

WOOLF IN WINTER

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Woolf in Winter

how,
In this our pinching cave, shall we discourse
The freezing hours away? (*Cymbeline* 3:3)

I HAVE CHOSEN in this freezing hour to ask what Woolf thinks of winter. I know: I am surely chasing a wild goose across the marshes. We should reconvene in August and I will lecture on ‘Woolf in Summer’, for she is obviously a summer writer. True there is a September chill in the air as Betty Flanders digs her heels into the sand, but soon we will be out sailing with young Jacob in the Scilly Isles, brown and carefree. There are the long gummy summer twilights, and then the flash of a lantern on moth wings. There is all the humming joy of June in the air when Clarissa goes out into the London morning and Peter goes out into an enchanted evening when windows and minds are thrown open for a carnival. It is the crest of the year. High pressure on the barograph is accompanied by what Woolf registers as a certain saturated quality of high human responsiveness. All life is pressed into the two September days of *To the Lighthouse* and the twenty-four June hours of *Between the Acts*. Woolf’s reading, as well as her writing, is often lit by a remembered summer light. Hakluyt and Browne and De Quincey belong always to the August garden in which she first read them, and in which she felt that their words (even cold words about the North-West Passage or the ashes in an ancient urn) could properly expand on warm air.¹

She was notably *not* possessed, like Auden and many of his contemporaries, by ideas of the frozen North, the Norse Sagas or the Anglo-Saxon epics. Miss Allan in *The Voyage Out* has written 70,000 words on the story of literature from ‘Beowulf to Browning’ (and Edward Gorey later drew a memorable cartoon of Virginia Woolf in the hands of Beowulf), but when Woolf herself thought back to the beginnings of English literature it was always to a singer among birds in the woods, rather than to monsters and chill.² She

¹See, e.g., ‘Reading’ in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, 6 vols, ed. Andrew McNeillie (vols 1–4) and Stuart N. Clarke (vols 5–6) (London: Hogarth Press, 1986–2011 [hereafter *E*]), Vol. III, pp. 141–61 and (on De Quincey) ‘The English Mail Coach’, Vol. I, pp. 365–8.

²*The Voyage Out*, ed. Lorna Sage (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 368; Gorey’s

was not haunted, like Coleridge, by ‘Ice mast-high’—or even (like Keats on a bitter chill night, when ‘the hare limp’d trembling through the frozen grass’), mesmerised by frosted breath ‘taking flight for heaven’.³ Re-reading Woolf’s letters and diaries with an eye for frost, it becomes clear that she had no great liking for cold—certainly not when snow blew into her bedroom at Monks House through a door that was frozen on its hinges, wedged open to the perishing draught.⁴

So perhaps it is not much of an offering on her 133rd birthday to look out across ‘wintriness and pallor’ as an aging Bernard does sadly near the end of *The Waves*, surveying the ‘negative view of the same landscape’ he had seen in summer. Yet this view is ‘negative’ not—or not only—in the bad sense, but in the photographic or printing sense, the sense of an inverse, the ink gathering in the spaces between. Woolf thought back through the snows of centuries, and back through the winters of her own history. She wrote about the work, the lights, the talk and party-giving, by which humans carry on in the cold. And her responses to the year’s midnight were part of that very significant thinking she did all her life about the cycle of the seasons, about the patterning of the year for a secular and non-agrarian society, and about how we all carve out shapes from the continuous, un-shapely passage of time. If we ask, then, what Woolf saw when she looked out of the window on any one of her January birthdays, the question may take us in unexpected directions.

I. Ancient Snowstorms

‘There is something very charming in an ancient snowstorm.’ Virginia Woolf makes this observation in her essay ‘Miss Mitford’, one of the four ‘outlines’, or biographical sketches, she included in

drawing was for the cover of an edition of Robert Manson Myers’s *From Beowulf to Virginia Woolf: An Astounding and Wholly Unauthorized History of English Literature* (New York: Charter, 1963); for Woolf and the beginnings of English literature see, e.g., ‘Anon [and] The Reader’, *E6*, pp. 580–607.

³Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, l. 51; John Keats, ‘The Eve of St Agnes’, ll. 3, 8.

⁴See, e.g., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell assisted by Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1977–84), Vol. V, 19 February 1940, p. 269.

the first *Common Reader*. She was not entirely serious, but nor was she entirely joking. She was bored with the book she was meant to be reviewing about Mary Russell Mitford, and decided to invent some Mitford life of her own. While the book went on with its facts about the picturesque, cottage-garden qualities of the ‘sunny corner of Hampshire’ in which Mrs Mitford gave birth in December 1787, Woolf wandered over to look out of the window—the Mitfords’ window, that is, imagining what was to be seen through it in 1787.⁵ This is where the prospect took her:

There is something very charming in an ancient snowstorm. The weather has varied almost as much in the course of generations as mankind. The snow of those days was more formally shaped and a good deal softer than the snow of ours, just as an eighteenth-century cow was no more like our cows than she was like the florid and fiery cows of Elizabethan pastures. Sufficient attention has scarcely been paid to this aspect of literature ...

