

## THE PRESIDENT ON ROBERT FROST

# ‘One Acquainted with the Night’

by Paul Gallagher

Dec. 10—Among the recent 60th anniversaries of the giant steps for mankind taken by President John Kennedy in the last 18 months of his life, one step not much observed was that of his last major speech, one less remembered. Its subject was poetry. Our last Classically cultured American President, JFK, appeared on the campus of Amherst College in his native Massachusetts on Oct. 26, 1963 to speak about the poetry of Robert Frost, our last poet dedicated to Classical metaphor.



Amherst College Archives

*President John F. Kennedy speaks of the power of Robert Frost's poetry, at Amherst College, Oct. 26, 1963.*

presented a class on the power of poetry to raise the self-consciousness, alike of citizens and governing officials, and to avoid tragic, overreaching hubris. It was a specific discussion of the work of one poet, whose completely unique, constantly ironic poetic style, and ubiquitous public readings and recitations, had made him America's best-known, most recited, and most appreciated poet (though never named Poet Laureate). From the 1920s on, Robert Frost barnstormed on campuses reading and reciting his verse, and reopened a wide public door for Classical poetry

(The great American poet

Paul Lawrence Dunbar was Frost's contemporary; they were born two years apart within a decade after the Civil War. But Frost lived and wrote for nearly three times as many years, and so seems "the last" American Classical poet.)

as a live art. (Unfortunately, it was the Beat Poets who very knowingly walked through the door Frost had opened, leading to the dominance of inchoate poetry "shouts.")

Of Frost, JFK told the students,

The students listening in the Amherst College

"Cage," the indoor sports facility serving as an auditorium, were struck by the President of the United States giving them a guest lecture on poetry. Kennedy's speech was not political pablum about the ennobling influence of "the arts"; nor did he tell any of a politician's engaging anecdotes or claim familiarity with the poet, although they knew each other and had collaborated, briefly, for peace with the Soviet Union.



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*The American poet Robert Frost as a young man.*

Our national strength matters, but the spirit which informs and controls our strength matters just as much. This was the special significance of Robert Frost. He brought an unsparing instinct for reality to bear on the platitudes and pieties of society.... "I have been," he wrote, "one acquainted with the night." And because he knew the midnight as well as the high noon; because he understood the ordeal as well as

Rather, the President

the triumph of the human spirit, he gave his age strength with which to overcome despair.

### An Opponent of Malthus

Now in October 1963, not many in JFK's Amherst "poetry class" had learned to think of the American people as having to overcome despair. They did not hear *this* part of the presentation, because after thinking about it, JFK had struck it out of the [draft](#), perhaps as too "political," or for some other reason:

We take great comfort in our nuclear stockpiles, our gross national product, our scientific and technological achievement, our industrial might—and, up to a point, we are right to do so. But physical power by itself solves no problems and secures no victories. What counts is the way power is used—whether with swagger and contempt, or with prudence, discipline and magnanimity. What counts is the purpose for which power is used—whether for aggrandizement or for liberation. "It is excellent," Shakespeare said, "to have a giant's strength; but it is tyrannous to use it like a giant."

In place of that stricken section, the President said:

I look forward to an America which commands respect throughout the world not only for its strength but for its civilization as well. And I look forward to a world which will be safe not only for democracy and diversity, but also for personal distinction. Robert Frost was often skeptical about projects for human improvement; yet I do not think he would disdain this hope. As he wrote during the uncertain days of the Second War:

"Take human nature altogether since time began...

And it must be a little more in favor of man,  
Say a fraction of one percent at the very least ...  
Our hold on the planet wouldn't have so increased."

Because of Mr. Frost's life and work, ... our hold on this planet has increased.

Students in 1963, at a college where Robert Frost had recently been something of an institution, thought of him as a poet of the 1960s ("The Road

Not Taken" was deep, man!). But when JFK said, "He gave his age the strength to overcome despair," he was thinking, of course, of the "age" of the two world wars, the intervening Great Depression, the descent into the Cold War. Once we place Frost when he lived (1874-1963), we see that he wrote many poems of the Depression—like "Death of the Hired Man," "Out, Out ...," "A Roadside Stand"—even though it might appear that he never once wrote a poem addressing any great event—just of rural life in New Hampshire.

