

Skyspaces: Notes on *Gigantic Cinema: a Weather Anthology*

ROWLAND BAGNALL

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‘– the day goes on, a strange, wild, smiling, promising, lowering, spitting day – full of threats and contradictions’
– Walt Whitman

‘This is an attempt to pull a book through without weather,’ suggests Mark Twain at the beginning of his novel *The American Claimant* (1892), in which all atmospheric ‘intrusions’ are banished to an appendix – ‘out of the way’ – from which the reader is at liberty to ‘help himself from time to time’. Twain’s gripe, however tongue-in-cheek, is that the appetite for weather as a ‘literary specialty’ is getting out of hand. ‘Many a reader who wanted to read a tale through was not able to do it because of delays on account of the weather,’ he writes, while ‘Nothing breaks up an author’s progress like having to stop every few pages’ to check in on the forecast.

‘Of course weather is necessary to a narrative of human experience,’ he concedes, but it ought to be put ‘where it will not interrupt the flow,’ a comment about the relationship between plot, digression, and stagnation that shares something with another famous observation credited to Twain: ‘Everybody’s talking about the weather but nobody’s doing anything about it.’

While it might be too simplistic to frame *Gigantic Cinema* – a recent anthology of weather-related (and -adjacent) writing co-edited by Alice Oswald and Paul Keegan – as evidence of somebody finally doing *something* about it, the collection certainly embraces weather’s plotless

and digressive nature. Presented as a twenty-four hour cycle of unending, shifting, changing states – an ‘omni-form’ day, containing all weathers’, suggests the preface, borrowing a phrase from Coleridge – the three-hundred entries included here not only span the different stages of a single day (from dawn to dusk and back again) but also slide their way over a full range of meteorological effects, emphasising the sheer, alive ongoingness of weather, a wave of ‘non-stop interruption’.

This process is represented by an equally impressive breadth of texts, from the literary to the scientific; poetry, yes, but also extracts clipped from novels, essays, letters, journals. Scholars of Alice Oswald’s work will be excited by the possibility of finding some original translations here, all unattributed examples noted as the labour of the editors, but the success of this collection lies in its surprises and collisions. There are plenty of old favourites – Hughes’s wind, Apollinaire’s rain, even Chaucer’s ‘shoures soote’ – though these turn out to be familiar faces in a crowd of unexpected guests, from Joan Didion and Frank O’Hara through to Edvard Munch and Wittgenstein. Stripped of their titles, the authors’ names pushed to the bottom of each page, the entries start to melt into each other, ‘one excerpt summoning up the weather of the next’, according to the editors. As such, the snow from a slice of Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space* (1958) falls into a poem by Norman MacCaig, snow-flaking its way through passages of Yoshida Kenkō’s fourteenth-century *Essays in Idleness* and the diary of Reverend Woodforde before settling over Captain Scott’s Antarctic journal and a scene from Chapman’s *Iliad*. Pliny’s eruption of Vesuvius is followed shortly by a fragment of Don DeLillo’s 1985 *White Noise*. Later, the ‘delicate and threadbare’ rains of Francis Ponge appear to fall from Roy Batty’s interstellar monologue during the closing scenes of *Blade Runner* (1982): ‘I’ve seen things you people wouldn’t believe.’

Despite its twenty-four-hour billing, the anthology comes to emphasise the peculiar timelessness of its subject. Phasing from extract to extract, one is aware of jumping backwards and forwards over centuries, as if the collection somehow offered a glimpse of all times happening at once, the past, present, and future playing out their weathers simultaneously. One thinks of John Ashbery’s poem ‘Into the Dusk-Charged Air’ (not present here), in which each line utters the name of a particular river: the poem is intensely linear, flowing from source to sea, each river inherently related to the forward movement of each line; at the same time, however, ‘Into the Dusk-Charged Air’ is entirely simultaneous, a snapshot of the globe at one specific moment, as though every line were spoken in the same breath as the rest.

