Snow has been used by artists and poets for centuries because winter weather is especially rich in the kind of paradoxes that generate complex cultural responses. Snow falls soft, but turns hard. It appears uniform, but is composed of crystals of infinite variety. Winter is a time of killing cold, yet it is a season of germination and renewal in nature. Snow obscures the familiar, but reveals new forms. Long winter nights are turned to day by reflected moonlight. None of these paradoxes was lost on artists and writers in Canada and the United States. During the past 150 years, snow has been studied, played in, painted, celebrated, and cursed. Attitudes toward snow are revealed in many ways, paintings and poems are just part of the larger cultural context that makes up the history of snow. A survey of these creative responses suggests three hypotheses for further investigation: 1) That artists and poets find in snow and snowstorms useful symbols of creativity, renewal, and imagination. 2) That these artists are at least aware of ideas and discoveries in the sciences, so that new attitudes are expressed over time. 3) That although Canada and the U.S. share many attitudes toward winter weather, the artists show some differences in their depiction of snow, differences that help to define the national identity of each country.

"Announced by all the trumpets of the sky, Arrives the snow, and, driving o'er the fields, Seems nowhere to alight: the whited air Hides hills and woods, the river, and the heaven, And veils the farm-house at the garden's end. The sled and traveller stopped, the courier's feet Delayed, all friends shut out, the housemates sit Around the radiant fireplace, enclosed In a tumultuous privacy of storm."

The first stanza of Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem, "The Snow-Storm," may be the best known lines about snow in American literature, especially since they preface the equally familiar "Snow-Bound" by John Greenleaf Whittier. Emerson's verse was written in 1841, the same year in which James Pollard Espy published The Philosophy of Storms, an early attempt to explain the mechanisms of storms based on variations in temperature and barometric pressure. Emerson, too, was interested in the laws of nature, not to predict changes in the weather, but to discover principles for guiding human behavior.
Snow was not a significant interest of Espy and other early meteorologists; farmers in the northern United States were accustomed to living with blizzards and deep drifts, and the railroads were still confined to the milder climates of the seaboard region. Later in the 19th century, when railroads and settlements stretched across the continent, scientists began to turn their attention to snow, first as a hazard to transportation, then as a potential source of water. Rain didn't follow the plow onto the prairies as many farmers hoped, but the snowplow led the railroads through the mountain passes.

Snow was important to Emerson and other artists of the Romantic movement. Influenced by Kant and Schiller, Coleridge and Burke, American artists on both sides of the border looked at their landscape for evidence of the sublime, often finding it in the power of a snowstorm or its aftermath. Believing that man could not comprehend the absolute "reality" of nature directly, these artists emphasized the importance of the imagination and the role of the artist in giving form and meaning to the chaos of nature. Far from celebrating nature for its own sake, or finding in a snowflake the perfect geometry of nature, these artists found ambiguity and paradoxes. After isolating the "housemates" in the "tumultuous privacy of storm," Emerson celebrates the "fierce", "wild", "fanciful", "savage", "mocking" snowstorm that leaves,

"... astonished Art
To mimic in slow structures, stone by stone,
Built in an age, the mad wind's night-work,
The frolic architecture of the snow."

If Emerson seems to prefer the playful freedom of nature to the slow mimicking of man-made structures, he is also aware of nature's lack of number and proportion, the characteristics of art. The American winter landscape is primordial, and it is the creation of a force that is neither serious nor rational. Henry David Thoreau, writing in his journal in the same winter, 1841, discovered visual puns in "... the snow [that] collects upon the plumes of the pitch pine in the form of a pineapple, which if you divide in the middle will expose three red kernels like the tamarind stone. So does winter with his mock harvest jeer at the sincerity of summer. The tropical fruits which will not bear the rawness of our summer, are imitated in a thousand fantastic shapes by the whimsical genius of winter." (Thoreau, Journal, volume I, 238).

There is always a problem in the use of literature for studying historical attitudes. How representative are the observations of Emerson and Thoreau? Although they are obviously important to understanding American philosophy, they were not the most popular authors of their day. If we compare their ideas and images with writers who were either more popular, or more conventional, or who worked in a different medium, we have a chance to see how a variety of opinions create a pattern. In 1858, James W. Watson published his verse, "Beautiful Snow", which tells the sad story of a derelict (whose sex is not indicated) who was "Once... pure as the snow," but who is now trampled like the snow into "the horrible filth of the street." Read as a straightforward morality tale and remembered, if at all, for the single phrase, "beautiful snow," Watson's verse seems simple and uninteresting in contrast to Emerson's, but scrutiny reveals an imagery close to that
of "The Snow-Storm," an imagery that suggests that humans who allow themselves to live naturally, like the creations of nature, may suffer the consequences. The first stanza sets the tone:

Oh! the snow, the beautiful snow,
Filling the sky and the earth below;
Over the house tops, over the street,
Over the heads of the people you meet;
Dancing,
Flirting,
Skimming along,
Beautiful snow! it can do nothing wrong.
Flying to kiss a fair lady's cheek,
Clinging to lips in a frolicsome freak;
Beautiful snow, from the heavens above,
Pure as an angel and fickle as love!

