

Malcolm Farley: On "Provide, Provide"

If the nationalistic celebration Frost provided President Kennedy in "The Gift Outright" still sets your teeth on edge, leaven that irritation with Frost's lacerating attack on the American cult of fame and money in his poem "Provide, Provide" from *A Further Range* The savage indignation in this poem is worthy of Swift at his fiercest. Its brilliant, razor-sharp tercets also make one think of Yeats or a character from Dante's *Inferno* lashing out at the sins of the world while unconsciously exposing his own. Indeed, in a layering of ironies so complex they are almost impossible to disentangle, Frost simultaneously mocks our tradition of literary self-help à la Benjamin Franklin and parodies his own stance as a New England moralist, while lampooning the American craving for celebrity, money, and the illusory solace they bring.

That the poem imagines a career almost the opposite of Frost's, who obtained fame and recognition only in the last half of his life, is yet another acid in this poem's potent brew. Yet, going beyond satire, Frost also slyly confesses to the raw human need, even at the end of life, for the love which applause makes manifest: "No memory of having starred/Atones for later disregard?" In doing so, the poem exposes the artist's desperation to receive an assurance of love and fame after his own death, that his works and his audience will outlive him. Frost's brutality both conceals and specifies this terrible pathos of the poet.

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