

Robert Frost

(1874-1963)

Desert Places (1936)

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.

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 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.

ANALYSIS

“Let us assume that the poem had been written without the last stanza. It would still be a poem, and a good one, but a very different one from the poem we know.... The reader knows who the observer is. A man, at dusk, is passing an open field where snow is falling. The poem is quickly defined as his observation...the man, in the second stanza, indicates a relation between himself and the empty field on which the snow falls, although he does not definitely state it. The snow-covered field, in its desolation, stands as a kind of symbol for the man's own loneliness...

A blanker whiteness of benighted snow  
With no expression, nothing to express.

As implied here, it does not matter what happens to the man now or what he does, for nothing can have any further meaning. If the poem be taken as ending there, the process used by the poet to give his effect is very easily defined: the observer describes a natural scene which becomes for the reader a symbol of the observer's own despairing state of mind. The scene in nature has been presented so that it serves to communicate a human meaning.

But the poem in reality does not end with the third stanza, and the last stanza introduces a new element into the poem--that is, the poet's own analysis and statement... The last stanza is not introduced with a transition from the earlier part; the observer does not say that after looking at the empty field he lifted his eyes to the sky and remembered what he had been told about the great emptiness of the stars and the interstellar spaces. But the reader understands that, and by the very abruptness of the shift gets a more dramatic effect, as though the man had jerked himself from his musing on the field to look at the sky and then make his comment. This comment, in summary, says this: a man who has known the desolation possible to human experience cannot be frightened or depressed by mere desolation in nature. And though this comment emphasizes the loneliness of the man, it gives us a different impression of him and gives a

different total impression of the poem. It is not an impression of mere despair, for the man, we feel, has not been overcome by his own 'desert places,' but has mastered them.

He does not make this statement in so many words, but his attitude is implied. A reader analyzing the poem can almost base this implication of the man's attitude on the use of the single word *scare*. The man says, 'They cannot scare me with their empty spaces.' He does not use *terrify*, or *horrify*, or *astound*—any word that would indicate the full significance of human loneliness and despair. Instead, he uses the word *scare*, which is an understatement, a common, colloquial word. One 'scares' children by telling them ghost stories, or by jumping at them from behind curtains. But by the use of the word in the poem the man is made to imply that he is not a child to be so easily affected.

Knowledge of the infinite emptiness of space, which astronomers may give him, cannot affect him, for he knows, being a grown man, that the loneliness of spirit can be greater than the loneliness of external nature. But in the last line the word *scare* is repeated, and its connotations...are brought into play in the new connection: 'To scare myself with my own desert places.' That is, the man has had so much experience of life, is so truly mature, that even that greater loneliness of the spirit cannot make him behave like a child who is afraid of the dark or of ghost stories. Even in his loneliness of spirit he can still find strength enough in himself."

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren  
*Understanding Poetry*  
(Holt 1938-1961) 105-06

## I

"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 'blinker 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'... 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 'blanker 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."

Albert J. Von Frank  
from "A Study of Frost's 'Desert Places'"  
*Frost: Centennial Essays*  
(U Mississippi 1973)

"Probably no poem of Frost's so well accommodates the wide emotive swings of self which he probed from early on in his career. In 'Desert Places' we watch the speaker go to the brink in his projection; then he comes back to normality, withdraws from dark vision, and rests in the stability of a balanced ironic consciousness. As well as any poem of dark vision that he wrote, 'Desert Places' gives evidence of Frost's ability to achieve aesthetic detachment from certain sorts of destructive experience.... The figure in 'Desert Places'...understands that he 'scare[s himself] with [his] own desert places'--that the desert places belong peculiarly to him because they are projections of the self."

Frank Lentricchia  
*Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self*  
(Duke 1975)

"'Desert Places'...vividly demonstrates the power of the imagination to influence the traveler's perception of the region he observes. 'I have it in me,' he says (l. 15) of the fear that arises from his bone-and spirit-chilling meditation. As a result of his voyage toward the 'blacker whiteness' (l. 11) of his imagination, he can barely continue that other journey across the countryside, at least not in the spirit with which he began. His vision of loneliness will dominate any future travel he undertakes, and we should recognize that this poem may represent a frightening extension of the imaginative journey implicit in 'Stopping by Woods.' If so, the two works testify to the poet's growing reluctance in the twenties and thirties to launch off on the speculative, figmental explorations that a decade or two earlier had animated such brilliant pieces as 'Mending Wall,' 'After Apple-Picking,' and 'The Wood-Pile'."

