

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Classic Book Notes #129

January 2024
Originally January 2023

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

Fire and Ice

Editor's note: Following is Part 2 of a Classic book note series on winter poetry by Dr. Andrew Roth. The Jefferson first published it Jan. 26, 2023.



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]



-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.
Scholar-in-Residence
The Jefferson Educational Society
roth@jeserie.org

This content is copyrighted by the Jefferson 2022.

Photo Credits

"Large bonfire" at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:Large bonfire.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed January 22, 2023.

"Fleur de givre L.jpg" at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:Fleur de givre L.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed January 22, 2023.

End Notes

1. Williams, William Carlos. "The Snow Begins" in **Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems**. (New York: New Directions, 1967), p. 56.
 2. Williams, William Carlos. "Winter Trees" at **American Academy of Poets** available at [Winter Trees by William Carlos Williams - Poems | poets.org](#) accessed January 22, 2023.
 3. Neruda, Pablo. "I Do Not Love You Except Because I Love You" at **PoemHunter.com** available at [I Do Not Love You Except Because I Love You - I Do Not Love You Except Because I Love You Poem by Pablo Neruda \(poemhunter.com\)](#) accessed January 22, 2023.
 4. Spenser, Edmund. "Amoretti XXX" in **The Poems of Spenser: The Complete Poetical Works**, Ed. R.E. Neil Dodge. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1936), p. 723.
 5. Gregg, Linda. "Winter Love," at **The Poetry Foundation** available at [Winter Love by Linda Gregg | Poetry Foundation](#) accessed January 22, 2023.
 6. Gilbert, Jack. "Winter Happiness" in **Collected Poems**. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), p. 318.
 7. Teasdale, Sara. "After Parting" at **Poetry.Com** available at [After Parting by Sara Teasdale \(poetry.com\)](#) accessed January 22, 2023.
 8. Yeats, William Butler. "When You Are Old" in **W.B. Yeats: The Poems**, Ed. Daniel Albright. (London: Everyman's Library, 1992), p. 62.
 9. Donne, John. "A burnt ship" in **The Complete Poetry of John Donne**, Ed. John T. Shawcross. (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), p. 160.
 10. Dickinson, Emily. "The Sky is Low, the Clouds are Mean" in **Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems**, Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1961), p. 241.
 11. Ibid., "Before the ice is in the pools," p.
 12. Stevens, Wallace. "Snow Man" in **The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens**. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), p. 9.
 13. Frost, Robert. "Fire and Ice," in **101 Great American Poems**, Ed. The American Poetry & Literacy Project. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1998), p. 48.
 14. Mazur, Gail. "Ice" at **The Poetry Foundation** available at [Ice by Gail Mazur | Poetry Magazine \(poetryfoundation.org\)](#) accessed January 22, 2023.
-

[Subscribe to JES Publications Mailing List!](#)

[Support JES | Donate](#)

In Case You Missed It

[The Wider World | Central Asia: The Great Game in the Modern Context](#) written by President of DC Analytics **Diane Chido**

[Truth in Love | Goals of White Supremacy: Subvert, Revise, or Eliminate Black History](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Parris J. Baker**

[Be Well | Turning Back Time](#) written by health and wellness expert **Debbie DeAngelo**

[Classic Book Notes #87 | A Snowfall of Winter Poems](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

[On the Waterfront | Bay Rat Branding: Robert Hall](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**

JES Mission: The Jefferson was founded to stimulate community progress through education, research, and publications. Its mission also includes a commitment to operate in a nonpartisan, nondenominational manner without a political or philosophical bias. As such, the Jefferson intends to follow the examined truth wherever it leads and is neither liberal nor conservative, Democratic nor Republican in philosophy or action. Our writers' work reflects their own views.

Jefferson Educational Society | jeserie.org

