

stand clear.) Certainly Schwartz must have been, as many have witnessed, filled with a nobility of poetic and intellectual passion that inspired others to seek the good, as he did. And as Atlas says, for all of Schwartz's comprehensive knowledge of high culture, he displayed a wonderfully democratic openness to possibilities of truth and value coming from all kinds of American popular sources. (Baseball was for him "the most lucid product of American life," and he was devoted to it and to the movies, although he was hilariously critical of television.)

Let his aunt Clara, who claimed his body, have the next-to-last, fittingly simple words here: "Our house wasn't Jewish in dishes, or in always going to *shul*. Jewish is heart. Delmore was Jewish." And let Delmore, in a selection from his long autobiographical poem, "Genesis Book II," have the last, oddly Audenesque words:

Though as the poet said, After such knowledge,  
What forgiveness?

yet will you be forgiven,  
Though you do not forgive yourself! ©

## The Poet as Bald Eagle

**Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing**  
by Richard Poirier  
Oxford University Press, 322 pp., \$11.95

Reviewed by Katha Pollitt

**R**OBERT FROST is the Andrew Wyeth of American poetry. Countless people who are otherwise indifferent to modern poetry—if not downright contemptuous of it—know "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by heart, just as many people who cheerfully hate modern art treasure a reproduction of "Christina's World" on their living room wall. Like Wyeth, Frost offers his audience surfaces that are immediately recognizable, pastoral, and pleasing, and many of his most passionate admirers are precisely those who have looked no further. Often, indeed, his poems are so charming, so ingratiating, that they seem actively to discourage further looks. The result is that when people say they love Robert Frost—and of all American poets he is the only one who can by any stretch of the imagination be called beloved—all too often what they mean is that they love Vermont and weathered barns and people who would rather take the road less

## Pruning for a more perfect wine: our philosophy.



Pruning—the cutting off of living parts of the grape vine—is one of the most important practices in the culture of grapes.

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On the other hand, if too much wood is cut away, the vine will produce what we call "second crop"—small green berries that will never ripen. These grapes are obviously undesirable because they would render the wine sharp, harsh and without character.

The amount of grapes allowed to grow on a vine is critical because each vine is able to produce only a *limited* amount of grapes with the proper combination of nutrients, minerals, proteins, sugar and acids in proper quantity and balance to each other. If the grapes are to develop the grand character required to make the finest tasting wines, it is essential that they be allowed to develop these components in the right amounts and proportions.

### How We Prune

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No two vines are identical. Each one must be pruned differently: How old is the vine? How is the vine supported—

on its own stump, on a stake, or on a wire? Does it get hot afternoon sun or only the cooler rays? Is it in vigorous health and should its crop be retained this year or sacrificed for the future good of the vine? Precisely where on the vine should spurs be permitted to grow? How many buds on this spur? How many on that spur? A master pruner must know all such things and care for each vine according to its own individual needs.

### Our Unique Next Step

An experienced pruner must be able to cope with situations when nature won't cooperate. On rare occasions nature does not perform exactly as expected and overcropping—the production by the vine of more grapes than it can properly ripen—can occur despite the most careful pruning. In such a case, we resort to "thinning."

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Gallo is one of the few wineries to practice this costly technique of thinning in a continuing effort to produce the finest grapes possible.

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WILLIAM MORROW

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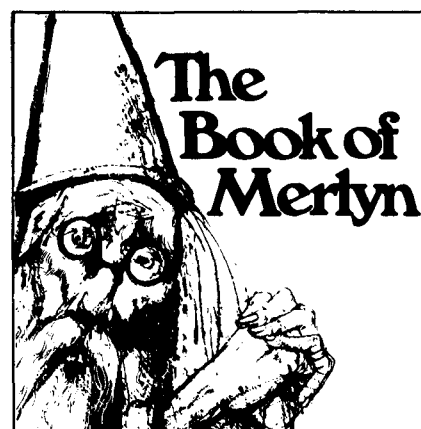
This state of affairs is at least partly Frost's own fault. "There is a kind of success called 'of esteem,'" he wrote to a friend a few years before the publication of his first book, "and it butters no parsnips." Frost was a consummate butterer of parsnips: His public image of folksy philosopher and twinkly eyed anti-intellectual had a profound appeal for the general reader, upon whose middlebrow nostalgia for rural simplicities he played with greater skill than was good for either of them. His popular success had its price, too, in the snobbish condescension of mandarin critics, who rather vengefully typed him as a minor poet who refused to grapple with the central concerns of the age. Even now, much of what passes for criticism of Frost is really a covert debate about his fitness as a national totem—the poet as bald eagle.