John C. Kemp  
*Robert Frost and New England: The Poet as Regionalist*  
(Princeton 1979)

"This later poem makes a fitting companion piece to 'Stopping by Woods.' Even the rhyme scheme (*aaba*) is the same, although in this poem, the poet has not chosen to commit himself to the greater difficulty of linking his stanzas by means of rhyme. This speaker too is traveling through falling snow at nightfall. The woods are present in this poem as well, though we are more conscious of their darkness in 'Stopping by Woods' and more conscious of whiteness here. While the opening line sounds soothing with its repetition of 's,' and 'f,' and 'o,' we know as early as the second line that this speaker does not stop, even for a moment—the fields he describes are those he is 'going past.' What is not presented as frightening in 'Stopping by Woods' is frightening in this poem. Nothing here makes one feel that the speaker finds this snowfall attractive, nothing draws him in, for this snowfall does not present a relaxing oblivion; it presents a concrete blankness. Because it is with blankness that he identifies, it presents no escape, only a reminder of self, a self that is not a welcome haven or wellspring. Withdrawal would not be 'strategic' and self-preserving. It would be facing a desert.

The open space is surrounded by woods that 'have it.' They claim it, and the speaker willingly relegates it to them—willing not because of a decision he has struggled to make, but because he is too apathetic, 'too absent-spirited to count.' The structural ambiguity in this line and its seeming carelessness emphasize his absent-spiritedness, his apathy. We cannot be sure whether 'count' is being used in its active sense (to count, to tell what is happening, to reckon up woods, animals and fields) or in its passive sense (to be counted, to count to anything or anyone else). The following line is also enriched by its apparently careless use of 'unawares,' which could modify 'loneliness' or could modify 'me.' Again, the ambiguous use of the word illustrates that very unawareness, that carelessness that causes us to associate absent-spiritedness with absent-mindedness.

In the third stanza loneliness is in apposition to snow, and just as the snow will cover more and more, will leave nothing uncovered to relieve its smooth unbroken whiteness, so the loneliness will become still more lonely and unrelieved. That same whiteness—snow or loneliness—is what makes desert of a field, helps the woods to 'have' the fields in that it obliterates clear boundaries between field and woods, raising, as it does in 'Stopping by Woods,' the dangerous prospect of boundarilessness. Even when the journey is into one's own desert places, one's humanity or identity is threatened, and loneliness, the apposition suggests, can do this too. What terrifies him so much, however, is not the fact that he is alone, without other people, but that alone with himself he may find nothing—no one and nothing within. Whereas 'Stopping by Woods' presented an invitation to the solitude and inertia of snow, this poem presents the attendant fear that once giving in to the self, or going into the self, he will find that the journey has been for nothing. That there is nothing but loneliness, blankness, and absent-spiritedness in the sense of absence of spirit.

The 'nothingness' that Frost fears is not the metaphysical void, it is the void he fears in himself. In relating this personal void to the spaces between stars, he suggests that a personal void can have—or seem to have—cosmic proportions, that it can seem at least as important, as vast and as frightening, as anything 'out there.' This speaker fears the void, but he does not seem, like Wallace Stevens's snow man, to be 'nothing himself'; he is capable of beholding what is not there. He is not a man of snow because he has enough feeling to be afraid. His is not yet a 'mind of winter,' for he can still think about having one, fear that he might discover it if he explores inside himself. He has it 'in him'—again, as in 'Spring Pools'—the threatening potential of what lies within. The man with the 'mind of winter' does not think, but to Stevens there are two kinds of nothingness—'the nothing that is' and 'nothing,' which is the absence of something. The greater lack is the latter—the absence of imagination in the man who 'beholds nothing that is not there.' In 'Desert Places' the speaker fears blankness 'with no expression, nothing to express.' There is a difference between 'nothing to express' and an expression of nothingness, as Stevens has shown us. The fear in the poem is of the former, but the act of the poem is the latter.

For the poet there is an additional terror in identifying his own 'desert places' with the blank landscape: it is a 'whiteness...with no expression, nothing to express.' If there is nothing there, nothing showing or growing, if there is no spirit, what will he have to say? This fear of nothing to say was a constant one to Frost. To Untermeyer he once confided 'a very damaging secret... The poet in me died nearly ten years ago... The calf I was in the nineties I merely take to market...Take care that you don't get your mouth set to declare the other two [books] a falling off of power, for that is what they can't be... As you look back don't you see how a lot of things I have said begin to take meaning from this?... I tell you, Louis, it's all over at thirty...Anyway that was the way I thought I might feel. And I took measures accordingly... I have myself all in a strong box' (SL 201-2). Having nothing more to say was what he assumed lay behind Hemingway's decision to commit suicide—a motive and a decision Frost defended (LY 294) .