"Fickle," "flirting," "frolicsome freak," even the alliteration seems sinister, so when the poet says "it can do nothing wrong," the reader is suspicious. Nature is just a bit too licentious. When, in the second stanza the snowflakes whirl about in "maddening fun" and "even the dogs, with a bark and a bound,/ Snap at the crystals that eddy around," that scene becomes more like a scene from Bosch than from Breugel. The snow itself is menacing and the cliche of being pure as the wind-driven snow takes on a more ambiguous meaning. Note, too, that a snowstorm has a different effect on a city than on a farm. The moment of revelry is brief, public, and noisy. The frolic architecture of the snow will have to be recreated in the ice palaces of future winter carnivals.

A Canadian equivalent of Watson is provided by Pamela S. Vining, whose "Under the Snow" was highly praised by Edward Hartley Dewart, editor of Selections from Canadian Poets, published in 1864. Vining uses the image of a snow-filled valley as a metaphor for thwarted dreams, suffering, and loss. Beneath the snow lies "buried the wealth of the long ago." Nevertheless, the poem ends on a hopeful note, the speaker has learned the true value of home and simpler pleasures from the experience of grief. The snowscape in Vining's poem is silent, pallid, and gloomy, but in the end the snow has acted to hide and protect the true "idols." There is a hint in Vining of perpetual snow, of a year-round presence, not the seasonal phenomena of the United States. If, as recent commentators have asserted, the Canadian sense of place includes the vast northern territories stretching toward the pole, then we are likely to see it in the writings and paintings of Canadian artists.

One of the well-known early painters of the Canadian landscape is Cornelius Krieghoff. His U.S. equivalent is George Henry Durrie. Aside from the obvious superiority of Krieghoff's drawing, the two show similar interest in recording people in the snow. Krieghoff, who emigrated from Holland, has been described by one art historian as "a romantic adventurer," who was a musician, story-teller, actor, dancer, woodsman, hunter, and botanist. This probably accounts for his interest in details of clothing, buildings, and sleighs. Certainly we learn more from his paintings than from Durrie's about material culture. In "The Habitant Farm" (1856) we see the
husband returned from town bringing supplies and a woman, probably a grandmother, to visit his family. The scene is happy, natural, even to the point of disorder, with half-buried objects in the snow and the hayloft door hanging by one hinge. The snow is old enough to have melted and slid down the roof, but the road is still buried and there is a sense that it will remain cold for sometime to come.

Durrie's paintings, which were popularized by Currier and Ives lithographic copies, depict New England farms as neat and orderly, the doors of sheds and barns open to show stacks of wood and abundant feed. More often than not the snow is spread evenly on the roofs, resistant to wind and thaw. Durrie's secondary motif is gathering wood for winter. Several of his paintings show an ox-drawn sled piled with wood accompanied by a man with an ax, a boy, and a dog. Unable to paint figures very well, Durrie wisely kept his men and cattle in the background. "Winter Scene in New Haven" (1858) is typical. Visitors in a sleigh stop at a farm on the edge of town. Durrie, like Kriehoff, saw snow as more than simply a flat expanse of white and many of his paintings show snow broken by animal tracks and drifts, reflecting shades of color. His happy, if somewhat severe scenes, became popular as lithographs during the Civil War when many Americans longed for a simpler and more peaceful past.

The success of Whittier's poem "Snow-Bound", published in 1866, confirms the existence of a nostalgia for the disappearing rural past in the United States. Subtitled "A Winter Idyl" and dedicated "To the memory of the household it describes," the 759 line poem was once committed to memory by high school students. Although most of the poem describes evenings spent in the house, telling stories, reading, and playing games, Whittier follows Emerson in imagining the landscape transformed by drifting snow, then goes beyond him in portraying the ways in which the children turn their work into play as they shovel a path from the house to the barn, dig a tunnel through a deep drift, imagine it to be Aladdin's cave, and later go for sleigh rides and have snowball fights. Whittier's snowfall, like Vining's, symbolizes the passage of time and consists of memories of childhood. Critics have noted the frequent references to anti-slavery movements in "Snow-Bound" and suggest that the poem is an allegory of New England's inner life. The country had weathered the blizzard of the Civil War, was memorializing its lost friends and relatives, and was looking forward to the springtime of peace.

