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Weather ex Machina:
Climatic Determinism and the Fiction of Causality in the Twentieth-Century Novel

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in English

by

Sydney Miller

2018

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Weather ex Machina:
Climatic Determinism and the Fiction of Causality in the Twentieth-Century Novel

by

Sydney Miller

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Michael A. North, Chair

Weather ex Machina charts a pattern of the weather as a plot device in the twentieth-century novel, where its interventions have been overlooked and understudied. According to the prevailing critical narrative of the topic, the ubiquitous and overwrought weather that characterizes the notoriously dark and stormy novels of the nineteenth century all but disappears in those of the twentieth, its determinative force in fiction diminishing with the advancement of a science that secularized the skies. This dissertation pushes against that narrative, arguing that is precisely *because* modern meteorology seemingly stripped the weather – so long assumed to be divinely sourced – of its mythological associations that the trope becomes available for co-opting as the makeshift *deus ex machina* of the modern novel: the believable contrivance that, in functioning deterministically while appearing aleatory, replaces the providentialism of the nineteenth-century novel and resolves the crisis of causality in the twentieth-century plot.

For E.M. Forster, whose works are marked by an anxiety about formlessness and a belabored adherence to causal chains, the weather becomes a divine scapegoat, its inculpation imposing a predictable but passably accidental order onto his plots. Virginia Woolf, in contrast,

turns to the weather not as a determinant but for its apparent indeterminacy, using the cloud as an organizing trope to forestall her plots and to project a sense of nebulousness onto even her most conventionally structured narratives. In *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov's weather becomes anachronistically over-determined, as his dramatic stagings of supposedly coincidental lightning strikes and thunderstorms illuminate the bars of Humbert's artistic cage. While in the novels of Salman Rushdie, the heat-induced blurring of cause and effect finally amounts to an inversion of climatic determinism itself, his hyperbolically humanist texts offering us fantasies of magically determined climates that ultimately prefigure the nightmarish reality of our current anthropocenic moment.

Less a matter of physics than of metaphysics, the meteorological aberration that is literary weather not only signifies a distinctly formal problem in the twentieth-century novel, but is itself the quintessentially chaotic form that these four writers are trying to represent in the constitution of their necessarily deterministic narratives. Used as a mode of emplotment to naturalize the fiction of strict causality, the weather thus emerges as the means through which the modern author is able to reckon with an increasing ambivalence towards classical theories of plot in a world that no longer believes in traditional laws of intelligible cause and effect.

The dissertation of Sydney Miller is approved.

Yogita Goyal

Louise E. J. Hornby

Kathleen L. Komar

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2018

This one's for me.

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Introduction

Pray hard to weather, that lone surviving god, that in some sudden wisdom we surrender.
– Richard Hugo

The Perfect Storm

We open in the middle of a hurricane, roaring amidst the rhythms of Shakespearian pentameter. Thunder and lightning are heard, per the stage direction, as the titular storm of *The Tempest* rages, rocking the boat of King Alonso and his crew. Their fate hangs in the balance as the scene cuts away to Prospero and his daughter, Miranda, observing the storm from the safety of the shore. Rightly suspicious of the conveniently timed tempest – though as of yet unaware of its facilitating of Prospero's revenge plot – Miranda presses her father to put an end to the storm, if "by [his] art," he created it (Shakespeare 1.2.1). Resolute in his disavowal, Prospero assures Miranda that he has nothing to do with this most natural of occurrences: "By accident most strange, bountiful Fortune, / Now my dear lady, hath mine enemies / Brought to this shore" (Shakespeare 1.2.213-215). This invocation of chance is explanation enough for Miranda, and why shouldn't it be? Weather happens, after all, and everyone knows that individuals have no control over the skies – unless, of course, that individual is a magician. Or, better yet, an author. Indeed, in the case of Prospero, *The Tempest* goes as far as to imply that these two forms of conjuring are one and the same.

No sooner does Miranda fall asleep than Prospero summons Ariel, inquiring whether the spirit has "perform'd to point the tempest that I bade thee?" (Shakespeare 1.2.230) Beyond working to Prospero's own point, the reveal of the tempest as performed – and thus, as a performance – speaks to the broader point of this dissertation, which reads the contrivance of literary weather as a *deus ex machina* in the modern plot, a magical but mechanistic means of naturalizing the fiction of narrative causality in the twentieth-century novel. In Prospero's successful evasion of responsibility via the tempest, we see how, by his art, the author can make a scapegoat of the weather; it is my

contention that such an assignment of blame becomes for the novelists of the twentieth century, as it was for Prospero, a especially efficient mode of covering up their own godly intervention.

Insofar as its initiatory storm acts as the catalyst of Shakespeare's plot, at fault for shipwrecking all of the key players on the strange island where the ensuing drama will take place, *The Tempest* is representative of the apparently contingent but actually deterministic function that the weather serves in the narratives considered in this dissertation. What is particularly significant about this opening exchange in *The Tempest*, then, is not simply that Prospero deceptively codes the fateful storm – which he, by proxy of Shakespeare, has purposefully orchestrated – as an accident. But rather, that despite her better judgment, Miranda (the surrogate reader) is willing to accept the alleged randomness of storm, effectively indicating the believability of Prospero's excuse, and in so doing, affirming the plausibility of such manufactured weather passing as *real*.

In making a case for the weather as a mode of emplotment, this dissertation reads weather not only as a distinctly formal trope in the twentieth-century novel, but as itself a form; in fact, as precisely the chaotic form that these authors are trying to represent in the structuring of their necessarily deterministic plots. In his 1984 *History of the Voice*, Barbadian poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite speaks to the dynamic relationship of weather and form: in his incisive declaration that "the hurricane does not roar in pentameters," Brathwaite is specifically calling out the English poetic tradition, formally restrictive as it is, for its inability to represent the oral rhythms of the Caribbean people, much less the tumultuous ones of its weather events; even more fundamentally, though, he is gesturing to the impulse of imposing order on that which intrinsically resists it, as the hurricane does (Brathwaite 10).[1]

To the extent that this is more or less a definition of narrative emplotment, which entails the arrangement of all of life's tempestuousness into intentionally organized and causally coherent

[1] For more on the significance of the hurricane in postcolonial literature, see Sharae Deckard's "The Political Ecology of Storms in Caribbean Literature," in *The Caribbean: Aesthetics, World-ecology, Politics* (2016).

chains, my project is certainly interested in this notion of ordering of the weather. Of equal concern to me, however, is the possibility of the inverse – that of weathering order. Accordingly, this dissertation looks at what happens when four authors attempt to impose the hurricane itself, the metonym for weather and its quintessentially chaotic form, onto their necessarily ordered narratives, such that they appear less deterministic than they in fact are. I am proposing that it is through this appropriation of the weather's form that E.M Forster, Virginia Woolf, Vladimir Nabokov, and Salman Rushdie are able to work out their personal ambivalence about a godless but nonetheless mysterious universe in their plots; to cover up the crisis of causality in the twentieth-century novel; and, in keeping with meteorologically-masked providentalism of Prospero, to make believably accidental even this most carefully contrived art.

The Context

There is no escaping the weather in *The Tempest*. Not in the title of the work; not in its opening scene; not in its plot. In confronting the reader with the immediate disruption of *The Tempest*'s tempest at the start, Shakespeare effectively puts us in the same boat as his characters, making it impossible to ignore the instrumental role that the weather plays in the text. To be sure, if this is the case for the reader of *The Tempest*, then it is doubly true for the theater-going audience, for whom the staging of lightning and thunder becomes an enveloping sensory experience. That this initiatory squall should be dramatized is a necessary condition of Shakespeare's chosen form, the play; but more than that, this titular tempest, which has been rendered in name as more violent and extreme than any simple storm, gale, or even hurricane, is specifically coded as dramatic. Defined as it is by its very tempestuousness, *The Tempest* sets a precedent for the increasingly histrionic weather that would escalate throughout the literature of the ensuing centuries, culminating in the comically overwrought weather of the nineteenth.

If its fiction is to be taken as a reliable index, the nineteenth was a dark and stormy century, throughout the entirety of which the rain fell, evidently, in torrents. It was the century not only of *Paul Clifford* and its infamously overwritten opening sentence, but of *Wuthering Heights* and *Bleak House* (the names of both of which, like *The Tempest*, contain their melodramatic meteorological fates). The fact of the matter, as Alexandra Harris points out in "Drip, Drip, Drip" (a precursor to her tome, *Weatherland*), is that "Victorian rainfall levels were no higher than average (stretches of the 1850s were problematically dry)," but this did nothing to stop the writers of the period from "perceive[ing] their world as a watery one" ("Drip" 2014). Rather, in line with Harris' observation that "in the landscape of English literary history, the 19th century is the dampest place," the soaking wet novels of the era became weighed down with the heavy-handedness of their storms, such that literary weather itself devolved into cliché (ibid). It is within the context of this watery world and its temperamental tempests that John Ruskin produced his 1856 polemic on the pathetic fallacy, cautioning against the impulse to project such extreme symbolism and sentimentality onto nature; by 1892, what Ruskin identified as a growing problem had turned into enough of a joke that Mark Twain set out to write an entire novel as its punch line.

"No weather will be found in this book." Appearing just under the header THE WEATHER IN THIS BOOK, this is the ironic introductory announcement of Mark Twain's preface to *The American Claimant*, which (he claimed) would be the first "attempt pull a book through without weather" (Twain 3). Resigned to the fact that weather had become an essential component of works of fiction, but peeved by what he perceived as its tendency to delay and disrupt the real story, Twain opted to provide a consolation compendium of the ablest literary weather as an appendix that could be found at the back of his book, where it would be decidedly out of the way. Farcical as it may have been, Twain's marginalizing of the weather here helps contextualize my project's serious theoretic concern with the compatibility – or possibly, the incompatibility – of

weather and narrative. It raises the fundamental questions, which I, too, am asking: why do we have weather in novels, and what does it have to do with plot?

As implied by the very premise of its meteorological appendix, *The American Claimant* purports to argue that weather has nothing whatsoever to do with plot. On the contrary, Twain suggests that novels only include weather because it "is necessary to a narrative of human experience" (ibid). Reflecting the values of his Realist moment, Twain's take on the weather in fiction is essentially a concession to mimetic description; in sum, there is weather in books because there is weather in life. In turning its attention to the twentieth century, just as the novel is turning away from its assumption of an objective reality, this dissertation thus begins by wondering why the weather would continue to be included as a trope in these modern narratives, rather than simply be discarded as another relic of literary realism.

As far as the muted response of literary criticism indicates, the general consensus on why the weather wasn't forsaken by the modern novel seems to be that, actually, it was; that, as if by Twain's decree, the ubiquitous weather of the nineteenth-century novel all but disappeared, not to be seen or heard from again until the anthropogenic crises of our own changing planet gave rise to the burgeoning environmentally-conscious field of ecocriticism and the contemporary genre of "Cli-Fi" with which it has shared a concurrent emergence. This, as Kathryn Schulz outlines in her 2015 *New Yorker* piece, "Writers in the Storm," is the prevailing narrative of the history of the weather's role in literary fiction. Significantly, it is a narrative from which the twentieth century – marked by the systemizing of chance in the physical sciences and a coinciding literary turn away from the Aristotelian plot – has been definitively excluded. Schulz acknowledges "it is easy enough to find a rainstorm or a humid afternoon in twentieth-century prose"; however, citing the neutralizing effect of meteorological advancements, she suggests that in the twentieth century, "weather dwindles as a pervasive and determinative force in fiction" (Schulz 2015). But weather didn't disappear from

narrative fiction just because we stopped looking at it. On the contrary, this dissertation argues that it is precisely *because* the weather supposedly has been naturalized – seemingly stripped of what Schulz refers to as its "mythological and metaphorical clout" (ibid) – that it becomes available for co-opting as the *deus ex machina* of the modern novel: the believable contrivance that, in functioning deterministically while appearing aleatory, resolves the crisis of causality in the twentieth-century plot.

Despite *The American Claimant*'s protestations otherwise, I am contending that the weather has everything to do with plot. But, Twain knows this already. The real joke of his would-be weatherless book, it turns out, is that its revolutionary attempt proves a complete failure, as the novel's protagonist (like the reader who helps himself to the book's quarantined weather) hatches a plan to "utilize the spots on the sun – get control of them, you understand, and apply the stupendous energies which they wield to beneficent purposes in the reorganizing of our climates" (Twain 234).[2] In the end, the weather that Twain was so eager to excise becomes, for better or worse, a central conceit on which the novel's plot hinges. This pivot on Twain's part signals a tendency that I see at work in the novels of the four authors on whom this dissertation focuses. Certainly, Twain's complaint regarding the disruptiveness of the weather speaks to its distracting aesthetic during those most tempestuous decades of the nineteenth century; but this meteorological faultfinding also anticipates a trend in the twentieth that my chapters will track, as E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Vladimir Nabokov, and Salman Rushdie each use this distraction to their own advantage, scapegoating the weather to avoid being held responsible for the contrivances that narrative emplotment in the modern era demands. Just as it was for Prospero, making weather the problem becomes a solution for the novelists of the twentieth century, as they negotiate rendering a world that no longer believes in traditional laws of intelligible of cause and effect. To this end, I am more

[2] Recalling Prospero's manufactured tempest, Twain's Colonel Mulberry Sellers is convinced that others have experimented with this same plan in the past: "Everywhere I find hoary evidences of artificial manipulation of climates in bygone times" (Twain 234).

on board with the case that Twain makes for including weather in the novel as a matter of mimetic accuracy than I initially let on; indeed, insofar as weather emerges in the twentieth century as a chaotic system – the quintessential structural model of orderly disorder – it is essentially still functioning as the representative marker of realism. Only, reality itself has changed.

To the extent that this study is interested in the weather primarily as form and, accordingly, as an organizational trope or mode of emplotment in the novel, it is necessarily and fundamentally concerned with evolving notions of cause and effect. Insofar as the novel can be understood as an exercise in meaning making – which is to say, in ordering what is often experienced as the disordered raw material of the world through the composition of a sequential narrative – I am in agreement with Timothy Morton's sweeping assertion that whenever you "study or make art…you are exploring causality" (Morton 41). Working from Morton's premise, this dissertation is very much an exploration of causality in fiction; but beyond that, it is an exploration of the novel during the time when causality itself had become a fiction.

It was the British philosopher Bertrand Russell who, in his 1912 paper, "On the Notion of Cause," most famously expressed this skepticism of causality as a construct: "The law of causality, I believe, like much that passes muster among philosophers, is a relic of a bygone age, surviving, like the monarchy, only because it is erroneously supposed to do no harm" (Russell 1). In its evident willingness to deny the existence of cause altogether, Russell's reading is, perhaps, too reductive in its approach to the complexity of causation; but in the extremity of his articulation, Russell effectively heralds the profound ambivalence towards cause and effect that accompanied the drastic developments in philosophy and physics in the twentieth century, as providentialism gave way to secularism and determinism to indeterminism.

In *Unlikely Stories: Causality and the Nature of Modern Narrative*, Brian Richardson helpfully traces the history of our changing notion of cause "from indigenous notions of preordained fate,

destiny, and doom to Christian beliefs of providence to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century mechanistic concepts of determinism to, most recently, relatively modern ideas of chance, randomness, and indeterminism" (Richardson 58). As evidenced by the destabilizing effect of these "modern ideas" coming from the sciences, the sense that causality has become a process too complicated to explain is due, in no small part, to its secularization. For all of its mystery, the concept of God as first cause and prime mover, going back at least as far as Aristotle, is as simple an explanation of why things happen as we could hope to have. And indeed, it was all we had for well over a millennium. Even as this specifically divine notion of causality was replaced by Newtonian physics during the Enlightenment, nature and its mechanistic laws were still understood as an expression of a grand cohering force in the universe; as Conrad Ostwalt observes in *Secular Steeples*, "Newtonian physics gave us a worldview that suited traditional theology very well: God authors the universe and eternal laws that cannot be violated" (Ostwalt 12). The compromise of classical physics, then, was to give us a scientific model that entailed all the implied deterministic trappings of divine causality: in its reinforcement of fixed laws and its promise of predictability and precision, this theory affirmed a desire to see the world as ordered, and to read even that which looked random as part of the design.

Not everyone was convinced. "Somebody had to make a first leap to indeterminism," writes Ian Hacking in his seminal text, *The Taming of Chance* (Hacking 201). For Hacking, the person to assume this mantle, if only synecdochically, was the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, who, in the closing decade of the nineteenth century, "denied determinism [and] conceived of a universe that is irreducibly stochastic" (ibid). In codifying his hypothesis, Peirce put forth the doctrine of tychism, which held that, contra Einstein, God may well be playing dice with the universe – if God was even still in the game. Though Peirce imagined himself alone in his thinking, Hacking assures us that, in fact, he "was riding the crest of antideterminist wave" (Hacking 11); as

would become clear only later, Peirce's tychism anticipated the uncertainty principle that Werner Heisenberg proposed in 1927, when this wave of antideterminism crashed onto the shore of quantum mechanics. As Hacking notes in contextualizing the premise of his study, the accompanying "discovery that the world is not deterministic" would be "the most decisive conceptual event of twentieth-century physics" (Hacking 1). Hacking's observation is fair enough, though perhaps it does not go far enough; for, this turn to chance did not simply signal a change in twentieth-century physics, but in twentieth-century literature, as well.

This dissertation works from Brian Richardson's premise that, despite often being taken for granted on account of its implied integrality, "causal connection is a necessary precondition of narrativity" (Richardson 96).[3] More specifically, it draws on theories of narratology that emphasize causality as the single most constitutive element of plot. As is so often the case, all roads seem to lead to Aristotle when tracing the narrative of narrative causality back to its origin. It is in his *Poetics* that we first receive the mandate that a unified plot must be a self-contained closed system, comprised of a beginning, a middle, and an end; more than just the sum of its parts, however, the unified Aristotelian plot demands causal connection, thereby distinguishing itself from the episodic plot "in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence" (Aristotle 18).

It must be noted that Aristotle was not (and could not have been) referring to the novel in his seminal conceptualizing of narrative form, given that it is a genre that would not emerge, at least in the western world, for another two thousand years. Nonetheless, as N.J. Lowe summarizes in his work, *The Classical Plot and the Invention of Western Narrative*, "Aristotle's emphasis on the *causal* connection between story events has long been felt to touch something essential in our modern

[3] In her essay, "Narrative Causality Denaturalized," Marina Grishakova notes the recent proliferation of critical studies on causality, citing Richardson's *Unlikely Stories* (1997) as an earlier harbinger of the trend. Among her other references, see: Noël Carroll's "On the Narrative Connection" (2001), Stephen Kern's *A Cultural History of Causality* (2004), and Emma Kafelenos' *Narrative Causalities* (2006) (Grishakova 127).

understanding of plot" (Lowe 12). Well into the intricately plotted Victorian period, then, the novel enjoyed its mimetic function of representing in a causally coherent way what it perceived to be a causally coherent world. In line with the sense that God was working as an ordering principle in the universe, the novel adopted what Thomas Vargish calls a "providential aesthetic," wherein a narrative is shaped in such a way as "to convey a sense of Supreme Being who foresees and controls human events for some divine purpose" (*Deviations* 48).[4] As Leland Monk tells it in his *Standard Deviations: Chance and the Modern Novel* – which is more or less an obituary of the providential aesthetic – the reassurance of providence is that, "though it might not be immediately apparent, there is order and design to [our] lives" (ibid). Even as classical physics began moving the novel away from a strictly divine model of providential order towards the latter half of the nineteenth century, the form was able to maintain its illusion of design via its natural theology; as noted by Susan Strehle in *Fiction in the Quantum Universe*, "realistic fiction represented the Newtonian cosmos, in all its causal continuity" (Strehle 15). My project situates itself at the moment of disillusionment.

To be clear, I am not arguing that the novel form abandons the structural logic of cause and effect in the twentieth century; quite to the contrary, my readings will illustrate just how dependent modern and postmodern plots continue to be on causal chains. Rather, I want to draw attention to the seemingly unresolvable tension of the enduring presence of the precisely plotted novel form in a modern world that is beginning to understand itself as inherently indeterministic. That "causality, long the bastion of metaphyics" – and of emplotment, for that matter – "was toppled, or at least tilted" at the start of the twentieth century, creates fundamental (if predicable) complications for the novel (Hacking 1). To construct a plot in the twentieth century is to grapple with the challenge of representing a world in which, as Strehle puts it, "reality itself is no longer realistic" (Strehle x). Seemingly responding to what Hacking calls the "space [that] had been cleared for chance" in the

[4] See Vargish's *The Providential Aesthetic in Victorian Fiction* (1985).

universe, the twentieth-century novel thus becomes marked by its insistence on contingency and its excessive incorporation of chance occurrences, as if the sheer number of accidents and coincidences littering a plot could amount to some semblance of their authenticity (Hacking 1).

Notably, literary criticism has recently seen a dramatic turn to this pervasive role of chance that emerges in twentieth-century fictions. In the last decade alone, we saw the publication of Julia Jordan's *Chance and the Modern British Novel: From Henry Green to Iris Murdoch* (2010), Steven Belletto's *No Accident, Comrade: Chance and Design in Cold War American Narratives* (2011), Evan Horowitz' "Narrative Accidents and Literary Miracles" (2011), and Jason Puskar's *Accident Society: Fiction, Collectivity, and the Production of Chance* (2012). Not long before that were Ross Hamilton's *Accident: A Philosophical and Literary History* (2007) and Leland Monk's previously mentioned *Standard Deviations: Chance and the Modern British Novel* (1994).[5] But what is perhaps most curious about this inundation of the accidental in literary criticism is that, for all the research that has been done, it is still not entirely clear whether or not the accidental can exist in literature at all. Indeed, chance has been defined in these texts time and time again as distinctly at odds with fiction. Julia Jordan goes the long way around to explain, "The tension between our attraction to forms that seek to counter life's meaninglessness with narratives, and our contradictory desire for art to be as close to reality as possible (and so to tell us something about this, the most central aspect of reality as it is experienced), amounts to chance's 'unrepresentability' in narrative" (Jordan ix), while Monk states quite bluntly, "Chance marks and defines a fundamental limit to the telling of any story: *chance is that which cannot be represented in narrative*" (*Deviations* 9).

[5] Monk's text is especially useful in outlining the history of chance, which he claims was first consistently thematized by the atomists Leucippus and Democritus in the fifth century BC. Even then, however, according to Monk, "They considered chance only to deny its existence. One of the few surviving fragments from Leucippus states: 'Nothing occurs at random, but everything for a reason and by necessity.'…According to the early atomists, when we designate or experience something as chance, we do so simply because we are ignorant of its determinant cause" (*Deviations* 17).

Deciding whether or not the authentically aleatory has a place in narrative is not the goal of my project; rather, I am interested in exploring how modern novelists attempt to reconcile this intrinsic tension via the trope of the weather, which is at once the cipher of radical contingency and divine design. It might well be argued that, in addition to its influx of chance occurrences, the modern novel committed to an indulgence in experimental forms that effectively undermined the edict of the Aristotelian plot, as sequential beginnings, middles, and ends gave way to all kinds of non-prescriptive and nonlinear storytelling. While this dissertation recognizes the effort to redefine the novel form in this conscious complicating of cause and effect, it holds that there is no more avoiding emplotment than there is denying the novel's inherently deterministic nature. As Gary Saul Morson writes in *Narrative and Freedom*, the novel's is fundamentally a form that, as we now understand it, "falsifies in several distinct but closely related ways. It violates the continuity of experience by imposing a beginning and an ending; it reduces the plurality of wills and purposes to a single pattern; it makes everything fit, whereas in life there are always loose ends; and it closes down time by conferring a spurious sense of inevitability on the sequence actually realized" (Morson 39). Insofar as even its disorder is part of a deliberate design, I am thus of the mind that the novel inevitably continues to adhere to its providential aesthetic in the modern period, long after excusing God from his default Providence post. In maintaining that the novel is a deterministic system that can only ever hope to appear random, I now turn to the weather, which *is*, in fact, a deterministic system that looks random.

Although a formal and formalist pairing of weather and the novel has been largely overlooked in critical readings of the twentieth century, there nonetheless exists a tacit understanding of the parallels between the two systems, both of which are fundamentally concerned with finding order in apparent disorder. In his entry on literature and weather in the *Encyclopedia of Climate and Weather*, Eduardo Cadava claims, "We must also read literature itself as a kind of weather.

Literature too is a medium that moves and occurs according to the rhythms and crises of its own atmospheres, storms, or pressure zones. It too is read and interpreted" (Cadava 235). But even beyond this shared emphasis on reading and interpretation as the primary means of engagement, both meteorology and narratology are premised on the promise of causal continuity.

In its primarily formalist investigation of weather in film, Kristi McKim's *Cinema as Weather: Stylistic Screens and Atmospheric Change* is perhaps the project that comes closest to my own in its concerns.[6] In it, McKim also recognizes this overlap of weather and narrative, suggesting that "weather forecasting itself functions as an aspiration toward plot mastery: If I can read these signs, then I know the plot – the weather – to come…weather afford this fantasy of the plausible prediction of cause and effect" (McKim 70). Naturally, this "presupposition of causality" in the weather is, as Matthew Gumpert writes in *The End of Meaning*, directly tied to our ancient attribution of the weather to a meddlesome divine source, dating back to the Hellenic period: "Poseidon inciting the waves, Helios driving his chariot across the sky. Zeus, of course, hurling his thunderbolts across the sky, is for the Greeks the weather god par excellence" (Gumpert 380).[7] The willful reading of the weather as an expression of divine intervention speaks both to that perennial human desire to believe in a designed and ordered universe, and to our collective experience of weather, in all of its incomprehensible uncontrollability, as characteristically disorderly. As long as the seemingly random phenomena of the weather can be said to function as a "set of physical effects point[ing] to metaphysical causes," there is some sense to be made of them (Gumpert 383); further, this notion of divine weather assures us that the world is not indifferent to our affairs. Surely, if the inscrutable forces governing this world care enough to send condemnatory storms and punishing

[6] McKim's project diverges from mine most consciously in its focus on an alternative medium; significantly, because McKim is studying cinema, she is particularly interested in the literal controlling of the weather that is implicit in film production, which relies on the actual manufacturing of meteorological phenomena.

[7] The attribution of the weather to a transcendent force extends into the monotheistic Christian tradition, as well; most notably, among the many other natural disasters in the Old Testament, God is explicitly credited for causing the forty-day long Genesis Flood (from which only Noah and his family were saved).

lightning as disincentives, then human behavior must matter. To think otherwise would be intolerable.

Unfortunately, this is the situation in which the novelists of the twentieth century find themselves. As this dissertation will explore, the secularism that the scientific developments of the late nineteenth century yielded extended to the skies as well, from which the weather gods were promptly excised. Thus stripped of its divine design, the weather, it seemed, was relegated to the realm of the irreducibly stochastic at the exact moment when the novel, as I've suggested, was desperately trying to appear chancier than it was. Incidentally, however, just as the novel was leaning in to its embrace of chance, modern meteorology resurfaced with its sights set on eliminating it. As will be more fully explored in the second chapter, the science of meteorology, which emerged in earnest in the nineteenth century, did not become an urgent concern until World War One, when, as Bernard Mergen explains in *Weather Matters*, "transcontinental and transatlantic aviation made an understanding of the atmosphere an absolute necessity" (Mergen 321). Deemed a military imperative, meteorological science thus sought to (re)reframe the weather as a causally coherent system, wherein chance could be thwarted and accidents avoided.

"If we acknowledge accident," cautions Mergen, "we open the door to chaos" (250). Recalling Prospero's coding of the storm in *The Tempest*, the profane weather of the early twentieth century seemingly settled into its role as the instrument of the accidental in the modern novel.[8] But, sure enough, this reading of the weather as purely accidental left the door ajar just enough for Edward Lorenz to peek in, in 1961, and see the weather for what it had always been: a chaotic system. Lorenz' discovery of chaos theory – which he presented officially in a 1972 paper – confirmed what the *The Tempest* intuited three hundred plus years prior: that though the weather looks random, it is

[8] The weather's providential behavior during this increasingly secularized period also corroborates Mergen's reading of "accident [as] an argument against belief, against faith" (Mergen 250).

entirely deterministic.[9] Critically, this is the paradox that defines the chaotic system; in a 1993 follow-up, *The Essence of Chaos*, Lorenz clarifies that his use of the word "chaos" specifically refers to processes "that appear to proceed according to chance even though their behavior is in fact determined by precise laws" (Lorenz 4). In effect, then, insofar as the weather exhibits this chaotic "behavior that *is* deterministic…but does not *look* deterministic," it instantiates precisely the form that I am contending the twentieth-century novel wants to model (Lorenz 8). According to Lorenz' framing of it, chaos is not, as Mergen sees it, "the negative twin [of] the providential universe," but rather, its twin in disguise (Mergen 250). Insofar as the weather epitomizes this chaotic order that is masquerading as disorder, it thus emerges as an especially effective organizational trope in the modern novel, replacing the deistic providentialism of the nineteenth century.

We used to have God, now we have weather. In making its argument for reading the weather as the makeshift *deus ex machina* of the twentieth-century novel, the artificial but seemingly natural trope through which authors are able to resolve otherwise insoluble crises of causality in their plots, my project comes down to this foundational supersession. Initially conceived of as a theatrical term, *deus ex machina* – the Latin for "god from the machine" – directly referred to instances when, as Andrew Mason summarizes in *Ancient Aesthetics*, "an actor playing a god might sometimes appear, normally at the end of a play, on a platform raised about the stage by a crane, a literal mechanical device" (Mason 86). If the complete dearth of critical inquiry into this literal and figurative device can be taken as any indication, though, there is something so characteristically obvious about the *deus ex machina*, by definition, that it hardly requires further explanation. Though in fact, this lack of explanation is entirely in line with the essential function of the device, which has now come to denote any convenient contrivance that "does not arise naturally out of the plot," essentially

[9] As suggested by its title, Lorenz' 1972 paper – "Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in Brazil Set Off a Tornado in Texas?" – also laid out the premise of "miniscule disturbances" that created weather variability, which would provide the foundation of what is now commonly known as "the butterfly effect" (Lorenz 181).

signaling an advantageous intervention that refuses to explain itself (Mason 86).[10]

In titling this project *Weather ex Machina*, I am assuming all of the implications that come with substituting the weather for God in this way. This means, as I've said, that I am arguing for its prominence as a providential force, which provides causal coherence and (disorderly) order to narrative; and it means I am arguing that, in contrast to the commotion of the Greek actor being lowered onto the stage, the inconspicuousness of the weather's contrivance naturalizes the artificiality of causality and emplotment. But to replace God with the weather is also, necessarily, to concede to the ultimate inexplicability that the two forces claim. All of the critical studies I have consulted are in agreement with Gumpert's sentiment that "meteorological phenomena" remain our contemporary "equivalent of Greek gods" (Gumpert 392). But in drawing this comparison, time and again, students of the weather emphasize its persistent incomprehensibility: Gumpert cites its "sudden epiphanies, brutal and unheralded, of unfathomable and inexorable forces" (ibid); and Mergen, for his part, cannot shake the lingering feeling that the weather remains aleatory, noting, "uncertainty shines through every forecast; chance casts shadows in every weather model" (Mergen 324).

In our continued contending with what Mergen calls "the ineffable power of nature," there is a nagging sense that the more we have learned about the weather, the more mysterious it has become (Mergen 44). This, too, is built into its classification as a chaotic system; sensitive as it is to the variability of initial conditions, the weather (as Lorenz's insight only further proved) can operate deterministically according to precise laws and nonetheless remain fundamentally unpredictable in the long term.[11] Problematic as this elusiveness may seem for the scientist, it is key to the weather's

[10] Naturally, the *deus ex machina* conceit can be traced back to *Poetics*, in which Aristotle counsels that it is best avoided.

[11] Per Lorenz, chaotic systems operate according to their "sensitive dependence on initial conditions"; this sensitivity (to which the phrase "the butterfly effect," as originally conceived, referred) is "the chief cause of our well-known failure to make nearly perfect weather forecasts" (Lorenz 12). Though the earliest weather watchers could not have known that

usefulness to the novelists considered in this dissertation, all of whom are actively searching for something other than God through which they can explore life's mystery. Because "a world without God," as Susanna Lee writes in *Narrative and Secularism*, "does not mean a world without inscrutable forces. Or, put another way, a world without God is not really a world without God – it is simply a world with God transposed into other places and given other names" (Lee 173). The name that this dissertation gives it – the name, I argue, that E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Vladimir Nabokov, and Salman Rushdie have given it – is the weather.

The Chapters

Because of the universality of the weather in (and outside of) literature, my project has the unique advantage of scope, seamlessly transcending national and temporal boundaries, and disregarding the restrictive parameters of geography, gender, and genre. In four chronological chapters, this dissertation tracks the increasingly conspicuous repurposing of the weather as a *deus ex machina* across the twentieth century, from the reluctant modernism of E.M. Forster to the enthusiastically reflexive postmodernism of Salman Rushdie's postcolonial novels.

Because of the universality of the weather in (and outside of) literature, my project also has the unique disadvantage of scope, theoretically allowing for the consideration of virtually any novel. To this point, it is possible for me to imagine how this project might be productively expanded, its net cast even wider. That said, I have chosen to look at the four particular authors I do for several specific reasons. Implicit in my argument is the notion that because of its ubiquity, the weather is often taken for granted; our proneness to overlook it is part of what makes the weather such an effective means of sidestepping irresolvable questions of causality and emplotment. Necessarily, in

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there would always remain an element of uncertainty in our forecasts, the choice to call to their official meteorological speculations "the probabilities" presciently speaks to this (as further explored by John D. Cox in *Storm Watchers*).

order to best demonstrate this point that the weather can be ignored, I purposefully selected canonical works – each of them the object of many critical inquiries – in which the role of the weather as a determinative force *has been* ignored. My goal in returning to these oft-considered authors, then, is both to produce new, unexplored readings of their individual texts, and to begin to establish a much needed body of work on the entanglement of weather and causality in the twentieth-century novel more broadly.

Further, insofar as this dissertation suggests that modern authors are turning to the weather as a way of working out a pervasive ambivalence towards causality and plot in the twentieth-century, it also benefits from focusing on novelists who double as literary critics, who were self-consciously thinking through these issues in their lives as they wrestled with them in their fiction. Arbitrary as Forster himself finds beginnings, he nonetheless emerges as the logical person with whom to start this study, given that his theorizing of story versus plot in *Aspects of the Novel* provided a foundational framework of privileging causality in the twentieth-century novel that continues to endure. This is not to say, however, that there wasn't plenty of pushback, most immediately evident in the impulse of the modernist novel to rebel against the determinative causality to which it had been bound. Virginia Woolf is the representative figure of this resistance, arguing in "Modern Fiction" that plot is nothing but a conventional constraint, and that, "if the writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must…there would be no plot" ("Modern Fiction" 150). Notably, Woolf's linguistic likening of emplotment to entrapment, and the implied inescapability of causality, persists into the postmodernist period, resurfacing in the nonfiction of Vladimir Nabokov; in "The Tragedy of Tragedy," Nabokov criticizes the continued compulsion "to cling to the same old iron bars of determinism which have imprisoned the spirit" of narrative for years, and makes a case for breaking "the iron chain of tragic causation" by flattening causality into a no less inexorable cage of coincidences ("Tragedy" 326, 335). This skepticism regarding strict causality that we see in

Nabokov escalates into full satire by the time it reaches Salman Rushdie, whose handcuffing of his protagonist to history works to directly subvert the author's comically disingenuous position on plot: "Effects must not…be permitted to precede causes" (*MC* 282). To this point, Rushdie is perhaps most successful in his undermining of causality, muddling his plots where the others, to borrow Forster's favorite binary, are contented with affirming their mystery.

Distinct as each of their four approaches is, all of this conscious grapping with causality is symptomatic of a broader preoccupation with order and disorder that my selected authors share – one that is, not incidentally, compounded by their avowed atheism. Significant to this project's proposed swapping out of God for the weather is the fact these authors are united, ultimately, not only in their disbelief, but also in their collective conviction that there is nevertheless something inexpressibly mysterious about the inner workings of the world that they are striving to represent. Forster, who repeatedly registers his preference of mysteries over muddles in *A Passage to India*, delights in this premise, which he takes as a given: "Yes, there is a mystery," attests Helen Schlegel in *Howards End*, "It's not my fault. It's the way life has been made" (*HE* 165). Woolf likewise revels in "the mystery of life," writing in her story, "The Mark on the Wall," that "once a thing's done, no one ever knows how it happened" ("Mark" 153). Woolf's embrace of this inexplicable darkness, as Rebecca Solnit refers to it, finds its match in Nabokov's conclusion in *Transparent Things* that "another thing we are not supposed to do is to explain the inexplicable" (*TT* 93).[12] Theirs is a sentiment that Rushdie finally systematizes via the mysterious "Processes Too Complicated To Explain" that keep the fairy-tale universe of his *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* up and running (*HSS* 57).

Of course, the most conspicuous of these so-called P2C2E is none other than a mild but extremely opportune tempest, the intervention of which resolves Rushdie's plot. Though it will be

[12] See Solnit's *New Yorker* essay, "Woolf's Darkness: Embracing the Inexplicable" (24 April 2014). For more on Nabokov, see David S. Rutledge's *Nabokov's Permanent Mystery: The Expression of Metaphysics in His Work* (2010) and Leona Toker's *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* (2016).

more fully explored in the final chapter, I mention this here to stress that, invested as they are in life's mystery, the weather for these four novelists is not a matter of physics, but of metaphysics. Recalling the persisting inexplicability of the weather even well into the era of modern meteorology, Nabokov – himself a man of some science – hypothesized, "the greater one's science, the deeper the sense of mystery" (*SO* 44). Framed this way, as *The Tempest* initially intimated, nature is nothing short of magical. And indeed, as the following chapters will illustrate, each of these authors manages to pull off an impressive trick with their weather, its illusoriness effectively distracting us from the authorial sleight of hand that it has so naturally covered up.

My first chapter, "Acts of God: E.M. Forster and the Natural Disastrousness of Emplotment" considers the implications of Forster's divine scapegoating of the weather in *Howards End* and *A Passage to India*. Beyond its complication of Forster's presumed investment in individual agency and personal responsibility, this tracing of accountability signals the author's continued effort to preserve a coherent chain of causality in his increasingly muddled plots. Written at the start of the twentieth century, these transitional novels are marked for their anxieties about formlessness and their belabored adherence to strict cause and effect, reflective of Forster's own lingering attachment to a classical theory of narrative that modern physics and modernist literature had, by 1924, rendered all but unviable. Confronted with a secularized world in which God can no longer be relied upon as an instrument of order, Forster deifies the weather as an arbitrating force that shoulders the blame for his characters' misfortune and misconduct, imposes an inconspicuously providential pattern on his plots, and enforces poetic justice under the guise of extreme neutrality. Though, in turning to the sky as the ostensibly impartial judge of his texts, Forster, the chapter concludes, reminds us that there is no such thing as fair weather – least of all in fiction.

In contradistinction to Forster, Virginia Woolf does not want to foist some semblance of artificial authority onto her narratives, but rather, aspires for them to expose and reflect the

unruliness of lived experience. To this point, she cares less about the weather as a causal determinant than she does about its inherent indeterminacy, using it not as an ordering force in her texts, but as a disordering one. If the first chapter is interested in Forster's inculpation of the weather as a means of making his narratives appear more tightly plotted than they are, then this second chapter makes an argument for reading Virginia Woolf's co-option of the weather as an expression of her modernist resistance to the tyranny of plot itself. Working from the premise that meteorology is the science of reading the skies, chapter two, "Reading the Clouds: Weather as (Anti-)Plot in Virginia Woolf," delves into the compatibility – and potential incompatibility – of weather and narrative, particularly as explored in *To the Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts*. At once resistant to and representative of form, the weather becomes the medium through which Woolf is able to make her novels appear less typically Aristotelian than they, in fact, are. In particular, I argue that the cloud becomes the organizational model that Woolf employs to project a sense of shapelessness onto even her most traditionally structured novels, its nebulousness effectively enabling her to sustain an illusion of formlessness as she yields to the unavoidable convention of emplotment.

As the twentieth century progresses and modernism gives way to postmodernism, representations of the weather in the novel become increasingly reflexive and conspicuously (re)charged. In the third chapter, "The Man Who Loved Lightning: Vladimir Nabokov and the Tragedy of Coincidence," I interrogate the author's striking affinity for the fateful bolt from the blue – that most (naturally and supernaturally) charged of meteorological phenomena, and the one through which Nabokov attempts to work out an ambivalence towards freedom and determinism that persists across his entire oeuvre. As with Woolf and her clouds, the lightning bolt is structurally significant for Nabokov, its characteristic zigzags offering a model metaphor for the erratic flow of life's plot. However, whereas Woolf's cloudy plots are purposefully indeterminate, the plotting sky of *Lolita* turns out to be anachronistically overdetermined, the novel's causality of meteorological

coincidence as ineluctable as those chains of tragic cause and effect that Nabokov claims to disdain. This chapter argues that it is precisely because of its pervasive power as a symbol of radical contingency that the lightning Nabokov stages in *Lolita* and its adapted screenplay works so effectively as a signifier of Humbert Humbert's fatidic entrapment; freakishly accidental as they may appear, the accumulation and coordination of lightning and thunderstorms across the author's career form a pattern that, while working to spring Humbert from his psychically determined cell, simply illuminates a different set of bars: those of his artistic cage.

Insofar as each of these authors' strategic blaming of the weather becomes itself a mode of emplotment, their novels enact what I refer to throughout this dissertation as a formal instantiation of climatic determinism. In the spirit of turning what appears first in Forster as a problematic imperialist notion into a progressive postcolonial solution, the fourth chapter, "What Blurs Best in the Heat: Salman Rushdie and the Muddling of Cause and Effect," charts Rushdie's thematic and structural inversion of climate determinism through his fantasies of temperamental climates that are determined by the characters of *Midnight's Children*, *The Satanic Verses*, and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. This blurry causality, which extends from Rushdie's moody lands to his muddled plots, is helped along, specifically, by that border-gnawing element of extreme heat – the infamously deleterious and confusing effects of which Rushdie does not refute, but rather, exaggerates to his own anti-partitioning ends. Implicit in this delusory weather that enables Rushdie's satire – the reality of which is its unreality – is the idea that it is no more or less of a fairy tale to make individuals directly responsible for the environment than it is to claim that the environment is responsible for individuals. Though there are no legitimate gods to be found in his skies, in imagining his characters as meteorological magicians, Rushdie, this last chapter argues, finally and unequivocally marks the weather as the enchanted and enchanting site of authorial hocusing and pocusing in the twentieth-century novel.

Reflecting the secular humanism of the figures at its center, this project is fundamentally invested in questions of individual autonomy and collective culpability. Underlying each of these readings is a suggested argument that, in routinely blaming the weather in their texts, these authors are undermining their own humanist instincts; to let their characters off the hook is also to deny them agency. But to track this trend over the course of the twentieth century is also to witness a swinging of the pendulum; for, by the time we reach the 1980s, Rushdie is conceiving of worlds wherein his characters are claiming responsibility for everything, including the weather. Not for nothing, it so happens that this is more or less how we've come to understand the very epoch in which we are currently living.

Having officially entered the age of the Anthropocene (named for its figuring of the human species as a determinative geological force), we are now navigating a world wherein the extreme ecological influence that Rushdie fantasized about bestowing on his characters, effectively making them responsible for drastic alterations in the weather, has become our nightmarish reality. "Meteorological activity, so long yoked to morality," observes Schulz, "finally has genuinely ethical stakes" (Schulz 2015). But at what point do these stakes begin to inform our reading and writing of the novel? It should be noted that Rushdie's manufactured weather and magically tropicalized cities are clearly evocative of global warming and of the increasingly undeniable impact of industry on the environment. And yet, as enthusiastic as Rushdie's novels are about their dramatically changing climates, he seems decidedly uninterested in confronting climate change. I am calling attention to this here neither to chastise nor excuse Rushdie, but to help clarify how I am situating my own project in relation to ecocriticism – the emergent, environmentally-conscious field of literary studies that any contemporary consideration of weather must call to mind.

Though necessarily in an unspoken dialogue with ecocritical themes, this dissertation, following the lead of the novels it reads, inches just up to the edges of the field without engaging it

directly. At least, not until the coda, which, in line with the chronological organization of the chapters, will bring Rushdie and myself to a reckoning with the state of causality and emplotment in the contemporary novel. This postponing of ecocritcal discourse is purposeful, having to do with methodology only in part. In the (approximately) thirty years since its inception, ecocriticism has produced a substantial corpus that addresses the relationship of humans to nature, the politics of artistic representation and linguistic mediation, and the potential of utilizing literature as a means of environmental activism. However, as some of the most prominent and influential ecocritics have noted, it still remains to be seen how such concerns might be conjoined to formal and aesthetic issues.[13] Insofar as mine is a study of the novel form and my intended intervention is on narrative grounds, the theoretical approach of this dissertation thus diverges from that of ecocriticism, which, as Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells explain in *Writing the Environment*, "seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis" (Kerridge & Sammells 5).

While this dissertation recognizes the potential value of turning to literature in responding to our current climate crisis, I also feel it is important to emphasize that the twentieth-century novels that this project considers are not, in fact, responses to our current climate crisis. To be sure, the close monitoring of changes in their weather was a shared preoccupation of each of my authors: E.M. Forster often worried about allergies and air pollution; Virginia Woolf watched the skies compulsively during the war, when every clear forecast threatened a raid; and Vladimir Nabokov claimed that, from the age of seven, his first waking thought was of the weather and of the butterfly

[13] In a 2011 forum on "Literature and Environment," preeminent Ecocritics Lawrence Buell, Ursula K. Heise, and Karen Thornber acknowledged these limitations of the field: "Although Ecocriticsm has successfully examined such forms as pastoral and apocalyptic narratives that address the state of the natural world, it has, to date, less intensively engaged with literary forms that tend not to engage with the natural world thematically, especially the highly experimental forms that have developed over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The question of how an environmentalist perspective may speak to the issue of aesthetic form and its functions will need to be answered more broadly before Ecocriticism can command the attention of literary scholars not primarily concerned with environmentalism."

hunting it would (or would not) engender (*SM* 120). However, with the exception of Salman Rushdie, these authors were not and could not have been aware that they were already in the midst of the very crisis that has now come to define our contemporary world, along with the hyper environmentally-aware fiction that our novelists must write. As such, much as they might anticipate our own ecocritical moment, there is an alternative value in taking the novels of the twentieth century on their own terms, as they offer us the last opportunity of looking at the weather in fiction with the naiveté of anthropogenic ignorance.

Although I can concede that its presence is markedly more subtle, I am resistant to Kathryn Schulz reading in *The New Yorker* that the weather loses its metaphorical clout in the twentieth century; on the contrary, this dissertation makes the case for reading the novel of the twentieth century as the last place in which we were able to think and write about weather as metaphor, be it one of irreducible stochasticism or of divine design. Once the ultimate signifier of banality and frivolity in discourse, today's weather is all too real. Tempering the urge to see our current climate crisis forecasted in the fiction of the twentieth century, the chapters that follow are a series of explorations into how literary representations of weather can expose distinctly modern textual anxieties. Specifically, in its function as a makeshift *deus ex machina*, a tropological metaphor for the contrivance of the providential aesthetic, the weather illuminates – as it works to mitigate – the crisis of causality in the secular novels of E.M. Foster, Virginia Woolf, Vladimir Nabokov, and Salman Rushdie.

Chapter One

Acts of God: E.M. Forster and the Natural Disastrousness of Emplotment

Well, the rain falls on the just and the unjust, as they say, doesn't it? Ha-ha.
– Elizabeth Bowen, The Heat of the Day

However much you may deplore the badness of the weather, nobody is likely to hold you responsible for it.
– The Independent, July 1913

One may as well begin with *Howards End*. We are midway through the novel. Margaret Schlegel and Henry Wilcox have recently announced their engagement. Even more recently, Helen Schlegel has found fault with Henry for the financial misfortune of Leonard Bast and announced that she has every intention of disliking her sister's betrothed. And just now, this very morning, Margaret has made her inaugural visit to the Imperial and West African Rubber Company – the workplace of Henry and the ethically questionable source of the Wilcoxes' own upper-class empire. It is then, as she and Henry are leaving the imperial office, that the narrator – seemingly through free indirect discourse – laments, "It was not an impressive drive. Perhaps the weather was to blame, being grey and banked high with weary clouds" (*HE* 168).

This not-so-scenic drive from the Imperial and West African Rubber Company to Howards End is, like the empty weather chatter it precipitates, rather banal. And yet, in the narrator's idiomatic indictment of the weather as the source of Margaret's ennui, this moment crystalizes several of the primary concerns of both Forster's fiction and this chapter. In its most broad thematic strokes, this articulation and assignment of blame recalls Forster's preoccupation with the separate but intimately related questions of judgment, accountability, and personal responsibility that are integral to both *Howards End* and *A Passage to India*. More specifically, in identifying England's predictably inclement climate as the likely root cause of Margaret's ills, the passage exemplifies Forster's habit of scapegoating the weather – marked for its innocuousness and indifference – not

only as a means of navigating these crises of agency within his plots, but also as a method of naturalizing the implausible structure of narrative itself. Knowing what we know of the scene in context, it is clear the cloudy skies are not really the cause (or at the very least, not the *only* cause) of the dampened mood. However, it is the mere fact of this narratorial impulse to connect – to try to untangle the novel's "jangles of causes and effects" (*HE* 281) – that speaks to the increasingly suspect issue of causality that Forster's texts are exploring.

How do causal chains work in narratives? How far back must we trace those chains to have done our due diligence in identifying the beginning of an end? Such an investment in causal logic, as epitomized by Margaret's internal indexing of possible sources of blame, is built into *Howards End*'s famously unmotivated opening: "One may as well begin with Helen's letters to her sister" (*HE* 3). The ambivalence of Forster's narrator betrays the self-consciousness of the text itself, which recognizes the necessary arbitrariness of emplotment and artificiality of narrative even as it performs them. A notoriously unclassifiable author straddling the line between Victorianism and Modernism, Forster is writing in the first decades of the twentieth century, when the premises of both causality and the novel form are being called into question. With religion giving way to science as the ruling law of order (and possibly chaos) in the universe and modernist experimentalism threatening to do away with the Aristotelian plot entirely, Forster's novels emerge as what Leland Monk identifies as an attempt to renovate "an old-fashioned and generally discredited way of ordering narrative experience which had come to seem irrelevant in his time" ("Apropos of Nothing" 401). Marked for their pervasive anxiety over formlessness, Forster's novels – particularly *Howards End* and *A Passage to India* – seem desperate to supply causal explanation where causal explanation is impossible, to provide a "why," to make sense of the muddle that life has become in the wake of a secularized emphasis on chance and the accidental. In other words: only to connect.

