

## The Persistence of Frost

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My historical novel *The Belle of Two Arbors* was published last spring. It's about a woman poet born in Glen Arbor in 1899 who moved to Ann Arbor in the fall of 1921 to enroll as an older student at the University of Michigan. Here, she met and became a student, acolyte, close friend and lifelong correspondent with Robert Frost.

This evening, I will focus on the three promises Frost shared with Michigan President Burton when hired as a Creative Fellow in 1921 and the extent to which Frost in his long life after Michigan fulfilled each in a manner that persists to this day.

1. In Burton's words to the original donor of the fellowship: "A real university should be a patron of art, literature and creative activity," with creative artists in residence to inspire students by practicing their craft rather than teaching students in class.
2. In Frost words accepting Burton's offer, to "keep the creative and the erudite together in education where they belong," where the "creative can make its demand on the young student," where students can learn by doing and creating.
3. In Burton's words to the original donor: "We ought to have on campus creative artists who produce the results which influence the thought of nations."

At Michigan, Frost quarreled with the "academics" who taught "literature" of long-dead writers and snubbed contemporary authors, including Frost. Nevertheless, after Frost dedicated his 1924 Pulitzer Prize winning book of poems to "Michigan," Burton signed the poet to a lifetime appointment as a Permanent Fellow in Letters.

Unfortunately, Burton died shortly thereafter. Having lost his partner and patron, Frost left Michigan for similar "permanent fellowships" at Amherst, Harvard, Dartmouth and then back at Amherst until his death 36 years later. With regard to his employment, Frost's chose to move on from several "permanent" appointments.

So what persists today of the three promises Frost and Burton shared more than 90 years ago?

1. With respect to the first, non-teaching positions for creative artists and inventors in residence exist but are rare on college campuses. Instead, the Frost-Burton model evolved so that many, many more creative writers, artists and inventors find faculty positions to practice their craft *while* teaching classes, seminars, and workshops.

2. With respect to the second, a funny thing transformed the promise of universities and colleges to impose “the demand of the creative on students.” Instead, the rising demand of students to create, “to write, write, write” as Frost so often encouraged, and to learn by doing rose many thousand-fold. This *student demand* also spread to other departments and colleges, from architecture to engineering, from music to the sciences, from business to medicine. And learning by doing on campuses -- by creating, inventing, and experimenting – has become an integral part of higher education today. The academics may still rule most faculty roosts, but the artists, creators, inventors, and discoverers now cut a wide swath on most campuses. Ironically, in the literature canon of the academy today, Robert Frost is the long-dead poet most read, studied, and analyzed. Although his big ego might take pride in this, he would be more delighted by the many great poets today who claim their lineage of mentors and exemplars leads all the way back, yes, to Robert Frost.

3. That leaves the final question: Did Frost “influence the thought of nations?” President Kennedy answered this question as of the early 1960’s, not once but twice. First, he invited Frost to read a poem at his inauguration for the first time ever. They agreed on a short poem that JFK particularly liked “The Gift Outright.” Two nights before the event, however, Frost stayed up into the wee hours of the next morning composing a much longer “Dedication” to serve as “preface” the agreed and much shorter poem. It 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.” The final couplet concluded, “A golden age of poetry and power/ Of which this noonday’s the beginning hour.” Alas, in the bright sun reflecting off the snow on January 20, 1961, the rheumy eyes of the 85-year-old poet were not up to the task. He embarrassed himself struggling to read even the first couplet of the long poem. Until he rose up and in a firm voice recited from memory “The Gift Outright” as only the greatest showman of all

poets could. The next day Frost delivered a copy of “Dedication” to JFK at the White House. They bantered about the relationship between Poetry and Power. Frost concluded by suggesting that the President, “Be more Irish than Harvard. Poetry and power is the formula for another Augustan Age. Don’t be afraid of power.” A few days later, JFK scrolled in hand across the typed thank-you letter to Frost, “It’s poetry and power all the way!”

Second, on October 26, 1963, at the groundbreaking for the Robert Frost Memorial Library at Amherst College, the President eulogized Frost. He began, “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 pay honor to the deepest sources of our national strength.”

The president then explained how Frost exemplified the value of independent questioning to American life and democracy:

He brought an unsparing instinct for reality to bear on the platitudes and pieties of society. . . . [I]t’s 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 man 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 truths which must serve as the touchstone of our judgment.

In free society art is not a weapon, and it does not belong to the sphere of polemics and ideology. It may be different elsewhere. But [in a] democratic society, 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.

This led to Kennedy’s conclusion about poetry, power and Robert Frost: “[Those] who create power make an indispensable contribution to the nation’s greatness, but [those] who question power make as indispensable a contribution...for they determine whether we use

power or power uses us.” 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 independent questioning in the American presidency today. Indeed, as President Kennedy warned in this, his Final 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.’”

Let this not be our fate.