Even worse than having nothing to say, perhaps, is emotional poverty—feeling used up, both by the pain of events in life and by the demands of his art. He once wrote: '[poets] are so much less sensitive from having overused their sensibilities. Men who have to feel for a living would unavoidably become altogether unfeeling except professionally' (SL 300). Whatever the basis, the poem ends with the fear of one's own emptiness, one's own nothingness. To traverse these spaces inside the self is to traverse the barren. At the same time, though, and characteristically, the fear is expressed with a kind of bravado: 'they can't scare me!' The comparison between the interstellar spaces and his own desert places also serves to aggrandize the speaker and the importance of his personal desert. Then, also characteristically, Frost undercuts both the bravado and the self-importance, mainly by means of metrics. Where the speaker tries so hard to show

strength the lines end weakly: they are the only feminine rhymes in the poem; the three rhyming lines of the last stanza all have an added, unstressed eleventh syllable: /ez/. The effect in lines 13 and 14 is to undercut the tone of confidence. By the last line, where bravado gives in to fear, the unstressed ending reinforces the fear by sounding weak in the face of what is feared. The XX rhyme concluding the poem also works against a feeling of closure and resolution.

While the whole final stanza has its metrical bumps, line 14 jolts us the most and alerts us to other tensions with and within that line. For example, whereas ‘spaces’ and ‘places’ are both noun objects of prepositions, rhyming what is also structurally parallel, ‘race is,’ as a noun subject and verb, seems out of kilter with the other two. To focus more closely, though, on these words is to notice the possible pun ‘where no human races’ and the tensions that produces between the two possible meanings: in one sense, the contrast between a place where people do not race—no rushing, no competition—and a world where the need to go forward quickly and competitively obtains even in one’s private desert.

Following on this contrast is another: the active verb of one reading—‘races’—contrasts with the static ‘is’ of the other, which creates further tensions. Grammatically, the two would be awkward together, as we do not coordinate an active verb with a stative one. Semantically, the difference is related to two conflicting needs: going, doing, rushing to compete and simply being. Such stasis, though, is located where there is no human life... Seen this way, the poem presents another version of the conflict between going and stopping, motion and stasis. While in this poem the outward action is not stopping but going past the field (he races?), what inner desert it represents, of course, goes with him, and, as ‘Stopping by Woods’ reminds us, we must go—move, do—if we are to be.”

Judith Oster  
*Toward Robert Frost: The Reader and the Poet*  
(U Georgia 1991)

“The speaker of ‘Desert Places’ also feels lost and tries to orient himself by the stars, but his circumstances and tone are very different. He goes rapidly past a field, awed by the swift descent of snow and night and disheartened by the smooth white cover over the last traces of vegetation, which presents a temptation to yield, as does much else in the scene, for everything seems gathered in. He participates as he yields the snowy field to the woods, envies the animals in their protective burrows, and feels so absent that he does not even count as part of the scene. ‘Unawares,’ used as an adverb to modify ‘includes,’ shows that the loneliness acts without thought.

The speaker generalizes about the scene: its loneliness will intensify long before any relief arrives. The snow cover will thicken and be covered by night, and will lack physical expression and anything to say, ‘benighted,’ describing the snow, puns on both the fall of night and spiritual ignorance. In a slyly abrupt transition, the speaker scorns an unspecified ‘They’ who might wish to scare him by pointing to empty spaces even more frightening than this field—the far reaches of the universe, presumably empty of consciousness.

This passage may allude to Blaise Pascal’s famous description of his fear when contemplating the infinite spaces between the stars, an emotion that helped restore his lagging religious faith. The ‘They’ who would make such efforts to scare people must be scientists and ministers, the latter anxious to demonstrate God’s power and potential refuge. The ‘nearer home,’ where the speaker has successfully faced such terrors, is the inner self, as in the phrase to strike home; its ‘desert places’ are moral and spiritual wildernesses. As many critics have noted, ‘scare,’ usually applied to children’s casual distress, is an understatement emphasizing the speaker’s deeply experienced stoicism.”

Mordecai Marcus  
*The Poems of Robert Frost: an explication*  
(Copyright by Mordecai Marcus 1991)

“Consider...the conclusion of ‘Desert Places’... ‘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 curves and grains of the first two lines of 'Desert Places' are...native to living speech, without any tonal falsity.... 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...

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's' / 'aware's,' 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 [those] 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."

Seamus Heaney

*Homage to Robert Frost*, eds. Joseph Brodsky, Heaney, and Derek Walcott  
(Farrar, Strauss 1996)

Michael Hollister (2015)



