

## Seamus Heaney: On "Desert Places"

Consider, for example, the conclusion of "Desert Places," which I have just quoted: "I have it in me so much nearer home / To scare myself with my own desert places." However these lines may incline toward patness, whatever risk they run of making the speaker seem to congratulate himself too easily as an initiate of darkness, superior to the deluded common crowd, whatever trace they contain of knowingness that mars other poems by Frost, they still succeed convincingly. They overcome one's incipient misgivings and subsume them into the larger, more impersonal, and undeniable emotional occurrence which the whole poem represents.

I call it an emotional occurrence, yet it is preeminently a rhythmic one, an animation via the ear of the whole nervous apparatus: what Borges called "an almost physical emotion." The tilt of the sound is unmistakable from the beginning. The momentary stay of the stanza is being sifted away from the inside, words are running out from under themselves, and there is no guarantee that form will effect a rescue from danger:

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast

In a field I looked into going past . . .

This meter is full of the hurry and slant of driven snow, its unstoppable, anxiety-inducing forward rush, all that whispering turmoil of a blizzard. Here the art of the language is like the art of the French farmer in "The Ax-Helve"; what is said in that poem about the lines and grains of a hickory axe shaft applies equally to the lines of "Desert Places." The French farmer

showed me that the lines of a good helve

Were native to the grain before the knife

Expressed them, and its curves were no false curves

Put on it from without.

The curves and grains of the first two lines of "Desert Places" are correspondingly native to living speech, without any tonal falsity. Who really notices that the letter f alliterates five times within thirteen syllables? It is no denigration of Hopkins to say that when such an alliterative cluster happens in his work, the reader is the first to notice it. With Frost, its effect is surely known, like a cold air that steals across a face; but until the lines are deliberately dwelt upon a moment like this, we do not even think of it as an "effect," and the means that produce it remain as unshowy as the grain in the wood:

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast  
In a field I looked into going past,  
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,  
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

This feels like an unpremeditated rush of inspiration, and Frost always declared that he liked to take a poem thus, at a single stroke, when the mood was on him. Yet even if the actual composition of "Desert Places" entailed no such speedy, pell-mell onslaught of perceptions, the finished poem does indeed induce that kind of sensation. There is an urgent, toppling pattern to it all, an urgency created by various minimal but significant verbal delicacies?like, for example, the omission of the relative pronoun from the line "In a field I looked into going past." Compare this with "In a field that I looked into going past" and hear how the inclusion of an extra syllable breaks the slippage toward panic in the line as we have it. Or consider how the end-stopping of the first eight lines does not (as we might expect) add composure to them but contributes instead a tensed-up, pent-up movement:

The woods around it have it?it is theirs.  
All animals are smothered in their lairs.  
I am too absent-spirited to count;  
The loneliness includes me unawares.

And where does that line about being "too absent-spirited to count" arrive from? Does it mean that the speaker does not matter? Or something else? In the onwardness of a reading, such curiosity registers fleetingly, like something glimpsed from a carriage window. To count what? The animals? The lairs? And what is "it" that the woods have? Is it snow? Is it loneliness? The speaker is so hypnotized by the snow swirl that he doesn't count as consciousness anymore, he is adrift instead, in the dream of smothered lairs. And those triple masculine rhymes of "fast" / "past" / "last, " with their monosyllabic stress repeated again in "theirs" / "lair" / "awares," are like the slowing of the heartbeat in the withdrawn hibernators.

Halfway through the poem, then, the narcotic aspect of the snowfall is predominant, and the vowel music is like a dulled pulse beat: going, covered smooth, stubble showing, smothered. But in the next eight lines we go through the nature barrier, as it were, into the ether of symbolic knowledge. The consolations of being "too absent-spirited to count" are disallowed and the poem suddenly blinks itself out of reverie into vision. The vowels divest themselves of their comfortable roundness, the rhymes go slender first and then go feminine: "loneliness" / "less" / "express"; "spaces" / "race is" / "places." The repetition which at the start was conducive to trance, and included speaker and reader "unawares," now buzzes everybody and everything awake.

Once again, the effect is not "put on from without," not a flourish of craft, but a feat of technique. There is a disconsolateness in the way the word "lonely" keeps rebounding off its image in the word "loneliness"; and the same holds true for the closed-circuit energy of

"expression" and "express. " Finally, there is a Dantesque starkness about the repetition of the word "stars." Even if these stars are not intended to echo the stelle that shine at the end of each of Dante's visions, they still do possess the cold tingle of infinity. So, by such feats of mimesis and orchestration, the speaker's inwardness with all this outward blankness is established long before he declares himself explicitly in the concluding lines. And that is what I meant earlier when I spoke of the excessiveness of the language's own rightness, brimming up beyond the poet's deliberate schemes and performances:

And lonely as it is that loneliness

Will be more lonely ere it will be less?

A blanker whiteness of benighted snow

With no expression, nothing to express.

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.

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