

Frost: The Poet and the Man

Selected Letters of Robert Frost, edited by Lawrance Thompson. *New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964. lxiv + 645 pp. \$10.00.*

IN INTRODUCING this collection of Frost's letters, Lawrance Thompson quotes a remark of the poet's by way of warning: "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 [p. 385]." The warning deserves every reader's consideration, not only, as Mr. Thompson astutely argues, because it notifies us to expect role-playing and like defensive indirections, but because it stands as an admonition to consider just what, in reading Frost, we seek. "A subject," the poet continues, "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. . . . 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 [p. 385]." An earlier letter offers another version of the same idea. "I'm never so desperate for material that I have to trench on . . . the private . . . nor on the personal. . . . A little in the first to manipulate is all I ask. My object is true form—is was and always will be—form true to any chance bit of true life. Almost any bit will do [p. 361]."

Yet in Frost, as in Byron, the pull toward biographical interpretation is abnormally strong. Despite himself, Frost has fostered the habit of reading his poems as parts of a life record. Like Yeats and Eliot, he was engaged by the need to make his art and his life one; and he believed that the most convincing principle of unity was his own character. Byron exists for most of us today as a person of great importance and little interest. If we follow Frost's lead and seek, primarily, to discover what

manner of man he was, we will end with another such personality—true to life, perhaps, but to be valued in the end for his place in a history which matters more. And since history is always an interpretation, we must consider whether our myth of the past should concern us more than the direct interpretations of life which poems as great as Frost's supply.

Granted that the more we can learn about a poet, the better we will be prepared to appreciate his art—if we hold to that purpose. But as our store of information in published letters and recollections increases, the need becomes greater to distinguish between our interest in Frost's poetry and his in making sense of his own life. This suggestion seems the more pertinent in that Mr. Thompson's *Selected Letters* gives us the most complete picture of Frost to date. Mr. Thompson, who is the author of two critical studies of the poet, *Fire and Ice* (1942) and a recent monograph, *Robert Frost* (1959), is presently writing Frost's official biography. The fine objectivity of his introduction to this volume is evidence that his close friendship with Frost has imposed no perceptible bias.

It would be hard to overpraise the method and arrangement of this book. It provides a generous selection of Frost's correspondence from his earliest notes to schoolmates to those last, terribly sad letters dictated in the hospital a few days before his death. These have been wisely supplemented by a number of letters to Frost and by his wife. The choice is so skillful that the more than four hundred items carry the reader forward through an almost novelistic development. Each chronological section is headed with a helpful introduction, and wherever a letter leaves gaps, Mr. Thompson obliges us with a brief prefatory paragraph. Adequate but never cumbersome notes, together with a detailed chronology, a genealogical appendix, and convenient subject indexing, make the book especially useful to serious students.

The reader is not to anticipate startling revelations. Rather the letters fill out and make sense of a Frost we already know. For example, his years of obscurity as a farmer and teacher at Derry can be seen more precisely as a time of struggle for inward balance and poetic skill when, through the details of his finances, we realize that his situation was not so simply desperate as we had supposed. The streak of vindictiveness, the habit of holding his cards rather too closely, his love of harsh judgments, are in like manner made—not less disconcerting—but far more human. In the perspective of the correspondence, these traits become the understandable impulses of a poet who so cared for his art that misunderstand-

ing terrified him, and of a thinker who valued a truth for its cutting edge.

The letters, especially Mrs. Frost's, provide an awareness of the mundane troubles of the poet's day to day life—the endless minor sicknesses, the annoyances of frequent moving and hectic lecture schedules, the nervousness, the spells of serious fatigue. One is more impressed by this record of ordinary stress than by what the letters reveal of the great tragedies, about which Frost would seldom say more than he did in confessing to Louis Untermeyer: "I am so deeply smitten through my helm that I am almost sad to see infants young any more [p. 381]." The sentence illustrates the frustrating charm of Frost's letters. They are less prose than poetry half-formed. The language is always tending towards an order not quite achieved.

Three themes running through the volume are of particular interest; politics, speculations on poetry, and the search for religious faith. We see Frost the politician moving to ever ampler fields, from Pinkerton Academy, to the literary avant-garde of 1912-15, to the more sanguinary academic and publishing battle fields, and so, at last, to the high stage of international politics during the last decade, where the poet played a role both inspiring and, at times, inadvertently comic. That he fought the good fight on all these grounds becomes the more important in the light of the reasons the letters suggest for his attraction to the game. But the reader will be even more engaged by Frost's uniquely personal searching of religious questions. How much they mattered to him the correspondence makes one keenly aware, but that we should conclude with Mr. Thompson is less certain. He argues that Frost never rejected "for long" the "deep religious faith" which was nurtured in him by his mother [p. xi]. One is tempted to borrow the thesis of Mr. Thompson's book on Melville, and reply that in the child the parent's faith became a piety of doubt. At any rate, we encounter in Frost a faith without a creed, or a creed which perforce keeps changing, because the poet's most fundamental beliefs concern the nature of experiential process rather than the nature of God. The poignant last letter concludes, "If only I get well . . . I'll go deeper into my life with you than I ever have before [p. 596]." For Frost, as for Emerson and Emily Dickinson, it was this "going into" life that mattered most. He believed that there is a destination, because the journey implied one, but it was always subject to the revision of the next mile.

Reviewed by JOHN FAIRBANKS LYNEN