In Praise of Robert Frost

John F. Kennedy

President John F. Kennedy (1917–1963) gave this address on October 26, 1963, at Amherst College in Massachusetts. In this speech, Kennedy extols the virtues of Robert Frost, who had passed away earlier that year, and explains the need for a nation to express itself through art.

This day devoted to the memory of Robert Frost offers an opportunity for reflection which is prized by politicians as well as by others, and even by poets, for Robert Frost was one of the granite figures of our time in America. He was supremely two things: an artist and an American. A nation reveals itself not only by the men it produces but also by the men it honors, the men it remembers.

In America, our heroes have customarily run to men of large accomplishments. But today this college and country honors a man whose contribution was not to our size but to our spirit, not to our political beliefs but to our insight, not to our self-esteem, but to our self-comprehension. In honoring Robert Frost, we therefore can pay honor to the deepest sources of our national strength. That strength takes many forms, and the most obvious forms are not always the most significant. The men who create power make an indispensable contribution to the Nation’s greatness, but the men who question power make a contribution just as indispensable, especially when that questioning is disinterested, for they determine whether we use power or power uses us.

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. His sense of the human tragedy fortified him against self-deception and easy consolation. “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 the triumph of the human spirit, he gave his age strength with which to overcome despair. At bottom, he held a deep faith in the spirit of man, and it is hardly an accident that Robert Frost coupled poetry and power, for he saw poetry as the means of saving power from itself. When power leads men towards arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man’s concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses. For art establishes the basic human truth which must serve as the touchstone of our judgment.

The artist, however faithful to his personal vision of reality, becomes the last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state. The great artist is thus a solitary figure. He has, as Frost said, a lover’s quarrel with the world. In pursuing his perceptions of reality, he must often sail against the currents of his time. This is not a popular role. If Robert Frost was much honored in his lifetime, it was because a good many preferred to ignore his darker truths. Yet in retrospect, we see how the artist’s fidelity has strengthened the fibre of our national life.

If sometimes our great artists have been the most critical of our society, it is because their sensitivity and their concern for justice, which must motivate any true artist, makes him
aware that our Nation falls short of its highest potential. I see little of more importance to
the future of our country and our civilization than full recognition of the place of the artist.

If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision
wherever it takes him. We must never forget that art is not a form of propaganda; it is a
form of truth. And as Mr. MacLeish once remarked of poets, there is nothing worse for our
trade than to be in style. In free society art is not a weapon and it does not belong to the
spheres of polemic and ideology. Artists are not engineers of the soul. It may be different
elsewhere. But democratic society—in it, the highest duty of the writer, the composer, the
artist is to remain true to himself and to let the chips fall where they may. In serving his
vision of the truth, the artist best serves his nation. And the nation which disdains the
mission of art invites the fate of Robert Frost’s hired man, the fate of having “nothing to
look backward to with pride, and nothing to look forward to with hope.”

I look forward to a great future for America, a future in which our country will match its
military strength with our moral restraint, its wealth with our wisdom, its power with our
purpose. I look forward to an America which will not be afraid of grace and beauty, which
will protect the beauty of our natural environment, which will preserve the great old
American houses and squares and parks of our national past, and which will build handsome
and balanced cities for our future.

I look forward to an America which will reward achievement in the arts as we reward
achievement in business or statecraft. I look forward to an America which will steadily raise
the standards of artistic accomplishment and which will steadily enlarge cultural
opportunities for all of our citizens. And 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 this planet wouldn’t have so
increased.

Because of Mr. Frost’s life and work, because of the life and work of this college, our hold
on this planet has increased.