

Robert Frost

(1874-1963)

The Gift Outright (1942)

The land was ours before we were the land's.  
She was our land more than a hundred years  
Before we were her people. She was ours  
In Massachusetts, in Virginia;  
But we were England's, still colonials,  
Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,  
Possessed by what we now no more possessed.  
Something we were withholding made us weak  
Until we found out that it was ourselves  
We were withholding from our land of living,  
And forthwith found salvation in surrender.  
Such as we were we gave ourselves outright  
(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)  
To the land vaguely realizing westward,  
But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,  
Such as she was, such as she would become.

ANALYSIS

“The ominous thirteenth line of Robert Frost’s ‘The Gift Outright’ is made to appear all the more ominous by its entire lack of tonal and grammatical relationship with any thing else in the poem, an isolation signaled, of course, by the parentheses. Almost by itself this line justifies Frost’s own characterization of the poem as being ‘about Revolutionary War,’ rather than, in a more general way, about the forming of a spiritual commitment to the land. Omit the thirteenth line and the poem is still a very good, though undoubtedly a very different, one—in some sense, perhaps, the ‘basic poem’ to which the apparently gratuitous reminder of war is the poet’s own gift outright. Moreover, the line is almost all that prevents us from taking the poem as simply an interesting, but finally conventional and unambiguous, patriotic effusion, something rather like what Frost must have had in mind when, in an unguarded moment, he compared the poem to ‘The Star-Spangled Banner.’ (See Reginald Cook, *Robert Frost: A Living Voice* [Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1974], p. 133.)

The key to the irony of the line is the curious phrase ‘The deed of gift,’ which means considerably more than merely ‘the act of giving.’ It is in fact a technical legal term, succinctly defined in Black’s *Law Dictionary* as ‘A deed executed and delivered without consideration’—that is, without expectation of return, a legal promise to give or donate. Frost might have encountered this relatively esoteric term in a purely legal context, but there is reason to believe that it came to him from Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, from a passage in which Mephistopheles tells the learned Doctor that he ‘must bequeath’ his soul ‘solemnly / And write a deed of gift with thine own blood...’ (II, i. 35-36). The phrase occurs again at line 60 (Mephistopheles reminds Faustus to ‘Write it in manner of a deed of gift,’ presumably as opposed to the manner of a contract), and again at line 90 (Faustus calls the completed document ‘A deed of gift of body and of soul,’ though he shrewdly goes on to include ‘conditions’).

Frost knew this play well, having on one occasion composed a shortened version for a production put on by his students at the Pinkerton Academy. In ‘New Hampshire’ (quoting I. iii. 81), Frost claimed that ‘Kit Marlowe taught me how to say my prayers: / “Why this is Hell, nor am I out of it”.’ (II. 242-243). In the play as in the poem, the distinctive peculiarities of the ‘deed of gift’ are that it is sealed in blood and that it involves the giving of the self, body and soul.

Perhaps the significance of the influence consists mainly in the implication that Frost thought of the development of American national character in terms of the Faust myth. Certainly the allusion to Faustus' compact with Mephistopheles casts a lurid light over Frost's use of the verb 'possess.' If in Frost's implied scheme one may be 'possessed' either by a debilitating God or by an invigorating Satan, it will be seen that we remained weak so long as our political, cultural, and, by extension, our spiritual allegiances were to England, a force which figures in the poem as a distant, invisible, yet powerful governing agency; we remained weak and dependent precisely because we were 'withholding' ourselves spiritually from the tempting natural environment that was supporting us materially. As in Doctor Faustus, the 'deed of gift' invokes the issue of 'salvation,' though in Frost's parable, the Faustian spirit of America is not merely strengthened temporarily and adventitiously as Faustus was, but instead is actually redeemed from weakness by a surrender to and immersion in the violent destructiveness of nature, self-reliance and war."

Albert J. Von Frank  
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"[In the poem Frost wrote to read aloud at John F. Kennedy's inauguration as President of the United States, he willed] the realities of modern power politics into an alliterative 'golden age of poetry and power'.... Except that, on the occasion, he was unable to read more than a few lines of the poem, troubled as he was by the sun's glare that bright, cold January day, but at least as much by the poem's newness to him, his unfamiliarity with and uncertainty about the way it went.