Yet, the growing interest in snow transcended the immediate concerns of the United States. An anthology of poetry and scientific articles titled, Cloud Crystals; A Snow-Flake Album, was published in 1865. The book was collected and edited by "A Lady," later identified as Mrs. Frances E. Chickering, who contributed original drawings of 189 forms of snowflakes observed in Portland, Maine. Chickering's attempts to record the shapes of snowflakes, though cruder than W. A. Bentley's, were done twenty years before he began his photographic experiments. Canadian science was represented by a paper from Dr. Charles Smallwood, "On Some of the Forms of Snow Crystals and the Different Electrical States of the Atmosphere During their Formation," which had been read before the Natural History Society of Montreal. Smallwood had constructed an elaborate apparatus to measure the electrical charges of snowflakes seventy feet in the air and was convinced that star-
shaped crystals were positively charged, while simpler hexagonals were negatively so. Smallwood succeeded in photographing some of the crystals by the chromotype process.

The trauma of preserving the union in the United States is paralleled by the creation of the union in Canada in 1867. The confederation heightened a sense of Canadian nationalism and encouraged writers and artists to concern themselves with national identity. Charles Mair was part of the generation that established a distinct Canadian literature and his poem "Winter" is analogous to Whittier's "Snow-Bound." Published in 1868, Mair's poem may contain allusions to the problems of unification, but its contrast between the harshness of winter that causes suffering, starvation, and death, and the opportunities that winter brings for reading, visiting, courting, and feasting seems more in the tradition of Kriehoff and Durrie.

While sentimental snow scenes remain popular to the present, progress in science in the late nineteenth-century brought changes in artistic styles and poetic sensibilities. The painter Thomas Moran accompanied a government-sponsored scientific expedition to Colorado and Wyoming in the 1870s and applied his knowledge of optics and geology to his landscapes. When he and the photographer William Henry Jackson recorded "Mt. of the Holy Cross" (1876) in the Colorado Rockies they helped to popularize the nationalistic notion that the destiny of the United States was divinely protected. The cross of snow in Moran's painting is presented as a natural curiosity in a setting as tempestuous as any of the romantic landscapes fifty years earlier. Yet, Moran's techniques were new, the brush strokes bold and impressionistic. Later artists would develop this technique and discover its particular suitability to snow scenes.

Among the Canadian artists who would exploit the techniques of impressionism was Marc-Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Coté. Born in Arthabaska, Quebec, and trained in Paris in the 1890s, he specialized in the effects of light on snow. His painting "Settlement on the Hillside", done in 1909, is, like Moran's "Mt. of the Holy Cross", both realistic and symbolic. The dark shadows of the forest contrast with the light on the village. The shaded woods retain the snow on the ground, while the roofs of the houses on the exposed hillside are already clear. Civilization overwhelms nature; in Canada too, man is divinely protected.

In the post-Darwinian world, the blizzards of 1888 and 1889 provided a good test of the survival of the fittest. Scientific interest in snow preceded the blizzards however. The First Polar Year in 1881 led to the establishment of weather outposts in Alaska and the Northwest Territories. In November 1888 the Monthly Weather Review began publishing a map of the United States showing the depth of snow on the ground and the limits of freezing weather. By 1891, the Review published two maps, the second showing the amount of snowfall during the month. Throughout the 1890s, articles on snow appeared with increasing frequency; most were purely descriptive, but a long article on "Snow Dust" by Cleveland Abbe in January 1895 raised a number of issues concerning the formation of snow crystals and the distribution of soils by wind.

Artists, responding more to Darwinian inspired naturalism, painted snow
scenes filled with pessimism and mystery. William Blair Bruce of Hamilton, Ontario, painted "The Phantom Hunter" in the blizzard year of 1888, basing it on a poem by Charles Dawson Shanly, "The Walker of the Snow", which had appeared in The Atlantic magazine in 1859. The poem tells of a hunter racing on snowshoes to reach his camp before dark. In the twilight he is joined by a "dusky stranger," who walks with him without speaking until the hunter notices that "the stranger/Left no foot-marks on the snow." When his friends find him in a snowbank in the morning, his hair has turned white as the snow. Bruce believed the legend was Canadian and sought to promote national pride by painting it. Its mood fits well with the melancholy of the end of the century.

