

# Robert Frost

## On Emerson

*On the evening of October 8, 1958 the American Academy of Arts and Sciences made its first award of the Emerson-Thoreau Medal to Robert Frost in recognition of his long and distinguished contribution to the creative arts. His response appears below, as revised by him from his words of that evening.*

*As befitted the eminence of the guest of honor and the importance of the occasion, the House of the Academy was filled. To accord with Mr. Frost's wishes, the atmosphere was informal and the ceremony simple – that of friends honoring a friend. Before dinner he chatted with some of his hosts, and after dinner he escaped for a short catnap. When he took his place before his enthusiastically applauding audience, it was as a member of the Academy, at home in its House, the man whom Amy Lowell called “a neighbor of neighbors.”*

*What he then said was essentially a conversation with friends. It followed the higher law of his own feeling rather than any formal*

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*Robert Frost, one of America's leading twentieth-century poets and a four-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize, became a Fellow of the American Academy in 1931. His remarks, given on the night he accepted the American Academy's first Emerson-Thoreau Medal, appeared in the Fall 1959 issue of “Daedalus.” Frost died in 1963.*

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*rules for oral rhetoric, and his idiom was tuned for direct communication with responsive hearers. The printer has no font for the intonation of his voice, the rhythms of his speech, its change of pace, its eloquent pauses. All who were present carried away an indelible impression of the spirit, the personality, and the mind of the poet we were proud to salute. – K.B.M.*

All that admiration for me I am glad of. I am here out of admiration for Emerson and Thoreau. Naturally on this proud occasion I should like to make myself as much of an Emersonian as I can. Let me see if I can't go a long way. You may be interested to know that I have right here in my pocket a little first edition of Emerson's poetry. His very first was published in England, just as was mine. His book was given me on account of that connection by Fred Melcher, who takes so much pleasure in bringing books and things together like that.

I suppose I have always thought I'd like to name in verse some day my four greatest Americans: George Washington, the general and statesman; Thomas Jefferson, the political thinker; Abraham Lincoln, the martyr and savior; and fourth, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the poet. I take these names because they are going around the world. They are not just

local. Emerson's name has gone as a poetic philosopher or as a philosophical poet, my favorite kind of both.

I have friends it bothers when I am accused of being Emersonian, that is, a cheerful Monist, for whom evil does not exist, or if it does exist, needn't last forever. Emerson quotes Burns as speaking to the Devil as if he could mend his ways. A melancholy dualism is the only soundness. The question is: is soundness of the essence.

My own unsoundness has a strange history. My mother was a Presbyterian. We were here on my father's side for three hundred years but my mother was fresh a Presbyterian from Scotland. The smart thing when she was young was to be reading Emerson and Poe as it is today to be reading St. John Perse or T. S. Eliot. Reading Emerson turned her into a Unitarian. That was about the time I came into the world; so I suppose I started a sort of Presbyterian-Unitarian. I was transitional. Reading on into Emerson, that is into "Representative Men" until she got to Swedenborg, the mystic, made her a Swedenborgian. I was brought up in all three of these religions, I suppose. I don't know whether I was baptized in them all. But as you see it was pretty much under the auspices of Emerson. It was all very Emersonian. Phrases of his began to come to me early. In that essay on the mystic he makes Swedenborg say that in the highest heaven nothing is arrived at by dispute. Everybody votes in heaven but everybody votes the same way, as in Russia today. It is only in the second-highest heaven that things get parliamentary; we get the two-party system or the hydra-headed, as in France.

Some of my first thinking about my own language was certainly Emersonian. "Cut these sentences and they bleed," he says. I am not submissive

enough to want to be a follower, but he had me there. I never got over that. He came pretty near making me an antivocabularian with the passage in "Monadnock" about our ancient speech. He blended praise and dispraise of the country people of New Hampshire. As an abolitionist he was against their politics. Forty percent of them were states-rights Democrats in sympathy with the South. They were really pretty bad, my own relatives included.

