

AMHERST

AS, jr.

draft

This day -- a day devoted to the memory of Robert Frost -- offers an opportunity for reflection -- an opportunity to be prized, I might add, by politicians no less than by poets. For Robert Frost was one of the <sup>granite figures</sup> ~~unchallengable heroes~~ of our time in America. ~~He carved his poetry in materials as subtle as the colors of this New England Indian summer, and as enduring as the granite of his New Hampshire hills.~~ He was supremely two things: an artist and an American. As we reflect on his life and his work, we must inevitably reflect on the abiding values of our American civilization.

A nation reveals itself, not only by the men it produces, but by the men it honors. ~~A society betrays its innermost secrets by its choice of heroes.~~ In America, our heroes have customarily run to men of large and dramatic accomplishment -- ~~statesmen, explorers, generals, magnates, investors, men of notable courage in war, men of notable enterprise in peace.~~ But today this College and this country honor a man whose contribution was not to our size but to our spirit -- not to our ideology but to our insight -- not to our self-esteem but to our self-comprehension. In honoring Robert Frost, we pay homage to the deepest sources of our national strength.

Strength takes many forms -- and the most obvious forms are not necessarily the most significant. ~~We take great comfort in our nuclear stockpiles, our gross national product, our scientific and technological achievement, our industrial might -- and, up to a point, we are right to do so. But physical power by itself solves no problems and secures no victories. What counts is the way power is used -- whether with <sup>bravado</sup> ~~swagger~~ and contempt, or with prudence, discipline and magnanimity. What counts is the purpose for which power is used -- whether for aggrandizement or for liberation. "It is excellent," ~~Shakespeare said, "to have a giant's strength; but it is tyrannous to use it like a giant."~~~~

The men who create power make an indispensable contribution to a nation's greatness. But the men who question power make a contribution just as indispensable -- for they determine whether we use power or power uses us. Our <sup>honor</sup> strength matters -- but the spirit which informs and controls our strength matters just as much. This was the <sup>spirit</sup> ~~greatness~~ of Robert Frost. He brought an unsparing instinct for reality to bear on the platitudes and pieties of society. His sense of the human tragedy fortified him against self-deception and cheap consolation. "I have been," he wrote, "one acquainted with the night." And, because he knew the gloom of midnight as well as the

~~blasted~~<sup>high</sup> noon, because he understood the ordeal as well as the triumph of the human spirit, he gave his age new strength with which to overcome despair. At bottom, he held and affirmed a deep faith in the unconquerable soul of man.

It is hardly an accident that Frost coupled poetry and power; for he saw poetry as the means of saving power from itself. When power leads man toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the area of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence.

~~When power intoxicates, poetry restores sobriety.~~  
~~When power intoxicates, poetry restores sobriety.~~  
 When power corrupts - poetry cleanses -  
 For art establishes the basic human truths which serve as the touchstone of judgment. The artist, forever faithful to his personal vision of reality, becomes the last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state.

The great artist is thus a solitary figure. He has, as Frost said, a lover's quarrel with the world. In pursuing his perceptions of reality, he must often sail against the currents of his time. This is not a popular role. If Robert Frost was much honored when he was alive, it was sometimes by those who preferred to ignore his darker truths. ~~Too often we do not honor our artists until they~~

~~are dead and can disturb us no longer.~~ Yet, in retrospect, we see how the artist's fidelity has strengthened the fiber of our national life. If sometimes our great artists have appeared most critical of our society, it is because ~~they love it so much~~ *their feelings are so strong* that they cannot bear for it to fall short of its highest potentialities.

I see little more important to the future of our civilization than full recognition of the place of the artist. If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it leads. We must never forget that art is not a form of propaganda; it is a form of truth; and, as Mr. MacLeish once remarked of poets, "There is nothing worse for our trade than to be in style." In free society, art is not a weapon. Art does not belong to the sphere of ideology. Artists are not engineers of the soul.

It may be different elsewhere. In Soviet Russia, Chairman Khrushchev has informed us, "It is the highest duty of the Soviet writer, artist and composer, of every creative worker, to be in the ranks of the builders of communism, to put his talents at the service of the great cause of our Party, to fight for the triumph of the ideas of Marxism-Leninism." In democratic society, the highest duty

of the writer, artist and composer is to remain true to himself and to his vocation, letting the chips fall where they may.

In serving his vision of the truth, the artist best serves his nation. And the nation which disdains the mission of art invites the fate of Robert Frost's hired man -- the fate of having

Nothing to look backward to with pride  
And nothing to look forward to with hope.

I look forward to a great future for America -- a future in which our country will match its military strength with its moral restraint, its wealth with its wisdom, its power with its purpose.

I look forward to an America which will not be afraid of grace and beauty -- which will protect the <sup>beauty</sup> ~~loveliness~~ of our natural environment, which will preserve the ~~same~~ <sup>best</sup> old houses and squares and parks of our national past, and which will build handsome and <sup>balanced</sup> ~~spacious~~ cities in the future.

I look forward to an America which will reward achievement in the arts as it rewards achievement in business or in statecraft.

I look forward to an America which will steadily raise the standards of artistic accomplishment and which will steadily enlarge cultural opportunities for all.

I look forward to an America which commands respect through the world not only for its strength but for its civilization.

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I look forward to a world which will be safe not for democracy  
and for diversity but for distinction.

Robert Frost was often skeptical about projects for human  
improvement. Yet I do not think he would disdain this hope. As  
he wrote during the uncertain days of the Second World War,

~~We may doubt the just proportion of good to ill.  
There is much in nature against us. But we forget:  
Take nature altogether since time began,  
Including human nature in peace and war,  
And it must be a little more in favor of man,  
Say a fraction of one per cent at the very least,  
Or our number living wouldn't be steadily more,  
Our hold on the planet wouldn't have so increased.~~