

LITERATURE

A NOTE ON ROBERT FROST AND ERNEST HEMINGWAY

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A clean, well-lighted café was a very different thing. Now, without thinking further, he would go home to his room. He would lie in bed and finally, with daylight, he would go to sleep. After all, he said to himself, it is probably only insomnia. Many must have it.
– *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*

Of the last line of Robert Frost's "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" Guy Rotella asks, "[I]s a repeated word a rhyme? Is the resolution excessive; does the repeated line work as a sign of *forced* closure? None of this is resolved; it is kept in complementary suspension (1987: 187)". As for the poem's equally familiar first line, Rotella adds,

As an expression of doubtful guessing, 'think' opposes 'know,' with its air of certitude. The line might be read to emphasize doubt (Whose woods these are I *think* I know) or confident knowledge (Whose woods these are I think I *know*). Once the issue is introduced, even a scrupulously 'neutral' reading points it up (Rotella 1987: 187).

In the prose of Ernest Hemingway, complementarity¹ is also achieved through subtle dovetailings of sound and sense. This is especially true of the last line of "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place", *Many must have it*, which invites close comparison with the fifth line of "Stopping by Woods": *My little horse must think it queer ...*

¹ In thumbnail terms, complementarity is "[a] recognition of an inescapable duality at the heart of things" (Gleick 1987: 40). This is not, however, as simple as it sounds. When the mathematician Arkady Plotnitsky refers to "the double nature of light", where "one must manage classically incompatible systems of representation *without resolving their incompatibility*", he is also describing complementarity [italics added] (Plotnitsky 1994: 6). "The process also produces," Plotnitsky adds, "specifically as *writing*, new economies of interpretation, history, theory, or literature" (Plotnitsky 1994: 205).

If we choose to stress Frost's *must* as in 'has to', nature on a snowy night becomes blindly deterministic, different from and indifferent to the human sensibilities of the speaker. If we distill the sound in a different way, however, the opposite happens; an unstressed *must* suggests that nature is sympathetic to the narrator as a thinking being, a part of the whole. It is the unstressed *must* of "Stopping by Woods" which, as Rotella puts it, "gives the game [of complementarity] away" (Rotella 1987: 186).

The prosodic status of the last line of "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" is strikingly similar to that of the fifth line of "Stopping by Woods". This passage may also be read in complementary fashion. One may emphasize the subject and de-emphasize the modal verb, as in *many* must have it, where *it* signifies a bleak existential condition shared by other persons. According to this reading, the re-appearance of the indefinite *it* connects insomnia with the *nada* of the older waiter's revised Lord's Prayer. On the other hand, because the close encounter with *nada* has *also* awakened the older waiter's humanity – e.g., his compassion for the old man – there is no reason not to emphasize the modal *must* instead, as in *many* *have to* experience it. As in the fifth line of "Stopping by Woods", this shift in emphasis is anything but subtle, for the indefinite pronoun *it* of "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" *now signifies manna for being*. Like the "owner" of Robert Frost's snowy woods, it has no face, but it wears many masks, one of which is a Spanish waiter's tired smile.

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