If the aim of Forster's texts is only connection, it is the weather, I am suggesting, that acts as the force of that connection, both in its capacity to bring together characters in his stories and in its repurposing as an organizing principle of his plots. In *On Beauty*, Zadie Smith's contemporary reimagining of *Howards End*, Smith illustrates weather's unique ability to erase distinction and unify disparate entities, even if only temporarily: "Outside the democratic East Coast snow was still falling," she writes, "making the garden chairs the same as the garden tables and plants and mailboxes and fence-posts" (*OB* 13). Beyond Smith's politicizing of the weather as democratic and its implications for the presumed neutrality of the weather within and outside of fiction, it is the flattening of difference into sameness and its connective affordances that I am especially interested in exploring here. Manifested in the snow for Smith, it is the same elemental and elementary sameness that Forster locates in India's heat, as when Aziz "had breathed in for an instant the mortal air that surrounds Orientals and all men" (*PTI* 59), or later, when it is "as if the heat of the sun had boiled and fried all the glories of the earth into a single mess" (*PTI* 257). To be sure, there are fundamental thematic and structural differences between *Howards End* and *A Passage to India*, just as there are fundamental class and ideological differences between the Wilcoxes, the Schlegels and the Basts, and fundamental national and religious differences between Fielding and Aziz. However, as the chapter will show, Forster's weather does its best to collapse these differences: in their shared investment in the potentiality of forging connections and the disastrous consequences of our failures to do so, both *Howards End* and *A Passage to India* take up as their causes the interrelated topics of assigning blame, passing judgment, and accepting and avoiding personal responsibility; unable to resolve these issues internally, each ultimately looks to the sky, which, as promised, "settles everything" (*PTI* 5).

In *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, Harold Bloom observes, "Stevens turns to the idea of weather precisely as the religious man turns to the idea of God, which is to say that for him

the weather is not just a trope for the supreme fiction but is itself as much of that fiction as poetry is or can be" ("Stevens" 186). This dissertation adopts Bloom's reading, arguing that the novel of the twentieth century likewise turns to weather as the religious man turns to God, finding in its disorderly order a providential force better suited to our modern era; in the case of this first chapter, E.M. Forster inculpates and deifies the weather to impose a meaningful pattern on his fiction – one that can at once function deterministically but appear stochastic, thereby maintaining the charade of literary lifelikeness. This semblance of controlled contingency is crucial to Forster, for whom the compulsory aspects of the novel are cause for serious concern. As is common to each of this project's authors, Forster is conflicted about the novel as a form, at once deeply committed to the principle of cause and effect and rightly dubious of emplotment, given its falsifying project of "transform[ing] life into destiny" (Barthes 39). The convenience of a theistic world-view, assured as it is of a God who acts as First Cause and divinely designs the universe, is that it is thus compatible with the determinism of the novel, which as Frank Kermode writes, "not only fakes human relationships but also, working against muddle and chance, fakes an idea of order without which those relationships could have no significance" ("Orderly Product" 81).[1] However, as it is for his proxy in *A Passage to India*, who professes outright, "I don't believe in Providence…I don't believe in God," Forster's view of the world is decidedly godless; in spite of this, and likely because of it, Forster is looking for an alternative ordering trope through which life's muddledom might be rearranged into a meaningful mystery (*PTI* 120).

"Without form," wonders Forster's Cyril Fielding, "how can there be beauty?" (*PTI* 313) Conceding to the fact that causality is itself a fiction, and conscious of narrative's inability to

[1] The title of Kermode's essay, "The One Orderly Product," alludes directly to Forster's own discussion, in "Art for Art's Sake," of art as one of only two possible ways of producing order in the universe; the other, which he says "lies outside [his] terms of reference," is "the divine order, the mystic harmony, which according to all religions is available for those who can contemplate it" ("Art's Sake" 89). Forster, for his part, cannot contemplate this, and is as a result all the more committed to preserving order in his art.

faithfully represent an inherently indeterminate world, Forster turns to the weather (itself long thought to be divinely sourced) in an effort to impose a secular but nonetheless believable form onto that which is inherently formless. In its function as the prevailing deity of his narratives – its interventions resolving the crisis of lost causation – the weather becomes a makeshift *deus ex machina* for Forster, effectively naturalizing his own authorial machinations. And yet, contra Kermode, these contrivances of plot do not validate, but rather, undermine the relations of Forster's human characters, along with his own humanist project. Indeed, in making a divine scapegoat of the weather, Forster is successful in connecting his characters and preserving coherent chains of cause and effect in his narratives; however, in absolving all individuals of blame via his formalist adoption of climatic determinism, Forster reminds us that, insofar as literary weather is necessarily divine weather, it can only ever be as fair as the author-god who is, in the beginning and the end, responsible for it.

Aspects of the Novelist

> *The rain fell alike upon the just and upon the unjust, and for nothing was there a why and a wherefore.*
> *– W. Somerset Maugham, Of Human Bondage*

Arbitrary as E.M. Forster himself felt beginnings to be, my decision to start this study with him is a motivated one. Essential to my readings of weather as the mark of a crisis of causality in narrative is a critical understanding of plot; and, despite whatever other discrepancies there may be in the evolving theories of the novel over the course of the twentieth century, Forster's 1927 *Aspects of the Novel* remains, invariably, one of two foundational texts that is cited as a source of our modern conception of plot. The other text, with which Forster explicitly engages and from whose commandments he imagines himself diverging, is Aristotle's *Poetics*. I say "imagines" here because, though Forster's own theory of plot begins with a rebuke of Aristotle, the two are very much in

agreement when it comes to their definitions of the term, particularly in their shared conviction that plot assumes the formulation and preservation of a chain of cause and effect.

For Aristotle, plot entails unity; this to say, a plot is a self-contained completed action, with "the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed" (Aristotle 35). So, too, for Forster, who likewise notes that a plot is "aesthetically compact"; echoing Aristotle's emphasis on the unity of completion, Forster concurs, "Every action or word ought to count; it ought to be economical and spare; even when complicated it should be organic and free from dead-matter" (*Aspects* 88). Further, and of more immediate relevance to my own concerns, Aristotle and Forster are of one mind in their regard of causality as the constitutive element of plot. As established by Aristotle, the plot, if "whole," "has a beginning, a middle, and an end" that are connected, specifically, "by causal necessity"; this, as opposed to the mere sequencing that characterizes an episodic narrative (Aristotle 31). Incidentally, in what has become perhaps the most well-rehearsed theorization of plot in literary criticism, Forster essentially makes this same distinction, though he frames it using different terms:

> We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. "The king died and then the queen died" is a story. "The king died and then the queen died of grief" is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it…If it is in a story we say: "And then?" If it is in a plot we ask: "Why?" That is the fundamental difference between these two aspects of the novel. (*Aspects* 86)

Though the definition and application of "story" and "plot" would become increasingly muddled in the literary criticism of the next several decades, Forster's drawing of the hard line of causality as a non-negotiable element of narrative would prove an enduring aspect of novel theory, and of the novel itself, in the twentieth century.

Forster's distinction between story and plot has some of its most familiar echoes in the roughly contemporary rhetoric of the Russian Formalists, particularly in Boris Tomashevky's *Thematics*. However, while Forster sets the mere sequencing of events of story against implicit

causality of plot, for Tomashevsky, story, too, "requires not only indications of time, but also indications of cause" (Tomashevsky 164) Here, the story is defined not against plot, but instead, against the chronicle or description: "As the story line becomes weaker, we move from the novel to the chronicle, to a simple statement of the sequence of events" (ibid). Conceiving of story and plot not as mutually exclusive alternatives (as Forster does), but rather, as standard aspects of any narrative, the Russian Formalists stress a narratological distinction of a different sort. Their innovation emphasizes two modes of narrative construction, termed fabula and syuzhet; roughly mapping onto story and plot, both the fabula and syuzhet assume causation and are inherent to works of fiction, but they denote distinct systems of ordering and reordering in the text: "From this point of view," Tomashevsky writes, "the story [fabula] is the aggregate of motifs in their logical, causal-chronological order; the plot [syuzhet] is the aggregate of those same motifs but having the relevance and the order which they had in the original work" (ibid). In its association with the rearrangement of events, Tomashevsky's plot deviates from Aristotle's, given that the modern Tomashevsky plot might just as easily begin with the middle or even the ending of a story. But again, the consensus here is on the integrality of causality; the Aristotelian components remain intact, even if the causal threads connecting them are becoming more and more easily tangled.

As the potential knottiness of plot became increasingly pronounced in the postmodern fiction of the later twentieth century, narrative theory continued to insist on the indispensability of causality. In *Story and Discourse*, Seymour Chatman reiterates the necessarily causal connection of events in narratives, though he clarifies that "causation may be overt, that is, explicit, or covert, implicit" (Chatman 45). The reference here to implicit causation is a direct response to Forster's earlier royal narrative. Challenging Forster's designation of plot as plot on the grounds that it adds causation to story, Chatman argues that, "because our minds inveterately seek structure," we will infer causation even when it is not explicitly stated (ibid). Referring back to the two accounts of the

sequentially deceased king and queen, Chatman writes, "At the deeper structural level, the causal element is present in both. The reader 'understands' or supplies it; he infers that the king's death is the cause of the queen's" (Chatman 46). Because of this, Chatman concludes that, though "modern authors claim to reject or modify the notion of strict causality…a narrative without a plot is a logical impossibility" (Chatman 47). In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth comes to a similar conclusion, suggesting that this logic of causality is not only inherently understood by the reader, but further, that it has become ingrained to such an extent that it is now compulsory for an author to affirm it: "When we see a causal chain started, we demand – and demand in a way that is only indirectly related to mere curiosity – to see the result. Emma meddles, Tess is seduced, Huck runs away – and we demand certain consequences…Not only do we believe that certain causes do in life produce certain effects; in literature we believe that they should" (Booth 126).[2]

Booth's supposition that narrative fiction demands at least the implication of causality, with which this project is inclined to agree, is striking to me for two separate though not unrelated reasons: first, Booth's repeated reference to this "demand" for causal chains speaks to an expectation on the part of the reader, the pressure of which Forster, writing nearly forty years earlier, was already feeling: with the comfortable distance of a critic who had given up novel writing for good, Forster writes, "We expect ['the plot-maker'] to leave no loose ends" (*Aspects* 88). Indeed, this chapter goes so far as to suggest that it is, in part, because of this expectation that Forster opted out of writing any more novels during his remaining forty-plus years, finding the obligatory act of plot-making fundamentally at odds with the concurrent revelation that life itself is full of loose ends.

[2] As Brian Richardson notes in *Unlikely Stories*, the link between plot and causation has been reinforced time and again over the course of the last century; among others, Richardson cites the work of Mieke Bal, J. Arthur Honeywell, Peter Rabinowitz, and the film critics, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (Richardson 93). To that list I would also add Peter Brooks, though he substitutes a rhetoric of interconnectedness and intentionality for causality, figuring plot as "the very organizing line, the thread of design, that makes narrative possible" (Brooks 4).

After all, and in getting to the second striking element of Booth's reading, it is notable that his statement of a lingering desire for complete causal chains in literature comes in the wake of a wave of scientific developments that had quite convincingly cut through the very idea that any such causal chains exist; although, perhaps it is precisely because this belief in the providential and then Newtonian notion of a billiard-ball model of cause and effect had been shaken to its core that certain novelists of this transitional time doubled down on their commitment to causally coherent plotting. Such, I propose, is the case for E.M. Forster, in whose criticism and fiction alike we encounter this basic tension: he is at once a key proponent of a traceable chain of causality as the prerequisite for a plot, and is also deeply ambivalent towards the process of emplotment, acutely aware as he is of its artificiality.

Before proceeding any further, it seems useful to define "emplotment," given its prominence not only in this chapter, but in the dissertation more broadly. Initially characterized in *Poetics* as the "organization (*systasis*) of events," emplotment is, as elaborated upon by Olav Bryant Smith, "a complement to the verb *compose*, and *poetics* is itself defined as *the art of emplotment*, or *composing plots*. We can think thus of *emplotment* as a verbal *composition*, organizing disparate events into the unity of composition, and the *poetics* as the particular kind of composing, or organizing, which creates a unified plot from what would otherwise be thought of as disconnected events" (O.B. Smith 146). This "operation that draws a configuration out of a simple succession" (as Paul Ricoeur alternately defines emplotment) is an active one, and one that, I would contend – as Ricoeur likewise does in *Time and Narrative* – inherently implies causality (*Time* 65).

Of even more urgent consequence, however, is that in its imposition of causality onto mere sequence, emplotment has come to be understood as a fictionalizing enterprise. For Ricoeur, as for historian Hayden White, emplotment is an exercise in meaning making, a unifying process that engenders narrative intelligibility. But in recognizing emplotment as a means of making sense of the

world, White calls attention to a troubling premise: the world, as it is experienced, does not make sense. "We do not *live* stories," he argues, "even if we give our lives meaning by retrospectively casting them in the form of stories" ("Literary Artifact" 200).[3] In other words, novels must be classified as fictional not only because they narrate stories about characters that do not exist and events that did not happen, but also because the nature of narrative emplotment itself, the "desire to have real events display coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure," is an attempt – as argued by White – to represent "an image of life that is and can only be imaginary" ("Value of Narrativity" 27). Indeed, as Booth likewise observes, "Most deprecations of plot are based on the claim that life does not provide plots, and literature should be like life" (Booth 56). To be sure, mimesis and its investment in notions of verisimilitude are at the heart of Aristotle's *Poetics*. But White challenges the very viability of assessing plot based on its life-likeness, asking, "Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subject, proper beginnings, middles, and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see 'the end' in every beginning?" ("Value of Narrativity" 27)

It may turn out that the answer to this question is, "It used to." Or, more specifically, "We used to think so." As Stephen Kern outlines in his *Cultural History of Causality*, the logic of providential order, which was pervasive for centuries preceding the Enlightenment, essentially understands life as God's well-made story: "In such an order God foresees all events, cares for his creatures, and directs their lives for some ultimate purpose. Nothing occurs by mere chance.

[3] For Ricoeur, as for Hayden White, the stakes of identifying this process of composing coherent narratives through emplotment emerge in their suggestions that this structuring impulse applies to history as well as literature. White's insistence on this likeness is at the crux of his essay, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact": So too for historical narratives. They succeed in endowing sets of past events with meanings, over and above whatever comprehension they provide by appeal to putative causal laws, by exploiting the metaphorical similarities between sets of real events and the conventional structures of our fictions. By the very constitution of a set of events in such a way as to make a comprehensible story out of them, the historian charges those events with the symbolic significance of a comprehensible plot structure. Historians may not like to think of their works as translations of fact into fiction; but this one of the effects of their works" ("Literary Artifact" 202).

Coincidences are humans' partial interpretations of an overall deterministic design that only God sees fully" (*Causality* 329). By 1910, however, a disbelieving E.M. Forster was left consciously contending with the arbitrariness and artificiality of emplotment, tormented by the realization that "life and death were anything and everything except this ordered insanity" (*HE* 281); with its continued investment in a guarantee of consequences in the face of an increasingly unstable notion of cause and effect, *Howards End* reads as Forster's way of wrestling with this incongruence between "the chaotic nature of our daily life [and] the orderly sequence that has been fabricated by historians" (*HE* 91). That has been fabricated not only by historians, but also by novelists. That has been fabricated, even, by Forster himself. Indeed, as this chapter will illustrate, this is the essential contradiction in Forster's relationship to the novel form: As a critic, Forster is wary of emplotment, and consistently betrays an awareness of narrative structuring's falsification of what he regularly refers to as "actual life," which is "full of false clues and signposts that lead nowhere" (ibid). As confirmed in *Aspects of the Novel*, Forster is under no pretense that a novel is anything but "a work of art, with its own laws, which are not those of daily life" (*Aspects* 62). And yet, as a novelist, Forster is nonetheless resolute in his conviction that it is his responsibility to provide a plot. "Most of life is so dull that there is nothing to be said about it," muses the narrating voice of *A Passage to India*, "and the books and talk that would describe it as interesting are obliged to exaggerate, in the hope of justifying their own existence" (*PTI* 146). But more than feeling obligated, Forster seems to take comfort in this dutiful adherence to the forceful, if forced, plotting of his narratives, which becomes for him a process of meaning-making, the expression of what Alan Wilde identifies as the author's "search for wholeness, a consonance of all forms and levels of existence" (A. Wilde 107). Insofar as Forster believes that art is, in his own words, "the one orderly product which our muddling race has produced," both *Howards End* and *A Passage to India* read as enactments of the search for wholeness via narrative form, their shared impulse to construct schematically designed and sensibly linked

worlds of causes and effects signaling Forster's admitted yearning for an ordered world that can only ever exist in his novels ("Art's Sake" 90).

This outmoded desire for order, which Leland Monk refers to as Forster's "regressive providentialism" strikes me as entirely of a piece with the Forster's epigraphic commandment at the start of *Howards End* to "Only connect" ("Apropos of Nothing" 401). Forster's oft-cited mantra is typically considered for its bearing on the interpersonal relationships in his novels; specifically, it reads as a criticism of Henry Wilcox's inability (or unwillingness) to recognize his own complicity in the lives of others and as a complement to the eventual collapse of *Howards End*'s three discrepant families into one harmonious household. This is very much in line with Forster's own humanist ideology, along with his privileging of character over plot in *Aspects of the Novel*. In, fact, it is on this point that Forster ultimately claims to disagree with Aristotle, for whom characters always exist as a "contribution to plot" (*Aspects* 85). To Forster's mind, the triumph of plot through what he calls "patterning" (his word to describe what we'd now call emplotment) comes at the expense of the humanity of the characters, who "have to suspend their natures at every turn, or else are so swept away by the course of Fate that our sense of their reality is weakened" (*Aspects* 93). And yet, this chapter argues, plot *does* triumph in the novels of E.M. Forster, for whom the mandate of connection becomes as much a matter of structural concern as it is one of empathy.

It must be said that despite publishing during the decades of the most revolutionary upheaval in the history of the novel form, Forster is conspicuously more conventional in his methods than many of his contemporaries. As Zadie Smith writes in her essay, "E.M. Forster, Middle Manager," Forster occupies a liminal space in literary history, always "halfway to where people want him to be"; specifically, she continues, Forster is an "Edwardian among modernists" ("Middle Manager" 15). Indeed, in line with Smith's categorization and my own reading of Forster's prioritizing of formal connections over interpersonal ones, both *Howards End* and *A Passage to India*

keep in the tradition of the classical Aristotelian plot, recognizable in their adherence to linear storytelling and resolved in their attempted recuperation of decipherable chains of cause and effect.[4] Certainly, such a desire for a connected form would have felt especially urgent during the historical moment when Forster was writing, when notions of divine providence had been all but abandoned and emergent theories of chance and disorder challenged the very viability of a meaningfully linked sequence of events.

But what, exactly, connects Forster's texts, both independently and to one another? The same thing that connects all of us, of course: the weather.[5] Published fourteen years apart (in 1910 and 1924, respectively), both *Howards End* and *A Passage to India* feature a central moral crisis, the cause of which, though muddled, can be traced back to the ostensibly accidental but utterly contrived meetings of their characters, whose foul-weather friendships precipitate Forster's naturally disastrous plots. Betraying his own sense that God cannot be relied upon as a providential designer, Forster makes a habit of bringing his characters together in ways that appear entirely inadvertent. Significantly, however, and foundational to my reading of Forster's scapegoating of the weather, in both novels these inadvertent meetings occur as a matter of meteorological happenstance. As will be explored momentarily, the paradigmatic example here is the case of Leonard Bast, who comes into the lives of the well-meaning but misguided Schlegels by way of an entirely innocent umbrella mix-up at a performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in rainy London. But, as we will see, there is a pattern to Forster's weather: for, as in *Howards End*, if we follow the catastrophic excursion to the Marabar caves in *A Passage to India* back to its starting point in the narrative, we arrive at a moment

[4] In *Challenge and Conventionality in the Fiction of E.M. Forster*, Stephen K. Land likewise observes: "Forster's plots are tightly structured, their three-phase pattern satisfying clearly the Aristotelian requirement that a story should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. The progress of the hero from an unsatisfactory initial situation, through a period of intensifying difficulty and unease, to a final release and resolution following a change of heart, is the classical pattern of heroic legend and romance" (Land 234-5).

[5] In a 2008 roundtable, "Pathetic Fallacy: Weather and Imagination," Anthony Leiserowitz summarized this universalizing and connective power of the weather: "Weather happens to be on of those things that I like to think of as a social glue. It's one of the things that unite all of us" ("Pathetic Fallacy" 5).

marked not by choice, but by climatically over-determined chance. Recalling the serendipitous entwinement of Leonard Bast and the Schlegel sisters, Dr. Aziz initially meets and becomes involved with Mrs. Moore when she leaves the performance of *Cousin Kate* at the local club on account of the Chandrapore heat (*PTI* 19). It is thus in her own quest for fresh air that Mrs. Moore irreproachably chances into the ineluctable chain of events that will lead to Dr. Aziz's trial and Adela Quested's tribulation. "No worse insult could be given to such a hero than to say that he had acted innocently," writes Hegel: "It is the honor of these great characters to be culpable" (qtd. in Macpherson 9). In suggesting, even inadvertently, that the weather is to blame for the array of actions that ensue, Forster's plots jeopardize the autonomy of his characters; despite being socially-conscious texts that allege to be deeply concerned with personal responsibility, both novels ultimately resist casting judgment in the cases of the parabolic ethical dilemmas around which the narratives revolve, defaulting instead to the absolving power of Forster's unavoidable acts of god.

Finding Fault with Forster's Weather

The rain, it raineth on the just
And also on the unjust fella;
But chiefly on the just, because
The unjust hath the just's umbrella.
– Charles Bowen

It used to be that beginnings weren't so arbitrary. It used to be that, in tracing causal chains back to their origin, one had to begin with God. This is premise of the First Cause Argument, initially put forth by Aristotle in *Physics* and later amended by St. Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica* to better fit his Christian framework. Alternatively referred to as the concept of the prime mover or unmoved mover, this theory of causation can be summarized as follows:

> The First Cause Argument states that absolutely everything has been caused by something else prior to it: nothing has just sprung into existence without a cause. Because we know that

> the universe exists, we can safely assume that a whole series of causes and effects led to its being as it is. If we follow this series back we will find an original cause, the very first cause. This first cause, so the First Cause Argument tells us, is God. (Warburton 16)[6]

Given humanity's propensity to identify God as the cause of all things, it should come as no surprise that this divine force has also been credited, historically, with causing the weather. Well into the nineteenth century, faced with the seemingly aleatory behavior of the skies and lacking the science to identify its laws, communities turned to deities to explain the full spectrum of weather phenomena. In *The Weather Experiment*, Peter Moore's bildungsroman of meteorology, Moore writes that up to the mid-1800s, "For most, weather was a divine force, mood music conducted by God sent to foreshadow change or punish a sin…It was only right. The sky was God's wilderness" (Moore 3). Even when the scientific advancements produced in the Enlightenment started to reveal the *real* causes of meteorological phenomena, humans clung to the deistic explanation, insisting that "the climate reflected the regular actions of physical laws that were manifestations of God's providential benevolence" (Golinski xii). Resigned to the perennial human inclination to attribute the weather to transcendent causes, Matthew Gumpert likewise concludes in *The End of Meaning* that "weather for most of us is proof, every day, of the existence of God – whether we call him Nature, or Destiny, or Law of the Cosmos" (Gumpert 382).

Dating back at least as far as the Greeks, for whom meteorological events happened at the whims of a pantheon of "anthropomorphized, divine instigators," this classical reading of weather's causality finds its modern analog in the Old Testament God, whose divine judgment is routinely made manifest in the moodiness of the sky (Gumpert 380). "The Christian story proposes

[6] In Aquinas' own words: "In a world of sense we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now in efficient causes it is not possible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause, and the intermediate is the cause of the ultimate cause, whether the intermediate cause be several, or only one. Now to take away the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore, if there be no first among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate, nor intermediate cause. But if in efficient cause it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, neither will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all of which is plainly false. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God" (Aquinas 22).

changeable weather as one of the penalties inflicted on humanity for its sins," observes Alexandra Harris in *Weatherland* (Harris 11). Beginning with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the climatic paradise that was Eden, and epitomized by the story of Noah and the flood, punishment of man's sins is synonymous with bad weather for the God of Genesis.[7] In line with the notion of the prime mover and with Forster's own rules of storytelling, the plot of the flood narrative is marked for its causal coherence: God sees "that the wickedness of man was great in the earth," and, in consequence, God determines, "I will cause it to rain upon the earth forty days and forty nights; and every living substance that I have made will I destroy from off the face of the earth" (*King James Bible*, Gen. 6.5, 7.4). There is in the absoluteness of the Genesis flood a suggestion of indiscriminate precipitation that anticipates the supremely nonpartisan God in the Gospel of Matthew, who "maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5.45). The implication, in both instances, is that that there is an inherent neutrality to the weather: un-raced, un-classed, un-gendered, the weather as caused by God emerges as a force for which no specific individual can be held responsible and no one in particular is to blame.

This abiding affiliation of catastrophic weather events with divine forces is the governing logic at the root of the legal term "act of God," which – in contrast to acts of man and the human agency and liability therein implied – refers to naturally occurring incidents that have been deemed outside of human control, such as "lightning, earthquakes, tidal waves, hurricanes, fog or snow" (Lauta 113). Defined in Kristian Cedervall Lauta's *Disaster Law* as "a providential occurrence or extraordinary manifestation of the forces of nature which could not have been foreseen and the effect thereof avoided," or alternatively, as "an unusual, sudden and unexpected manifestation of the

[7] Observes Harris: "In Eden there was moisture to nurture abundant plants, and such warmth that Adam and Eve needed no extra layers. If there was 'weather' at all, it was steadily benign. The trouble began either immediately after the Fall or with the Flood. John Milton in *Paradise Lost* described the dire 'alterations in the heavens and elements' set in train by God as soon as the apple was eaten. Winds were summoned to do battle in the air. Angels tipped the Earth on its axis, subjecting it to the variability of seasons. Man would now have to cope with the unpredictability of a lopsided globe" (*Weatherland* 11).

forces of nature which man cannot resist," the rationale behind dubbing something an act of God emphasizes unpredictability, inevitability, and human blamelessness (Lauta 112).[8] "Not only does everyone participate to some degree in the weather," writes Jay Rosen, "but everyone is innocent – we are all either hapless victims or grateful beneficiaries of what the skies bring" (Rosen 31). In its exculpatory function, the act of God goes the long way around to diminish agency and confirm Rosen's reading of human faultlessness; and yet, an act of God is not a no-fault concept. On the contrary, the very predicative structure of the term, which effectively attributes the act to a source, necessarily implicates an agent; as opposed to the senseless "natural disaster," or even the charged but not deified "force majeure," the "act of God" is uniquely powerful because, in giving us someone to blame, it also provides the comfort of clear causation.

In its conversion of the contingencies of the weather into the determinism of divine intervention, the act of God conceit reveals an enduring effort to make narrative sense out of that which fundamentally resists it. Even as a form of punishment, there is something consoling in reading what would otherwise be the indifference of bad weather as the frustrated expression of an adjudicating deity. In fact, punishing weather makes meaningful not only the weather itself, but equally important, human behavior. Taking the Genesis flood once more as the ur-example, the unequivocal crediting of the deluge to God per his performative utterance, "*I will cause* it to rain" (emphasis mine), satisfies our demand for causation by literalizing the act of God; but more than acting, God here is reacting.[9] That is to say, God's decision to produce forty days and forty nights of rain is presented as his direct response to human wickedness; insofar as this divine reading of the

[8] In his book *Acts of God: the Unnatural History of Natural Disasters in America*, Ted Steinberg challenges the rhetoric of this phrase, which allows for a problematic denial of accountability: "This constrained vision of responsibility, this belief that such disasters stem solely from random natural forces, is tantamount to saying that they lie entirely outside human history, beyond our influence, beyond more reason, beyond control. In truth, however, natural calamities frequently do not just happen; they are produced through a chain of human choices and natural occurrences" (Steinberg xxi).

[9] Notably, this biblical model of dramatic weather as the consequence of human misbehavior now curiously resembles the current notions of anthropogenic climate change, which emphasizes the complicity of human agents in directly affecting the weather.

weather frames it as the deserved sentencing for our own misdeeds, we can rest assured knowing that our actions matter and that even at its foulest, there is a fairness to the variability of weather, indicative as it is of an overseeing judge who is invested in our lives.

Surely, this is much preferred to the alternative – to the cruel insouciance and neglect of a world ruled by the "crass casualty" of chance. This term derives from Thomas Hardy's 1866 poem, "Hap," which laments what the speaker perceives to be the absence of any divine participation in human affairs. In the poem, the speaker's wish for "some vengeful god" that could explain his pain as part of a greater design – even a malevolent one – is symptomatic of his deeper desire for a decipherable logic of causality ("Hap" line 1). If only there were someone watching – a First Cause – he could bear it. "But not so" the speaker concludes ("Hap" line 9), effectively reframing the poem as an elegy for the loss of meaning that providentialism provides. Interestingly, despite Forster's explicit criticism of Hardy in *Aspects of the Novel*, this is a loss that he and his characters also feel; echoing the wish of the narrator of "Hap," the narrator of *Howards End* expresses a longing for a concerned deity that would ease the alienating effects of modern metropolitan living: "London is religion's opportunity – not the decorous religion of theologians but anthropomorphic, crude. Yes, the continuous flow would be tolerable if a man of our own sort…were caring for us up in the sky" (*HE* 92). Likewise, a fixation on sight and spying in *A Passage to India* amounts to an almost religious obsession with the idea that somebody is watching (over) the characters. But, as the following readings will show, there is nothing of the sort to be found in Forster's skies, representative as they are of the "panic and emptiness" of a world that, as Lukács reminds us, "has been abandoned by God" (*HE* 28, Lukács 88).

In trying to make sense of the senselessly tragic turn that *Howards End* takes near its close, Margaret Schlegel seems to come to the same conclusion as the speaker of "Hap": "Death a blue sky," she thinks, realizing that there is no god to be found in the heavens (*HE* 281). There is a

certain irony to reading Forster's reluctant atheism by way of Hardy's, given that Forster specifically identifies Hardy as a novelist who "emphasized causality" at the expense of his characters' agency, effectively turning his plots into a "superb and terrible machine" (*Aspects* 94).[10] But then again, of this Forster, too, has been accused. Significantly, for all of Forster's investment in human connection and personal responsibility, there persist in his plots glaring structural shortcuts and narrative conveniences that undermine the agency of the characters; whereas *A Passage to India* is conspicuously missing the central link in its causal chain, *Howards End* has been accused of being too tidy. Correspondingly, while *A Passage to India* has, according to Glen O. Allen, "enjoyed the somewhat paradoxical status of being valued without being understood" (Allen 934), *Howards End*, says David Lodge, is deeply flawed, if fascinating: "Its design is excessively schematic, its plots relies on improbable coincidences, the behavior and motivation of the main characters are sometimes implausible, and its verbal style is prone to sudden, and not always happy, shifts of tone" (Lodge vii).

In his book-length study, *E.M. Forster*, Lionel Trilling explicitly likens Forster's formal compromises to Hardy's, noting, in particular, the crass casualty of his abrupt executions: "Something must be said of the brusque casualness, the lack of 'reason' and 'motivation' which invariably marks his deaths' (Trilling 64). For his part, Trilling says two conflicting things, reflective of Forster's own ambivalence towards emplotment: we can read the suddenness of Forster's deaths as his attempt at representing those "certain kinds of unmotivated events [that] happen in life"; or, we can read it as "a useful device for his contrivance of plot" (ibid). Insofar as each of these is, no doubt, partially accurate, we might conclude that Forster is looking for a device that makes even his most blatant plot contrivances appear as unmotivated as the chanciest of events. As unmotivated as the weather, stripped of its divine signification. To this end, I argue, Forster co-opts the weather as a

[10] Not for nothing, David Cecil identifies Thomas Hardy as the author for whom nature "played a larger part…than in those [books] of any other English novelist" (Cecil 23); in exploring the fraught affinities between Hardy and Forster, then, one is struck by their shared reliance on the apparent aleatoriness of weather as a means of disguising the machinery of their plotting.

primary causal agent in his narratives, instrumentalizing it as an ordering trope that is able to provide the holistic causality of the providentialism with which it was once synonymous, under the guise of the stochasticism it has now come to represent. However, in scapegoating the weather this way, as the just cause of his triumphant plots, Forster risks undermining his own humanist project; for, in deflecting our attention from his own responsibility, blaming the weather for what are his own godly acts, Forster ("quite inadvertently of course" [*HE* 99]) involves his characters "in various snares" – "bound hand and foot" by what ultimately reads as his own Hardyesque "ceaseless emphasis on fate" (*Aspects* 93).

When it comes to the conspicuously contrived downfalls of E.M. Forster, the paradigmatic example must be *Howards End*'s Leonard Bast. In a novel filled with more symbols than characters, Bast represents the aspirational lower middle class; in drawing this lot, he serves the as the inevitable collateral damage of a plot that is admittedly "not concerned with the very poor" (*HE* 38), a plot that aligns itself instead with a hero and heroine (as the narrator refers to Henry and Margaret [*HE* 220]) who come from those classes of people who "stand upon money as upon islands" (*HE* 51). In his function as the incidental victim of this ethically minded condition-of-England novel, Leonard presents as a blank canvas onto which the other characters can project their own anxieties of responsibility, and through which Forster can work out his own laws of liability.

In a particularly representative moment, when Margaret Schlegel is feeling guilty about Leonard's misfortune in opting for a lower-paying job, Henry Wilcox assures her, "You're not to blame. No one's to blame" to which she responds, "Is no one to blame for anything?"(*HE* 163) This is, perhaps, the text's most pressing question. To ask it raises doubts not only about intentionality, but about the possibility of human agency itself; to answer it demands an untangling of the narrative's messy web of cause and effect. This is where blame is especially useful for Forster, not only because it speaks to the issues of accountability and personal responsibility that he holds

dear, but because culpability implies an intact and identifiable chain of causation. This is to say, insofar as it relies on the connection between agent and event, blame demands form.

In a novel notorious for its improbable plot twists and confused causality, Leonard's death stands out as the incident that most offends our sense of a logical sequence of events. If we were to reduce the narrative of Leonard's death to the simple construction that Forster devises to explain those of the king and queen, it would read as follows: A bookshelf fell, and then Leonard Bast died of heart disease. Heart disease? Yes, "death was due to heart disease," Charles Wilcox thinks to himself, via free indirect discourse (*HE* 279); "Death had come, and the doctor agreed that it was due to heart disease" (*HE* 282), corroborates the narrator; "But the real cause was heart disease?" Henry presses, "Of that you're sure?" (*HE* 280) On the contrary, if there is one thing the novel is decidedly unsure of, it is this, the *real* cause of Leonard's death. For, despite this insistence on Leonard dying "from natural causes" (*HE* 281), Charles is nonetheless brought to trial, convicted of manslaughter, and sentenced to three years in prison. While the narrator declares it "against all reason that he should be punished" (*HE* 285), it is Charles – the man who proclaims early in the novel, "I'm not responsible…for anybody else or anything, so there!" (*HE* 157) – who, according to the pervasive law of strict liability, would most likely be deemed responsible for Leonard. In *Harm's Way: Tragic Responsibility and the Novel Form*, Sandra Macpherson highlights the primacy of causation in early liability law, which "impose[d] responsibility for accidental injury without requiring that it be shown the wrongdoer acted carelessly or with fault" (Macpherson 4). The model offered here is one that allows for cause without culpability, that fixes the accidental in the register not only of the illegal, but of the immoral. Unreasonable as Charles' punishment may be, his proximity to Leonard's death – and the ambiguous involvement of the sword he wields – is enough to render him a probable cause.

But, in fact, one might easily argue that any one of the characters in the novel could be just as reasonably blamed for Leonard's undoing and ultimate death. If we are to maintain a stake in personal responsibility (though it is not yet certain if we are), it seems only fair that Leonard accept some of the blame for his rotten luck; after all, he chose to quit his job, chose to sleep with Helen, and chose, finally, to show up at Howards End, where he would meet his own. In framing his storyline this way, Leonard seems "not a man, but a cause" (*HE* 266). The malleability of the word's meaning is key here; while the narrator seems to be using "cause" in reference to Leonard's status as Helen's philanthropic project, it simultaneously recasts Leonard as an unwitting agent of his own undoing. And indeed, guilt-ridden over his extramarital tryst and "overshadowed with Remorse," it never occurs to Leonard "that Helen was to blame" for her role in his slow but steady downfall (*HE* 269-270). Helen, for her part, is only willing to admit indirect responsibility for Leonard ("via Mr. Wilcox" [*HE* 194]), and is most vocal in assigning blame to Henry, the embodiment of the uncompassionate and negligent upper-class, who, in his adamant conviction that "it's absurd to pretend that anyone is responsible personally" (*HE* 163), fails to realize that his own careless counsel loses Leonard his job.[11] Though, certainly, Helen herself must bear some of the burden, as it is she who not only seduces Leonard and becomes pregnant with his child (thereby prompting the altercation with Charles),[12] but who also initiates Leonard's embroilment with this crowd by "quite inadvertently" taking his umbrella instead of her own at the opera (*HE* 29); still, Leonard never would have met Helen and gotten involved at all had not the well-meaning Margaret "I believe in

[11] "The poor are poor, and one's sorry for them, but there it is," asserts Henry. "Neither you, nor I, nor the man who informed him, nor the directors of the Porphyrion, are to blame for this clerk's loss of salary" (*HE* 163). Of course, the novel attributes this fundamental flaw of Henry's (that "he had never been interested in human beings" [*HE* 217]) on his profound inability to connect (*HE* 263).

[12] Katherine Mansfield famously quipped about the unlikelihood of this turn of events, saying, "I can never be perfectly certain whether Helen was got with child by Leonard Bast or by his fatal forgotten umbrella. All things considered, I think it must have been the umbrella" (qtd. in Bradshaw 129). To be sure, the text itself makes a point to figure the umbrella as a metonym for Leonard himself, as when the narration observes that in trying to track down Leonard at the Schlegel's, "[Jacky] asked for a husband as if was an umbrella" (*HE* 96).

personal responsibility…and in personal everything" Schlegel insisted on bringing him into their home to retrieve the purloined parasol (*HE* 199).

"Yes," thinks Leonard, as he enters the plot by way of this most accidental of occurrences, "the umbrella was the real trouble" (*HE* 34). In tracing the causal chain to the beginning of Leonard's end, it is evident that none of this would have happened if Leonard hadn't been carrying his umbrella that day – an umbrella he needed only as a defense against a forecast of rain. The irony of it being his umbrella – an item predicated on the promise of protection – that puts Leonard in harm's way, is further compounded by Leonard's anguished assessment of the risks involved in recovering it. Weighing his uneasiness over the stolen item against the fear that he might "be 'had' over his umbrella," Leonard ultimately determines that its retrieval, "though a risk, was as safe as most things" (*HE* 31). Only through tracing the trajectory of his demise does the poignancy of Leonard's initial attempt to minimize the loss – protesting to Margaret, "It isn't of any consequence" (*HE* 29) – come into focus. Because, in "occasioning the entire plot of the novel," the mis-taken umbrella turns out to be of every consequence (Rankine 21). The narrator is not entirely wrong in acquitting the characters on the charges of Leonard's death, citing instead natural causes; but the natural cause that kills Leonard is not heart disease – it is the weather.

Aware as he is of the artificiality of emplotment, Forster makes a conscious effort throughout *Howards End* to naturalize causality, as best exemplified by Margaret's retrospective attempt to make sense of the "jangle of causes and effects" that led to Leonard's death "from natural causes": "It was *natural* that Henry should do this and cause Helen to do that…*natural* that she herself…*natural* that Leonard…" (*HE* 281, emphasis mine). Here, Margaret is performing for us the very process of tracking causality with which the novel has been so concerned, though she stops short of reaching that most natural first cause: nature itself. In his scapegoating of the weather, Forster thus appears to be stressing the random nature of life itself, in which "events succeed in a

logical, yet senseless, train" (ibid). In sorting out the umbrella mix-up, the text makes repeated reference to the inadvertence of Helen's action, as if to ensure that we read this convenient narrative meet-cute as but one of those "chance collisions of human beings" that occur in real life; as long as there is a chance of rain, the episode suggests, there is a chance of a just such a trivial collision, "through which the doors of heaven may be shaken open" (*HE* 21). But then, this is the false contingency on which Forster's over-determined plot hinges: Forster never actually specifies in the novel whether or not it is raining on the day of this encounter (as far as one can tell, when Margaret and Leonard walk home, they are apparently dry), but the joke and tragedy of Leonard having his umbrella is that, in England, there is always more than a good chance of precipitation.[13] To this point, *Howards End* might be better classified as a weather condition of England novel.

"Somebody should tell these foreigners that it is always raining in England," writes Caryl Phillips in *In the Falling Snow*, "after all, an umbrella is a key part of the English uniform" (Phillips 86). Relying on the well-documented stereotype of England as the "country [that] has the worst weather in the world," Forster knows he can count on the inevitability of the rain, and of this conceit of the umbrella as a natural accessory (Allport & Wingfield 19).[14] Specifically, it is essential to the uniform of the particular class to which Leonard, "a clerk who is engaged in a dogged struggle to improve himself," belongs; in *Becoming Dickens*, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst traces the trope back to the novels of Charles Dickens, in whose "imaginative worlds umbrellas are almost exclusively working-class or

[13] The divergent treatments of this scene in the cinematic adaptations of *Howards End* underscore the ambiguity of its weather as written in the original text. For example, in the 1992 film version, it is pouring rain, and Leonard spends several minutes waiting outside (sans umbrella) before the Schlegels notice the sopping-wet man and invite him in; in contrast, in the 2017 BBC remake (airing as a four-part series), it does not appear to be raining at all as Margaret and Leonard walk home together from the opera under London's characteristically grey sky.

[14] In *England*, Allan Allport and George Wingfield probe the almost mythic status of England's perennially wet weather conditions: "The problem is that the same Gulf Stream currents that bring such vital warm water also propel cloud banks along with them. These clouds, which have picked up plenty of Atlantic Ocean moisture along the way, break across the western British Isles and regularly douse much of Britain and Ireland in rain showers. Over 60 inches of rain will fall on average in the worst-affected English region – the northwestern Lake District. England's green and pleasant land owes its existence to regular precipitation, but that is small comfort to the local population which must endure what can seem like endless, dreary dousing. The close also obscure much of the natural sunlight, making England a frequently gray, overcast country" (Allport & Wingfield 19).

lower-middle class accessories" (Douglas-Fairhurst 117). Recalling this, several critics have commented on the significance of Leonard's markedly ratty umbrella as symbol of his aspirational status, typically reiterating a sentiment approximate to Catherine Mintler's in *Fashioning Identity*, when she says, "Leonard Bast's umbrella is undoubtedly one of the most important accoutrements of the class costume he dons in order to perform as a gentleman" (Mintler 199). I underscore this here not only to call attention to the unfairness of Forster's weather, which is stacked against Leonard, but also to highlight just how unnatural the causes of Forster's foul-weather friendships are.

In her reading of Forster and Hardy in *Death, Men, and Modernism*, Ariela Freedman observes, "The death plot pits characters against plot" (Freedman 44). Freedman's framing of plot as a threat to character directly recalls Forster's discussion of these two aspects of the novel, only to conclude, as I likewise have, that the author has failed to meet his own standards: "Leonard is a character taught to believe in the ideals of will and self-determination," she writes, "who is nonetheless caught in a narrative of determinism" (ibid). For all the circumstantial aleatoriness of his entry into the world of the novel, Leonard never stands a chance: that it will rain is dictated by the nature of England, comically predictable as its weather patterns are; that Leonard must carry an umbrella, and that he then must retrieve it, no matter the consequences, is dictated by the very nature of his character.

Indeed, not only is Leonard's umbrella – "all gone along the seams" (*HE* 35) – itself evidence of his lower social standing, but his worry over its being taken further exploits the financial limitations that would prevent him from purchasing a new one. It is this same worry that compels him to accompany Margaret to the Schlegels' home to retrieve it, where Leonard's anxiety over losing his one "appalling umbrella" is put in sharp contrast with Helen's obliviousness to the model or condition of her own. "Is yours a hooky or a nobbly?" she asks Leonard, not waiting for an answer. "Mine's a nobly – at least, I *think* it is" (ibid). As Earl Ingersoll rightly observes in *Filming*

Forster, "when Helen fumbles in the Schlegel umbrella stand in search of Leonard's, it cannot be lost on the working-class clerk that the Schlegels have so many umbrellas Helen cannot easily identify one of them as his" (Ingersoll 221). Living as she does upon her island of money, Helen need not concern herself with umbrellas. Leonard, however, cannot afford such a life – one that is free of the practical worries "that distracted him in the pursuit of beauty" (*HE* 34). The umbrella functions here as the symbol of these distractions, as manifested in Leonard's sustained fixation on its whereabouts and well-being throughout the course of his walk and talk with Margaret. As the cultured Margaret expounds on Monet and Debusssy and Wagner, Leonard, we are told, is thinking "I suppose my umbrella will be alright…I don't really mind about it. I will think about music instead. I suppose my umbrella will be alright" (ibid). What Leonard ought to be thinking of, however, is himself; for, though he is not wrong in following his instincts to recover his umbrella, what the clerk could not have predicted ("before the umbrella intervened") was that Forster's narrative had been plotting against him from the start. "What matters," writes Freedman in assessing the natural causes of Leonard's death, "is that it is inevitable" (Freedman 44). Just as the umbrella becomes a distraction for Leonard, then, Forster's move of scapegoating the weather works to distract the reader, who is inclined to accept the naturalness of the weather in all its haphazardness, despite its being used as an entirely deterministic device in the plot.

In its strategic scapegoating of the weather, *Howards End* is but a primer for *A Passage to India*. As in *Howards End*, the weather of *A Passage to India* must be acknowledged as an agent of causality and an accomplice of novel's irresponsible assignment of blame; however, in relocating his tale of moral crisis to India, Forster does away with much of the pretense of contingency that he clings to in *Howards End*. Not only is the weather considerably more involved here – with the sky always being personified, the Heat always being capitalized, and the weather always seeming to have its own agenda – but it is downright impossible to ignore the tyrannous heat and merciless rains that shape

A Passage to India. While a light drizzle always lingers in the margins of *Howards End*, the heat of *A Passage to India* forcefully imposes itself on the body of the text: "The sky dominated as usual," the narrator notes, "but seemed unhealthily near" (*PTI* 156). Crucial to the depiction of weather in *A Passage to India* is its sheer physicality, its undeniable material presence in the novel. Granted, the argument that atmospheric conditions – particularly what we classify as heat or cold – can even be said to have a materiality is a fraught one, as such weather occupies a particularly nebulous place in tactile discourse; that is, the heat is something we always "feel" but can never "touch."[15] And yet, through its adamant anthropomorphism, the weather of *A Passage to India* operates in an aggressively haptic register. In line with Jan Golinski's observation that "The weather is always with us…we cannot escape it" (Golinski xi), the heat in Forster's last novel is not only suffocating, but ravishing; the European visitors constantly comment on the unbearably high temperatures, Mrs. Moore suffers another of Forster's crassly casual deaths at the hands of the sun, and the central crisis of the novel – the pervading mystery of what happened in the cave – might also be reasonably explained by the narrative's hinting at Adela Quested's heat-induced delirium.[16] Whereas *Howards End* might be read as Forster's way of wrestling with godless weather and the unordered world it signifies, *A Passage to India*, in leaning into the preordained determinacy of the Indian climate, takes the next logical (if senseless) step: turning the weather itself into its god.

[15] In his *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, Tim Ingold muses on the immateriality of weather: "Rainwater enters the material world only when it accumulates in puddles on the ground, and snow only when it settles. The wind can figure only as a figment of the imagination, leading armchair theorists to suppose that boats sail, kites fly and trees flex their limbs on account of some animating force – an agency – lodged within the things themselves, as solid objects. Suffused in sunlight, even the sky becomes an imaginary realm that we can inhabit in our thoughts and dreams, while the air we breathe is dematerialized into a spiritual ether that sustains the soul, but not the material body" (Ingold 130).

[16] The circumstances of Mrs. Moore's death are recounted in the narrative as follows: "She died at sea. / The heat, I suppose. / Presumably. / May is no month to allow an old lady to travel in. / Quite so" (*PTI* 274).

The Alpha and Omega

Like the rain, you know, which falls upon the just and the unjust alike; a thing which would not happen if I were superintending the rain's affairs. No, I would rain softly and sweetly upon the just, but whenever I caught a sample of the unjust outdoors I would drown him.
– Mark Twain

If in *Howards End* E.M. Forster is openly wondering whether there might not be someone "of our own sort caring for us in the sky," then by *A Passage to India*, his last novel, Forster seems resigned in his conclusion that there is nothing at all beyond the translucent blue sky that is life and death (*HE* 92). This isn't to say that there is nobody keeping watch in *A Passage to India*; on the contrary, the novel is preoccupied with all forms of seeing, spying, and points of view. "Whatever you say or do in this damned country," warns Dr. Aziz early in the novel, "there is always some envious fellow on the lookout" (*PTI* 130). Reflective of this proliferation of outlooks, Mrs. Moore insists on forming opinions from her "own personal point of view" (*PTI* 73); Adela Quested seeks Ronny Heaslop's "point of view about [her]" (*PTI* 89); Ronny, for his part, "review[s] and recount[s] the day from his own point of view" (*PTI* 102); and Cyril Fielding laments the impossibility of "regard[ing] a tragedy from two points of view" (*PTI* 182), later "add[ing] dully that different people had different points of view" (*PTI* 357). In constantly calling attention to its multiplicity of perspectives, however, the novel effectively registers its skepticism regarding the possibility of any single omniscient point of view. As Barbara K. Olson explores in *Authorial Divinity*, the perspective of omniscient narration has traditionally been analogized to "the viewpoint of God" (Olson); but it is precisely the failure of what was once a reliable god's eye view that *A Passage to India* dramatizes, turning to the weather as its divine arbiter instead.

