

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## *Book Notes #129*

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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence  
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### *Fire and Ice*



Whatever happened to winter?

*I know, I know* – to ask about winter’s absence while living in Erie, Pennsylvania in January with the lake still unfrozen tempts fate, for any shift in the Canadian wind can bring Lake Erie’s water ashore in frozen flakes drifting your lawn in mounds of snow.

William Carlos Williams captured it in “The Snow Begins”:

*from* The Snow Begins

... this comes gently over all

all crevices are covered  
the stalks of  
fallen flowers vanish before

this benefice all the garden's  
wounds are healed  
white, white, white as death

fallen which dignifies it as  
no violence ever can  
gently and silently in the night. [1]

But still, what happened to winter? You know, winter as Shakespeare sang of it:

Winter

When icicles hang by the wall,  
And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,      (*blows his nail: blows on his hands to warm them*)  
And Tom bears logs into the hall,  
And milk comes frozen home in pail,  
When blood is nipp'd and ways be foul,  
Then nightly sings the staring owl,  
Tu-whit;  
Tu-who, a merry note,  
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.      (*keel: to stir*)

When all aloud the wind doth blow,  
And coughing drowns the parson's saw,      (*coughing parishioners drown out the preacher*)  
And birds sit brooding in the snow,  
And Marion's nose looks red and raw,  
When roasted crabs hiss in the bowl,  
Then nightly sings the staring owl,  
Tu-whit;  
Tu-who, a merry note,  
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

from ***Love's Labor's Lost*** V, ii, ll. 912-929

You know, winter, in preparation for which months ago the trees lost their leaves and as William Carlos Williams once again wrote:

*from* Winter Trees

... having prepared their buds  
against a sure winter  
the wise trees  
stand sleeping in the cold. [2]

After 11 consecutive weeks of **Book Notes** about weighty topics, although I think the Christmas **Notes** were fun, I thought a breath of fresh air in order. I asked myself, in winter's absence, what have the poets had to say about the season of fire and ice.

"Fire and ice," you ask? Yes, for it seems, as we shall see next week rummaging around in the history of Groundhog Day, that since before memory began poets have coupled winter's ice with images of fire as they beseeched the sun's return. And the two, having been linked by poets in quest of the life force, fire and ice became love's most evocative symbols, whether the superheated erotic energy of Thomas Hardy's Eustacia Vye silhouetted against a bonfire illuminating an autumn night on the Cornish coast or Pablo Neruda saying:

*from I Do Not Love You Except Because I Love You*

I do not love you except because I love you;  
I go from loving to not loving you,  
From waiting to not waiting for you  
My heart moves from cold to fire...

Maybe January light will consume  
My heart with its cruel  
Ray, stealing my key to true calm.

In this part of the story I am the one who  
Dies, the only one, and I will die of love because I love you,  
Because I love you, Love, in fire and blood. [3]

Or, in "Amoretti XXX" Edmund Spenser's befuddlement that his fiery desire cannot melt his beloved's icy response nor her icy coldness freeze his ardor:

*from Amoretti XXX*

My Love is like to ice, and I to fire:  
How comes it then that this her cold so great  
Is not dissolved through my so hot desire,  
But harder grows the more I her entreat?  
Or how comes it that my exceeding heat  
Is not allayed by her heart-frozen cold,  
But that I burn much more in boiling sweat,  
And feel my flames augmented manifold ... [4]

Speaking of winter love, it is not always flash-and-bang and “hot desire.” Sometimes, as Linda Gregg muses, it can hint of an opportunity missed and the quiet acceptance of the *is-that-is*:

*from Winter Love*

I would like to decorate this silence,  
but my house grows only cleaner  
and more plain. The glass chimes I hung  
over the register ring a little  
when the heat goes on.  
I waited too long to drink my tea.  
It was not hot. It was only warm. [5]

Or maybe the “spareness,” the “emptiness” that winter reveals, having scoured the earth before blanketing it in snow, might be all there is, as Gregg’s lover the poet Jack Gilbert suggests in “Winter Happiness in Greece”:

*from Winter Happiness in Greece*

The world is beyond us even as we own it.  
It is a hugeness in which we climb toward.  
A place only the wind knows, the kingdom  
of the moon which breathes a thousand years  
at a time ... [6]

If Spenser’s ardor could not melt his beloved’s icy shield, Sara Teasdale in “After Parting” knows that her love like the pillar of fire and cloud leading the Israelites in their exodus will warm her absent lover and bring him back again. Only it didn’t, as Teasdale and her beloved, the poet Vachel Lindsay, never could quite get out of one another’s way, could never quite get in-sync. Speaking of winter’s chill, they both committed suicide in the early 1930s.

*After Parting*

Oh I have sown my love so wide  
That he will find it everywhere;  
It will awake him in the night,  
It will enfold him in the air.

I set my shadow in his sight  
And I have winged it with desire,  
That it may be a cloud by day  
And in the night a shaft of fire. [7]

It seems that fire and ice as metaphors for love speak not only to love's ardor, but to coping with unrequited love's aftermath. Perhaps nowhere more famously than in William Butler Yeats' "When You Are Old." In a melancholy tone, Yeats tells his beloved, the actress Maud Gonne, when she is old and sitting by a fire that fire will not stoke their passion, but only remind her of what might have been. (Or at least the pining poet hopes.)