Our brilliant young men might do worse, when in search of a subject, than devote a year or two to cows in literature, snow in literature, the daisy in Chaucer and in Coventry Patmore. At any rate, the snow falls heavily. The Portsmouth mail-coach has already lost its way ... At Hatford Peveral twenty sheep have been buried, and ... there is grave reason to fear that the French king’s coach has been blocked on the road to Colchester. It is now the 16th of February 1808. (*E4*, pp. 191–2)

This snow-drifting, time-passing digression takes up a large portion of what is really a very strange essay, especially given that there is no mention at all, in the book she was reviewing, of Mrs Russell giving birth in a snowstorm, or even of a snowy childhood.⁶ To imagine the snow in the background is here both evasive and provocative. Is it a mischievous distraction from consideration of what matters in the life of Mary Russell Mitford, or is it possible that by looking at the snow we might grasp something about the texture of a life?

Let us turn first to the odd idea that the ‘weather has varied almost as much in the course of generations as mankind’. Woolf is not, I think, talking here about changes in the climate that would show up

⁵Constance Hill, *Mary Russell Mitford and her Surroundings* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1920), p. 1.

⁶The snow comes later: see *Mary Russell Mitford*, pp. 112–14, for the 1808 snow, replete with details from the *Chelmsford Chronicle*.

on a barometer or rain gauge. The English climate has varied, of course, most notably during the Little Ice Age. But this would not affect Miss Mitford, and Woolf is not in any case talking about measureable cold. She is talking about something aesthetic, the 'formal shape' of the snow. The aesthetic and philosophical values of a culture influence its perception of things that we might imagine to be always the same—like cows, like snow. Looking out on snow in 1808, one might have in mind certain literary models. The snow is shaped, perhaps, by James Thomson's *The Seasons*, learnt by every schoolchild at the time; by William Cowper's 'Winter Walk at Noon' from *The Task*; by myriad popular guidebooks that advocated snow for its picturesque effect of unifying a scene. Snow is made up from the words and music and pictures that have described it.

Through all her enormous reading, Woolf accumulated impressions of the 'background' in this way. So, for example, though the letters of the medieval Paston family rarely mention any views from windows, Woolf gleans merely from the brisk tempo of the sentences that there are draughts in the stark stone corridors of Caister castle (*E4*, p. 21). Her reading of Parson Woodforde's diary, likewise, shapes and is shaped by her notion of a cool, sharp eighteenth-century atmosphere. Nothing is muffled or obscured. 'Cold strikes unmitigated upon the house', she observes. 'Every little incident stands out sharp and clear' (*E5*, p. 421).

In 1927 Woolf tested to the limits her idea that the weather has varied in the course of generations. Each era of Orlando's life is marked by a different kind of weather, not because Woolf thought the weather was actually completely different in each century but because human sensibilities change.⁷ And so we read that a marriage between Orlando and Euphrosyne was just about to be settled when, 'with the suddenness and severity that then marked the English climate, came the Great Frost'.⁸ Across the country, there are instant and alarming

⁷Paula Maggio argues that Woolf in *Orlando* 'connects weather to the actual meteorological record'. I think Woolf was more interested in perceptions than in the actual weather, but certainly, as Maggio says, Woolf 'emphasizes not only the weather's changeability, but its ability to shape and reflect the "spirit of the age"' (*Reading the Skies in Virginia Woolf: Woolf on Weather in her Essays, Diaries, and Three of Her Novels* (London: Cecil Woolf, 2009), p. 29).

⁸*Orlando: A Biography*, ed. Rachel Bowlby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992 [hereafter

metamorphoses:

Birds froze in mid-air and fell like stones to the ground. At Norwich a young countrywoman started to cross the road in her usual robust health and was seen by the onlookers to turn visibly to powder and be blown in a puff of dust over the roofs as the icy blast struck her at the street corner. (*O*, pp. 32–3)

In London, King James has ordered a carnival on the frozen Thames:

Frozen roses fell in showers when the Queen and her ladies walked abroad. Coloured balloons hovered motionless in the air. Here and there burnt vast bonfires of cedar and oak wood, lavishly salted, so that the flames were of green, orange, and purple fire. (*O*, pp. 34)

The ice itself is so transparent that one can see eels ‘in a trance’ beneath it (*O*, p. 35). This will be the scene of Orlando’s first falling in love—very suddenly of course, his passion for Sasha keeping him warm even as he skates into biting winds. And then, very suddenly, the thaw will come, raindrops will fall as violent blows, and the love affair will be over.