As far as Forster's middling position is concerned, *Howards End* has been read, historically, as the author's quintessential transitional text: "Neither experimental nor rigorously realist," the common reading goes, "*Howards End* seems to reside in the indeterminate space between the

modernist and the Victorian novel" (Weihl 444). In contrast, *A Passage to India* seems the surer marker of what David Medalie calls Forster's "reluctant modernism," the clearest sign that the author was beginning to cave to the rapidly evolving expectations of the novel in the modern era.[17] In line with Medalie's characterization, it might even be that *A Passage to India* is staging Forster's concession, as modernist tropes encroach on what is, on its face, a perfectly traditional plot. For, Forster's final novel is nothing if not conventionally constructed; with its linear chronology and tripartite structure that methodically works through its setup, crisis, and resolution, *A Passage to India* is positively Aristotelian in its composition. Except. As every reading of the text must reckon with, there is a gaping, Marabar cave-shaped void in the middle of the narrative: a pivotal and profoundly consequential episode to which no one – not the characters, not the reader, not even an omnipresent God – is given access.

In "Apropos of Nothing: Chance and Narrative in Forster's *A Passage to India*," Leland Monk summarizes the inaccessibility of this cavity in the text, identifying it as the novel's "central mystery – what happened to Adela Quested in the cave?" In trying to answer that question, Monk concludes, "The central, crucial, pivotal scene of the novel is not represented and, as the rhetoric attached to the caves suggests, it is strictly speaking unrepresentable" ("Apropos of Nothing" 396). To the extent that the text seems unable or unwilling to account for this lacuna in its otherwise unified plot, this fundamental crisis of the novel thus presents as a distinctly modern catastrophe, both in terms of faith and of form. Symptomatic of the trend towards secularization in the early years of the twentieth century, the "spiritual muddledom" of the caves signals the breakdown of the would-be providential system governing the text (*PTI* 208). Appearing, as it does, to be at some odds with Forster's fierce agnosticism, it must be said: *A Passage to India* is an awfully religious book.

[17] See, for example: Sreemati Mukherjee's "*A Passage to India* as Modernist Narrative"; Malcolm Bradbury's "Two Passages to India: Forster as Victorian and Modern"; Jo Ann Hoeppner Moran's "E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*: What Really Happened in the Caves"; and Pericles Lewis on *A Passage to India* in *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*.

In line with Ronny's claim that "India likes gods," Forster's novel situates the country as the site of convergence for three world religions: Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism. Beyond their import in shaping the interactions between the characters in the story, these creeds serve a schematic function in the narrative's structure; as has been well established, the titles of the beginning and ending sections – "Mosque" and "Temple" – refer metonymically to the Muslim and Hindu faiths. However, in the vacant tomb that is the middle section – "Caves" – there is no God to be found, as the devout Mrs. Moore must come to terms with the profound emptiness of Christianity. "Poor little talkative Christianity," she thinks to herself, growing faint. "She knew that all its divine words from 'Let there be light' to 'It is finished' only amounted to 'boum'" (*PTI* 166).[18] The inability of even the word of God to make meaning of the chaos that reverberates in the monotonous echo of the caves speaks not only to the breakdown of divine providence as an ordering principle, but also to the threat of lawlessness and epistemological uncertainty posed by the scientific discoveries of Forster's time. This to say, insofar as the cave functions as a literalization of the absent center, it instantiates modernism's challenge to classical notions of emplotment; specifically, that of a break in the causal chain.

And yet, modernist as *A Passage to India* appears in this evident refusal to connect cause and effect, one must remember Forster's dutiful, if ambivalent, commitment to plot. In fact, this "central mystery" of what happened in the cave might be read, alternatively, as the most conventional of plot conventions: for, according to Forster, "mystery is essential to plot" (*Aspects* 87). That Monk explicitly classifies the central crisis of the text as a mystery – rather than say, a muddle – becomes particularly significant within the context of Forster's own critical take; this, after all, is a binary that *A Passage to India* sets up, beginning with Mrs. Moore's announcement, "I like mysteries but I rather

[18] In a further nod to their godlessness, the Magistrate in *A Passage to India* suggests that "All Marabar caves are Jain," referring to India's ancient nontheistic religion (*PTI* 247).

dislike muddles" (*PTI* 73).[19] Fielding's response to this, that "A mystery is a muddle," forces us to consider what, if anything, distinguishes the two. In line with Forster's investment in connection and emplotment, it seems best to consider each in relation to causality; the muddle, then, represents a thing for which no causal logic exists, while a mystery implies something that does have a coherent causality waiting to be discovered, if only we could connect the links of its severed causal chain. And is this not what Forster and his characters are doing in *A Passage to India*, attempting to impose form onto formlessness, to take the muddle of the cave incident and force it into the ordered framework of a mystery? "The plot," writes Forster, "requires mystery, but the mysteries are solved later on" (*Aspects* 96). In trying to solve its central mystery and thus bridge its narrative chasm, *A Passage to India* – like *Howards End* before it – thus makes the assignment of blame its predominant concern. And, as he does in *Howards End*, Forster again shirks his adjudicative responsibility by opting instead to make a divine scapegoat of the weather, the acts of which emerge as nothing short of godly.

Where *Howards End* merely does a rhetorical staging of its crimes against humanity and the accompanying miscarriage of poetic justice, *A Passage to India* institutionalizes this conceit officially with the alleged violation of Adela Quested in the Marabar caves and the subsequent trial of Dr. Aziz. "The plot," writes Trilling, "is as decisive as a judicial opinion" (Trilling 147). Cutting allegiances and forcing connections across national and religious lines where *Howards End* draws them across class, *A Passage to India* predictably offers up as its sacrifice the phlegmatic Indian physician. "I ask you," entreats a sympathetic Fielding, "did [Aziz] do it or not?" (*PTI* 196) In his plea, not to God, but to Professor Godbole, Fielding gives voice to the text's investment in the

[19] In "Snakes in the Cave: Religion and Echo in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*," Tracy Pintchman likewise notes Forster's aversion to formlessness and produces a catalogue of the novel's preoccupation with its counterpart, the muddle: "Forster often uses the word 'muddle' to suggest formlessness. India is identified by Fielding as a muddle ('Aziz and I know well that India's a muddle' [69]), and later, Ronny worries that Aziz will make a muddle over the caves (83). After the car accident, the passengers 'muddle about in the dust' (90). Fielding foresees that 'there would be a muddle' resulting from the accusation that Adela levels against Aziz (175). Fielding himself 'muddles through' a conflict with the other Englishmen at their club (190). Mrs. Moore cares as little for 'muddles' as she does for infinity…Even Aziz prefers clarity over muddledom" (Pintchman 66).

placing of blame, not simply as a matter of morality, but of causality. *A Passage to India* is a narrative of law and order – emphasis on the order. We sense this formalist privileging of cause and effect in Godbole's initial response to Fielding, which also serves as a helpful summing up of the novel's plot: "I am informed that an evil action was performed in the Marabar Hills," says Godbole, "and that a highly esteemed English lady is now seriously ill in consequence" (*PTI* 197). But who performed this action? Who, finally, is to blame for Adela's consequential illness? "My answer to that is this," says the professor: "That action was performed by Dr. Aziz…It was performed by the guide…It was performed by you…It was performed by me…And by my students. It was even performed by the lady herself" (ibid). There is, in Godbole's reading of universal action, a corroboration of the novel's seeming willingness to hold its characters responsible, albeit indirectly, for their choices – an acknowledgment that insofar as everything is connected, everyone is implicated.

Evidently, Forster's is a novel with a conscience. But in this assignment of collective responsibility, there are also troubling echoes of the prevarication we hear in Henry Wilcox's earlier claim that "it's absurd to pretend anyone is responsible personally" (*HE* 163). In fact, this exact attitude is reiterated in *A Passage to India*, ventriloquized through Mr. Turton, Chandrapore's staunchly British tax collector: "We are all to blame in the sense that we ought to have seen the expedition was insufficiently guaranteed, and stopped it. I knew about it myself; we lent our car this morning to take the ladies to the station. We are all implicated in that sense, but not an atom of blame attaches to you personally" (*PTI* 206). And yet, as in *Howards End*, we might find fault with any number of characters who played a personal part in whatever "evil action" was performed in the cave: had Miss Quested not pushed to see the *real* India… had Callendar, the British head doctor, not given Aziz leave for the afternoon…had Fielding and Godbole not missed the train that would have enabled them to supervise the excursion…had Mrs. Moore not decided to opt out after the first cave, leaving Adela and Aziz alone…had Ronny's proposal not prompted Adela to ask Aziz

whether he had one wife or more than one, prompting him, in turn, to let go of her hand…and had Aziz not been there, at the wrong place at the wrong time, then "nothing," as they say, "would have happened" (*PTI* 263).

But wait, *had Aziz not been there*? To return to Godbole's sermon, perhaps the question is not who performed this evil action, but rather, was this action performed at all? As far as the composition of the narrative goes, the short answer is no, and therein lies the problem; to the extent that the incident in the cave marks the narrative's blind spot, it is all but impossible to pass judgment. Technically, as a matter of form, this event simply does not happen. But even within the world of the story, Forster gives us reasonable doubt. When trying to account for the gaping hole in the narrative and make sense of what happened to Adela in the cave, the novel offers us one explanation that exculpates all involved parties: a heat-induced hallucination. Perhaps the weather was to blame? Given the evidence that the text provides, this is the naturalistic explanation, foreshadowed by the ominous advancement of the heat throughout the chapters leading up to the cave.[20] The effect of this heat is repeatedly articulated in terms of its tendency to compromise perception and judgment. The narrative thus notes that, as "the sun was getting high," sight and objects alike are "blurred by the heat" (*PTI* 167) and "films of heat…increased the confusion" (*PTI* 155). As the host of the excursion, Aziz is the most aware of this threat, and like Leonard Bast, he is marked for his precautions that ultimately do him no good. "Put your head topis on at once," he warns Mrs. Moore and Miss Quested, "the early sun is highly dangerous for heads" (*PTI* 152). This reads as both a literal and figurative danger, given what we learn in the days following Aziz's arrest; the narration repeatedly makes a point to say that Adela is ill – specifically, Adela is suffering from sunstroke, an affliction that manifests itself both physically and psychologically (*PTI* 197).

[20] The fatal threat of the heat is further foreshadowed in the characters' recounting of the story of the Emperor Babar: "And you know how he died," Aziz says, "They were caught in the heat. They should have gone back to Kabul for the bad weather, but they could not" (*PTI* 159).

"India does wonders for the judgment, especially during the hot weather" (*PTI* 27). So warns Forster, alerting the reader to the potentiality of misguided characterizations and misplaced blame. From the start, the heat looms as a source of impending doom in the text, and everyone is acutely aware of this "vague threat which they called 'the bad weather coming'" (*PTI* 123). The threat is realized in the "Caves" section of the novel, as the narration becomes especially attuned throughout the episode to the escalating temperature, which rises with the sun (*PTI* 166). But, key to Forster's project of scapegoating the weather, the Marabar heat is not merely decorative; evolving from what Boris Tomashevsky would call a "static" motif into a "dynamic" one, the weather becomes an active agent in the narrative, an element that "is central to the story and which keep[s] it moving" (Tomashevsky 167). Still more important than the fact of its exercising agency, however, is that, rendered as it is in haptic terms, the heat fills the role of the missing assailant in the plot. The incident in the cave, though only ever obliquely discussed in its aftermath, involves the physical violation of Adela Quested. But time and again, it is the heat – not Aziz or any other character – that takes on the verbs typically associated with such an offense.

Thus, in the pages immediately following the accusation, when the reader is still trying to put together what has happened, the victim, Adela, is bedridden, having "been *touched by* the sun" (*PTI* 213, emphasis mine). Elsewhere, this rhetoric of violent tactility reappears, as when "the heat had invaded [Adela]" (*PTI* 240); when Adela "felt the heat strike her" (*PTI* 254); and when, in its most brutal construction, the group is "pursued by stabs of hot air" as they flee the caves (*PTI* 175). Repeatedly figured as an agent of assault, it is, in the end, the weather that most forcefully imposes itself on the bodies and the body of the text.[21] In returning to Professor Godbole's line of reasoning,

[21] The heat is to blame not only for Miss Quested's attack, but also for Mrs. Moore's untimely death. Using the same euphemism for sunstroke that afflicted Adela, the narration announces, "Dead she was…she was further in the tropics than she ever achieved while on shore, when the sun touched her for the last time" (*PTI* 284). The irony here, as with Leonard Bast, is that it is precisely Mrs. Moore's attempt to protect herself from the advancing heat that ultimately exposes her to its wrath: "We are safely out of the frying-pan," says Lady Mellanby, advising Mrs. Moore not to stand in the sun on the ship – "it will never do to fall into the fire" (*PTI* 233). Mrs. Moore departs Chandrapore and the narrative

it is evident that, in their case against Aziz, the authorities have inverted cause and effect. Adela's sunstroke is the not result of any wrongdoing by the doctor; it is the result of the extreme Indian heat that has been portentously advancing throughout the first two parts of the novel, leaving "less and less room for the movements of mortals" (*PTI* 219). It is not, then, that an evil action is performed and, as a consequence, a lady becomes ill; but rather, a lady becomes ill and, as a consequence, an evil action – specifically, the condemnation of Aziz – is performed. A woman "got a sunstroke and went mad," Forster tells us, by way of explanation (*PTI* 166). As if his muddled story was, in fact, a mysterious plot. As if that were cause enough.[22] India's climate does wonders for the judgment, indeed.

"If we draw near the South," posits Montesquieu, "we fancy ourselves entirely removed from the verge of morality" (Montesquieu 224). Insofar as I am suggesting that Forster scapegoats the weather in accounting for the central crisis of *A Passage to India*, I am purposefully gesturing to the philosophy of climate determinism. Although, in this, I am only following the lead of Forster himself, whose exculpation of his characters relies on rendering them, not so subtly, as helpless victims of their environments. Typically approached as a subsection of environmental determinism, climatic determinism broadly refers to the theory that there is "a one-way, causal relationship between climate (or environment, if you will) and human activity" (Warrick & Riebsame 20). Working from the premise that climate is the single strongest force of influence on human behavior, climate determinists believed they could use weather patterns to not only account for the physiology and emotional states of individuals, but also to explain why certain races and civilizations floundered

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believing she has escaped the so-called "bad weather coming" (*PTI* 230), but the novel never lets us forget: there is no escaping the weather.

[22] In *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise*, Alan Warren Friedman follows Lionel Trilling's lead in exploring the "crass casualty" of Forster's cruelest acts, noting the disorienting effect of "chance and synchronicity displac[ing] certitude and causality" with the "loss of faith" in the late nineteenth century (as experienced by both Hardy and Forster) (A. Friedman 188-9). Working from Trilling's comparative premise, Friedman then invokes Jacques Barzun's reading that "we blame Hardy for failing to show adequate cause when the lack of adequate cause if what he is trying to show," and proposes that we apply this to Forster, as well (ibid).

or flourished. I speak of these determinists in the past tense because such a strict notion of climate determinism has been largely discredited and widely disavowed over the course of the last century, criticized for its minimizing of human agency, its co-option as a justification for colonialism, and its patent racism.

While recent reconsiderations of climatic determinism in our own world have rightfully moved away from what Mike Hulme calls "the inevitability of a climate-shaped destiny" (Hulme 249), and many geographers and historians, according to Mark Carey, seem ready to compromise in reframing climate as one of several "historical agents" rather than a "mono-causal force" (Carey 32), it is my contention that a strain of climatic determinism has been appropriated by modern authors, thereby finding a new and more suitable home in the world of the novel. Forster makes for an especially useful case study here because he stages this shift in thinking about the deterministic nature of climate as a matter of content to one of form; that is to say, he challenges the flawed implementation of traditional climatic determinism on the level of story through his scapegoating of weather, while simultaneously subscribing to its premise in the construction of his plot, the machinations of which undermine character agency entirely.

"You are a most extraordinary race…Is it your climate, or what," asks Aziz of Fielding, apparently having internalized the same essentialist principles of climatic determinism that will be used to reduce him to a hapless criminal (*PTI* 131). To be sure, humans have always been interested in defining themselves in relation to the physical world they inhabit; however, the earliest writing on the powerful effects of climate – and "the vision that continued to captivate writers throughout the Medieval and Renaissance periods" – is found in Hippocrates' *On Airs, Waters, Places*, which, in its reading of the humours and the environment, put forth the general proposition "that warm climates breed passionate people, frigid zones produce hardiness, while temperate regions generate intellectual excellence" (Livingstone 370). Modern notions of climate determinism gained traction in

the eighteenth century, led by the French thinker Montesquieu, who made the famous claim in *The Spirit of the Laws* that "The empire of the climate is the first, the most powerful of all empires" (qtd. in Livingstone 372).[23] But it was not until the first decades of the twentieth century – the decades, in fact, in which I begin my own study – that climate determinism reached its peak popularity and influence. Spearheaded by American geographers Ellen Churchill Semple and Ellsworth Huntington, the archetypical climatic determinists, this twentieth-century resurgence moved beyond the characterization of individuals to explain civilizations and, consequently, world history itself as a product of climate.

While he conceded that climate was not the only determining factor at work here, Huntington nonetheless hypothesized that "a certain peculiar type of climate prevails wherever civilization is high," while other regions suffer climatic handicaps (Huntington 9). Incidentally, for Huntington, this paragon of climatic perfection could be found in New Haven, Connecticut, where he just so happened to live; likewise, Montesquieu was relieved to discover in his studies that it was, coincidentally, the temperate climate of France – his own native habitat – that would produce the ideal temperament. More dubious than the convenience of these conclusions are Montesquieu and Huntington's remarks on the decidedly inferior climate of the tropics, as epitomized by the case of India. Citing the "reality of tropical inertia," Huntington laments the plight of the white man in uncivil climates, as "experience shows that the presence of an inferior race in large numbers tends constantly to lower the standards of the dominant race" (Huntington 35):

[23] Crediting his hypotheses to the effects of air on the external fibers of the body, Montesquieu characterizes the personalities produced by warm and cold climates much like Hippocrates did: "People are therefore more vigorous in cold climates…a greater boldness, that is more courage; a greater sense of superiority, that is less desire for revenge; a greater opinion of security, that is more frankness, less suspicion, policy, and cunning" (Montesquieu 221); in contrast, "The heat of the climate may be so excessive as to deprive the body of all vigor and strength. Then the faintness is communicated to the mind; there is no curiosity, no enterprise, no generosity of sentiment; the inclinations are all passive; indolence constitutes the utmost happiness; scarcely any punishment is so severe as mental employment; and slavery is more supportable that the force and vigor of mind necessary for human conduct" (Montesquieu 224). Perhaps most controversial is Montesquieu's reading of a hot climate as cause for slavery, which he explains as follows: "There are countries where the excess of heat enervates the body, and renders men so slothful and dispirited that nothing but the fear of chastisement can oblige them to perform any laborious duty: slavery is there more reconcilable to reason" (Montesquieu 240).

> It is generally agreed that the native races within the tropics are dull in thought and slow in action. This is true not only of the African negroes, the South American Indians, and the people of the East Indies, but of the inhabitants of southern India and the Malay peninsula. Perhaps they will change, but the fact that the Indians both of Asia and South America have been influenced so little by from one to four hundred years of contact with the white man affords little ground for hope. Judging from the past, there is scant reason to think that their character is likely to change for many generations. Until that time comes they will be one of the white man's greatest obstacles. (ibid)

Initially published in 1915 and revised in 1924, Huntington's *Civilization and Climate* is contemporaneous with *A Passage to India* (also published in 1924), and we can hear echoes of Huntington's outlandish and offensive claims in Forster's work. Indeed, having spent considerable time in India's tropical climate himself during those very years – and no worse off for it – Forster betrays a clear familiarity with the essentialist principles put forth by the determinists, which he candidly critiques through the character of Mr. McBryde. Having apparently borrowed his "theory of climatic zones" from Montesquieu, McBryde postulates, "All unfortunate natives are criminals at heart, for the simple reason that they live south of latitude 30. They are not to blame, they have not a dog's chance – we should be like them if we settled here" (*PTI* 184). McBryde's belief presents a discouraging double bind for Aziz, simultaneously denying him his own volition while presuming his guilt. There is something especially menacing in the novel's attribution of this attitude to its police superintendent, whose hypocrisy is further highlighted when he is later caught conducting his own shady business. "He will blame the Indian climate," supposes Aziz, resigned. "Everything is our fault, really" (*PTI* 302).

Forster clearly disapproves of the reductive nature of this deterministic logic; and yet, he is not ready to denounce it completely. For instance, when commenting on Adela's disappointment in finding Ronny's temperament altered with his changed environment, the narration reports, "India had developed sides of his character that she had never admired. His self-complacency, his censoriousness, his lack of subtlety, all grew vivid beneath a tropic sky" (*PTI* 85); this directly corroborates Huntington's arguments about the threat of alteration in the tropics and his

observation that a "lack of will power is shown by northerners in tropical regions not only in loss of energy and ambition, but in fits of anger" (Huntington 43).[24] Posed in *A Passage to India* as a potential glitch for the novel's romantic subplot, Ronny's regrettable change in temperament is indicative of a broader paranoia surrounding the susceptibility of Europeans to the supposedly deleterious effects of tropical climates; indeed, insofar as the British imperial project in India depended, in part, upon colonists' ability to weather these extreme conditions, the stakes of acclimation were not to be underestimated.

In *Predicting the Weather: Victorians and the Science of Meteorology*, Katherine Anderson identifies the climate as not only a determinant, but also a deterrent for the colonists in tropics, writing, "The climate was considered a constant strain on a European constitution, draining the pores, relaxing the nerves, and making true assimilation impossible" (Anderson 256). Misguided as the calculations of early climatic determinists were, it seems there is no denying the status of the tropical weather as a force to be reckoned with, as a cause with very real effects on those unaccustomed to it. In his companion to *A Passage to India*, Rama Kundu likewise comments on "the alien weather in the far-flung colonies," which was "viewed by the European with a degree of terror, and it became necessarily part of a hostile and unsurmountable mystery" (Kundu 77).[25] But muddled (to use Forster's word) as India may have appeared to the colonists, its climate was not the insurmountable mystery that Kundu describes; on the contrary, the climate is markedly stable in its extremity, yielding a possibility of predictability not afforded by England's mild variations. In fact, much as it

[24] While Huntington's is perhaps the name most closely associated with this perspective – a perspective he reiterates in "The Handicap of the Tropics" (1913) and "The Adaptability of the White Man in Tropical America" (1914) – these assumptions were pervasive and commonly accepted as fact. Tracing the history of this theorem back to its etymological origins, Trevor Burnard writes, "Europeans were changed by being in the tropics (the word 'tropic' itself has a dual meaning, being both a geographical region and a state of being, derived from the Greek term tropikos, or 'turning). In particular, they were willing to violate standards of proper behavior" (Burnard 429).

[25] In *Art and Order*, Alan Wilde notes the inability of the British colonists in *A Passage to India* to successfully impose their orderly rule on the mysterious muddledom of Forster's Chandrapore, its outlines being "indistinct, blurred, amorphous…it has all the variety of Nature, all its transmutations, all its inconsistencies" (A. Wilde 125). Likewise, in the novel itself, Forster comments on failure of his English chacacters' imperialist predecessors, "who also entered the country with intent to refashion it, but were in the end worked into its pattern and covered with its dust" (*PTI* 234).

may have hindered assimilation, the Indian weather was pivotal in helping justify the British imperial project, alternately motivated as it was by the "scientific attraction of the tropics" (Anderson 260).

"Amid political debate over the future of the empire in the 1870s," explains Anderson, "meteorology provided a natural foundation for British imperialism" (Anderson 11). Citing the debt of modern methods of weather prognostication to the Indian climate, Anderson is explicit in paralleling the projects of meteorology and of British imperial rule, both of which are predicated on the "the imposition of Western conceptions of order upon a vast, confusing subject" (Anderson 262). Critical as he may have been of the tenets of climate determinism, Forster nonetheless subscribes to this concept of India as a muddle – a "frustration of reason and form" onto which he has projected his own anxieties of modernist formlessness (*PTI* 319). But there *is* a reliable form to be found in India. It is the same one that the British sought in locating India as "a natural laboratory for meteorology": its deterministic and determinate weather patterns (Anderson 260).[26] Just as Forster could count on it beginning to rain at any time in the England of *Howards End*, so, too, could he depend on the regularity of the extreme and varied weather that he uses to impose a preordained order on *A Passage to India*.

As it happens, Forster plainly admitted to modeling the novel's structure on the Indian climate, specifying, "The three sections into which it is divided, Mosque, Caves, Temple, also represent the three seasons of the Cold Weather, the Hot Weather, and the Rains, which divide the

[26] In the "Pathetic Fallacy" roundtable, Sheila Jasanoff reads into the particular Englishness of the very word, "weather" (which is Germanic in its roots) in contrast to the reliable climate of India: "There's the fine British joke that we don't have climate in Britain, we only have weather. That reflects the intense variability of what it's like just to go outdoors. You carry an umbrella and it may be raining one minute and might not be the next minute, and so on and so forth. In India there's not that kind of talk about weather at all. When you get a seasonal change it's fixed in place for a long time. You have the dry season, and everybody knows it's the dry season. There's no point in saying, 'What's the weather going to be like?' In the month of May, every day is going to be like every other day in Delhi. It's going to be very hot and dry, and you know it's not going to rain." ("Pathetic Fallacy" 4)

Indian year" ("Authors Note" xxix).[27] The symbolic significance of this tripartite structure is not lost on Rama Kundu, who rightly elaborates, "It may also be noted that it is during the advent of hot weather that the panic and emptiness of the caves engulfs people, and the subsequent hostility develops with the temperature outside too reaches its peak. On the other hand, the resolution, two years later, takes place under the soothing monsoon rains, called the 'best weather' of India" (Kundu 78). Not long after she accuses Aziz of assault, Adela changes her mind, inquiring as to whether the case might be withdrawn. Ronny's response to this – that "she has started the machinery" and that "it will work to its end" – recalls Forster's condemnation of the superb machines that are Hardy's plots, which operate deterministically with little concern for the characters who get caught in the gears (*PTI* 229). *A Passage to India* is no less mechanical, its conflict and resolution as predicable as the Indian seasons; only, in co-opting the weather as the primary causal agent and organizing principle of his narrative, Forster has enacted what I refer to throughout this dissertation as a formalist appropriation of climatic determinism, which works to naturalize the superb machinery of emplotment that bedevils the novelist of the modern era. But Forster's deifying scapegoating of the weather as a structural model does more than gesture to its utility as a metaphor for both chance and determinism in narrative; rather, as this final section will elaborate upon, in mapping the distinct seasons onto the previously established metonyms of religion that its three sections represent, Forster signals *A Passage to India*'s subversive secularizing habit of replacing God with the weather outright.

"I do not believe in belief." So begins E.M. Forster's 1938 creed against creeds, "What I Believe." In it, he bemoans "The Age of Faith" in which he must participate and establishes his firmly humanist convictions, the contents of which might well be boiled down to his early axiom: only connect. And yet, in spite of its author's very public disavowal of organized religion, *A Passage*

[27] "The year," explains Anderson of India's tropical regularity, "was divided into three seasons, a cold season (November to mid-February), a hot season (until mid-June), and a rainy season (mid-June to October)" (Anderson 255).

to India is not immune to the promise of unity (to borrow Aristotle's term) that divine providence provides in a plot. Specifically, as evidenced by the conspicuously religious overtones of the novel's section titles, God begets form. However, implicit in the catastrophe of the cave incident – occurring as it does beyond the purview of any divine overseer and thus compromising the unity of the text – is that Forster is writing during a time when God can no longer be counted upon as an ordering and connective force in narrative.

As previously noted, Forster's works are marked by their shared anxiety over the threat of formlessness – a seeming response to the turn of the century novel's move away from the providential logic of Victorianism, and an anticipation of modernism's experimental renouncement of form. In his essays, Forster speaks to this frankly, arguing that insofar as "it is the outward evidence of order…form of some kind is imperative" ("Art's Sake" 92). Within his fiction, Forster voices this same sentiment via his surrogates, Margaret Schlegel and Cyril Fielding: in *Howards End*, Margaret laments "eternal formlessness" as "the epitome of us at our worst" (*HE* 156); likewise, in *A Passage to India*, Fielding lauds "the joys of form" (*PTI* 314). Yes, men "desire that…infinity have a form," writes Forster, "and India fails to accommodate them" (*PTI* 234). In India itself then, and in *A Passage to India* more broadly, Forster depicts a world in which his fear of formlessness has been realized, wherein religion itself has been relegated to a muddle, as exemplified by the jumbled refrain "of God si love" throughout the text (*PTI* 320). In *Modes of Faith: Secular Surrogates for Lost Religious Belief*, Theodore Ziolkowski cites this pervasive disbelief in *A Passage to India*, using it to argue that the novel "can in no way be construed as a quest for a surrogate faith" (Ziolkowski 115). On the contrary, I argue that Forster's own commitment to the internal form of art and his coding of the climate as the divine and determining force in the text seems to situate the weather as just such a surrogate faith: the thing you can feel but not touch; that you can know but not fully explain; that

you can lean on to make sense of an increasingly senseless world in the midst of a muddling of cause and effect.

Granting that the breakdown of religion in *A Passage to India* necessitates a new providential force, Forster's explicit mapping of the three season's of the tropical climate onto the beginning, middle, and end sections of his narrative should serve as our first indication that he has turned to the weather where, recalling Bloom's reading of Stevens, the religious man might once have turned to God. But this replacement of God with the weather, blatant as it is in Forster's paratextual commentary, finds an even less ambiguous counterpart within the text itself. Calling to mind Margaret Schlegel's prior supposition that the weather might be to blame for a dreary outing with her betrothed in *Howards End*, Ronny Heaslop observes that Miss Quested's reticence in pursuing an engagement might be likewise be attributed to the weather; when his mother, Mrs. Moore, objects to this suggestion, saying, "Oh, it wouldn't be the weather," Ronny counters with this foreboding proclamation: "There's nothing in India but the weather, my dear mother; it's the Alpha and Omega of the whole affair" (*PTI* 50).[28] As would be familiar to his devoutly Christian mother, Ronny is invoking is a distinctly divinely charged phrase; specifically, the Alpha and the Omega is the epithet claimed by God, several times, in the Book of Revelation. In effect, then, Ronny's reappropriation of the designation epitomizes the rhetorical and ideological displacement of God with the weather in *A Passage to India*, as will be reinforced in both its themes and its form.

"I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord," in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 1.8). Being the last book of the Christian Bible, Revelation is singular for its forecasting of the Final Judgment. Already then, in Ronny's repurposing of this moniker, the weather does more than simply represent God, as it did in traditional conceptions of weather as an

[28] In fact, the novel vindicates Ronny in his speculation that the weather might deter Adela from a marriage and move to India, as we have already seen that it is the heat-induced delirium that she experiences in the cave that makes her realize she does not love Ronny.

expression of God's divine power and investment in human affairs; rather, it displaces God as the First Cause and the arbiter of judgment in the secularized world of the modern novel. The paralleling of the weather and God seems to find its logical source in the mystery of causality that enshrouds both forces; accordingly, as Toby Miller observes, "meteorology performs the same structural task as superstition (a.k.a. religion), explaining forms of life that are outside the control of those experiencing them" (Miller 215). In *A Passage to India*, this internalized notion of the deistic status of the weather is reinforced through the rhetoric of faith that characterizes Mrs. Moore and Miss Quested's discussion of the ominously approaching heat: "I don't believe in the Hot Weather," announces Adela, as incredulous as she is naïve. "I believe in the Hot Weather," responds Mrs. Moore, "but never did I suppose it would bottle me up as it will" (*PTI* 148). The use of "belief" here is further magnified by the capitalization of the Hot Weather, a grammatical honor shared by the capital G God of the Bible; however, this likening also demands an acknowledgement of the comparative extraneousness of faith when it comes to the climate, as the Hot Weather has ability to fulfill the burden of proof in a way that God cannot, simply by arriving. And arrive it does – coming to settle everything, as promised (*PTI* 5).

As has been previously addressed, *A Passage to India* is a novel of and about judgment. In putting Aziz on trial, Forster is able to institutionalize and litigate his abstract concerns over culpability, effectively formalizing this process of sorting through evidence and consulting witnesses with the prospect of rendering a fair and explanatory verdict at the end. I specify "prospect" here with the intention of calling attention to two conflicting ways that the judgment of Aziz is working in the text. On the one hand, the judge's official verdict is irrelevant because, even before his trial begins, the court of popular opinion in the novel has already decided Aziz is guilty, and thus his conviction is considered a mere formality. The "yet" in the Collector's reminder to himself that "in the eyes of the law, Aziz was not yet guilty" (*PTI* 203) betrays the inevitability of the ruling, and

testifies to the accuracy of McBryde's attitude as prosecutor that "Everyone knows the man's guilty, and I am obliged to say it in public" (*PTI* 242). And yet, on the other hand, the judgment of Aziz is only ever a prospect because the mechanics of *that* trial do, in fact, break down before reaching their foregone conclusion. There is an underlying apprehension in the text around the necessity of judgment, as best embodied by the Magistrate, who, as he listens to the presentation of the evidence, "trie[s] to forget that later on he should have to pronounce a verdict in accordance with it" (*PTI* 247). But conveniently enough, this "later on" never comes for him, as the case resolves itself when Adela rescinds her testimony.

This infinite deferral of human judgment reminds us that the trial of Aziz is a farce; the real case that must be settled in the novel is the matter (introduced in the first conversation in the text) of whether or not "it is possible [for an Indian] to be friends with an Englishman" (*PTI* 7). And only the sky, Forster tells us, can make the final ruling on that. In the last section of the narrative, it becomes increasingly clear that the novel is less interested in the dramatic and traumatic plots that it has set up, obligatorily, around Adela Quested than it is in the potential friendship between Aziz and Fielding. This investment culminates in the final scene, when Fielding asks Aziz, "Why can't we be friends now?" (*PTI* 362) But there is no Magistrate to pronounce a verdict here; in fact, there is no human voice at all. Instead, it is the weather, the Alpha and Omega of *A Passage to India*'s whole affair, that must answer this question. In a novel almost completely devoid of speech tags – the effect of which is not only an indistinguishability of voices, but also an impossibility of accountability – it is especially noteworthy that the narration names the anthropomorphized speaker of its closing verdict: "'No, not yet,' and the sky said, 'No, not there'" (*PTI* 362). But perhaps anthropomorphism is the wrong word here, because what the sky's final arbitration of judgment ultimately amounts to is not a personification, but rather, a deification; for Forster, India's weather is not simply another man, but a veritable god.

As Alpha and Omega, the weather in *A Passage to India* occupies the all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful role once reserved for an omniscient God. Though the text gestures to the notion that there should be something that exceeds the weather (seemingly the all too familiar desire to identify a prior cause), it finds itself wanting, faced instead with a void:

> Some kites hovered overhead, impartial, over the kites passed the mass of a vulture, and with an impartiality exceeding all, the sky, not deeply colored but translucent, poured light from its whole circumference. It seemed unlikely that the series stopped here. Beyond the sky must not there be something overarches all the skies, more impartial than even they? Beyond which again… (*PTI* 40)

Working within a simple probabilistic framework based on likelihood, the narration figures that this chain of oversight must keep going – that somewhere up in the heavens, above everything else, someone just and fair is watching over us. In this antiquated yearning, we hear echoes of the impulse in *Howards End* to "reach in desperation beyond the fog, beyond the very stars," ransacking "the voids of the universe" (*HE* 92). But as in the instance of *Howards End*, and of "Hap" before it, the expectation falls short, as the passage trails off with a series of ellipses, providing nothing beyond the empty, "translucent" sky. Still, this isn't to say that the sky itself cannot provide something crucial in the text; indeed, implicit in this invocation of the sky's impartiality – which itself speaks to Forster's interest in the presumed fairness of the weather – is the unique unifying power of its absolute objectivity.[29]

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[29] Though he is making a specific point about the overarching (and empty) sky in *A Passage to India*, Forster has a history of challenging the presumed impartiality of omniscience, going back to the conspicuously compromised neutrality of the narrator in *Howards End*. In his *Cambridge Companion to E.M. Forster*, David Bradshaw offers a representative reading on the role of the *Howards End* narrator, in particular; in *Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth argues for the impossibility of narrative neutrality more generally, noting that they very act of telling a story demands certain allegiances: "Even among characters of equal moral, intellectual, or aesthetic worth, all authors inevitably take sides. A given work will be 'about' a character or set of characters. It cannot possibly give equal emphasis to all, regardless of what its author believes about the desirability of fairness. *Hamlet* is not fair to Claudius…*Othello* is not faire to Cassio; *King Lear* is not just to the Duke of Cornwall; *Madame Bovary* is unfair to almost everyone but Emma; and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* positively maligns everyone but Stephen. But who cares? The novelist who chooses to tell *this* story cannot at the same time tell *that* story; in centering our interest, sympathy of affection on one character, he inevitably excludes from our interest, sympathy, or affection some other character. Art imitates life in this respect as in so many others; just as in real life I am inevitable unfair to everyone but myself, or at best, my immediate loved ones, so in literature complete impartiality is impossible" (Booth 79).

I've suggested before that the weather is the connecting force in Forster's novels, and it is able to fulfill this position precisely because of its empirical universality and apparent neutrality. "Though its specific effects – heat, cold, humidity, winds – are localized," writes Bernard Mergen in *Weather Matters*, "weather is an environmental universal" (Mergen 320). The characters in *A Passage to India* are seeking just such a universal, which, as we've seen time and again, cannot be provided by religion. In the novel's case study of the Mughal Emperor Akbar's Din-i Ilahi, we find yet another iteration of this. The premise of Akbar's "syncretic religion" was "to merge the best elements of the religions of his empire" (Prakashan 58), the effect of which, assumes Adela, would be to "embrace the whole of India" (*PTI* 160). Resistant to this notion, Aziz declares, "Nothing embraces the whole of India, nothing, nothing, and that was Akbar's mistake." But Adela persists, reasoning, "There will have to be something universal in this country – I don't say religion, for I'm not religious, but something, or how else are barriers to be broken down?" (ibid) With "altogether something like five or six religious views…presented, depending on how one counts them," *A Passage to India* uses religion to put up barriers between its characters, not break them down (Webb 198). However, Adela's certitude that there must exist something universal is not completely unfounded in the novel; there is one thing that is shared by everyone in the text, one thing that flattens nationalistic partitions and erases religious difference.

Hammidullah. Haq. Syed Mohammed. Rafi. Ram Chand. Dr. Panna Lal. Cyril Fielding. These are the individuals who visit the slightly ill Aziz in his bungalow in chapter nine. Over the course of this chapter, tensions escalate as the men discuss and largely disagree over issues of race, religion, and politics, including a heated debate on the existence of divine providence and the merits of the British imperial project in India – all of which amounts to what the narration generously calls an "inconclusive talk" (*PTI* 123). Inside the bungalow, there is no uniting these men; when they eventually move to make their exit, their segregated status is emphasized: "they filed out – four

Mohammendans, two Hindus and the Englishman" (*PTI* 122). But over the course of the last hour, we are told, "the heat had lept forward," to universalizing results:

> When the seven gentleman who had held such various opinions inside the bungalow came out of it, they were aware of a common burden, a vague threat which they called 'the bad weather coming.' They felt that they could not do their work, or would not be paid enough for doing it. The space between them and their carriages, instead of being empty, was closed with a medium that pressed against their flesh, the carriage cushions scalded their trousers, their eyes pricked, domes of hot water accumulated under their head-gear and poured down their cheeks. Salaaming feebly, they dispersed for the interior of other bungalows, to recover their self-esteem and the qualities that distinguished them from one another. (*PTI* 123)

In co-opting the heat to collapse the distinctions between the men, the novel suggests that, as Adela suspected, there is something that embraces the whole of India: the weather. Figuring the bad weather as material, Forster uses the heat to fuse the characters together, filling the space between them. Indistinguishable from one another, each of the men is stripped of his name – and, with it, his individual identity – as the narration lumps them all into one amorphous collective through the repeated use of the plural pronouns "they," "their," and "them." Set in a community where the barrier of language is only one among many, the common callousness of the spring weather fully translates here; in Chandrapore, April is rendered not only the cruelest of months, a la Eliot, but a veritable "herald of horrors" (*PTI* 124). And yet, time and again, weather in the novel does what no Bridge Party can: only connect.

Beyond its unifying power in regards to Forster's characters, however, the weather, as deified in Ronny's specifically narrative terms, works to provide unity to Forster's plot. Notably, implicit in the "Alpha and Omega" epithet is the preeminence of the written word. Denoting the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, alpha and omega represent language in its entirety; spanning as they do from from the beginning to the end, they represent, so to speak, the whole story. And indeed, this is how weather works in *A Passage to India*. Not only does its tripartite structure directly map on to the three Indian seasons, effectively making meaning out of muddle, but the novel both opens and closes with weather. In fact, there is no human presence in the entirety of the first chapter – only

"the overarching sky" (*PTI* 5). Likewise, yielding to the dictate not of its characters, but of India's cyclical climate, the last section of the novel is soaked through in a torrential downpour, which, displacing religion one last time, wipes out the Hindu festival of Krishna's birth.

"The air," Forster writes, "was thick with religion and rain" (*PTI* 334). As Monk notes, "The narrative experiments of 'Temple' indicate Forster's nostalgic longing for outmoded forms of storytelling that invoke the power of a providential force (be it deity or novelist) benignly guiding and watching over lives and events" ("Apropos of Nothing" 401). But again, this force, which comes like the Genesis flood to wash away the wickedness of the characters' misdeeds and to resolve the narrative's inconclusive plot, manifests in the form not of Krishna nor any of the other gods of which India is apparently so fond, but of the weather. "High above them a wild tempest started," we read, as the rain predictably moves in on the festival, the inevitable final machination of causally bound sequence of events that Forster has set in motion: "Gusts of wind mixed darkness and light, sheets of rain cut from the north, stopped, cut from the south, began rising below, and across them struggled the singers, sounding every note but terror, and preparing to throw God away, God Himself (not that God can be thrown) into the storm" (*PTI* 353). As far as the weather's usurpation of providentialism goes, it does not get much more literal than this hurling of God into the storm. It is, seemingly, a triumph of fortuity over destiny, but we know better: Forster has simply traded out one deterministic order for another.

What the weather begins, so, too, it ends. As the bad weather of "Caves" gives way to the monsoon season of "Temple," the heat retreats and, in its place, "the rain settle[s] in steadily to do its job of wetting everybody and everything through" (*PTI* 354). Again, we are struck by this language of indiscriminateness and unification, as the weather gets to its task of reconnecting the characters. Time passes. Hostilities subside. Fielding and Aziz, flung together again, finally make peace with the limits of their friendship. There is something unsettling in this conclusion, however,

which, for many critics, reads as an unwarranted and unconvincing coda: "So far as the story interest is concerned," summarizes Kundu, "the novel could have been comfortably terminated with the caves section; because, practically nothing 'happens' after it. The action – whatever little of it is there – has been brought to its climax in the second section, and then it fritters away as the trial fritters out" (Kundu 117). But even in registering this dissatisfaction, Kundu's complaint points us to the reason for the final section: it is not that Forster's story is especially interested in what happens after the crisis of "Caves," but that his plot demands the resolution of "Temple." Confirming this motivation in interview, Forster himself half-heartedly justified the closing section of the book as "architecturally necessary" (Kundu 114). This, for Forster, is the hazard of the trade. Eschewing the particulars of his own markedly feeble endings, Forster generalizes in *Aspects*, "Nearly all novels are feeble at the end. This is because the plot requires to be wound up" (*Aspects* 95). Life may be a muddle, but the novel, as Forster understands it, must be a mystery. It exists not only to be solved, but to be resolved.

As this chapter has illustrated, the ways in which Forster repurposes the weather as a substitute for God in his narratives are manifold: it functions as a First Cause, back to which his foul-weather friendships in both *Howards End* and *A Passage to India* can be traced; it shoulders blame and excuses human misconduct; it becomes an arbiter of judgment, settling matters once reserved for an omniscient deity; and, as alpha and omega of the whole of Forster's affairs, it becomes the providential force that orders his narratives, imposing a rigid pattern of formal climatic determinism under the guise of contingency. Faced with the enduring expectation of emplotment in an increasingly formless world, Forster finds himself in a seemingly hopeless situation as a novelist; however, insofar as his divine weather intervenes to resolve his own complicated relationship to plot – just as the downpour of Indian rains conveniently settles the fraught relationship of Fielding and Aziz – it emerges as the *deus ex machina* of E.M. Forster's reluctantly modern novels, the device

through which he is most effectively able to camouflage the contrivance of narrative causality.

As the following chapters will explore, in its role as a makeshift *deus ex machina* of the twentieth-century novel, the weather works to make the artificiality of emplotment appear natural: as natural as the cycle of the seasons in India; as natural as the chance of rain in England. But, implicit in the very conceit of the *deus ex machina*, of course, is the first cause of the machine itself. So it is for Forster, for whom the weather is but a manifestation of his own machinations. It may be that there is no longer a god to be found in the skies of *Howards End* and *A Passage to India*, but, to be sure, there is still a man of our own sort caring for the characters living under them – hovering as he does just beyond its pages, ever on the brink of intervention. Insofar as literary weather is always necessarily divine weather – its most unexpected and ostensibly neutral interference always an act of *a* god – even the seemingly fairest weather in fiction must be read as a sign of authorial foul play. Indeed, for all the talk of rain falling on the just and unjust alike, there is, inherently, a motivated partiality to the weather of the novel, as there as always been to the intentional weather of God – that same God of Genesis who, in point of fact, did discriminately choose to save Noah and his family from the flood while conveniently washing away those who had become dispensable to his plot.

"Incidents and people that occurred at first for their own sake now have to contribute to the *dénoument*," writes Forster in *Aspects of the Novel*, "In the end even the author feels he is being a little foolish" (*Aspects* 95). The problem with the designedness of Forster's divine weather as an instrument of emplotment, as the author-critic knows only too well, is that it ultimately comes at the expense of human agency in his texts. While futilely fighting against the tempest that is *A Passage to India*'s concluding section, "Aziz," writes Forster, "found it hard to work against the advancing wind" (*PTI* 351); in calibrating the two forces that he sees comprising the novel – "human beings and a bundle of various other things not human beings" – Forster has tipped the scales, making his

naturalizing plot device of the weather stronger than human nature itself (*Aspects* 105). "Rereading it again," writes Harold Bloom of *A Passage to India*, "I find it to be a narrative all of whose principle figures – Aziz, Fielding, Adela Quested, Mrs. Moore, Godbole – lack conscious will" ("Forster" 1). In his insistence on preserving structural cohesion, Forster compromises his humanist project.

Apparently recognizing his own godly position and its consequential exposure of the artifice of free will and personal responsibility in his texts, Forster writes, "[The novelist] plans his book beforehand: or anyhow he stands above it, his interest in cause and effect give him an air of predetermination" (*Aspects* 96). Convenient as it may seem to continue using Forster's own criticism against his him, I have purposefully referred it throughout this chapter because it strikes me as significant that Forster produced these reflections on his chosen art in 1927, in the years just after publishing what would turn out to be his last novel. There is, then, a way of reading *Aspects of the Novel* as his lecture of resignation. Acknowledging the regrettability of the neatly resolved plot, to which he has gone to such great lengths to adhere, Forster wonders if, "instead of standing above his work and controlling it, cannot the novelist throw himself into it and be carried along to some goal that he does not foresee?" (*Aspects* 97) Throw himself, for example, into the winds of plotlessness the way that *A Passage to India* throws its god into the storm? No, not yet, says the sky. Not here. In *Aspects*, however, Forster gestures to the optimism of his modernist peers, whose forays into formlessness suggest such a thing might soon be possible; nowhere is this clearer than in the case of Virginia Woolf, who, as the next chapter will explore, shares Forster's fondness for the weather as narrative device, although her repurposing of it is in the interest of projecting indeterminacy rather than determinism; of disorder rather than order; of plotlessness rather than plot. There is nothing godly about Woolf's weather, the impersonality of which works to neutralize the forecasted predictability of her plots. Nevertheless, in his divine scapegoating of the weather, Forster has arguably found as good a way as any of abdicating his deistic authorial post: in the

contingency of its chaos, he is able to gesture to a world ruled by chance; while in the determinism of its patterns, he is nonetheless able to ensure that order is kept. Perhaps Forster isn't at fault for his nostalgic providentialism and reluctant modernism; for his attachment to causality and his capitulation to narrative contrivance; for insisting, against hope, to impose meaningful causality onto a world that has been redefined as antithetical to emplotment. Perhaps we should not blame him for only trying to connect. But he has the weather to thank for that.

Chapter Two

Reading the Clouds: Weather as (Anti-) Plot in Virginia Woolf

He said that a sentence ought to form like a cloud at the end of the pen – don't you think so?
– Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 3

In the midst of chaos, there were shapes. Glaxo? Kreemo? Toffee? A word is forming in the clouds. A word is forming out of the clouds. "But what word was it writing?" wonders the collective consciousness of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (*D* 21). The 'it' referred to here is the plane that has suddenly entered Woolf's narrative airspace, leaving in its wake a string of barely legible letters that exist just long enough to capture the attention of each individual below, before dissolving into a billow of atmospheric amorphousness. "Everyone looked up," the narration tells us, repeatedly, from a perspective that is as fluid and fleeting as the clouds it observes (*D* 20). While the characters are decidedly divided in their discrepant interpretations of the word that is forming above their heads, they nonetheless remain united, if only for a moment, by a common purpose; structured as it is around the uncertainty and speculation of the craning mass that is attempting to decipher the clouds' message, this oft-cited scene functions not only as the ur-moment of skywriting in literary fiction, but as an emblematic moment of sky reading, as well.

But what exactly does it mean to read the skies, and how does one become literate in the language of the weather? Taking its cue from Woolf and her framing of the sky as a text that must be read and interpreted, this chapter will explore the fraught relationship between weather and narrative, with the aim of illustrating how Woolf ultimately repurposes the weather as a tool of modernist resistance against the tyranny of plot. "Weather, communication, code, interpretation, influence: these things have always gone together," writes Tom McCarthy in "Meteomedia": "For both Seneca and Aristotle, the airy region was one of conveyance, of transferal and translation…For Virgil, too, weather told a coded tale of influence, of cause and effect, and hence was decrytable

[sic]…Seventeenth-century English Puritans treated the sky as a switchboard connecting them to God, divining portents in its storms and light shows" (McCarthy 237). McCarthy's rhetorical figuring of the weather as a text reinforces Woolf's own, likewise introducing meteorology as the science of reading the sky. In its depiction of the communal construal of the clouds, *Mrs. Dalloway* thus offers us a model not only of modernist meaning-making, but of modern weather forecasting; specifically, the novel's systematic data collection of myriad subjectivities as they experience the weather evokes the technology of the synoptic chart – the etymological and biblical roots of which emphasize comprehensive understanding through the process of seeing together. So coined by Robert FitzRoy, the man who would issue the first weather forecast, synoptic charts mark a critical advancement in the history of meteorology, suggesting that more than merely tell a story, the sky might well have a plot. Taking this apparent inextricability of weather and narrative as its premise, the first section of the chapter will begin to trace the major scientific and secularizing developments that have informed how we read the sky and facilitated the effective mastery of nature's plot that is weather prediction.