Alongside its expanding and contracting temporalities, *Gigantic Cinema* also raises questions about what – if anything – all this weather has to do with us. One cluster of entries draw explicit (often religious) connections between the weather and human activity, as in the rain-making rituals of various indigenous communities (recorded in *The Golden Bough* [1890-1915]), or the gods of Greek mythology producing weather in response to men. In an entry consisting of a Royal Proclamation, Charles II decrees a ‘publick Fast’ in order to reverse a

recent bout of national flooding, a last-ditch attempt ‘to divert those Judgements which the sins of this Land have worthily deserved’. In the following passage, John Evelyn connects the appearance of a whale swimming up the swollen Thames with the death (‘That year’) of Oliver Cromwell. Even Banquo’s assassination in *Macbeth* (1606) appears to trigger atmospheric consequences – ‘It will be rayne to-night’ – just as Duncan’s earlier murder conjures up a supernatural darkness: ‘by the clock, ‘tis day, / And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp’.

Stranger than these, perhaps, are passages in which the distinctive flavour of the weather – so often unseen and unregistered – is rendered suddenly significant. The anthology is filled with moments of startling and striking human experience, scenes of fragility and violence, to which the weather seems inherently attached. A storm of 1773 that may otherwise have been forgotten sticks in the mind of Gilbert White because it kills a lady’s coach-horse. Elsewhere, Defoe pauses over the wind-stripped lead of Lytton Church, blown from the roof, ‘rolled up like Sheets of Parchment’. ‘Once I faced the reflection of my own face in the jet-black mirror’ of the train window, writes Rudyard Kipling: ‘When the fog thinned, I looked out and saw a man standing opposite the pub where the barmaid lived. Of a sudden his breast turned dull red like a robin’s, and he crumpled, having cut his throat.’ Most staggering of all is an anecdote from the operating table, in which a surgeon brings procedures to a sudden, unexpected halt, gathering his team to view ‘an extraordinary local rainbow effect’ occurring in the patient’s body.

‘After all, what is not weather?’ ask the editors, who include a wealth of other entries detailing intriguing possibilities, from starling murmurations to the bombing of Hiroshima. ‘[M]eteorologists are discussing the possibility of a connection,’ wrote Alexander MacAdie in the pages of *The Atlantic Monthly*, between ‘the tremendous expenditure of ammunition’ in Europe during the First World War and ‘the records of excessive raininess during the winter of 1914-15’. ‘In concise terms,’ he wonders, ‘has the bombarding not only caused clouds but forced the clouds to send down rain?’

While many authors listed here seek to discover a relationship between the human and the atmospheric, the reverse side of the coin is to imagine pure indifference, like the great, cavernous clouds dominating Turner’s painting *Snow Storm* (1812), in which Hannibal and his men are being hopelessly engulfed. Prominent extracts in *Gigantic Cinema* express the bold theatricality of weather – an ‘Atmospherical Theatre,’ in the words of Thomas Appletree – for which we are the audience. ‘I have often thought of writing a set of *Play-bills* for the vale of Keswick,’ writes Coleridge in his notebook, ‘announcing each Day the Performances by his Supreme Majesty’s Servants, Clouds, Waters, Sun, Moon, Stars, &c.’ This idea is nowhere more pronounced than in Virginia Woolf’s ‘On Being Ill’, an essay of 1926 from which the anthology borrows its title. ‘This then has been going on all the time without our knowing it!’ writes Woolf, considering the ‘shocking’ sky:

– this incessant making up of shapes and casting them down, this buffeting of clouds together, and drawing vast trains of ships and wagons from North to South, this incessant ringing up and down of curtains of light and shade, this interminable experiment with gold shafts and blue shadows, with veiling the sun and unveiling it, with making rock ramparts and wafting them away – this endless activity, with the waste of Heaven knows how many million horse power of energy, has been left to work its will year in year out. [...] One should not let this gigantic cinema play perpetually to an empty house.

Like the sky that she describes, Woolf's writing vibrates with 'endless activity,' a pageant of images traversing her stage, coming and going with 'incessant' unfinishedness, an 'interminable experiment' of 'veiling' and 'unveiling'. Framed, in part, by illness's invitation to pay attention to the world anew, 'to look round, to look up,' she writes, 'perhaps for the first time for years,' framed even by the rectangle of window that one sees through from one's sickbed, Woolf discovers in the sky something inherently cinematic, though also something which – however we may like to think so – 'has nothing to do with human pleasure or human profit.' 'If we were all laid prone, frozen, stiff,' she continues, 'still the sky would be experimenting with its blues and golds.' Not just a cinema, but a cinema in which the film is playing whether we are there or not.

