

Albert J. Von Frank: On "Desert Places"

The poet sees the snow and the night descending together, black and white, working together to muffle sensation and obliterate perception; yet they work against each other, paradoxically, to heighten perception. The snow works against the night, giving ghastly light whereby to see the darkness, while the fast falling darkness gives urgency to the need to see, for the opportunity will not last long. What the poet sees is truly "for once, then, something." In the moments before obliteration he sees something with a positive existence, something he can put a name to—a field. He knows it is a field because, for the moment, positive signs of its identity remain: the "few weeds and stubble showing last." It is important to understand, then, that this is a cultivated field and not a natural clearing in the forest; it is nature given purpose and identity by man. Like the snow and the night, the weeds and stubble set up crosscurrents of meaning. The stubble is more clearly the hint of man's presence, the aftermath, quite literally, of man's contact with the land, while the weeds—which can exist only in (and therefore define) a cultivated area—remind us of nature's persistent reclamation of the artificial. What the snow smothers, in addition to everything else, is the vital conflict which the juxtaposition of "weeds and stubble" suggests.

II

As the snow piles on, obliterating all distinction, the field becomes—as the first line three times tells us—an inanimate, dead thing, unmarked by, and unreflective of, the care of man, the very thing which gave it its positive identity as a field. Remove the signs of man's involvement, and it straightway ceases to be "for once, then, something" and can only be identified negatively: it is the nothingness at the center of the encircling trees; it is the nothingness which can only be known by the positiveness which surrounds it and which can only be named in the indefiniteness of a pronoun. This annihilation is figured as death, the ultimate weight of which in cosmic fashion smothers all life, leaving the poet alone in a dead universe, touched, himself, by the death that smothers.

Confronted with the deadness, the spiritlessness, of the external world, the poet notes that he, too, is "absent-spirited"; he, too, is "included" in the loneliness, which is to say the separateness, of the universe of material objects. The paradox here is to be included in separateness, and one arrives at a perception of that paradox by recognizing the plurality of material existence and understanding one's own place in the universal array of physical facts—that is, in nature. This sense is akin to if not identical with Emerson's discovery, made "too late to be helped . . . , that we exist." For Emerson, however, we exist in positive relation to higher values; the essence of our meaning consists not in separateness but in unity. For Frost (thus far in the poem) the persona exists negatively, just as the field may be said to exist negatively. More specifically, the field (no longer a field, properly speaking) is known as the emptiness which disturbs the continuity of the woods; similarly, the poet-observer is defined by his absent-spiritedness and thus by his isolation. The analogy between the condition of nature and the condition of personal psychology is a romantic concept and one perfectly in accord with the ideas of Emerson or Wordsworth. In "Desert Places," however, the implications of the analogy are necessarily and entirely reversed since what is analogous in the persona and the field is the quality of discontinuity. For Wordsworth, and for many

subsequent romantic writers including Emerson, the analogy between states of mind or dispositions of the spirit and the sympathetic universe was uplifting because it implied, or rather presupposed, an active positive alliance, a radical continuity, through God, between man and nature. Nature lives and spiritually supports us, even though it is composed in large measure of inanimate objects, because we live and God has allowed us to invest it with our lives. Wordsworth expressed this reciprocal relation when he said, "That from thyself it comes, that thou must give / Else never canst receive" (*The Prelude*, XII, 276-77). Frost appears, in the first three stanzas, to have reversed these implications. The analogy between man and nature appears operative, but the reciprocal relation is negative rather than positive; pluralistic rather than monistic; fragmented in its stress on aloneness rather than unified; deadly rather than life-supporting.

III

The third stanza appears at first the weakest on several counts. The purpose it serves seems primarily mechanical. It is necessary to shift the focus from the poet himself back to the scene before him in preparation for the final statement in the last stanza. The first two lines, as Reuben Brower has pointed out, achieve a "Poe-like melancholy," though perhaps by equally Poe-like mechanisms?the use of the archaic "ere" and the mournful reiteration of the word "lonely." A further weakness of these lines might consist in the inadequacy of the physical phenomenon which prompts them. Presumably the quondam field will become lonelier or less expressive than earlier because the snow is now deep enough to hide not only the "weeds and stubble showing last," but also the very contours of the land. Since the annihilation of the identity of the field was earlier accomplished when all signs of its use, its pragmatic definition, were covered, this added touch may strike the reader as gratuitous or insignificant by comparison.

The stanza does, of course, accomplish an intensification of mood, though again almost in spite of itself. The gentle hint of "ere it will be less" must be rejected if these lines are to be read as a genuine concentration of despair. The implied rebirth in the necessary melting of the snow and the reemergence of the field as a real thing is an unassimilated lump of hope, working for the moment in stubborn defiance of the tone and meaning of the poem as it stands at this point.

More subtly in defiance of the tone and meaning is the paradoxical assertion that the "blanker whiteness" has "nothing to express"?a proposition which the very existence of the poem appears to jeopardize. "Nothing" actually becomes "for once, then, something" in a context which is consistently negative. The intensity of nothingness?that is, the intensity which is insisted on in the third stanza?begins to lend to that nothingness an almost palpable reality. It is, after all, that quantity which had defined the field and defined the poet; and because nothingness is thus the landmark by which realities are known, it becomes a real, and in a sense a positive, quality. It is truly a case of nothing having escaped Frost's observation; he is like the listener in Wallace Stevens' "The Snow Man" "who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." Frost evokes a similar awareness in "Neither Out Far nor In Deep" by what Trilling has called "the energy with which emptiness is perceived." That Frost could work such a paradox on us is only to say that he makes emptiness real for us as readers of the poem.

