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ESSAY

Political Poeticizing

‘The Gift Outright’ and how poetry is built on problems.

BY SIOBHAN PHILLIPS



John F. Kennedy delivers his inaugural address in Washington, D. C. in 1961.
(U. S. Army Signal Corps photograph in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston)

Good politics is a game of clear, unambiguous messages; good poetry, less so. How to make poetry political, then? Take “The Gift Outright,” by Robert Frost, a poem about American history and politics that occupies its own space within them. First published in 1942, the poem is most famous for its appearance at John F. Kennedy’s inauguration in 1961. Frost was the first American poet to read at a presidential swearing-in ceremony, and his inclusion seemed to signal new prestige for poetry itself. Kennedy later called Frost’s work “the deepest source of our national strength.” But Frost didn’t trust “The Gift Outright” to demonstrate that strength. He wrote another—bad—poem to make sure his audience got the point. The couplet-rich “For John F. Kennedy’s Inauguration” bristles with certainty about the American past: “Our venture in revolution and outlawry / Has justified itself in freedom’s story / Right down to now in glory upon glory.” It’s also pretty confident about the American future—“a golden age of poetry and power / Of which this noonday’s the beginning hour.” Together, the assertions of this “preliminary history” were meant to set up “The Gift Outright.”

“The Gift Outright” might not need such help. It already focuses on a key American-exceptionalist myth, the story of settlement. “The land was ours before we were the land’s,” the poem begins, looking “westward” to national fulfillment. When Kennedy accepted the Democratic nomination in July 1960, he invoked the same narrative, describing how “pioneers of old gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their lives to build up a new world” before rallying listeners to join him at a “New Frontier—the frontier of the 1960s—a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils—a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats.” Frost’s poem seems to ratify Kennedy’s return to Manifest Destiny.

Frost’s poem also undermines it, though. In “The Gift Outright,” “freedom’s story” doubts happy endings. The conclusion exposes parallel uncertainties about “the land”: “such as she was, such as she would become.” Wary of what has been, the line is necessarily wary of what is to be, because any future will rewrite the past. Both include, therefore, the poem’s racist assumption of a white, European, landowning “we” and its racist ignorance of how the same Europeans worked to eradicate Native American culture and perpetuate slavery. The very crudity of Frost’s trundling, plain-spoken, mostly end-stopped lines betrays insecurity rather than confidence about “civilization,” wonder rather than scorn at a supposedly “artless” and “unenhanced” continent. (Marit MacArthur, in her analysis of the poem, is acute on these ambiguities.) Frost’s “vaguely realizing westward” could be hesitant as well as indistinct. It’s not surprising that this poem was probably begun in depression-ridden Key West; MacArthur, citing Robert Faggen and Lawrence Thompson, suggests 1935. “The Gift Outright” doesn’t wholeheartedly believe in national triumph or national progress.

“For John F. Kennedy’s Inauguration” could fix all that, lending “Gift” some inaugural certainty after (in Frost’s words) “the greatest vote a people ever cast.” But thwarted by the glare of the sun, at the age of 86, Frost had to abandon his reading of those purpose-written lines. He instead spoke “The Gift Outright” from memory. Perhaps in compensation, he altered the final phrases: “such as she would become, has become, I—for this occasion let me change that to—what she will become.” As Jay Parini recounts in his Frost biography, Kennedy had already asked for a similar change when he asked the poet to read. Mike Chasar, in *Poetry*, describes how Frost’s impromptu oral revision “contributed to—perhaps even saved—an otherwise highly scripted moment.” But it also simplified that moment to conform to a patriotic script: *will*, not *would*. (In the poem’s earliest publication, as Ted Genoways points out, Frost used the more hesitant *might*.) Inaugurations need an optimistic vocabulary.

Frost’s inaugural words weren’t the last ones, though. “The Gift Outright” endures in the version reproduced here. And other poets have capitalized on its problems, on what it says not only about American politics but also about political poeticizing. They use the uncertain occasion Frost keeps offering; they pay tribute in further questions.

