# Winter Light

The coming of the winter twilight clarifies the mind. With the snow the light becomes more intense, the dark more evident, and the remaining colors more obvious. The heightened contrast forces us to think.



The 1871 painting *Winter Twilight from Olana* is by Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900). He was a successful member of the Hudson River School, and at the time of the painting lived on the Olana estate overlooking the river. This small painting (10 by 13 inches) is a vivid representation of winter.

This posting considers the light of winter through four different poems.

**Emily Dickinson**

An 1861 poem by Emily Dickinson describes the “heavenly hurt” experienced in the winter light. She lived in Amherst, Massachusetts, not that far from the location of Church’s painting.

There’s a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are –

None may teach it – Any –
‘Tis the Seal Despair –
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air –

When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, ‘tis like the Distance
On the look of Death –

Like the “heft” of hymns, the winter light forces us to think of “meanings,” even those most painful. “Heft” is an old English word for “weight,” that has also come to mean “importance.” The word is etymologically related (cf. “heave”) to “haft,” the handle of a tool or weapon such as a knife. Winter light can cut right through us.

Dickinson’s approach to life and religion was significantly affected by American Transcendentalism (Barnstone, 2006; Farr, 1992). One of the tenets of this movement (Goodman, 2011; also American Transcendentalism webpage) was that the contemplation of nature provides us with all we need to know and teaches us how to live our lives. In his 1836 essay *Nature,* Emerson states

> the noblest ministry of nature is to stand as the apparition of God. It is the great organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead back the individual to it. (p. 77).

Dickinson followed this precept but sometimes found despair rather than enlightenment. As winter brings the year to end, it inevitably elicits thoughts about death. Dickinson describes this in terms of silence. The landscape “listens” and the shadows “hold their breath” but nothing can be heard. The ending of the poem focuses on death. The “distance on the look of Death” is cold and abstract. Death is so far from life that it cannot be understood.

The mystery of death dominated the mind of Dickinson. About half of her poems are related in some way to the death of loved ones, to the nature of death, or to what may happen after death (Nesturuk, 1997).

However, to get only one level of meaning from a Dickinson poem it simply to miss the other levels. The very word “slant” immediately brings to mind another poem *Tell all the truth but tell it slant*. The final stanza of the poem on winter light gives a sense of reconciliation more than despair. Death will not be understood, but that just makes it distant. What it will mean we will only come to know when it comes (and when it goes).

The technique of this poem is striking (Vendler, 2010, pp 128-129). The rhythm is never regular, and the reader should not lapse into simple periodicity. The opening line is best read as beginning with an anapest: “There’s a *cert*ain *Slant* of *Light*.” This type of beginning recurs intermittently during the rest of the poem, especially in the last stanza: “When it *comes*…” and “When it *goes* …” The anapests provide a feeling of expectancy or involvement. The rhymes are just as intriguing as the rhythm. Vendler remarks on how the inevitable paired rhyme of “breath” and “death” at the end of the poem is balanced by the gentle slant-rhyme of “listens” and “distance.” Inevitable is not necessarily harsh.

**Thomas Hardy**

In face of despair we bolster ourselves with beliefs. The Christian religion centers on the idea of salvation. Death then becomes as much the beginning of a new life as the ending of the old. The celebration of Christmas occurs in the middle of winter. Winter will occur but we should not mind since the savior has been born. Spring is coming and the festival of Easter will describe the actual process of our resurrection.

Such beliefs can keep us warm in winter when thoughts of death are near. Thomas Hardy's poem *The Oxen* published on Christmas Eve, 1915, considered the state of belief when the world found itself in a devastating war.

The word "oxen" nowadays often refers to castrated bulls used as draught animals. However, it can also simply mean "cattle," and this fits more easily with Hardy's description of them as "meek" and "mild." Two other words in the poem come from old English. "Barton" is a farm outbuilding, and "coomb" a small valley.

