

... So Does Season

HERE'S MY FAVORITE SNIPPET OF POETRY:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold:
Bare, ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

As you know, that's Shakespeare's sonnet 73, your constant bedside reading. I like it for a lot of reasons. First, it just sounds wonderful—say it out loud a couple of times and you'll start to hear how the words play off each other. Then there's the rhythm. I often recite it in class when I'm explaining meter and scansion—how the stressed and unstressed syllables function in lines of poetry. But the thing that really works here,

in the next ten lines, is the meaning: the speaker is seriously feeling his age here and making us feel it, too, with those boughs shaking in the cold winds, those last faded leaves still hanging, if barely, in the canopy, those empty limbs that formerly were so full of life and song. His leaves, his hair, have mostly departed, we can surmise, and his appendages are less resolute than formerly, and of course, he's entered a quieter period than his youth had been. November in the bones; it makes my joints ache just to think about it.

Now to the nuts and bolts: Shakespeare didn't invent this metaphor. This fall/middle-age cliché was pretty creaky in the knees long before he got hold of it. What he does, brilliantly, is to invest it with a specificity and a continuity that force us to really *see* not only the thing he describes—the end of autumn and the coming of winter—but the thing he's really talking about, namely the speaker's standing on the edge of old age. And of course he, being himself, pulls this off time and again in his poems and plays. "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" he asks. "Thou art more lovely and more temperate. What beloved could turn her back on that one? When King Lear is raging in his old man's madness, he's doing it in a winter storm. When the young lovers escape to the enchanted woods to sort out their romantic difficulties and thereby take their proper places in the adult world, it is a midsummer night.

Nor is the issue always age. Happiness and dissatisfaction have their seasons. A thoroughly unpleasant king, Richard II, rails against his situation by saying, his voice dripping with sarcasm, "Now is the winter of our discontent, / Made glorious summer by this son of York." Even if we don't know what he means by that, we know from his tone what he feels and we're pretty sure it doesn't say anything good about this son (with a play on "sun") of York's future. Elsewhere he speaks of seasons as having each their appropriate emotions, as in the song from *Cymbeline*, with its "Fear no more the heat o' th' sun, / No

the furious winter's rages." Summer is passion and love; winter, anger and hatred. The Book of Ecclesiastes tells us that to everything there is a season. *Henry VI, Part II* gives us the Shakespearean formula for the same thing, although a bit more mixed, "Sometimes hath the brightest day a cloud, / And after summer evermore succeeds / Barren winter, with his wrathful nipping cold; / So cares and joys abound, as seasons fleet." Even his titles tell us seasons matter with him: *A Winter's Tale*, *Twelfth Night* (that is, the last of the twelve days of Christmas), *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Of course, seasons aren't the private playground of our greatest writer. We sometimes treat old Will as if he's the beginning, middle, and end of literature, but he's not. He began some things, continued others, and ended a few, but that's not the same at all. A few other writers have also had something to say about the seasons in connection with the human experience.

Take Henry James, for instance. He wants to write a story in which the youth, enthusiasm, and lack of decorum that mark the still comparatively new American republic come into contact with the stuffy and emotionless and rule-bound world that is Europe. He must overcome an initial problem: nobody wants to read about geopolitical entities in conflict. So he needs people, and he comes up with a pair of real beauties. One is a girl, American, young, fresh, direct, open, naive, flirtatious, maybe a little too much of each; the other is a man, also American but long resident in Europe, slightly older, jaded, worldly, emotionally closed, indirect, even surreptitious, totally dependent on the good opinion of others. She's all spring and sunshine; he's all frosty stiffness. Names, you ask. *Daisy Miller* and *Frederic Winterbourne*. Really, it's just too perfect. And obvious. You wonder why we don't feel our intelligence has been insulted. Well, for one thing, he sort of slips the names in, and then the emphasis is really on her surname, which is beyond ordinary,

and her hometown, which is Schenectady, for crying out loud. We get so involved with those aspects that the first name seems to us merely a quaint holdover from the old days, which weren't old to James. In any case, once you pay attention to the name game, you pretty much know things will end badly, since daisies can't flourish in winter, and things do. On one level, everything we need to know is there in those two names, and the rest of the novella pretty much acts as a gloss on these two telling names.

Nor are the seasons the exclusive property of high culture. The Mamas & the Papas, expressing dissatisfaction with winter, gray skies, and brown leaves, do some "California dreamin'" as they wish their way back to the land of perpetual summer. Simon & Garfunkel cover much the same unhappy ground in "A Hazy Shade of Winter." The Beach Boys made a very lucrative career out of happy-summer-land with all those surfing and cruising songs. Head for the beach with your surfboard and your Chevy convertible in a Michigan January and see what that gets you. Bob Seger, who is from Michigan, goes nostalgic for that first summer of freedom and sexual initiation in "Night Moves." All the great poets know how to use the seasons.

