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When snow covers a landscape, it uncovers the bare bones of the land: a seeming paradox. The hollows, bumps and edges of our world are both softened and accentuated by a layer of snow. Our hearts leap up when we behold a morning of dazzling snow that has fallen silently in the night. Snow landscapes seduce us to pause and listen to "the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." This elegant quote from Stevens' poem "The Snow Man" suggests that we listen carefully as we look since the sounds of snow are less silent than we imagine, yet more silent than our dreams.

As we feel, see, hear and smell snow's presence, some intriguing change in our relationship to the land slips quietly into play. The many seeming sensual contradictions about snow enchant us and make us forget ourselves. Inner and outer merge in snow. Paralleling our response to snow and under the influence of Japanese art, the best of American snow painting of the late 19th century tempts the listener to use all of our senses as we dissolve into art of air that is "alive with feathery flakes descending."[1] Japanese art brought snow to the attention of American artists and taught them to relate to nature through touch, hearing, and smell instead of offering the land as a "vision" (either literally as something to look at or as a symbol for some idea) as American landscapes prior to this time had often been. This new "American" view is not ashamed of its metaphysical overtones and invites the same union of subject and object that our actual experience of snow does. Although Americans learned much about how to approach snowy landscapes, what these artists discovered in snow was a nothingness that differs from Japanese perceptions of snow.

First the differences between snowy and commonplace landscapes. Snow results from a mysterious dance of ordinaly elements; water molecules, pieces of the earth, dust, and cold wind. These unremarkable elements are transformed as snow is created six miles above the earth[2] and the snow that falls in turn transforms the land and atmosphere we are accustomed to. Land unadorned by snow is other. It is in-itself, resisting the impact of light and wind. For example, though not immune to all the sky's nuances, fields of corn stand up to the light, forebear the sun's power. Ordinary landscapes cannot completely resist the play of the shadow's colors or the spangle of the noon sun, but in general its being proclaims an independence from the sky. However, we are astonished when we perceive the new reality created by a sonwstorm in the night: a new world is present. The snow surface, like its liquid sister, has a new relationship with sky and light. The pinks, yellows, mauves, and salmons of

the passing light are welcomed by the openhearted snow. Indeed, in a snow landscape, snow and sky often seem to completely merge, becoming indistinguishable from one another. In a partially covered field of snow the dark earth sinks deep into itself, confident of its color and being while the snow floats over the earth and reflects the color of the sky: snow seems more at home with the sky since it is water become air, while the earthy parts interfere with the union of sky and snow. In completely covered landscapes, however, the union is complete.

The raw earth generally feels solid, massive, real. Except on rare occasions wind passes over not through the land, leaving the underlying untouched. Snow landscapes, however, are the result of an intimate dance of wind, flake and waiting object. The architecture of snow is born in the wind. Snow and little or no wind create a delicate, irregular beauty. (This type of snow is best captured by Chinese and Japanese artists.) These shapes are the most ephemeral. Moderate wind and snow uses the earth's shapes and our additions to the earth to create a new outline and space. Other contours result from different ratios of wind and amounts of snow until we reach the blinding, horizontally blowing snow that swirls but will not settle into a shape even for a moment and which drove some pioneer women to suicide.[3]

The earth rarely changes before our eyes.[4] We can sometimes see the results of changes e. g., eroded hills, or wind carved rock, but seldom do we observe change first hand. Even the leaves change colors imperceptibly. On the other hand, the new reality of the snow world is ephemeral, fragile, delicate, short-lived, and we perceive this quality. In most places where humans live, snow dies into its watery grave in minutes, hours, days, or at most weeks from its birth. Each moment of its existence snow constantly and visibly changes from downy flake to the powdery surface, to the well packed substance that can support our weight, to the squeaky grit underfoot, to the slush of its old age. Even in land that is covered by snow during all or most of the year, this inconstant surface of snow is visible to observers. This Heraclitean world is unbearably light.