Still, like Woolf's own experimental writing, the weather is both bound by and resistant to the constraints of classical narrative convention. Even with the considerable meteorological advancements that developed in the early years of the twentieth century, the discourse of weather and climate remained largely hieroglyphic throughout the modernist period: its science inexact, its moods mercurial, and its messages, as Septimus Smith notes of the signaling clouds in *Mrs. Dalloway*, "not indeed in actual words" (*D* 21). Except, in Septimus's case, the message of the clouds *is*, indeed, in actual words; incidentally, "actual" is precisely the word the narration uses when it enthusiastically notes that the heralding aeroplane is "actually writing something! making letters in the sky!" (*D* 20). In his certitude that the clouds are communicating to him through their beauty, Septimus completely fails to realize that the smoky forms are, in fact, spelling something in a language that he should be

able to read. This, it may be worth noting, is not typically how real weather works. Though, of course, Woolf isn't in the business of real weather. Moving beyond the mere metaphor of weather as text, Woolf's use of the technology of skywriting to generate a vaporous prose of her own manufacture signifies literary rather than literal weather. Insofar as *Mrs. Dalloway* co-opts a plane to artificially produce aerosols that can only perform naturalness, the novel makes manifest what I have been referring to as the *weather ex machina* trope in the modern plot. In this case: out of a machine, clouds. Beyond raising the issue of weather as a contrived literary convention that betokens authorial machinations, this feat of narrative geoengineering – which exposes the not-weatherness of weather – speaks to an anxiety of the weather as a cipher, an at once empty and loaded expression of something else entirely. In the chapter's second section, then, we will turn our attention to the ways in which Woolf's controlled dictation of windy weather in *Between the Acts* both undermines and enables communication, as it blows her words away whilst giving rise to unspoken and unspeakable topics. Chief among these is the matter of the imminent war that was already well under way, waging above Woolf's head as she wrote her final novel; notably, the plane that "bore[s] ominously" through *Mrs. Dalloway* proliferates into a fleet in *Between the Acts*, both recalling Woolf's habit of entangling weather and machinery and reminding her reader of the looming threats of air raids, global warfare, and psychological trauma that linger in the margins of her text.

As a matter of narrative intervention, the planes that deliver Woolf's weather exist primarily to get in the way, serving as a distraction not only from more serious topics, but from plot itself. Like the formation that pulls the audience's attention from the pageant in *Between the Acts*, the skywriting aeroplane, in its explosion onto the scene in *Mrs. Dalloway*, diverts the eyes of both critic and character away from the other vehicle moving through the narrative: the royal motorcar. It is the motorcar that initially serves as the harbinger of war in the text, as signified by Clarissa's mistaking of the sound of it backfiring for "a pistol shot in the street outside!" (*D* 13) And it is the motorcar,

too, that initially serves as the source of communal speculation for Woolf's characters, all of whom are trying to detect the identity of its mysterious passenger: whether "Queen, Prince, or Prime Minister nobody knew" (*D* 16). In both form and content, then, the motorcar and aeroplane scenes are about as different as cars and planes themselves; sure, one is flashier, but transportation is transportation. Why, then, does Woolf overlap these already overlapping passages? One answer, this chapter argues, is that Woolf makes a habit of turning to the sky not, as Forster does, to facilitate her plots, but rather, to forestall them. Insofar as the modernist project involves the rejection of traditional realist modes of linear storytelling and legible causation, the seeming stochasticism of the weather becomes especially useful for Woolf, who – as we will see in the third section's reading of *To the Lighthouse* – uses her own smoky alphabet to engineer an aesthetic form of what appears like climatic *in*determinism, wherein weather speculation becomes its own narrative end.

To return to our primal sky-reading scene, for a moment, let us again consider the motorcar, which is working its way through the narrative by all of the official channels; deliberate in method and teleological in purpose, it moves through the streets of London on a direct path to Buckingham Palace, effectively driving forward, as it goes, not only its high-profile passenger but the very plot of the novel. The sudden interruption of the plane abruptly shifts the site of speculation in the text from the ground, with its human and national concerns, to the sky, with its ontological and narratological ones. But it also throws the plot into a literal tailspin, as the forward motion of the motorcar is replaced by the seemingly erratic movement not only of the aeroplane – which "soared straight up, curved in a loop, raced, sank, rose" (*D* 20) – but of the faux clouds themselves, as they thin and thicken, struggling to put the weather into words. Everyone continues to gawk, but the object of their collective gaze changes: "All down the Mall people were standing and looking up into the sky," the narration tells us again (ibid). Wedded as it is to the consciousnesses of its characters, the narrative becomes so preoccupied with the inscrutable clouds that are "languishing and melting

in the sky" that it pays no notice to the motorcar as it finally passes by (*D* 22). To model this disinterestedness, Woolf relegates the spectacle of the royal car – a spectacle that had, just pages ago, incited such excitement – to an incidental parenthetical: "(And the car went in at the gates and nobody looked at it)" (*D* 21). Here, again, we see the language of looking that pervades the passage, as the narrative's focus changes in unison with the darting eyes of its characters. Woolf's fiction is characterized by just such a shift in its own gaze; in consistently averting its eyes from conventional modes of emplotment and looking towards the sky instead, Woolf's preempted narratives insist that the weather itself is the preeminent event of the modernist novel.

Mrs. Dalloway's skywriting scene is an allegory of weather as plot. And yet, it is also an allegory of weather as plotlessness. More important, perhaps, than the fact that the cloud letters in *Mrs. Dalloway*'s sky are clearly meant to be spelling out a specific word – which, in and of itself, would reinforce the sequential ordering of strict narrative – is that Woolf does not see this project to its logical end, but rather, lets the wispsy word trail off into the ether, its plot unfinished. No sooner do these letters take shape than they begin to dissolve, as is the wont of the clouds. This is a wont shared by Virginia Woolf, who likewise longs for a mode of storytelling that resists what she perceives as the tyranny of plot; in the ostensible disarray of the weather, as epitomized by the figure of the cloud, Woolf, I argue, finally finds a structural model for her novels. As she makes clear in her diaries, the great tragedy of fiction writing for Woolf is that the structural demands of narrative sequencing and causality are fundamentally incompatible with the transitoriness of life and the nebulousness of consciousness. That is, as a matter of practical construction, novels require shape. However, by turning to the weather as a mode of emplotment, Woolf is able to impose an order on her texts that gives the impression of chaos, effectively yielding to the indispensability of form while preserving an illusion of formlessness. Like *Mrs. Dalloway*'s clouds, even the most conventionally plotted of Woolf's novels – chief among them *To the Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts* – appear to

"move freely…on a mission of the greatest importance which would never be revealed" (*D* 21); and yet, aleatory as the weather's patterns may seem, they are patterns nonetheless. So, too, for Woolf's novels, which, though they aspire to the amorphousness of clouds as they track the passage of time, ultimately elapse with clockwork precision.

Reading the Weather

Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?
Polonius: By th' Mass, and 'tis like a camel, indeed.
Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel.
Polonius: It is backed like a weasel.
Hamlet: Or like a whale.
Polonius: Very like a whale.
– William Shakespeare, Hamlet

"Variable winds; fair average temperature; rain at times" (*BA* 22). This is the forecast for the summer day in 1939 on which Virginia Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts*, takes place. As far as forecasts go, this is not an especially prophetic one; the extent to which it is eventually proven accurate over the course of the novel's typical June day is exceeded only by its profound vagueness. After all, what could be more predictable than the variability of the weather? Still, there is something quietly revolutionary going on in Woolf's weather reportage: banal an act as it may seem, Bart Oliver's divinatory announcement, recited verbatim from the pages of the local paper, literalizes the basic conceit that we understood implicitly in *Mrs. Dalloway*'s skywriting scene: namely, that we conceptualize the weather in terms of discourse, as something to be read.

This inherent compatibility between weather and narrative exists – has *always* existed – because weather itself is a sort of story, written in the amorphous alphabet of the clouds. Like narrative, the weather is a system of signs that demands interpretation. And like narrative, the project of meteorology is to makes sense of and impose order onto that which seems, fundamentally,

chaotic. To be sure, this is not a novel idea. As Richard Hamblyn summarizes in *The Invention of Clouds*, "Weather writes, erases, and rewrites itself upon the sky with the endless fluidity of language; and it is with language that we have sought throughout history to apprehend it" (Hamblyn 11). Keeping in mind this notion of control through codification, this first section outlines the history of weather forecasting as filtered through the fiction of Virginia Woolf.

Wet or fine, which will it be? Such is the question on which *Between the Acts* hinges. Such is the question on which *To the Lighthouse* hinges. And such is the question on which weather forecasting – the science of reading the skies – hinges. In responding to this interrogative refrain, Virginia Woolf's final novel presents us with two alternative modes of reading the sky, which neatly correspond to the dueling methodologies of ancient and modern weather forecasting: either look up to the sky itself and try to interpret the language of the clouds, or look down to the daily weather report, which has made the narrative of the sky legible to the atmospherically illiterate masses. Representing these modes in *Between the Acts* are siblings Bart Oliver and Lucy Swithin, the concerned hosts of the pageant that the text intends to stage. But the question remains: stage where? "If it's fine," writes Woolf via Lucy, "they'll act on the terrace." "And if it's wet, in the barn" she responds, by way of Bart (*BA* 22). "And which will it be, wet or fine?" (ibid) While Mrs. Swithin fixes her gaze out the window, scouring the heavens for a sign, it is Mr. Oliver who – consulting the paper – first proffers an answer, in the form of the forecast with which I began.

Indeed, by the time that Woolf was composing her own final act in the early years of the second world war, these daily weather "prognostications" – as they had since been rebranded – had become standard practice, having been reinstated by the British Meteorological Office in 1879; in fact, one can still look up the Weather Report of the Met Office for June 1939 (the month in which *Between the Acts* takes place) and see that it corroborates the novel's equivocal forecast: "Warm and unusually sunny at first; less settled and mainly cool later" (vol. 56, no. 5). Yes, unsettled – that was a

word for it. It is precisely the imprecise word that Lucy herself uses as she purveys the sky: "It's very unsettled," she observes, "it'll rain, I'm afraid" (*BA* 23). More notable than Lucy's assessment – which, after all, essentially only serves to echo Bart's initial reading – is the religious tenor of her speculation; as Lucy focuses in on one "immortal marble" cloud, her sister-in-law, Isa, imagines "her gaze was fixed because she saw God there, God on his throne" (ibid). Though God is nowhere to be found in Woolf's sky, Lucy confirms Isa's characterization of her in the resigned response that follows: "We can only pray" (ibid). It is here, too, that Bart, reasserting himself as a foil, betrays his own ideological allegiances, as he counters, "And provide umbrellas" (ibid). Faced with what appears to be profound epistemological uncertainty – as emblematized by the variability of atmospheric conditions – the siblings' divergent reactions signal a distinct institutional shift in how we think of ourselves in relation to the weather. Beyond its suggestion of the possibility of human agency and industry as a viable combatant of natural and uncontrollable forces, Bart's striking of Lucy's faith – as Woolf puts it, "When she had said 'pray,' he added 'umbrellas'" (ibid) – reminds us that the history of modern meteorology is a history of secularizing the heavens.

As embodied by Mrs. Swithin and her direct observation of the sky, the classical approach to weather reading was tied to experiential knowledge, folkloric tradition, and above all, divine providence. One need not go very far to discern the connection; Lucy's surname recalls St. Swithun, whose July 15 feast day is a cornerstone of British weather lore. So foretells the legendary adage: "St. Swithun's day if thou dost rain/For forty days it will remain/St. Swithun's day if thou be fair/For forty days 'twill rain nae mare" (Speake 275). In addition to illustrating the inescapable interdependence of weather and language that dates back to the earliest aphoristic predictions, the St. Swithun association signals Lucy's religiosity and aligns her with the same faith-based epistemology that typified ancient weather prophesy. "For centuries," writes Peter Moore in *The Weather Experiment*, "meteorology had been characterised by mystery and superstition." Indeed, "for

almost two millennia meteorological thought had been based on the ideas set out by Aristotle in his treatise *Meteorologica*, produced during the fourth century BC" (Moore 28). Accordingly, as Vladimir Jankovic likewise notes in his *Cultural History of English Weather*, the first weather prophets (as they were called) were not data collectors who monitored changes in wind and temperature; rather, they were laymen who believed "in the nature of the divinely sustained order to reveal the patterns of weather to humankind" (Jankovic 137) and whose vocations demanded the constant experiencing and observing of those patterns. These laymen – the sailors, and the shepherds, and the farmers – became weather wise by necessity, as their daily tasks depended on it. This "obligation of constant attention to the changes of the weather," writes J.F. Daniell, "endued the most illiterate of the species with a certain degree of prescience of some of its most capricious alterations" (Daniell 1). In addition to highlighting the narrative potential of weather, Daniell's rhetorical invocation of literacy taps into the distinctly unscientific nature of early weather wisdom and its strict association with a lack of formal education: "The Virgilian famer thus predicts weather because Jove himself has *revealed* to him the true correspondence between signs and signified events" (Jankovic 137). Insofar as weather variability was understood as a providential phenomenon – "Weather is not just Zeus' domain to command; it is his preferred *mode of communication*" (Gumpert 384) – the predictive method of these weather-wise few was one based on translation; that is to say, if the sky, as a part of nature, was but a page in (a) god's book, then one need only compile a key of concurring signs to decipher its hieroglyphic narrative.

Implicit in the metaphor of reading the skies is the notion that the weather has – or rather, is itself – a language, and that, with proper instruction, one might become proficient in its complex system of signifying characters. Such is the logic behind the exemplary compendium of classical weather wisdom, Theophrastus' *On Weather Signs* – the title of which likewise speaks to this rhetoric of meteorological literacy. In his role as interpreter, Theophrastus reads the weather not through a

causal model, but through a correlative one, basing his projections on the habitual concurrence of a specific natural phenomenon with a specific meteorological event. As Jankovic explains of John Claridge's 1755 *The Shepherd of Banbury's Rules* – a later weather manual that models georgic methodology – the business of the first prognosticators was "to *decipher* predictive signs and to establish a connection between them and the weather" (Jankovic 138). These auguries could take any number of outlandish forms; as might be expected, variations in the sun, the moon, and the sea all denoted certain impending weather. But so, too, did the erratic behaviors of animals. Among the multitudinous array of very specific and yet wildly broad indicators of coming rain listed in *On Weather Signs*: non-water birds washing themselves, dogs rolling on the ground, flies biting vigorously, oxen licking their fore-hoofs, many centipedes crawling towards a wall, and a raven doing just about anything at all – including, but not limited to, "sitting on an olive tree and picking lice from itself" (Theophrastus 65-69). Absurd as it is excessive, the catalog of animal signs offers little (or perhaps too much) in the way of reliable meteorological intelligence. Unless one happens to be near an anthill, it is little help to know that a parade of ants carrying eggs is a sure omen of rain. If only there was a more democratic way. If only one could cock one's head, look up to the sky, and read the future in the clouds. But, then again, according to classical weather lore, one could.

In opening their 1970 textbook, *Climate and Weather*, John Day and Gilbert Sternes announce clouds as the representative weather signs by citing one simple criterion: they can be seen (Day & Sternes 2). Reasoning that clouds – the physical manifestation of the atmosphere's complex and otherwise intangible processes – effectively "advertise the coming weather," Day and Sternes suggest that they be termed "billboards of the sky" (ibid). Resonating with what we already know of primitive weather forecasting and its faith in the sky's fulfillment of its promises, this characterization draws on the etymological root of "advertisement" for its full effect; derived from the Spanish "advertir," the cloud as advertisement functions, most appropriately, as a warning of

coming weather. So cautions Claridge's *Shepherd of Banbury*: "When clouds appear like Rocks and Towers, the Earth's refresh'd by frequent Showers" (Claridge 5).

If Day and Sternes' advertising metaphor feels uncannily familiar, it may be because it is the very the metaphor that Virginia Woolf literalized five decades earlier when she sent a skywriting plane through the pages of *Mrs. Dalloway* advertising…what exactly? Toffee? Dried-milk powder? Upon revisiting Woolf's celebrated skywriting scene, one notes that, amidst the commotion of communal speculation, the novel's narration withholds the definitive answer to this question.[1] This omission is, as the novel itself conveniently spells out for us, *key* to our understanding of the vexed relationship between language and weather, not only as explored in the novels of Virginia Woolf, but as embedded in the history of modern weather forecasting. In its insistence on the interpretive leeway that the skywriting encourages, *Mrs. Dalloway* illustrates the inherent impediment of cloud lettering: namely, its cloudiness. Resistant to form and ephemeral by nature, clouds offer, at best, a certain limited legibility; to quote meteorologist Ralph Abercromby, "Clouds always tell a true story, but one which is hard to read" (qtd. in Anderson 183). It wasn't until the first years of the nineteenth century that this story became significantly easier to read, when Luke Howard's "Essay on the Modification of Clouds" finally initiated the process of transliterating the sky.

On or about December 1799, the weather changed. No, that is not right. At precisely the stroke of midnight on January 1, 1800, "a change," writes Virginia Woolf in *Orlando*, "seemed to have come over the climate of England" (*O* 227). Specifically: "A turbulent welter of cloud covered the city. All was dark; all was doubt; all was confusion. The Eighteenth century was over; the Nineteenth century had begun" (*O* 226). In its chronicling of the absolute overcast that characterized the start of the nineteenth century, *Orlando* does more than reimagine John Ruskin's

[1] *Mrs. Dalloway*'s critics have themselves indulged in some of this guesswork, essentially enacting their own version of the synoptic speculation that the characters perform in the text. Although the *Daily Mail* was the first institution to use skywriting as a means of self-promotion in 1922, most readers accept that Woolf's letters were on their way to spelling out "Kreemo."

infamous storm-cloud; it ceremoniously ushers in what Woolf, a noted weather diarist herself, recognized as the century when clouds, as Karl Popper would later put it, became clocks. Bookended by Luke Howard's revolutionary classification of the clouds in 1802 and the publication of the first International Cloud Atlas in 1896 (so heralded as the International Year of the Cloud), the nineteenth century was not only the one in which we finally learned how to officially read the sky, but also the one in which we figured out how to effectively transcribe its hieroglyphic language into our own.

"The scientific study of clouds," writes Anderson, "could be quite literally considered a question of language, because it's central problem appeared to be a suitable and accurate nomenclature" (Anderson 182). Luke Howard's great innovation then, was as Adamic as it was scientific: here was the man who brought order to the clouds simply by naming them. Cirrus. Stratus. Cumulus. "Until then," says Peter Moore, "clouds had remained beyond the realm of science…Describing them had always been a challenge. Shape-shifting, mercurial, sleek or vast, they had roamed wild without definition" (Moore 47). Interestingly, Howard's mode of defining these formless forms was fundamentally descriptive; their names – meaning "curled," "strewn," and "heaped" – refer directly to the appearance of each of Howard's three initial cloud classifications. But crucially, in an attempt at nominal universality, Howard proposed these descriptive categories by way of a Latin taxonomy. And indeed, Howard's lasting influence as the so-called father of meteorology has been widely credited to this decision to use the Latin rather than an Anglicized alternative.[2] As Mary Favret summarizes in *War at a Distance*, Howard was adamant in his argument "that clouds had no nationality: There were no *English* clouds" (Favret 135). Howard's insistence on

[2] In *Storm Watchers*, John D. Cox takes care to note that Howard was not peerless in his pursuit of cloud classification. Chief among these would-be competitors was the evolutionary biologist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, a contemporary who outlined similar categories of cloud types; however, "where Howard had selected common words in universally acceptable Latin, Lamarck had chosen unusual French names for the types of clouds," effectively thwarting his own project with localizing rhetoric (Cox 16).

the global citizenry of clouds speaks to an underlying investment in their translatability; in rhetorically figuring clouds as themselves in a state of constant translation – "harbingers of their own transformation" (ibid) – Howard not only made meaning of their protean patterns, but also helped institutionalize a growing sense that the weather wasn't a series of isolated incidents, but rather, a continuous and causally coherent system. As it turned out, the universality of the clouds was not just nominal; insofar as the vapors that comprised them were always on the move, in an ongoing state of dissolution and reconstitution, Swiss clouds were, in fact, *becoming* Italian clouds which were *becoming* French clouds, and so forth.[3] To put it in Forster's narrative terms: the weather didn't just tell a story. It had a plot.

The idea that weather could be causal rather than correlative – that nature might have its own laws separate from those of an omnipotent and often overbearing God, and that those laws might be understood through the tracking of certain meteorological data across vast swathes of land and sea – was a critical ideological shift that continues to undergird contemporary weather forecasting. Howard had equipped weather watchers with a shared language that was making this data communicable, but it was not until technological advancements produced a means of actually communicating the data that weather forecasting, as we now know it, became possible. Characterizing prediction as "a sharply modern science," Anderson stresses the reality that "its development hinged on a dramatic new form of communication, the telegraph, which for the first time allowed weather data to travel faster than the winds themselves" (Anderson i). Beyond its reinforcement of the inextricability of the weather itself and the language used to make sense of it, the telegraph had the effect of turning what had been contingencies of far-flung observers – each

[3] Howard's inkling of the interconnectedness of weather systems anticipated the work of meteorologists like Heinrich Wilhelm Brandes, who, in 1816, would create the first weather maps. Per McCarthy, "[Brandes] translated weather data into graphic symbols on a map bases for each day of 1783, then laid them out in a series, and discovered that low pressure over Switzerland, a southeasterly storm in Italy and northwesterly winds in France were all connected, part of one and the same system. On August 31, 1846 the *Daily News* established Brandesian logic firmly in the public consciousness when it published the world's first weather map. Nothing would be the same again: local weather readings became parts of a jigsaw that depicted globally evolving systems" (McCarthy 240).

independently recording the meteorological conditions of his own modest realm – into coordinated networks.

In their earliest iterations, weather reports involved just that: reporting. It was a retrospective practice of documenting what the weather *had been*, not what it *would be*. However, if the weather was indeed a progressive, emplotted system – if its past was indicative of its future – then the idea followed that if these reports could confirm where, say, a storm had been, then they might well be able determine where it would be going next. Reframing this conceit of data reportage as a sort of exercise in transcendentalism, a young John Ruskin, in his *Remarks on the State of Meteorological Science*, imagined the predictive (and poetic) potential of this community of isolates: "Let the pastor of the Alps observe the variation of his mountain winds; let the voyagers send us notes of the changes on the surface of the sea; let the solitary dweller in the American prairie observe the passage of storms, and the variations of the climate; and each, who alone would have been powerless, will find himself a part of one mighty mind, a ray of light entering into one vast eye" (Ruskin 210). In Ruskin's one vast eye, we recognize the same impulse that underlies *Mrs. Dalloway*'s sky-reading scene: that possibly, when taken together, a collection of subjectivities could function as an instrument of objective oversight, effectively doing away with the need for a God's eye view.

This was the same principle that Robert FitzRoy would ultimately adopt in his development and coining of synoptic charts. As Moore explains, FitzRoy "borrowed from the name of the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke – each of which told the life of Jesus from a different perspective. Only by studying them together could a Christian fully understand Jesus' life" (Moore 239). But before he would collate these meteorological gospels, FitzRoy was just another singular subjectivity, an avid weather diarist and Royal Navy officer who had – at the urging of Francis Beaufort – made an early habit of recording atmospheric changes (using Beaufort's own scale)

during his time at sea as the captain of the *Beagle* (Moore 91).[4] As it turned out, this was to be a rather eventful voyage; also on the *Beagle*'s manifest was another familiar name: Charles Darwin. Though the two men began as friends at sea, their relationship would deteriorate over the years following their return. As a man of devout faith, FitzRoy was, as Moore tells it, himself unmoored by the ideas put forth in Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859); but even unaligned, it was in tandem that these two speculators threw the Church into existential crisis, effectively excising God from the rituals of both heaven and earth: "Forecast and evolution were scientific twins," writes Moore, "One wrenched away the past, the other wrenched away the future" (Moore 248). It was only two years after Darwin rewrote our yesterday that Robert FitzRoy – in his new capacity as the first director of what would become the British Meteorological Office – began ordaining our tomorrows; on August 1, 1861, FitzRoy issued the first official weather forecast in *The Times*. There is, of course, more to it than that. As writers like Peter Moore, Vladimir Jankovic, Katherine Anderson, and John Cox have so thoroughly and elegantly narrativized, and I've only just gestured to here, FitzRoy's path to prediction was – as all paths are – long and windy, and not travelled alone.[5] Like the clouds he so carefully tracked, FitzRoy's project evolved; what began in 1854 as methodological data collection turned into posted bulletins, detailing the weather across the country from the previous day. But ultimately, "the key to the whole operation," explains Moore, "was the telegraph": "It meant that in a flash the station observer could codify a breezy day on Loch Lomond, blustery showers at Scarborough, bright sunshine at Lowestoft or blue skies over Penzance…the data was read, reduced,

[4] In 1806, only a few years after Luke Howard classified the clouds, the Royal Navy officer, Francis Beaufort, devised a standardized notation system – still known as the Beaufort scale – for uniformly measuring and transmitting the force of the wind. The chart, which devised to communicate the "escalating strengths of the wind from 0 – *calm* to 12 – *a hurricane*," was adopted by FitzRoy and eventually integrated into the forecasts of the first Met Office (Moore 37).

[5] Although Robert FitzRoy would be remembered as the man who invented the weather forecast, thereby cementing the influential role of the Met Office in meteorological history, in fact, writes Katherine Anderson, in 1859 Britain was "the third European country, after France and Belgium, to create a telegraphic network for weather forecasting, and all three were proceeded by an American project, based at the Smithsonian Institute under Joseph Henry" (Anderson 3).

corrected, errors obliterated, and written up into prepared forms for analysis by FitzRoy" (Moore 275).

Initially motivated by the need for maritime safety, FitzRoy's early "forecasts" (so coined by him) were originally devised for practical purposes as standard storm warnings, intended for the limited audience of those living at or near the sea. But when FitzRoy broadcasted his first forecast in 1861, proclaiming that moderate winds were likely in the coming days, he didn't yet see on the horizon the massive storm cloud that was headed for his life and legacy in the coming years. He couldn't have predicted then how enthusiastically his forecasts would be embraced by the public, as much for their novelty as for their utility; or how his how his newfound celebrity would soon give way to increasing scientific skepticism and institutional pressure; or how, on a balmy April day in 1865, he would wake up, kiss his daughter on the forehead, and go to the bathroom where he would use his razor to slit his own throat. For his many critics, FitzRoy's suicide acted as a referendum on the failure of weather forecasting itself. In the wake of his death, the Board of Trade and the Royal Society were quick to assemble an investigative committee that would disavow FitzRoy's speculative project and accuse him of "hopelessly distort[ing] the aims of his office" (Anderson 124).[6] Forecasts, they determined, were to be halted immediately.

Part of the fault that the committee found with forecasts – as evidenced by their subsequent rebranding of them as "prognostications" – was with the word itself. And, in fact, this had posed a problem for FitzRoy as well, who had selected the term with the intention of emphasizing probability over certainty: "Prophecies and predictions they are not," insisted FitzRoy, "the term forecast is strictly applicable to such an *opinion* as is the result of scientific combination and

[6] Of the investigation, Anderson writes: "The 1866 report insisted on FitzRoy's personal responsibility. It underscored the shift from meteorological statistics to forecasting. 'There is no indication,' declared the report, 'that it was a part of the functions of the Department, as originally instituted, to publish undiscussed observations on the one hand, or to speculate on the theory of meteorology on the other. Still less can it be considered a part of these functions to attempt to prognosticate the weather'" (Anderson 124).

calculation" (qtd. in Moore 272). And yet, adamant as he was in rejecting the role of a diviner, he continued to conceptualize forecasts as "principally a matter of faith" (Moore 275). Insofar as Robert FitzRoy represents its pioneering practitioner, then, it is critical to note that the role of the modern weatherman has always existed in the liminal space somewhere between science and superstition. As Matthew Gumpert likewise explains in *The End of Meaning*, "It is in his function as forecaster that the meteorologist most clearly occupies the role of contemporary soothsayer (and doomsayer)…for all his new sophisticated instruments yielding previously untapped troves of empirical data with unprecedented precision, the meteorologist remains a prophet conjuring the signs of the sky, and reading them as tokens of the future" (Gumpert 391). We are already aware of FitzRoy's tendency to "integrate religious detail into his meteorological work" (Moore 239), given his history of reframing empirical data into scripture; and nowhere was this conflation of science and religion (reflective of FitzRoy's own competing ideologies) more evident than in the naming of his most innovative and influential predictive tool, the synoptic charts. But, while FitzRoy's faith no doubt informed his meteorological work, it was also shaken by it. Worse still, as the deeply devout FitzRoy was busy grappling with the question of who governed the weather – "Was it God or was it science?" (Moore 293) – a third and even more troubling option had emerged: perhaps it was the weatherman himself.

In his fateful decision to take it upon himself, with no official government sanction, to begin publishing the meteorological drama of the day, FitzRoy would make Bart Olivers of us all. As previously noted, Bart's deferral to the newspaper forecast succinctly introduced for us the conceit of weather as something to be figuratively and literally read; however, the forecast's chief importance in *Between the Acts* lies not simply in the implications of its legibility, but rather, in the immediate effect it produces in the novel's characters, all of whom promptly look up "to see whether the sky obeyed the meteorologist" (*BA* 22). In its invocation of sky's presumed obedience, Woolf's stage

direction suggests that it is not merely the characters, but, in fact, the weather itself that now yields to the authority of the modern meteorologist – that replacement deity who, having usurped God's throne, officially dictates the behavior of the clouds. The novel doubles down on this notion of meteorological sovereignty in its subsequent characterization of Lucy and Miss La Trobe's courageous decision to "defy Bart and the weather" by going ahead with the pageant (*BA* 24), finding above them no higher authority. Implicit in this excising of God from the so-called heavens is a jarring and intoxicating notion that for man to exercise a linguistic command over and predictive mastery of the weather effectively amounts to his control over it. It is the very notion that WG Herdman was toying with in this teasing verse he wrote in 1863, at the height of FitzRoy's prominence: "I wish I was Admiral FitzRoy, / Who up in the clouds calmly sits – high / Ordering here, and ordering there / The wind and the weather – foul or fair" (qtd. in Moore 291). Notably, the perception of the forecaster playing God rests on the slippage between the double meaning of "order," which signifies both systemization and legislation. As Luke Howard's cloud classifications and Robert FitzRoy's synoptic charts both indicate, the project of meteorology is not merely, as Richard Hamblyn writes, "a search for narrative order among events governed not by laws alone" (Hamblyn 12); but rather, it is an *imposition* of that narrative order onto processes that appear fundamentally aleatory. For the weather forecaster, linguistic codification is its own form of control.

While FitzRoy had no interest in claiming responsibility for the weather – preferring to situate himself "as a sort of benevolent bystander" instead (Moore 275) – it must be stated that there have been those who sought to play God more seriously. Often considered the first in a long line of would-be rainmakers was James Pollard Espy, an ambitious American meteorologist whose 1841 treatise, *The Philosophy of Storms*, proposed to close the gap between Herdman's two strains of order; to Espy, it seemed that if he could only determine the cause of rain, then surely he should be able to produce it. Espy's plan – which involved systematically starting fires that would mimic volcanic

eruptions and prompt precipitation – was met mostly with ridicule; after all, as James Fleming notes in *Fixing the Sky*, "control of weather and climate is a perennial issue rooted in hubris and tragedy" (Fleming 3). And yet, by 1946, an innovative new method called cloud seeding had begun to reap the idea of "Artificial Rains" (so called in the proposal) that Espy had sown a century earlier.

Though neither Espy nor Virginia Woolf would live to see the development of these mechanically engineered masses of vapor, there is, in this suggestion of artificially produced weather (made by a plane, no less), a vestige of *Mrs. Dalloway's* own manufactured clouds. Because after all, convenient as this cloudy alphabet has been as a metaphor for the legibility of real weather, it is, in the end, only that: a metaphor. Much as we like to lie on our backs and find shapes in the clouds, we know better than to look for literal letters in them. No, putting the weather into *actual* words is not a divine act. It is not even a scientific act. Rather, it is a distinctly literary act. In Herdman's imagining of Robert FitzRoy up in clouds, strategically dictating and designing the weather, the empowered forecaster is not playing God. He is playing a novelist. The slippage that Herdman is punning on with the two types of order, and that Espy likewise dreamed of achieving, is the slippage between reading the sky and writing it. In the next section, then, as we ourselves slip from the literal to the literary, we will continue to consider the inherent interconnectedness of weather and language; however, as Woolf's works will show, it may be that, embroiled as it is in all manner of communication, novelistic weather in the modernist text is in fact antithetical to narrative itself.

Writing the Weather

But now they only block the sun, they rain and snow on everyone.
So many things I would have done, but clouds got in my way.
– Joni Mitchell, Both Sides Now

Literary fiction is no stranger to fantasies of climate control. In the first chapter of *Fixing the Sky*, James Rodger Fleming catalogues a partial inventory of these stories of control, tracking the

trend back past Milton and Dante to its perceived origin point in the Greek myth of Phaethon. Notably – and, I'd argue, not coincidentally – the most concentrated cluster of these stories emerges around the turn of twentieth century. As per Fleming's index, this period alone saw the publication of Jules Verne's *The Purchase of the North Pole* (1889); Charles Curtz Hahn's *The Wreck of the South Pole, or the Great Dissembler* (1899); George Griffith's *The Great Weather Syndicate* (1906); William Wallace Cook's *The Eighth Wonder: Working for Marvels* (1907); Arthur Train and Robert Williams Wood's *The Man Who Rocked the Earth* (1915)*;* Margaret Adelaid Wilson's "The Rain-Maker" (1917); and Elizabeth Maddox Roberts' *Jingling in the Wind* (1928) – all of which imagine some version of willable weather as engineered by machines and/or governed by humans. As it happened, this was the same time period when the study of meteorology had been firmly established, thus bringing scientific order and some semblance of predictability to the chaos of the sky; and, not for nothing, these were also the years of one of the greatest shakeups in the history of the novel form, as the orthodoxy of the Victorian plot gave way to the experimentalism of literary modernism.

To be fair, despite the overlapping publication timing, the works listed above betray few signs of their high modernist context, most of them relegated instead to the fringes of genre fiction. And yet, in their thematizing of the weather as a plotline – often to absurd effect – these texts still signal a critical shift in how the literary fiction of the twentieth century pushed back against the, by then, hackneyed trope of the pathetic fallacy that had characterized the dark and stormy pages of the nineteenth-century novel. Nowhere is this more evident than in our own ur-text of overwrought weather bemoaned: Mark Twain's *The American Claimant*. In line with its 1892 publication date, Twain's would-be weatherless novel turns out to be, in the end, one more fantasy of climate control; satirizing its own stipulated attempt to "pull a book through without weather" (Twain 2), the novel concludes with the announcement of its protagonist's cockamamie plan to harness sun spots in order to "reorganize the climates of the earth according to the desire of the populations interested"

(Twain 233). That Sellers' (whose very name betrays his capitalist motivations) get-rich-quick scheme to "furnish climates to order, for cash or negotiable paper" (ibid) is so clearly ridiculous is crucial to Twain's satire, not only because it mocks the (often misguided) project of climate control, but also because Twain has already proven himself successful where Sellers will inevitably fail. In appending an archive of esteemed weather passages and inviting the reader "to turn over and help himself from time to time as he goes along" (Twain 2), Twain furnishes his book with its own made-to-order climates; in so doing, he doesn't just become Sellers, but a veritable FitzRoy in the clouds, authorizing the weather vis-à-vis his authoring of it.

Beyond its significance in speaking to the divinatory power of the novelist as a surrogate weather god who inserts rain delays as he chooses, Twain's insistence on formally segregating the weather as an Appendix in *The American Claimant* introduces the central problem of this section: namely, that weather, and our frivolous talk of it, might be fundamentally at odds with narrative. In justifying his need for an appendix in the preface, Twain reasons that "persistent intrusions of weather are bad for both reader and author," and thus, "it ought to be put where it will not be in the way; where it will not interrupt the flow of the narrative" (ibid). Twain's charge against literary weather here exists on the grounds of both aesthetics and structure; though he is especially contemptuous of what he calls "poor-quality, amateur weather," he is clear that even the "ablest weather that can be had" – such as the Genesis classic, "It rained for 40 days and 40 nights" – has no place in the body of his text. By Twain's calculation, the weather's relationship to narrative progress is not simply one of expendability, but rather, one of outright obstruction. While Twain's polemic against the weather seemingly functions as a direct response to the bogged down Victorian plots that preceded his, it nonetheless anticipates Virginia Woolf's own ambivalence toward the compatibility of weather and narrative. In returning now to *Between the Acts*, we can see that despite Woolf's investment in the meteorology-enabled legibility of the weather, she remains unsettled on its

value as a convention of both manners and literature, given its potential repurposing as a conversation topic that can either initiate or impede intimacy.

It is not digging too deep to observe that the titular acts of *Between the Acts* refer to those of the pageant that Miss La Trobe intends to stage at Pointz Hall, the country home belonging to the Oliver family, "who had bought the place something over a century ago" (*BA* 7). As is tradition, the pageant is to be a history – not only of the English state, but of its literature. Thus, as the novel itself elapses over the course of its June day, the festival play within it likewise moves forward in time, incrementally putting on each of its deliberately plotted performances: first, a proper Prologue, followed, in order, by an Elizabethan, a Restoration, and Victorian scene, before culminating, finally, in and at the present moment. With its chronological timeline, its linear progression, and its clearly demarcated beginning, middle, and end, the pageant functions in Woolf's novel as the model of narrative itself. And this, ultimately, is what is at stake (not only for Woolf, but for the modernist novel) in Bart Oliver and Lucy Swithin's concerned refrain of wondering whether it will be wet or fine. And which would it be? "As for the weather," Woolf assures us, "it was turning out, against all expectation, a very fine day. A perfect summer afternoon" (*BA* 76). In its promise of fine weather, *Between the Acts* appears to suggest, if only for a moment, that a traditional form of Aristotelian emplotment is still possible. Even in the midst of modernist chaos, some semblance of orderly progress might be achieved. This is against expectation indeed, both because it runs contrary to what much of Woolf's previous work has told us and because we have already read the forecast for the day, which warned of variable winds.

Notably, the prescience of the forecast in *Between the Acts* is itself foreshadowed, as the text's nebulous narrating voice endorses the report several pages before Bart Oliver reads it aloud to the group. Setting the scene in the library "at this early hour of a June morning," the narration observes, "the light but variable breeze, foretold by the weather expert, flapped the yellow curtain" (*BA* 17).

Beyond working as a critique of the vagueness and, perhaps, futility of weather forecasting, the text's certainty regarding this variability of the wind – reiterated at several points throughout the novel – crucially, if paradoxically, frames the weather as representative of that which is both entirely predictable and entirely contingent. It is both surprising and unsurprising, then, when, not long after the pageant begins, the wind picks up, fulfilling not only the forecast but also Twain's caution of narrative intrusion.

It is all too appropriate that the light breeze that is lifting the curtains at the start of *Between the Acts* should turn to a gust once the acts themselves begin. Considering the supposed variability of the wind itself, the consistency of its function in the novel is particularly striking; time and again, as the pageant's players attempt to perform their lines, the narration calls attention to the interruptions of "the wind," which "blew the words away" (*BA* 125, 126). As the wind continues to blow – and "half their words were blown away" with it (*BA* 78) – the play itself, already technically segmented, becomes increasingly difficult to follow. Significantly, Woolf's characterization of the effect that the weather has on this metanarrative of the pageant is one of fragmentation, as "the breeze blew gaps between their words" (*BA* 139). The prose repeatedly expresses these narrative gaps with series of ellipses, essentially using the suggestive dots as a trace, reminding us of a link that is now definitively absent. Indeed, Woolf is explicit in this, as she writes of the players: "They were singing; but only a word or two was audible, *'…wore ruts in the grass…built the house in the lane…'* The wind blew away the connecting words of their chant" (*BA* 80). The wind's preclusion of linguistic coherence here amounts to the novel's instrumentalization of the weather as a compromising narrative force – one that, in denying continuity, effaces causality and threatens to turn plot into mere sequence.

Tacitly understood in these windswept snippets of prose is the novel's ultimate resistance to meaning making. For, although the wind in *Between the Acts* is adamantly indiscriminate, blustering such that "even the great words" – the Achilles and the Odyssesus and the Helens of Troy –

"became inaudible" (*BA* 140), it is worth noting that the novel's climactic moment of interruption comes as the Reverend G.W. Streatfield tries to give his homily on the purpose of the play: "His first words (the breeze had risen; the leaves were rustling) were lost," Woolf writes. "Then he was heard saying: 'What.' To that word he added another 'Message'; and at last a whole sentence emerged; not comprehensible; say rather audible. 'What message,' it seemed he was asking, 'was our pageant meant to convey?'" (*BA* 191) Note here how, in its incremental construction of the Reverend's query – one word after another – the passage itself enacts the very process of meaning making that it is simultaneously calling into question. By breaking up this quest for meaning, Woolf seems to be privileging the conceit of "orts, scraps, and fragments" that characterizes the fractured novel (*BA* 188, 189, 192); after all, intermissions are built into the very title of *Between the Acts*, and, even without the interruptions of the weather, there is a way to read the acts themselves as already an arrangement of fragments, a series of loosely but not explicitly connected scenes depicting contained moments across English history. In trying to piece these fragments together – to fill in the gaps left by Woolf's wind – the Reverend must take on the role of the critic. This paralleling of his project and ours is striking, and our recognition of it gives some credence to Streatfield's reading that "Each is part of the whole…We act different parts; but are the same" (*BA* 192).

And yet, as much as he functions as a mirror for the reader, there is something to be said for Streatfield's conspicuously churchly designation. Recalling Lucy Swithin's stricken faith at the beginning of the novel, the wind's interruption of the Reverend's address suggests not only that religion may no longer be equipped to provide meaningful order in an increasingly lawless world, but that, as I explored in the previous chapter, the weather itself may be all we have left in place of it. As Streatfield looks up at the sky, the narration reinforces this, noting his "condemn[ation] by the clouds which continued their majestic rearrangement of the celestial landscape" (*BA* 190). Still, godless though the sky of Woolf's modernist novel may be, this isn't to say that it's empty. On the

contrary, the atmosphere of *Between the Acts* is thick with the anticipation of another threat. This one, too, materializes during the Reverend's sermon; having successfully trained its reader to expect the interruption of the wind, the novel takes us – and its characters – by surprise when an alternate aerial noise suddenly blows through the text, bisecting Streatfield's talk of "opportunity": "The word was cut in two. A zoom severed it. Twelve airplanes in perfect formation like a flight of wild duck came overhead…Then zoom became drone. The planes had passed" (*BA* 193, ellipsis mine).

The novel's transferal of its interruptive apparatus is operating on several fronts here, which are worth addressing. First, in affiliating the weather and the planes, this moment reinforces and recalls the same association in the *Mrs. Dalloway* skywriting scene. There is, to be sure, a certain logic to this: As with the *Dalloway* example, the enmeshment of the wind (there the cloud) with the plane evokes my reading of the weather as a form of novelistic machinery. But the connection is really more fundamental than that; indeed, if we continue to track our history of meteorology into the first half of the twentieth century – that is, through the years when Woolf was writing – it is clear that forecasting and aviation had become mutually enabling endeavors. Though daily forecasts had been reinstated in the years since Robert FitzRoy's death, it was not until the advent of World War I that the predictive possibilities afforded by meteorological science emerged as a military imperative. The war effort rendered planes both the cause and effect of modern meteorological developments: as the sky announced itself as a second battleground, foreseeable weather conditions became themselves a condition of aerial reconnaissance and warfare; at the same time, as technologies evolved, aircrafts became increasingly valuable tools of data collection and analysis that could facilitate both the forecasting and the fight. By the end of the war in 1919, still less than two decades since the Wright brothers' famous first flight, the Met Office would become part of Britain's Air Ministry, making the symbiotic relationship between meteorology and aeronautics official.

Then came the bombs. As the First World War gave way to the Second in late 1939, it wasn't the wet, but rather, the fine weather that would seem ominous – its clear skies signaling the dreaded possibility of air raids. It is this very possibility that Woolf's fleet of planes both anticipates and recalls as it whizzes through the pages of *Between the Acts*. Much has been written about the particular historical circumstances that informed the writing of Woolf's final work, the title of which has often (if alternately) been read as a signifier of its interwar status. Although, as Alice Wood rightly points out, *Between the Acts* is "both a pre-war and a wartime novel"; published in 1941 but set in 1939 "less than three months before Germany's invasion of Poland on 1 September," the novel, writes Wood, "recaptures the historical moment directly preceding the outbreak of World War II for an audience now living through that event" (A. Wood 108). Taking into account these conditions of its composition, the pretense of speculation and possibility that is so deeply embedded in the novel's emphasis on forecasting exists in direct tension with its overwhelming sense of inevitability; emboldened by the omniscience that only hindsight can provide, *Between the Acts* functions itself as a forecast – its weather worn narrative prophesizing a political climate that was beginning to look quite unsettled indeed.

Of these mounting tensions, Virginia Woolf was acutely aware. As Alex Zwerdling summarizes in "*Between the Acts* and the Coming of War," "The book reflects the impact on her of the extraordinary events of the time – the Munich crisis, the declaration of war, the fall of Paris, the preparations for a German invasion, the Battle of Britain, the Blitz – moments in the history of her country and her civilization in which the threat of catastrophic ruin was constant" (Zwerdling 220). Citing Woolf's own diary entries as evidence of her engagement with these crises, Zwerdling takes care to show that "she was constantly responding to the decisive historical events taking place" (ibid). It also seem important to add here that, beyond documenting certain ongoing developments in the war, Woolf's diaries are filled with weather reports; that, for her – as for *Between the Acts* – this

threat of catastrophic ruin that the air raids (in particular) constantly posed was contingent upon and consistently figured in terms of the weather. Take, for example, this series of entries from the fall of 1940: "*Thursday 12 September* A gale has risen. Weather broken. Armada weather. No sound of planes today only wind…If we can hold out this week – next week – week after – if the weather's turned – if the force of the raids on London is broken – " (*Vol. 5* 318); "*Friday 13 September* A strong feeling of invasion in the air" (ibid); "*Tuesday 27 September* No invasion. High wind" (*Vol. 5* 321); "*November* Wind rising. So perhaps traffic will be interrupted (*Vol. 5* 339). In using the wind as a gauge for the likelihood of an attack, Woolf's entries speak to the technical interconnectedness of weather and war; as Paula Maggio writes, "Since weather helped determine visibility, and visibility determined whether a German bombing raid on London would take place as well as how successful it might be, it is natural that Woolf would scan the skies for cue regarding potential risks to safety and comfort and include these in her diaries" (Maggio 17). But notably, this actual association between war and the weather in the diaries became a strictly metaphorical association in the fiction that Woolf was writing at the time. As such, in *Between the Acts*, the intrusive and destructive wind functions not as a protection from, but rather, as the substitute for the threat of war. Indeed, as the characters likewise note, the war and its metonyms are conspicuously absent from both the pageant and the novel: "Why leave out the British Army," wonders Colonel Mayhew, "What's history without the Army, eh?" (*BA* 157) Still, as Wood and Zwerdling rightly note and Woolf's diaries further attest to, even in being pushed to the margins of the text, the anxiety of war pervades each page of *Between the Acts*. We feel it in every gust of the wind; in every glance to the sky; in every repetition of that initial charged question: wet or fine? Woolf's mapping of the war onto the weather works so effectively here because, as Matthew Gumpert observes, "Weather is inherently *catastrophic*: a privileged category of *interruption*. Weather is that which may always *happen*, at any moment" (Gumpert 384). This emphasis on the interruptive event recalls Woolf's initial co-opting of the weather as a trope of

narrative subversion; just as the wind threatens to blow away the words of the pageant, so, too, does the imminence of the coming war suggest a rupturing of the continuous progress of England and its literature that the performance signifies.

Tangential though this consideration of war and the weather may seem, I interrupted my own argument to address it because, insofar as Woolf privileges the distinct metaphorical affordances of the weather in her warless interwar novel, *Between the Acts* speaks to my broader questions about the effect and effectiveness of the weather as a mode of communication. As readers of *The Importance of Being Earnest* will recall, Woolf's weathered doublespeak in *Between the Acts* is reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's own oft-cited adage: "Pray don't talk to me about the weather, Mr. Worthing. Whenever people talk to me about the weather, I always feel quite certain that they mean something else. And it makes me so nervous" (O. Wilde 10). As both Woolf and Mr. Worthing confirm, what we talk about when we talk about the weather is often something else entirely; but the wit of Wilde's observation continues to resonate, it seems, because it calls attention to the unique status of weather talk as somehow both the emptiest and most loaded form of communication. As Samuel Johnson likewise notes in *The Idler*, there is something both distinctly tempting and trivial about this topic of conversation. "It is commonly observed," writes Johnson, "that when two Englishmen meet, their first talk is of the weather. They are in haste to tell each other, what each must already know, that it is hot or cold, bright or cloudy, windy or calm" (Johnson 182). While a more generous reading of this habit might invoke what we know of the history of forecasting and its reliance on synoptic speculation and shared data collection, the seemingly appropriate critical take here is that this communicative compulsion (and the paradox it contains) derives from the etymological variability of the very word "meteorology"; paraphrasing Vladimir Jankovic in his own essay, "Meteomedia," Tom McCarthy reiterates that, "since *meteoros*, 'rising,' can refer to rising wind within the stomach,

meteoro-logeo means not only 'talk of high things' but also 'windy speech', 'high talk', 'empty musings'" (McCarthy 238).