The God who made New Hampshire  
Taunted the lofty land  
With little men; –

And if I may be further reminiscent parenthetically, my friend Amy Lowell hadn't much use for them either. "I have left New Hampshire," she told me. Why in the world? She couldn't stand the people. What's the matter with the people? "Read your own books and find out." They really differ from other New Englanders, or did in the days of Franklin Pierce.

But now to return to the speech that was his admiration and mine in a burst of poetry in "Monadnock":

Yet wouldst thou learn our ancient speech  
These the masters that can teach.  
Fourscore or a hundred words  
All their vocal muse affords.  
Yet they turn them in a fashion  
Past the statesman's art and passion.  
Rude poets of the tavern hearth  
Squandering your unquoted mirth,  
That keeps the ground and never soars,  
While Jake retorts and Reuben roars.  
Scoff of yeoman, strong and stark,  
Goes like bullet to the mark,  
And the solid curse and jeer  
Never balk the waiting ear.

Fourscore or a hundred is seven hundred less than my friend Ivor Richard's basic eight hundred. I used to climb

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on board a load of shooks (boxes that haven't been set up) just for the pleasure I had in the driver's good use of his hundred-word limit. This at the risk of liking it so much as to lose myself in mere picturesqueness. I was always in favor of the solid curse as one of the most beautiful of figures. We were warned against it in school for its sameness. It depends for variety on the tones of saying it and the situations.

I had a talk with John Erskine, the first time I met him, on this subject of sentences that may look tiresomely alike, short and with short words, yet turn out as calling for all sorts of ways of being said aloud or in the mind's ear, Horatio. I took Emerson's prose and verse as my illustration. Writing is unboring to the extent that it is dramatic.

In a recent preface to show my aversion to being interrupted with notes in reading a poem, I find myself resorting to Emerson again. I wanted to be too carried away for that. There was much of "Brahma" that I didn't get to begin with but I got enough to make me sure I would be back there reading it again some day when I had read more and lived more; and sure enough, without help from dictionary or encyclopedia I can now understand every line in it but one or two. It is a long story of many experiences that let me into the secret of:

But thou, meek lover of the good!  
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven.

What baffled me was the Christianity in "meek lover of the good." I don't like obscurity and obfuscation, but I do like dark sayings I must leave the clearing of to time. And I don't want to be robbed of the pleasure of fathoming depths for myself. It was a moment for me when I saw how Shakespeare set bounds to science when he brought in the North Star, "whose worth's unknown although his

height be taken." Of untold worth: it brings home some that should and some that shouldn't come. Let the psychologist take notice how unsuccessful he has to be.

I owe more to Emerson than anyone else for troubled thoughts about freedom. I had the hurt to get over when I first heard us made fun of by foreigners as the land of the free and the home of the brave. Haven't we won freedom? Is there no such thing as freedom? Well, Emerson says God

Would take the sun out of the skies  
Ere freedom out of a man.

and there rings the freedom I choose.

Never mind how and where Emerson disabused me of my notion I may have been brought up to that the truth would make me free. My truth will bind you slave to me. He didn't want converts and followers. He was a Unitarian. I am on record as saying that freedom is nothing but departure – setting forth – leaving things behind, brave origination of the courage to be new. We may not want freedom. But let us not deceive ourselves about what we don't want. Freedom is one jump ahead of formal laws, as in planes and even automobiles right now. Let's see the law catch up with us very soon.

Emerson supplies the emancipating formula for giving an attachment up for an attraction, one nationality for another nationality, one love for another love. If you must break free,

Heartily know,  
When half-gods go  
The gods arrive.

I have seen it invoked in *Harper's Magazine* to excuse disloyalty to our democracy in a time like this. But I am not sure of the reward promised. There is such a thing as getting too transcended. There

are limits. Let's not talk socialism. I feel projected out from politics with lines like:

Musketaquit, a goblin strong,  
Of shards and flints makes jewels gay;  
They lose their grief who hear his song,  
And where he winds is the day of day.

So forth and brighter fares my stream, –  
Who drink it shall not thirst again;  
No darkness stains its equal gleam,  
And ages drop in it like rain.

Left to myself, I have gradually come to see what Emerson was meaning in "Give all to Love" was, Give all to Meaning. The freedom is ours to insist on meaning.

