

**"IT WAS AN UNCERTAIN SPRING": READING THE WEATHER IN
*THE YEARS***

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INTRODUCTION: THE WEATHER AND VIRGINIA WOOLF

The abounding weather descriptions which distinguish *The Years* from Virginia Woolf's other works were, according to Grace Radin, added spontaneously as a final touch: "the passages describing the weather and setting the scene that begin each chapter and that separate scenes within chapters were not added to the novel until the final months before publication" (xxii). The reason why the weather was inserted at the book's final stage, I propose, might be that Woolf resorted to the weather as an alternative solution to what she perceived as the novel's main problem: extremely abrupt and incoherent transition between scenes. She articulated what she thought was problematic in her work on Monday 16 March 1936: "I think the change of scene is what's so exhausting: the catching people plumb in the middle; then jerking off. Every beginning seems lifeless— & then I have to retype" (D5: 17).

Descriptions of seasonal cycle can produce paradoxical effects. On the one hand, it portrays an ever-changing world and helps us imagine time in terms of space: streets, pathways, and backyard gardens covered with snow in winter and filled with dry leaves in autumn. On the other hand, however, the idea of a constant cycle situates the ever-changing world in a fixed temporal pattern. Winter is believed, as a fact, to be followed by spring and summer by autumn. This paradoxical union, of course, does not run smoothly and might be the reason Woolf perceived the book as a "complete failure" (D5: 17), the kind of failure which, she complained in a letter to Elizabeth Bowen on Sunday 23 February 1936, might better be "dropped into the waste paper basket" (L6: 16). Woolf's sense of failure might be an inevitable result of the weather's "uncertainty" or, in other words, its Janus-faced ambivalence. The weather's insertion in *The Years* is paradoxical from the start, and so is the impact it produces.

"AGAINST ONE'S FORECAST"¹: THE ELUSIVE WEATHER

The first director of the Meteorological Office was the then Admiral Robert Fitzroy (1805-1865), who in his early career had been the captain of HMS *Beagle* as well as the second governor of New Zealand. After his retirement in 1851, he was appointed as head of the Meteorological Statist to the Board of Trade, established in 1854. Fitzroy was fully aware of the impact of mass media and the significant ways in which mass observation could contribute to the accuracy of weather prediction. Telegraphs and publications were then used to spread information accumulated from the office's "forecasting." He famously coined the term "forecast" (88) in his 1863 *The Weather Book*, which was written as a manual for amateur weather observers. It is in this book that Fitzroy's intention to "democratize" the weather can be seen: "The means actually requisite to enable any person of fair abilities and average education to become practically 'weather-wise'; are much more

readily attainable than has been often supposed" (B). Despite the many attempts to chart and contain the weather in an exact pattern, it is true that we can never be certain about the climactic condition in the next instant or in the future. Fitzroy himself was also aware of the weather's elusive nature. "Meteorology," he wrote, "never can be an *exact* science, like Astronomy, because its elements are incessantly changing, in *nature* as well as quantity; but it does not therefore require a merely superficial degree of attention" (vii-viii). It is this very ambivalence in the weather that *The Years* demonstrates.

The weather's transformative power and impact on place can be seen in the novel's Oxford section of 1880. It has been raining when young Kitty Malone, cousin of the Pargeters, makes her way to Miss Craddock's home among the "cheap red villas" (61) for her history lessons. Afterwards, she goes to tea with Mr. Robson, a blue-collar academic from Yorkshire, and his family. She has been looking at a landscape painting of the Yorkshire moor and feels that the artwork itself brings out Mr. Robson's regional identity: "In looking at the picture he had increased his accent" (68). The following excerpt depicts the trail she takes back home to the Lodge where her father, an Oxford Don, sits working on the history of the college. The rain has stopped earlier:

As she stood still for a second at a crossing she too seemed to be tossed aloft out of her usual surroundings. She forgot where she was... She could almost see the moors brighten and darken as the clouds pass over them. But then in two strides the unfamiliar street became the street she had always known...and next moment she was out in the famous crooked street with all the domes and steeples. (71)