Framed this way, Woolf's utilization of the breeze to blow away the words of the Reverend's address seems a sort of punning joke, a clever literalization of his longwinded speech. Still, while the weather may pose a problem for communication in *Between the Acts* – creating gaps in plot and syntax alike – it would be shortsighted not to acknowledge, as Woolf herself does, that even the windiest of speech can function as a tool of social, if not narrative, connection. Building on Johnson's observation, Jan Golinski calls attention to the practical utility of weather discourse as the definitive "'starting point' of polite conversation…a way of initiating an interaction, of engaging a conversational partner with whom one wanted to talk about other matters" (Golinksi 69). Whatever else its function, the weather emerges here as, quite simply, a reliable convention. We talk of the weather when we meet because when we meet, it is customary to talk of the weather. The value of this is not to be understated. Certainly, there is something to be said for proper etiquette. But more than that, insofar as such chatter is "a paradigm example of what linguists call phatic communication, in which the primary meaning lies not in what is referred to but in the social bonds consolidated by the exchange," the aggressive banality of weather talk is, in fact, the very thing that allows for its intimacy (ibid).

Always begin with the weather. As it happens, this advice that Jan Golinski gives to the polite conversationalist is the same advice that Virginia Woolf gave to the polite modernist novelist in her essay, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1924). Recognizing the utility of phatic conversation as a means of bridging the same narrative and interpersonal gaps that windy speech can so easily create, Woolf proposes this analogy:

> A convention in writing is not much different from a convention in manners. Both in life and in literature it is necessary to have some means of bridging the gulf between the hostess and her unknown guest on the one hand, the writer and his unknown reader on the other. The hostess bethinks her of the weather, for

> generations of hostesses have established the fact that this is a subject of universal interest in which we all believe. She begins by saying that we are having a wretched May, and, having thus got into touch with her unknown guests, proceeds to matters of greater interest. So it is in literature. ("Mr. Bennett" 206)

Ever the gracious hostess, Woolf's made a habit of beginning several of her own novels with the weather. "The sun had not yet risen." "It was an uncertain spring." "Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow." But there is, for both Golinski and Woolf, a stipulation: start with the weather, but don't stop there. In both of these figurations, talk of the weather is meant to be "the pretext [for conversation] rather than the principle subject of it" (Golinski 69). To not realize this, to go on at length about the weather itself, is to commit the ultimate faux pas. This breakdown of the convention – when weather, per the analogy, "ceases to be a means of communication between writer and reader, and becomes instead an obstacle and an impediment" – is, according to Woolf, the central crisis of the modernist novel: "The literary convention of the time is so artificial – you have to talk about the weather and nothing but the weather throughout the entire visit – that, naturally, the feeble are tempted to outrage, and the strong are led to destroy the very foundations and rules of literary society" ("Mr. Bennett" 210).

But, then again, isn't this precisely what Virginia Woolf wants? To destroy the very foundations and rules of literary society? To do away with convention. To talk about the weather and nothing but the weather throughout the entire visit. In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Woolf articulates that which *Between the Acts* only implied: namely, that weather is at once a boon and an impediment to communication; at once an indicator of naturalness and of artificiality; at once the signifier of formlessness and of form. In this next section, I will use the model of *To The Lighthouse* to examine how Woolf turns what she has posed here as a particular literary problem – that of the weather forestalling proper narrative – into its own solution, effectively co-opting the weather and our compulsive talk of it into her ultimate mode of resistance against what she perceived as the tyranny of plot.

Plotting the Weather

The sun did not shine.
It was too wet to play.
So we sat in the house.
All that cold, cold, wet day.
– Dr. Seuss, The Cat in the Hat

"Never open a book with the weather." So certain was Elmore Leonard of the weather's status as a sure mark of amateur literary production that he decreed this the first of his 10 Rules of Good Writing.[7] But as anyone familiar with the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest will know, Leonard's admonishment is simply the pithiest expression of a decades-long tradition of disparaging weather description as unbecoming of estimable literature. Instituted in 1982 by the San Jose State University English department, the self-proclaimed "wretched writing contest" – named for nineteenth-century novelist Edward George Bulwer-Lytton – annually awards a pittance to the entrant who composes "the opening sentence to the worst of all possible novels." The illustrious terrible sentence against which all entries are measured is the opening line to Bulwer-Lytton's 1830 novel, *Paul Clifford*, which notoriously begins: "It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents…" Insofar as the climatically dramatic opening has come to be accepted as "the literary posterchild for bad story starters" (Petit 2013), it speaks to both Leonard's and Twain's concern that weather is fundamentally antithetical to narrative progress and that no respectable tale ought to begin with it. But what about *Bleak House*? Or *Jane Eyre*? Or *The Cat in the Hat*? What about *To the Lighthouse*?

In accordance with Virginia Woolf's instincts as a proper hostess of fiction, *To the Lighthouse* opens with the most congenial of literary conventions: talk of the weather. Joining the exchange mid-conversation, the reader is promptly greeted by Mrs. Ramsay's affirmative answer to James' and the novel's un-uttered titular question: Would they go to the lighthouse? The definitive "Yes, of

[7] *New York Times* "Writers on Writing" (16 July 2001)

course" of Mrs. Ramsay's response (and the book's opening) teases for a moment a version of this story wherein the matter is no sooner raised than it is settled, before immediately undercutting that certainty with the conditional clause that follows: "if it's fine tomorrow" (*TL* 3). In ceding to the radical contingency of the "if," Mrs. Ramsay initiates the predictive conversation that will sustain the text's narrative tension throughout the duration of its first section. In other words, insofar as this antagonistic forecasting between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay constitutes the major event of the book's first hundred and twenty pages, *To the Lighthouse* emerges as the realization of Woolf's own prognostication on the fate of the modernist novel, in which the whole visit consists of talk of the weather. Suffice it to say, then, that not much happens over the course of the one late-summer day on which the entire first section of *To the Lighthouse* takes place. In line with Woolf's characteristic privileging of interiority over action, it takes a full fifteen pages for the author to transcribe what are, essentially, the eight lines of dialogue that make up the external drama of the characters' initial exchange:

> Mrs. Ramsay: Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow. But you'll have to be up with the lark.
> Mr. Ramsay: But, it won't be fine.
> Mrs. Ramsay: But it may be fine – I expect it will be fine.
> Charles Tansley: It's due west.
> Mrs. Ramsay: Nonsense.
> Charles Tansley: There'll be no landing at the Lighthouse tomorrow.
> Mr Ramsay: No going to the Lighthouse, James.
> Mrs. Ramsay: Perhaps you will wake up and find the sun shining and the birds singing. Perhaps it will be fine tomorrow. (*TL* 3-7, 14-15)

For *To the Lighthouse*, the effect of this prolonged weather speculation and the debate on the variable hypothetical futures that it generates amounts to exactly that which Twain warned us about in *The American Claimant*: the postponing of narrative progress. With this, I suspect, Virginia Woolf essentially agrees. However, as this section will argue, it is precisely because of its incompatibility with narrative that the convention of novelistic weather becomes so uniquely useful to Woolf, whose own literary project has been defined by its explicit resistance to determinative causality and

prescriptive plots. Emergent as it was at the beginning of the very century when chance would become the ruling law of the land, the modernist novel is – not unexpectedly – profoundly concerned with the interrelationship between order and chaos. In the last chapter, we saw how E.M. Forster, when confronted with the godless randomness of the modern world, strove to impose coherent causality onto his narratives by co-opting the weather as a seemingly deterministic and providential mode of emplotment. Woolf wants something different here. Rather than foisting some semblance of artificial order, Woolf aspires for her narratives to expose and reflect the perceived chaos of lived experience. And yet, divergent though they are in their aims, Forster and Woolf find in the weather a shared solution. Acknowledging the necessity and inevitability of form even in that which is most apparently formless, Woolf takes up the weather not just as the method of forestalling her plots, but as the seemingly stochastic but ultimately patterned model for modernist anti-plotting itself.

"Is life like this? Must novels be like this?" As with Forster, the craft of Virginia Woolf's fiction is deeply informed by her criticism. And in this fundamental mimetic question, famously put forth in her essay "Modern Fiction" (1921), Woolf articulates the whole of her novelistic philosophy, effectively framing her work as a lyrical form of resistance against the tyranny of plot. Analogizing the capitulation to plot as a veritable compulsion, Woolf writes, "The writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot…if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot" ("Modern Fiction" 150). Inverting Forster's outmoded investment in providing plots in fiction to compensate for the fact that they do not exist in life, Woolf advocates for plotlessness on the very basis of upholding life-likeness in literature: "Is it not the task of the novelist," she probes, "to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it

may display?" (ibid)

Even beyond the integrity of her ideological and artistic principles, Woolf struggled with the practicalities of these artificially structured narratives, confessing in a 1927 diary entry, "I can make up situations, but I cannot make up plots" (*A Writer's Diary* 114). Faced with the limits of not just the form but of her own facility, Woolf imagined the possibility of a semantic solution; while composing *To the Lighthouse* (also in 1927), Woolf recognized the categorical failure of the rubric that had been ascribed to her, and looked to a rhetorical pivot as a potential way out: "I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant 'novel.' A new --- by Virginia Woolf. But what?" (*A Writer's Diary* 78) Nearly a hundred years on, for better or for worse, Woolf's ---s have been canonized as the quintessential "novels" of the modernist period. Conventional critical wisdom reads Woolf's skepticism toward traditional plots as symptomatic of the literary moment from which she emerged. In his critical introduction to *The Modernist Novel*, Stephen Kern cites the modernists' "rejection of the strong plot [as] the most significant formal innovation of the period" (*Modernist* 66), explicitly tying this effective subversion of master narratives to the scientific advancements of the time: as the deterministic processes of nineteenth-century physics gave way to quantum theory's probabilistic framework in the twentieth, modernists, observes Kern, abandoned "conventional causality, devis[ing] new ways to integrate experience through mythic parallel, spatial form, and probabilistic causality" (*Modernist* 61). Fittingly, this model of causation à la expectation is the very same one that underlies weather forecasts (alternatively called "the Probabilities"), and correspondingly, *To the Lighthouse*, which spends the better part of its anti-narrative debating the likelihood of various hypothetical futures. As for its immediate past, *To the Lighthouse* is, as previously mentioned, comparably vague; its refusal to begin at the beginning further affirms Kern's observation that modernist authors "sought ways to start their novels *in medias res* to capture an

increasingly secular world where belief in ultimate origins was becoming more and more difficult to sustain" (*Modernist* 136).

While the beginningless beginning of *To the Lighthouse* formally hints at the possibility of a world without origins, it is not until *Between the Acts* that Woolf's own preoccupation with the hollowness of historical and literary continuity takes center stage (so to speak). As mentioned, the performative celebration of English history as reconstructed through the pageant provides the basis for the novel's metacommentary on the simultaneous desire for and artificiality of grand narratives. Though, as Karen Schneider rightly points out in "Of Two Minds: Woolf, the War, and *Between the Acts*," the play itself is only one of the many things that speak to this idea in the text: "Lucy Swithin's preoccupation with the past and concern with origins, the many references to the persistence of the past in the present, as well as the narrator's frequent historical allusions and nostalgic tone, all suggest a profound need for cultural roots, for unbroken continuity" (Schneider 101). Still, cognizant as Woolf may be of this collective need for unbroken continuity, she remains convinced, now more than ever it seems, of its impossibility – at least in this modern moment. Surely it is not incidental that when the skies do finally open up and pour down on the pageant – fulfilling the "rain at times" portion of Bart's initial forecast – it interrupts the festival's concluding sketch, "The Present Time. Ourselves" (*BA* 178). Naturally, this "utter fragmentation of life in the modern period," as Zwerdling sees it, would be caused by fickle weather (Zwerdling 234); the "sudden[ness], profuse[ness]" of the shower, emergent from a cloud "no one had seen coming," further reinforces the godlessness of Woolf's modern sky and the decidedly secular world that it signifies (*BA* 180).

It is entirely fitting that it should be Lucy Swithin – whom we meet as she scans the empty sky for "God on his throne" (*BA* 23) – who is most invested in seeing the pageant through to its proper end, for she is the "visionary who fabricates a benevolent providence, who makes consoling fictions out of the cosmic emptiness" (Zwerdling 230). Critically, in this, both she and the novel fail.

Yet, as Pericles Lewis asserts in *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, "a sense of the sacred persists even in the apparently godless modernist novel" (Lewis 24). For Woolf then, as for Forster, where we used to have God, we now only have weather; accordingly, the orts, scraps, and fragments of *Between the Acts'* acts exist as a reflection of the elemental chaos that this has wreaked on the order of things. Perplexed by the confusion of the pageant's plot, Isa Oliver stands in here as the surrogate for the reader who, likewise, can "make nothing of" the novel's own (*BA* 90). This disorder, however, is itself by design, as *Between the Acts* is explicitly engaging with – and arguably, enacting – the very idea put forth by Woolf decades earlier in "Modern Fiction"; "Don't bother about the plot: the plot's nothing" (*BA* 91). Though this notion had, as we know, long preoccupied Woolf, it is not until her final "novel" that she addresses the tyranny with such directness, asking point blank: "Did the plot matter?" (*BA* 90)

Woolf's own answer to this question, stated explicitly in the following lines, has oft been taken as a directive on how to read her novels: "There was no need to puzzle out the plot," she writes, "The plot was only there to beget emotion" (ibid). Let us entertain this suggestion for a moment, because it is also one way to think about Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay's plot forestalling weather chatter in *To the Lighthouse*. As with the weather and the war in *Between the Acts*, the discussion of the weather in *To the Lighthouse* acts as a cipher, a way of talking – as Wilde feared – about something else entirely. Recalling Woolf's own analogy of weather talk as a social lubricant, the day-long debate on the potential fineness of tomorrow's weather works here as a means of establishing and exploring the fraught intimacy between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay.[8] Insofar as Woolf believes that all novels "deal with character, and that it is to express character…that the form of the novel…has been evolved,"

[8] Woolf plays with this idea of weather as a facilitator of intimacy with another of the novel's potential couples, Minta Doyle and Paul Rayley; as Mrs. Ramsay wonders if Minta will accept Paul, the narration shifts to Nancy as she invokes the weather to encourage their union: "There they stood, looking at the sky, wondering about the weather, and she had said, thinking partly to cover their shyness, partly to encourage them to be off…'There isn't a cloud anywhere within miles'" (*TL* 56).

the weather emerges in *To the Lighthouse* as the ideal instrument of this expression ("Mr. Bennett" 199). For, as we have seen through the synoptic model of weather forecasting, which preferences perception over objective experience, "this transcendental subject is difficult to distinguish from subjectivity itself" (Gumpert 380); indeed, writes Matthew Gumpert, "*to talk about the weather* is to talk about everything, and nothing…here weather is a universal subject, or a non-subject, or an Ur-subject" (ibid). As such, it has been easy for critics to project all manner of subtextual character traits onto the couple via their telling reactions to the weather. As Susan Stanford Friedman summarizes, "Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay constitute a marriage of opposites – epistemologically, ontologically, ethically, creatively, and historically. They reproduce the underlying binary system of patriarchy: masculine-feminine, public-private; objective-subjective; rational-intuitional; creative-procreative; egocentric-relational (etc)" (S.S. Friedman 172).

Most relevant to our purposes, though, is the seemingly gendered breakdown of determinism versus contingency as embedded in the rhetorical patterns of husband and wife. Significantly, all of Mrs. Ramsay's dialogue in the exchange in marked by her use of the conditional. Her mode of discourse is one of possibility, full of "might," "may," and "perhaps."[9] In contrast, Mr. Ramsay enters the narrative with an oppositional "But" and the decree that "it won't be fine" (*TL* 4). As each challenges the other's forecast, tensions mount. Believing science and objective truth are on his side, Mr. Ramsay is adamant in his definitive assessment that "There wasn't the slightest possible chance that they could go to the Lighthouse tomorrow…not with the barometer falling and wind due west" (*TL* 31-32), while Mrs. Ramsay refuses to accept his certainty on a matter that is characterized by its inconstancy: "But what had she said? Simply that it might be fine tomorrow. So

[9] We can see further evidence of Mrs. Ramsay's indulgence in the rhetorical, as well as her empathy, in the repeated use of "if" in her plea for the lighthouse keeper: "For how would you like to be shut up for a whole month at a time, and possibly more in stormy weather, upon a rock the size of a tennis law? she would ask…if you were married, not to see you wife, not to know how your children , – if they were ill, if they had fallen down and broken their legs or arms" (*TL* 5).

it might" (ibid). Woolf makes the gendered underpinnings of this conflict explicit, as Mr. Ramsay fumes over "The extraordinary irrationality of her remark, the folly of women's minds" (ibid), while Mrs. Ramsay groups all the male opposition together in thinking, "All these young men parodied her husband, she reflected; he said it would rain; they said it would be a positive tornado" (*TL* 15).[10]

In Mr. Ramsay's function as amateur meteorologist and Mrs. Ramsay's appeal to blind faith, we can see the pair as prototypes of siblings Bart Oliver and Lucy Swithin. Like Bart, Mr. Ramsay's conviction that the weather won't hold appears to derive from an outside authority. In *Archipelagic Modernism*, John Brannigan unpacks this, citing the couple's use of the word "fine" – which was "one of the handful of terms used by the Meteorological Office in describing and forecasting the weather" – as evidence that "the daily weather forecast printed in *The Times* newspaper is likely the source of Mr. Ramsay's certainty" (Brannigan 112).[11] This notion of certainty with regard to the weather remains for Brannigan, as it does for me, a matter of some mystery in the novel. As Robert FitzRoy knew all to well, "weather forecasting was a matter of fairly crude calculations which produced cautious predictions" at best (ibid); all things considered, then, even if Mr. Ramsay did have a copy of *The Times* on hand, writes Brannigan, "it may have given him the information with which to make an educated guess about the likely course of the follow day's weather, but not the certainty of 'fact' which he upholds testily against his wife's seemingly flighty speculations" (ibid). Given Woolf's own investment in the characteristic variability of the weather, it is especially striking here that she chooses to situate this deeply subjective debate firmly in the register of objective truth; notably, Mr.

[10] As Marita Sturken observes in *Desiring the Weather*, "Throughout history, the relationship of humans to the weather has been dictated by narratives of control. Weather has long been understood as the primary symptom of nature, the way that nature speaks to its occupants. Nature has been defined historically in both religious and gendered terms, with centuries' worth of analogies of nature as female and science/technology as male" (Sturken 163).

[11] Brannigan notes that following the renewed investment in forecasting during the First World War, the 1920s was a boom period for meteorology as a matter of public interest: The Met Office had taken to publishing several widely circulating instruction manuals intended to democratize weather prediction, and forecasts – now also broadcast on the radio – were now a fixed feature of daily life (Brannigan 116). Which is to say, it is entirely likely, given Woolf's preexisting interest in weather tracking, that she would be familiar with the language and methods of the forecasts.

Ramsay's fundamental grievance against his wife is that "she flew in the face of facts, made his children hope what was utterly out of the question, in effect, told lies," while her gripe with him is that he, in turn, would "pursue the truth with such astonishing lack of consideration for other people's feelings" (*TL* 32). We know that there is no truth or lie when it comes to speculation. Probability is not a matter of veracity. And yet, *and yet*, Mr. Ramsay is, in the end, vindicated in his insistence that they will not go to the lighthouse tomorrow. Directly following the patriarch's initial declaration that "it won't be fine" in the early pages of the text, the narration confirms, "What he said was true. It was always true. He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact" (*TL* 4); and sure enough, by the close of the section, Mrs. Ramsay has capitulated to her husband and the weather, looking out the window and finally ceding, "Yes, you were right. It's going to be wet tomorrow. You won't be able to go" (*TL* 124). Mrs. Ramsay's closing "Yes," which echoes her opening line, is not tempered here with an "if"; there is no longer any conditionality to tomorrow's conditions.

But. Mrs. Ramsay is not talking about the weather. Or rather, she is not talking about *only* the weather. This conversation, as the text reminds us again and again, is about people's feelings. From the start, Mrs. Ramsay's indulgence in the conditional is less about her own ideological attachment to contingency than it is an optimistic effort to protect the hopes of her son, James, who longs to go to the lighthouse; likewise, Mr. Ramsay's parallel refusal to "alter a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being" is framed, in his mind, as an equally merciful management of James' expectations (*TL* 4). But over the course of the day, it becomes clear that this dispute is not just about James' feelings – it is also about their own.[12] The phatic discourse of the weather provides the cover for the emotional battle that is being waged throughout the novel's first

[12] Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay's tempestuous exchange is further refracted in the snippets of the intertext that Mrs. Ramsay is reading to James throughout the day; "The Fisherman and His Wife" is a German fairy-tale about an unsatisfied wife who keeps sending her husband back to an increasingly inclement sea with escalating demands for the magical flounder he has found there.

section, the crux of which is Mr. Ramsay's unspoken request of his wife: "Will you not tell me just for once that you love me?" (*TL* 124) But. "She could not do it," we're told, "she could not say it" (ibid). Or rather, she would not. Instead of giving into her husband's need for a verbal affirmation of her affection, Mrs. Ramsay, at the emotional climax of the narrative, returns to that most trivial of topics: tomorrow's weather. Insofar as she is able to simultaneously communicate her love whilst withholding any direct expression of it, Mrs. Ramsay's climatically coded concession is alternatively figured as her ultimate victory: "For she had triumphed again. She had not said it; yet he knew" (ibid). Could it be, then, that this is a win-win-win situation? Not only does Mrs. Ramsay find her own validation in validating Mr. Ramsay's forecast, but Virginia Woolf, one might argue, also emerges triumphant here in her resistance against the tyranny of plot.

"A group of people plan to sail in a small boat to a lighthouse. At the end, some of them reach the lighthouse in a small boat. That is the externality of the plot." So says Arnold Bennett, one of the harsher critics of *To the Lighthouse* (qtd. in Majumdar 200). To be fair, Bennett's summary is more or less accurate, as far as externality goes; true to Woolf's form, the majority of the novel's action (if we can call it a novel and call it action) occurs within the minds of the characters. Although, this first part of the narrative – the longest of the three – is not actually about a group of people planning to sail, as Bennett claims, but rather, about two individuals debating whether or not this expedition is even possible, hinging as it does on the variability of the weather. Thus, while we may well read this exchange as an expression of character (as Woolf might have us do), we can also read it as a deliberation on plot. "As the generic name for the phenomenological," writes Gumpert, "weather is the category of that which *happens*" (Gumpert 380). Stripped down to its most fundamental formal function, then, the will-it-or-won't-it-be-fine binary that structures Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay's forecasting exercise and forestalls the storyline can be treated as a comment on the novel as narrative construct – one that traditionally requires things to happen, but that Woolf threatens to

subvert. Insofar as it implies forward motion and continuous progress towards a predetermined destination, going to the lighthouse constitutes what would be the causally coherent narrative action of the novel. To go, in effect, is to plot. If, on the other hand, it rains, then both James' excursion and Woolf's narrative must be postponed until the next fine day, as per Mrs. Ramsay's assurance that "even if it isn't fine tomorrow…it will be another day" (*TL* 26). "Soon," she promises, putting James to bed (*TL* 114); but what both Mrs. Ramsay and Mrs. Woolf know is that the expedition has been delayed indefinitely, tomorrow being the final day of the Ramsays' annual summer holiday on the Isle of Skye.

As the day – and with it, the novel's first section – comes to a close, Skye's skies open up: down comes the rain, washing Woolf's plot out. The effect of this "downpouring of immense darkness" on the text is distinctly indistinct:

> Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which, creeping in at keyholes and crevices, stole round window blinds, came into bedrooms, swallowed up here a jug and a basin, there a bowl of red and yellow dahlias, there the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers. Not only was furniture confounded; there was scarcely anything left of body or mind by which one could say, "This is he" or "This is she." (*TL* 126)

In its dissolution of "both material objects and human differences within it," the rain essentially functions here as a mechanism of formlessness (Mahaffey 183). The amorphousness that the darkness imposes on the house and the consciousness within it is reflective of the section's lack of narrative shape. As one rainy night dilates into a rainy decade, with nary a human presence nor a narratable event to show for it, all logical sequencing is defied; lest they be mistaken for discernable plot points, the section takes care to minimize several significant incidents that occur [including the deaths of three Ramsay family members] by marginalizing them in bracketed asides. Despite its title, as Anny Sadrin likewise notes, the whole of "Time Passes" "speaks of stagnation…it places us in a world that would best be described as atemporal, a world of perpetuity where nothing happens barring atmospheric disturbances. It is as if weather were busy murdering time" (Sadrin 99). In

essentially replacing plot with weather here – that is to say, weather is what happens instead of going to the lighthouse – Woolf comes as close to the "spasm of rebellion" that she imagined in "Modern Fiction" as we have seen ("Modern Fiction" 149).

While this frustration of conventional form is, as the title of Woolf's essay clearly affirms, an explicitly modernist technique, it is also, according to critics like Rachel Blau DePlessis and Susan Stanford Friedman, a uniquely gendered mode of protest. In "Lyric Subversion of Narrative in Women's Writing: Virginia Woolf and the Tyranny of Plot," Friedman poses the question of whether narrative itself is "an authoritarian plot which women, as the colonized and plotted against, must resist" (S.S. Friedman 162). Locating the inherent tyranny of plot within the prescribed "sequential order of its discourse," Friedman proposes the lyric mode – which "foregrounds *simultaneity*, a cluster of feelings or ideas that project a gestalt in stasis" – as Woolf's preferred method of disruption (S.S. Friedman 164). The chronological flattening that characterizes the muddled middle section of *To the Lighthouse* speaks directly to this lyricism, and, if the novel were to end there, it would, I concede, signal an uncontested triumph on Woolf's part of impressionism over plot. But it doesn't.

On the opening page of the novel, James Ramsay, at his mother's encouragement, considers the matter of going to the lighthouse a foregone conclusion: "As if it were settled, the expedition were bound to take place…after a night's darkness and a day's sail" (*TL* 3). And, indeed, this expedition is bound to take place. As if the rain steadily continued through the single decade-long night that is "Time Passes," Woolf then resumes her narrative on that next fine day, which comes – as Mrs. Ramsay promised – with the long-awaited, titular odyssey to the lighthouse. The wind, for Woolf, blows both ways. It is at once fundamentally incompatible with narrative – blowing "from the worst possible direction for landing at the Lighthouse" (*TL* 5), just as it had blown away the words of the pageant in *Between the Acts* – and essentially enabling of it, filling the sails of the

Ramsays' boat as they complete their final voyage. And why shouldn't it? After all, as the late Mrs. Ramsay rightly pointed out, "The wind often changed" (*TL* 31). As we've seen time and again, this variability of the weather, which Woolf identifies as its defining characteristic ("Certainly the weather was variable" [*BA* 23]), is key to her project of projecting narrative contingency. Insofar as the weather creates an air of chaos, Woolf's reliance on it as a mode of plot preemption allows for her novels to appear less orderly than they are. But make no mistake, as even Arnold Bennett inadvertently called attention to in his critique of the novel, there is a discernable order to *To the Lighthouse*; in dismissively summarizing the plot – in which, to recap, "A group of people plan to sail in a small boat to a lighthouse. At the end, some of them reach the lighthouse in a small boat" (qtd. in Majumdar 200) – Bennett highlights the progressive linearity that is foundational to the text's structure. Indeed, more than any other of Woolf's novels, *To the Lighthouse* is positively Aristotelian in the way of its construction, its three discrete sections neatly mapping onto the traditional beginning, middle, and ending that a plot demands.

If plot is, as Kern writes, "about moving through time towards a meaningful goal" (*Modernist* 66), then is there anything plottier than the Ramsays' landing at the lighthouse which concludes the novel, thereby fulfilling the promise of not just its matriarch, but of its title? Only, perhaps, Lily Briscoe's own unambiguously conclusive ending, as she makes the final mark on the painting that she has been working on throughout the entirety of the narrative and thinks, "It was done; it was finished" (*TL 209*). Per Kern, "Modernists criticized conclusive endings and created their own unresolved endings to capture the open-ended nature of life as without any ultimate meaning or purpose" (*Modernist* 139); and yet, as Marina Ludwigs observes in "Epiphany and Closure in *To The Lighthouse*," the ending of Woolf's novel "is perfect, almost too perfect in the way the two narrative strands come together and reinforce each other in their mutual culmination" (Ludwigs para. 1). For all of its ostensible emphasis on chance and the precariousness of the future, *To the Lighthouse*

ultimately reinforces a fundamentally deterministic narrative model; in telling "the story of a boy who wants to go to the lighthouse and does, eventually," the novel, writes Ludwigs, is telling "a story of wish fulfillment" (Ludwigs para. 3). Although, we might argue that the fulfillment of James' wishes comes at the cost of Woolf's own. In the "almost parodic way that [*To the Lighthouse*] implements the narrative pattern of the quest," one senses that its patently contrived resolution is yet another of Woolf's reluctant capitulations to the tyranny of the patriarchal plot (Ludwigs para. 2).

Paraphrasing Robert Caserio's reading of Woolf's feminist resistance, Friedman writes that the overthrowing of the plot "is for the woman writer tantamount to overthrowing the power of the father in Woolf's polemical modernist manifestos" (S.S. Friedman 163). This take is familiar enough, considering that *To the Lighthouse* is widely accepted as Woolf's most autobiographical novel and Mr. Ramsay – whose tyranny is tied to the strict emplotment that is the alphabetic sequence – is typically read as a fictionalized version of Woolf's own father, Leslie Stephen. And surely it isn't much of a stretch to read Mr. Ramsay as the novel's antagonist, given his role as the dasher of James' hopes; that is, when we first see Mr. Ramsay it is through the eyes of his son, who thinks, "Had there been an axe handy, or a poker, any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast and killed him, there and then, [he] would have seized it" (*TL* 4). As it relates to my own argument, it is worth noting that James' deep resentment towards Mr. Ramsay, as figured in this primal scene, derives from the fact that he blames his father for the weather. And in this, he is not entirely alone. On the contrary, the text itself seems to reaffirm this responsibility. Like Bart in *Between the Acts*, Mr. Ramsay, writes Paula Maggio, "exerts weather's authority. While Mrs. Ramsay and her six-year-old son James sit in the parlour window hoping for good weather….they don't look at the sky to determine whether it will be fine enough for the trip. They look to Mr. Ramsay. As the patriarch of the family and a learned man, he has the power of weather" (Maggio 24). To be sure, this is a construction we have seen before: Mr. Ramsay, emboldened by his atheism and the backing of science, "seems to be

setting himself as an alternative to God" in the novel, willing the weather to reflect his own whims (Lewis 37). Accepting this premise, it follows that, to overthrow the tyranny of the patriarchal plot, Woolf need only defy Mr. Ramsay and the weather. And isn't this what the modernist novel is all about – the rejection "of the realist novel's alleged depiction of an orderly world, represented to us in an orderly manner by a narrator who speaks as if with the voice of God" (Lewis 24)? And yet, as we know, Woolf decides against this, choosing instead to corroborate Mr. Ramsay's forecast and, in so doing, acknowledging the ultimate necessity of plot.

"Plot is not abolishable," writes Gerhard Hoffman, "not because the writer has to impose it on the narrative as a clarifying diagram, but because the plot constitutes itself out of the consecutiveness of situation which narrative inevitably builds" (Hoffman 307). In her concession to Mr. Ramsay's short-term forecast and fulfillment of Mrs. Ramsay's long-term one, Woolf implies that, for her, plot – like the weather – is actually less about possibility (the "if" of it all) than it is about inevitability (the "when" of the will). In *Between the Acts*, Woolf articulates the binary that seems to structure and constrict her novels: "Every year, they said, would it be wet or fine; and every year it was – one or the other" (*BA* 22). But this either/or dichotomy, resonant as it is as a refrain, is patently false. Both *Between the Acts* and *To the Lighthouse* hinge on the question of whether it will be wet or fine, and in both novels, it is both wet *and* fine. "The rain," Woolf tells us, "was sudden and universal. And then it stopped" (*BA* 180). The interruption of narrative is decisive, but temporary.[13] The show must go on. And so, too, must the novel. "Time Passes" is not simply the title of *To the Lighthouse*'s interim section; it is the philosophy that underlies each and every of Virginia Woolf's plots. And insofar as the weather exists as a singular signifier of the passage of time, it emerges in

[13] Woolf is consistently toying with these alternating notions of variability and predictability, which loosely map onto weather and climate. In opening *The Years*, for instance, she begins with the utter indeterminism of "It was an uncertain spring," only to promptly undercut it with the comforting consistency of, "But in April such weather was to be expected" (*Y* 3).

Woolf's fiction, over and over, as not just the forestaller of plot, but in fact, the replacement of it: weather is the thing that happens.

"By chance or wisdom," writes Michael Serres in *The Natural Contract* (1990), "the French language uses a single word, *temps*, for the time that passes and for the weather outside" (Serres 27). The etymological entanglement of time and weather seemingly informs the narrative strategy of Virginia Woolf, who regularly expresses one in terms of the other. In *The Waves* (1931), Woolf maps the lives of her characters onto the passing of a single day through the inclusion of poetic interludes that function like a sundial. In *The Years* (1937), she begins each section of the Pargiter family history with a meteorological preface: "1880 It was an uncertain spring" (*Y* 3); "1891 The autumn wind blew over England" (*Y* 89); "1907 It was midsummer; and the nights were hot" (*Y* 129); "1913 It was January. Snow was falling; snow had fallen all day" (*Y* 214), etc. And in *Orlando* (1928), as Allen McLaurin notes, "each century has its appropriate weather" (McLaurin 159), the most ceremonious of which being the aforementioned storm cloud that ushers in the nineteenth century:

> She heard the far-away cry of the night watchman – 'Just twelve o'clock on a frosty morning'. No sooner had the words left his lips than the first stroke of midnight sounded. Orlando then for the first time noticed a small cloud gathered behind the dome of St Paul's. As the strokes sounded, the cloud increased, and she saw it darken and spread with extraordinary speed. At the same time a light breeze rose and by the time the sixth stroke of midnight had struck the whole of the eastern sky was covered with an irregular moving darkness, though the sky to the west and north stayed clear as ever. Then the cloud spread north. Height upon height above the city was engulfed by it. Only Mayfair, with all its lights shining, burnt more brilliantly than ever by contrast. With the eighth stroke, some hurrying tatters of cloud sprawled over Piccadilly. They seemed to mass themselves and to advance with extraordinary rapidity towards the west end. As the ninth, tenth, and eleventh strokes struck, a huge blackness sprawled over the whole of London. With the twelfth stroke of midnight, the darkness was complete. A turbulent welter of cloud covered the city. (*O* 225-26)

I present this passage in full here to illustrate how, in alternating lines, Woolf systematically sets her weather to the striking of the hour. The fact that this parallel marks the start of the nineteenth century, in particular, is especially fitting; this, as we know from our history of meteorology, was to

be the century that science (with the help of Luke Howard) would bring order to the sky – or when, as Karl Popper theorized in a 1965 lecture, Newtonian physics would turn all clouds into clocks, "even the most cloudy of clouds" (Popper 210). Popper's reconceptualization of determinism and contingency in "Of Clocks and Clouds" (which might also make an apt alternate title for a collection of Woolf's complete works) uses these tropes as the representative figures of two distinct causal systems: on the one hand (the clock hand, that is), the "systems which are regular, orderly, and highly predictable in their behaviour," and on the other, the "systems which, like gases, are highly irregular, disorderly, and more or less unpredictable" (Popper 207). For Popper, the nineteenth century's hypothesizing of physical determinism could be summarized in the proposition that all clouds had turned out to be perfect clocks, essentially postulating the existence of underlying law and order even in that which appeared most ontologically resistant to it. In the twentieth century, however, Newton's perception of precision gave way to Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of probability. The randomness and disorder of tychism, as propounded by Peirce, affirmed the Woolfian entanglement of clocks and clouds, but inverted their positions, such that "even the best clock would, in its molecular structure, show some degree of cloudiness" (Popper 213). "In other words," writes Popper, "*only clouds exist*" (ibid).

Popper's characterization of the absolute cloudiness of the early twentieth century gives us some context of the world that Woolf was trying to represent in her writing; as we know from *Between the Acts*, Woolf felt it was high time someone had invented a new plot, and the cloud, in all its shape shifting glory, emerges in the text as an external manifestation of the very ephemerality and incoherence that Woolf hoped her not-novels could convey. Insofar as Woolf's texts aspire to forego the precision of strict plotting in favor of the amorphousness of consciousness, they have always reaffirmed a quintessentially modernist privileging of interiority. And yet, if her diaries can be read as any indication, it may be that even as she stressed this inward turn, Woolf looked up to the

sky, locating in the vagaries of the weather the ideal template onto which she could project the fluidity and transience of thought: "Now & again, I feel my mind take shape," she writes, "like a cloud with the sun on it, as some idea, plan, or image wells up, but they travel on, over the horizon, like clouds, & I wait peacefully for another to form" (*Diary Vol. 3* 248). If Woolf's ambition is to create a literary style that represents thought itself, and if she identifies in her own thoughts a behavioral likeness to clouds, it makes a certain sort of sense that Woolf would try to impose this formless form of the clouds onto that of her fictions.

Incidently, as Woolf was working on *Between the Acts*, it seems that she came to this very conclusion regarding the distinct affordance of the increasingly indeterminate trope of the cloud as a structural model for her plot-resistant narratives; in her concurrent essay, "Leaning Tower" (1940), Woolf articulates this connection, observing that "literature is always changing, like the weather, like the clouds in the sky" ("Leaning Tower" 130). Given this, it feels entirely fitting that in *Between the Acts*, the work of art is explicitly figured in these terms: thus, as the pageant comes to a close, Miss La Trobe thinks, "You have taken my gift…But what had she given? A cloud that melted into the other clouds on the horizon" (*BA* 209). Recalling Woolf's initial cloudy narrative that lettered the sky of *Mrs. Dalloway*, the play-as-cloud likewise functions here as a site of synoptic subjectivity and collective meaning making; reframing literary interpretation as an exercise in finding shapes in the clouds, Woolf writes: "They all looked at the play…Each of course saw something different. In another moment it would be beneath the horizon, gone to join the other plays…drifting away to join the other clouds" (*BA* 213). And yet, even in recognizing this insistence on shape shifting and dissolution, Woolf appears to be equally aware of the cloud's natural propensity towards configuration. As Bart and Lucy look to the sky at the beginning of *Between the Acts*, the narration observes, "There was a fecklessness, a lack of symmetry and order in the clouds," seemingly reinforcing the function of the clouds as emblems of disarray (*BA* 23). But then that thought

dissipates – as thoughts tend to do – and is reformed anew, as this consciousness goes on to ask, "Was it their own law, or no law, they obeyed?" (*BA* 23) It is in this invocation of a lawfulness so imperceptible that it passes for lawlessness that the cloud's ultimate utility as a structural model for Woolf's work becomes most apparent. As Woolf so often acknowledges in lamenting the tyranny of plot, storytelling inevitably begets form. Faced with the challenge of representing a modern world wherein causality itself has been exposed as a fiction, Woolf thus turns to the weather to create what is and can only ever be an illusion of formlessness.

Virginia Woolf is tired of stories. It is 1929 and she has decided to write what she is referring to instead as a play poem. *The Waves* (1931) would be Woolf's most experimental work. With no discernable plot to speak of, the text is made up of a series of alternating soliloquies from its six dramatis personae. "I am not trying to tell a story," insists Woolf in her diary (*Diary Vol. 3* 229). It is a sentiment that seeps, as it so frequently did, into the poetic play she is composing, as her surrogate Bernard thinks, "How I distrust neat designs of life that are drawn upon half sheets of notepaper. I begin to long for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words" (*W* 238). What Bernard wants is something that is both language and a subversion of language, something that is at once an embodiment of narrative and fundamentally incompatible with it. It is the same thing that Woolf herself wants. And it seems only fitting that they should discover it in the same place:

> Lying in a ditch on a stormy day, when it has been raining, then enormous clouds come marching over the sky, tattered clouds, wisps of clouds. What delights me then is the confusion, the height, the indifference and the fury. Great clouds always changing, and movement; something sulfurous and sinister, bowled up, helter-skelter; towering, trailing, broken off, lost, and I forgotten, minute, in a ditch. Of story, of design I do not see a trace then. (*W* 239)

In the defiant nebulousness of clouds, operating again here as the quintessential weather sign, Woolf locates a template of abject formlessness. By using the forestalling convention of literary weather as a substitute for plot, Woolf is able to impose this sense of formlessness on even her most tightly and

traditionally structured novels, as we saw with *To the Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts*. But this elusiveness of the weather within Woolf's fiction is itself an illusion, a means of covering up what Woolf – more acutely than anyone – recognized as the tyranny of plot and necessity of narrative in fiction, even in the modernist moment. Life may be a cloud, but novels are clocks. To return for a moment to Bernard, whom we left lying in his ditch, it is crucial to note that his narration cannot assert that there is, in fact, no trace of design in the clouds, but only, rather, that there is none that he is able to perceive. So, too, it was for the early observers of the sky, who knew not the rules of the weather. So, too, it is for Woolf's reader, who does not discern the determinative pattern in her performance of contingency. But there is a pattern, as there always must be behind the cotton wool of daily life. A pattern of wet weather followed by fine. A pattern of time passing. It isn't eight months after Woolf announces that she has "never written a book so full of holes & patches" before she admits to herself and to us that "what it wants is presumably unity" (*Diary Vol. 3* 302, 343). "But how to pull it all together, how to compost it – press it into one?" she wonders (*Diary Vol. 3* 285). And once more, she looks up to the sky, cohering her play poem into a plot with sequential interludes that track the sun across the heavens like the veritable clock that it is. And we, too, turn with her to read the sky: as Bernard did; as Mrs. Dalloway did; as Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay did; as Bart Oliver and Lucy Swithin did. There is, to be sure, a fecklessness to Virginia Woolf's prose, a seeming lack of symmetry and order to her cloudy novels, as they thin and thicken. But it is not no law – only, their own laws – that they follow.

Chapter Three

The Man Who Loved Lightning: Vladimir Nabokov and the Tragedy of Coincidence

And when above the livid plain
Forked lightning plays, therein may dwell
The torments of a Tamerlane,
The roar of tyrants torn in hell.
– John Shade, "The Nature of Electricity"

As Humbert Humbert writes his memoir from the confines of his padded cell, a summer thunderstorm is being performed offstage. It is July of 1951, and above the livid plains of the American West, forked lightning is playing. In Telluride, Colorado, an amateur entomologist wakes up every morning at 6 a.m., hoping that the weather will prove warm and calm enough for collecting butterflies; but day after day, he is disappointed (*American Years* 224). Climatically caged, he turns his attention instead to the composition of his latest novel, and "as the wet and the wind kept him indoors…*that* world was rapidly becoming more real" (*American Years* 203). Such is the scene that Vladimir Nabokov and his biographer, Brian Boyd, set in creating the mythology of *Lolita*'s origin story. By now, the narrative beyond the narrative of *Lolita* has become a familiar one, first recalled by Nabokov in his afterword to the novel, in which he explained that every summer, he and his wife Vera would go butterfly hunting, and that his work on *Lolita* was "energetically resumed in the evenings or on cloudy days" (*L* 312). Corroborating this story and cementing its centrality to the novel's lore, Boyd later confirmed, "Though Nabokov spent every possible moment on butterflies, *Lolita* made her claims too…whenever the weather closed in" (*American Years* 203). By every account, the circumstances of *Lolita*'s composition, while apparently worth noting, are incidental; all novels must be written in some kind of weather, and it just so happens that *Lolita* was written during a series of thunderstorms. But more than being incidental, the circumstances of *Lolita*'s composition are eerily *co*incidental, perfectly synchronized with the equally foreboding weather in the tale that

Nabokov was in the midst of telling; such that, as Humbert and Lolita were zigzagging their way across the United States hotly pursued by torrential rain and Jovian fireworks, Nabokov, meanwhile, was desperately trying to outrun the storms simultaneously chasing him so that he might chase his butterflies instead.

During that summer of 1951, Nabokov was on the hunt for one butterfly in particular: the female of the *Lycaeides sublivens*. In the scientific paper that he would later write on his findings, to be published in *The Lepidopterists' News*, Nabokov precisely and dispassionately reports the unaccommodating changes in the weather, which would ultimately determine his activity for the day: "Every morning the sky would be of an impeccable blue at 6 a.m. when I set out," he writes; but by 10 a.m., he continues, "there would come the daily electric storm, accompanied by the most irritatingly close lightning I have ever encountered" (*SO* 116). In the essay, "Enchanted Hunting," Boyd takes note of yet another coincidence, one that he detects in this description; citing the detail of the electrical storms, along with the would-be pun embedded in the name sub-livens (which nearly translates to "under lightning"), Boyd writes that Nabokov was "after, if you like, a female who loved lightning" ("Enchanted" 281). Boyd's joke, though it depends on a slight mistranslation ("sublivens," he concedes, actually means "dark bluish"), is a play on a play; specifically, he is riffing on *The Lady Who Loved Lightning* – the name of the play in *Lolita* co-written by Clare Quilty and Vivian Darkbloom, the staging of which eventually entraps Humbert by serving as a cover for Quilty and Lo's conspiratorial rendezvous. But it is not the ladies of *Lolita* that so love lightning: not the female sublivens, not Dolores Haze, not even Vivian Darkbloom. Rather, as this chapter will illuminate, it is Darkbloom's male anagrammatic double – Vladimir Nabokov – who ultimately exhibits a striking affinity for lighting, specifically as the trope through which he is able to work out his own lifelong ambivalence towards matters of freedom and determinism.

Notably, Humbert Humbert's fate, like that of *Lolita* itself, is contingent upon the lightning that is striking both within and beyond the pages of text. And, in fact, it is precisely this detail – that lightning is defined by its transgression and transcendence of boundaries – that makes it such a uniquely useful trope for Nabokov. As a natural (and perhaps supernatural) phenomenon, lightning's status is distinctly ambiguous. It exists not only inside and outside of Nabokov's text, but inside and outside of our own bodies; as electricity, it both controls our internal nerve impulses, and maintains the balance of our external world. As the literal manifestation of the channel between heaven and earth, it straddles the line of the material and the immaterial; of the scientific and the spiritual; of chance and fate. In Nabokov's aforementioned description of Telluride's predictably fickle weather, we are able to discern some sense of this affordance: insofar as the ill-mannered lightning emerges from what Nabokov describes as an impeccably clear sky, it fulfills its idiomatic destiny as a metonym of chance, its bolts suddenly and randomly appearing out of the blue; and yet, in his recording and recounting of its daily regularity, Nabokov suggests that behind the apparent chaos of the lightning, there is an underlying pattern. So it goes for Nabokov, who, throughout his life, continually returns to lightning as an instrument of both radical contingency and fatidic entrapment – often simultaneously. As a symbol, the zigzag of the lightning bolt at once offers a model metaphor for the erratic flow of life's plot while also signaling the misdirection of Nabokov's plotting skies. And after all, if Nabokov's work shows us anything, it isn't simply that chance and fate are not mutually exclusive, but that, as the narrator of Nabokov's "A Busy Man" observes, "The folly of chance is the logic of fate" (*Stories* 293).

Perhaps there is no logical sense to be made of the chance circumstances of *Lolita*'s composition. Perhaps it does not matter that the thunderstorms chasing Humbert Humbert across the livid plains of the text were synchronous with those chasing Vladimir Nabokov. It is, after all, only a coincidence. Except, Nabokov doesn't believe in coincidence; or more precisely, he believes

in coincidence so deeply that its inexplicable contingency serves as the very basis for his own faith, the surest proof of some cosmic force, some Aubrey McFate, some Agent X designing the world behind the world. Nabokov thought of reality as itself a sort of fiction, crafted not by God, but by coincidence, which he preferred to see "as a marvelous artist" (Schiff 34). In line with Frank Joseph's explanation of synchronicities as "those instances when two dimensions momentarily interface…[when] such an otherworld can no longer be shelved as purely theoretical" (Joseph 14), Nabokov uses lightning to flash a light on this otherworld, a world determined not by the laws of strict cause and effect but determined nonetheless: determined by the meaningful cross-connection of acausal coincidence. Nabokov's love of coincidence is not in question; as is evident from his own highly literary autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov relished the mysterious coincidences of his own life and the way that the magic of time and retrospect rendered them fateful, suggestive of a traceable "pattern of a life's design" (Appel xxvii). The question for Nabokov, which this chapter shares, is: how many coincidences must accumulate before they "cease to be coincidences, and form, instead, the living organism of a new truth?" (*Ada* 361) At what point, in this case, does something as incidental as the weather – something that the science of the twentieth century has made every effort to evacuate of its symbolic charge – start to mean something? In attempting to determine just how meaningful Nabokov's meteorological coincidences are, this chapter will work through three stages of his staged weather: first, what lightning means; second, what lightning means for Nabokov; and finally, what this means for our reading of *Lolita*.

What Lightning Means

Lightning, uncapturable, evanescent, unthinkable, is man's tragedy and torment; it is also his contact with divinity.
– G. Wilson Knight

In line with its postmodern obsession with literary precedent, *Lolita* can trace the origins of its origin story lineage back to the ultimate bad weather novel: *Frankenstein*. Like *Lolita*, *Frankenstein* was written over the course of a summer vacation. And like Nabokov, Mary Shelley included with her novel a note on the circumstances of its composition, which every reader must encounter and engage with upon opening the book. Though the extent to which this origin story informs readings of Shelley's novel undoubtedly varies, it has nonetheless become a foundational piece of the *Frankenstein* mythos. As has been well documented, the nineteenth century was a famously dark and stormy one, and perhaps no year was darker or stormier than that of 1816, when Mary Shelley (née Godwin) found her Swiss holiday somewhat dampened by seemingly perpetual rain. To hear Shelley tell it in the original preface to the 1818 version of *Frankenstein* (a revised preface would be included in the 1931 version), she "passed the summer of 1816 in the environs of Geneva," but "the season was cold and rainy" (Shelley 4). Before proceeding any further here, we must note that to hear Shelley tell it in the preface to the 1818 version is *actually* to hear Percy Shelley tell it. Though the prefatory note was written from the first-person perspective of Mary, it was published anonymously, and the critical consensus (drawn, in part from the science and name-dropping that will soon be discussed) is that this was an act of ventriloquism on Percy's part. Presumably, this accounts for some of the minor differences between this first preface and the one that was substituted in subsequent editions. By the time that Mary finally had the opportunity to write her own introduction – and with it, to construct her own paratextual frame story – for the 1831 printing of the revised novel, she would emphasize the spoiling effect of the weather, as "it proved a wet, ungenial summer, and incessant rain often confined us for days to the house" (Shelley 194). Ungenial, indeed. What

Shelley couldn't have known at the time is that she was living through what history would come to remember as "the year without a summer," so-dubbed for the chilling effects of a massive volcanic eruption that had occurred on a small, faraway island the previous spring. As John Dippel explains in his book, *Eighteen Hundred and Froze to Death*, the ecological impact of the April 1815 eruption of Indonesia's Mount Tambora – among the largest eruptions in recorded history – was global, causing drastic drops in temperature, a slew of climate abnormalities, and apparently, lots and lots of rain.[1] And causing, perhaps, in its own zigzagging way, the creation of a novel called *Frankenstein*.