Snow reveals innocence and memory in startling ways. Recall how an unmarked patch of snow draws your attention and your being like a child. Its open whiteness puts us in awe, yet tempts us to joyfully **interrupt** its pristine blankness. (How many of you yearn to make an angel in this snow?) Snow flaunts its innocence, insisting that we forget while covering the roads and paths that have lead us into the land. The paths revealing our social life, where ***we*** have gone are hidden. Yet, every new activity, every movement in the snow leaves a flagrant track. Ordinary landscapes hide a plethora of unseen action. Insects, worms, even birds, squirrels and rabbits carry on a life behind the veil of green and brown that constiute the ordinary land. Only habits of long-standing leave a trail for others. The land remembers the old and common, not the unique or unexpected. To eyes grown dull to subtlety, a individual's "journey" through the woods is virtually invisible. But, in snow, every rabbit's step, deer's meandering, or human step is proclaimed. Our social history hides, but our individual journeys are celebrated. Snow memorizes every fresh mood and movement. A solitary human footstep confronts us: we cannot imagine we are newcomers to this land. The garden is already inhabited. The 'Others' presence commands decision. We must choose to follow or to

turn aside. The receptivity of snow invites us to impose ourselves on the snow. Even a child's gait can be embedded in the snow. Conscious path-making is as natural as a seven year old. Snow awaits our creativity like a blank canvas, a lump of clay, or a musical instrument. Each of us counts, our acts are held up for us to see our involvement with the world.

In a very practical sense snow changes the ordinary. During our agricultural childhood (for some of us literally, others metaphorically) snow changed the landscape is positive ways. Snow covered roads made the muddy byways more passible. Sleighs made travel easy and just plain fun. Winter was also a time of re-creation and recreation, both of the land in its fermenting fallowness, and of those who work the land. Snow acts as a fertilizer and insulator of the earth and the things nourished by it. On the other hand, after the turn of the century, life with snow was a transformation of the ordinary into something much worse. If one must work during the winter, and urban transportation is not adaptable to a snowy environment, snow is unwelcome.

Experiencing snow not only transforms the ordinary landscape, it leads us to transvaluate many of our familiar values. For example, the sensuous surface is valued more than "getting to the bottom of things." Ambiguity and slipperiness is more valued than stability and stasis. Movement is more valued than arrival. Creativity is more valued than practical "work." Silence is more valued than sound.

Most importantly, snow landscapes seem to transform our relation to the uncovered plainness of the land in one of two ways. Snow landscapes seem to invite us to become "unearthed" either through a creative abandon or a more solemn meditation. The first way to become "unearthed" is to allow snow to surprise us with silliness. When we lick it, throw it, mold it, and cannot resist the urge to sled, side and ski over it some small miracle takes place. Pointing to the creative joyfulness snow affords in 1851, Hawthorne describes two children playing in the snow in his "The Snow Image: A Childish Miracle":

> To look at them, frolicking in the wintry garden, you would have thought that the dark and pitiless storm had been sent for no other purpose but to provide a new plaything for Violet and Peony; and that they themselves had been created, as the snow-birds were, to take delight only in the tempest, and in the white mantle which it spread over the earth.[5]

However, this kind of elation is not common in American art. Most American snow landscapes, penned or painted, offer a darker more poignant atmosphere. I believe a view of snow can be heard and seen in American writers and painters that reveals a spirit of meditation suffused with an All-American submersion in what is there. Here we find the second way to become "unearthed," the sober acquaintance with snow. As Thoreau says, "In winter we lead a more inward life."[6] In these writers and painters, the spiritual is not transcendent, but exists in the land, air, and leaf they perceive. I will trace the development of this sense of no-thing that is heard by American poets and by painters.

I want to concentrate on the influence of Japanese art and thinking on American painters at the end of the 19th century, but in order to understand the importance of these paintings, a short history of western snow landscapes may be useful. As far as I've been able to discover

the first appearance of snow in Western painting is the February page of a manuscript illumination by the Limbourg Brothers in 1416. The first true Western snowscape was Albrecht Durer's watercolor, painted in 1492 when returning through the Alps from Italy. In the 1600's Dutch painters captured life at work and play on the ice with snow only around the edges. Friedrich began making famous Romantic snow landscapes in the early 19th century in Germany, but Americans were just becoming bold enough to try painting landscapes during this period. Early 19th century snow scenes, such as this one by Birch recall the Dutch visions, but with simpler designs. These scenes are not cluttered with humans, but allow Americans to show off the land they had begun to cherish. There is an ambiguous attitude toward winter in the early 19th century. On the one hand, winter was a test of one's fortitude and resourcefulness, yet on the other hand, winter **required** that farmers sit back, relax, and renew themselves. You can see this ambiguity in these two paintings: the first envisions the bitterness and loneliness that blows though us like a blizzard, but the latter delights in the sleigh ride displaying the joyful lifting of the burden of work and dedication that summer demands. Remember, during this period only a small percentage of our population lived in cities and had 8 to 5 jobs year round. Having grown up on a farm myself, I know how busy and exhausting summer is! In 1794 Dwight (soon to become the president of Yale) wrote:[7]

How pleas'd, fond Recollection, with a smile,
Surveys the varied round of wintry toil . . .
Yet even stern winter's glooms could joy inspire:
When social circles grac'd the nutwood fire;. . .
And Hospitality look'd smiling round,
And Leisure told his tale, with gleeful sound.