In the same way that the oil painting has ignited both Mr. Robson and Kitty's imagination of Yorkshire, the weather has physically contributed to the metamorphosis of Oxford's scenery. The sight of a glistening pavement and flowers on it leads Kitty to conjure up her abstract version of Yorkshire and its moor in the middle of stern concrete domes and spires, "her usual surroundings." Although her vision of Yorkshire appears only in a short while, it has a haunting effect. Woolf's "rainbow" is suddenly juxtaposed with the "granite" as Kitty turns the corner and finds herself in a familiar street. The changing weather as well as the switch from vision to reality gives her the status of an outsider possessing a mind which has just travelled to a place "other" than this mundane university town:

The usual undergraduate in cap and gown with books under his arm looked silly. And the portentous old men with their exaggerated features, looked like gargoyles, carved, mediaeval, unreal. They were all like people dressed up and acting parts, she thought. Now she stood at her own door and waited for Hiscock, the butler, to take his feet off the fender and waddle upstairs. Why can't you talk like a human being? She thought, as he took her umbrella and mumbled his usual remark about the weather. (72)

The weather as technology of place² encourages her to defamiliarize herself from her comfort zone and question social norms and traditions, such as Oxford's gown-wearing ritual and rigid hierarchy system. According to Homi K. Bhabha, the moment when one, like

Kitty, becomes the "other" within oneself or feels unhomey³ in a place that is supposed to be one's own home is called "the moment of discursive transparency" (155). He explains that the moment when one is able to see into the "discursive transparency" is "the moment when, 'under the false appearance of the present', the semantic seems to prevail over the syntactic, the signified over the signifier" (155). The countryside of Yorkshire is, for Kitty, an "other" place where the Robsons would, she imagines, speak and live differently from what they are compelled to do at present. By positioning herself as the unhomey "outsider" within the body or parameter of an insider, the daughter of an Oxford professor, Kitty comes to challenge the "signifier" or the façade and fixity of places and power discourses. She realizes that had Hiscock, the butler, been placed or stationed somewhere else, his ways of speaking and behaving would have been different. It is social class systems that divide them. It is social norms that make his weather remarks sound most unnatural to her ears. The ambivalent weather, therefore, unbolts a new possibility of seeing and understanding society as a physical and as a discursive construct.

"I CAN WADE GRIEF"⁴: THE REVOLUTIONARY WEATHER

The weather is portrayed in the novel as having the power to unite people in an imagined community. At the same time, its ambivalence can also shatter the illusion of that very sense of community. For the subaltern or the socially marginalized people, in particular, the weather is there to emphasize their seclusion from mainstream society. In other words, it highlights a social paradigm which builds itself upon class, status, gender, and racial segregation. An example can be seen when Crosby, after moving out from Abercorn Terrace, comes to pick up Martin's laundry. After dismissing her by lying that he has had a previous engagement, Martin watches her walk away from his window: "She stood for a moment, like a frightened little animal, peering round her before she ventured to brave the dangers of the street. At last, off she trotted. He saw the snow falling on her black bonnet as she disappeared. He turned away" (212). On the surface, it can be said that Crosby has finally been liberated from class and domestic constraints. It seems that she is now able to live a life of her own. However, the weather description in the extract reveals the opposite. Crosby, depicted as a "little animal," feels ever more frightened and alienated. Her black bonnet juxtaposes with the whiteness which surrounds her. This extreme color contrast emphasizes that she is forever the unwanted "other" whose presence agitates even the most intimate people in her life like Martin.

In the 1918 section, five years after her eviction from Abercorn Terrace and her meeting with Martin, Crosby reappears as a frail old woman: "She looked so small and hunched that it seemed doubtful if she could make her way across the wide open space, shrouded in white mist" (287). Her new "liberated" life proves to be repeating the same old story of servitude. Louisa Burt, the landlady, has ordered her to clean the bath of a count, who is one of her fellow lodgers. Here, the opaque "veil of mist" (287) has allowed Crosby an opportunity to express her frustrations:

It was not actually raining, but the great open space was full of mist; and there was nobody near, so that she could talk aloud.

'Dirty brute,' she muttered again. She had got into the habit of talking

aloud. There was nobody in sight; the end of the path was lost in mist. It was very silent... Her face twitched as she walked, as if her muscles had got into the habit of protesting, involuntarily, against the spires and obstacles that tormented her (...)

'The dirty brute,' she muttered again. She had had some words that morning with Mrs Burt about the Count's bath. He spat in it, and Mrs Burt had told her to clean it.