Orlando’s plunge into winter corresponds to a particular turn in Renaissance literature. In the Middle Ages, and right up until about the 1560s, it is rare to find winter descriptions in English poetry. This sounds odd put baldly, but makes more sense when one considers the convention of the spring-song or *reverdie* (re-greening). Spring was the traditional season for poetry and, on the whole, if it was winter you wrote a poem yearning for spring. But then a chill blew in. Alan T. Bradford, a scholar of Early Modern literature, has traced the emergence of winter landscapes in Tudor poetry. ‘The development of the stylized winter description as a recurrent *topos*’, he says, ‘is not only a Renaissance phenomenon but ... characteristic of the Renaissance spirit’, a spirit of inwardness and melancholy, when winter without could be an image for winter within.⁹

The poet who marked the change, establishing winter as a literary

O]], p. 32.

⁹Alan T. Bradford, ‘Mirrors of Mutability: Winter Landscapes in Tudor Poetry’, *English Literary Renaissance*, Vol. IV (1974), 3–39, 8.

theme, was Thomas Sackville, Vita Sackville-West's ancestor, cousin to Queen Elizabeth, builder and first occupant of Knole, close relative to Orlando. While Chaucer begins *The Canterbury Tales* with spring ('Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote ...'), Sackville begins his 1567 contribution to the *Mirror for Magistrates* with a winter landscape and a winter perspective on the world:

The wrathfull winter proching on apace,
with blustering blastes had all ybared the treen.
and old *Saturnus* with his frostie face
with chilling cold had pearst the tender grene ...¹⁰

And here is Sackville's enchanted description of the night sky:

Then loking vpward to the hevens beames,
with nightes stars beset in everie wheare
which erst so glistend with the golden streames
That cherful *phoebeus* spred doune from his spheare
beholding darke oppresse the daie so neare
the soden sight resorted to my minde
the sundrie chaunges that in earth we finde.¹¹

Sackville chooses winter as his scene because he is going to tell the solemn story of a fall from greatness, and the general mutability of the world. But he is clearly attracted to the glistening sight of the winter sky. This was the time when, across Europe, a taste for snow was beginning to emerge; Sackville's poem is, for example, precisely contemporary with Brueghel's snow scenes. Commentators usually point out how cold it was in these years and argue that the changed climate prompted the new winter art.¹² But it had been cold before. People just hadn't wanted, it seems, to spend much time describing frost. Orlando in winter is prone to both ecstasy and to bouts of the tragic despair Thomas Sackville evoked. As here:

Then, suddenly Orlando would fall into one of his moods of melancholy; the sight of

¹⁰Thomas Sackville, 'Induction' in *The Complaint of Henry, Duke of Buckingham, including the Induction*, ed. Marguerite Hearsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936), ll. 1–4.

¹¹*Ibid.*, ll. 57–63.

¹²See, e.g., Wolfgang Behringer, *A Cultural History of Climate* (2007), trans. Patrick Camiller (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p. 140.

the old woman hobbling over the ice might be the cause of it, or nothing; and would fling himself face downwards on the ice and look into the frozen waters and think of death. (*O.*, p. 44)

So winter falls on Orlando and on English literature. Woolf delights to emphasise the suddenness with which it arrives—and departs. Of the Elizabethan age, she says in *Orlando* that '[s]unsets were redder and more intense' than they are today: 'Of our crepuscular half-lights and lingering twilights they knew nothing. The rain fell vehemently, or not at all. The sun blazed or there was darkness' (*O.*, p. 26). Of course there were as many half-lights then as now, but they were not written down. Woolf's wide reading in the literature of both the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Renaissance poetry, Marlowe, Dekker) suggested to her dramatic and emblematic understandings of weather.

The extraordinary weather was one of the things she noticed in the later seventeenth-century diary of John Evelyn, and her comments on it give us an analogue for *Orlando*:

Nature, it seems, was determined to stimulate the devotion of her seventeenth-century admirers by displays of violence and eccentricity from which she now refrains. There were storms, floods, and droughts; the Thames frozen hard; comets flaring in the sky. (*E4*, p. 92).

Evelyn never noted a gentle breeze, though he must have felt a great many. His weather comes in terrifying bursts of flood and frost, and nothing in between. Orlando in the seventeenth century, therefore, must have dramatic weather. Woolf drew on Evelyn's and Pepys' descriptions of the Great Frost in 1683–4—an extremely well-documented frost. Evelyn thought it was a terrible punishment from God, but all the same he kept going down to the river to see the fair:

... all sorts of Trades & shops furnished, & full of Commodities, even to a Printing presse. ... Coaches now plied from Westminster to the Temple, & from severall other staires too and froo, as in the streetes; also on sleds, sliding with skeetes; There was likewise a Bull baiting, Horse and Coach races, Puppet-plays ... so as it seemed to be a bacchanalia, Triumph or Carnoal on the Water.¹³

¹³*The Diary of John Evelyn*, ed. E. S. de Beer, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), Vol. IV, 24 January 1684 (new style), p. 362.