At about the same time as Birch's playful genre scenes, Thomas Cole, a member of the Hudson River School, was producing more sophisticated landscapes. This school did not produce many snow landscapes, but concentrated on panoramic views of the noble wilderness that represented the manifest destiny. Their land was Emerson's — an ecstatic vision, not an intimate acquaintance. They went into the woods with their gloves on and mufflers around their ears. But a major change in snow painting was about to occur: After Americans came to know to the marvelous snow landscapes of Japanese artists, they would never paint snow the same way again.

In order to understand the influence of Japanese artists and thinkers on American painting, I will begin with American writers. As I move from writers to painters I will try to define what each heard when they listened to snow.

During the period that American intellectuals became acquainted with Japanese art and its powerful representations of snow, Emerson recognized snow's ability to illicit our communion with the world. His classic, eyeball passage takes place *in the snow:*

Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. . . There I feel that nothing can befall me in

life, — no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. 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 eyeball; I am nothing; I see all.[8]

This "nothing" united with the all occurs frequently in American poetry. Americans saw an emptiness in snow that both attracted and repulsed them. Emerson is elated to melt into nothing while listening to nature (at least early in his writings), but his focus on **eyes** reveals his prejudice in favor of **mental** ecstasy.

In "A Winter Walk," Thoreau says, "The snow levels all things, and infold them deeper in the bosom of nature," and "We would fain stay out long and late, that the gales may sigh through us, too, as through the leafless trees, and fit us for the winter. . ."[9]. Thoreau's union incorporates all of his senses and is more earthy, more connected to his body. In his journals his absorption in the snow is evident. He snowshoes and skates through the winters. "The driving snow blinds you, and where you are protected, you can see but little way, it is so thick. Yet in spite, or on account, of all, I see the first flock of arctic snowbirds. . . An hour after I discovered half a pint of snow in each pocket of my greatcoat."[10] He weathers the frozen air to capture the sunrise: "The winter morning is the time to see the woods and shrubs in their perfection, wearing their snowy and frosty dress. Even he who visits them half an hour after sunrise will have lost some of their most delicate and fleeting beauties."[11] He wallows in snow's white nothingness: "I go up to my middle in the deep but silent snow."[12] Awake, alive to every nuance, Thoreau's "body is all sentient. As I go here or there, I am tickled by this or that I come in contact with, as if I touched the wires of a battery. . . The age of miracles is each moment thus returned."[13] His ecstasy is of the body as well as the mind. His religion is grounded in his body.

Perhaps the best representation in writing of this elusive view in found in Wallace Stevens' "The 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.

The poem begins with the listener regarding the "outer" world of frost covered pine-trees **crusted** with snow. If we merely have a **mind** of winter, we will **regard**, guard against the snowy landscape (as all attempts to use only sight, only reason, separate us from the object.) 63 Yet, something warm exists beneath the *crust* of snow, so if we combine that mind of winter with a listening body that has been cold a long time we will **behold** junipers **shagged** with ice and rough glittering spruces. "Behold" captures a barely suppressed enthusiasm, a holding, a warm possession of, in short a listening to, this scene in all its sensuous glory. As the listener to this wind "beholds/Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is," she hears no delusion, and **no** misery. When we look squarely at what is, if we are properly prepared with a mind of winter, and a body attuned to nature, we will see the nothing that is there. Although Stevens does not have the innocent enthusiasm of Emerson, listening to the nothing that is there does not lead to despair, it is no-thing not nihilistic blankness that is heard in the snow.

Painters too listen to this special no-thing in snow landscapes especcially during the late 19th century. During the last half of the 19th century, George Inness, John La Farge and John Twachtman quietly transformed white canvases into place to listen to the snowy "no-thing."