Bruce's American counterpart is Winslow Homer, best known for his seascapes and realistic scenes of rural life, who in his later years became increasingly pessimistic. "The Fox Hunt" (1893) uses the deep snow to impede the fox and highlight the black bird that hovers above him, competing for the same prey. Homer's symbolism is clear: the hunter is hunted, the feast that one may enjoy is temporary at best, and the ultimate destiny of both is death without any promise of rebirth. The visual equivalent of a story by Jack London, Homer's painting anticipates the suffering and death experienced by many Arctic and Antarctic explorers in the next two decades as the final terrestrial frontiers were closed.

Homer's view was not widely accepted. As the new century opened, progressive reformers promised efficient management of cities, including the prompt removal of snow from streets. In snow research, the period Samuel Colbeck calls the period of discovery resulted in improved measurement of snow and its water content, expanded knowledge of the energy exchange at the surface of melting snow, and a satisfactory classification of snow types and structures. In the United States and Canada, most artists painted snow scenes in the style of the French Impressionists.

John Henry Twachtman's "Winter Harmony" (1906) may represent this style for the purposes of this paper. The landscapes of Durrie and Moran are reduced to a small patch of woodland. The brook and the shining snow both invite contemplation and reflection rather than awe or even reminiscing. There is something ominous in the tranquility, however—a sense of uneasiness found in some of the snow poetry of Robert Frost. In "Afterflakes" (c. 1938) Frost describes a person caught in a snowstorm who sees his shadow. In the second stanza he thinks:

If I shed such a darkness,
If the reason was in me,
That shadow of mine should show in form
Against the shapeless shadow of storm,
How swarthy I must be.

Frost leaves the reader with an unanswered question. Is the shadow on the snow cast by something darker in human nature than nature itself, or does the sun, shining through the storm, cause the shadow, confirming that man is a part of the natural world? If the latter is the case, how, the poet asks, can it be light enough to cast a shadow in the midst of a snowstorm? The atmospheric phenomena of snow falling from clear skies was often reported;
Cleveland Abbe offered an explanation in the February 1906 Monthly Weather Review, and Frost may have been aware of the scientific discussions. The conflicts among scientists and between science and religion were among Frost's major themes.

The Canadian artist Tom Thomson's "Snow Shadows" (1915) illustrates Frost's point. The alternating dark and light of the tree trunks and the shadows they cast seem at first random lines, then like the bars of a cage, finally arhythmic composition. Thomson's distinctive combination of impressionism and realism compliments his apparent desire to place snow in a context of forest and sunlight. He gives a sense of snow as a dynamic substance, changing from moment to moment. Again, it would be useful to know if he were aware of the work of S. J. Allan of McGill University on "Radioactivity of Freshly Fallen Snow" (Monthly Weather Review, December 1902) or Charles Mixer of Rumford Falls, Maine, on "The Water Equivalent of Snow on the Ground" (Monthly Weather Review, April 1903).

Artists interested in the city depict the effects of snow in interesting ways. George Bellows spent much of his life as a newspaper illustrator and painter in New York City. His "North River" (1908) shows tug boats in an estuary of the Hudson River between New York and New Jersey. The near shore is snow-covered and the steam from a locomotive and the tugs form a counterpoint to the mottled snow. A park bench in the foreground is almost buried in snow, creating the effect of increasing temperatures as the viewer mentally crosses the river to the barren far shore. The grass may not be greener across the river, but an impression is given that if you don't like the weather, or life, where you are, just wait and it will improve.

Not so in James Wilson Morrice's "The Ferry, Quebec" (1909), a view across the St. Lawrence River toward Quebec City. Not only are both shores covered in deep snow, but it is still snowing. The boat approaching the dock, the small building, the shadowy figures of horses and men seem more in harmony with the landscape than Bellows's configurations. Both paintings illustrate the important differences between rural and urban snowfall, psychologically and well as physically. For the city dweller snow may be a temporary respite, but the relentless movement of men and machines soon reduces the snow to slush. Life goes on and an ineffable sadness prevails. The poets Howard Nemerov (U.S.) and Margaret Avison (Canadian) both capture this feeling.

Nemerov's "The View from an Attic Window" (c. 1958) describes a child watching a snowstorm, surrounded by family heirlooms. As the snow falls on the bare limbs of a tree outside, the child cries and thinks:

But what I thought today, that made me cry,
Is this, that we live in two kinds of things:
The powerful trees, thrusting into the sky
Their black patience, are one, and that branching
Relation teaches how we endure and grow;

The other is the snow,

Falling in a white chaos from the sky,
As many as the sands of all the seas,
As all the men who died or who will die, . . .
Avison's "Thaw" (1960) is full of images of sky and land dissolving as civilizations rise and fall, ending with:

A boy alone out in the court  
Whacks with his hockey-stick, and whacks  
In the wet, and the pigeons flutter, and rise,  
And settle back.