Woolf almost certainly knew such details about 1684: it was from 1684 that she took the idea of the king and court being out on the ice, and it was the baroque atmosphere of the 1684 fair that she evoked in her descriptions of spectacular fireworks and feasts. But it was more convenient for Orlando to experience an earlier episode, the frost of 1608.

Woolf knew well, and had to hand in 1927, one particular description of the 1608 fair. This was an anonymous pamphlet entitled *The Great Frost: Cold Doings in London*. She found it reproduced in an eight-volume hoard of miscellaneous treasures called *An English Garner*, where the editor's note suggested that this 'excessively rare tract reminds one somewhat of T. Decker'.¹⁴ It has now been firmly attributed to Thomas Dekker, a writer Woolf greatly enjoyed. ('I bathed myself in Dekker last night as in my natural element' she would write a few years later as she let the essays and plays lap around her (*D4*, 3 September 1931, p. 42).) *Cold Doings* certainly appealed to Woolf, and, as Alice Fox has shown, she drew liberally on its details when she wrote her own exaggerated (though not *very* exaggerated) version of the Great Frost.¹⁵

Dekker's essay takes the form of a conversation—and indeed it may well have been one of the inspirations for Woolf's own use of dialogue as she sought out new forms for her critical essays. It is a conversation between an old man from the country (in a plain Holland ruff and kersey stockings) and a London citizen, who sit talking cordially together in a tavern, exchanging stories of cold. This convergence of country and town experiences may have caught Woolf's attention: her own life was an exchange between rural and city experience, Sussex and London winters.

The Londoner describes the Thames as a pavement of glass, the Thames having put on a 'freeze-coat' like a great winter costume. He tells of archery on the ice, and barbers showing off their steadiness with the knife. One boy drowns as he runs to catch a bird. People of

¹⁴[Thomas Dekker], *The Great Frost: Cold Doings in London, Except It Be at the Lottery* (1608), in *An English Garner: Ingatherings from Our History and Literature*, ed. Edward Arber, 8 vols (London: Edward Arber, 1877–1896), Vol. I, pp. 77–100.

¹⁵See Alice Fox, *Virginia Woolf and the Literature of the English Renaissance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 159–62.

every kind are out on the river, 'of all ages, of both sexes, of all professions, this is the common path'.¹⁶ The river is a theatre, where the freeze-coat disguises people and where normal rules are suspended. In Woolf's frost, the king and nobles occupy a ribbon-edged area near the palace, but Orlando's anarchic impulse is to duck under the dividing ribbon and skate off into the crowds, and then on into the silent stretches downriver where the ice is empty but for an old woman gathering what sticks of kindling she can.

Perhaps most significant for Woolf's use of the *Cold Doings* pamphlet is the fact that Dekker's elderly countryman has in his mind a whole store of frosts-gone-by. There are the frosts of living memory, and frosts of centuries passed down to him from ancestors and from books. He recites them so that we get a pageant of history, a history of frosts—each a tableau of an era. 'Carts and wains' cross the ice in the time of King William Rufus; the frost in the time of King John is memorable for the damage it brought to the following harvest; the frost of 1517 goes down in the record as an augury of the sweating sickness; and then, under Elizabeth, comes the start of winter celebration. The games begin: football and shooting.¹⁷ This procession of frosts and ancient snowstorms resembles, just fleetingly, *Orlando* itself.

Dekker's descriptions tend to nervous apprehension of the providential. Woolf scrapped all fears and auguries, left Dekker's two avuncular men sitting in the tavern on dry ground, and launched with great speed onto the ice to conjure the baroque spectacles of a city in which everything is metamorphosing, caught in a trance or fired into life, as torches burn and rockets shoot into the air, holding back like a retaining wall of light the 'bowl of darkness' that is a winter's night (*O*, p. 53).

II. Vita Sackville-West in Winter

Orlando is Woolf's only work in which a frosty world is so glitteringly seductive. Her other winter writing tends to inhabit London in the dusk, or in a blackout, or in iron-hard stubble fields.

¹⁶*Cold Doings*, pp. 83, 85.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 91–2.

Only in *Orlando* is there a delightfully cold carnival; only in *Orlando* is winter a season of passion, unless we count the crossed emotional wires in the deep midwinter of *Night and Day*, the source of much pain and confusion, which will be resolved, like a Shakespearean comedy, in springtime. Orlando experiences winter as itself a surging, budding springtime, such is his discovery of love.¹⁸ There is a tribute here to the fact that the affair between Woolf and Vita Sackville-West had begun at Long Barn in December 1925, and only for a short winter spell was it a serious proposition. The imagery of glowing candles and firesides would always remain in their letters as a kind of memorial to that time.