The discussion surrounding Lawrence Thompson's massive official biography, the last volume of which was published this spring, is a good example of how moral categories tend to replace literary ones where Frost is concerned. While most reviewers relished Thompson's depiction of the poet as an ethical fraud, and most letters-to-the-editor writers took to the barricades in defense of traditional America and the good old ways, the book's real weakness—that it fails to account, except in the crudest biographical terms, for the growth of Frost as an artist—went unnoticed.

Richard Poirier's book should do much, one hopes, to scotch this debate forever. "In writing this book," he says early on, "I found myself sometimes straining against the familiar in order to reach him where he most intensely lives in his writing. And yet the Frost I got to know was always somehow restoring himself to the lineaments of a massively settled official portrait." Poirier's central accomplishment is his reintegration of the popular and the literary Frost, so that we no longer choose sides between a poseur and a genius but see him whole, as one of those classically great writers for whom "the surfaces are as important as the depths."

The Frost Poirier presents is a far more complex figure than we may have bargained for. He is, for example, as deeply philosophical as Stevens, with whom he shares a profound debt to Emerson; yet Frost's metaphors, unlike Stevens's, are always firmly grounded in an actual situation

*This summer Katha Pollitt was the first poet in residence at The Robert Frost Place in Franconia, New Hampshire.*



BY T. H. WHITE

The Unpublished Conclusion to *The Once and Future King*  
Prologue by Sylvia Townsend Warner

This is the final chapter of the tale that inspired *Camelot*. "Enthusiasts for White's touching, profound, funny and tragic story will not want to miss the version, for it is the true and intended ending of the great work and contains some of White's best writing ... filled with poignance and marvelous power."—Robert Kirsch, *Los Angeles Times*  
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recounted by a particular human voice: His spring pools are, among other things, real water. Where Eliot is a chronicler of sexual ineffectuality, Frost is "a great poet of marriage, maybe the greatest since Milton, and of the sexuality that goes along with it." Where Eliot mourned a modern loss of historical and cultural continuity—and mirrored our fragmentation in the artful obscurities of *The Waste Land*—Frost saw the twentieth century as no worse than any other (meaning that all ages have been pretty awful) and saw the task of poetry, and indeed of all human labor, as the imposition of form on chaos. It is precisely in such labor that human life has value for Frost, so that after conjuring up a vision of "hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos, and against the background any small man-made figure of order and concentration," he slyly adds, "What pleasanter than that this should be so?" Poirier has many tart things to say about Eliot and Joyce and the critics who placed them so centrally in our literary tradition while keeping Frost politely but firmly off to one side. He makes an effective argument that Frost's maturity and humaneness are precisely what has prevented his acceptance by a critical consensus that dismisses such qualities as insensitivity to contemporary dilemmas.

In close readings of poem after poem, Poirier elucidates the tensions between the strongly felt contraries that obsessed Frost: domesticity and a need for freedom, reticence and passion, the meaningless sounds of nature and the accents of the human voice. *The Work of Knowing* belongs on the shelf of everyone who thinks there's nothing much to be said about such standbys as "Home Burial" or "The Wood-Pile." At first grudgingly, then gladly, one forgives Poirier his overlarge claims for poems, like "Rose Pogonias," that resume their slight, graceful outlines in the mind as soon as one turns the page. Occasionally, he seems to read too subtly admittedly subtle poems. I can just barely accept, for example, the possibility that Frost uses the word *appall* in the next to last line of "Design" to mean "make pale" in the sense that *pale* can mean "enclosure"—but I can't help feeling that the credit for this verbal tour de force belongs to Poirier, and not to Frost. But then, is there an English professor alive today who can resist the temptation to make poets sound like English professors alive today? Poirier has, in fact, the revealing stylistic habit of identifying writers with the scholars who have explained them: He speaks of "Hartman's

Wordsworth" and of the emotions shown by this poet "in, say, 'Nutting,' and in David Ferry's fine analysis of it." I suppose next year's academic criticism will offer us "Poirier's Frost."