For about as long as anyone's been writing anything, the seasons have stood for the same set of meanings. Maybe it's hardwired into us that spring has to do with childhood and youth, summer with adulthood and romance and fulfillment and passion, autumn with decline and middle age and tiredness but also harvest, winter with old age and resentment and death. This pattern is so deeply ingrained in our cultural experience that we don't even have to stop and think about it. Think about it we should, though, since once we know the pattern is in play, we can start looking at variation and nuance.

W. H. Auden, in his great elegy "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" (1940), emphasizes the coldness of the day Yeats died. Auden

had the great good fortune that it happened to be true; Yeats died on January 31, 1939. In the poem rivers are frozen, snow falls, the mercury settles to the bottom of thermometers and won't budge—everything unpleasant winter has to offer, Auden finds it for his poem. Now, the traditional elegy, the *pastoral* elegy, has historically been written for a young man, a friend of the poet, often a poet himself, who died much too young. Typically the elegy turns him into a shepherd taken from his pasture (hence the pastoral part) at the height of spring or summer, and all nature, which should be rejoicing in its fullness, instead is sent into mourning for this beloved youth. Auden, an accomplished ironist and realist, turns this pattern around in memorializing not a youngster but a man born at the end of the American Civil War and dead on the eve of World War II, whose life and career were very long, who had made it to his own winter and who died in the heart of meteorological winter. That mood in the poem is made colder and more desolate by Yeats's death, but also by our expectations of what we might call "the season of the elegy." Such a tactic requires a very great, very skilled poet; fortunately Auden was one.

Sometimes the season isn't mentioned specifically or immediately, and this can make the matter a bit trickier. Robert Frost doesn't come right out and say, in "After Apple Picking," that it's now October twenty-ninth or November umpteenth but the fact that he's finished his apple picking informs us we're in autumn. After all, winesaps and pippins don't ripen in March. Our first response may not be, "Oh, here's another poem about fall," although, in fact, this may be the most autumnal poem in the world. Frost expands on the seasonal implications with time of day (late evening), mood (vertigo), tone (almost elegiac), and point of view (backward looking). He speaks of the overwhelming sense of both tiredness and completion, of bringing in a huge harvest th

surpassed even his hopes, of being on a ladder so long that the sense of its swaying will stay with him even after he falls into bed the way a fishing bobber, watched all day, will imprint itself on the visual sense of eyes closed for sleep.

So harvest, and not only of apples, is one element of autumn. When our writers speak of harvests, we know it can refer not only to agricultural but also to personal harvests, the results of our endeavors, whether over the course of a growing season or a life. St. Paul tells us that we will reap whatever it is that we sow. The notion is so logical, and has been with us so long, that it has become a largely unstated assumption: we reap the rewards and punishments of our conduct. Frost's crop is abundant, suggesting he has done something right, but the effort has worn him out. This, too, is part of autumn. As we gather in our harvest, we find we have used up a certain measure of our energies, that in truth we're not as young as we used to be.

Not only has something come before, in other words, but something else is coming. Frost speaks in the poem not only of the coming night and his well-earned sleep but of the long night that is winter and the longer sleep of the woodchuck. Now this reference to hibernation certainly fits with the seasonal nature of the discussion, but that longer sleep also suggests a longer sleep, the *big sleep*, as Raymond Chandler called it. The ancient Romans named the first month of our calendar after Janus, the god of two faces, the month of January looks back into the year gone by and forward into the one to come. For Frost, though, such a dual gaze applies equally well to autumn and the harvest season.

Every writer can make these modifications in his or her use of the seasons, and the variation produced keeps seasonal symbolism fresh and interesting. Will she play it straight or spring ironically? Will summer be warm and rich and lilting or hot and dusty and stifling? Will autumn find us

ing up our accomplishments or winding down, arriving at wisdom and peace or being shaken by those November winds? The seasons are always the same in literature and yet always different. What we learn, finally, as readers is that we don't look for a shorthand in seasonal use—summer means x , winter y minus x —but a set of patterns that can be employed in a host of ways, some of them straightforward, others ironic or subversive. We know those patterns because they have been with us for so long.

How long?

