

### Introduction and Wrap-up to Frost-JFK Audio

In 1921 when President Burton wooed Robert Frost to be the first “Creative Fellow” at Michigan, he looked for more than an artist or writer who could share examples of his or her creating with the students, faculty and community in Ann Arbor: “We ought to have on campus creative artists who produce the results which influence the thought of nations.” That’s a pretty tall order under any circumstances, but for a poet? I will play two audio recordings so you can determine if Frost realized this promise.

From Frost’s last semester at Michigan in 1926, please jump forward to January 20, 1961, and hear the first poem at a Presidential Inauguration “The Gift Outright.” [Play audio]

Ironically, two nights before, Frost had scribbled out a 77-line “preface” to the much shorter poem JFK requested. Fortunately, the rheumy eyes of the 85-year-old poet failed as he fumbled badly trying to read even the first couplet of the long poem. Until he rose up and in the firm voice you just heard and recited from memory “The Gift Outright.” The Washington Post reported: the nation’s most beloved poet thereby “stole the hearts of the inaugural crowd.”

Frost’s performance might only have become a footnote in history, as the first and most memorable of the 5 poets who said a poem at Inaugurations thus far. But the next day, Frost delivered a signed copy of his 77-line poem to President Kennedy at the White House. The final couplet concluded, “A golden age of poetry and power/ Of which this noonday’s the beginning hour.” President and Poet bantered about the relationship between Poetry and Power. Frost suggested that the President, “Be more Irish than Harvard...Don’t be afraid of power.” Yet the long poem also spoke of the key role of the arts and artists in American life and democracy and of the “courage” of elected leaders “to break with their followers when in the wrong, a healthy independence from the throng.” A few days later, JFK scrolled in hand across the typed thank-you letter to Frost, “It’s poetry and power all the way!”

Perhaps only another footnote to history – until JFK appeared later in the fall of 1963 on the occasion of the ground-breaking for the Robert Frost Memorial Library at Amherst College. Please listen for the next few minutes to President Kennedy’s deeper exploration of poetry and power in American life and democracy. [Play Audio]

I was there to witness this speech. I shook the President’s hand. Too soon after this, his final speech, President Kennedy was gone, forever.

This much I can still safely say: No President will ever pay greater tribute to an artist “influencing the thought of nations” than JFK did to Robert Frost.

In contrast to President Kennedy and his time, I regret to report that there is little respect for poetry, art, and such independent questioning in the American presidency today. Indeed, as President Kennedy warned in his Last Speech, “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.’”

As we celebrate the art and sound of poetry and savor the taste and fragrance of this food tonight, let this not be our fate.