

Pusillanimous Humanist

Jay Parini, *Robert Frost: A Life*. Heinemann, £20.

As an afterword to his *Robert Frost: A Life*, Jay Parini considers the complex relationship between his subject and myriad biographers. Parini identifies three strains of Frost study: those early biographies which appeared in Frost's own lifetime and which helped to create the myth of the poet as down-to-earth philosopher and all round regular Yankee; Lawrence Thompson's official biography which demythified Frost in three volumes of relentless character assassination and from which, as Ian Hamilton has said, one comes away liking the biographer even less than his subject; and those subsequent biographies which have attempted to rehabilitate the man while being responsive to the obvious complexities of his personality. Parini's book belongs resolutely to this third strain. His is a clear-sighted if somewhat overly tactful view of the life a great poet and his work. He may even have begun a fourth strain of Frost biography, which sees the demonisation of Thompson as Frost's Iago. At times you could be forgiven for thinking that Thompson's onslaught was entirely unexpected. It is worth remembering, however, that a youthful Elizabeth Bishop could call Frost, in a letter to a friend in 1953 and at the height of his celebrity as America's national poet, a "malicious old bore".

The external movements of the life must be by now generally familiar to anyone acquainted with the work. As is often the case in biographies of great poets, the earlier half of the life tends to be more engaging than the latter. Frost's academic shortcomings, his many attempts to support his family, the decade farming in Derry and writing at the kitchen table at night, his late emergence as a poet in England and his return to America as the coming man, all still make for compelling reading. Far less compelling are those years of financial and critical certainty, the endless awards and rave reviews and stints in Amherst and Dartmouth and civic receptions. This is aggravated by Parini's insuperable discretion and his reluctance to gos-

sip. What use is a biography which refuses to gossip? At times the prose risks becoming an exercise in cheesy hero worship littered with half-revelations for which Parini makes too many gullible allowances. He also has a habit of referring to other biographers and critics when putting the boot in, resulting in a tepid criticism-by-proxy for actions which seem to have been, yes, monstrous.

However, given that the last most recent biography of Frost by Jeffrey Meyers was remarkable only for its mean-spiritedness and dearth of scholarship, Parini's tact and diligence can be welcomed. His prose style is fluent and he has an excellent understanding of Frost's nature in the abstract. In the early chapters there is a vivid evocation of Frost's essentially pusillanimous nature, which fuelled his personality to the bitter end, and the way he used prejudices and hatreds to define his selfhood. We also come away with a good sense of the poet's charisma in performance and his growing awareness of the possibilities of public persona. He quickly cultivated a reputation for reading and talking which was designed to make himself, in Ginsberg's marvellous description, "the original entrepreneur of poetry". One word appears tellingly on two separate occasions, illustrating how conscious Frost became of his own mystique. In a memorable phrase quite early on, Parini describes how he was becoming "the fondest spectator at his own show". Towards the end of his life Frost characterised, in typically aphoristic fashion, the criterion upon which he agreed to readings: "I only go when I'm the show".

Parini is inclined to let himself down in details. Either those details staple to biographies of poets simply are not gone into at all, or they are skimmed over in the most forgiving terms. Parini is inclined to document facts without examining their significance. For example, he diligently records Frost's many house purchases, and repeatedly makes reference to his "mania for real estate". At no point, however, does he take time out of the narrative to ponder the implications of the fact that a poet who could declaim at a presidential inauguration "The land was ours before we were the land's", should have been privately a pathological hoarder of property. Parini is similarly reluctant to suggest the significance of several behavioural mannerisms. There seems to be obvious connections between Frost's gift for talking into the small hours and his perennial depression. One gradually realises that his famous monologues may have been less than riveting to their audiences.

Apart from those early chapters chronicling Frost's father's demise, the usual question of alcohol barely raises its head. One sifts through damn near eighty-five years of his life with no idea as to whether or not Frost drank heavily or moderately or not at all. On

page 407 we are finally told that he liked one sweet daiquiri before every meal. Similarly, sex is scarcely an issue, at least until his wife Elinor dies. The subsequent bizarre *ménage à trois* with his “secretary” Kay Morrisson and her husband Ted, and several occasions when Frost behaved obnoxiously to supposed friends, are discreetly filed under that catch-all convenient to sympathetic biographers—grief. Parini also tries to make light of Frost’s severity as a schoolmaster, his repeated expressions of homophobia, the fact that his health seems to have depended on the critical reception given to his work and his constant bitching about fellow poets. Frost was a consummate liar whenever lies were needed, as one double-crossed acquaintance remarked, “to suit his crotchety whims”. His lies extended to descriptions of his methods of composition. In later life, again conscious of his own capacity for self-mythology, he liked to suggest that certain celebrated poems came to him in one sitting. A solitary sentence on page 335 tells us that that was never the case. One astonishing episode involved an informal gathering at Harvard in which T.S. Eliot agreed to read a poem if Frost would read one as well. Frost said from heart a poem which was written several months before, yet seriously claimed that he had written it during Eliot’s poem and that he had improvised the last stanza on the spot.

Parini’s take on those celebrated poems became the biggest chore for this reader as the biography progressed. To be fair, this is not merely Parini’s doing, but rather the central stumbling block of all literary biography. It makes little sense to disrupt the narrative sequence of the life with fairly pedestrian readings of the formal procedures of poems which were, as often as not, prompted by much earlier events. All biographers will argue, understandably enough, that the intention is to illuminate the work by setting it within the context of its author’s phases of life and states of mind. Inevitably, however, here and in most other biographies, the work gradually serves to illuminate the life. As if determined to say something new and unpredictable about Frost’s work, Parini is given to dubious assertions such as claiming that a goodish later poem like “Spring Pools” is his masterpiece.

On the plus side, one of the real pleasures of this book lies in the vignettes afforded of Frost’s contemporaries. These are revealing side-long glimpses of major poets which a reader would seldom be granted in their own respective biographies. There is, for example, the irresistible image of Wallace Stevens in a bar in Key West, roaring drunk and making passes at the waitresses. There is Faulkner confined by booze to a hotel room in Brazil, much to the displeasure of his travelling companion. Pound, predictably, comes across as a megalomaniac, resplendent in a blue-and-green silk dressing gown after his

“bird-bath”. Eliot, far less predictably, emerges from these pages smelling of roses. Parini is generous enough to concede throughout that his enmity with Frost was almost entirely caused and sustained by Frost, and throughout which Eliot maintained a respectful silence. There is a moving description of those two great poles of twentieth century American poetry exchanging compliments and news over a pot of tea in Frost’s house in Cambridge, where Eliot had come to visit a sick brother.

The best one can say about Jay Parini’s *Robert Frost: A Life* is that, with all its discretion and objectivity, it documents remarkably well a transition from private poet to national emblem that is not unique to Frost, and the way that personal identity can easily be subsumed by public persona. Parini, unfortunately, adheres to the biographer’s traditional tenet that behind all great literature must lie a great human being. In Frost’s case it simply does not wash. One comes away from this book with an even stronger sense that his only great actions were his poems. Henry James was right: “The artist’s life is in his work, and this is the place to observe him”.