That the world-wide effects of a volcanic eruption on a tiny island over seven thousand miles away should coincide with Mary Shelley's would-be summer romp along the shore of Lake Geneva nearly a year later is clearly a matter of chance; and yet, the fate of *Frankenstein* depends on it. As it happened, by June of 1816, "lightning flashes and booming thunderstorms became daily occurrences" around Geneva; these storms, which Shelley described as "grander and more terrific than I have ever seen before," gradually became routine, just as the daily electrical storms would for Vladimir Nabokov on an adjacent continent, a hundred and thirty-five summers hence (Dippel 151). But the incessant thunder and lightning had its consequences; among them, Mary Godwin and her soon-to-be husband, Percy Shelley, relocated to a villa across the lake belonging to their neighbor, Lord Byron. There they were joined by Byron's physician, John William Polidori, and as "the inclement weather drew them together," the four unwitting shut-ins busied themselves with work and conversation, finding in their climactic confinement an opportunity for creativity (ibid). As the legend goes, the group – huddled around a "blazing wood fire" as that summer-long thunderstorm played outside – made a habit of amusing themselves with "some German stories of ghosts, which happened to fall into our hands" (Shelley 4); according to both Shelley's (and both Shelleys) and

[1] The eruption of 1815 had a disastrous domino effect on the world's climate: the smoke blocked the sunlight, which then caused temperatures to drop, which then, among other things, wiped out huge swaths of crops, leading, in turn, to a global famine. As Gillen D'Arcy Wood writes in *Tambora*, "To be alive in the years of 1816-18, almost anywhere in the world, meant to be hungry" (G. Wood 9).

Polidori's accounts, it was their host who decided to turn this mode of entertainment into a friendly literary competition, introducing the now famous challenge "that each of the company present should write a tale depending upon some supernatural agency" (qtd. in Marsh 207). This language, which comes from one of Polidori's letters, echoes Percy Shelley's characterization of Byron's proposition in his 1818 preface, wherein he cites the participants' agreement to each write a story "founded on some supernatural occurrence" (Shelley 4).[2]

With this prompt, Mary Shelley began drafting a tale, and as she did, the thunderstorms that had been occurring offstage while she wrote quickly took center stage within her story, with the "majestic region" of tempestuous Switzerland serving as the shared principal setting of both her own life-creating pursuit and that of Victor Frankenstein's (ibid). Much has been made of the potential parallels between Shelley's act of creation and that of her most infamous character[3]; though, for my purposes, I want to call attention to their mutual dependence on a specific set of weather conditions. From the start, Frankenstein's destiny – like *Frankenstein*'s – is meteorologically determined: first, when sourcing his predilection for science to his thirteen-year-old self, Victor cites a bout of inclement weather on a vacation that "obliged [him] to remain a day confined to the inn," wherein he "chanced to find a volume of the works of Cornelius Agrippa" (Shelley 22); then, at fifteen, this initial interest in the occult collided with the principles of natural philosophy, when, during "a most violent and terrible thunderstorm," Victor witnesses a "stream of fire" strike and destroy an oak tree, immediately causing him to inquire of his father "the nature and origin of

[2] By the time that Shelley would refine this origin story for her introduction to the 1831 version of the text, the particulars of this challenge would change ever so slightly, with Byron allegedly saying, "We will each write a ghost story" (Shelley 7).

[3] See, for example, Anne Mellor's chapter, "My Hideous Tragedy" in *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monster*, in which she explores Shelley's explicit paralleling of her novel to her monster.

thunder and lightning" (Shelley 24).[4] For Victor, the course of his life is defined by his father's response in this moment; his answer presages not only the flash of inspiration that will animate Victor's scientific quest, but the very same "spark of being" (Shelley 38) that will ultimately animate his creature: electricity.

As Anne Mellor notes in *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, this moment undergoes a slight alteration in the revised version of the text; according to Mellor, "Mary Shelley remembered that she had described the Frankenstein family as not interested in science. In 1831, she therefore attributed Victor Frankenstein's initiation into legitimate science to an unnamed 'man of great research in natural philosophy' who happened to join them and who then 'entered on the explanation of a theory which he had formed on the subject of electricity and galvanism' (238-39)" (Mellor 91). This unnamed man sounds an awful lot like some Frankensteinian composite of Percy Shelley and Lord Byron, who happened to have joined Mary at Villa Diodati, and who spent much of that rainy summer discussing "various philosophical doctrines…among others the nature of the principle of life" (Shelley 8) Central to these conversations between Byron and Shelley, "to which [Mary] was a devout but nearly silent listener," were the theories of Luigi Galvani and his nephew, Jean Aldini. Galvani, an Italian physicist, made a name for himself in the 1780s when he conducted a series of experiments in which he "touched the sciatic nerve of a frog with a scalpel charged with static electricity," which caused "a spark, and the animal's leg [to] jump" (Amidon 119); this result led him to the conclusion that "animal tissue contained a heretofore neglected innate vital force," and thus, that the activation of this fluid via an electrical stimulus might amount to the restoration of life to dead bodies (Mellor 105-06). In 1803 and 1804, Jean Aldini took his uncle's hypothesis a step

[4] As Derek Elsom explains in *Lightning: Nature and Culture*, the oak tree has long been linked to lightning. This is, in part, simply because of the frequency of their being struck ("Because oak trees tend to grow tall and isolated," writes Elsom, "they are more at risk of lightning strikes than other trees" [Elsom 76]); but beyond this, both Zeus and Jupiter (that is, the Greek and Roman gods of thunder and lightning) were alternately known as "the Oak God and often depicted wearing a wreath of oak leaves" (Elsom 17).

further, experimenting on the dead bodies of recently executed criminals; sure enough, the corpses "became violently agitated and one even raised itself as if about to walk; arms alternately rose and fell; and one forearm was made to hold a weigh of several pounds" (ibid). These experiments, which were widely and sensationally reported by the press, were of particular interest to Percy Shelley, a lifelong student of lightning and electricity who, while studying at Eton, "had actually seen a teacher recreate Galvani's frog experiment" (Amidon 119). But of more particular interest to us is that these theories would capture the imagination of Mary Shelley, ultimately providing the prototype for Victor's research.

In her imagining of electrical experimentation as the practical, technological answer to one of the world's most ancient and mysterious questions – that of the source of life itself – Mary Shelley tapped into the zeitgeist not just of her own time, but perhaps of all time, successfully cementing her place in the literary canon. But never mind that *Frankenstein* is a classic. Never mind that Shelley came out the clear winner of Byron's challenge, her tale emerging as "the only one which [was] completed" (Shelley 4). Because, in turning to galvanism rather than ghosts, as Nicholas Marsh writes in *Mary Shelley*, "she disobeyed the rules. She ignored the supernatural" (Marsh 207). By suggesting a spirit of rationality and empiricism as an integral part of *Frankenstein*'s infrastructure – relying on the consequential reoccurrence of lightning and the agential force of electricity to power her creature and her narrative – Shelley effectively sidestepped Byron's proposition to write a gothic novel, and inadvertently invented the genre of science fiction instead.[5]

Still, the fact that these two genres invite as much overlap as *Frankenstein* proves that they do speaks to the ambiguous nature of electricity itself. In the original preface, Percy opens by name-

[5] There is plenty to be said about the intersection of these two genres, which, as *Frankenstein* proves, are by no means mutually exclusive. And, incidentally, lightning is one of the main elements that transcends both genres, thereby enabling Shelley to move freely between them. As we have seen, it is the co-opting of lightning as an electrical force that ultimately situates Shelley's would-be ghost story as a work of science fiction; but the lightning is *Frankenstein* is as much a matter of mood as it is of functionality. As in a classic gothic novel, Shelley's ominous weather is often there to create atmosphere, typical of the nineteenth-century novel's indulgence in the pathetic fallacy; indeed, "lightning storms are so common in tales of horror and the supernatural that they have been genre clichés for decades" (Van Riper 170).

checking Erasmus Darwin (evidently the dead giveaway), and is careful to frame the events contained within as "not of impossible occurrence"; insofar as Victor's experimentation is based in the legitimate field of physiology, Percy (as Mary) writes, "I have not considered myself as merely weaving a series of supernatural terrors" (Shelley 3). Here, again, we encounter this charged word, which raises the question: to what extent do we read lightning and electricity – the sources of *Frankenstein*'s terror – as supernatural phenomena? My suggestion is that, in fact, we take them as the paragon of the supernatural, that lightning is uniquely defined by precisely this: that it is nature, yes, but that it is also somehow *more* than nature. As *Frankenstein* so neatly illustrates, lightning marks – and has always marked – a threshold between science and mysticism.

It is important that Victor's academic interests shift from the occultism of Agrippa to those of natural philosophy and chemistry. And it is important that Shelley identifies Victor as a scientist. But it is equally important that the actual science of *Frankenstein* is more than a bit vague. In addressing his discovery of "the cause of generation of life," Victor makes sure to situate it within the realm of the explicable; and yet, he conspicuously refuses to reveal the explanation (Shelley 34). Within the novel, Victor justifies this choice as a public good, withholding his secret lest the acquired knowledge lead the reader down the same path that it led him, to "destruction and infallible misery" (Shelley 35). Practically speaking, we understand that Shelley cannot disclose the details of the process because she is unaware of them herself. And yet, the effect of this concealment is crucial, in that it turns what is meant to present as a scientific process into essentially a magic trick. In setting the scene, Victor notes that it was "a dreary night of November"; that he collected the instruments to "infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing at [his] feet"; and that, as the "rain pattered" – ta-da! – a yellow eye of the creature opens, "and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs" (Shelley 38). The coinciding occurrence of the thunderstorm that accompanies the use of words like "spark" and "convulsive" seems to indicate a jolt of electrical charge, recalling the experiments of Galvani and

his twitching frog, whose limbs, when sparked, were likewise seized with "violent tonic convulsions" (Piccolino & Bresadola 95). In his 1931 film adaptation of the novel, director James Whale doubles down on this idea, filling in the gap left by Victor's narration by directly attributing the animation of the creature's lifeless corpse to its being infused with lightning, in what is likely now *Frankenstein*'s most iconic moment: throughout the scene, which takes place in Victor's lab, we hear the rumbling of offstage thunder and witness the flashes of lightning; though the camera takes care to call attention to the sparking machinery in the lab, the process is actually less mediated than these devices would suggest, with Victor simply raising the creature up to a hole at the top of the ceiling, and leaving him suspended there for several seconds while lightning continuously strikes; upon lowering the table, the creature's fingers begin to twitch, prompting Victor's legendary proclamation that, "It's alive!"

As such, the process in the film remains unsatisfactorily explained and retains the air of mysticism that the novel cultivates, but the combination of the harnessed sparks within the lab and the unbridled flashes outside it also works to further reinforce our instinctual understanding of lightning as a phenomenon that is defined by the lines it straddles: not only is it both scientific and spiritual, both destructive and creative; but it is also at once entirely external to us – an immaterial element of nature whose power we can only behold from afar, as young Victor looks on at the bolt striking the tree – and simultaneously within us, the electric current that animates us as human beings, physically motivating us by igniting our nerve impulses, just as it does for the creature. In its encapsulation of this inherent paradox, *Frankenstein* recalls Adam Walker's notion, put forth in *A System of Familiar Philosophy* (1799), that electricity is not simply "the paragon of the elements," but that "it is impossible not to believe it the soul of the material world" (Walker 391). Given its transcendental status, it's no wonder that electricity would become so integral to the work of the Romantics; and indeed, in *Aesthetic Materialism*, Paul Gilmore's study on the topic, he likewise singles

out electricity for its ability to "bridge the spiritual and the material, the natural and the technological world" (Gilmore 7). That said, such mystical associations predate our Romantic notions by millennia; before Walker and Shelley and Gilmore, before modern science fortified these bridges from the spiritual to the material and from the natural to the technological, before electricity was electricity as we now understand it, there was lightning, that most recognizable divine weapon.

At its foundation, all of this conceptualizing and theorizing of electricity as a bridge between the spiritual and material world is fundamentally an extrapolation of a basic understanding of the lightning bolt itself as the conduit between heaven and earth; for, in its most familiar form, lightning gives the appearance of a materialized line that literally connects the clouds to the ground. In reality, the process is slightly more complicated than this, but for the earliest civilizations, the explanation of this channel was simple: obviously lightning was spiritually charged, because lightning came from the gods. In *Lightning: Nature and Culture*, Derek M. Elsom notes the foundational perception of lightning as a force "so powerful and terrifying that only gods or goddesses could generate and discharge it," and provides an extensive catalogue of the various deities conceived of by ancient cultures who wielded this power (Elsom 9). Among them: Hinduism's Indra; Shintoism's Raijin; the Etruscan's Tinia; the Inuit's trifecta of weather sisters (Kadlu, Kweetoo, and Ignirtoq); a pre-Marvel comic Thor from Norse mythology; and, most famously, Zeus, the Greek god of gods, whose image has become synonymous with the lightning bolts he hurls down from the heavens (Elsom Ch. 1).[6]

As Michael Brian Schiffer points out in *Draw the Lightning Down*, this attribution of lightning and thunder to a multicultural pantheon of supernatural agents was understandably appealing,

[6] For the Italian philosopher, Giambattista Vico, this causation is inverted; which is to say, it is not that the gods created lightning and thunder to communicate with man, but that in response to lightning and thunder, man created gods. In *The New Science*, he writes of the first moment after the flood when "the sky fearfully rolled with thunder and flashed with lightning," prompting "a few giants…[who] were frightened and astonished by the great effect whose cause they did not know…[to] picture the sky to themselves as a great animated body, which in that aspect they called Jove, the first god of the so-called greater gentes" (Vico 117-18). In this projection, the myth of Vico's giants gives us not only the first god and the first distinction between sky and earth, but also, evidently, man's first misstep into the pitfall of the pathetic fallacy.

considering that for centuries "lightning had no obvious mechanical cause" (Schiffer 184). Even now, the science of lightning remains a matter of some mystery, and there are, evidently, "lots of things about lightning that are imperfectly understood, including the physics of exactly how a stroke of lightning gets started" (Henshaw 148). This widely held view of lightning as a phenomenon of obscure origin is of a piece with our cultural association of lightning with a sudden but inexplicably-sourced jolt of illumination or enlightenment: that is, as a metaphor for a flash of inspiration. Beyond perpetuating our perception of lightning as an element internal to us, this conceit compounds our collective feeling that its bolts are seemingly, if not actually, uncaused. In *Childe Herald's Pilgrimage* – one of the poems that Lord Byron was working on while Mary Shelley was writing *Frankenstein* down the corridor of Villa Diodati – Byron invokes this trope, musing, "And how and why we know not, nor can trace / Home to its cloud this lightning of the mind" (Byron 519). We can see here how, in its function as a metaphor of inspiration, lightning is at once tied to human creativity and ingenuity, and yet simultaneously undermines these values, suggesting that often our most celebrated revelations of individual artistry and inventiveness are less a matter of will than of chance. In a move that is a little bit too on the nose (even for an allegory like *Frankenstein*), Shelley goes so far as to literalize this metaphor in her novel, using an actual lightning bolt (in this case, the one that strikes the oak tree) as the inciting incident that sparks Victor's initial interest in animation and that leads him to the study of electricity.

Implicit in Victor's pivot to studying electricity – and with it, Shelley's pivot from the gothic to the scientific – is the fact that electricity had, by 1816, become a phenomenon that could be studied. This shift in thinking is part of a storied though not so distant past, and its history is one with which Shelley was evidently familiar. Notably, Victor's own recognition of lightning as a form of electricity is immediately and directly linked to the primal moment of discovery that would make *Frankenstein* (and his creature) possible; in demonstrating the various effects of electricity's power,

one of the first things that Victor's father does is make "a kite, with a wire and string, which drew down that fluid from the clouds" (Shelley 24). This, incidentally, is an exact reenactment of the experiment that Benjamin Franklin conducted one stormy summer day in June of 1752 – the very experiment that would confirm, as Franklin supposed, "that lightning is an electrical discharge," marking what Schiffer proffers as "perhaps the most dramatic and far-reaching finding of eighteenth-century science" (Schiffer 161). Given our own broader concerns, it is worth noting that this finding depended, in no small part, on Franklin's cataloguing of what he rightly perceived to be the meaningful coincidences between lightning and electricity. Convinced that lightning and electricity were "the same physical agent, differing in nothing save the intensity of [their] action," Franklin compiled a list of their analogous qualities: "The electrical spark is a zig-zag, and not straight; so is lightning. Pointed bodies attract Electricity; lightning strikes mountains, trees, spires, masts, and chimneys. When different paths are offered to the escape of Electricity, it chooses the best conductor: so does lightning. Electricity fires combustibles: so does lightning. Electricity fuses metals; so does lightning…" (qtd. in Noad 84). As is so often the case, Franklin's discovery was largely a matter of happenstance. And yet, it is crucial that the world coded this revelation as belonging definitively to the realm of science.

The mythologizing of Franklin, a renowned Renaissance man, as specifically a pioneer of science (like Victor) is not incidental; because, while it's true that Franklin's experiment and discovery would have significant practical effects – leading, for example, to his invention of the lightning rod and a better understanding of storm safety measures – the thing that made this finding as dramatic and far-reaching as Schiffer assures us that it was is its impact in "divert[ing] Zeus's thunder into experimental science" (Tucker xix): in first drawing that fluid down from the clouds, Franklin literally and figuratively brought lightning down to earth. This notion that Franklin singlehandedly conducted lightning away from the spiritual register and into the scientific one is

deeply embedded in our folklore, perpetuated even through the titles of many Franklin studies, including Schiffer's *Draw the Lightning Down*, but also Philip Dray's *Stealing God's Thunder*. Both of these examples read as iterations of the epigram inscribed on Jean-Antoine Houdon's bust of Franklin, in which the French economist Turgot emphasized the ideological ramifications of Franklin's act in no uncertain terms: "He took the lightning from the heavens and the scepter from the tyrant" (Tucker 217). The image conjured of Franklin here is not merely as a usurper of the gods, but as a god himself; and indeed, in *Bolt of Fate*, Tom Tucker does his part in the deifying process by observing that "Benjamin Franklin would become as essential as Zeus or Thor to the myth of lightning" (Tucker 124). While this recognition of Franklin's integrality to the history of lightning is no doubt accurate, Tucker's characterization of lightning as a myth misses the point: the discovery of atmospheric electricity meant that lightning wasn't a myth at all, but very real indeed.

Franklin's illuminating experiment, which conveniently coincided with the Enlightenment, sparked a renewed interest in lightning as belonging to the realm of science: something to be harnessed, to be studied, and just maybe, to be explained. Still, while the eighteenth century saw a great shift in our understanding of lightning as an electrical current, it wouldn't be until well into the next two centuries that modern instruments would make it possible for us to determine and detail the circumstances that create lightning in the first place. As any long-form data analysis of lightning will tell you (and as so many of them told me), there is still plenty that we do not understand about Earth's most dramatic and concentrated electrical source. But here's what we know: Lightning is, to reiterate, a natural form of electrical discharge, and its flash – along with the audible crackling that so often accompanies it – typically results from the combination of atmospheric conditions produced during a thunderstorm. While a thunderstorm can bring with it any number of meteorological phenomena (most commonly including rain, hail, and strong winds), its hallmark signifier is the

eminently fluffy cumulonimbus cloud, and it is within these amorphous, vaporous puff balls that lightning, as we understand it, originates.

As even the novice meteorologist will recall, the term "thunderstorm" is widely used interchangeably with the slightly more nuanced "electrical storm"; this is because thunderstorms are characterized by the friction between conflicting air currents and a jumbling of heavy ice particles that lead to a buildup of electrical charge in what we might now refer to as a thundercloud. During the storm, the particles within the cloud begin to separate, slowly and inexorably, with the negatively charged electrons congregating at the bottom while the now electron-deficient top of the cloud becomes positively charged. When a spark jumps between these oppositely charged regions, the appropriately named intra-cloud lightning occurs, producing luminous but diffused flashes of light in the clouds (hence its alternate name, sheet lightning) that might read to the less studied observer as simply the celestial cross-slinging of thunderbolts between two warring gods. Although this intra-cloud lightning is by far the most frequently occurring type (accounting for roughly seventy-five percent of all instances of lightning), it is its counterpart, the cloud-to-ground variety, which creates the familiar bolt that we equate with a lightning strike. While my usual inclination would be to comment, again, upon the rather unimaginatively direct naming of this type of lightning, I am struck in this case by just how crooked a situation it turns out to be; see, cloud-to-ground lightning tends to get conflated with its inverse, ground-to-cloud lightning, though the two designations are meant to distinguish whether the bolt is downward or upward moving. In both cases, lightning that strikes between a cloud and the ground happens when the insulating air separating the negative charge collecting at the bottom of the thundercloud from the positive charge of the earth's surface is no longer able hold the two apart. Now, this is where things get complicated, and it's time to turn to the experts; as Elsom explains in *Lightning*, "when the electrical separation reaches about 100 million volts," lightning is triggered within the cloud, "and a stream of electrons from the cloud then begins

searching for a conducting route to the positively-charged surface" (Elsom 90). As this downward moving discharge – called a stepped leader – approaches the ground, it initiates an upward streaming reaction – called a return stroke – and together, these two merge to establish a flow of current (Elsom 91); the bright flashing channel that we recognize as lightning is the result of an the almost instantaneous back-and-forth between these two alternating strokes, and in fact, it is the return stroke that is visible to the human eye. This is to say, then, that lightning of this type is essentially multi-directional, with the simultaneity of the downward and upward strokes – each both triggering and triggered by the other – flattening any clear trajectory of cause and effect. While the name cloud-to-ground suggests an identifiable source, data tells us that, occasionally enough, the charge originates from tall objects on the ground (skyscrapers, steeples, an oak tree perhaps), and the leader moves upward toward the cloud. As the theoretical physicist Richard Feynman reiterates in his own lecture on lightning: "Again, we don't understand exactly how it works"; as such, he goes on, we can only "give a qualitative description of what it *looks* like" (Feynman 9-10). Well, what *does* lightning look like?

My sense that lightning is a less than straightforward science is neatly underlined by the fact that the lightning bolt itself appears to take the shape of a zigzag. As Elsom likewise notes, this association dates back at least as far as Ancient Mesopotamian civilization, when depictions of lightning were "originally shown by two or three wavy or zigzag lines, representing the celestial flames of its flashes (bolts)" (Elsom 14). In time, science made some sense of this shape, attributing it to the charged stroke's natural inclination to make its way toward the ground along the path of least resistance; because the combination of elements present in the earth's atmosphere at any given time and place can be irregular and uneven, the bolt's route more often than not becomes a jagged one. On occasion, the leader might even be split in such a way as to create the effect of many

branching strokes; when these branching strokes then makes contact with the ground at multiple points, they earn their classification of fork lightning.[7]

One might suppose that it is because of this zigzagging nature, paired with its propensity to deviate from its set course and strike unexpectedly, that lighting has become "one of the great metonymies of chance" (Lyons 99). Indeed, if its idioms tell us anything, it is that lightning is the chanciest of chance occurrences, the very instantiation of randomness and unlikelihood; hence, our use of the expression "out of the blue" – a truncation of the proverbial bolt from the clear blue sky – to describe something that happens unexpectedly and without warning. As with the sudden flash of inspiration, this figuration of lighting emphasizes our sense of its coming out of nowhere. Though the origin of the bolt itself is decidedly indeterminate here, the origin of the phrase is more easily traced: occasionally, a bolt of lightning will travel great distances horizontally, striking as far as twenty-five miles away from its cloud, thus giving the appearance of manifesting out of a perfectly settled sky showing no other signs of a thunderstorm (Elsom 100).

Despite "the lightning-friendly shape of the human body," to be struck by one of these bolts – or any bolt – of lightning is unlikely, perhaps even the quintessential unlikely event (Van Riper 169). In *Struck by Lightning: The Curious World of Probabilities*, Jeffrey Rosenthal estimates that "in a single year, only about one in 6 million Americans will be killed by lightning"; to put this in his own highly technical terms: "That's rare" (Rosenthal 117). Even more rare, though, is the coincidence of being struck multiple times in a single lifetime, which would defy our other truism of chance and improbability: that lightning never strikes the same place twice.[8] Unlike the bolt from the blue, this

[7] According to Benjamin Silliman's *First Principles of Physics*, it was Francois Arago who, in the nineteenth century, divided lightning into its "three classes, viz: zig-zag or chain lightning, sheet lightning, and ball lightning"; as noted, fork lightning occurs when zig-zag lightning then bi- or trifurcates (Silliman 704). The first English translation of Arago's *Meteorological Essays* was printed in 1855, at which point the convenient classification system, writes Silliman, was "universally adopted" (ibid).

[8] The list of individuals who have been struck by lightning multiple times is a surprisingly long one. To date, the record for surviving the most lightning strikes belongs to former Virginian park ranger, Roy C. Sullivan (1912-1983), whom the

expression finds few scientific facts to support it; on the contrary, most myth-busting studies will tell you that lightning often tends towards similar spots.[9] As with all weather systems, lightning has certain discernable patterns. Thus, while it is true that, "if anything epitomizes true luck, especially bad luck, it must be a lightning strike" (Reep 17), it can also be true that one could bolster their luck a bit by, say, steering away from highly conductive materials like metal and water during an electrical storm.

As Rosenthal confirms, for all of its erratic behavior, "lightning is not quite an equal-opportunity killer. You are more likely to be killed by lightning if you live in an area with many electrical storms, if you are often outdoors during storms, and if you live in a flat area without many tall buildings to absorb lightning" (Rosenthal 118). In a helpful chart accompanying this assessment, Rosenthal informs us of the most dangerous states in the US for lightning strikes. The top three? Wyoming, Utah, and Colorado (ibid). Incidentally, these are the same three states that Vladimir Nabokov would be driving through in the summer of 1951, as he composed the first drafts of *Lolita* on index cards in the back of his rubber-insulated sedan on wet and cloudy days. Is it really such a coincidence that this man – whose great passion was to go butterfly hunting, outdoors, on the plains, during the summer months, in our country's most thunderstorm-stricken states – would take an especially keen interest in the science and mysteries of lightning? Frankly, we're just lucky he didn't carry a wire net.

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media referred to as "the human lightning rod," on account of his having been struck on seven separate occasions and surviving (J. Friedman 5).

[9] Though it is not clear just how far back this fallacy goes, its origin seems to be wrapped up with a joke that was printed in a 1917 edition of "The National Drug Clerk": In a section entitled "Hit or Miss," a teacher asks, "Can you tell me why lightning never strikes twice in the same place?" To which the student responds, "Yes, sir. Because there's nothing left of the place after the first strike" (Killalee 228).

What Lighting Means to Nabokov

It is not the coincidence in the story that bothers us so much as the coincidence of coincidences in several stories.
– Vladimir Nabokov to Alfred Appel, Jr.

In Vladimir Nabokov's 1962 novel, *Pale Fire*, annotator Charles Kinbote recounts the story of a seemingly paranormal episode that a young Hazel Shade – the daughter of "Pale Fire" poet, John Shade – experienced one night in an old barn. Under the suspicion that the barn is haunted (or at the very least is the site of certain supernatural activity), Hazel and a companion make their inaugural nocturnal visit to investigate, "when an electric storm that was to last all night enveloped their refuge with such theatrical ululations and flashes as to make it impossible to attend to any indoor sounds or lights" (*PF* 187). Undeterred, Hazel returns, alone. This time, she encounters what the text repeatedly refers to as "a roundlet of pale light" (*PF* 188) – only one of the novel's many pallid fires. According to Hazel's notes from the evening, this "luminous circlet" appeared to have a life of its own, "flitt[ing] across the dark walls…linger[ing] here and there, dancing up and down; seem[ing] to wait in teasing play for evadable pounce" (ibid). After ecstatically dashing to and fro for some seconds, reports Kinbote, "the roundlet of light that until now had been keeping its distance made a pugnacious dash at [Hazel's] feet so that she nearly fell off the wooden block serving her as a seat" (*PF* 190).

This sphere of electrical energy, the properties of which Hazel Shade can only make sense of as the manifestation of some "inexplicable and perhaps very evil being," might be more rationally understood through our rubric of lightning, the final type of which is said to take the form of a ball (ibid). "Described as a luminous sphere," or an "electrified ball of fire," ball lighting is the among the rarest and most mysterious marvels of the material world, with many researchers still convinced of its being merely an illusion; because it characteristically shows up indoors and floats in accordance with the air currents, its movements, as Hazel Shade has to learn the hard way, "occasionally seem to

be attracted to the observer, who moves away from it in fright but is then left startled and shocked when it follows" (Elsom 120). Appropriately spooked by this, Hazel flees the barn, but insists on bringing her parents back to the scene so that they can witness this electrical phenomenon for themselves, and confirm not only its spiritual and/or scientific wondrousness, but its very existence.

"The light never came back," Kinbote tells us (*PF* 192). The mystery of the ball lightning would elude John Shade, but the poet remained transfixed by the incident, which would evidently serve as the inspiration for a subsequent poem, entitled "The Nature of Electricity":

> The dead, the gentle dead – who knows? –
> In tungsten filaments abide,
> And on my bedside table glows
> Another man's departed bride.
>
> And maybe Shakespeare floods a whole
> Town with innumerable lights,
> And Shelley's incandescent soul
> Lures the pale moths of starless nights.
>
> Streetlamps are numbered, and maybe
> Number nine-hundred-ninety-nine
> (So brightly beaming through a tree
> So green) is an old friend of mine.
>
> And when above the livid plain
> Forked lightning plays, therein may dwell
> The torments of a Tamerlane,
> The roar of tyrants torn in hell. (*PF* 192-193)

At the risk of further exposing my and Charles Kinbote's shared critical instincts, I am reproducing John Shade's posthumously published poem in full here because, like Shade, Vladimir Nabokov was eminently curious about lightning, returning to it over and over again as a recurring motif throughout his decades-long writing career. As this section will show, Nabokov turned to lightning in his poetry and his prose; in his novels, his short stories, and his nonfiction criticism; in Russian, and in English. While lightning means many different things to Nabokov in various different times

and places, it seems to me that nearly all of these things are encapsulated in "The Nature of Electricity," as an extended close reading of the poem will elucidate.

To begin at the beginning: the name. From the start, the poem's title frames its topic as belonging to the material world; in presuming to determine its precise nature, Nabokov (via Shade) introduces electricity as a natural element in and of itself. Beyond that, although we understand that this is a poem, the title reads just as believably as applying to a research-based study – not unlike, for instance, Robert Serrell Wood's 1844 "Attempt to Explain the Nature of Electricity." This initial positioning of electricity (already a distinctly scientifically-charged variant of lightning) as a subject of analytical inquiry speaks to Nabokov's own scientific inclinations. Famously, Nabokov flitted between the worlds of art and science (and in fact, to his mind, the two fields were in many ways one and the same). In recent years, this overlap and the ways in the author's scientific sensibility informed his fiction have become matters of particular interest within Nabokov studies, solidified by the publication of books like *Nabokov's Blues: The Scientific Odyssey of a Literary Genius* (2001) and *The Quill and the Scalpel: Nabokov's Art and the Worlds of Science* (2009), along with the drawings, diagrams, and collection of essays printed in *Fine Lines: Vladimir Nabokov's Scientific Art* (2016). While we are already familiar with Nabokov's enthusiasm for entomology – as evidenced by his frequent butterfly-hunting excursions – it should be stated that Nabokov was, in fact, an accomplished (if amateur) lepidopterist, and his discovery of the first known female Lycaeides sublivens on that fateful trip across the Rockies in 1951 (defying the dismal weather, he managed to find 10!) remains an important contribution to the field.[10]

[10] In his review of *Fine Lines*, Vladimir Lukhtanov summarizes Nabokov's achievements as an amateur entomologist: "He served for six years as curator of the butterfly collection at Harvard University's Museum of Comparative Zoology in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and published a dozen papers on taxonomy — the description and classification of organisms — that remain important. His observations on butterfly morphology have stimulated breakthrough research in evolutionary biology. Several of his original biogeographic hypotheses have been confirmed in the past few years" (Lukhtanov 2016).

In line with his faith in science as a means of exploring – though never unlocking – nature's secrets, Nabokov was adamant in his indifference to organized religion and resolute in his godlessness; and while critics agree that Nabokov was by no means a devout empiricist, his biographer Brian Boyd does nonetheless detect a certain persistent return to the reliability of matter and the material across his work: "In the vast bulk of his work," writes Boyd, "he presents a seemingly self-sufficient material world, with human beings in it who are certainly mental agents, who may have a conviction or strong curiosity about something mindlike behind or beyond matter…but whose conviction never seems supported, or whose curiosity never seems answered, within the fiction" (*Stalking* 64).[11] For Boyd, the prime example here is none other than John Shade, for whom the nagging but decidedly unsubstantiated belief in the existence of an afterlife becomes an act of desperation in the wake of his daughter's death. As Boyd points out, the cruel joke of Shade writing in his final poem (the titular "Pale Fire") that he is as "reasonably sure" of Hazel being "somewhere alive" as he is that he will wake up the next morning "and that the day will probably be fine," is that, in fact, Shade dies that very day – killed off with the same crass casualty with which we've become so familiar (*PF* 69). This to say, Nabokov entertains the possibility of an otherworld only to debunk it, recasting Shade's assuredness of the immaterial as wholly unreasonable. And we've seen iterations of this elsewhere; the anticlimactic case of the presumed paranormal barn reemerges here as a notable example, when John and Hazel Shade (then both alive and well) have to reckon with the reality that its charge might be simply be normal. This dispiriting conclusion of the barn incident speaks to Boyd's observation that Nabokov often baits his characters with the promise of the meta only to leave them with physics; that sometimes an electrical disturbance is just that; that ball lightning isn't always the ghost of your dead aunt trying to speak to you from beyond the grave.

[11] This is an important qualifier, as Boyd goes on: "It is only after we have mastered all the details of the particular world of a novel, forming a relationship to its parts and its time quite unlike that of the characters as they life it, that we can see that the very evidence that seems to refute the hopes of a Fyodor or a Shade actually testifies to their being fulfilled in a way greater than even they could imagine" (*Stalking* 64).

Implicit in the poem's title, then, is this sense that some part of Nabokov conceives of electricity as simply a matter of matter. This notion is reinforced by Kinbote in his direct response to the poem, when he claims, "Science tells us, by the way, that the Earth would not merely fall apart, but vanish like a ghost, if Electricity were suddenly removed from the world" (*PF* 193). Now, we know better than to take Charles Kinbote's word for anything, and the so-called science of his claim is pseudo at best; but there is nonetheless a certain validity to this idea that electricity is a constitutive element of the material world, considering that one of the things that Elsom tells us is that the world *does* need its variant, lightning: "Since electrons leak continually from the planet's surface to the air during fair weather," he writes, "negative lightning discharges are needed to replenish the Earth's negative field and maintain a balanced electrical state" (Elsom 82). One suspects that Nabokov already understands this; in his later novel, *Ada, or Ardor*, Nabokov makes good on Kinbote's claim by conjuring the world (or rather, the non-world) of Antiterra, effectively producing that ghost Earth first imagined in *Pale Fire* – one characterized, specifically, by its total lack of electricity. And yet, on the other hand, this imagining of Antiterra is ultimately just that, a fantasy. Because for all of Nabokov's investment in reason, rationality, and the material world, his grasp on the forces that power our reality still comes down to this: "Electricity. Time. Space. We know *nothing* about these things" (Field 87).

Vladimir Nabokov was a scientist. Maybe even a great scientist. But for him, "the greater one's science the deeper the sense of mystery" (*SO* 44). Accordingly, whatever science the title of "The Nature of Electricity" might imply, this is instantaneously undercut by the mysticism of its opening line; not only is its subject immediately revealed to be "the dead, the gentle dead," but the abrupt interjection of "who knows?" promptly establishes the speaker's overwhelming sense of uncertainty concerning electricity's potentially super nature. And Nabokov wouldn't have it any other way. Like Forster and Woolf before him, Nabokov was taken with the mystery of life. Indeed,

for all of his resistance to God as such – the popularity of whom he could "only explain…by an atheist's panic" (*SO* 147) – his own system of faith still tended to skew towards Shade's who knows-ism: an openness motivated perhaps by a purely pragmatic reluctance to rule out any possibilities, but an openness nonetheless. We hear echoes of Shade's "who knows?", for instance, in Nabokov's hedged claim that "The existence of eternal life is an invention of human cowardice; its denial, a lie to one's self. Whoever says 'There is no soul, no immortality' secretly thinks 'but maybe?'" (qtd. in *Russian Years* 154)[12]

This "but maybe?" is not only a central theme of "The Nature of Electricity," but is also, if Vera Nabokov has any say in it, perhaps *the* central theme of her husband's entire oeuvre, "saturating everything he wrote" (*Otherworld* 4). As Vladimir Alexandrov recounts in *Nabokov's Otherworld*, Vera famously wrote a Foreword in 1979 to a posthumously published collection of Nabokov's poems proclaiming that the "main theme" of his work was "potustoronnost'" – a Russian word which translates to "the beyond," "the hereafter," or Alexandrov's preferred choice, "the otherworld" (*Otherworld* 4). Predictably, Nabokov critics took Vera's accusation that nobody had yet seemed to notice the pervasiveness of this theme as a challenge, and indeed, once one begins looking (as so many studies promptly did), it becomes impossible not to find examples of this metaphysical preoccupation everywhere. As a matter of convenience, we may as well just stick to the example we have on hand; in returning to Shade's poem, we quickly realize that it is not about pinning down the science of electricity at all, but rather, about the possibility of electricity as a current capable of channeling (an)other world. The scenario that Shade lyricizes in the poem is an iteration of Hazel's initial experience in the barn, when she interpreted the flashes of the ball lightning as the materialization of her deceased Aunt Maud's effort to communicate with her. The

[12] Incidentally, Nabokov's own sense of another world – as unreasonable as it was unshakeable – seems to find its source in his the belief system of his mother, whose "intense and pure religiousness took the form of her having equal faith in the existence of another world and in the impossibility of comprehending it in terms of earthly life" (*SM* 39).

fact of this poem's being published after Shade's death neatly underscores its hypothesis that the nature of electricity is the means through which spirits speak from beyond the grave; and moreover, Shade's rendering of electric charge as itself the material instantiation of some immaterial presence does track with our established understanding of lightning and electricity as liminal forces, marking the threshold between heaven and earth.

Given Nabokov's own oscillation between the natural world and an inaccessible but acutely sensed world beyond, it's easy to see how he might be drawn to the transgressive affordances of lightning and electricity in his work. As Gilmore explains in *Aesthetic Materialism*, "Because electricity troubled Newtonian understandings of the objective world, it spurred questions about the very nature of the material word…It seemed to be imponderable – lacking in weight and mass and everything else that would seem to distinguish matter – yet it also seemed to pervade all matter" (Gilmore 7). To Nabokov – for whom science is a form of spirituality – such a paradox is not problematic, but, in fact, ideal; insofar as a central tenet of Nabokov's belief system is that "contemporary biology shows that the cells of any organism are themselves immortal," and therefore, "what we call 'the soul' is completely dependent on matter" (qtd. in *Russian Years* 154), lightning becomes a distinctly utilitarian trope – an instrument that is able to signify the physical and the metaphysical simultaneously.

In her essay, "Faragod Bless Them: Nabokov, Spirits, and Electricity," Rachel Trousdale begins to establish a discourse on the interchange of these elements Nabokov's fiction, selectively limiting her study to *Pale Fire*, *Ada*, and the short story, "The Return of Chorb." Using Vronsky and Levin's debate on electricity and spiritualism in *Anna Karenina* as a framework for her own investigation, Trousdale makes the convincing argument that "electricity becomes a metaphor for the spirit" for Nabokov, and that "the coincidental similarities of the two powerful, invisible, and dangerous forces of electricity and ghosts illuminate each other" (Trousdale 119). This reading

strikes me as right enough, and we will see these forces working in a similar way when the powerful coincidence of lightning bolts in *Lolita* electrifies the text with the ghost of Nabokov himself. But, as Trousdale likewise notes in her reading of "The Nature of Electricity," not all spirits are charged equally. For Nabokov, the threat of materialism is the same threat posed by any totalitarian ideology – by Marxisim, yes, but even by Darwinism, and above all by Freudianism: that is, the threat of determinism. Although he was about as reluctant to claim a political doctrine as he was a religious one, Nabokov's creed was simple: "Freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of art" (*SO* 34). Here was a man who valued aesthetic autonomy above all, whose insistence on creative control and authorial tyranny remain a hallmark of his brand. There is, then, something especially dangerous about electricity for Nabokov, which, in its most basic elemental form is not just a vital life force, but a determinative one. As Frank Joseph writes, "the connection between modern humans and the natural world may be much more intimate than we have so far appreciated. Our very bodies are composed of zinc, copper, iron, seawater, potassium – elements of the Earth. The electrical impulses of our brain resemble flashes of lightning" (Joseph 57). The idea that all individual will and motivation might simply be explained away as electrical nerve impulses presents a troublingly mechanistic view of human nature that Nabokov cannot abide. Fortunately for him, the comparison of brain activity to lighting is not an entirely automating one; after all, historically, the bolt of lightning has always been aligned with one impulse in particular: the creative one.

As Trousdale notes, Shade's poem suggests an electrical hierarchy of souls: "one man's beloved is enough to light up a bedroom, while Shakespeare can light a whole town" (Trousdale 121). It is important that the only two proper names Shade invokes belong to artists, and that they are associated with the poem's highest wattage. For Shade, as for Nabokov, the creativity of the artist is not only sourced by some electrical power; he is a power source in and of himself. Although it is difficult to reconcile with his claims of pure will and his frequently espoused need to be in

complete control of his writing, Nabokov's equally strong conviction that mystery must be embraced – a sentiment nicely summed up in *Transparent Things'* caution that "another thing we are not supposed to do is to explain the inexplicable" (*TT* 93) – does leave some room at least for inspiration, that most inexplicable of artistic impulses. As we know from our brief survey of lightning science, causality is a cloudy business, and sometimes there is just no telling the origin of a rogue bolt that has forked from its path, striking out of a clear blue sky several miles away. This, our metaphors tell us, is how artistic inspiration works, as well. Maybe even for Nabokov.

Despite its own less-than-inspired name, Nabokov's 1972 essay on the topic, "Inspiration," is striking in this regard. Doing his best to not explain his way around the inexplicable process of artistic epiphany, Nabokov leans into the familiar metaphor of lightning: "One sees inspiration accompanying the author in his actual work on the new book," he writes. "She accompanies him (for by now we are in the presence of a nubile muse) by means of successive flashes" (*SO* 310). Within a few pages, the metaphor reaches its full clichéd charge, as Nabokov cites "the bolt of inspiration [that] strikes invariably" (*SO* 311).[13] Notably, this is not the only occasion on which Nabokov figured his compulsion toward creativity in these terms. As Brian Boyd points out in his account of the author's time in the United States, Nabokov's career as an American novelist began with a similar jolt: upon returning from an icy walk to his new New England home in 1942, Nabokov reportedly told Vera, "On the way a lightning bolt of undefined inspiration ran right through me, a terrible desire to write, and write in Russian – but it is impossible" (*American Years* 52). Within the month, he would begin working on *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the first of nine novels to be written in his so-called "second rate brand of English" (*L* 317).

[13] As Alexandrov points out in *Nabokov's Otherworld*, Nabokov's use of the lightning conceit for inspiration spanned decades, dating at least as far back as 1932, when he wrote: "The plan of my novel comes to me suddenly, is born in a minute…The first jolt is what is important" (*Otherworld* 29).

In *Lightning*, Elsom quotes the American poet and literary critic Randall Jarrell, who writes, "A good poet is someone who manages, in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms, to be struck by lightning five or six times; a dozen or two dozen time and he is great" (qtd. in Elsom 184). If the extensiveness of his bibliography is any indication, it seems to me that lightning struck Nabokov enough times that he's giving poor, record-holding Roy C. Sullivan a run for his money. At the very least, we know he stood in a lot of thunderstorms. While Nabokov made a habit of metaphorizing inspiration through lightning, this association is not merely a matter of rhetoric for him; rather, he has a history of portraying actual thunderstorms as the inciting incidents of artistic creation and recounted narrative. This is best exemplified in one of Nabokov's early short stories entitled "Groza" – that is, "The Thunderstorm" (1924). In it, a man falls asleep during an electrical storm and is abruptly awoken, first by the crashing of thunder, quickly followed by the crashing of a chariot belonging to the prophet, Elijah. As he loses control of the reigns (and along with it, a wheel), the thunder-god is thrown out of the chariot and into the story. In his personified form as a roughed-up old man, the dethroned deity has a brief exchange with the narrator, who helps him track down his lost wheel and bids him adieu. According to Boyd's portrait of Nabokov as a young man, the artist who wrote this story was "still searching for ways to fit a world beyond into the world of the human, but he had not found his *own* way yet" (*Russian Years* 234). But perhaps in the thunderstorm (and "The Thunderstorm") Nabokov *had* found his way; in terms of plot, the use of the storm as the conduit of the divine in the story speaks back to Nabokov's regular return to lightning, thunder, and electricity as the channels through which the spiritual world makes its way into our own. Moreover, as useful as this interaction is in illuminating the supernatural nature of Nabokov's weather patterns, it is equally important to note that "The Thunderstorm" does not simply end with the end of the thunderstorm. Instead, as the storm abates and Elijah departs, the story concludes with the man running down the street in his "soaked bedslippers and worn dressing

gown," and "as I ran," he narrates, "I imagined how, in a few moments I would be in your house and start telling you about that night's midair accident, and the cross old prophet who fell into my yard" (*Stories* 89). The anonymity of the second-person address in the final line produces the effect in the reader of having just heard the story that the narrator imagines his future-self recounting. Insofar as the whole incident ultimately becomes the prompt for this tale, the nominal thunderstorm thus emerges not just a literal source of inspiration in and for the story, but as the very event on which narrative itself depends.

If this were an isolated incident, I might be more inclined to let it go. But, oddly enough, Nabokov has another story about young man running home in a hurry after a storm, struck by an urgent need to recite. And this time, it's personal. Imagine the chances that Nabokov should trace his own initial artistic impulse all the way back to a particularly memorable thunderstorm. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov's version of an autobiography, he recounts an episode from the summer of 1914, when the then fifteen-year-old retreated into a pavilion to seek "shelter during a thunderstorm, of which there was an inordinate number that July" (*SM* 215). "The storm passed quickly," he writes. The rain stops. The clouds part. A rainbow slips into view. "A moment later my first poem began" (*SM* 217). Here, again, we have the trope of the electrical storm as the ur-moment of inspiration. Maybe the only thing more perfect than Nabokov crediting the sparking of his creative consciousness to the sudden jolt of an incidental weather event is the revelation that, according to Boyd, this narrative simply isn't true:

> Despite the masses of circumstantial detail in Nabokov's full account of this 'first poem,' it is a considerable stylization of the actual event. In his autobiography he presents the poem as a bolt from the blue, sudden and unprecedented, when in fact for five years or so he had been composing verse in three different languages. The poem he evokes ['The rain has flown'] was written not in 1914, but in May 1917, hundreds of poems later. (*Russian Years* 108)

As a fabrication, Nabokov's poetic origin story may tell us more about his relationship to thunderstorms than it could as an accurate account. If it were true that Nabokov's writing career

was, in fact, inspired by this electrical storm, it would be a neat coincidence. Given what we know about how Nabokov would go on to use lighting and electricity as a medium through which he could navigate and negotiate his own developing metaphysics, we might even be tempted to read it as an especially meaningful coincidence. But Nabokov's bolt from the blue is nothing more than a special effect. It's not a coincidence, at all, but a contrivance – a storm that he has staged. And this, as we will see in turning our attention to *Lolita* in the next section, is key to the way that Nabokov uses the weather not just as an instrument of divine intervention, but as a workaround for determinative causality.

Just as so many of Nabokov's novels take the form of biography, Nabokov's autobiography is known for its adoption of novelistic convention. Nabokov claimed no more interest in the chronological organization of a life than in the chronological organization of a work of fiction; instead, he subscribed to the idea that "true purpose of autobiography" should be the following of "thematic designs through one's life" (*SM* 27). The story that Nabokov has constructed around his first poem may not be true, but it fulfills a true purpose in extending a theme of his autobiography – that of the fatefulness of coincidence, and the coincidence of fate. Like all of the best themes, Nabokov's thunderstorm – the materialized metaphor of chance and consequence – is designed, and that, it seems, is the basis of its appeal. As evidenced by both "The Thunderstorm" and the incident in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov takes a certain joy in the special literariness of literary weather. Like "The Nature of Electricity" likewise shows, the actual matter of lightning and electricity matters less to him than their aesthetic affordances. And this is where it becomes important to pay attention to the artists that Shade has decided to summon in his poem.

Of all the writers in all the worlds, John Shade names only two: Shelley and Shakespeare. The suggestion here is not only that Shade feels a certain connection to these two authors who have come before him, but that these two authors share a certain connection to lightning and electricity.

Like Shade, Nabokov is writing in the twentieth century, with a twentieth-century understanding of how lightning and electricity work. And yet, as we've seen in *Pale Fire* and will see again in turning our attention to *Lolita*, Nabokov seems to invoke weather in intentionally anachronistic ways, sidestepping the contemporary science in favor of a pre-modern mysticism. Specifically, he is using it in ways reminiscent of Shelley and Shakespeare. I would be remiss not to acknowledge that in his poem, Shade neglects to identify which of the two famous Shelleys it is that he pictures luring pale moths on starless nights; given his status as a man and a poet (not to mention an electricity enthusiast), Percy seems the surer bet. But it is the specificity of the "incandescent soul" that really matters here; for, while the transcendentalism it implies is more typically associated with the work of Mary's husband, we might just as easily imagine the soul of Mary's own electrified monster glowing with such a heat. Less important than making a clear distinction between the two (after all, there is in the *Frankenstein* preface a legitimate precedent for conflating them) is that, together, Mary and Percy Shelley are representative of a Romantic sensibility that is synonymous with the nineteenth-century literary tradition: a tradition of dark and stormy nights; of the pathetic fallacy; of weather that really *means* something. A tradition that the compulsively allusive and interminably well-read Nabokov is deliberately and heavy-handedly tapping into. Although, this wouldn't be much of a tradition if its own roots couldn't be traced even further back. And, indeed, it seems that the ominously charged weather of the nineteenth-century novel is itself the logical evolution of the overwrought weather of the Shakespearean stage.