In George Inness' painting, *Home at Montclair,* the painter struggles with, instead of welcoming the demands of union with the no-thing. Here one feels the strings of responsibilites and earthly needs that pull us away from an absorption in nature and toward strictly human affairs in this painting just as we do in Frost's "Stopping by Woods On a Snowy Evening".

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Just as the horse's harness bells shake one awake and away from nature in the poem, in the painting the friendly smoke insists on being civilized and the barn quietly interrupts the tree. The woods are **owned** in the poem just as the fields here are cultivated. The birds are in flight and not yet settled in their nests, so the human seeks home in this painting. Promises and all keep one from being absorbed in the woods both here and in the poem. Yet, the soft color, the friendly smoke, and stable composition welcome participation. The river pulls toward the comfort of the buildings as the lone human struggles through the snow. The smell of the smoke and the coming evening beckon us into the painting as do the rhythm and rhyme of the poem. We hear Frost's 'sweep of easy wind and downy flake.' The urge to be absorbed is not dissolved, even the civilization doesn't take away the sound of nothing. The stream separates the viewer from the house. One cannot arrive within without effort. The viewer feels the cold yet yearns for the warmth of the hearth.

Unlike many Japanese paintings, American snow landscapes such as *Home at Montclair* and John La Farge's *Snow Landscape with Evergreen Tree,* tend to be very quiet, almost silent. No birds sing nor dried leaves rustle. This painting allows us to stand on the snow as we look up a slight rise to an irregular evergreen. The high horizon encourages us to focus on the snow that separates us from, and connects us to the tree and the forest in the distance. The painting is not about the tree or the forest, but the no-thing, the snow, that encircles both me and the tree as I listen in the quiet. "The loneliness includes me unawares,"[14] as Frost put it in his poem "Desert Places," but I do not resist it.

La Farge was probably the first Western artist either in the United States or Europe to recognize the aesthetic value of Japanese art. Since his wife's grandfather was the famous or infamous Admiral Perry, La Farge was among the first to see the art that was being brought from Japan. After coming to Japan himself, La Farge noted that the Japanese landscape was not "'inimical, as ours is, to what we call the miraculous.'[15] Rather, he found that in Japan he could 'fall into moods of thought. . . of feeling — in which the edges of all things blend, and man and the outside world pass into each other.'"[16] This "miracle" of meditative union with a landscape can be heard in this painting. La Farge listens with his whole body to the no-thing in the snow. He, like Thoreau, is at home in the snow. Listen to Thoreau's words in this snow.

> There is the least possible moisture in the atmosphere, all being dried up or congealed, and it is of such extreme tenuity and elasticity that it becomes a source of delight. . . The withdrawn and tense sky seems groined like the aisles of a cnathedral, and the polished air sparkles as if there were crystals of ice floating in it. . . this pure, stinging cold is an elixir to the lungs, and not so much a frozen mist as a crystallized midsummer haze, refined and purified by cold. The sun at length rises through the distant woods, as if with the faint clashing, swinging sound of cymbals, melting the air with his beams, and with such rapid

steps the morning travels, that already his rays are gilding the distant western mountains. . . Probably if our lives were more conformed to nature, we should not need to defend ourselves against her heats and colds, but find her our constant nurse and friend, as do plants and quadrupeds. . . All things outside seem to be called in for shelter, and what stays out must be part of the original frame of the universe.[17]

The American master of snow landscapes is John Twachtman. After studying Japanese art, reading Zen texts, and even painting *A View of Fujiama* (1885) and *Japanese Winter Landscape* in the 1879, Twachtman began an intense study of snow that would last over ten years, from 1890-1900.[18] Twachtman's art holds "no-thing" so that we can drink it in. *Winter Harmony*'s high horizon, like La Farge's, focus our attention on the bowl of water on the bottom half of the painting. We stand on the same level as the pond as we look into the foggy source of the (all?) water. A weightless waiting overcomes the viewer. Our senses are alert yet completely at rest.[19] Snow muffles the sound so that silence insists on pushing its way into our busy consciousness. We can smell the spruce and cold. Our eye does not rush, but slides from one resting place to another. The cool blues and greens dance with the warm golds and pinks. The satisfying completeness of its rhythms demands the name "harmony." We are not overwhelmed by cold, although we are not unaware of it. The even surface seems untouched by a personality; we do not see Twachtman's landscape, just the land. Yet a closeup reveals the subtle effort of layers of paint pushed into connection with one another. Twachtman even exposed his canvases to the environment of rain and sun to allow nature itself to help create the art as well as the land.[20] The landscape we see is not a fairy tale land, it is an accurate portrayal of what is there: "no-thing."