In “Gold,” for example, Paul Muldoon thinks particularly about the January inauguration, purporting to Frost at the podium a self-ironizing that allows Muldoon his own jabs. The same poet who praised a “golden age of poetry and power,” Muldoon points out, had already written that “nothing gold can stay.” Certainly the “golden” age that began in January 1961 did not last long. Kennedy was killed in November 1963, at which time Frost had been dead for 10 months. Muldoon knows that a vague realization westward, the direction in which Irish writers could find authenticity and American writers aggrandizement, shambles toward inevitable mortality. Think of the end to Joyce’s “The Dead,” when Gabriel realizes that it’s time to set out on his “journey westward.” Even the most brilliant move down to dusk.

Among those brilliant, Muldoon suggests, is Marilyn Monroe—the figure concluding “Gold.” Monroe famously sang “Happy Birthday” to Kennedy at his Madison Square Garden celebration in May 1962; then she, too, died—less than three months later. (In *Robert Frost and Northern Irish Poetry*, Rachel Buxton provides a great explication of the poem’s references.) The allusion makes for Muldoon’s final warning about Frost’s platform pomposity. How different are the distinguished poet, versifying of Kennedy’s “beginning,” and the Hollywood siren, crooning on his birthday? Both sing for their supper. Time comes for both. Of course, Muldoon is warning himself too: the similarities between “Muldoon” and “Marilyn” would have delighted the poet of “Gold.” Quit writing “Gold,” the poem tells itself. Quit believing anything about poets’ evading time, about poetry triumphing over history. You know it’s not true.

Is there a warning about a particularly American self-deception here? “Gold” appears in the middle of Muldoon’s 1987 volume *Meeting the British*, the title poem of which brings together the French and English languages at an 18th-century meeting of Ottawan and British forces. The latter’s parting gift, along with “six fishhooks,” is “two blankets embroidered with smallpox.” Here are the indigenous peoples that “The Gift Outright” ignores, facing soldiers of the British government that also controls Muldoon’s native Northern Ireland. At the time *Meeting the British* appeared, though, Muldoon was about to move from the United Kingdom to the United States, no longer the subject of European powers but a world power in its own right, where Ronald Reagan could tell conservative activists, in 1988, that they were “troops ... on the frontier of freedom.” Colonial history, frontier history: these are never really historical. Muldoon uses Frost to reinforce the contradictory knowledges that natural death comes for all while political life, inevitably, repeats itself. Both facts trouble the American desire or ability to “belong” to a “land.”

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Juliana Spahr is even more troubled about “belonging.” In a 2011 essay, “Contemporary U.S. Poetry and Its Nationalisms,” Spahr describes how the burgeoning interest in poetry after 9/11 made art into an agent of state interests. (Included in her distrust: “special synergy between the Bush administration and the Poetry Foundation.”) Her description of “poets who wrote nationalist poems” singles out Frost: “There are few meaningful poems in U.S. literature that

are as much about the complicated intersection between nationalism and privatization as is ‘The Gift Outright,’ which overwrites Native American presence and naturalizes the relationship between European immigrants and land-ownership.” These concomitant moves, for Spahr, form the basis of a U.S. imperialism that continues into the present.

Spahr was particularly aware of present consequences because of time spent teaching at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, where she worked from 1997 to 2003 amid pressing evidence of American territorial aggression. In her work, she writes, she used Hawaiian and pidgin vocabulary to separate herself “from U.S. economic, cultural, and/or linguistic imperialism.” She continues the practice in “Some of We and the Land That Was Never Ours,” the opening poem of a book that appeared the same year as her article on nationalism. She rewrites Frost by deforming the most objectionable and easily assumed parts of “The Gift Outright”—that first-person plural pronoun and that idea of ownership. “We are in this world. We are in this world,” Spahr’s poem repeats. “We are together. We are together.” The content of these incantations refuses national polity for global citizenship. The form of these incantations replaces national progress with recursive rearrangements.

These are rearrangements of language, as Spahr explains. After taking notes on a vacation in France, she ran her words through a “translation machine” that moved them back and forth between French and English. The poem is English turned inside out, or seen outside in, an estrangement that mimics Spahr’s stance at the time—looking back on her own country from thousands of miles away. It’s also Frost’s legacy turned around: “I thought about who owned what. And divisions. And songs sung in bars. And inaugural poems,” Spahr writes in “Some of We.”

The result suggests Spahr’s imbrication in the very structures that she wishes to unmake: in her essay, she doesn’t want to “suggest that one could easily refuse one’s way out of” poetic nationalism. Refusal would be too easy. Writers must instead do something with the history and poetry—including Frost’s—that they inherit.