In the final stanza of "The Nature of Electricity," Shade evokes his subject in its purest form, summoning up the image of a rural thunderstorm as spectacle: "And when above the livid plain / Forked lightning plays," he writes, calling attention to the performed and performative nature of the phenomenon in its aesthetic, if not material, form. In considering the curious grammatical construction of Shade's line, one is struck not so much by the lightning itself but by the

causal ambiguity implied by this verb, "plays," which at once indicates that the lightning is somehow self-enacting, and yet also suggests a certain passivity, as if the lightning is engineered: not playing, but being played; not naturally occurring, but produced. This, of course, is how stage weather works. In her essay, "The Meaning of '*Thunder and Lightning*': Stage Directions and Audience Expectations," Leslie Thompson breaks down the mechanics of the manufactured tempests of the early modern theater, explaining that "the thunder was usually produced by drums and the lightning by fireworks" (Thompson 14). Such dramatic effects would have been all too familiar to audiences in the Globe Theater at the start of the seventeenth century. As Gwilym Jones' book-length study on the subject of *Shakespeare's Storms* can attest, foul weather finds its way, in some form or another, into "every Shakespearian play" (Jones 2). Most often, as was custom at the time, these climactic (and climatic) disruptions would come in the form of a straightforward stage direction: *thunder and lighting.* And, in fact, both *Macbeth* and *The Tempest* open with this trope. But the electrical storms indicated by these directions are highly charged. In *Macbeth*, these elements accompany the entrance of the play's three witches, who anticipate their next meeting "in thunder, lightning, or in rain" (qtd. in Jones 87); and, in *The Tempest*, as noted at the start of this dissertation, we quickly learn that it is Prospero who, by some trick of magic, conjures up the titular storm that initiates the plot – not by separating the characters (as is typical, per Jones' reading), but by forcing them all together. Both, then, are exemplary cases of a particular theatrical tradition that Nabokov appears to be invoking with his own gesture to play(ing) weather; as summarized by Thompson: "'*thunder and lightning'* was the conventional stage language – or code – for the production of effects in or from the tiring house that would establish or confirm a specifically supernatural context in the mind of the audience" (Thompson 11). In other words, thunder and lightning are shorthand for imminent divine intervention.

As Siggy Frank explores in *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination* and Alfred Appel reiterates in his introduction to the *Annotated Lolita*, Nabokov was both dismissive of drama as a genre and obsessed with theater as a metaphor, constantly conjuring elements of the conceit (staging, playwriting, acting, etc.) as masked (and masqued) evidence of his own meta-literary direction. Per Frank, Nabokov's attraction to theater is more or less a matter of coincidence; specifically, "Theatre is unique among all forms in its capacity to let the real and the imaginary (the reality of the auditorium and a fictional stage reality) physically coincide in the same space" (Frank 4). Nabokov revels in this juxtaposition between the two worlds not because it spotlights the distinction between the real and the imaginary, but because it dissolves it, effectively manifesting his belief in nature and artifice as essentially synonymous (*Otherworld* 17). There is, it seems, no better realized example of this than in the manufactured storm of a Shakespearean drama, the audiovisual effects of which, though directed for and towards the stage, inevitably extend beyond the proscenium, its flashes and roars filling the theater. "In this view," continues Frank, "theatre becomes a means to emphasize the artifice of the (fictional) world and its crafty deception, which in turn implies the existence of a stable creator behind this world" (Frank 14). As much as Nabokov might profess that "everything is fluid, everything depends on chance" (*E* 27), he maintains a fundamental fatalism that we typically associate with the dramatics of tragic theater – an inclination to see with each of life's accumulating coincidences further proof of some divine design, some otherworldly stage manager arranging into a pattern each random bolt of lightning as it plays above the livid plain.

As far as our own earthly stage managers go, even Nabokov could acknowledge that there was none better than Shakespeare. Among the strongest of his *Strong Opinions*: "The verbal poetical texture of Shakespeare is the greatest the world has ever known" (*SO* 89). Accepting, as Dana Dragunoiu does, that "the idea that life is ordered by fate was deeply appealing to Nabokov" (Dragunoiu 70), it is worth noting that he was especially "fascinated by fatidic dates" (*SO* 75) and

took a certain pride in sharing a birthday with the bard. However, it is, perhaps, also worth noting that this coincidence is about as authentic as the misbegotten thunderstorm that inspired young Vlad's first poem. In *Nabokov's Shakespeare*, Schuman attempts to unpack this error in one amusingly long and involved paragraph, reflecting Nabokov's own convoluted justification (which relies on a cross-referencing of the Julian and Gregorian calendars) in *Speak, Memory*; in the end, Schuman concludes that, "no matter which calendar one uses, or how cunning the calculation, Nabokov's birthday and Shakespeare's are not the same," but that, "in fact, Nabokov adopts the April 23 option by choice" (Schuman 3). Sometimes, this birthday debacle suggests, it takes a certain deliberate and divine contrivance to bring people together; sometimes, to tear them apart. So it is with Shakespeare's weather, and so, too, it is with Nabokov's (having evidently adopted these anachronistic weather conventions by choice, as well). In turning now to *Lolita*, we can see how Nabokov stages his own electrical storms. Not only to bring Humbert Humbert and Dolores Haze together. Not only to tear them apart. But to remind us, over and over again, that when it comes to the theatrics of the novel's lightning and thunder, he is always waiting in the wings with the drums and the fireworks.

What This Means for *Lolita*

And I, the Human Lightning, illuminating that scene.
– Vladimir Nabokov, Despair

There is a pattern to Vladimir Nabokov's weather, and it involves the staging of thunderstorms. Reader, look at this tangle of coincidences. Between the years of 1959 and 1961, it so happened that Nabokov was working on three projects: he was overseeing the English translation of his novel, *Invitation to a Beheading*, by his son, Dmitri; composing the titular poem and accompanying commentary of *Pale Fire*; and adapting *Lolita* into a screenplay, which would be

published only after it became clear that Stanley Kubrick's final version of the film had disregarded it entirely. In *Invitation to a Beheading*, a "summer thunderstorm, simply yet tastefully staged, [is being] performed outside" the cell of the gnostically turpitudinous Cinncinatus C. (*IB* 129); in *Pale Fire*, the fictional poet John Shade likewise elegizes the way in which "One opal cloudlet in an oval form/Reflects the rainbow of a thunderstorm/Which in a distant valley has been staged –/For we are most artistically caged" (*PF* 37); and in the *Lolita* screenplay, Nabokov dramatizes yet another thunderstorm – one that had apparently happened offstage on the night prior to Humbert Humbert arriving in the town of Ramsdale, where he was meant to take up residence in the McCoo household and act as tutor to their twelve-year-old daughter, Ginny. In the novel, Humbert shows up in Ramsdale – after "a fantastic night on the train, imagining in all possible detail the enigmatic nymphet" (*L* 35) – only to be informed by Mr. McCoo that his house "had just burned down – possibly," supposes Humbert, "owing to the synchronous conflagration that had been raging all night in my veins" (ibid).

In both structure and theme, *Lolita* is a novel obsessed with causality. More specifically, *Lolita* is concerned with the ways (of varying self- and sub-consciousness) in which we construct linear narratives in order to make sense of what Humbert refers to as the "wrought-iron world of criss-cross cause and effect" (*L* 21). Insofar as part of Humbert and his reader's shared project is to unkink the zigzagging plot of *Lolita* by tracing its disastrous effects back to their initial cause, one is tempted to cite the fire that burns down the McCoo's home, and the counterfactual scenario that goes up in smoke along with it, as a singularly consequential event in the novel, upon which the rest of the narrative relies (*L* 21). Indeed, as Dmitri Nabokov tells it, "Humbert's whole destiny is changed by the conflagration that destroys the house where he would have lived" (D. Nabokov 14). In his use of the conditional here, Dmitri rhetorically raises the possibility of the novel's alternative fates. Had only Humbert boarded with the McCoos as he was meant to, there might have been no

marriage to Charlotte; no rape of Lolita; no murder of Quilty. And yet, despite the far-reaching effects of the McCoo house-fire, the novel notably fails to give an actual cause for the conflagration beyond Humbert's projection of his own internal state upon the external world. It is only through the screenplay's added scene of the thunderstorm that Nabokov belatedly provides a material – if improbable – explanation of the fateful fire that would land Humbert Humbert in the home of Dolores Haze: "Their house got struck by lightning" (*Screenplay* 27).

As a matter of form, the conventions of the screenplay liberate the reader from the perspectival restrictions of Humbert's first-person narration in the novel; as such, we are afforded the crucial opportunity to meet Lolita outside of the distortions of Humbert's gaze, presented in this scene of the storm-battered Ramsdale as a scared little girl – your average young lady who doesn't love lightning. More than that, the retconning of Humbert's displacement as the direct result of this freak weather accident – the very same freak accident that took his (very photogenic) mother, no less – in the *Lolita* screenplay makes even more conspicuous the ways in which the coincidental causality of the novel works. In its original form, the crediting of the McCoo fire to the synchronous burning in Humbert's veins is of a piece with the Freudian framing of Humbert's manuscript, which is presented (in the novel's fictional Foreword) as a would-be psychoanalytic case study. It is no secret that Vladimir Nabokov hated Freud, and expressed (frequently and publically) nothing but contempt for psychoanalysis, which he viewed as, among other things, an essentially totalitarian ideology that left no room for human creativity, let alone free will. That the structure of *Lolita* mimics the staging of the analysand's unconscious (with Humbert feigning to track the psychic origins of his perversion) is clearly meant to be read as a mockery of this notion of psychic determinism, which purports to provide explanations (see also: excuses) for even the most abhorrent of acts. Through this lens, then, we can see how Humbert's attribution of the McCoo house fire to his internal pathological torment is part of the joke; obviously Humbert's raging veins didn't *cause*

the McCoo's house to burn down – they simply coincided with it. The lessons here seem simple enough: psychic determinism is a farce; the nature of causality is itself a mystery; and Humbert is representative of the danger that Nabokov sees in reading causation into correlation as a means of retrospectively converting chance into fate. The implication of the novel not providing a cause for the pile of ashes that Humbert discovers upon his arrival in Ramsdale is that it might, in fact, be futile to try to determine cause at all. Sometimes, bad things happen.

Admittedly, the added scene of the screenplay complicates this somewhat, giving clear cause where there was none; however, what I am proposing instead is that the identification of the cause as a bolt of lightning is part of Nabokov's larger project in *Lolita* to undermine the tyrannical fatalism of psychic determinism with the radical contingency of meteorological coincidence. Or at least, to create the illusion that he has done so. Insofar as a denial of Humbert's autonomy would effectively amount to his exoneration, there are meaningful humanist questions of ethics and accountability at stake in reading *Lolita* as a determined and deterministic narrative. As an isolated incident, the employment of the lightning to strike down the McCoo house seems to speak to its utility as a motif of chance materialized, one that is able to successfully destabilize this potential determinism of the narrative. The rub comes in the acknowledgement that this is not an isolated incident in *Lolita*; in line with Nabokov's own assessment, it is not the coincidence that begins to bother me, but the coincidence of coincidences. Because really, what are the chances that a lightning bolt, of all things, should fatefully strike Humbert Humbert's life not once but twice?

There is a troubling tension at work in Nabokov's novels that reflects what seems to be an inherent paradox of his belief system, characterized as it was by a profound ambivalence towards the competing notions of free will and determinism. For, vocal as he was in his staunch opposition to "the miserable idea of determinism, the prison regulation of cause and effect" (qtd. in *Otherworld* 240), Nabokov was equally resolved in his sense of "some playfully benign design behind the cosmic

cyclorama, perhaps some impish fate, perhaps something more, some artistic and gamesome god" (*Stalking* 154). My suggestion here is that Nabokov employs and emplots the trope of the weather – and specifically, that of the thunderstorm and its coinciding lightning – as a way of working through this ambivalence. Nabokov believed in both coincidence and fate, and the lightning that strikes in *Lolita* conveniently functions as an arbiter of both. For Nabokov's biographer, Brian Boyd, it was possible to simply separate these two things: "Obvious coincidences of course happen often enough in life," writes Boyd, "and Nabokov gives them their due, but he also takes the greatest care not to build plots in which coincidences are chained to one another with the phonily inexorable logic of tragedy" (*Russian Years* 299). Here, I'm afraid I have to disagree. While *Lolita* surely critiques deterministic genres and ideologies and actively cautions against the fallacious imposition of fatidic frameworks, it nevertheless does so whilst chaining its meteorological coincidences together in just such a way as to reinforce precisely that phonily inexorable logic of tragedy upon which Humbert's exculpation depends.[14] In using the weather to undermine the psychic determinism of the novel, Nabokov breaks Humbert free from one cage, the so-called prison of his personality; however, as Cinncinatus C. likewise comes to understand through the performance of the thunderstorm that Nabokov has staged outside of his cell, "the lightning printed the shadows of the bars in unexpected places" (*IB* 129). That is to say, for all of its apparent contingency, the accumulation of thunderstorms and lightning in *Lolita* ultimately only serves to illuminate the bars of a different cage; from the initial bolt that fells Humbert's mother to the literal staging of Vivian Darkbloom's play *The Lady Who Loved Lightning*, Nabokov has created a conspiracy of meteorological coincidences that

[14] In this, I am of a mind with Vladimir E. Alexandrov, who comes to the conclusion in *Nabokov's Otherworld* that "in general, the dominance of fate and patterning in Nabokov's fictions makes it impossible to prove the absence of determinism from any concatenation of events" (*Otherworld* 249). The implication of this, which warrants further exploration, is that insofar as the absoluteness of Nabokov's tyrannical rule as an author deprives Humbert of choices, it is fundamentally incommensurate with whatever humanist ethics we might try to find in *Lolita*.

functions as a determinative trap all its own. That *Lolita* turns out to be a tragedy may be a matter of coincidence; but it is a tragedy nonetheless.

The human response to tragedy is nothing if not predictable. Always the same search for reasons, the same attempt to make sense of the seeming senselessness of pain and suffering. And always the same question: why? Why do things happen? Why did *this* happen? Such a question is mere shorthand – an inquiry into the unsolved mystery of causality itself. In the fall of 1952, in the quiet town of Ramsdale, one man walked into the home of another man and murdered him. Why? This is the initial question that "Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male," purports to answer, at least according to its editor, John Ray Jr. (Ph.D!): "References to 'H.H.'s crime may be looked up by the inquisitive in the daily papers," Ray tells the reader in *Lolita*'s fictional Foreword, adding that, "its cause and purpose would have continued to remain a complete mystery, had not this memoir been permitted to come under my reading lamp" (*L* 4). Debatable moral apotheosis aside, *Lolita* is framed here as every bit a revelation. By presenting Humbert Humbert's manuscript as the explanation of an event that would otherwise be inexplicable, the good doctor Ray does a good deal more than convert a random act of violence into a motivated one; he directs us to read *Lolita* itself as the staging of the process with which it is most conspicuously preoccupied: that of using narrative emplotment to convert contingency into necessity, not only as a means of metaphysical demystification but as a mechanism of propagating the belief in an ineluctable chain of cause and effect.

No doubt, some have more to gain than others by embracing and perpetuating this deterministic system. For instance, those being held in legal captivity, awaiting trial for murder. It is worth nothing, the cage and its accompanying conceits of entrapment and confinement are important recurring motifs for Nabokov. Cinncinatus' wrongful imprisonment is the premise of *Invitation to a Beheading* and the likelihood of an equally unjust arrest poses a similar threat to Adam

Krug in *Bend Sinister*. But, no doubt, Nabokov's most famous prisoner is none other than Humbert Humbert, about whom the very first thing we learn is that he has "died in legal captivity…a few days before his trial was scheduled to start" (*L* 3). Surely, if we are to engage with the ways in which narratives are constructed – as the infinitely metafictional *Lolita* would have us do – then we ought to start by contending with the particular circumstances under which Humbert Humbert has composed his own so-called confession, "first in the psychopathic ward for observation, and then in [the] well-heated, albeit tombal, seclusion" of his cell (*L* 308). Humbert's voluntary admission that he initially began writing his story with the intention of using the notes at his trial – to save, as he puts it, "not his head but his soul (ibid)[15] – corroborates and compounds John Ray's allusion to cause and purpose, suggesting that beyond serving as an explanation, the document might well stand in as his formal defense. And yet, there is something redundant about this, because, in fact, the very context of Humbert's imprisonment is its own defense – one that is stronger than any other he might hope to raise. Insofar as Humbert's exoneration depends on his ability to assure the reader – alternately figured as his confessor, his judge, and his psychiatrist – of the inexorability of his fate, the conceit of his being jailed metonymically reinforces just such an involuntary forfeiture of individual autonomy; in order to be freed of the crimes he committed, Humbert need only convince us that he had no freedom to begin with. There is no denying the charges that the novel brings up against Humbert Humbert. He will rape Dolores Haze. He will kill Clare Quilty. In addressing us, the gentlemen and women of his jury, Humbert doesn't need to prove that he did not do these things, but only to convince us that he did them because he was bound to do them – bound by the inescapable shackles of fate, by each link in what Nabokov referred to as "the iron chain of tragic causation" ("Tragedy" 335).

[15] The use of the "head" and "soul" here speak to the dual registers of confession that the novel is oscillating between: the legal and the spiritual.

Fundamentally, then, Humbert's defense rests on a question of genre classification; recalling Nabokov's repeated association of stage and cage, Humbert's task becomes one of framing his narrative in such a way as to ensure that we read it as a tragedy.[16] In the summer of 1941 – not long after "the first little throb of *Lolita* went through [him]" (*L* 311) – Vladimir Nabokov took up a post at Stanford to teach a course on drama; while there, he delivered a lecture on what he considered to be "The Tragedy of Tragedy," which he identified as the continued compulsion "to cling to the same old iron bars of determinism which have imprisoned the spirit of playwriting for years and years" ("Tragedy" 326).[17] Coincidentally, Nabokov invokes the trope of the iron bars to rhetorically figure the restrictiveness of determinism here, explicitly recalling (or anticipating) Humbert Humbert's literal imprisonment and his corresponding metaphysical sense of fatidic entrapment. Given Nabokov's consistency in using this conceit, it is easy to read the image that Humbert conjures of himself "gripping the bars" as a signifier of his attachment to the very same deterministic framework that Nabokov singles out as the precondition of tragedy (*L* 151). "As used in everyday speech," writes Nabokov, "the term [tragedy] is so closely allied to the idea of destiny as to be almost synonymous with it – at least when the presupposed destiny is not one that we would be inclined to relish" ("Tragedy" 324). So keenly clued into this mutually constituting interplay of tragedy and destiny is Humbert that one half expects to find Nabokov's "The Tragedy of Tragedy" among the list of books that he claims to have come across in the prison library. For surely there

[16] Though early reviews of the novel seemed ready to accept Humbert as tragic hero ("I can only say that Humbert's fate seems to me classically tragic," writes one critic), the obscenity charges later levied against the novel would turn this into a topic of some debate. As for Nabokov's take on the matter, in a letter to his friend Morris Bishop, he himself categorized *Lolita* as a tragedy: "I know that LOLITA is my best book so far. I calmly lean on my conviction that it is a serious work of art, and that no court could prove it to be "lewd and libertine". All categories grade, of course, into one another: a comedy of manners written by a fine poet may have its "lewd" side; but "LOLITA" is a tragedy." (6 March 1965)

[17] One is tempted to note another cozy coincidence. Nabokov's delivers his polemic on tragedy right around the time when he claims the first throb of *Lolita* hit him: "Late in 1939 or early in 1940," he writes in the afterword, "as far as I can recall, the initial shiver of inspiration was somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes, who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature's cage" (*L* 311).

could not be a more uncannily accurate assessment of Humbert Humbert's own narratological defense than the one that Nabokov puts forth when elaborating upon his thesis that "tragedy without a background of fate is hardly perceptible to the ordinary observer" (ibid):

> If, say, a person goes out and kills another person, of more or less the same sex, just because he happened to be that day in a more or less killing mood, there is no tragedy or, more exactly, the murderer in this case is not a tragic character. He will tell the police that everything went sort of black and experts will be invited to measure his sanity – that will be all. But if a perfectly respectable man is slowly but inexorably (and by the way the "slowly" and the "inexorably" are so used to being together that the "but" between them ought to be replaced by the wedding ring of an "and") driven to murder by the creep and crawl of circumstance, or by a long-repressed passion, or by anything that has long been working at undermining his will, by things, in short, against which he has been hopelessly and perhaps nobly struggling – then, whatever his crime, we see in him a tragic figure. (ibid)

This, no doubt, is precisely how Humbert would have his reader see him – as the tragic hero of what John Ray likewise confirms is a "tragic tale" (*L* 5); as a man driven, ever so slowly and inexorably, to murder Claire Quilty. Why? Because. Because he had to. Because nothing would have happened had it not been that.[18]

As Herbert Grabes summarizes in *Fictitious Biographies*, Humbert's account of his life is carefully constructed in such a way as "to reduce the extent of his personal responsibility for what has happened and at the same time to pass on the charge to an unseen force in control of individual actions" (Grabes 32). When it comes to undermining individual agency, there is no ideology more tragically and tyrannically deterministic for Nabokov than that of Freudian psychoanalysis, which "has been plagued by the problem of the will" from its inception (Mitchell 239). By now, Nabokov's antipathy toward Freud has been well documented. Indeed, despite Nabokov's own oft-cited instruction that "all of [his] books should be stamped Freudians, Keep out" (*BS* xii), there has emerged a robust body of psychoanalytic criticism that not only considers Freud's ideas as applied to

[18] In returning to the scene of the ur-crime where both Nabokov's and our own reading of tragedy began, we see how the novel enforces and undermines the notion of traceable causality, as Humbert's best efforts at gravitas devolve into the Nabokovian burlesque that is Quilty's execution; significantly, the text's undercutting of this would-be "poetical justice" – to use the term that Humbert happily applies to it – is encapsulated in Quilty's forced reading of his death sentence, a parodic rewriting of T.S. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday" that uses the anaphoric repetition of "Because…" to suggest some semblance of what John Ray Jr. might call "cause and purpose" (*L* 299).

Nabokov's novels, but that, as often as not, probes the nuances of Nabokov's relationship to the man himself; a man who figures so prominently in the author's fictions – and apparently, in his consciousness – that it prompted Jeffrey Berman to quip, "If Freud had not existed, Nabokov would have had to invent him" (qtd. in Kwon 94).[19] There is something perversely appropriate about the meta-critical instinct to psychoanalyze what now reads as Nabokov's almost pathological preoccupation with psychoanalysis and the "the Viennese quack" who founded it *(American Years* 221). For example, in "Vladimir Nabokov and Sigmund Freud, or a Particular Problem," Leland de la Durantaye takes for granted Nabokov's long-established contempt, and pivots instead to the question of motivation: "But w*hy* should Nabokov have so disliked Freud?" (de la Durantaye 60)[20] The answer for de la Durantaye is the same reason that Humbert finds psychoanalysis so useful as a structuring principle of his manuscript: it is "associated with prison…it is something that limits individuality and freedom. Among other things, Freud's thought is branded as determinist" (de la Durantaye 61). To Nabokov, for whom (according to biographer Brian Boyd) "causation is never a rigorously mechanical affair," this determinism poses both an ethical and an aesthetic problem (*Russian Years* 224). Not only does Freudianism "propagate moral relativity in its inappropriate exculpation of wicked acts" (Glynn 67), but it also subscribes to the same fallacy of retrospectively projected causation that Nabokov locates in the concatenated chains of tragedy, wherein our imaginative logic is so hypnotized by the inevitability of inevitability that "it will invent a cause and modify an effect rather than have none at all" ("Tragedy" 325).

Naturally, in his effort to disavow responsibility for his own not-well-enough-repressed passion, Humbert would try to exploit this inherent fatalism of Freudian thought; as such, his

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[19] For the foundation texts on Nabokov and Freud, see Geoffrey Green and Jenefer Shute.

[20] While Durantaye's question already betrays a psychoanalytic instinct, he plays with this further by teasing the possibility that Nabokov's antipathy might be subconsciously motivated: "It is neither possible nor necessary to judge – as so many of Nabokov's critics and defenders have endeavored to do – whether Nabokov's resistance to Freud was determined or overdetermined by factors or feelings of which he was not aware" (de la Durantay 68).

memoir takes the form of what Will Norman identifies as "the staging of his unconscious in [a] mock psychoanalytical case study" (Norman 112). Practically speaking, this staging is manifested in Humbert's structuring of his narrative as an attempt to "try to analyze [his] own craving, motives, actions, and so forth" and in the decision to plot the narrative as if tracing a line of strict cause and effect back to where, exactly, "the rift in [his] life began" (*L* 13). For Humbert, all roads lead back to Annabel Leigh. From the start, Humbert purposefully imbues the tragic tale of unconsummated adolescent love with that "certain initial girl-child…in a princedom by the sea" with this sense of fatalism, diagnosing it as the precise moment that the initial domino of his tragic life first fell: "In point of fact," proffers Humbert in the novel's opening paragraphs, without his Annabel Leigh (and Poe's "Annabel Lee" before her), "there might have been no Lolita at all" (*L* 9). But the contingency of this counterfactual is undermined by Humbert's repeated insistence on the fatedness of his finding Lolita. After his initial encounter with the nominal nymphet, whom he recognizes as a reincarnation of his Riviera love, Humbert further belabors this direct line of cause and effect, "stress[ing] that my discovery of her was a fatal consequence of that 'princedom by the sea' in my tortured past" (*L* 40). That Humbert has co-opted the shared methodology of psychoanalysis and tragedy as a means of explaining and excusing his behavior is clear; that we ought to be immediately wary of this, doubly so. In presenting himself as the analysand, Humbert forces the reader into the position of acting as his surrogate psychiatrist. But we know how Humbert likes to engage psychiatrists: "There was an endless source of robust enjoyment in trifling with psychiatrists," he confides, "cunningly leading them on; never letting them see you know all the tricks of the trade" (*L* 34). Chief among the tricks of Humbert's trade is his habit of "teasing them with fake 'primal scenes'" (ibid). This confession should be enough of a reason to make us rethink the primal scene that Humbert has been baiting us with over and over again, and to be suspicious of his repeated conviction that "in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel" (*L* 14).

Certainly, if Nabokov's derision of Freud has taught us anything, it is to be skeptical of Humbert's motivation here. And indeed, it does seem that, divergent as his own predilections may be, Humbert ultimately shares this contempt for psychoanalysis with Nabokov, for whom "psychiatric explanations of behavior are often idiotic, and are easily faked" (M. Wood 121). But whereas Nabokov dismisses psychoanalytic thinking for its imposed determinism, Humbert clings to it for precisely that reason – clings to it with such fervor that, as Michael Wood observes in *The Magician's Doubts*, "we are left with the feeling, not that the Annabel affair simply set the pattern for Humbert's later life, but that he pretty much believes that it did, in spite of his doctor-baiting antics – and to that extent it actually does set the pattern" (ibid). What Wood is identifying here is a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, a convenient reading that recalls the Oedipus myth and brings Humbert's own framing of himself as a tragic hero into even sharper relief. To the extent that the Annabel episode does clearly inform Humbert's relationship to Lolita, I am in agreement with Wood's conclusion that "the past does haunt the present" (ibid); but the pattern that it sets, I'd argue, has less to do with psychology than it does with the weather.

Humbert Humbert knows that psychological determinism is a farce, but more than that, he knows that he needs to be able to point to an agency greater than himself if he is to stand any chance of being absolved of moral responsibility for his actions; insofar as it figures weather as a fated and fateful force, the Annabel Leigh episode – along with the "Annabel Lee" episode that precedes it – provides the model of a plotting sky that Humbert builds on over the course of his narrative. In "The Tragedy of Tragedy," Nabokov notes the ways in which the weather can be manipulated and adjusted – "forced to resort to the most eerie dialectical tricks" – to accommodate and reflect the moves of a plot, "now stormy, now fair, now again dirty…always in such a manner as to give the maximum suspense without bothering about likelihood" ("Tragedy" 329). Ever the mindful tragedian, Humbert taps into this anachronistic implementation of the weather to

underscore the ineluctability of his own destiny; instantiating Nabokov's critique yet again, one notices how, throughout the story, the weather "forms a pattern which in a very comical way turns out to be specially, and solely, adapted to the needs of the author" (ibid). How convenient, for instance, that Humbert's plans of staying at the McCoo house should go up in smoke with a violent nocturnal thunderstorm, only for the weather to clear the very next day – just long enough for Humbert to stumble across Charlotte Haze's young daughter sunning on the veranda. This detail is of critical importance in Humbert's estimation, as it is through the burst and blur of this "sun-shot moment" that Humbert immediately recognizes Lolita as the reincarnation of his Riviera love, "the same child…in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling…peering at me over dark glasses" (*L* 39). So glaring is the entanglement of Humbert's eventual infatuation with the sun-soaked Lolita with his initial seaside princess that Nabokov originally intended to title his novel *Kingdom by the Sea* (*Stalking* 277). Implicit in such a title is not the psychological determinism that Humbert so adamantly but disingenuously applies to the Annabel episode, but rather, the incidental but fateful meteorological coincidence of two fair weather days turned foul. Or, make that three. Because, as the allusive title likewise reminds us, the coincidence plot of Humbert recognizing Lolita in Annabel Leigh is compounded by the even less likely and perhaps more meaningful coincidence of Humbert's lost love sharing a name with Edgar Allan Poe's "Annabel Lee" (1849).

The pattern that is set in Humbert's life by Annabel Leigh is exceeded only by the pattern set by "Annabel Lee." While Humbert recognizes the need for that moment of sunshine to justify his defense of fate bringing him and Lolita together, an exceptionally erudite romantic like himself would also intuit that there is no better way to make one's reader root for a set of star-crossed lovers than to show their struggle against the more powerful forces that are working to keep them apart. In this, the narrator of Poe's "Annabel Lee" provides the perfect strategic blueprint, blaming his Annabel's death on the petty jealousy of a host of angels who also happen to control the weather:

The angels, not half so happy in Heaven,
  Went envying her and me—
Yes!—that was the reason (as all men know,
  In this kingdom by the sea)
That the wind came out of the cloud by night,
  Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee. (Poe ll. 21-26)

Humbert's eventual union with Lolita is haunted by the death of not one but two Annabels Le(e(igh)). As we know from the primal scene that Humbert teases us with, Annabel dies a mere four months after their whirlwind summer romance on the beaches of the Riviera, gone before the two ever have an opportunity to consummate their relationship; that Nabokov switches her cause of death from typhus in the novel to pneumonia in the screenplay is, I'm sure, purely coincidental and has nothing whatsoever to do with the chill that killed Annabel Lee. Regardless, here we can see how Poe's narrator informs Humbert's treatment of the weather not just as cipher of fate, but as an an ill-intentioned foe. Like Humbert, Poe's narrator is retrospectively recounting what now reads as an inevitable chain of events; and thus, like *Lolita*, "Annabel Lee" – as this stanza neatly illustrates – is deeply concerned with the question of causality. The exclamatory "Yes!" of the third line is suggestive of a sudden realization, as if the stanza is tracking, in real time, the narrator's process of trying to make sense of the tragedy that has befallen him. In his search for reasons and rationality in the wrought-iron world of criss-cross cause and effect the he occupies, the narrator's attempt to impose meaning onto the coincidence of the inclement weather helpfully prefigures Humbert's own project.

Poe's use of the weather, like the Shelleys before him, is characteristic of the century in which he is writing – a full century before Nabokov and Humbert would come along and co-opt it. This moody and meaningful weather, which is not just ominous but, evidently, motivated, is a clear example of what we recognize today as the pathetic fallacy, in which human (or perhaps superhuman) feeling and agency are attributed to the external world. It is a device that is not only distinctly literary (which is to say, poetic), but also outright conspiratorial, solipsistically dismissing

the scientifically proven indifference of the natural world to our individual affairs. Humbert Humbert is so vain that he thinks the weather is about him; and like the narrator of "Annabel Lee," his paranoia is of a piece with his strategic reframing of the scattered showers sprinkling his narrative as the incontrovertible evidence of a "plotting sky" (*L* 244).[21] This notion that weather might function as an instrument of fate – that it might form its own sort of deterministic trap – holds an obvious appeal for a pedophile and murderer like Humbert (an anti-Freudian who is nonetheless committed to casting himself as a tragic figure), and, taking his cue from Annabels Leigh and Lee, it is one he invokes early and often.

If, as Boyd writes in *Stalking Nabokov*, "Humbert's requited but still unfulfilled passion for Annabel can find a reprise in Lolita sunning herself on a lawn," then naturally it would be "in the prospect of Lolita on the sand beside Hourglass Lake" that he imagines its "promised consummation" (*Stalking* 277). But, in line with Nabokov's critique of eerily accommodating weather patterns, no sooner does Humbert arrive in sunny Ramsdale than the weather takes a turn for the worse, and he finds himself "paying with hail and gail for the tropical beginning of the month" (*L* 51). According to the entries of the diary that he kept – and claims to have reconstructed from memory – during his first weeks as a lodger in the Haze house, Humbert notes with mounting suspicion the persistence of a series of summer thunderstorms that dampen his hopes of picnicking at the local lake (in bathing suits!): "We (mother Haze, Dolores, and I) were to go to Our Glass Lake this afternoon, and bathe, and bask," Humbert reports one Monday, "but a nacreous morn degenerated at noon into rain" (*L* 43). As for Tuesday? "Rain. Lake of the Rains" (ibid). When the following week brings more rainy mornings and "clouds again interfered with that picnic on that

[21] Humbert is clearly fond of the pathetic fallacy. For instance: "Presently I was driving through the drizzle of the dying day, with the windshield wipers in full action but unable to cope with my tears" (*L* 280).

unattainable lake," Humbert finally comes out with what he trusts his reader will likewise accept as the only logical conclusion: "Is Fate scheming?" (*L* 50)[22]

No, of course not. Weather happens. It is not fate that is scheming, but Humbert. Right? Except, it is true that *Lolita*'s weather does have a funny way of keeping Humbert from ever rectifying that thwarted seaside fantasy, and by implication, of "releasing [him] from the 'subconscious' obsession of an incomplete childhood romance with the initial little Miss Lee" (*L* 167). Beyond its rhetorical conflation of Humbert's Annabel with Poe's, this parroting of psychological self-analysis further highlights the overlap of Freudian and climatic determinism in the narrative; as Humbert likewise notes, the so-called "'gratification' of [his] lifetime urge," is entirely wrapped up with his ever-unfulfilled "search for a Kingdom by the Sea, a Sublimated Riviera, or whatnot" (ibid). This "or whatnot," speaks to Humbert's continued (if contradictory) resistance to the psychiatric explanation of this quest, which he insists holds only a "certain purely theoretical thrill for him" (ibid). Preempting his Freudian reader, Humbert thus confesses:

> Let me tell you that I *did* look for a beach…the angels knew it, and arranged things accordingly. A visit to a plausible cove on the Atlantic side was completely messed up by foul weather. A thick damp sky, muddy waves, a sense of boundless but somehow matter-of-fact mist – what could be further removed from the crisp charm, the sapphire occasion and rosy contingency of my Riviera romance? A couple of semitropical beaches on the Gulf, though bright enough, were starred and spattered by venomous beasties and swept by hurricane winds. Finally, on a California beach, facing the phantom of the Pacific, I hit upon some rather perverse privacy in a kind of cave whence you could hear the shrieks of a lot of girl scouts taking their first surf bath on a separate part of the beach, behind rotting trees; but the fog was like a wet blanket, and the sand was gritty and clammy, and Lo was all gooseflesh and grit, and for the first time in my life I had a little desire for her as for a manatee. (ibid)

[22] The capitalization of Fate here, and throughout the novel, is indicative of a habit that Humbert and Nabokov share; as Stephen Blackwell notes in his article, "Fated Freedoms," "Fate is a central character in much of Nabokov's work, achieving varying degrees of explicit personification in *King, Queen, Knave, The Defense, The Gift, Lolita, Pale Fire,* and *Transparent Things*" ("Fated Freedoms" 62). There is much more to be said about the role of Aubrey McFate in *Lolita*, but I am especially interested in this compulsive need to make fate incarnate, as it seems to speak to the inherent paradox of Nabokov own belief system, which at once upholds the primacy of the material world and simultaneously expresses the conviction that there must exist some intangible and inexplicable realm beyond.

This passage, in addition to confirming Humbert's early assessment of nymphancy as itself a climatically conditional condition ("Nymphets do not occur in polar regions," he concludes while undergoing treatment in the Arctic [*L* 33]), also makes explicit his interpretation of the weather as something not just determinative, but determined; not just plotting, but plotted. For Humbert's dream of having Lolita beside Hourglass Lake to be rained out once is one thing; but the effect of this list, which I've deliberately presented in full here, is that it enacts an excessiveness so improbable that fate *does* begin to seem like the only explanation. Not one for subtlety in his overwrought, nineteenth-century invocation of weather, Humbert explicitly attributes this arrangement to the conspiratorial angels here, in a move that directly aligns him with the narrator of "Annabel Lee."

Helped along by the angel's relentless spoiling of potential beach days as compiled by Humbert above, Humbert's paranoia about what he perceives as the novel's plotting sky builds, slowly and inexorably, over the course of his narrative, finally climaxing in Humbert's psychic linking of his sense of being followed with a series of continuous thunderstorms that happen to be accompanying him and Lolita as they travel by car across the country, resigned to a new life on the run. "Or perhaps," Humbert revises, "there was but one single storm which progressed across county in ponderous frogleaps and which we could not shake off just as we could not shake off detective Trapp" (*L* 216). Implicit in this comparison – and further compounded by the pun of a name that Humbert has assigned to the entity tailing him – is Humbert's interpretation of the weather not simply as the fateful force that threatens his union with Lolita, but as the external proof of his long-felt sense of fatidic entrapment. Given that Humbert spends much of his life in and out of psychiatric hospitals, and is prone to referring to his own writing as "a maniac's masterpiece" (*L* 257), the novel does leave us some room to read his paranoia regarding the fateful weather patterning of his narrative as itself pathological – a symptom of a certain strain of persecution mania.

The suggestion, then, is that this manic fear of losing Lo has driven him into such depths of madness that his only reasonable explanation for these "Jovian fireworks" is that they must be a sign of "another Humbert avidly following Humbert and Humbert's nymphet…over the great and ugly plains" (*L* 217). But, even a self-proclaimed lunatic like Humbert knows how crazy this sounds, and he concedes the likelihood that, probably, he is just having hallucinations, "as happens with me at periods of electrical disturbance and crepitating lightnings" (ibid).

Beyond the not insignificant fact of Humbert's hallucinations being directly linked to lightning, what is of particular interest to me here is the specific nature of these so-called hallucinations, which effectively amounts to Humbert's willful misreading of meaning into the weather. Humbert's insistence on projecting his own psychic state onto a concurrent series of thunderstorms that happen to be working their way across the country along his same route is as much a textbook example of the pathetic fallacy as it is one of textbook paranoia. We needn't look further than the florid characterization of his "Jovian fireworks" to see Humbert's flair for dramatic, and distinctly literary, weather at work; but the fallaciousness of the pathetic fallacy derives not only from its misguided attribution of the (super)human to the inhuman; rather, and more to our point, it is a device that involves the imposition of causality onto coincidence. Humbert's synchronous sense of being followed has as little to do with the Jovian fireworks here as the synchronous conflagration of his veins had to do with the striking down of the McCoo house; in neither case does the correlation amount to causation. In fact, for all of their rhetorical flash and flourish, these fireworks, Nabokov seems to counter, have nothing at all do to with Jove: whatever other charged language we might apply to it, lightning is just lightning. Any assumption otherwise, *Lolita* suggests, is nothing more than a hallucination.

I refer specifically to Nabokov's *Lolita* here, rather than Humbert's "Lolita," to highlight the tension between the dueling designers who share the credit for constructing the text we are reading;

how fitting that the motherless Lolita should be the child of two men, bound together eternally by their joint authorial custody. Although Humbert Humbert is, as John Ray Jr. prefaces, the author of "Lolita, or Confessions of a White Widowed Male," his intradiegetic (and likely unreliable) narration must always be considered in relation to the authorial – and authoritarian – deity of *Lolita* that is Vladimir Nabokov. Keeping this is mind, one is tempted to reinterpret Nabokov's observation in "The Tragedy of Tragedy" that narrative weather tends to accommodate the precise needs of the author; indeed, it may turn out that the alternately fateful and contingent weather of our present tragedy is accommodating the discrepant needs of both of its authors. Thus, as Humbert clings to the iron bars of determinism in his "Lolita," Nabokov, meanwhile, coordinates a series of acausal coincidences across *Lolita* in such a way as to affirm his critical take that "most of the worst and deepest human tragedies, far from following the marble rules of tragic conflict, are tossed on the stormy element of chance" ("Tragedy" 340).

The climatic characterization of this "stormy element" is no more incidental to Nabokov's argument than it is to my own; or rather, it is precisely the fact of their being incidental that Nabokov finds so useful about storms. Nowhere is this more pointed than in the case of Humbert's mother. A few words about the original Mrs. Humbert while the going is good (a bad accident, to quote her son, is to happen quite soon): Convenient as it is to read Annabel as the precursor and primary cause of Humbert's perversion, that Humbert is personally invested in our doing so should be enough to make us wonder if this is one of his faked primal scenes. And, after all, as any good Freudian is already well aware, Humbert didn't go back nearly far enough in locating the original source of his trauma. Even as he savaged the practice, Nabokov himself was familiar enough with psychoanalysis to know that it's *always* about the mother: "The Freudian faith leads to dangerous ethical consequences, such as when a filthy murderer with the brain of a tapeworm is given a lighter sentence because his mother spanked him too much or too little – it works both ways" (*SO* 116). In

this, again, we recognize not only the premise of Nabokov's morally fraught novel, but also his familiar critique of the scapegoating that psychoanalysis enables. Notably, Humbert Humbert's mother hardly had a chance to spank him at all, having "died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when [he] was three" (*L* 10). In one felling strike, this trivialized (if not trivial) detail of Humbert's biography, which is delivered in what Tom Stoppard deemed the "best parenthesis in literature" (qtd. in *American Years* 411), simultaneously undercuts the fallacious fatalism of psychic determinism and the pathetic fallacy of Humbert's plotting skies.

Psychoanalytic readings of Humbert Humbert that have been done in earnest, such as those by Happy Pramukti and Warren Holt, take seriously the suggestion of maternal impact that Nabokov references with ridicule and contempt. For instance, in "Humbert, Nabokov, and the Ego Ideal," Holt writes:

> If we explore Humbert's narrative, what could be the cause of this 'inherent singularity'? …Humbert being deprived of his mother at three (let alone the shocking nature of the loss) would change the shape of his Oedipal map, if not fully explode it, denying him a normal transition through the oedipal phase and towards the psychic and structural integrations that occur during adolescence and adulthood…Furthermore, the early loss of the maternal object would deprive young Humbert of the nurturing and empathic support he could take from the foundation of the dyadic mother-child relationship to carry into the arena of his oedipal conflicts. (Holt 2012)

Crucially, despite looming so large in the psychiatric circles in which Humbert's memoir would, as John Ray farcically predicted, "become, no doubt, a classic" (*L* 5), Humbert's mother's death is treated as an afterthought in the novel – incidental in both content and form. Reminiscent of the crassly casual deaths sentences of Forster and Woolf, the nonchalance with which Humbert reports the death – introducing and killing off his mother in the span of a single line – is exacerbated by its relegation to a parenthetical (a form of punctuation that is distinct precisely because, while it contributes to a sentence, it can just as easily be taken away without compromising its functionality); insofar as it thus instantiates the Aristotelian definition of the term as non-essential, the manner of

reporting the freak accident becomes itself accidental. In effect, Nabokov identifies what would be the causal source of the novel's inevitable tragedy, and rather than emphasizing its significance, he makes it the site of the chanciest of chance occurrences. In place of determined and determinative cause, the line suggests, there is only the incidental; or rather, the coincidental. Surely, part of what has made this parenthesis so infamous is the peculiar ambiguity of the grammatical construction contained within it. In linking its two words with only a comma, and no further explanation, the parenthetical connects the picnic and the lightning merely as coinciding incidents, without any discernable causal relationship between them beyond the fluke of their simultaneity. We have seen this before. But here, the text makes no effort to make us believe otherwise. This is a distinctly different treatment of weather than we are used to. In the classification of the death as a freak accident, there is no suggestion of a scheming fate; of an envying angel; of a plotting sky. If Humbert's weather was conspicuous for its inexorable meaningfulness, then in Nabokov, we see an effort to evacuate weather of meaning entirely. By felling the late Mrs. Humbert with a seemingly random bolt of lightning, Nabokov reframes the tragedy of Humbert's mother's death not as a matter of strict causation but of radical contingency; which is to say, it is not tragic because it had to happen this way, but because it just as easily might not have happened at all. In exposing the indeterminate nature of the narrative's heretofore overdetermined weather, Nabokov appears to instantiate precisely the type of tragedy that he endorses in "The Tragedy of Tragedy," one characterized by the genius of "discovering exactly the right harmony of accidental occurrences…without suggesting anything like the iron laws of tragic fatality" ("Tragedy" 341).

Vladimir Nabokov's affinity for "topsy-turvical coincidence" as, to quote John Shade, "the real point, the contrapuntal theme" of lived experience is of a piece with his anti-determinism (*PF* 62). As noted in a conversation with *Lolita*'s annotator, Alfred Appel Jr. (also Ph.D!), Nabokov claims to have considered the coincidences that shaped his narratives not as arch contrivances but

rather as a marker of verisimilitude, the surest signifiers of "real life" (Appel 124). This tracks with biographer Brian Boyd's assessment that Nabokov's ideology was based in his passionate belief "that there was too much chance in time, too many accidents in history, too much freedom in life for inevitability to be more than an illusion" (*Russian Years* 224), and that as such, "the highest achievements in poetry, prose, painting, showmanship are characterized by the irrational and the illogical, by that spirit of free will that snaps its rainbow fingers in the face of smug causality" ("Tragedy of Tragedy" 326).

And what better way to snap one's fingers in the face of smug causality than with the striking of an errant lightning bolt, the quintessential metaphor of unpredictability and improbability? That the idiomatic "bolt from the blue" holds the place in our collective ~~unconscious~~ imagination as the ur-symbol of inexplicable chance is a coincidence that can't have been lost on Nabokov. But, in line with his anti-Freudianism, Nabokov was decidedly hostile to symbolism, the very notion of which "has always been abhorrent" to him (*SO* 304). As we have already seen from Nabokov's undermining of Humbert's hallucinatory projection of meaning onto what is clearly coincidental weather, *Lolita* seems intent on stripping lightning of its symbolic charge. And yet, it is precisely as a symbol that lightning becomes most meaningful to Nabokov.[23] Indeed, as David S. Rutledge observes in *Nabokov's Permanent Mystery*, Nabokov's conceptualization of the forking nature of life itself is regularly represented by the zig-zag. In *Glory*, Martin's moment of enlightenment comes when he "under[stands] for the first time that human life flowed in zig-zags" (*G* 9); in *The Eye*, the worldview of nameless narrator is illuminated in much the same way: "A mysterious thing, this branching structure of life: one senses in every past instant a parting of ways, a 'thus' and an

[23] Beyond the zigzag's universal recognition as the symbol for lightning, Nabokov – a synesthete – had a personal relationship to it. In his notes to his story, "The Thunderstorm," which was first written in Russian, Nabokov writes, "Thunder is *grom* in Russian, storm is *burya*, and thunderstorm is *groza*, a grand little word with that blue zigzag in the middle" (*S* 656). The blue here refers to the color in which he saw the letter "z," the zigzag of which in the Russian "groza" enacts the striking of a lightning bolt in the middle of the thunderstorm. Indeed, when breaking down the hues of his alphabet in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov specifically codes it as "thundercloud z" (*SM* 34).

'otherwise,' with innumerable dazzling zig-zags bifurcating and trifurcating against the dark background of the past" (*E* 28). Insofar as Nabokov claims to believe that life does not adhere to a straight line of strict determinism, but rather that it zigs one moment and zags another, it follows that he would strive "to create literary structures that convey this sense of real life" (Rutledge 110). In its symbolic form of the zigzag, then, the value of lightning as a structural tool for Nabokov's own convoluted brand of novelistic realism becomes clear; by marking certain significant pivot points in the narrative with the freak accidents of bolts from the blue – first the one that fells Humbert's mother and then the other that happens to strike the McCoo house – the zigzagging plot of a novel like *Lolita* gives the illusion of hinging, like life, on chance coincidences. But make no mistake, it is an illusion.

In his effort to untangle a straightforward path of causality in his wrought-iron world of criss-cross cause and effect, Humbert Humbert recalls the zigzagging worldview of the Nabokovian narrators that came before him. As he mentally leafs through his memories, Humbert writes, "I surrender to a sort of retrospective imagination which feeds the analytic faculty with boundless alternatives and which causes each visualized route to fork and re-fork without end in the maddeningly complex prospect of my past" (*L* 13). In Humbert's forks and re-forks, we recognize not only that familiar shape of the bifurcating and trifurcating lightning bolt, but also the thuses and the otherwises of *The Eye*. This conjuring of a parallel trajectory – of infinite parallel trajectories – serves the same function as the lightning in *Lolita*, effectively refuting the notion of determinism and suggesting instead a world of radical contingency. In its indulgence of all manner of counterfactual scenarios, Humbert's exercise in retrospective imagination is evocative of the device that Gary Saul Morson refers to in *Narrative and Freedom* as sideshadowing; for Morson, sideshadowing occupies a "middle realm of real possibilities that could have happened even if they did not" (Morson 6). My sense is that, reflective of its ambivalence regarding necessity and contingency, *Lolita* plays with this

notion that "things could have been different from the way they were" in its themes only to promptly repudiate the idea in its structure. Here and there, then, we witness the genuine (if self-consciously performed) sideshadow, as in the moment when Humbert, upon visiting the now married and pregnant Lolita and realizing that he has lost her forever, writes, "Then I pulled out my automatic – I mean, this is the kind of fool thing a reader might suppose I did. It never even occurred to me to do it" (*L* 280). Setting aside the obvious point that the idea of killing Lolita clearly occurred to Humbert at least enough to bring it up here, this teasing of an alternative direction that the story might have gone in both offers a sideshadow and speaks back to Rutledge's reading of the zigzag, which contends that, for Nabokov, "a too-predictable plot 'twist' is another type of straight line, a supposed surprise which only follows the basic law of plot surprises" (Rutledge 107). Sometimes, for Nabokov, the most surprising thing is not that life's plot zigs when it looks like it is going to zag, but that it simply maintains its set course. And *Lolita*'s course is nothing if not set. Thus, while we get the occasional hint of a sideshadow, it is more typical that Humbert makes as if to open the space for an alternate possibility only to remind us that it is ultimately impossible. Take, for instance, the moment of his returning to a drugged and drowsy Lolita asleep in the Enchanted Hunters hotel: having cited his decision at this juncture as "his only regret" (*L* 123), Humbert, making his way down the corridor and up to the door, narrates, "One could still – but the key was already in the lock, and then I was in the room" (*L* 127). Once again, as part of his thinly veiled attempt at exculpation, we see Humbert organizing and orchestrating his memoir as if his fate is sealed.

