

tems) the ability to protect their claims and control demonic males, society becomes more tolerable. Less exciting, perhaps, but more tolerable.

—James Q. Wilson

WHERE DOES THE WEIRDNESS GO?

Why Quantum Mechanics Is Strange, But not as Strange as You Think.

By David Lindley. Basic Books. 251 pp. \$24

Quantum mechanics is the branch of physics that considers the structure and behavior of the fundamental, unobserved components (atoms, electrons, photons) of the visible world. Given that some world-class physicists have found it difficult to understand and accept the principles of quantum mechanics (Einstein himself was a doubter), it's not surprising that the theories should puzzle the layperson. What is surprising is that a scientist should undertake to explain quantum mechanics to the general reader, and that he should succeed as well as David Lindley has in this compact, patiently argued volume. A certain unease lingers with the reader at the close of the book, but that is nature's fault, not Lindley's.

If a layperson knows anything about quantum mechanics, it is likely to be some variant of the principle that "measurement affects the thing measured." Alas, even that knowledge is flawed, for the statement is misleading. It implies that a quantum object—"the thing measured"—has a definite but unknown state, which is disturbed and altered

by the act of measurement. A more accurate formulation is that measurement itself gives definition to quantities that were previously indefinite. That is, a quantity has no meaning until it is measured. The primal state is indeterminism.

Hence the "weirdness" whose disappearance Lindley traces. The word refers to the ambiguous behavior of the particles that are the basis of everything in our workaday physical world (the world of classical physics). How, Lindley asks, does the unobservable, unstable subatomic world (where particles may be waves, and waves, particles, and photons seem to be in two places at once) provide the basis for a physical world susceptible to measurement and routinely exhibiting the stability lacking in its minutest components? Is there a boundary separating one world from another, across which the transformation occurs?

Yes and no. Or, fittingly, no and yes. Lindley insists on only as much certainty as the topic will bear. Quantum mechanics provides mathematical explanations for how the subatomic world works. But despite their validity, these mathematically unambiguous explanations leave us some distance short of understanding. Why? Because they cannot be made to assume shapes that we recognize from our experience of the workaday world. The reality they describe seems so ghostly and elusive that we wonder finally whether it has any claims on our attention. Lindley's accomplishment is to persuade us that it does—while at the same time reassuring us that nature as we know it is not thereby undermined.

—James Morris

Arts & Letters

LIFE OF A POET:

Rainer Maria Rilke.

By Ralph Freedman. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 640 pp. \$35

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) is that rare oxymoron, a popular poet. Not in the academy, where young Germanists stake their careers in trendier soil, but among the ragged ranks of the reading public, Rilke is one of the most beloved poets of the 20th century. Born in Prague of a German-speaking family, he rejected the military and busi-

ness career that was expected of him and, after a brief marriage to the sculptor Clara Westhoff, became a wandering artist, cultivating friends and admirers all over Europe. In the modernist age he began as a romantic, evolving over time into a visionary poet who revolutionized the German language.

One might quibble with the emphasis, or lack thereof, given certain minor works and figures in this biography. But Freedman, emeritus professor of comparative literature at Princeton University, manages to distill

Rilke's letters, and many other sources besides, to their narrative essence—while doing justice to the major works, personae, and events. (Rilke scholars will also appreciate the book's comprehensive appendix.) Of special interest are the portraits of the writer Lou Andreas-Salome, arguably the most influential woman in Rilke's life, and of the artist Paula Modersohn-Becker, whose enigmatic painting of Rilke graces the book's cover and whose tragic early death inspired the poem "Requiem for a Friend."

Rilke's concept of nonpossessive love (*besitzlose Liebe*) was central to his life and work, even though it caused him great anguish. In his letters to the artist Baladine Klossowska, the conflict between Rilke's calling as a poet (and the solitude it required) and his attraction to certain creative women comes through most clearly. As Freedman shows, Klossowska actually helped Rilke complete his most important work, the *Duino Elegies* (1923), by finding him a permanent home in the Château de Muzot, a primitive 13th-century tower in the Valais canton of Switzerland.

Rilke is sometimes seen as a pampered would-be aristocrat, flitting from one noble lord's (or lady's) castle to another. Yet while Freedman makes no attempt to gloss over the poet's shortcomings, the overall picture that emerges from these pages is admiring—and deservedly so. Rilke's life was hardly one of ease; his emotional and financial travails were real. But from pain he made poetry, as he himself explained in his *Letters to a Young Poet*: "Do not believe that he who seeks to comfort you lives untroubled among the simple and quiet words that sometimes do you good. His life has much difficulty and sadness. . . . Were it otherwise he would never have been able to find these words."

—Richard Pettit

HOMAGE TO ROBERT FROST.

By Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, and Derek Walcott. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux. 117 pp. \$18

For several generations of Americans, the name Robert Frost has conjured up a rustic cliché: in Joseph Brodsky's words, "a folksy, crusty, wisecracking old gentleman farmer"; in Seamus Heaney's, "a mask of Yankee homeliness"; in Derek Walcott's, "that apple-cheeked, snow-crested image that the country idealized in its elders." Not surpris-

ingly, each of these Nobel laureates—the Russian Brodsky, the Irishman Heaney, and the Caribbean Walcott—discards the familiar caricature of Frost in favor of the poet's complex, often abrasive genius.

In Frost's nature lyrics and narrative poems, Brodsky finds a spiritual anguish all the more chilling for being understated. The pitch-black woods of "Come In" suggest an image of "the afterlife" that "for Frost is darker than it is for Dante." The stripped-down dialogue of "Home Burial" exposes an "extremely wide margin of detachment" from a subject (the death of a child) that came directly from Frost's own life. Likewise, Heaney locates a "crystal of indifference" at the core of Frost's extraordinary poetic technique. In "Desert Places," Heaney uncovers a vein of stoicism toward the annihilating stillness of a New England snowstorm, and in the concluding lines a willingness to open the poet's mind—and the reader's—to "the cold tingle of infinity."

For all of Frost's sidelong glances into the abyss, it is the



American poet to whom Walcott returns. In a 1934 letter to his daughter, Frost wrote (of the proposed cast of an opera by Gertrude Stein) that "negroes were chosen to sing . . . because they have less need than white men to know what they are talking about." Sorting out his reactions to this comment, Walcott admits that it has the power to diminish his "delight" in the poet. But it is just as mistaken, he adds, to dwell on Frost's prejudices as it is to wrap him in the red-white-and-blue bunting of American patriotism. Only by discarding such associations can we experience the poet in his own terms, weathering the "black gusts that shook his soul."

—Hugh Eakin

WITTGENSTEIN'S LADDER: *Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary.*

By Marjorie Perloff. University of Chicago Press. 285 pp. \$27.95

"What is it about this man, whose philosophy can be taxing and technical enough,