IV

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars?on stars where no human race
is. I have it in me so much nearer home To
scare myself with my own desert places.

The protestation of the first line appears to Reuben Brower "a bit flamboyant." "The scary place," Brower writes, "is thrust off 'there' by the emerging man of wit, by the mind that won't give way to 'absent-spiritedness.' But the gesture . . . opens a worse form of terror by bringing fear where the poet lives most alone." This reading depends on the assumption that the last stanza is essentially disjointed; that something has occurred between lines two and three that leads the poet to reconsider the confident defiance he has just, perhaps too heroically, expressed. In other words, in explaining the sense of the last stanza Brower finds an implicit "but" before the third line. To be sure, the poem has proceeded by crosscurrents to such an extent that it would be easy to see another one here, but in this instance the relationship between ideas seems to be causal rather than antagonistic?a transition which is perhaps better expressed by "because": They cannot scare me with their empty spaces because I have it in me to scare myself with my own desert places.

The other assumption implicit in Brower's reading is that the recognition of private deserts in one's own mind involves "a worse form of terror" than the vision of a dead universe. This assumption also needs to be examined, but first it is necessary to determine who "they" are in the opening line of the stanza and why they cannot scare the poet.

Brooks and Warren have suggested that "they" are astronomers, and, insofar as astronomers adopt an inorganic, physical, and scientific viewpoint and speak for a standard, accepted view of the universe, the suggestion is not amiss. But if the intrusion into the poem of prosaic astronomers seems unduly reductive of Frost's intended ambiguity, it might be more appropriate to take "they" to mean nature itself, pluralistically figured, since nature has been felt throughout the poem as a collection of material objects.

In "Desert Places," then, Frost is commenting on one of the most basic romantic assumptions about the universe?that it is essentially responsive to man, that we are its vital force, its reason for being. . . . What Frost realizes at the beginning of the last stanza is that nature's empty spaces are truly empty?not only of matter, but of meaning and that it is only meaning that can scare. The tune is not in the tree, and the lesson of emptiness is not between stars.

Here, in the last stanza, the major paradox of the poem is resolved. The third stanza asserts that the "blanker whiteness" had "nothing to express," though the deadly heavy pall of nothingness was itself a very considerable thing for the "blanker whiteness" to have expressed; and were it not for that very effective expression, the poem would have had no subject. Realizing now, in the fourth stanza, that the idea of nothingness, of emptiness or aloneness, is generated from within the mind outward and not placed in the mind from exterior nature, obviously the "blanker whiteness" truly does not and can not express, but is a mere canvas on which the observer builds out his own inherent conceptions. The tune is not in the

tree; the tune of nothingness is not in the snow. Thus what seemed paradoxical in the third stanza is, when seen from the vantage of the fourth, a simple statement of fact. The "blacker whiteness" has "nothing to express"; it has, literally, no meaning.

If meaning does not inhere in nature, it exists only in the mind, just as Emily Dickinson affirmed. Frost agrees with entire explicitness: "I have it in me," he says, contrasting the substantiveness of the "it" with the "nothing" that the snow has to express. "I am," in other words, "the repository of meaning." This implied assertion, in turn, gives final development to a major theme of the poem—that of location. The field has been transformed from a positively defined entity into a thing which exists only in relation to exterior fixities, by the agency of the snow. The snow, in addition to symbolizing death, symbolizes an allied concept—doubt, that quality which undermines self-knowledge and self-containment and makes us look outside ourselves for points of reference. The poet is located by a quantity which appears to be exterior, the pervasive nullity of a dead universe. But when the poet-observer comes to understand that he is himself the repository of meaning, he is relocated—or, more properly, he locates himself as definer, namer, potentially as poet—and puts himself positively at the center of the universe. The experience he observes in the field—or rather the romantic misunderstanding he has of it—literally pulls him out of himself and makes him so vulnerable to the apparent deadness that he is nearly smothered in the rarified atmosphere of aloneness and homelessness. The poem restores him to himself, equips him with a sense of who and where he is, defined positively this time, in relation to nature and to the objects to which he will give meaning poetically. He is brought home: "I have it in me so much nearer home," he says. Here again we are dealing with two concepts which are related as cause and effect. He can locate "home" because, for the first time in the poem, he can see that there is something in him which does not exist elsewhere, and that "something" is the potential to create meaning.

Perhaps the modernity of "Desert Places" is most clearly seen in its acceptance of a universe without inherent prior meaning. There is, in the last stanza, a note almost of relief at the realization that one is not tied to a dead universe; that is, to a universe whose overarching principle is death and separateness. Rather he finds a universe without overarching principles, without prior meaning—a universe which he, as a poet, can fill up and fill out with meaning from his own life. For Frost this insight and the prospect it affords represent a tremendous freedom. "They cannot scare me," seen in this light, is simply another way of saying "the universe cannot impose upon me."

For Frost, meaning is a thing people use to bridge separateness and to bring order out of real, not apparent, chaos . . . The analogy which exists between man and nature was not, for Frost, established by God, but is continually being created by man's own imagination: each time one draws an analogy between man and nature, one does so by an act of the will, not in accordance with the scheme of the universe but in defiance of its essential schemelessness. . . . What led the poet-observer into despair at the beginning of the poem was his Wordsworthian assumption that the analogy does exist a priori; by the end of the poem the mistake is discovered.

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