

## Derek Walcott: On "The Gift Outright"

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. She was our land more than a hundred years Before we were her people.

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.

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