Robert Frost, who died today in 1963, is still one of America’s best-known poets. But he is also its most quickly dismissed. The reason behind this attitude is debatable—contrarian disdain for the famous writers, a postmodern vantage of Frost’s poems as elementary. Perhaps the most persuasive argument for the pooh-poohing of Frost is the popularization of Lawrance Thompson’s biographic trilogy of the poet, published from 1966–77, that portrayed him as a cutthroat competitor in the literary world who sabotaged lesser-knowns to rise to the top.
While some have defended Frost—Randall Jarrell, in his 1952 Kenyon Review essay “To the Laodiceans,” said, “the regular ways of looking at Frost’s poetry are grotesque simplifications, distortions, falsifications”—the poet Clive James is correct in saying that Frost’s work “is still generally thought to be the output of some kind of simpleton.”

In the latest Prospect, however, James reviews the forthcoming volume of Frost’s letters (Harvard University Press, February) and offers this tonic to the malaise the poet’s reputation now suffers: “To put Frost’s proper renown back on track, what’s needed is the re-emergence of common sense.”

Taking on Thompson’s unsavory claims, he points out that Frost consistently supported other poets in their endeavors, calling Pound “the most generous of mortals,” praising Yeats as “the man of the last twenty years,” and helping Edward Thomas establish himself as a poet before he was killed in action in 1917. Moreover, James is sure to point out the hardscrabble life Frost endured while trying to make ends meet, farming and lecturing to get by. He was in the business of writing poetry for its own sake, not for the ends of fame and fortune. At one point he wrote to an American friend: “Poetry is not a living. It is not even a reputation today. It is at best a reputation next year or the year after.” These are neither the words nor the actions of a self-serving writer looking to claw his way to international renown.

On Frost’s skill as a poet, James is unequivocal:

Before he crossed the Atlantic in 1912, he was already regaling his American editors and poetic acquaintances with his considered ideas about poetry: ideas that add up to a conception of modernism still pertinent today. . . . It was a true idea, not just an easy motto. Implicit in the idea was that the spoken language supplies the poet with a store of rhythms which he can, and indeed must, fit in counterpoint to the set frame of
the metre. A hundred years later, very few poets want to face the labour involved in doing this. . . . Frost was the man, even more than Eliot and Pound, who both formulated and demonstrated the modernist principle of listening for the rhythms of poetry in the language around us.

He continues, addressing those who would call Frost’s work simplistic:

His most formidable detractors think that his reaching out was too often a folksy grab at the lapels. The truth of the matter is that the typical, seemingly unambitious little Frostian poem is a wonder of sophisticated construction: no other poet could have done it. Our tyro—Coleridge would have called him a nursling—will soon find that Frost’s poetry, even at its most approachable, is the product of craft at a level that it takes sweat even to analyse, let alone to emulate. Frost could tell you what made an English vowel long or short; it was as if he had transported the tools of a quantitative language, Latin, into a new language, English, that was not supposed to have quantities, only stresses. But Frost had studied how the metre and the intonation formed an interplay which, on the page, would
stabilise the rhythms of a conversation overheard from the next room; a conversation whose specific meaning might be a mystery but whose drift was detectable from how the speech rose, fell, sped and slowed. It was a version of Eliot’s electrifying proposition that poetry in a foreign language could communicate before it was understood.

Hopefully James’s rallying cry for common sense catches on and makes the world safe again to proclaim one’s affinity for Frost.

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