

13 TWO POEMS ABOUT WELLS (July 2019)



Here in Houdetot we are lucky enough to have a well of our own. Actually, it's not really a well ("*puits*") as such but more a beautiful, sunken water butt or "*citerne*". There used to be a real well in the village along the rue du Puits. It was at least 80 metres deep before finding the water table far below the chalk of this chalky region, the Pays de Caux (meaning chalk). Our "well" modestly collects water from the roof and stores it in this traditional way for old houses like ours (the farmhouse dates back to before 1500). The water was, and still is elsewhere in the region, used for making cider, washing clothes and watering the garden. Ours has a 3 or 4 metre drop and then the water goes down another 5 metres, which,

since the lined interior widens, means quite a lot of water, which up to now we have been rather hopeless at managing sensibly. "An electric pump," people tell us, "with pipes leading to the toilets for a start..." For the moment, we are content simply to treasure it as a beautiful and very useful adornment of our garden. Watering is longwinded, but ecologically good and, of course, cheap.

Children are fascinated by it – of course, we have put a heavy iron cover over it. They stare down into its coolly sombre depths and drop pebbles in to hear the melodic "plop!" that echoes hollowly and musically. The cat poses prettily on the cover as if daring any snotty-nosed *Jeannot Vert* (Johnny Green) to push him in. And in summer, heat-wave and "*canicule*" time, our "*citerne*" comes into its own as the bucket is sent down on its iron chain to be hauled up brimming with cold pure rainwater for our thirsty plants.



Here, then, are two poems which explore the fascination of staring down into wells and what the wells give back:

For Once, Then, Something (Robert Frost)

Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs
Always wrong to the light, so never seeing
Deeper down in the well than where the water
Gives me back in a shining surface picture
Me myself in the summer heaven, godlike,
Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.
Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,
I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,
Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,
Something more of the depths--and then I lost it.
Water came to rebuke the too clear water.
One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple
Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,
Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?
Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.

In this somewhat puzzling poem, Frost claims to have been fixated, as a boy, by the view given back to him when he looked into wells. The “picture” he usually had was a “shiny” one, on the surface, showing himself (“Me myself in the summer heaven, godlike”). He remembers one time, however, when he was “trying” to go “beyond the picture” and saw something “white, uncertain”. What was it? He doesn’t know (“Truth? A pebble of quartz?”). This is the enigmatic conclusion which also forms the title of the poem and leaves us pondering. What is he *getting* at? What *doesn’t* he want to say here?

To discover just that, we must look more closely at the poem itself. It doesn’t rhyme and only just avoids comparison with a sonnet by being 15 lines long, broken into a clear 6 and 9 structure. This sort of blank verse in the first person is very much in the style of Wordsworth’s “Prelude”, his huge and autobiographical poem, where he is constantly led by Nature to interrogate himself and his ideas about the world around him. Far from being comfortable in the mountains and lakes he grew up in and so loved, Wordsworth is forced to reevaluate what nature teaches him about his innermost soul or psyche – and it is often dark (as in the episode where he borrowed a boat and rowed himself out into a lake only to be terrified by the dark, looming mountains, who seemed alive and accusatory – for he had borrowed the boat without permission and was possibly feeling guilty right from the start).

In the same way, perhaps, Frost is confronting something hidden deep within himself from his childhood. We notice at the beginning a slight feeling of paranoia, certainly of separateness from the “Others”, who, he claims, used to “taunt” him. He seems (as a boy) content just to kneel “at well-curbs” (like our grandson Louis, aged 4, who is also fascinated by our own well and stares down into it, surreptitiously dropping little stones to hear the echoey “plop”). Frost, we learn, usually liked to see his reflection, and the word “godlike” rings a note of irony, because actually he is the one kneeling and feeling awkward and different. In fact, the poem doesn’t reveal him as at all confident or happy, if he was thinking of himself as a god. The title of the poem suggests, on the contrary, that disappointment ruled in his life, particularly, when he was trying to get the full “picture”, a word that is repeated three times in the poem.

The poem ends very ambiguously – he discovered something, he says, but he doesn’t tell us what. It’s white, which *could* seem positive. White suggests light, brightness, the opposite of “darkness”, surely? Yet white is also a brutally cold colour in Frost’s poetry. Think of the whiteness of the snow in “Stopping at Woods”, where the “darkness” of the woods is contrasted as something welcoming (even though it might refer to the comfort of self-annihilation, as many suggest). There is, however, an even darker poem of Frost’s called “Desert Places”: here it is in full.

Desert Places

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.

The phrase “a blanker whiteness” and “With no expression, nothing to express” surely resonate here. The last two lines of the poem clearly point towards Frost’s inner “desert places” of depression.

So, “What was that whiteness? Truth?” One *truth* is that Frost, despite his often breezily upbeat tone in many of his poems as farmer and backwoodsman, was prone to serious depression, and I think that in “For Once Then, Something”, with its search – even in childhood - for answers, or “pictures”, the well is giving him back a picture of something deep within him that may not be the obvious terrors of darkness, but rather the hard white, stony “pebble” of *blankness*. The bleaker, less obvious side of the coin of black melancholy.

