SNOW-BOUND: An Appreciation

A dawn the color of iron; a dull cold afternoon; then snow swirling till daybreak and beyond. A small family along with a schoolteacher and a female friend sit before a ruddy fire, telling stories to fend off the mindless wind. Two days and transfiguration. Dazzling crystal, fenceless drifts, moaning tree-boughs, isolation for a week: the "chill embargo of the snow."

These are the simple, picture-perfect ingredients of John Greenleaf Whittier's splendid masterwork, "Snow-bound: A Winter Idyll," which depicts a bygone era in the New England of Whittier's birth (Haverhill, Massachusetts, 1811). But the poem is more than charming vignettes of local color nostalgically presented. "Snow-bound" tenderly evokes time past and loved ones long gone through its canny use of reminiscence-- and reminiscence within reminiscence-- affirming the power of imagination over "loss in all familiar things."

The poem's poignancy derives in part from the circumstances of its birth. For three long years, from 1861-1864, casualties had mounted in the grueling battles of the Civil War, and then just as war ended, President Lincoln was struck down by an assassin's bullet. New England homes recently celebrating the end of slavery now painted their mantels black. And in Amesbury, Massachusetts, where Whittier was then living, the poet mourned losses closer to home: in the fall of 1864 he was stricken by the death of his beloved sister Elizabeth. "It is terrible," Whittier wrote to a friend, "the great motive of life seems lost."

By the following summer, Whittier was writing his wintry poem, issued on February 17, 1866, and an immediate success. Selling 20,000 copies in the first months of publication, it shot its author to fame and netted him more money than this impoverished son of a farmer had ever known. Not that Whittier had been obscure exactly, but he hadn't written the kind of verses sure to please the multitude or pay the bills. The gentle Quaker had been an early, fierce abolitionist whose antislavery verse-- and politics-- earned him the opprobrium of his less enlightened peers. "Snow-bound" changed all that, and by the time Whittier died in 1892 he was hailed a national treasure.

In its own time, the elegiac poem soothed a country bruised by war, calling for "North and South together brought …/In peace." His social conscience steadfast, the poet incorporated it into a homely rural scene something like Oliver Goldsmith's "Deserted Village" but with far more terror beneath its octosyllabic surface. For Whittier terrifies the way Robert Frost does--

and Frost is Whittier's direct heir; both poets, despite their popularity, are acquainted with the terrors of night. Modernists tended to forget this when disdaining Whittier as too sentimental, accessible, or sweet. Accessible though he is, Whittier's lissome sentiment is undergirded by steel, and if "Snow-bound" staves off despair, it does so without easy consolation. It touches something deep in the human heart-- the warmth of memory-- and with that, the Quaker poet offers us his benediction of the air.

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