

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,

that so fascinates the *artistic* imagination?" The words are critic Terry Eagleton's, but the question is Marjorie Perloff's. Professor of humanities at Stanford University and an authority on artistic modernism, Perloff finds a striking affinity between the philosophical practice of Ludwig Wittgenstein (especially late in his career) and the poetic practice of certain 20th-century avant-garde writers.

Unlike his philosophical contemporaries, Wittgenstein did not distinguish between "literary" and "ordinary" language. Nor did he lay claim to a philosophical "metalanguage" that could step outside everyday discourse and make pronouncements on how it works. In his later writings, especially the *Philosophical Investigations* (1958), Wittgenstein understood that language transcends our efforts to analyze it. "When I talk about language," he wrote, "I must speak the language of every day. Is this language somehow too coarse and material for what we want to say? *Then how is another one to be constructed?*"

This rejection of philosophical convention should have allied Wittgenstein with the artists of his time, argues Perloff. But he showed no interest in modernism. "It is a delicious irony," she writes, "that this icono-

clast, who refused to listen to Mahler and Schönberg and paid little attention to the great art movements of his day, was himself the most radical of modernist writers." In such avant-garde figures as Gertrude Stein and Samuel Beckett, Perloff finds word play—puns, shifts of syntax, simultaneously proliferating and eroding meanings—similar to Wittgenstein's. It is in the move from expository to experiential narrative, whereby the reader puzzles out the text unaided, that she locates Wittgenstein's modernism.

Is Perloff justified in making Wittgenstein the "patron saint" of avant-garde literature? There is a cryptic charm in many of the philosopher's utterances, such as "Why can't my left hand give my right hand money?" And Wittgenstein did say that "philosophy ought really to be written only as a form of poetry." But does this make him kissing cousin to experimental poets such as Ingeborg Bachmann, Robert Creeley, and Ron Silliman? To Perloff, the answer is clearly yes, and she labors tirelessly at mapping every contour of resemblance. Yet her book neglects the most important difference between Wittgenstein and his literary admirers: his dense, startling style was a teacher's tool; theirs is a pupil's game.

—Genevieve Abravanel

Contemporary Affairs

ALL THAT WE CAN BE: Black Leadership and Racial Integration the Army Way.

By Charles C. Moskos and John Sibley Butler. Basic Books. 193 pp. \$24

Part scholarly analysis, part policy prescription, part starry-eyed advocacy, this small book has a big agenda: the dismantling of "the paradigm of black failure." The authors, both veterans, sociologists, and noted observers of military affairs, advance two striking propositions.

First, they assert that the U.S. Army, beleaguered by racial problems in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, is now the nation's most successfully integrated institution. This change did not occur by chance, they

argue, but rather as a result of a series of well-conceived reforms devised and forcefully implemented by the army's top uniformed and civilian leaders. Second, the authors suggest that the approach adopted by the army to close its racial divide provides a model for solving the seemingly intractable racial problems of the larger society.

Overall, the second proposition is less convincing than the first.

About the army's monumental achievement, Moskos and Butler are essentially correct. Black Americans accept the army's claim of zero tolerance of discrimination. Talented young African Americans see the army as an institution wherein effort correlates with re-