For both Nemerov and Avison, snow is part of the natural world that is distant, powerful, and mysterious. The complexity of twentieth-century life, which made snow the subject of dozens of different sciences, left artists less concerned with the everyday effect of snow, even the symbolic meanings of those effects, and more concerned with the essence of the winter experience, the isolation, disorientation, sensory deprivation of the individual in the minimalist landscape of snow.

In the U.S., Rockwell Kent, who knew the Arctic firsthand, produced memorable snowscapes in which the soft contours of the whitened hills create an impression of amorphous but powerful forces. Kent's "Mount Equinox, Winter" (1921), with its ghostly deer leaping across the snow, is closer to the surrealism of Marcel Duchamp (who once exhibited a snowshovel as a work of art) than to the pastorals of Durrie or the naturalism of Homer. Kent's deer is superimposed on the snow, an image flashed in the artist's mind while he paints something else. Like the snow in the fantasies of the autistic boy in Conrad Aiken's short story, "Silent Snow, Secret Snow" (1932), Kent's snow is less a product of the atmosphere than of the intellect. Similarly, the Canadian Lawren Harris created pillowy snow-covered mountains that threaten to bury the viewer in an avalanche of ice cream. Harris's "Snow, Rocky Mountains" (1925) not only reduces the landscape to an abstraction, it reduces the abstraction to a single moment in the mind of the artist, the moment he locates himself in the order of nature.

In the same year that Kent painted "Mount Equinox, Winter", the poet Wallace Stevens published one of his best pieces, "The Snow Man." In a short poem of a single sentence, Stevens captures the scientific paradoxes of his day:

One must have a mind of winter  
To regard the frost and the boughs  
Of the pinetrees 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.
Here in a nutshell is the debate over whether order is discovered or invented. Both scientists and poets work in metaphor, but few are willing to conclude that the only order is the one they create. Stevens's snowscape is a place where man must confront the essentials, the "nothing that is not there and the nothing that is," the created and the discovered, although the discovered is as elusive as snow itself.

The Canadian poet P. K. Page follows this thought and metaphor in a 1967 poem with a similar title, "The Snowman", but significantly one word, not two. Describing the snowmen built by children, he writes:

Abstract. Everyman.
Of almost manna, he is still no man
no person, this so personal snowman.
O transient un-inhabitant, I know
no child who, on seeing the leprous thaw
undo your whitened torso and face of snow
would not, had he the magic
call you back
from that invisible attack
even knowing he can, with the new miracle
of another and softer and whiter snowfall
make you again, this time more wonderful.

Page's snowman is not the man contemplating snow, but the man of snow, whose uniqueness we value, imperfections and mortality included.

Most artists in the late twentieth-century continue to reduce snow to a minimal experience in order to make a point about contemporary life. The Canadian painter Jean-Paul Lemieux in "Le visiteur du soir" (1956), portrays a black-robed priest, faceless in an empty snowscape. The figure is mysterious, enigmatic, body and shadow are one. Nor are there footprints in the snow. The horror is not that of Shanly or Bruce's hunter, however, nor the ever-present possibility of madness and death in the harsh landscape, but the tragedy of lost opportunity and incomplete existence. Margaret Atwood uses a similar image in one of her "Small Poems for the Winter Solstice" (1981):

we're walking together

through the drifted snow
which is no colour,
which has just fallen,
which has just fallen,
on which we will leave no footprints

Snow continues to evoke the past, happy and painful memories of both youth and age. The American Indian artist Fritz Scholder's painting, "Indian in the Snow" (1972), is neither historical nor contemporary. A stylized image on a white field, the snow itself is merely a convenient abstraction, a mat to frame the icon, yet to anyone familiar with the tragic history of the native people of North America, the image of warriors frozen in their
blankets at Wounded Knee, the painting evokes a host of associations. The juxtaposition of an Indian and snow suggests a continuity, a fundamental reality from which there is no escape. We must come to terms with both nature and history, we can destroy one only by being destroyed by the other.

It should be clear from this survey that artists and scientists inhabit the same cultural universe. Each generation is faced with questions that it deems significant. One of the primary goals of science is to explain the laws that govern nature. One of the objectives of art is to define the essence of man. At the simplest level one difference between Canadian and U.S. painters is that the former show more snow. At a more profound level, the artists of both nations have, like scientists themselves, split into two major groups—those who relish the paradoxes, the complexity, the diversity of snow, developing the implications of this into intricate metaphors and terminologies, and those who see in snow the ultimate negation of all order, the blank page on which to create whatever order satisfies them. Neither is quite free of the other.

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