The only Frost [poem](#) Kennedy quoted that day, "Our Hold on the Planet," shows that the President meant *that* despair that arises—as in economic depression, or terrible war—when it seems the human race does not have the capacity to progress, to multiply, or to rise in humanity. The poem is practically unknown among Frost's thousand or so; but the anti-Malthusian JFK obviously liked it. The last eight lines of this brief poem, which he compressed into four in ending his speech, are:

We may doubt the just proportion of good to ill.

There is much in nature against us. But we forget;

Take nature altogether since time began,  
Including human nature, in peace and war,  
And it must be a little more in favor of man,  
Say a fraction of one percent at the very least,  
Or our number living wouldn't be steadily more,  
Our hold on the planet wouldn't have so increased.

And Frost could wax really angry over Malthusian "darkness," while still remaining a poet of rural American incident and anecdote:

### The Times Table

More than halfway up the pass  
Was a spring with a broken drinking glass,  
And whether the farmer drank or not  
His mare was sure to observe the spot  
By cramping the wheel on a water bar,  
Turning her forehead, with a star,  
And straining her ribs for a monster sigh;  
To which the farmer would make reply,  
'A sigh for every so many breath,  
And for every so many sigh a death.

That's what I always tell my wife  
Is the multiplication table of life.  
The saying may be ever so true;  
But it's just the kind of a thing that you  
Nor I, nor nobody else may say,  
Unless our purpose is doing harm,  
And then I know of no better way  
To close a road, abandon a farm,  
Reduce the births of the human race,  
And bring back nature in people's place.

And there are others like: "Sand Dunes"; "The Rhythm of Life"; "Two Tramps in Mud-Time"; "The Line Gang"; and so on.

### 'Many ... Ignored His Darker Truths'

President Kennedy was also "one acquainted with the night"—his life marked by serious illness and near death in war, his Presidency by repeated, grievous confrontations with the world-war party, the infamous military-industrial complex President Eisenhower had warned of but not fought against. JFK was one acquainted with the threatening in the night, and with those who believed, or contemptuously insisted, that only good fences—even nuclear fences—make good neighbors.

Frost had written that since-famous [poem](#), "Mending Wall," in 1914, as World War I was starting. With no hint about war, Germans, Irish or other suddenly suspect Americans—just a poem about two farmer neighbors in New Hampshire—the poet gave a portrait of American xenophobia that is often thought of as a longer narrative poem, though it has just 45 lines. That was Frost's most common form of metaphor—ironic, even sardonic—though he was certainly capable of Classically beautiful, dense metaphor in a few such poems as "To Earthward."

"If Robert Frost was much honored in his lifetime," JFK taught, with his own irony, "it was because a good many preferred to ignore his darker truths." Consider another poem, also virtually unknown, typical of so many:

### Neither Far Out Nor In Deep

The people along the sand  
All turn and look one way.  
They turn their back on the land  
And look at the sea all day.

As long as it takes to pass  
A ship keeps raising its hull;  
The wetter ground, like glass,  
Reflects a standing gull.

The land may vary more;  
But whatever the truth may be—  
The water comes ashore,  
And the people look at the sea.

They cannot look out far.  
They cannot look in deep.  
But when was that ever a bar  
To any watch they keep?

Or another, this one very well known:

### Fire and Ice

Some say the world will end in fire,  
Some say in ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire,  
I hold with those who favor fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate  
To know that for destruction, ice  
Is also great,  
And would suffice.

And even in one of Frost's most-memorized poems, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" (1922), there are warnings of darker truth, which can slip past a listener's mind because they come almost whimsically, in the second and third stanzas, from "my little horse." It knows the danger, not the dreaminess, of the incident. Stopping too long at night in such a storm, and far from any house or any light, holds not the momentary rising of a thought of death, but the threat of meeting death. The poet wrote a long narrative poem on just that threat, "Snow," which contains within it a plain but devastating image of distinctly American "religious" fanaticism.