A Dorset folk belief was that the animals that had been present at the manger when Christ was born kneel in remembrance of his birth on Christmas Eve. The presence of these animals at the original birth is not documented in the scripture, but soon became part of the accumulated legends of the nativity (Cartlidge and Elliott, 2001, pp 18-19; Wager, 1939). A possible justification of the belief (for the animals at the original birth though not for the reverential kneeling on Christmas Eve) might be found in prophetic lines like Isaiah 1:3 "The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib." Yet this would require an additional belief in the possibility of prophecy.



The above illustration shows the nativity with ox, ass and manger on a 4th-Century sarcophagus in the Sant'Ambrogio Basilica in Milan (Source: Wikipedia Commons). Very soon after Rome turned to Christianity, the animals came for Christmas. One English version of the hymn *In dulci jubilo* by John Mason Neale (*Good Christian Men Rejoice*) contains the lines

> Jesus Christ was born to-day:
> Ox and ass before Him bow,
> And He is in the manger now.

The fair "fancy" that the oxen kneel at midnight every Christmas Eve does not follow any logic. How would one know if the oxen were kneeling in reverence or simply resting? Yet the story is magical. We are entranced by the idea that the natural universe attends to human history and marks the birth of a child in a manger many years ago. Shakespeare mentions in *Hamlet* (I:1:160) a similar folk belief that during the Christmas period "the bird of dawning singeth all night long."

In his poem, Hardy remembers back to his childhood:

> Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
> 'Now they are all on their knees,'
> An elder said as we sat in a flock
> By the embers in hearthside ease.
>
> We pictured the meek mild creatures where
> They dwelt in their strawy pen;
> Nor did it occur to one of us there

To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
‘Come; see the oxen kneel

‘In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,’
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

Hardy no longer believes the story. Yet he regrets the comfort that came with the idea that God was in his heaven and peace was on the earth. When he wrote the poem the world was at war. In the trenches the idea of peace on earth was being torn to shreds by shrapnel.

Hardy was uneasy in his lack of faith (Perkins. 1959). Though he had written a poem on *God’s Funeral* (1910), he always felt that perhaps he was missing something. This is most poignantly rendered in his poem celebrating the century’s turning *The Darkling Thrush* (1900). Hardy’s description of the bleak winter scene is interrupted by the joyful song of a thrush:

So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.

*The Oxen* continues his uneasy isolation. Hardy both wishes for the comfort of the old beliefs and realizes only too clearly that they are in part responsible for the present. Beliefs in God and Country now support a war that reason says should not have been entered into.

Hardy's poem was published in *The Times* on December 24, 1915. Allingham (retrieved 2014) points out the irony that the poem occurred on the same page as a smug editorial claiming that the English and their allies were the true Christians, and that the Germans had shamelessly departed from the true faith.

**Wallace Stevens**

Wallace Stevens' 1921 poem *The Snow Man* draws other thoughts from winter. The poem begins with a bravura description of the winter landscape: the "juniper branches shagged with ice," the "distant glitter of the January sun."

The poem then contrasts the reality that we perceive to the meaning that we attribute to it. The syntax is as torturous as the understanding is difficult. It is so easy to think of misery when we see the frost and hear the wind. Yet if we develop a "mind of winter" like that of the snow man, we can experience what really exists.

> 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.

The last two lines describe the true experience that lies beyond our preconceived notions. If we become empty of ourselves, we no longer see things that are not there. We come face-to-face with the truth, realizing that it is as empty as the perceiving self. There are three nothings: the nothing of the emptied self, the “nothing that is not there,” and “the nothing that is.”

This has some similarity to Dickinson’s experience after the heavenly hurt passes and she is left with the “distance on the look of death.” However, Stevens found in winter not despair but understanding.

The poem has been interpreted in different ways, depending mainly on how the critic considers the “nothing that is.” For some, such as Bloom (1977) and Pack (2003), the nothing that concludes the poem is but the first stage on the path to imagination. One must remove the old ways of looking and then create a better way. Contemplation can lead to detachment but must then proceed to imagination.

However, other critics, such as Bevis (1988, 2003), Qian (2001) and Hahm (2003) propose that the nothing that concludes the poem may be an end in itself. Stevens’ conclusion hearkens back to Buddhist and other Eastern philosophies, wherein the goal is to lose oneself in the universal self and thereby reach enlightenment. The wording of the poem’s last two lines brings to mind the koan riddles of Zen, verbal tricks to help the meditator reach true understanding.