Or perhaps, as he had been wont to say about himself, it was a sort of judgment. He had been tempted to believe that it was a great occasion at which he would perform-not just a transfer of power from one party to another, both of which were filled with politicians. Like many others, he conceived the new president as Young Lochinvar, the perfect combination of spirit and flesh, passion and toughness, poetry and reality, Harvard and Irish. It was almost as if, in the language of his poem 'Kitty Hawk,' Kennedy had been sent 'As a demonstration / That the supreme merit / Lay in risking spirit / In substantiation.' And Frost wrote the extravagant words about the 'next Augustan age,' as if by proclaiming them he could help it come into being, could substantiate it.

But the poet was old, the flesh was weak, and he could not utter the words he had written. At this moment of disaster, he called on some resource and rose to a level in every way superior to the pumped-up one of the new poem's advertisement. Putting behind him the stumbling uncertainties of voice and tone which characterized his attempt to deliver the new poem, he fell back on an old one he knew perfectly, and in the most splendidly commanding of voices read 'The Gift Outright' impeccably: 'The land was ours before we were the land's.' His performance thus attained a dramatic, even a heroic quality, which it would otherwise have lacked if things had gone off perfectly. The imperfect version had more of 'life' in it: In the midst of flattery and display, the sound of sense suddenly and movingly made itself felt."

William H. Pritchard  
*Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered*  
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"Here Frost presents himself as spokesperson for Americans and adopts a tone of grieving and longing desperation that slowly yields to love and triumph. The poem opens by describing the American people's first possession of their land merely as land--before they also belonged to the land--partly because the people were subservient to their English masters. With 'Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,' a partly sexual metaphor is extensively punned on. We were unpossessed because ownership of the land was denied us by England and because we did not give ourselves to the land in the spiritual and physical union love demands. A variation of this idea is in the next line, 'Possessed by what we now no more possessed,' which means that as we began a deep involvement, it was denied by the foreigners who still ruled. These limitations were overcome when Americans realized they had to give themselves in an act of passionate surrender, for to give oneself 'outright' means to do so immediately and totally, as lovers do.

Again Frost puns: 'deed of gift' as 'deeds of war' refers to certificates of possession and sacrificial acts of possession. The land 'vaguely realized itself westward' because the action proceeded spontaneously over

a long period but led to a crystallization resembling the nation's birth. This vagueness is shown by the country's being 'still unstoried, artless, unenhanced' as its development continued, which echoes the earlier unpossession and creates a sense of unformed spaces that have not yet achieved their myths. John Doyle points out that 'artless' means simple and sincere as well as without works of art. In the high sense of convincing story and belief, these myths are projected forward in the last line, with its curious perspective from the past: looking at the present and the still-hoped-for future and asserting that they will become reality."

Mordecai Marcus  
*The Poems of Robert Frost: an explication*  
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"There was the very effective moment of performance when Frost gave up on the physical and intellectual distances involved in reading off a page and gazed out at the nation and recited, directly from his body as it were, 'The Gift Outright,' a poem which also insisted on a mystic connection between body and world: 'The land was ours before we were the land's.' These simple words are eminently tricky: Frost is celebrating Manifest Destiny, but history is kept in decidedly soft focuses....

After this beginning, political and historic specifics fade into even more elemental arrangements. Questions of who, at different times, lived on the land and named it are sidestepped. Jerome McGann notes this evasion: the Native American name Massachusetts 'reminds us that this supremely Anglo-American poem cannot escape or erase a history that stands beyond its white myth of Manifest Destiny'; Massachusetts reveals Virginia as a 'lying, European word.' There are no more proper names after the three mentioned above; the rhetoric subsides into general considerations of ownership. The land becomes a woman, making us a corporate male that needs to make her ours; and the passage of historical time gives way to the drama of sexualized geopolitical possession with only a before and an after. Strength is crucially at issue in this Oedipal question, but it masked by a rhetoric of religious self-sacrifice... 'Giving ourselves' can be understood innocently as knowing a place well, clearing forests and cultivating farms. The land that is rhetorically the recipient of our gift and in reality the object of our possession is kept quite general and thus, beyond the poem, has room for many adherents from John Wayne in Red River to current ecological sensibilities expressed by poets such as Wendell Berry.

