

## 18 Weather

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The evening of this day was very long, and melancholy, at Hartfield. The weather added what it could of gloom. A cold stormy rain set in, and nothing of July appeared but in the trees and shrubs, which the wind was despoiling, and the length of the day, which only made such cruel sights the longer visible.

JANE AUSTEN *Emma* (1816)

London. Michaelmas term larely over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a *Megalosaurus*, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes — gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection of ill temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.

CHARLES DICKENS *Bleak House* (1853)

APART FROM THE ODD STORMY at sea, weather was given scant attention in prose fiction until the late eighteenth century. In the nineteenth, novelists always seem to be talking about it. This was the consequence partly of the heightened appreciation of Nature engendered by Romantic poetry and painting, partly of a growing literary interest in the individual self, in states of feeling that affect and are affected by our perceptions of the external world. As Coleridge put it in his ode on "Dejection":

O Lady! We receive but what we give  
And in our life alone does Nature live.

We all know that the weather affects our moods. The novelist is in the happy position of being able to invent whatever weather is appropriate to the mood he or she wants to evoke.

Weather is therefore frequently a trigger for the effect John Ruskin called the pathetic fallacy, the projection of human emotions onto phenomena in the natural world. "All violent feelings . . . produce in us a falseness in our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterize as the pathetic fallacy," he wrote. As the name implies, Ruskin thought it was a bad thing, a symptom of the decadence of modern (as compared to classical) art and literature, and it is indeed often the occasion of overblown, self-indulgent writing. But used with intelligence and discretion it is a rhetorical device capable of moving and powerful effects, without which fiction would be much the poorer.

Jane Austen retained an Augustan suspicion of the Romantic imagination, and satirized it in the characterization of Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility*. "It is not everyone who has your passion for dead leaves," her sister Elinor comments dilly after Marianne's autumn rhapsody, "How have I delighted, as I walked, to see them driven in showers about me by the wind. What feelings have they, the season, the air altogether inspired!" Weather in Jane Austen's novels is usually something that has an important practical bearing on the social life of her characters, rather than a metaphorical index of their inner lives. The snow in Chapters 15 and 16 of *Emma* is representative in this respect. The first mention comes in



the middle of Mr Weston's pre-Christmas dinner party, when Mr John Knightley, who never wanted to attend it in the first place, comes into the drawing-room and announces with ill-concealed *Schadenfreude* that it is "snowing hard with a strong drifting wind", striking terror into the heart of Emma's valetudinarian father, Mr Woodhouse. There follows a discussion in which everybody has something to say, more self-revealing than to the point, until Mr George Knightley returns from his own examination of the weather, and gives a typically reasonable and reassuring report of it. He and Emma, concluding that Mr Woodhouse will nevertheless fret for the rest of the evening, decide to call for the carriages. Mr Elton takes advantage of this sudden departure to get unaccompanied into Emma's carriage, and makes a declaration of love which is both unexpected and deeply embarrassing to her, since she has been under the illusion that he was courting her protégée, Harriet. Fortunately, the weather over the next few days gives her a welcome alibi to avoid meeting either of the other two parties:

The weather was most favourable to her . . . The ground covered with snow, and the atmosphere in that unsettled state between frost and thaw, which is of all the others the most unfriendly for exercise, every morning beginning in rain or snow, and every evening setting in to freeze, she was for many days a most honourable prisoner.

The weather is described because it is relevant to the story, but the description is quite literal.

Even Jane Austen, however, makes discreet use of the pathetic fallacy on occasion. When Emma's fortunes are at their lowest ebb, when she has discovered the truth, with all its embarrassing implications for her own conduct, about Jane Fairfax, when she belatedly realizes that she loves Mr Knightley but has reason to believe he is going to marry Harriet — on this, the worst day of her life, "the weather added what it could of gloom." Ruskin would point out that the weather is incapable of any such intention. But the summer storm is a precise analogy for the heroine's feelings about her future, because her very fixed and prominent position in the small and enclosed society of Highbury will only make such

"cruel sights" as Harriet's marriage to Knightley "the longer visible". Being unseasonable, however, it is an unreliable portent: next day, the sun comes out again and George Knightley turns up to propose to Emma.

Where Jane Austen slips the pathetic fallacy past us so stealthily that we hardly notice, Dickens hits us over the head with it in the famous opening paragraph of *Bleak House*. "Implacable November weather." The personification of the weather as "implacable" is a commonplace colloquialism, but here it carries suggestions of divine displeasure, being in close conjunction with allusions to the Old Testament. "As if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth," echoes both the description of the Creation in Genesis and the story of the Flood. These Biblical allusions are mixed up in a very Victorian way with a more modern, post-Darwinian cosmology in the references to the Megalosaurus and the running down of the solar system from entropy. The total effect is a startling feat of defamiliarization.

On one level this is a realistic picture of nineteenth-century London streets in bad weather, a montage of typical details quite simply and literally described: smoke lowering down from chimneys-pots . . . dogs undistinguishable in mire . . . horses splashed to their very blinkers . . . jostling umbrellas. But Dickens's metaphorical imagination transforms this commonplace scene into an apocalyptic vision of the proud capital of the British Empire reverting to primitive swamp, or anticipating the final extinction of all life on earth. The metaphorical double somersault from soot flake, to snowflake in mourning, to the death of the sun, is particularly stunning.

It is a scenario of a kind we meet later in science fiction (the vision of the Megalosaurus waddling up Holborn Hill anticipates King Kong scaling the Empire State Building, the "death of the sun" the chilling finale of H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*) and in postmodernist prophets of doom like Martin Amis. It sets up for denunciation the idea of a society that has denatured itself by greed and corruption, which Dickens is about to examine in his many-stranded plot centering on a disputed estate. Wittingly, the mud



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accumulates at compound interest here in the City of London, reminding us of the Biblical condemnation of money as filthy lucre. The Lord Chancellor described at the beginning of the passage (in a series of terse statements like headlines from "News at Ten") presiding over the court of Chancery, seems also to preside over the weather, and the equation is clinched some paragraphs later: "Never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mud and mire too deep, to assort with the groping and floundering condition which this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary sinners, holds, this day, in the sight of heaven and earth."

## 19 Repetition

In the fall the war was always there, but we did not go to it any more. It was cold in the fall in Milan and the dark came very early. Then the electric lights came on, and it was pleasant along the streets looking in the windows. There was much game hanging outside the shops, and the snow powdered in the fur of the foxes and the wind blew their tails. The deer hung stiff and heavy and empty, and small birds blew in the wind and the wind turned their feathers. It was a cold fall and the wind came down from the mountains.

We were all at the hospital every afternoon, and there were different ways of walking across the town through the dusk to the hospital. Two of the ways were alongside canals, but they were long. Always, though, you crossed a bridge across a canal to enter the hospital. There was a choice of three bridges. On one of them a woman sold roasted chestnuts. It was warm, standing in front of her charcoal fire, and the chestnuts were warm afterward in your pocket. The hospital was very old and very beautiful, and you entered through a gate and walked across a courtyard and out a gate on the other side. There were usually funerals starting from the courtyard. Beyond the old hospital were the new brick pavilions, and there we met every afternoon and were all very polite and interested in what was the matter, and sat in the machines that were to make so much difference.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY "In Another Country" (1927)