It was Sackville-West, not Woolf, who loved winter. Perhaps it had come down all the way from Thomas Sackville as a kind of inheritance. Sackville-West's 1926 poem *The Land*, a georgic pastoral of four seasons on the weald, begins (as Woolf never begins) with winter. '*Many have sung the summer's songs*', she writes:

*But I, crouched up beside the hearth,
Will sing the red and grey;
Red going-down of sun behind
Clubbed woods of winter's day.*¹⁹

Like her ancestor, Sackville-West loves the nights when the planets seem on fire in the '*black, resplendent winter sky*'.²⁰ While Lytton Strachey moaned to Woolf about how miserable and damp he was in the cold at Ham Spray, Vita went into raptures about country beauty. 'Snow means such special things to me', she wrote to Virginia from Knole on 17 January 1926, describing the sound of snow 'shovelled off the roofs and ... the strange melancholy halloo' with which the deer are called across the estate to be fed.²¹ Vita wrote about this because she knew that she and Bloomsbury were very different in their feelings about winter, and she wanted to explain her own sense of its magic.

¹⁸See *Reading the Skies*: 'Although *Orlando*'s external narrative is set in winter, his internal narrative transforms winter into spring' (p. 30).

¹⁹V. Sackville-West, *The Land* (London: William Heinemann, 1926), p. 7.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 8.

²¹*The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Louise de Salvo and Mitchell A. Leaska (London: Hutchinson, 1984), p. 94.

At Knole the following January, Sackville-West showed Woolf her native winter world. She talked of how they ‘had brought wood in from the Park to replenish the great fires like this for centuries: & her ancestresses had walked so on the snow with their great dogs bounding by them’ (*D3*, 23 January 1927, p. 125). This winter seemed to stretch back through time. In her diary Woolf wrote that ‘[a]ll the centuries seemed lit up’ (*D3*, p. 125). It was one of the visions that would inspire her time-travelling novel.

Then, when Sackville-West travelled to Persia in January 1927, she passed through Germany, Poland and Russia, going deeper into snow and sending love-letters back to Woolf at every stop along the way. Her Russia was a place of ‘Dark fir-woods weighted down with snow; peasants in sheepskins; sleighs; green, glaucous rivers immobilised into ice’. In Moscow she saw the ‘traffic passing to and fro over the frozen river as though it were a road; and sleighs everywhere, and coachmen stuffed out with straw’.²² It was a picture fit for a novel.

Orlando goes on through centuries, and so do Woolf’s images of winter. Because she was interested in the idea of the eighteenth century as a time of serenity—serenity aspired to if not always achieved—she gave it weather conducive to cool calm thinking. Orlando leans out of her window on a frosty night of utmost clarity at the end of the eighteenth century, ideal for admiring the symmetries and planned distances of enlightenment London. And then comes the cloud of the Victorian age, which heralds a murkier kind of weather, a prolonged dreary autumnal winter, which might be the subject of several further lectures. Woolf suggests that societies have aesthetics of weather and seasons, just as they have architectures and poetic forms and social codes. She combines her sense of historical eras with the particular sensibility of Vita Sackville-West, dramatising Vita’s feelings about winter. But what about Woolf’s own winter feelings? It is time to look at some ancient snowstorms from her personal history.

III. Rituals

²²*Ibid.*, 31 January 1927, pp. 182–3.

If we were all to think back through our winters, we would probably, along the way, compile a record of Christmases—as Dekker’s old countryman compiles a record of frosts. We can, likewise, make a tiny sketch of Woolf’s life composed entirely of Christmases. The holiday was celebrated in the Stephen household much as it would have been celebrated in other large Kensington houses, except that there was no God. Presents were piled up on the grand piano; there might with luck be books for Virginia. Leslie Stephen would recite aloud Milton’s poem ‘On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity’ (and his daughter, as a consequence, would know the words by heart to the end of her life). When he wrote about Milton, Stephen strenuously tried to take God out of the picture, to read *Paradise Lost* as a poem about men and women rather than about the biblical Adam and Eve.²³ Reciting Milton at Christmas, looking for the philosophy rather than the faith that might last across time, he made a Stephen family equivalent to midnight mass.

But Christmas for non-Christians could be (and still can be) a disorienting time. By the age of twenty, Virginia Stephen was advertising her detachment from festivities, at least in her letters to the religiously devout Violet Dickinson: ‘Nessa and I both forgot it was Christmas—a sign of age and many lost illusions’.²⁴ That was a mocking thing to write to Violet, as was this: ‘Christmas is the Devils own feast, not the other way round ... Once when our singing mistress asked me why I hung up my stocking on Christmas Eve, I said it was to celebrate the crucifixion’ (*L1*, p. 63).

