ready understanding of underlying principles even in areas as recondite as mathematics and nuclear fission." She summarized the poet's intellectual nature as a "formidable mind—constantly active, skeptical, believing, joking, probing, mocking, sometimes giving offense, sometimes warmly genial, the delight and wonder of visits from everywhere. . . . To encounter Robert Frost was to encounter one of the notable minds of a generation, a mind with restless curiosity seeking for the truth unfettered by secondhand opinions and moving to its target swiftly as an arrow. Many witnesses could testify to the range of his intellectual force." Unfortunately, no reader of this biography would glean from it the great intellectual force and range of Frost's mind.

Frost himself once told an audience that "there is danger of forgetting that poetry must include the mind, as well as the emotions." Since his dualism involved conflicts "between endless things in pairs ordained to everlasting opposition," such as the conflict between justice and mercy, Frost's dualism is most evident in his dramatic poems *A Masque of Reason* and *A Masque of Mercy*, and in his narrative poems "New Hampshire," "Build Soil," and "The Lesson for Today." Consistent with Meyers' failure ever to rise above an impressionistic surface journalism to a philosophical understanding of Frost as a thinker and poet,

he either denigrates or ignores all of these poems. The religious, social, and political ideas in these poems are filled with irony, wit, banter, whimsy, paradoxes, puns, and ambiguities, and their serious themes are presented in a true Horatian vein. These poems satirize the secular and rational beliefs regarding modern society and culture held by many of Frost's liberal critics whose strictures against Frost Meyers quotes, accepting their fatuous judgments at face value before dismissing Frost's dramatic and narrative poems as artistic failures. Meyers can respond only to Frost's lyrical poems, which lend themselves more readily to the personal interpretations consistent with the psycho-biographical approach to Frost's life and poetry.

If, as Meyers says, "the heart of Thompson's biography was based upon a lie," so too is his own claim that in being the first to document Frost's love affair with Kay Morrison he thereby acquires the vehicle by which to reinterpret the whole of the poet's life and art. Frost himself confided his affair to Untermeyer, Hervey Allen, and other friends, and after 1940 it was common knowledge among the Writers' Conference staff and longtime residents at Bread Loaf, one of whom, Dulcie Scott, first revealed it to Thompson. Meyers' hyperbolic reference to sex in describing Frost's life and poetry results in many incredible conclusions, while his "original" findings are stated in the crude and sensational language of soap-opera journalism. Among the worst are his undocumented speculations that Frost's mother was the illegitimate child of a prostitute; that as a boy Frost seduced his future wife; and that he was expelled from Dartmouth, rather than quit of his own accord. (Meyers accepts at face value the hearsay testimony in 1986 of the son of a boyhood friend of Frost's that the poet was expelled in 1892.) Meyers' portrait of Frost's daughter Lesley is filled with an animus wholly unwarranted by any facts. Despite his unreliable and even unscrupulous methods, Meyers claims that "this biography offers a radically new view of Frost's character and an original interpretation of his poems." He then cites 13 poems that he interprets mainly in the light of Frost's affair with Kay Morrison.

What to Frost was the unspeakable heresy of art as self-expression runs through the whole of Meyers' interpretation of Frost's poems. Frost's injunction, "Don't tell the poem in other and worse

English" applies perfectly to Meyers, who almost never rises above a prose paraphrase of Frost's poems. Meyers notes that Frost disliked "pedantic academic critics, who lacked insight into a poet's imagination," but he lacks the wit and humility to see that this criticism applies even more completely to his own psycho-sexual analysis of poetry. In his constant desire to expose "the secret places" in Frost's psyche, Meyers finds one-to-one cause-and-effect connections between specific events in Frost's life and the plot, themes, and metaphors in his poems. His method in literary criticism is similar to the literal-mindedness of a religious fundamentalist who arbitrarily abstracts a passage from the Bible and connects it with a particular event in modern times in order to draw out a sensational conclusion. Jeffrey Meyers does not understand that the universality in poetic theme or metaphor poem makes several meanings possible within their semantic context, but precludes any arbitrary and particular application to external matters. He injects crude and tasteless sexual interpretations upon many of Frost's poems, particularly upon "The Most of It" and "The Silken Tent."

Frost wrote to Sidney Cox (September 19, 1929), "We shall be judged finally by the delicacy of our feeling of where to stop short." If he is right, Meyers' biography will be dismissed as a vulgar aberration, a presumptuous and tasteless work which leaves the need for a definitive and balanced biography of Frost greater even than it was before. c

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His Final Lesson

by Scott P. Richert

The Sword of Imagination: Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict
by Russell Kirk

Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans
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497 pp., \$35.00



A friend of mine has expressed the devout hope that, upon his death, his wife and children will have the good sense to burn his papers. While his main desire is to prevent unfinished thoughts from seeing the light of day, there are other, equally important, concerns. Posthumously published works allow enemies to attack without fear of reprisal; even worse, they encourage excessive—and uncritical—adulation from friends. *The Sword of Imagination* has provoked both responses.

