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Abstract of ***A Dark Star Passes Through It***

By Leslie Ullman

The task of seeking the “center” of a poem enables a reader to participate in every gesture a poem makes, and in the process to feel the entirety of the poem at an intuitive level. This encourages the experiential sort of reading French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard refers to when he speaks of *reverberation* as the operative word for describing the dynamics of literary expression—the associations and, more importantly, the *sensations* kindled in the reader by what she encounters on the page.

Early in my university career, a conversation with my then-colleague James Ragan helped me find a vocabulary for using reverberation as the starting point for grasping the spirit, the felt meaning of a poem, without having to dissect or paraphrase it first. He said, if I remember correctly, that every poem has a “center,” a line or group of lines which reveal the heart of the poem but should not be confused with theme or content. Rather, they are lines with a distinctive energy, almost always heightened energy, and one way to identify them is to imagine that when the writer drafted these particular lines, she could feel the force and trajectory of the finished poem even if many details still needed to be worked out—that the poem from that time forward held mystery and potential completeness for the writer and would indeed be worth finishing.

I soon discovered that one cannot identify a poem’s center without dwelling upon each of the poem’s gestures—each image, transition, close-up and wide-angle view—without, in other words, feeling the weave of the entire texture, its larger and smaller variations. Imagine being blindfolded, learning the layout of a room by groping your way along its walls and furnishings, letting your sense of touch replace your eyes and yield the landscape of the

room in a visceral, intimate way. This is what happens when one reads a poem with the intent of identifying its center.

The center can occur anywhere in the poem. It can be a phrase or a stanza, or it may reveal its energy in the gap between stanzas. It can be a moment where the poem's tension is most palpably enacted, or where the poem's time frames or layers interact simultaneously, or where the texture of the poem undergoes significant variation, or where the poem seems to contradict itself, or where it seems to quicken and gather itself into a passage that acts as a kind of net. The center is where the reader can grasp intuitively the poem's themes. And nearly always, the center contains a pivot or surprise that gives the whole poem simultaneous light and darkness, hence considerable range.

To read the essay, click here:

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