After Leslie’s death, the Stephen siblings spent several Christmases in the New Forest, making ostentatious shows of their jolliness: tea, turkey, rum punch, freedom, a secular holiday. The extent to which Virginia’s written reports of such occasions might be works of fiction is disturbingly clear in the letters over the Christmas period of 1906, when, long after Thoby Stephen’s death on 20 November, she was writing to Violet that Thoby would soon be up

²³See, e.g., Leslie Stephen, ‘New Lights on Milton’ in *Studies of a Biographer*, 4 vols (London: Duckworth, 1898–1902), Vol. IV, pp. 86–129.

²⁴*The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson, assisted by Joanne Trautmann, 6 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1975–80 [hereafter *L*]), Vol. I, [27? December 1902], p. 63.

and that he was hoping to go hunting.

This fierce, capable, struggling, bereaved young woman, Virginia Stephen, accepted that Christmas was a landmark in the year, but took an anthropologically questioning view of it. Imagine her on 12 December 1906, writing her ghostly lies to Violet while carol singers hymned joyously outside her window. 'What a strange religion', she writes. 'Now supposing I went and danced chaste Bacchic dances beneath the plane trees, and chanted the odes of Sappho, the next policeman would put me in an ambulance' (L1, p. 260).

She didn't, as far as we know, put this to the test. She did, however, conduct a series of experiments in how best to 'do' Christmas. After Thoby's death and after Vanessa's marriage, she tried non-family holidays. Virginia Stephen and Lytton Strachey ate ham until they were comatose by the fire in 1908; in 1909, gloomy at the thought of a Christmas with Adrian, she suddenly leapt on a train down to Cornwall and sat reading by a gas fire in an empty hotel, delighted (or so she said to Dickinson) to let all the festivals pass over her head 'without a trace' (L1, 27 December [1909], p. 417).

Some of that exploratory feeling went into the Christmas sequence of *Night and Day*, which is full of questions about where one should spend the festive season, and full of negotiations between scepticism and enchantment. Katharine Hilbery can't help but feel some residue of wonder at the Christmas story. Looking up at the stars in the clear black sky over Lincolnshire, she feels this to be the one season when 'the Heavens bend over the earth with sympathy, and signal with immortal radiance that they, too, take part in her festival'.²⁵ Just for a moment the sky seems sentient; the world seems to have a story. But Woolf will not, of course, let Katharine get away with that for long. Another moment and the stars have retreated into vast indifference, and human history is the short adventure of a few apelike forms in the mud.²⁶

Woolf did not do away with Christmas, and nor did Bloomsbury as a group. When their respective households were established, they continued with turkey dinners and the exchange of gifts. The Woolfs would make a visit to Charleston on Christmas Eve or Boxing Day.

²⁵*Night and Day*, ed. Suzanne Raitt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 202.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 203.

Vita Sackville-West was invited to Charleston for Boxing Day 1926, which got everybody talking. In future years, Vita sent a giant goose pie or pâté, while Christmas Day itself—all through the 1930s—became for the Woolfs an annual reunion with the Keyneses.

As an atheist, among an atheist group of friends, Woolf was deeply interested in the ceremonial forms that might shape our lives if we do not abide by the Christian liturgy. For believers across centuries, the year had been arranged around high days and holy days, stretches of work punctuated by festivity; individual lives had been ritually marked by the staging posts of the Seven Sacraments. But without God, without the church, how can we give shape to things? This is one of Woolf's enduring questions. It emerges in the last supper of *To the Lighthouse*; it emerges in the private ceremonies performed by each character of *The Waves* in memory of Percival, and in Woolf's own records of sorrow that there should be no funeral for Lytton Strachey. It emerges in the records of a lifetime's Christmases.

Much more important than Christmas itself, however, was the ritual of spending between a week and a month in Sussex at Christmastime. It was not a holiday, but it was a vital change of pace and outlook. Often, after the long autumn in London, juggling visits and telephone calls, Woolf longed for space and the country. The winter stay in Rodmell was part of the Woolfs' firmly defined working calendar. Their year was not quite arranged according to the four seasons, but it was an amalgam of different almanacs (including the publishing calendar and the social seasons). Like the traditional agricultural year, it had four distinct parts to it. Any reader of Woolf's diaries will be familiar with the quarters of her year, each quarter a 'lap'. There would always be an Easter holiday to recharge for life in London from April to July, then the long Sussex summer of immersed writing from July to October, then the autumn in London ending with a break at Christmas, and then, the last lap, from January to March.

