

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,