But the next lines reveal the limitations of the capacious optimism of the poem: 'we gave ourselves outright / (The deed of gift was many deeds of war) / To the land vaguely realizing westward.' The play on 'deed of gift' / 'deeds of war' does not exclude any war from the single act of giving ourselves to and taking possession of America; but the fact that war is the crucial act does *exclude women* from the large 'we' the poem invokes. [How? This is PC sexism. Many women served during all past wars. Italics added.] The mention of war only in parentheses and the cloudy uplift of the language keep particulars at bay; but 'westward,' even if it's qualified by 'vaguely realizing,' is still specific enough to implicate the Indian wars. If the 1942 publication date of the poem is kept in mind, 'westward' stretches to--or at least gestures toward--the Pacific Theater of the Second World War.

If the date of the inaugural recitation is kept in mind, then the meaning of the poem can stretch still further to foreshadow the Vietnam War. Clearly, such a reference is foreign to the poem as a specific act of writing that took place in 1942, but the poem's own prophetic-colloquial invocation of Manifest Destiny invites such expansion. Such vague but compelling terms as 'us' and 'land' were central to the rhetoric under which the war was conducted, as 'we' 'fought for freedom,' wherever it was deemed necessary by the war managers, trying to win 'hearts and minds': in this context 'vaguely realizing westward' points directly at South Vietnam. Of course, Robert Frost was not Robert McNamara or General Westmoreland. As a political act, his recitation was a minor ornament. But in terms of the explicit or subterranean political allegiances of poetry, Frost's position--lone sage facing and possessing the landscape for the nation--is an affirmation of the American status quo that is difficult for [anti-American] poets to ignore."

Bob Perelman  
*The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History*  
(Princeton 1996)

“On that gusting day of the inauguration of the young emperor, the sublime Augustan moment of a country that was not just a republic but also an empire, no more a homespun vision of pioneer values but a world power, no figure was more suited to the ceremony than Robert Frost. He had composed a poem for the occasion, but he could not read it in the glare and the wind, so instead he recited one that many had heard and perhaps learned by heart. ‘The land was ours before we were the land’s’....

This was the calm reassurance of American destiny that provoked Tonto’s response to the Lone Ranger. No slavery, no colonization of Native Americans, a process of dispossession and then possession, but nothing about the dispossession of others that this destiny demanded. The choice of poem was not visionary so much as defensive. A Navajo hymn might have been more appropriate: the ‘ours’ and the ‘we’ of Frost were not as ample and multihued as Whitman’s tapestry, but something as tight and regional as a Grandma Moses painting, a Currier and Ives print, strictly New England in black and white.

By then as much an emblem of the republic as any rubicund senator with his flying white hair, an endangered species like a rare owl, there was the old poet who, between managing the fluttering white hair and the fluttering white paper, had to recite what sounded more like an elegy than a benediction. ‘The land was ours before we were the land’s’ could have had no other name, not only because he was then in his old age, but because all his spirit and career, like Thomas Hardy’s, lurched toward a wintry wisdom.”

Derek Walcott  
from “The Road Taken,” *Homage to Robert Frost*  
Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, and Derek Walcott, eds.  
(Farrar, Strauss 1996)

“One can hardly imagine a better brief description of our national history than Frost’s image of ‘the land vaguely realizing westward.’ Both ‘vaguely’ and ‘realizing’ are unexpected, and perfect. The poet gets the haphazard, unplanned quality of the process in the former term and underscores the seeming historic inevitability of it in the latter; in Frost’s version of social Darwinism, morality is stripped to the bare essentials: there were millions of strong transplanted Europeans in the East, and they would eventually need room to expand; they had greater numbers and better weapons than the native people, so they overcame them; indeed, they nearly wiped them out altogether! That they remained ‘unstoried, artless, unenhanced’ is also part of the story, and Frost does not (as a lesser, merely patriotic poet might have done) overly praise *these conquerors, who even seem more like a virus than a nation.*” [Most of the pioneers were humble family people more discerning than this critic. Italics added.]

Jay Parini  
*Robert Frost: A Life*  
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Michael Hollister (2015)