### When You are Old

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,  
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,  
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look  
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,  
And loved your beauty with love false or true,  
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,  
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,  
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled  
And paced upon the mountains overhead  
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars. [8]

Fire is not always a sign of love and the life force; sometimes, it illuminates death. John Donne, who we discussed in a **Book Note** several weeks ago, which can be found [here](#), could never banish from his memory the sight of Spanish sailors dying in a burning ship during a sea battle off the coast of Cadiz.

### A Burnt Ship

Out of a fired ship, which by no way  
But drowning could be rescued from the flame,  
Some men leap'd forth, and ever as they came  
Near the foes' ships, did by their shot decay;  
So all were lost, which in the ship were found,  
They in the sea being burnt, they in the burnt ship drown'd. [9]

Well, I seemed to have jinxed us, because since I started working an hour or three ago on this brief **Note** about winter and its great metaphors – fire and ice – this morning's unseasonably green lawn is now blanketed with a thickening covering of snow.

I've lit the fireplace – that tame domestic version of those ancient Nordic fires warming the *mead hall*.

What are the best American poems about winter and fire and ice? I'll draw this short **Book Note** to a conclusion by nominating three.

Emily Dickinson has a number of poems that speak of winter, of snow and ice. I think two are worth a second look. In "The Sky is Low ...," she hears in the souging wind echoes of people complaining about one another.

The Sky is Low, The Clouds are Mean

The Sky is low – the Clouds are mean.  
A Travelling Flake of Snow  
Across a Barn or through a Rut  
Debates if it will go –

A Narrow Wind complains all Day  
How someone treated him  
Nature, like Us is sometime caught  
Without her Diadem. [10]

On a more positive note, Dickinson anticipates the coming winter season with a sense of wonder in "Before the ice is in the pools"

*from* Before the ice is in the pools

Before the ice is in the pools,  
Before the skaters go,  
Or any cheek at nightfall  
Is tarnished by the snow,

Before the fields have finished,  
Before the Christmas tree,  
Wonder upon wonder  
Will arrive to me! [11]

If, as Katharine Rundell said of John Donne in that **Book Note** mentioned earlier, the greatest poetry calls you to **attention**, or as I have argued in numerous **Book Notes** these past several years makes you more **present-to-the present**, then Wallace Stevens' "Snow Man," that man of ice, who seeing nothing sees all, calls you to **attention** making you more **present-to-the-present**.

Snow Man

One must have a mind of winter  
To regard the frost and the boughs  
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time  
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
The spruces rough in the distant glitter  
Of the January sun; and not to think  
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,  
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land  
Full of the same wind  
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. [12]

Although his “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening” with its “promises to keep” and “miles to go before I sleep” is far more famous, let’s conclude this **Note** with Robert Frost’s “Fire and Ice.” Published in 1920 shortly after the end of World War I and the shock of the scale of death wrought by modern, mechanized warfare, Frost meditates upon how the world will end. Will it end in the flames of desire run amok or will it end in icy hate’s crushing embrace, or will it end in some *Dantesque* fusion of both?

### Fire and Ice

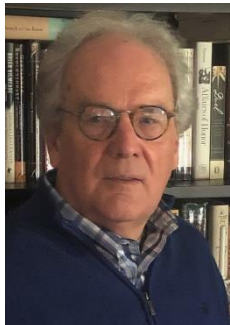
Some say the world will end in fire,  
Some say in ice.  
From what I’ve tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favor fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate  
To say that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice. [13]

Actually, the freshly falling snow outside creates too charming a tableau to end on Frost’s brooding note. Noodling around my notes on poetry, I rediscovered Gail Mazur’s wonderful memory piece of a shy girl ice skating at dusk with her father. Although she is not shy, it always reminds me of my daughter Samantha, who is a superb skater, trying to teach me to skate backwards at the Glenwood ice rink – a skill I never mastered.

### Ice

In the warming house, children lace their skates,  
bending, choked, over their thick jackets.

A Franklin stove keeps the place so cozy  
it's hard to imagine why anyone would leave,  
clumping across the frozen beach to the river.  
December's always the same at Ware's Cove,  
the first sheer ice, black, then white  
and deep until the city sends trucks of men  
with wooden barriers to put up the boys'  
hockey rink. An hour of skating after school,  
of trying wobbly figure-8's, an hour  
of distances moved backwards without falling,  
then—twilight, the warming house steamy  
with girls pulling on boots, their chafed legs  
aching. Outside, the hockey players keep  
playing, slamming the round black puck  
until it's dark, until supper. At night,  
a shy girl comes to the cove with her father.  
Although there isn't music, they glide  
arm in arm onto the blurred surface together,  
braced like dancers. She thinks she'll never  
be so happy, for who else will find her graceful,  
find her perfect, skate with her  
in circles outside the emptied rink forever? [14]



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## End Notes

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12. Stevens, Wallace. "Snow Man" in **The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens**. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), p. 9.
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