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Michael Robbins also does something, but he is more amenable to outright refusal. His “To the Drone Vaguely Realizing Eastward” was intended to be an inauguration poem, written in 2012 when Yahoo! News commissioned six poets to compose something for the occasion of Barack Obama’s swearing in. As with “For John F. Kennedy’s Inauguration,” though, circumstances intervened: not the harsh glare of sunlight but the cautious shadow of propriety. Robbins recalls the controversy in an article he wrote for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*: the final line of his poem, “The bomb bay opens with a queef,” offended the Yahoo! Standards desk with its reference to “vaginal farting.” Whereas Frost changed the conclusion of his poem to fit a patriotic script, Robbins won’t alter the ending of his. To do so would betray his fury at “President Drone,” as the poem calls Obama, who mourns the killing of innocents in Newtown,

Connecticut while ordering the killing of innocents in “Pakistan and Yemen.” With his title, Robbins suggests this fresh travesty as no more than a continuation of a national imperialism that once did its “civilizing” work westward toward the Pacific and now perpetrates its “democracy-building” work in other directions. Such as we were, perhaps, we will continue to be, in the worsening continuation of what Frost called “many deeds of war.” From the murder of Native Americans to the murder of Pakistanis and Yemenis: what has changed? Some life is worth mourning; some isn’t.

There’s more to Robbins’s satire, though, than this message, and more to his use of Frost than a pessimistic conviction about U.S. tendencies. Like Muldoon and Spahr, Robbins comments on the very possibility of nationalist or anti-nationalist poetry. He knows that his refusal to compromise does little for victimized Pakistanis: “I remember I am doing this for the murdered children,” he writes and then “I remember to feel guilty that I am using murdered children as a pretext to stir up queef controversy.” In the final line of Robbins’s essay, in which he waits for a “kill fee,” he admits continued implication in a history of killing. His refusal to compromise about *queef*, then, aims at more than pride. (Or poetic integrity: did Robbins wish to retain Frost’s reference to the sexual pleasure in American dominion over the land—“such as *she* was”—and over others?) It also intends to underline the hypocrisies of a country eager for the sanctity of poetry at important moments but wary of any poetry that doesn’t reinforce a triumphant self-perception. Inaugurations, we hypocritically feel, call for something more like Frost’s “For John F. Kennedy’s Inauguration” than Robbins’s “To the Drone.”

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The official poem for Obama’s 2012 inauguration, by Richard Blanco, was indeed more like the former than the latter. “One Today” celebrates the “we” of American unity, includes an elegy for the victims of Newtown and ignores the “war on terror.” As Harris Feinsod points out in his wonderful exegesis, Blanco’s work even naturalizes westward expansion in its sun-dappled opening.

But Blanco’s is not the last word till now on Frost’s legacy: the 2012 inauguration included a more direct attempt to use the example of Frost’s inaugural performance. Paul Muldoon was also asked to write a poem for Yahoo!, and he modeled his offering, “For Barack Obama, His Second Inauguration,” explicitly on the form of “For John F. Kennedy’s Inauguration”—those easily rhyming couplets. Muldoon’s poem includes a reference to drones and a recommendation to apologize to Native Americans. It eschews both the “golden age” history of Frost’s inaugural verse and the Manifest Destiny history of Frost’s “The Gift Outright.” In Muldoon’s poem, a cautious optimism is built only on restraint: it is “no bad thing,” Muldoon muses, that the myth of U.S. exceptionalism is now impossible to sustain. It means that the United States can stop trying “to teach the world how to behave” and can start sorting out the consequences of its own behavior.

These recommendations are so clear, in Muldoon's lines. So possible. So amiable an answer to the questions of Frost's inaugural poetry, of inaugural poeticizing generally. And then I reread "The Gift Outright"—along with Robbins's poem, Spahr's, Muldoon's "Gold." Poetry is built less on reasonable solutions than on enduring problems. The questions keep going, and there are more poems to write.

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BIOGRAPHY

Siobhan Phillips's poems and essays have appeared in *Boston Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Southwest Review*, and other journals. She is the author of *The Poetics of the Everyday: Creative Repetition in Modern American Verse* (Columbia University Press, 2010).

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