Very long. I mentioned before that Shakespeare didn't invent this fall/middle age connection. It predates him by a bit. Say, a few thousand years. Nearly every early mythology, at least those originating in temperate zones where seasons change, had a story to explain that seasonal change. My guess is that the first thing they had to account for was the fact that when the sun disappeared over the hill or into the sea at night, the disappearance was only temporary; Apollo would drive his sun chariot across the sky again the next morning. About the time the community had a handle on this cosmic mystery, though, the next item on the agenda, or next but one, was probably the matter of spring following winter, the days growing shorter but then growing longer again. This, too, required explanation, and pretty soon the story had priests to carry it on. If they were Greek, they would come up with something like this:

Once upon, etc., there's a beautiful young girl, so stunningly attractive that her beauty is a byword not only on earth but in the land of the dead, where the ruler, Hades, learns of her. And Hades decides he has to have this young beauty, whose name is Persephone, so he comes up to earth just long enough to kidnap her and spirit her away to the underworld, which confusingly enough is also called Hades.

Ordinarily the theft of even a beautiful young girl by a god would go unchecked, but this particular girl is the daughter of Demeter, the goddess of agriculture and fertility (a happy combination), who goes instantly and permanently into mourning, leaving the earth in perpetual winter. Hades doesn't care, because like most gods he's very selfish, and he has what he wants. And Demeter doesn't care, because in her selfishness she can't see beyond her own grief. Fortunately, the other gods do notice that animals and people are dying for lack of food, so they ask Demeter for help. She travels down to Hades (the place) and deals with Hades (the god), and there's a mysterious transaction involving a pomegranate and twelve seeds, of which only six get eaten, in most versions by Persephone although sometimes by Hades, who then discovers he's been tricked. Those six uneaten seeds mean she gets to return to earth for six months of every year, during which time her mother, Demeter, is so happy that she lets the world grow and be fertile, only plunging it back into winter when her daughter has to return to the underworld. Hades, of course, spends six months of every twelve sulking, but he realizes that even a god can't beat pomegranate seeds, so he goes along with the plan. Thus spring always follows winter, and we humans aren't buried in perpetual winter (no, not even in Duluth), and the olives ripen every year.

Now, if the tellers of the tale were Celts or Picts or Mongols or Cheyenne, they'd be telling a different version of this tale, but the basic impulse—we need a story to explain this phenomenon to ourselves—would remain constant.

Death and rebirth, growth and harvest and death, year after year. The Greeks held their dramatic festivals, which featured almost entirely tragedy, at the beginning of spring. The idea was to purge all the built-up bad feeling of winter from the populace (and to instruct them in right conduct toward the

gods) so that no negativity would attach to the growing season and thereby endanger the harvest. Comedy was the genre of fall, once the harvest was in and celebrations and laughter were appropriate. Something of the same phenomenon shows itself in more modern religious practice. Part of the immense satisfaction of the Christian story is that the two great celebrations, Christmas and Easter, coincide with dates of great seasonal anxiety. The story of the birth of Jesus, and of hope, is placed almost on the shortest, and therefore most dismal (preelectric) day of the year. All saturnalia celebrate the same thing: well, at least this is as far as the sun will run away from us, and now the days will start getting longer and, eventually, warmer. The Crucifixion and Resurrection come very near the spring equinox, the death of winter and beginning of renewed life. There is evidence in the Bible that the Crucifixion did in fact take place at that point in the calendar, although not that the birth took place anywhere near December 25. But that may be beside the point, because from an emotional standpoint, and quite apart from the religious significance of the events for Christians, both holidays derive much of their power from their proximity in the calendar year to moments on which we humans place great emphasis.

So it is with books and poems. We read the seasons in them almost without being conscious of the many associations we bring to that reading. When Shakespeare compares his beloved to a summer's day, we know instinctively, even before he catalogs her advantages, that this is way more flattering than being compared to, say, January eleventh. When Dylan Thomas recalls his enchanted childhood summers in "Fern Hill" (1946), we know something more is afoot than simply school being out. In fact, our responses are so deeply ingrained that seasonal associations are among the easiest for the writer to upend and use ironically. T. S. Eliot knows what we generally think of spring, so when he makes April "the cruellest month"

and says we were happier buried under winter snows than we are having the earth warm up and start nature's (and our) juices flowing again, he knows that line of thought will bring us up short. And he's right.

Seasons can work magic on us, and writers can work magic with seasons. When Rod Stewart wants to say, in "Maggie May," that he's hanging around too long and wasting his youth on this older woman, he makes it late September. When Anita Brookner, in her finest novel, *Hotel du Lac* (1984), sends her heroine off to a resort to recover from a romantic indiscretion and to meditate on the way youth and life have passed her by, what point in the calendar does she choose?

Late September?

Excellent. So Shakespeare and Ecclesiastes and Rod Stewart and Anita Brookner. You know, I think we might be onto something here.

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