Twachtman explores all types of snowscapes looking for the essence of snow. *Icebound* chills even the most adventuresome with its cold blue look at the same environment we saw in *Winter Harmony.* The ambiguity we sense between the illusion of depth and the pattern on the picture plane resembles the ambiguity felt with "real" snow landscapes. The formed and formless shape of water do not conflict. *Winter Silence* reflects the ethereal sun glittering on fhe frozen depths of the same waters. As in actual snow landscapes, we are not interested in the underlying. The **surface** of snow and ice distills the light in subtle and miraculous ways. Furthermore, it is the momentary glint of sun, not the permanence of the underlying that is of interest. Both of these works require our body be open to the winter wind just as snow itself does. A mind of winter is not sufficient to behold these fragile moments.

The earth's move toward spring's rebirth is recorded away from the depth of water plumbed in the three works we just saw. Twachtman instinctively turns toward moviog water for *February* and *Frozen Brook* as the earth regenerates itself. We hear the beginning sound of moving water and the end of the hush of snow. We perceive the spontaneous in the structure.

In some Twachtman snow landscapes the canvas is covered in thick impasto as we can see in *Snowbound.* In others, the surface is almost completely devoid of brushstroke. Cournos, writing in 1914, "determined that Twachtman's brush, like that of the Zen painters, was invisible; his brush lost itself in the "soul of things" and in the process effaced the painter's

self."[21] Caffin another contemporary of Twachtman said he "had 'extracted' from the landscape 'a whisper from the eternal. . .'."[22] This quality shines in *Round Hill Road.* The comparison of Twachtman's art to Zen painting is not a coincidence. An early 14th century Japanese poet writes:

Each drifting snowflake
falls nowhere
but here and now

In this painting we hear no-thing, no-where, but here and now.

When snow covers a landscape, it uncovers the bare bones of the land: a seeming paradox. I began with that sentence and I will end with it. So many seeming paradoxes, essence and surface, realistic and abstract, material and anti-material, mind and body, even Western and Eastern, are just that: seeming paradoxes. Snow teaches us that we are partners with nature, if we learn to listen. We can even discover how the linear becomes circular just as a snow ball rolling in a straight line over a flat surface expands as a circle. We need to be like snowbirds accepting the variability of the frosty air as our environment. We tend to want an unchanging earth, one that is reliable, constant. We need to become unearthed like the birds. The experience of real snow seduces us into this unearthed state. The painters and writers I've discussed expect the listeners to their art to open all of their senses in order to hear their song of no-thing.

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12 *Ibid.,* 230.
13 *Ibid.,* 225.

14 Robert Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost,* ed. Edward Connery Lathem, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 296.

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.

15 John La Farge, *An Artist's Letters from Japan,* New York, 1897, 170. Cited in "John Twachtman and the Therapeutic Landscape," by Kathleen A. Pyne, *John Twachtman: Connecticut Landscapes,* Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1989, 68.

16 *Ibid.,* Pyne, 68, footnote 29.

17 Thoreau, "A Winter Walk," *op. cit.,* 166-167.

18 Two blizzards, one January, 1888 on the Central Plains, and one, March 12, 1888 in New York City demanded the attention of everyone in the United States that year. ("At 100, Still the Champ of Winter's Snowy Olympics," *Smithsonian* 18, #12 (March 1988) 70-81.) Perhaps these storms piqued Twachtman's interest in snow. By the end of Twachtman's snow period, in 1898, a Vermonter, Wilson Bentley, had published his still famous photographs of snow in *Harper'*s.

19 A contemporary critic of Twachtman pointed to this quality in Twachtman: 'Here the painter leads you to some quite spot — you see the damp melting snow, — the bare wet trees, and the swiftly flowing brook, you feel that the air is laden with moisture — it is one of those gray, damp days. You are not restricted to the narrow limits of the canvas, you feel as though you could follow the brook's course farther down, and see way into the distance.' Quoted in "Twachtman's Greenwich Paintings: Context and Chronology," Lisa N. Peter, in *John Twachtman: Connecticut Landscapes,* Washington, D. C.: National Gallery of Art, 1989, 20.

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22 *Ibid,* 57.