The 'last slope of the year' (D3, 5 March 1927, p. 130), she called this winter season, as if she were skiing downhill—or perhaps trudging *up* one last slope of the Downs, before Easter and a 'new start'. In this sense, she worked according to the old calendar (the

calendar still enshrined in our tax year), where the new year began in March. Winter was always an ending for her, not a beginning. This was often the hardest lap. 'I dislike these months', she wrote in 1928, on the home straight to Easter. It was the time of 'lights down' and hard work in the cold. 'Shall we try Rome next year' (D3, 18 March 1928, p. 177). It was on this 'last lap' that she was often determined to finish a book. On this last slope of the year she worked rapidly on *To the Lighthouse* and later on *The Waves*, gathering momentum towards the end.

'A month of winter fields will cool me down', she noted on 11 December 1938 (D5, p. 191). But winter in Sussex, without double-glazing or central heating, could be very cold indeed. Each night Woolf went out of the house and up the steps to her bedroom annexe (finished by Christmas 1929). There was, at least, an electric fire in the writing lodge. But there were years when the electric was down, the pipes were frozen, and an excursion for food meant skidding along the icy roads to Lewes with chains on the wheels. Gamely, Woolf saw that there could be joy in these conditions. 'Suppose it is winter', thinks Neville in *The Waves* as he articulates his undiminished desire, despite middle age, for love and strangeness and definite sensation:

The snow falling loads down the roof and seals us together in a red cave. The pipes have burst. We stand a yellow tin bath in the middle of the room. ... We shout with laughter at the sight of ruin. Let solidity be destroyed. Let us have no possessions.²⁷

Winter here is notably not numbing but sensual, not constraining but liberating. The burst pipe and the tin bath open up a dream of something wild and undomesticated. But all moods and viewpoints in *The Waves* are temporary and provisional. Neither Neville nor Woolf wanted burst pipes for long.

It was a relief, after the cold, to get back to London and light the fire in the sitting room at Tavistock Square. 'How we protect ourselves from the elements!', Woolf wrote after the return journey in 1927. 'Coming back last night I thought, owing to civilisation, I, who am now cold, wet, & hungry, can be warm & satisfied & listening to

²⁷*The Waves*, ed. Gillian Beer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992 [hereafter *TW*]), p. 177.

a Mozart 4tet in 15 minutes. And so I was' (D3, 28 February 1927, p. 129). There is not much romance about primal winter here, but rather gratitude for the 'civilisation' manifested in a heater with an on-off switch and the orderly beauty of a string quartet.

London Januaries and Februaries could seduce her. When she gave instructions to the potential street haunter, she was firm that the 'hour should be evening and the season winter, for in winter the champagne brightness of the air and the sociability of the streets are grateful' (E4, p. 480). The word 'haunting' gives a frisson to an essay which is full of fun but which is also a little ghostly. Haunting is possible when there are dark stretches between the pools of lamplight. There is, perhaps, just a shadow of Jekyll and Hyde—those winter street haunters—in Woolf's essay about losing one's body and changing identities. Later, in 1939, one might have seen a figure haunting the Thames foreshore on a bitter cold January day. Woolf let herself down on a rope, walked on the sea-weedy shingle past warehouses, through a 'rat haunted, riverine place' (D5, 31 January 1939, p. 203).

In the winter of 1940, when her beloved London was a war zone, she stayed at Rodmell, yielded to the cold and quiet, and began to be more enraptured by country winter than she had ever been before. She was thinking about nature's indifference, about how one's love for winter views goes unreciprocated. 'This heartless & perfect beauty', she calls it in her diary. 'All looked very distant, & picked out'. The coolness and hardness shaped her thoughts. Though the cold was heartless, it seemed to grip her and hold her up for inspection: 'I was somehow held in a pair of pincers'. Language was changed: 'all the words seem bodiless too' (D5, 20 January 1940, pp. 259–60).

For the next week she would be caught in what she called 'glacial suspense', which became an 'intense spiritual exaltation'. With the thaw, the exaltation subsided. 'The lyric mood of the winter' she noted, had gone (D5, 26 January 1940, pp. 260–1). The following year, she again found the winter landscape around Rodmell beautiful. This time there were floods, and the feeling for England that she was distilling in *Between the Acts* intensified her feeling about the bare flooded country. The Ouse burst its bank in November and there was

an inland sea all the way across the meadows from Caburn (now a cliff above water) to the bottom of the Monks House garden. It looked medieval in the mist, she thought, and on bright days it looked like a virgin land, 'as it was in the beginning' (*D5*, 5 November 1940, p. 336).

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IV. The Turning Year

In 2011, the Canadian writer Adam Gopnik gave a series of lectures about winter in which he asked how, across centuries, we have come to terms with the most hostile time, the time when we humans who were formed in the Savannah roam in a wilderness that does not suit us. ‘Sometimes’, he says, with simple awe,

I sense with fear the reality of the cosmos as it is: just this big huge *nothing*, billions of years old, without segments or seasons or anything in it, where the truth of the universe is just that it brutally *is*. We live in a cold world.