The poem’s vision is austere. Not one that the western mind can easily grasp. The goal is to lose one’s self. Not to gain comfort, not to make oneself better, not to determine how things work. Yet by losing ourselves we might be released from suffering, learn what is right, and gain true understanding.



The illustration shows some calligraphy of Sengai Gibon (1750-1837), a monk from the Zen monastery *Shofukuji* in Fukuoka, Japan. The characters represent *bu* and *ji* in Japanese or *wú* and *shì* in Chinese (Mandarin). Sengai presents the traditional characters □□ quite freely. On the left is his signature and seal. The meaning of buji is difficult to pin down. The first character negates and can be translated as "no, not, nothing" depending on the context. The second character means "matter, affair, activity." Combined the two characters mean "nothing doing." *Buji* is the goal of meditation, equivalent to *samadhi* in Sanskrit. As such it also means "serenity." The state attained when one has the mind of winter.

Though he had only slight exposure to Eastern religions, Emerson (1936) described a similar state:

> Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. (p. 13).

**Myra Schneider**

The final poem in this winter sequence is actually the beginning of a longer poem *Caedmon* by Myra Schneider (1988).

Caedmon lived in northern England in the 7th century. He is known for one surviving poem, *Caedmon's Hymn,* in praise of the Creator of heaven and earth. This lovely example of alliterative verse is the oldest recorded English poem. The webpage of A. Z. Foreman presents the hymn in Old English together with a recitation and a modern English translation.

Schneider's poem also uses alliteration though not in as formalized a fashion as in Old English. The beginning of her poem about Caedmon describes the middle of winter:

> That night frost stretched
> the fields into stiff white sheets;
> from post, strut and roof glinting
> ice-fingers pointed to the ground.
> But within walls, reed-woven,
> mud-baked, we warded off
> the wind-beast's bellow and bite.
> Herded in the wool of our own warmth,
> near red-gold flames that licked
> logs, then leapt to find the hole
> to heaven, we defeated winter's pikes.
> That festive night we filled
> our bodies' troughs with roasted meats,
> with mead that honeys the senses, muzzes
> the mind. As ever I kept quiet,
> stoked myself with the comfort rising
> from the rush-strewn floor, the goodwill
> steaming through talk and laughter.

This poems vividly depicts the human response to winter's cold. We come together round the fire. We drink the mead that

“honeys the senses” and “muzzes the mind.” The word “muzz” meaning “confuse” derives from an old English word for bog (cf. “moss”). Too much thinking should cede occasionally to simple conviviality. In winter, human beings gain comfort from human company, whatever their beliefs. Goodwill is the best response to adversity.

The rest of Schneider’s  poem describes the story of Caedmon’s vision, as originally told in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of England* (731) which was written about fifty years after the death of the poet. Caedmon was a simple cowherd unable to put words together with any meaning or music. He therefore leaves the winter feast when the harp is passed around and everyone asked to sing.




That night, while Caedmon is sleeping with the cows, an angel wakes him and asks him to sing. Caedmon is told to “delve for the hoard of words in himself” and sing in praise of the creator. And so he does. Caedmon’s song becomes famous, and he

joins the monastery in Whitby as a lay brother. He writes many other hymns though only the first one survives. The illustration shows the depiction of Caedmon’s story on a commemorative cross outside St. Mary’s Church in Whitby (derives from a photograph in Wikimedia Commons).

Caedmon’s was a different vision from Dickinson’s experience of death. It had something akin to the beliefs that Hardy held when he was young and longed for when he was old. In some ways it is the opposite of Steven’s experience of the nothing that is everything. It shows a commitment to poetry rather than a detachment from the world.

**Frederic Edwin Church**

The posting concludes as it began with a small painting by Frederic Church from 1871. Like the first it represents the winter landscape viewed from his home in Olana. The light is brighter, the land is simpler. It is an invitation to behold.



I wish you all a Happy New Year! May your winter bring enlightenment.

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