In this respect, the well operates on many symbolic levels. Wells are watery life-giving places, but they also tunnel deep underground into the subterranean pits... of the psyche. Here in Normandy, many villages harbour stories of desperate women who sought what must be one of the most horrific ways of doing away with yourself: falling headlong into a well.

The well may also stand for poetry itself, reaching down to discover “pictures” in the way that poems can. Heaney’s poem takes us further in that direction.

Personal Helicon (for Michael Longley)

As a child, they could not keep me from wells
And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.
I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells
Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

One, in a brickyard, with a rotted board top.
I savoured the rich crash when a bucket
Plummeted down at the end of a rope.
So deep you saw no reflection in it.

A shallow one under a dry stone ditch
Fructified like any aquarium.
When you dragged out long roots from the soft mulch
A white face hovered over the bottom.

Others had echoes, gave back your own call
With a clean new music in it. And one
Was scaresome, for there, out of ferns and tall
Foxgloves, a rat slapped across my reflection.

Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,
To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring
Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.

It's useful to know that a helicon is a large brass wind instrument, a member of the tuba family. But "Helicon" also refers us a little to Mount Helicon, the mythologised mountain in Greece. Perhaps the poem explores a personal "myth".

This is a work that engages fully with our senses – fingering "slime", sights of foxgloves or rats, smells of "waterweed, fungus, and dank moss", and particularly sounds: "rich crash", "slapped", "echoes" "a clean new music". The poem, as Heaney reminds us forcefully at the end, rhymes. Rhymes are musical echoes.

Tensions are set up early between words or phrases that are negative, balanced by positives; Look at the first two stanzas – "dark drop" (which conjures up the gallows!), "trapped sky", "rich crash". Wells can encapsulate positives and negatives.

Like Frost, Heaney admits to a fascination for wells as a child and it's interesting that he chooses the word "Narcissus", which is so like Frost's "godlike". They are bot, perhaps, a little full of themselves – as children are, of course! But there's a rueful note of irony struck at the end of Heaney's poem as he reviews his adult position ("beneath all adult dignity..."). and then, so Heaney-like, we have that resonant finish to the poem:

".....I rhyme
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing."



Heaney's poem accepts the negatives of wells and also the positives. What a beautiful phrase "Fructified like any aquarium" is! But Heaney's poetry doesn't shirk internal darkneses and never has done. From his early poem "Digging" onwards, Heaney's poetry has explored depths, psychological, cultural or sociological. For a time he was much taken with the newly unearthed "Bog People" dug out and beautifully preserved from the bogs and marshes of Denmark. The picture here is of Tollund Man, and that is the title of one of his poems. In another poem, "Punishment", he compares one of the

bodies, that of a girl with a noose round her neck, to the punishment beatings and violence handed out during the Irish Troubles. In the poem, Heaney doesn't absolve himself totally from the general guilt around reprisals and violence, which is a hard confession to make.

Unlike Frost, however, Heaney's poetry does not reveal someone defeated by depression. He was a lovely man to encounter in the flesh and I took pupils in Paris to see him read his poems back in the Nineties. Unlike the Ted Hughes débâcle which I have written about elsewhere, Heaney was warm with his audience - he had a musician friend with him and there was singing and lots of laughter as well as seriousness – it was an enriching experience to hear him recite and talk with us, the audience.

Here is another poem I admire of his, in which, like Frost in "Desert Places", Heaney engages with the dark places of Ireland during the Troubles, his role as a poet and the subject matter of his poetry. Like Frost he refers to stars but with a very different approach. As a poet, he rejects the idea of romanticising "stars", nor is he attracted by the remoteness, the "otherness" of stars.

Outside History

There are outsiders, always. These stars –
These iron inklings of an iron January,
Whose light happened

thousands of years before
our pain did: they are, they have always been
outside history;

They keep their distance. Under them remains
a place where you found
you were human, and

a landscape in which you know you are mortal.
And a time to choose between them:
I have chosen:

out of myth I move to be
part of that ordeal
whose darkness is

only now reaching me from those fields,
those rivers, those roads clotted as
firmaments with the dead.

How slowly they die
As we kneel beside them, whisper in their ear.
And we are too late. We are always too late.

For him, life must be lived and faced up to here on earth. His choice, however, is very stark – he is committing himself and his poetry to the service of other poor people caught up in the ghastly, violent turbulence of “history”. The words “I have chosen”, coming in the middle of the poem, are significantly placed. The horror is not internal but external for Heaney. The image of the poet willing to “kneel beside them, whisper in their ear,” gives us an idea of poetry going beyond the Self and serving a wider community. Frost is often consciously writing for a wide readership, but in his most personal poems he can only hint at his own inner darkness and it remains private. Heaney’s poetry, I feel, comprehends darkneses but it shares more. It attempts to unearth his personal experience not just for himself but for others to share in - it is there to inspire, engage with, and with music, to “set the darkness echoing”.