But instead we give the coldness names, we write it poetry, we play it music ... We see not waste and cold but light and mystery and wonder and something called January.²⁸

Virginia Woolf sees and writes about the way these opposing perceptions go on side by side. She writes novels in which we feel the independent turn of the seasons, outside and apart from us, heartless, and then the bounding human energy that makes time and weather inhabitable.

This is one of the organising principles of her novels, even those which do not feel explicitly calendrical. *Jacob's Room*, for example, is a book of seasons and weathers as much as *Orlando*. Its plot is the turning of the years as much as it is Jacob's life story, though most of all it is the relation between these things. London winter is talk, lights, friends, rough wind as the traffic goes by, ‘the ecstasy and hubbub of the soul’, a shuffling old man and a young girl, the baton of life passed from one to another, life stubbornly persisting through winter.²⁹ There is also a silent passage of country snow, one of the simplest, barest, and most ghostly passages of the novel.

Jacob is in London, reading the papers, but we go out into an empty landscape:

The snow, which had been falling all night, lay at three o'clock in the afternoon over the fields and the hill. Clumps of withered grass stood out upon the hill-top; the furze bushes were black, and now and then a black shiver crossed the snow as the wind drove flurries of frozen particles before it. The sound was that of a broom

²⁸Adam Gopnik, *Winter: Five Windows on a Season* (London: Quercus, 2012), p. 214.

²⁹*Jacob's Room*, ed. Kate Flint (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 155.

sweeping—sweeping.³⁰

Human life makes its small mark in the wilderness. A figure with a lantern crosses the monochrome scene. It is like a woodcut by Bewick, though not quite monochrome for there is one patch of colour: a ‘window tinged yellow about two feet across alone combated the white fields’. Then Jacob comes, fast and athletic, hot, cold, alive, ‘glazed with ice over pounding arteries’, galloping through the snow, jumping hedges.³¹ It is a memory of Thoby and Adrian Stephen hunting during those Christmases in the New Forest, and it is a memory of how Thoby Stephen, being dead, did not go out hunting at Christmas 1906. It is all human life in the cold.

The Waves, when Woolf started to write it in 1929, was a book of seasons. Starting out, Woolf typed the title, and under it the parts she proposed:

Spring 1
Summer 2
Autumn 3
Winter 4³²

The book she imagined sounds like a medieval almanac, with the four seasons correlating to the ages of man. She began with the dawn, and light gradually coming into the room: she was planning to map the stages of the day onto the stages of the year, and both these onto the stages of life.

Early in the first holograph draft, there is a new outline in which the book is structured by the stages of childhood, youth, and maturity, rather than by season. Yet through the drafts and into the finished book, the annual natural cycle keeps coming back into view. ‘Summer comes, and winter’, says Susan. ‘The seasons pass’ (*TW*, p. 141). Susan is the character in *The Waves* whose life is tuned to the seasons in the most traditional sense. If the six characters are one, and if the composite of their lives is ‘the life of anybody’,³³ then

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 134.

³¹*Ibid.*, pp. 134, 137.

³²*The Waves: Two Holograph Drafts*, ed. J. W. Graham (London: Hogarth Press, 1976), MS 1 verso.

³³*Ibid.*

Woolf's portrait of Susan is a gesture to the seasonal rhythm that sounds, however faintly, beneath all our lives.

Susan describes herself carried along passively through the years: 'heat and cold will follow each other naturally without my willing or unwilling' (*TW*, p. 108). Louis, too, though uncomfortably, feels himself 'woven in and out of the long summers and winters that have made the corn flow and have frozen the streams. I am not a single and passing being' (*TW*, p. 168). He goes deep into the earth where all the roots connect up. His imagery is that of a medieval spring rite: Percival 'was laid in the earth with all his branches still sighing in the summer wind' (*TW*, p. 168).

Bernard, at the close, is an elderly figure of winter, as he might have been in the medieval almanacs, and as he would have been in Woolf's first plan for a book that progressed steadily through the four seasons. He is sad and disoriented by his experience of age: 'the melancholy path led along the level, to more wintriness and pallor'. The picture he gives is of an old grey man pushed out, involuntarily, into a colourless empty field. He casts no shadow, and his tread leaves 'no impress on the dead earth' (*TW*, p. 238). At the close, however, Bernard returns from the empty field and goes to the restaurant where he will tell the story of his life. He fills his age and his winter with words.

The seasons go on without us. But while we are here, we tell stories that give shape to winter; we 'discourse the freezing hours away'. We make our own little marks in the white field.

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