By the time of his death in 1994, Russell Kirk had generated an impressive body of work that included over 30 books and hundreds of articles and reviews. Departing from this vale of tears, he left behind his completed but unpublished memoirs, which appeared a year later as the current volume. In the preface, Kirk notes his peculiar (but for him characteristic) stylistic choice: “Emulating Julius Caesar, Henry Esmond, and Henry Adams, I express my memoirs, throughout the following chapters, in the third person—that mode being less embarrassing to authors who set at defiance the ravenous ego. Besides, when the man within . . . regards critically the life of the outer man, it may be possible to attain some degree of objectivity—using that word in its signification of detachment from strong emotion or personal prejudice.” Curiously, Kirk was too much of a Romantic not to know that “objectivity,” especially regarding oneself, is a fiction. Indeed, the pretense of objectivity often serves as cover for “the ravenous ego,” rather than setting it at defiance. Some readers, especially if they did not know Kirk, may suspect that to be true in this case.

The decision to write in the third per-

son may be at once the book’s strongest point and its weakest. It allows Kirk to put into writing emotions that he could never express in the first person, especially about his family life. On the other hand, portions of *The Sword of Imagination* (for instance, where the author discusses the importance of his own work, or its influence) read like the work of a biographer, even a hagiographer, rather than an autobiography. While he may have seen himself in the third person (and some who were close to him often suspected he did), Kirk might better have left an appraisal of his own work to others.

Forty years after the publication of a book is probably too soon to be able to gauge its long-term significance. Yet Kirk attributes the rightward drift of American politics in recent decades in no small part to the influence of *The Conservative Mind*: “So it was that *The Conservative Mind*—working through a kind of intellectual osmosis and popularized through newspapers and mass-audience magazines, radio and even television commentators, and other media of opinion—gradually helped to alter the climate of political and moral opinion. A generation later, Kirk’s works would be cited and quoted by the president and the vice president of the United States.” Whether, a century from now, historians will draw such a connection is anybody’s guess; but even if they should do so, what would it mean? Ronald Reagan quoted more often from Tom Paine, the intellectual enemy of Kirk’s hero, Edmund Burke, than from any other political figure; and in his eight years in office, he enshrined as the centerpiece of conservatism those “dreams of avarice” that Kirk wanted to get beyond. Though Kirk writes of President Eisenhower that he “and his people did retard the advance of the welfare state in America but did little to give flesh to the conservative imagination,” Reagan and his people merely fed that imagination a steady diet of Hollywood-style celluloid. (Kirk admits as much: “Mr. Reagan was endowed with a certain power of imagination; successful actors almost necessarily have a talent for image-making.”) As for the Vice President who quoted from Kirk’s works, when he ascended to the presidency Kirk found him “worse than unimaginative—

merely silly, often,” and “would come to detest Bush for his carpet-bombing of the Cradle of Civilization with its taking of a quarter of a million lives in Iraq.” And “so in 1992 Kirk became general chairman of Patrick Buchanan’s campaign in the Michigan primary.” If *The Conservative Mind* really led to Reagan and Bush, even Kirk might question the value of that accomplishment.

Unlike Eisenhower and Reagan, Kirk did help to “give flesh to the conservative imagination,” and the number of conservative luminaries who claim that his works played a role in their political and intellectual development is legion. But today, with the conservative movement in a shambles and the Republican Party headed for self-immolation in November, perhaps we can learn a final lesson from Russell Kirk. For unlike those who have succumbed to the siren song of Washington, D.C., Kirk realized that the lasting accomplishments of his life were not political, nor even intellectual. Rather, they surrounded him every day, and he presents them here in loving detail: a devoted wife, who still works tirelessly to keep his memory alive; four gracious daughters, who will raise their children well, as they were raised; a congeries of assistants, who planted trees and took long walks with Kirk, and came to see the woods and fields that surround Mecosta, and even the little village itself, through the lens of his Romantic imagination.

In an age of abstractions, in which “Efficiency and Progress and Equality” are seen as more real than “all those fascinating and lovable peculiarities of human nature and human society that are the products of prescription and tradition,” Kirk cultivated a sense of mystery and awe and wonder. To his eyes, Mecosta, shunned and despised by the commissars of big government, big business, and big culture, was a Brigadoon. As a business partner of Kirk’s once remarked, “Russell, you are the last of the Romantics, and probably the greatest: for nobody else could make tales out of that God-forsaken Mecosta County.”

That Romantic imagination is Kirk’s greatest legacy. If his influence should continue on into the next century, it will be because those who knew him had their imagination awakened to possibi-