"Stopping by Woods..." catches the unique character of Frost's poetry. It is a beautifully spare little drama of four brief stanzas, each linked to the next by the third-line rhyme; the repeated line ending the last stanza concludes the rhyme-linking in the most complete poetic way, evoking ambiguous simultaneous thoughts as it "snaps the poem shut." Which is to say, it was constructed with a lot of painstaking work, to be an ironic beauty.

And yet—it is nothing but common speech, entirely

as a man would talk to himself after stopping to collect his thoughts during a long trip home through a snowstorm. There are no inversions, alliterations, no highly wrought figures of speech; there is no “steed,” no “gale,” no “Winter chill,” no “silvered moonlight” or “firmament of stars”; certainly no “wild woods”—the fellow starts by remembering whose real estate he’s looking at! The sole “poetic image” worthy of the name, is the man hearing a sound, “the sweep of easy wind and downy flake.”

Whose woods these are, I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not mind me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound’s the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.

These woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

As Frost put it, he wanted to write “a few things that are hard to get rid of.”

### ‘Whose Thought I Had Not Hoped To Reach’

Common speech is the reserve currency of all of Robert Frost’s poetry. There are a few of his many, many poems in which he paid in gold, perhaps to show himself he could mint it: “To Earthward” (1914) is one; “The Silken Tent” (1942), “A Soldier” (1945), “Mowing” (about 1912) are others. But because he chose to create Classical poetic metaphor with nothing but that common currency of plain speech—as if an “ordinary American” suddenly raised up on his two hind legs and got out a deeply felt idea—Frost pointed to a path, *open even now*, for progress out of the wilderness of modernism, self-absorption, and raw emotionalism of poetry today, toward a restored ability to engage the listener’s consciousness of “what is better.”

With plainer speech, in fact, Frost created more

movingly beautiful poems. [One](#) of those, “The Tuft of Flowers,” was written before 1900—more than six decades before he recited at John Kennedy’s inauguration; nearly seven decades before JFK approved sending him with Interior Secretary Stuart Udall to the Soviet Union, where both had lengthy meetings with Nikita Khrushchev, in a period of backchannels two months before the Cuban Missiles Crisis erupted.

The poet F.D. Reeve, Frost’s translator in his 90-minute meeting with Khrushchev, later wrote that the poet was highly wrought up at the prospect of bending Khrushchev’s ear, with his vision of the two powers in a great and peaceful competition to lead the world in science, in art, in sports.... And being 88 and ill, Frost was exhausted and downcast afterwards over whether he had accomplished anything, despite having been given a “message” for Kennedy. Perhaps the conservative Republican poet was recalling that despite hailing and reciting for Kennedy, he had voted for Richard Nixon.

The head of the Soviet Writers Union, the poet Aleksei Surkov, was with Khrushchev when he came to Sochi to meet Frost; formally it was he who had invited Frost to visit and read and discuss his work, which was known and appreciated there. Surkov and Khrushchev reportedly were in animated discussion the next morning before departing. Just days later, surprisingly, Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s brutal portrait of the Stalinist gulags, later translated as *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, was allowed in print in the Soviet Union. Khrushchev’s gamble, it was called.

“The Tuft of Flowers” and “Mowing” are among a half-dozen Frost poems of mowing grass by hand, of “my long scythe whispering to the ground”; it is his most frequent image. The former is in much simpler speech than “Mowing,” the images less dense and intriguing, not “poetic.” But “The Tuft of Flowers” is the only one of these in which the poet lets the mower be someone else. It is an unseen stranger who has mowed the long grass and gone, but who has spared and left standing one beautiful tuft of flowers by a brook, as a kind of “brotherly speech/ With one whose thought I had not hoped to reach.”

Beauty is the speech of truth, the poet discovered. And perhaps when Khrushchev decided on the unexpected publication of Solzhenitsyn’s novel 70 years later, truth was the beauty found in very blunt and common speech.

One can listen to John Kennedy’s speech on Frost [here](#).