The disinterested sky of Woolf's essay brings to mind *The Clock* (2010), Christian Marclay's ambitious twenty-four-hour film installation, a real-time collage of clippings from movies in which the time of day appears on screen, an artwork that serves, in its way, as a useful analogue to Oswald and Keegan's project. I am reminded, also, of the Pantheon in Rome, whose oculus – a circular opening at the centre of the building's dome, seen in Panini's painting (c.1743) – offers a permanent view of the sky's 'endless activity'. More than these, however, *Gigantic Cinema* evokes the work of veteran American artist James Turrell, whose Skyspaces encourage viewers to perform the kind of looking Woolf's essay promotes. These site-specific chambers, typically smooth concrete interiors – there are more than eighty internationally, including three in the UK – present a framed, uncovered aperture, completely open to the air, through which the colours, shifts, and contours of the sky reveal their overlooked complexities.

While learning how to be attentive to the weather – to really *look*, as Woolf would have it – might be achieved through practice, the problem of how to translate one's attention into writing is a challenge of a different kind. One solution might be discovered in the language of precision, as in the attempted scientific classifications of Francis Beaufort's 'Wind Force Scale' or Robert Hooke's descriptions of the 'faces of the Sky', both present here. 'It is [...] desirable,' urges Hooke, 'that the particulars may be entered [...] in as few words as are sufficient to signify them intelligibly and plainly.' And yet, 'It must be remembered,' as Dr. Johnson reminds us, that 'words are hourly shifting their relations, and can no more be ascertained in a dictionary, than a grove,

in the agitation of a storm, can be accurately delineated from its picture in the water.' How can we ever hope to write about something as slippery as the weather, this anthology appears to ask, with something as slippery as language?

There comes a moment in any review of an anthology, I suspect, when the reviewer complains about the absence of some key passage or other, a missing author who ought to be present, a poem whose absence undermines the project. Oswald and Keegan make it clear that their selections are a small drop in an ocean, emphasising their preference for 'writing which is "like" weather,' 'As if the weather were to write itself', reminiscent of Yves Klein's eccentric attempts to capture 'the mark of an atmospheric occurrence' by exposing empty canvases to rain. Some of the anthology's most successful moments are those that seem to share this spirit, presenting writing as immediate, unfixed, and changing as its subject, particularly true of the many rapid-fire notebook jottings on display from Hopkins, Whitman, Coleridge, and Clare, to name a handful. As Gilbert White puts it in a letter of 1776, perhaps 'The most certain way to be exact' about the details of a 'remarkable frost' is 'to copy the passages from my journal, which were taken from time to time as things occurred.' This immediacy – moment to moment, 'time to time' – acts as the guiding principle of the selections here. I am reminded of the word 'trans-shifting' – 'To shift and then be shifted by that shift' – which Oswald singles-out from Herrick in her inaugural Professor of Poetry lecture at the University of Oxford, available online. In the words of the Polish poet Wisława Szymborska: '*I'd have to be really quick / to describe clouds – / a split second's enough / for them to start becoming something else.*'

Despite my best efforts to resist the anthology-reviewer's cliché, the emphasis on natural writing as a (trans-) shifting, fluid, even living thing leaves me surprised not to find Emerson here. Criticism of Emerson's prose very often comments on its distinct, unstable quality. Indeed, 'Like the weather,' writes Eduardo Cadava, it 'moves and happens according to the rhythms and crises of its own atmospheres, storms, and pressure zones. Like the weather, whose variable and unpredictable nature makes it difficult to circumscribe, the gestures of his writing [...] resist, from the very beginning, all our efforts to bring together or stabilize whatever we might call his "thought." 'He looms up like a thunder cloud,' suggests an anonymous reviewer of 1849, then 'comes down in a shower of tinkling sleet and rolls away like a fire on the prairie.'

Nevertheless, *Gigantic Cinema* stands as a great and full achievement, establishing an essential bedrock of weather-related writing with which to help make sense of our own ongoing changing climates. More than this, it strikes at the heart of poetry's greatest and oldest subject, mutability. After all, 'We are the changing inhabitants of a changing world,' writes Emerson: 'The night & the day, the ebbing and flowing of the tide, the round of the seasons, the waxing & waning moon, the flux & reflux of the arts & of the civilization of nations & the swift and sad succession of human generations, these are the monitors among which we live.'