

## William H. Pritchard: On "The Gift Outright"

[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.

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### **Publication Status:**

Excerpted Criticism <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Publication:**

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### **Criticism Target:**

Robert Frost <sup>[2]</sup>

### **Author:**

William H. Pritchard <sup>[3]</sup>

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