This is a difficult, challenging book; would that its only difficulty were the challenge of its content. Poirier's prose can be quite a struggle of its own, though, and when complexities of argument combine with turgidity of style, it can be genuinely hard to follow. It is certainly curious that

the verbally pungent and scrupulous Frost should be championed in flaccid circumlocutions, whereby "walks" become "ambulatory itineraries," and in hip professorial puns ("the dream is rather a wet one," he notes of an early poem about a vision of women in mist). It's a tribute to the real originality of Poirier's insights that the title of his book is more than an unfortunately apt comment on the efforts required of his readers: The knowledge he offers is indeed worth the work. ●


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### **Reality in Fantasy**

by Doris Grumbach

**S**HE WAS BORN in Denmark into the aristocratic Dinesen family and named Karen. She married her cousin, Baron Bror Blixen, and went with him to Africa, where they operated a coffee plantation purchased for them by their two families. Karen Blixen's marriage was to become the tragedy of her life; from her husband she contracted a venereal disease (which she fought but ultimately succumbed to). She divorced her husband, stayed on in Africa to run the plantation alone for 10 years, and then, after the coffee market collapsed, left her beloved country and friends and returned to Denmark.

Although she had written some stories when she was young, she launched her career as a writer in 1931, taking the nom de plume of Isak Dinesen. She published her memoirs, *Out of Africa* (1938), and a series of short stories and novellas that she herself termed "gothic" (*Seven Gothic Tales*, *Winter's Tales*, and *Last Tales*). These books became justly celebrated. All three were critically praised, and all three were Book-of-the-Month Club choices. The stories in these collections are now widely anthologized, studied in college courses, read and reread by lovers of fiction everywhere. Isak Dinesen is now a familiar name to the Western literary world; she was a master storyteller, a writer of unusual imaginative powers, a prose stylist as skilled in English as in her native Danish.

While she was still in Africa, Dinesen sketched out some stories, fairy tales, and romances that would, she wrote, "take my mind a long way off." In the following 30 years she went on writing them whenever her poor health would permit. When she died in 1962, she left some unpublished manuscripts, finished and unfinished, among her papers. Several of these are now, fortunately, available to us in a new collection, *Carnival: Entertainments and Posthumous Tales* (University of Chicago Press, \$10).

Dinesen's "tales" and "entertainments" are special, even unique. No one could possibly confuse them with those of any

other writer. Her prose is formal and dignified. She uses an almost stiff diction, as if she were assigning her stories to a future without jargon or idiom, to a permanent library shelf where the degraded language of the street, the airwaves, and newsprint no longer exists and only her stately prose endures.

Two of the best stories in this new collection, "The de Cats Family" and "Uncle Theodore," were written in Danish and translated well by P. M. Mitchell and W. D. Paden. There is no difference between the easily identifiable sound of Dinesen's voice in these stories and those she wrote in English. It is the same elegant, sinewy, elevated diction. Legend, fairy tale, family history—all are told in her own aristocratic voice, witty, ironic, and so subtle in its final "turn" that they seem to ascend out of story into the higher reaches of myth, saga, and *Edda*.

"The de Cats Family" is an early tale (1909) and proves how quickly Dinesen's style and narrative manner were formed (she was twenty-five when she wrote it). The de Cats are, like the townspeople of Hadleyburg in Twain's famous story, known throughout the land for their honesty and righteousness. But every generation of this upright family ("being a member of the de Cats family was equivalent to being a superior person") contains one black sheep. It turns out that the family's probity depends on the existence of "one member of the family who takes on the burden of all the family's sins. All the errors that might have been distributed among us all are accumulated in one of us, and by this means the rest of us are freed."

This discovery is made when the last black sheep, Jeremias, reforms. The whole family begins to slip morally; they consult with each other and decide to bribe the reformed son to return to his evil ways. This is a fine solution for both the reader and Jeremias: "How wisely and oddly life is arranged, better than I could have imagined it. How pleasant it is that we all of us end in being happy; you have the heavenly satisfaction of being superior human beings, while I who will lack that pleasure will have others in recompense."

There are other equally good stories. I