

Mordecai Marcus: On "The Gift Outright"

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.

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