The kind of story Steinbeck likes to tell is about an old labor hero punch-drunk from fighting the police in many strikes, beloved by everybody at headquarters as the greatest living hater of tyranny. I take it that the production line was his grievance. The only way he could make it mean anything was to try to ruin it. He took arms and fists against it. No one could have given him that kind of freedom. He saw it as his to seize. He was no freedman; he was a free man. The one inalienable right is to go to destruction in your own way. What's worth living for is worth dying for. What's worth succeeding in is worth failing in.

If you have piled up a great rubbish heap of oily rags in the basement for your doctor's thesis and it won't seem to burst into flame spontaneously, come away quickly and without declaring rebellion. It will cost you only your Ph.D. union card and the respect of the union. But it will hardly be noticed even to your credit in the world. All you have to do is to amount to something anyway. The only reprehensible materiality is the materialism of getting lost in your material

so you can't find out yourself what it is all about.

A young fellow came to me to complain of the department of philosophy in his university. There wasn't a philosopher in it. "I can't stand it." He was really complaining of his situation. He wasn't where he could feel real. But I didn't tell him so I didn't go into that. I agreed with him that there wasn't a philosopher in his university – there was hardly ever more than one at a time in the world – and I advised him to quit. Light out for somewhere. He hated to be a quitter. I told him the Bible says, "Quit ye, like men." "Does it," he said. "Where would I go?" Why anywhere almost. Kamchatka, Madagascar, Brazil. I found him doing well in the educational department of Rio when I was sent on an errand down there by our government several years later. I had taken too much responsibility for him when I sent him glimmering like that. I wrote to him with troubled conscience and got no answer for two whole years. But the story has a happy ending. His departure was not suicidal. I had a postcard from him this Christmas to tell me he was on Robinson Crusoe's island Juan Fernandez on his way to Easter Island that it had always been a necessity for him some day to see. I would next hear from him in Chile where he was to be employed in helping restore two colleges. Two! And the colleges were universities!

No subversive myself, I think it very Emersonian of me that I am so sympathetic with subversives, rebels, runners out, runners out ahead, eccentrics, and radicals. I don't care how extreme their enthusiasm so long as it doesn't land them in the Russian camp. I always wanted one of them teaching in the next room to me so my work would be cut out for me warning the children taking my courses not to take his courses.

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I am disposed to cheat myself and others in favor of any poet I am in love with. I hear people say the more they love anyone the more they see his faults. Nonsense. Love is blind and should be left so. But it hasn't been hidden in what I have said that I am not quite satisfied with the easy way Emerson takes disloyalty. He didn't know or ignored his Blackstone. It is one thing for the deserter and another for the deserted. Loyalty is that for the lack of which your gang will shoot you without benefit of trial by jury. And serves you right. Be as treacherous as you must be for your ideals, but don't expect to be kissed goodbye by the idol you go back on. We don't want to look too foolish, do we? And probably Emerson was too Platonic about evil. It was a mere *Tò μὴ οὖν* that could be disposed of like the butt of a cigarette. In a poem I have called the best Western poem yet he says:

Unit and universe are round.

Another poem could be made from that, to the effect that ideally in thought only is a circle round. In practice, in nature, the circle becomes an oval. As a circle it has one center – Good. As an oval it has two centers – Good and Evil. Thence Monism versus Dualism.

Emerson was a Unitarian because he was too rational to be superstitious and too little a storyteller and lover of stories to like gossip and pretty scandal. Nothing very religious can be done for people lacking in superstition. They usually end up abominable agnostics. It takes superstition and the prettiest scandal story of all to make a good Trinitarian. It is the first step in the descent of the spirit into the material-human at the risk of the spirit.

But if Emerson had left us nothing else he would be remembered longer than the Washington Monument for

the monument at Concord that he glorified with lines surpassing any other ever written about soldiers:

By the rude bridge that arched the flood  
Their flag to April breeze unfurled  
Here once the embattled farmers stood  
And fired the shot heard round the world.

Not even Thermopylae has been celebrated better. I am not a shriner but two things I never happen on unmoved: one, this poem on stone; and the other, the tall shaft seen from Lafayette Park across the White House in Washington.