'Count indeed—he's no more Count than you are,' she continued. She was talking to Mrs Burt now. 'I'm quite willing to oblige you,' she went on. (287-88)

The weather condition of this particular November day provides an alternative space for Crosby, the oppressed and marginalized, to "talk aloud" and make comments which challenge the dominant discourses of power: classism and patriarchy. In broad daylight, with crowd swarming around, Crosby would not have the chance nor the courage to condemn Mrs. Burt and the Count. She would not have dreamed to undermine their authority: "Count indeed—he's no more Count than you are." To analyze this chosen passage in terms of Bourdieu's formula of habitus and field: "[habitus] (capital) + field = practice" (*Distinction* 101), the haze creates an "alternative field" which exposes the "challengeability" of a particular class and gender habitus. To illustrate, a "social field" can be visualized in terms of an arena where social games are played or practised according to a habitus or a set of rules. Class habitus, a product of social hierarchy which privileges those on the upper ladder, propels Crosby to accept Mrs. Burt's command to clean the Count's dirty bathtub. When combined with gender habitus, a product of a convention which privileges men over women, class habitus also propels her to serve Martin even when she is supposed to be "liberated" from the confines of servitude. One's habitus is shaped by "doxa" which, according to Bourdieu in *The Logic of Practice*, means "the fundamental presuppositions of the field" (68) or what one is made to think as "natural." A classist doxa is reflected, for example, in the idea that the rich and the elite are better human beings than the poor and the working class. A sexist or patriarchal doxa, on the other hand, is reflected in the idea that men are better human beings than women. Crosby's "initiation" into the field of servitude, her adoption of habitus and of classist and sexist doxa, are aided by her "rites of passage" and "examinations." She has the illusion of being given the privilege to be "chosen" as a part of the Pargiter family when, in truth, it is not so. Martin finds no difficulty in discarding her like he disposes of his old childhood trinkets. Crosby's actions and attitudes towards Martin reflect the notion that it is "natural" for her to serve and obey. Here, however, everything "natural" is dismantled in the "misty" November air. In Crosby's "alternative field," created and made possible by the weather condition, questions which have long been suppressed are finally articulated: What gives Mrs. Burt authority over her? Why does the man dare call himself a Count when he is not? The weather, to conclude, opens up Crosby's possibility to imagine and articulate her "heterodoxa." Despite the fact that Crosby is still "orthodoxic" in that she upholds the doxa: "Even out here, in the mist, where she was free to say what she liked, she adopted a conciliatory tone, because she knew that they wanted to be rid of her" (288), her attempt to attack and simultaneously defend the doxa of classism and patriarchy shatters its truth claims. The weather, therefore, empowers her to think beyond her usual familiar habitus.

Notes

1. "Anyhow, nothing is more fascinating than a live person; always changing, resisting & yielding against one's forecast." (D1: 85).
2. My idea of "technology of place" was inspired by Michel Foucault's concept of technologies of the self and Irvin C. Schick's concept of the technology of place in his book *The Erotic Margin*, in which he states that technology of place is "the discursive instruments and strategies by means of which space is constituted as place" (9). I propose that we come to understand place through an amalgamation of (including clashes and negotiations between) "concrete place" which we perceive through our sensory reception and "abstract place" which we imagine from shards of personal and collective memories, narratives, and representations. This paradoxical union parallels Woolf's visionary concept of the "granite" and "rainbow" in her essay "The New Biography," first published in the *New York Herald Tribune* on 30 October 1927:

And if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one and that we need not wonder if biographers have for the most part failed to solve it. (149)

For more explanation on the concepts of "technology" and "technology of place," see my essay "'Unleashing the Underdog': Technology of Place in Virginia Woolf's *Flush*."

3. As Sigmund Freud points out in his essay "The Uncanny," concepts of the "unhomely" and the "uncanny" are interconnected through their shared German semantic word *unheimlich*. Equivalent terms in English are "uncanny" and "eerie" (124). 'The Uncanny is a term used when something seems familiar and strange at the same time: "the uncanny [the 'unhomely'] is what was once familiar ['homely', 'homey']'. The negative prefix *un-* is the indicator of repression" (151). The paradox and ambivalence in the notion of the Uncanny, therefore, mirrors Bhabha's concept of colonial ambivalence.
4. "I can wade grief, / Whole pools of it, -- / I'm used to that" (Emily Dickinson, "The Test," *Poems [Series 2]*).

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