The joke (*a* joke) of Humbert compiling his notes in such a way as to insist that his fate is sealed from the start of "Lolita" is that, in fact, his fate *is* sealed from the start of *Lolita*. Indeed, one will recall that very first thing we learn about Humbert, via the framing device of John Ray's Foreword, is that he is dead. Structurally speaking, then, *Lolita* begins with its ending; the immediate

effect of this convention – of opening the story by announcing its foregone conclusion – is that it casts over Humbert's account the same profound sense of inevitability that he works so hard to cultivate within it. Framed this way, whatever is going to happen over the course of "Lolita" *must* happen, because it has already happened; whatever possible futures we might imagine for its characters, already decidedly past. To open *Lolita* is to enter a graveyard; to read it, to commune with a congress of ghosts. With Humbert, yes. But also with Valeria and Charlotte; with Quilty; and, finally, with Lolita herself, upon whose death this posthumous publication depends. As in a Shakespearean tragedy, Nabokov's drama ends with the death of all of its major players. And there, lain center stage, is its tragic hero, Humbert Humbert.

It is nice to imagine another version of *Lolita*; a version where the plot zigged instead of zagged; a version where no bolt of lightning struck and killed Humbert's mother when he was but an infant, setting him (as the psychiatrists say) on a path of sexual perversion; a version where no separate, subsequent, and totally random other bolt of lightning struck and set fire to the home where he would have stayed in Ramsdale, which could have kept him from ever meeting Lolita. But there is no other version of *Lolita*. Not only because, as Ricoeur tells us, emplotment transmutes chance into fate (*Oneself* 147). But because, as Nabokov himself seems to believe, life itself is a plot, even if we don't recognize it as such while we're in it; writes Boyd, "As a thinker, Nabokov always stalked inscrutable fate, the incomprehensible gap between the unforeseeability of an event and the light it casts, once happened, back over the past, turning hitherto neutral moments into abortive tries or necessary preparations for an outcome now obvious" (*Russian Years* 100). We are all of us artistically caged; sometimes it just takes a distant thunderstorm to see it.[24] So it is that through the

[24] In his essay, "How Can Ethics Exist in Nabokov's Fated Worlds?" Vladimir Alexandrov puts pressure on Nabokov's claims of free will. Citing Nabokov's comment that "We know from real life that however obediently we may follow the paths of causation, some queer and beautiful force, which we call free will from want of a better expression, allows or at least appears to allow us to escape again and again from the laws of cause and effect," Alexandrov writes: "To my mind, this quotation suggests that Nabokov's view of free will may well have been ambivalent, since he is willing to entertain the possibility that it is illusory ('at least *appears* to allow us to escape')" ("Fated Worlds" 2008).

patterning of its coincidental zigzags – which is to say, of its staged lightning – *Lolita* reveals its inevitable fatalism, finally letting Humbert off the hook once and for all. That lightning makes Humbert hallucinate a pursuit by a series of thunderstorms (okay, one continuous storm) would certainly stand out as conclusive evidence of his persecution mania if not for the fact that, actually, now that I think of it, Humbert *has* been being pursued by a series of thunderstorms over the course of the novel. As Diane Butler likewise points out in her essay, "Lolita Lepidoptera," "Thunderstorms are a constant threatening leitmotiv in the novel. Humbert's mother was killed by one, after Charlotte's death Humbert leaves the Haze house during a thunderstorm, a thunderstorm interferes with the performance of *The Enchanted Hunters*, and a thunderstorm accompanies Humbert on his way to kill Claire Quilty" (Butler 65). Ah, yes, Claire Quilty – the personification of the dark cloud that has been tailing Humbert. To be sure, nowhere are these thunderstorms more threatening to Humbert than when he is weaving his way across the country with Lolita, following what appears to be a zigzagging path that, unbeknownst to him, has been predetermined and designed by Lo and Quilty.

Though Humbert is entirely ignorant of this conspiracy at the time, he is not wrong, as it turns out, to take the coincidental thunderstorms as a bad omen. After all, he *is* being followed; and as the reader will soon find out, he *is* about to lose Lolita. In his later novel, *Ada, or Ardor*, Nabokov comments on the need for "some law of logic" which would "fix the number of coincidences in a given domain, after which they cease to be coincidences, and form, instead, the living organism of a new truth" (*Ada* 361). Here is the new truth: Humbert Humbert is not insane; or rather, he is suffering from the same condition that afflicts so many of Vladimir Nabokov's "galley slaves" – which is to say, his is the pathology of a fictional character slowly and inexorably realizing he is a

character trapped in a world that someone else has designed.[25] For all of the apparent contingency of its weather – all of its supposed snapping in the face of smug causality – *Lolita* remains a novel governed by Fate, "whom the author leads by one hand, and the late professor Freud by the other" ("Tragedy" 336). As the tug of war described here implies, Nabokov has simply swapped out the tragic determinism of Freudian psychology for a slightly subtler brand of his own.

This compromise – which reads at times as utter contradiction – is integral to our understanding of the way that that the lightning and thunderstorms work in *Lolita*, as their accumulation and coordination ultimately form a pattern that, while working to spring Humbert from his psychically determined cell, simply illuminates a different set of bars: those of his artistic cage. As the reader will remember from the series of thunderstorms that opened this section, Nabokovian weather is staged weather.[26] And to Appel's introductory point: "What better way to demonstrate that everything in a book is being manipulated than by seeming to *stage it*?" (*L* xxx) We feel this theatricality most acutely, as a matter of form, in the *Lolita* screenplay. But we feel it, too, in the contrivances of the lightning bolts that fell both the McCoo house and Humbert's mother. Through this lens, one might even be inclined to read the bracketing of "(picnic, lightning)" as one of Humbert's dramatic flourishes, a riff on the way that stage direction appears in the text of a printed play, recalling Leslie Thompson's explanation of theatrical thunder and lightning as the

[25] Most notable among this group is the protagonist of Nabokov's "Signs & Symbols," a patient suffering from a conditional called "Referential mania," which causes him to believe "that everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme" (*Stories* 599). In *Nabokov's Novels in English*, Lucy Maddox likewise invokes this idea: "Nabokov's characters sense this 'plexed artistry,' as John Shade puts it in *Pale Fire*, and are predisposed to see in the turnings of their own lives evidence of the same manipulative will. The problem is that the intention behind the artistry is never revealed. In reviewing their lives, or in some cases others' lives, these characters begin with a puzzle that varies little from one novel to another: the reflected pattern of a life produces 'a most melancholy and meaningful picture - but meaning what, what?' (*Ada*, p. 284) Nabokov's people are consistently frustrated by the sense of living on the edge of meaning, of being part of a complicated pattern that they get only glimpses of but that must surely make wonderful sense to someone, somewhere" (Maddox 1).

[26] In addition to the staged thunderstorms at the start of this section, one might also recall "the theatrical ululations and flashes" that made it impossible for Hazel Shade to attend to any indoor sounds or lights in *Pale Fire*'s haunted barn (*PF* 187). This collapse of the boundary between in the inside and outside world, conceived of using the metaphorical conceit of the theater, comes up again in the letter that Mona sends to Lolita reporting on the play Lo missed, about which she says: "The terrific electric storm outside interfered with our own modest offstage thunder" (*L* 222).

signifier of the supernatural. And indeed, despite his insistence (in the Foreword of the *Lolita* screenplay, no less) that "by nature [he is] no dramatist," Nabokov's work is riddled with theatrical motifs[27]; in line with the extensive engagement with the genre of tragedy that we have already seen in *Lolita*, I am suggesting that Nabokov's use of thunder and lightning in the novel invokes this same coded convention of stage weather put forth by Thompson, and that these instances of roaring and crackling prose should likewise prime his reader to expect some "intervention in human affairs by the demonic or divine" (Thompson 14). That is to say, although (and I'd argue, precisely because) the thunder and lightning in *Lolita* appear to be operating as an instruments of chance – ones that seem to destabilize the fatidic determinism that the text purports to position itself against – they must ultimately be read (as electricity always has been for Nabokov) as the sites of the otherworld making its way into this one: in this case, as the sign of Nabokov's own authorial intrusion. If Humbert uses weather like Shelley and Poe, invoking the foreboding, pathetically fallacious storms of the nineteenth century, then Nabokov is here to remind us that this weather has been Shakespearean all along, its cracks of light always exposing the man behind the curtain.

To this point, it matters that Humbert's nemesis is a playwright; not only does this detail fortify, yet again, the link for Nabokov between the stage and the cage (evidently a matter of so much more than mere sonic coincidence), but in so doing, it also further compounds the effectiveness of Humbert's rendering of himself as an individual without autonomy, the unwilling hero of a tragedy that someone else has staged. Never one for subtlety, Humbert puts his final act of committing murder in exactly these terms, choosing to see it (and hoping to make us see it) as "the end of the ingenious play staged for me by Quilty" (*L* 305). Now, in fairness to Humbert, Quilty *has* staged a few plays for him. Or perhaps, less for Humbert than for himself and Lolita, as these

[27] The collective critical sentiment on the topic is best summed up by Siggy Frank's assessment in *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination* that "as a metaphor, structural principle, theme and context, the theatre becomes an essential and pervasive element of his fiction" (Frank 1).

productions serve as the covers that allow them to plot her escape. Most notably, Quilty's is the pen behind *The Enchanted Hunters*, the production (put on by her school, with the direction of its author) in which the newly minted thespian Lolita makes her acting debut. The immediately suspect thing about *The Enchanted Hunters* is the fact of its name, which it happens to share with the hotel where Humbert and Lolita first consummated their relationship. Crucially, while Humbert "Scheming Fate" Humbert recognizes the wonder of this coincidence, he makes nothing of it. Beyond forecasting the role that such staged productions will eventually play in Humbert's downfall, the obviousness of Humbert's ignorance here reinforces what I take to be the inherent double-bind of *Lolita*, and of Nabokov's works more broadly, which prove time and again that coincidences are never simply coincidences and then make you feel crazy for finding meaning in them; to wit, for all of the cautioning against reading causation into correlation, it is when Humbert fails to make these close-reading connections that he falls into the traps laid for him, not just by Quilty and Lolita but by Nabokov himself.

Reminiscent of the French detective tale that Humbert once read in his youth "where the clues were actually in italics" (*L* 211), the names of Quilty's plays – all presented in italics – are clues that Nabokov leaves for Humbert, and for us. The reader first encounters these works in the entry for Clare Quilty in *Who's Who in the Limelight*, one of the books that Humbert happens upon in the prison library. Among the highly suggestive titles from the prolific playwright's catalogue: *Fatherly Love. The Little Nymph.* And, of course, *The Lady Who Loved Lightning* "(in collaboration with Vivian Darkbloom)" (*L* 31). Nowhere is Nabokov's role as the manager of *Lolita*'s staged lightning more literal than here in the naming of his anagrammatic proxy as Quilty's frequent collaborator and co-conspirator. As has been previously noted, in adopting the first-person form of the memoir, *Lolita* is credited to two authors, making it difficult to ever be entirely certain where Humbert ends and Nabokov begins. This haziness serves various strategic purposes for both Humbert and Nabokov,

each of whom has a stake in claiming and disavowing control of what is an ethically and aesthetically fraught narrative that takes as its central conceit the very possibility of legal and moral exoneration. It strikes me as especially significant, then, that it is in this play, of all Quilty's plays, that Nabokov – via Vivian Darkbloom – chooses to insert himself into the text. We have already seen the ways in which Humbert is wont to manipulate the weather in his tragic tale so as to make it fit his conspiracy theory of the novel's plotting skies; but in the cases of both co-authoring *The Lady Who Loved Lightning* and of belatedly supplying the bolt that strikes the McCoos in the *Lolita Screenplay*, Nabokov's plotted and plotting lightning remains well outside the bounds of Humbert's narratorial and narratological purview.

In fact, evidently the play exists so far outside Humbert's purview that, though he actually sees it, he pays it no attention at all. As is custom, *The Lady Who Loved Lightning* strikes the narrative in multiple places, each time printing the shadow of another bar of Humbert's cage; but again, Humbert pays no heed to the coincidence when, for instance, during one of the novel's especially violent thunderstorms, Lolita declares, "I am not a lady and do not like lightning" (*L* 220).[28] The "pathetic solace" that Lo's "dread of electric storms" gives Humbert at this moment lulls him into a state of such ease that he fails to notice anything odd when, only a few days (and sentences) later, a chance scheduling mix-up lands him and Lolita at a theater festival in Wace, where they see an unspecified play from authors Clare Quilty and Vivian Darkbloom. In withholding the name of the play, the novel enacts the obliviousness of Humbert, who is focusing his and our attention on the "seven bemused pubescent girls in colored gauze" representing a living rainbow on the stage

[28] In *Nabokov's Otherworld*, Alexandrov notes a slight change between the English version of this scence and its Russian translation (which Nabokov did himself): "[Nabokov] added Humbert's comment that Lolita 'stranno vyrazilas' when she utters her phrase about lightning, which means, literally, 'expressed herself in a strange manner,' or 'put it oddly.' This inevitably calls the reader's attention to the hidden meaning of her words in a way that the English original does now, and at the same time implies that Humbert could not have noticed it" (*Otherworld* 176).

instead.[29] In his essay, "Enchanted Hunting," Brian Boyd makes the connection for us that Humbert won't: "When Quilty arranges with Lolita to have Humbert drive her across state lines to his ranch out West, they plan to coincide in Wace, Continental Divide, before heading off together from Elphinstone. Quilty has specified Wace because there Lolita can see him at a performance of the play, *The Lady Who Loved Lightning*, that he has co-authored with Vivian Darkbloom" ("Enchanted" 281). Leave it to Boyd to break down the mechanics of the conspiracy that finally entraps Humbert – a conspiracy characterized by that tragic law, not of causality, but of coincidence: out of the clear blue sky of that "fair mid-June evening" in Wace, another bolt of lightning (*L* 220). Surely the coincidence must signify something. Surely if anyone could make meaning of it, it would be Alfred Appel, who, while working on his annotations to the novel, wrote Nabokov to have his suspicions about *The Lady Who Loved Lightning* confirmed: "Yes," Nabokov wrote in response, "this is the play they go to in Wace; but I do not think it has much to do with H.'s mother being killed by lightning – though the connection is cozy and tempting" (*SL* 409).

No, no, of course there is no meaningful connection to be made here. Obviously it is only a coincidence that after first felling his mother and then burning down the McCoo house, it would be yet another stroke of staged lighting that finally marks the trap that Lolita, Quilty, and that mysterious gal Vivian Darkbloom have set for Humbert. Just as surely it is a coincidence that in the poetry of *Pale Fire*'s John Shade, Nabokov identifies electricity as the (im)material through which an artist makes his spirit felt in the world. Wait, though, doesn't electricity have something to do with lightning? Or that in his early novels, *Glory* and *The Eye*, Nabokov just so happens to use the shape of the zig-zag to conceptualize the forking structure of life itself. That's right, the very same shape as a bolt of lightning! All of which makes perfect sense given how, entirely by chance, this completely

[29] As Humbert alludes to and Appel likewise notes in his annotations, the living rainbow is reminiscent of James Joyce, and specifically of *Finnegan's Wake*. There may be something more to make here of the coincidence that the *Wake* is likewise infamous for its thunders.

coincides with the opening of Nabokov's autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, in which he defines existence as "but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness" (*SM* 19). A brief *crack* of light?! You mean…lightning? See, that's the thing: to quote the narrator of Nabokov's "A Busy Man," "The more one heeds coincidences the more often they happen" (*Stories* 293). The very serious, academic intentions behind this reenactment of my own process of heeding some of the many (many, many) coincidences I came across while researching this chapter are twofold: one the one hand, I am performing and thereby proving Nabokov's point about the fatalistic impulse to project meaning onto what may, in fact, simply be an independent and unconnected sequence of incidents (lightning comma lightning comma lightning); but on the other, I mean come on, how many times does lightning have to strike in the same place before it stops being a coincidence and fulfills its destiny as the symbol of divine design?

Nabokov is right. It is cozy and tempting to think that his many flashes of lighting have something to do with each other. More than something: everything. In disabusing Appel of any misguided notion that *The Lady Who Loved Lightning* might meaningfully coincide with the freak circumstances of Humbert's mother's accidental death, Nabokov's joke, it seems, is on me. And yet, this perfect punch line – while obviously calling into question the very premise of the project I have taken on here – may ultimately put Nabokov himself in the more uncomfortable spot: either he is lying to (or, to be more generous, let's say being coy with) Appel; or, god forbid, he has created this extensive and elaborate pattern of coordinated lightning strikes and staged thunderstorms over the course of his entire fifty-plus year career *completely unconsciously*. Given his infamous hatred of Freud and his equally notorious need to exercise extreme control over his narratives and characters, it seems clear to me that the former is the more likely alternative. It is obvious enough that we can write off the coincidental lightning contained within *Lolita* – like the coincidences contained within any novel – as clear contrivances of its author. But, as David Rutledge reminds us and as this

chapter has hopefully shown, when it comes to Nabokov, "the zigzag travels beyond the frame" (Rutledge 108). As it did when that thunderstorm jolted him into composing his first poem; as it did when the bolt of inspiration hit him just before he began writing in English; and as it did that fateful summer of 1951 when the daily accompaniment of "the most irritatingly close lightning" he had ever encountered anywhere in the Rockies kept a thwarted butterfly hunter indoors, confined to his own artistic cage (*SO* 316). The cage in which he would write *Lolita*. As Andrew Field writes, "It is clear that Nabokov understood the cage…as the dual metaphor of artistic form and tragic human fate" (Field 84). Naturally, then, it would be lightning that would ultimately function – as it did for John Shade and Humbert Humbert and Cincinnatus C. before him – as the (im)material element that illuminates the bars of Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov's cosmic cell. Lightning, the symbol of inexplicable human creativity, but also involuntary nerve impulses; of the zigzagging flow of life, but also the inexorability of divine design; of freedom, and of determinism. If the fickle weather on which *Lolita* depends tells us anything, it is that *Lolita* might never have happened. If it tells us anything else, it is that *Lolita* had to happen, that it was fated to happen, that it was bound to happen; bound, not by the iron laws of strict cause and effect, but by the meaningful coincidence of its being tossed, as all the greatest of human tragedies are, on that stormy element of chance.

Chapter Four

What Blurs Best in the Heat: Salman Rushdie and the Muddling of Cause and Effect

I was in love with the heat, I felt for it what the convert feels for his new religion. I was in league with it, and half believed that for my sake it might perform a miracle.
– L.P. Hartley, The Go-Between

Perhaps the weather was to blame after all. Seventy-eight years after E.M. Forster's heroine Margaret Schlegel supposed such a thing during a grey and drizzly ride home from the Imperial and West African Rubber Company, Salman Rushdie's Gibreel Farishta comes to this same conclusion in *The Satanic Verses*, floating on his cloud high above the soggy streets of London. Perturbed by the geographical and psychological indiscriminateness that characterizes the city and its inhabitants, Gibreel is intent on transformation. "But where should he begin?" he wonders (*SV* 365). "Well," he reasons, "the trouble with the English was their…their…*In a word*, Gibreel solemnly pronounced, *their weather*" (ibid). Yes, that was it, clearly the "moral fuzziness of the English was meteorologically induced" (ibid). Gibreel's logic here relies on a conflation of inner and outer weather, as he directly attributes the foggy disposition of the English character to the literal fogs that define the English climate. In Gibreel's prompt scapegoating of the weather upon passing into England, Rushdie evokes a reversal of the climate determinism that we first encountered in Forster's *A Passage to India*; indeed, as Janice Ho writes in *Nation and Citizenship*, England's mild weather has "long provided a powerful metaphor with which to explain the constitutional moderation and restraint of the nation's politics and its people" (Ho 151). But, it is precisely this point of national pride that is so problematic to Gibreel, who fervently feels that temperament should be anything but temperate. To Gibreel's mind, the English are not admirably neutral, but rather, "damn cold fish!" whose dreary weather has caused them to "lose the power to make distinctions, and to see everything…as much-the-same, nothing-to-choose, give-or-take" (*SV* 365). "What folly!" thinks Gibreel, for whom "truth

is extreme, it is *so* and not *thus*…"; pairing his belief in the mirror relationship between climate and character with this equally ardent conviction that truth "is, in brief, *heated*," Gibreel understands what he must do: "City," he cries, "I am going to tropicalize you" (ibid).

While Gibreel Farishta's intended tropicalization of foggy London has typically (and rightfully) been read as a metaphor for "the enigmatic arrival of postcolonial theory on the British literary scene," this chapter reads it more literally as an outline of Salman Rushdie's plan for critiquing and reappropriating the archaic and bigoted notion of climatic determinism in his work (Israel 83). Insofar as it was used as a justification for England's colonial project, we've long recognized climatic determinism as a dangerous and destructive idea[1]; in indulging Gibreel's enumeration of the ridiculously extensive benefits of tropicalization, however, Rushdie immediately manages to defuse this threat, emphasizing the patent absurdity of the idea instead. As comprehensive as it is excessive, the complete list of benefits takes up nearly a full page in *The Satanic Verses*, and ranges everywhere from the more luxurious "intuition of a national siesta" and personal "emphasis on the extended family," to the practical economics of "a new mass market for domestic air-conditioning units, ceiling fans, anti-mosquito coils and sprays" (*SV* 365-66). In short, the passage seems to concede, climate determines everything.

Woefully misguided as it is, Gibreel's effort to fight weather with weather, effectively swapping out one deterministic climate for another, helpfully illustrates a premise that this dissertation has been exploring: specifically, that the weather is alternately a problem and a solution for the twentieth-century novelist, as it is for the twentieth-century novel. In the juxtaposition of Gibreel's denunciation of England's perpetual greyness with his enumeration of the (many, many) benefits of a tropical heatwave, this scene instantiates Rushdie's preferred method of satirizing

[1] As Homi Bhabha notes in his reading of the scene in *The Location of Culture*, Gibreel's emphasis on "the English weather also revives memories of its daemonic double: the heat and dust of India; the dark emptiness of Africa; the tropical chaos that was deemed despotic and ungovernable and therefore worthy of a civilizing mission" (Bhabha 243).

climatic determinism, not by refuting it, but by doubling down on it: that is to say, by taking an inherently problematic idea, and turning it into a solution for his plots. In the first section of this chapter, then, I will look at how Rushdie leans into that most problematic element of the tropical heat, made infamous by Forster for frustrating form and making muddles out of mysteries, to facilitate an anti-partition aesthetic in *Midnight's Children*. In exposing Saleem's narrative to the heat and affirming its deleterious consequences, Rushdie manages to blur the boundaries of characters, of chronology, and ultimately, of cause and effect.

There are traces of this muddling of cause and effect in *The Satanic Verses*, as well. No doubt, part of the joke of Gibreel's fantasy of tropicalizing London is that, miraculously, it becomes a reality. In the paragraphs immediately following Gibreel's performative declaration of climatic transformation, we are given a weather report confirming its success: "Rain over Moscow," marvels Alicja Cone, "while here it's a tropical heatwave" (*SV* 367). In her reading of this passage in *Exploring Magical Realism in Salman Rushdie's Fiction*, Ursula Kluwick rightly points out that the use of the word "tropical" in Alicja's description (which recurs through the text) directly echoes Gibreel's own language, as if to confirm his role as the cause of this freakish meteorological effect (Kluwick 27). That Gibreel is inexplicably able to enact this transformation speaks to what I read as Rushdie's broader argument that it is no more or less absurd to make a character responsible for the weather than it is to claim that the weather is responsible for one's character. Considering this inversion in earnest, the second section of the chapter will therefore look into how Rushdie's (fairy) tales of moody lands, characterized as they are by the multi-directional mirroring of inner and outer weather, allow him to imagine climates that are as determined as they are deterministic.

Indicative of his doggedly secular humanism and resistance to seeing himself as a determined subject, Rushdie leaves it to his weather-controlling characters to play God in his texts. In line with the secularization of the skies over the course of the twentieth century that this dissertation traces,

Rushdie's novels are definitively godless. To be sure, Gibreel Farishta makes every effort to frame his tropicalization of London as an act of God, going so far as "spreading his arms to fill the sky," and proclaiming, "Let it be"' (*SV* 366). This language is meant to be reminiscent of that first story, Genesis 1, wherein the very creation of the world is brought about through God's refrain of "Let there be…" However, while Gibreel is clearly prepared to deliver God's lines, there is a scripted quality to his performance here that suggests he is only inhabiting the role of a deity, as he has been trained by trade to do; certainly, it is neither insignificant nor particularly subtle that Gibreel Farishta made a name for himself as a famous Bollywood actor by playing gods.

From the jump (or in his case, from the novel's initiatory fall), the ambiguous status of Gibreel's divinity is up in the air.[2] Perhaps it is only appropriate then that this is where we find him, floating on his cloud high above London as he contemplates the source of the problematic English character. But it must be said that this scene begins with Gibreel on slightly more solid ground, waiting in the wings of the theater where he will make his grand comeback to the world of acting. As if a *deus ex machina* incarnate, the haloed star is set to emerge from the rafters, lowered onto the stage in a chariot against a backdrop of manufactured clouds. Gibreel misses his cue, likely owing to a psychotic episode, and yet, Rushdie manages to sidestep even this reality with the distraction of a tropicalized London. But make no mistake: miraculous as it appears, the *weather ex machina* that is this tropicalization is not a matter of divine intervention, but rather, a signifier of the magical causality on which Rushdie's determined climates rely.

Just before Gibreel decides where to begin amending the English character, we encounter this non sequitur: "Abracadabra! Hocus Pocus!" (*SV* 365) In terms of their literal meanings, "Let it

[2] At best, within the flexible framework of Rushdie's fantastic text, a generous reading might accept Gibreel as a sort of demigod, marked (like so many of Rushdie's characters) for his hybridity; more precisely, the novel classifies him as the nomenclaturally-determined archangel Gibreel (his surname translating to "angel" in Urdu). Surely, the dubiousness of Gibreel's supposed divinity is of a piece with the broader concerns of *Satanic Verses*, the premise of which, after all, is not the affirmation of godliness, but rather, the interrogation of it.

be" and "Abracadabra" function almost identically, each used to denote creation through performative language alone.[3] Yet, unlike "Let it be," which is directly attributed to Gibreel, "Abracadabra!" and "Hocus-Pocus!" are not presented as quoted speech in the text. In signaling to the presence of a power above and beyond the alleged archangel, the disembodied narration undermines the character work that Gibreel is doing in performing his godly act, suggesting that England's otherwise inexplicable climate changes ought to be read instead as a magic trick. Implicit in this magical characterization is the argument that there is something illusory about Rushdie's weather; and, in fact, as the chapter will illustrate, this might be the most useful way to think about literary weather as we have seen it operating in the modern novel.

Whatever meaning we project onto the etymologically muddled "abracadabra," much of its sorcery still derives from its status as a representative gibberish phrase; likewise, the transcendental power of "hocus-pocus" has "diluted over the years, [such that] modern audiences are likely to consider it nonsensical or to associate it with meaning 'cheap trickery'" (Conley 175). Paying particular attention to *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, the chapter's third and final section will look at how Rushdie pulls off this trick of using his magically manufactured weather as a *deus ex machina* that resolves (even if only temporarily) the unavoidable problem of emplotment, and specifically, of narrative resolution in his texts. But by branding his weather as hocus-pocus, I argue, Rushdie goes the long way around to reinforce their shared properties: while it is hardly a stretch to compare the meaningless talk of hocus-pocus with that of weather chatter, more pressing, it seems, is the mounting evidence that our authors have used the weather as an enchanted and enchanting device that distracts us from their covering up of the crisis of cause and effect in the twentieth-century novel.

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[3] While its definitive etymological origin remains a matter of some mystery, "Abracadabra" is typically "associated with a Hebrew-Aramaic expression, variously translated: *ibra k'dibra* ('I create through my speech')… *Abra kadavra* ('I will create with words')" (Conley 66).

Rushdie's Climate Determinism

But I have been out of doors for quite long enough now, and must get my narrative out of the sun before it is afflicted by mirages or heat-stroke.
– Salman Rushdie, Shame

There is no place like the homeland. Such a sense of environmental estrangement is implicit in Gibreel Farishta's indictment of England's dreary weather as a source of moral fuzziness; in his satirizing of the climatic determinism that characterizes much imperialist literature, Rushdie simultaneously situates himself alongside his fellow postcolonial authors, who've made a habit of commenting on the problematic implications of England's perennially grey sky. Indeed, thorough as his litany of grievances is, Gibreel Farishta is hardly the first person to complain about the lonely life of a new Londoner, "living underwater most of the year, in days the colour of night" (*SV* 363). Notably, interspersed between portions of Gibreel's own polemic are quotations from Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, which work not only to underscore the fantasy of accountability and reversed oppression inherent in Gibreel's tropicalizing act, but more fundamentally, to call attention to Gibreel's status as an immigrant trying to make a home in a nation where even the weather is inhospitable. In repurposing these foreign weather conditions as a metaphor for Gibreel's own sense of national exclusion, Rushdie (at least) is in good company. As Ruth Maxey observes in *South Asian Atlantic Literature*, "Britain's physical environment is of course a well-documented element of the postcolonial migrant experience," its "wintry coldness and darkness…clearly signifying the unwelcoming *froideur* of its political, cultural, and social climate" (Maxey 39).

In her study, Maxey does much of the work of compiling a list of several of the postcolonial texts that have documented this phenomenon so well. Looking them over, one is struck by the sameness of the complaints made against the English weather, which neatly reflects the sameness of the weather itself. Echoing Gibreel's elegizing of those "stark, imperative oppositions [which] were

drowned beneath an endless drizzle of greys" (*SV* 364), Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters* takes note of "dull, foggy mornings" and a "grey, perpetually drizzling sky" (Sidhwa 240); in *Gifted*, Nikita Lalwani dwells on "the wretched shade of grey that seemed to own the sky in that part of the world" (Lalwani 42); and Meena Alexander, in her memoir, *Fault Lines*, is likewise dogged by this "porous greyness," along with the accompanying sense that "everything blurred in the peculiar English weather" (Alexander 137). For their part, West Indian writers like Jean Rhys and Sam Selvon express a similar preoccupation with England's distinctly indistinctive weather in their accounts of the migrant experience. In *Voyage in the Dark*, Rhys' displaced heroine, Anna Morgan, bemoans her inability to get used to the cold and to the lack of variety which she locates in England's insistent colorlessness: "Always a little grey street…and another little grey street…and smoke the same colour as the sky…and a grey stone promenade" (Rhys 8). The repetition of "grey" in Anna's narration reflects its monotonous effect, as time and place begin to blur for her under "the leaden sky" (ibid). So, too, for Selvon, whose *The Lonely Londoners* begins: "One grim winter evening, when it had a kind of unrealness about London, with a fog sleeping restlessly over the city and the lights showing in the blur as if is not London at all but some strange place on another planet" (Selvon 23).

Though Selvon's is a story of outsiders, there is, ironically, nothing more English than to talk of the weather upon meeting. In compulsively commenting upon the climatic conditions of their adopted country, these migrant authors ultimately recall Samuel Johnson's quintessential Englishmen, who "are in haste to tell each other, what each must already know" (Johnson 182). And, indeed, we do already know all about the peculiar monotonies and monotonous peculiarities of the English weather, because the English novelist has been calling attention to it for centuries. Again and again in these passages from postcolonial texts, one notices the emphasis on the weather-induced blurriness of England. Considered through the lens of the immigrant experience, Selvon's comment on the haziness of London, which causes it to appear as if an alien planet, seems entirely

of a piece with his own sense of dislocation; likewise for Rhys and Alexander, who explicitly link their disorientation to England's perceived formlessness. However, useful as this confusion is as a metaphor for the immigrant experience, London's fog didn't just roll in with Postcolonialism; on the contrary, as Christine Corton's *London Fog: The Biography* makes clear, the British novel has always been shrouded in this haze, and obsessed with its distorting effects.

Throughout *London Fog*, Corton stresses the reliance on England's most ephemeral and nebulous vapor as an agent of dissolution and distortion in fiction, repeatedly citing the usefulness of "the blurry formlessness created by the fog" for authors like Charles Dickens and Henry James (Corton 140). These words, "blurry" and "formless," come up often in Corton's readings, apparently justifying Gibreel's call for "Clarity, clarity, at all costs clarity!" (*SV* 364) Similarly, in Corton's observation that the fog in *Bleak House* "causes the dissolution of the individual," one thinks of Gibreel – his escalating schizophrenic episodes psychically splitting him apart, his identity becoming increasingly undefined and indefinable amidst hazy London. And perhaps most significant is Corton's take on Dickens' and James' attachment to fog as proof of their delight in "illusion, rather than [in] the realities of the world as it is" (Corton 140), corroborating Gibreel's reading of his adopted city as "pandemonium of mirages" (*SV* 95). In doing "away with all fogs," Gibreel Farishta seems to genuinely believe that he is calling for a new era of distinction (climatic and otherwise) in England (*SV* 363). The irony of Gibreel's tropicalizing plan, however, is that the accusations of confusion and formlessness that he has brought against England and its fogs are the very same ones that authors have been bringing against the heat of India for decades.

One author, in particular, emerges as an especially useful foil for Rushdie on this topic. For, we can hardly forget that it was E.M. Forster's Cyril Fielding who declared, "Aziz and I know well that India's a muddle" (*PTI* 73). In searching for evidence that Rushdie has purposefully put himself in conversation with Forster, one needn't look further than this referenced Aziz, the resident doctor

in *A Passage to India* who just so happens to share a name and occupation with Saleem Sinai's grandfather and the patriarch of *Midnight's Children*, Dr. Aadam Aziz. But the connection between these two authors, whose projects bookend my own, is much more than nominal; Forster provided the first example of the formal instantiation of climatic determinism that this dissertation has been exploring over the course of the twentieth century, and that Rushdie is now complicating as it comes to a close. In its depiction of a strange land and its inhospitable weather as experienced by a foreigner, *The Satanic Verses* mirrors the premise of *A Passage to India*; likewise, Gibreel's exasperation with foggy England's lack of clear distinctions presents as the inverted reflection of Fielding's assessment that sun-stricken India is "a frustration of reason and form" (*PTI* 319). Directly recalling Corton's identification of the foremost effects of the fog on the English landscape, the dominant narrative of India in the British novel has been as a country "blurred by the heat" (*PTI* 167): its cliffs "melt[ing] into the haze of a tropic sea," and its hills "infected with illusion" (*PTI* 233, 155). "Films of heat," observes Forster, "increased the confusion. They came at irregular intervals and moved capriciously. A patch of field would jump as if it was being fried, and then lie quiet" (ibid). Here, again, this description of the optically illusive Indian heat explicitly evokes the mirage effect that Corton attributes to the fog, which was "infamous for changing the appearance of reality, not only dissolving it into seemingly formless states but also playing visual tricks" (Corton 72).[4] I emphasize these parallels to show that in swapping out fog for heat, Gibreel sees a fix that is not actually there – at least, not in the way he perceives it. The mirage of Gibreel's moment of clarity is that his proposed solution perpetuates the same blurriness that he claims to find so problematic. John McLeod may be right in supposing, "Gibreel wants order and definition, not chaos" (McLeod 152).

[4] Familiar as we are with these weather conditions by now, writers on both dreary London and sweltering India stress that there is no getting used to their effects (one more thing they have in common). In *One Day*, Ardashir Vakil insists that the British weather is "horrible…dark and depressing…you never get used to it" (qtd. in Maxey 41); likewise, Reginald Savory warns of India, "It's mistake to think that people get used to heat – they don't. When they first meet it, it doesn't worry them, but when they go on encountering it year in and year out, then it begins to wear them down" (qtd. in Mukerji 193).

But all that Gibreel gets from the heatwave that is about to hit London is a hazy reproduction of Forster's chaotic and formless India. Indeed, Rushdie's take is not a refutation of the dramatic and extensive effects of the heat, but rather, a reinforcement of them; in his tropicalization of London, then, Rushdie manages a trick that Gibreel can't quite pull off, writing against the precedent of climatic determinism by writing into it.

When Stanley Wolpert notes in *India* that "heat is to India what fog and rain are to England," he is commenting on the comparable pervasiveness of the elements, and of their centrality to national identity (Wolpert 11). In this, he is entirely correct. But Wolpert's analogy is truer than even he seems to realize; notably, both heat and fog fulfill the same tropological function, each deployed as a hazy element of narrative confusion. Right on cue, Gibreel's fantasy that there might be someplace like home, after all, is fulfilled in the form of a heatwave, which persists throughout the remainder of *The Satanic Verses*. Turning the imperialist dream into a nightmarish reality, this tropicalization makes manifest the threat of the sun never setting on the British Empire. Days give way to "nights of dreadful heat" (*SV* 436). "The temperature," writes Rushdie, "continued to rise" (*SV* 434). As "the heatwave reached its highest point…the whole city, its edifices, its waterways, its inhabitants, came perilously close to the boil" (ibid); but still the plot moves forward, unfolding against the backdrop of "simmering streets" and "unseasonably hot nights" (*SV* 483). And still, writes Rushdie, "the temperature continued, inexorably, to rise" (*SV* 466). Whatever clarity Gibreel hoped to impose with his mandate of extremity, none is to be found in the post-tropicalized pages of *The Satanic Verses*; moral fuzziness gives way to outright aggression, as hot certainties turn into hot disputes and riots erupt in the boiling streets. "I love England in a heat wave," writes Ian McEwan in *Atonement*. "It's a different country. All the rules change" (*Atonement* 120). Rushdie has quite literally turned England into a different country here, but the rules of his heatwave are the same as those of the perpetually grey sky and thick fog that preceded it:

weather-induced ambiguities. "Biblical-Satanic confusions" (*SV* 364). When it comes to Rushdie's temperamental territories, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Indeed, Rushdie's intention in hyperbolizing Gibreel's exaltation of differentiation is not, as Ian Baucom writes in *Out of Place*, "to rain this catalog of difference upon England but to erase the difference of difference" (Baucom 212). For, much as Gibreel Farishta may be clamoring for the clarity of stark oppositions, Salman Rushdie, I argue, wants the blur; to this end, that muddling tropical heat that caused Forster such distress becomes for Rushdie not only an inherently political tool in his restructuring of the climatically determined scaffolding of British narratives of India, but also his most effective means of aesthetically undermining the partitioning of his own plots.

The title of *Step Across This Line*, Rushdie's collection of nonfiction from 1992-2002, tells us all we need know about his position on imposed borders and extreme divisions. As its name might suggest, the dominant through line of the collection has to do with frontiers, which Rushdie conceives of as "elusive lines[s], visible and invisible, physical and metaphorical, amoral and moral" (*SA* 352). Specifically, Rushdie is tormented by one frontier – by that line which he did not step across, but which stepped across him. "Eight weeks after I was born," writes Rushdie, "a new frontier came into being, and my family was cut in half by it" (*SA* 368) He is speaking, of course, of Partition: the decision – made one fateful midnight of August 1947 – "to carve a Muslim homeland, Pakistan, out of the body of subcontinental India," which would lead "to bloody massacres in which over a million Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims lost their lives" (*SA* 161). Rushdie minces no words in identifying Partition ("the dark side of Independence itself") as the defining event not just of those new neighboring nations of India and Pakistan, but of his own life and career (*SA* 160); speaking of himself, his family, his fellow country-men, and those who found themselves on the other side of this frontier, Rushdie concludes, simply, "None of us are who we would have been if that line had not stepped across our land" (*SA* 369). In considering Rushdie's literary project, it is crucial to take

into account his opposition to Partition (which he regards as "an avoidable mistake") and towards the act of partitioning more broadly: "Who would celebrate," he wonders, "the descent of the Iron Curtain, the building of the Berlin Wall?" (*SA* 161) Equally important to keep in mind is his related conviction that "in our deepest natures, we are frontier-crossing beings" (*SA* 350). We hear reverberations of this in the titular imperative to *Step Across the Line*, which may as well be read as Rushdie's MO. To this point, I have begun with Gibreel and the tropicalization of London because it so neatly encapsulates what I see as an aesthetic goal of Rushdie's fiction, that of "creating a confusion of form and blurring boundaries" (Corton 134).

I confess, I am deliberately repurposing this phrase of Christine Corton's, which she uses in her discussion of the particular appeal of the London fog for Henry James. I draw this line between James' project and Rushdie's own because, fittingly enough, it was James who famously described the job of an author as itself one of line drawing: "Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so" (James vii). In other words, his is a notion of the novelist as partitioner, whose most fundamental task is to impose form and enforce boundaries. It is an imperative not to step across the line, but rather, to delineate; an imperative that James himself resisted, and one that Rushdie, to the extent that he is able, simply refuses to abide. Partition may be the thing that "defined and shaped" Rushdie's life, but he will not let it be the thing that defines and shapes his texts (*SA* 161). In fact, if he had it his way, Rushdie's narratives might not be shaped at all; but he is not quite so naïve a novelist to believe this possible. As *Midnight's Children*'s Saleem Sinai cautions, "Everything has a shape, if you look for it. There is no escape from form" (*MC* 259). Rushdie cannot avoid shaping his stories any more than he can un-Partition India. However, in that most problematic weather of extreme heat – with its characteristic "jumbling influence" – Rushdie is

able to find as good a solution as any (*MC* 71). For nothing blurs the boundaries of beginnings, middles, and ends quite like the indiscriminate midday sun.

The narrator of *Shame*, Rushdie's third novel, knows something about the dangers of overheated plots, and is especially mindful of the potential effects of leaving one outdoors for too long. When the narrator interrupts his own story for fear of getting the "narrative out of the sun before it is afflicted by mirages or heat-stroke," one is reminded yet again of the antiquated notion of a determinative tropical climate that has, historically, posed a threat to the constitution of Europeans and European literature alike (*S* 17). In vocalizing his concern, the narrator of *Shame* seems to be validating the legitimacy of this stereotyped threat, as if to say that however concocted our myth of it, the power of heat as an affecting force is very much real. While I concede, as Rushdie likewise appears to do, that the heat does produce palpable effects, I am less convinced that this is a genuine source of anxiety for Rushdie, who has left many a novel baking in the heat. On the contrary, I argue that this is precisely the kind of confusion-creating condition to which Rushdie intends to expose his narratives. But what would this mean, exactly? What would it look like for a narrative to be afflicted by mirages or heat-strokes? Presumably, it looks a little like something we have seen before. Take, for example, the confused and confusing narrative of Adela Quested in *A Passage to India*, whose account of an assault in the Marabar Caves makes explicit the violence implied by a phrase like the "mild *attack* of heatstroke" that Saleem Sinai suffers in *Midnight's Children* (*MC* 326, emphasis mine). But, as this section will illustrate, *A Passage to India*'s affliction pales in comparison to the mirage and heat-stricken narrative of *Midnight's Children*; given that Saleem is suffering a febrile illness that endures the duration of his narration, his fever-dream of a story emerges as the cautionary tale to which the narrator of *Shame* seemingly alludes, the thematic and formal instantiation of a novel that has been too much touched by the sun.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I discussed how Forster depicts the immaterial element of heat in *A Passage to India* as an almost tangible force, representative of a broader trend in characterizations of the Indian heat by those not accustomed to it. In her essay from the anthology, *Indian Fiction in English*, Nirmal Mukerji notes the tendency of foreigners to emphasize the aggressiveness of the heat, citing this early report from British Indian Army general, Reginald Savory: "When you walk out of the customs shed into the sun of India, it hits you like a blow, and continues to do so all through the years you're in India. Every time you walk out of the door during the middle of the day you feel as if you've been hit by something" (qtd. in Mukerji 193). By the time that David Shulman is writing his South Indian diary, *Spring, Heat, Rains* in 2009, he is aware enough to acknowledge the trope as cliché, even as he invokes it. "We speak, as everyone does, of the heat," he writes, with a nod to the unoriginality of the topic; and yet, its force remains so potent that he simply cannot ignore it. "Sometimes," he continues, "heat, *vedi*, seems to me the name of an animal, a living, menacing being, roused, relentless, driven by its own autonomous moods and needs" (Shulman 67). In his personification of the heat, Shulman emphasizes not just its animosity, but even more fundamentally, its discernable agency; in attributing autonomy to the weather, he effectively undermines that of the individual. This is, no doubt, cause for concern for Saleem Sinai, who is constantly fighting the nagging sense that "destiny, inevitability, the antithesis of choice had come to rule [his] life" (*MC* 477). And perhaps he has reason to worry; while, as evidenced by the aforementioned examples, such determinative characterizations of the heat are typically reserved for outsiders, *Midnight's Children* is proof that the weather of the tropics is unselective in choosing its victims.

In *The Indian Mirror*, an anonymous text published by Thomas Nelson and Sons in 1878, the author stipulates, "so intense is the heat in India…that the natives themselves occasionally perish through *coup de soleil*, or sun-stroke" (Anon 298). And, in fact, we know that Saleem is prone to heat

disorders (and thus susceptible to Rushdie's own exaggerated strain of climatic determinism) because he tells us as much; according to his records, it was back in 1958 that eleven-year-old Saleem, "anchored off the Rann of Kutch on heat-soaked afternoon," first suffered "a mild attack of sunstroke" (*MC* 325-6). As outlined in *Forensic Neuropathology*, sunstroke (alternately referred to as heatstroke) is a condition caused by prolonged exposure to the sun resulting in an increase not just in body temperature, but also in "brain temperature" (Auer et al. 250). Because of this, its effects are often neurological, including "headaches, visual disturbance, nausea, delirium, [and] confusion" (ibid). In its literalizing of the pervasiveness of the Indian heat – which is now making its way into the innermost recesses of Saleem's mind – sunstroke thus signifies a breakdown of the partition between inner and outer weather, speaking back to Rushdie's investment in border-blurring power of the heat. In line with this, Saleem's bout with sunstroke is set at the borderland of borderlands; existentially impervious to delineation, the "chameleon area" that is the Great Rann of Kutch salt marsh straddles the boundary not only of India and Pakistan, but of land and sea (*MC* 325). Because of its fantastical status, Saleem expects to be completely enchanted when "gazing for the first time upon this amphibian terrain," but instead, he is confronted with the reality of the heat "weighing him down" (ibid). As Saleem soon learns, the Rann is one of the hottest parts of India; and, as the ship's purser informs him when advising Saleem to go below deck and get out of the midday sun, "It's the hottest time just now" (ibid). Saleem declines. "Fail to dump the heat," writes Bill Streever in *Heat*, "and the body's temperature rises. Add six degrees in core temperature, and suffer heatstroke. The skin goes dry, coordination diminished, the mind becomes delirious…Without help, only death remains (Streever 20). Saleem doesn't die (not yet anyway), but he does describe this sense of delirium, as he feels what he thinks is the boat's deck violently swaying despite there being "virtually no wind"; further, his coordination is seemingly diminished, as he explains that he "tried

to grab the rails [but] the boards were too quick for me" (*MC* 326). And, now that I think of it, Saleem has been complaining of dry skin…of skin so dry that it is beginning to literally crack.

Taking that evergreen temptation of blaming the weather to its most absurd conclusion, Rushdie afflicts Saleem Sinai with a most peculiar condition, no doubt brought on by what Forster so ominously referred to in *A Passage to India* as "the Hot Weather" (*PTI* 148). Notably, in illustrating "the trying effect of the heat on the constitution of Europeans," the author of *The Indian Mirror* uses "the havoc it often plays with parts of the household furniture" as an analogy: "Lamps, tumblers, and wineglasses become so much heated as often to crack and burst; objects made of metal seem as if they had been placed before a fierce fire; and wooden furniture feels hot to the touch, and, unless well put together, speedily falls to pieces" (Anon 296). Like a piece of poorly constituted furniture, Saleem – the narratorial centerpiece that ties together all of *Midnight's Children* – is cracking under the pressure of the Indian heat. Recalling the dissolving effect of the London fog, Saleem's body, if we are to take his word for it, is "literally disintegrating" (*MC* 37). Whatever other fuzziness obscures his narrative, Saleem wants to be perfectly clear in stating (t)his reality: "I am not speaking metaphorically; nor is this the opening gambit of some melodramatic, riddling, grubby appeal for pity. I mean quite simply that I have begun to crack all over" (ibid). The issue of Saleem's splintering should be of urgent concern to Saleem's reader, as it (obviously) is to Saleem. While Saleem assures us that this degenerative condition of physically falling apart is progressing "slowly for the moment," he also notes "signs of acceleration" (ibid); insofar as his terminal self-diagnosis is the primary motivator of his scramble to compose his narrative, it is not just Saleem's life, but his life story, that depends on this cracking trope. Figuring himself a modern-day Scheherazade, Saleem is desperately writing against his own ending, the circumstances of which he imagines will inevitably involve a fragmentation so complete that he simply turns to dust; and yet, symptomatic of Salman Rushdie's

own ambivalent magical realism, there is some question as to just how scientifically sound this medical emergency is.[5]

All Saleem wants is for his reader "to accept (as he has accepted)" that he is crumbling. It seems a small enough ask for anyone even adequately versed in the genre of magical realism, based as it is on the "acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality" (Chanady 22). But Rushdie pushes against this, letting a trace of skepticism into the novel in the form of a doctor – a man of medicine, of science, of reason – who rejects the premise of Saleem's condition outright. This house call from "a certain Doctor N.Q. Baligga" is recounted as a PSA by Saleem, who has a digressive habit of interrupting his own narrative to report on the shenanigans occurring in the present moment (*MC* 70). Though, ultimately, Saleem's running commentary on the context of his story's composition is as important as the story itself, the framing device opening a space for Rushdie to self-consciously debate the mechanics of plot and plausibility through the ongoing exchange between the author-patient and his caretaker and confidant, Padma. Doing her due diligence in her capacity as reader surrogate, it is Padma who, rightfully "alarmed by [Saleem's] references to cracking up," summons Baligga to come examine Saleem. Although he agrees to be looked after and looked over, Saleem resists the pragmatism of medical expertise, dismissing "this Baligga – this ju-ju man! this green-medicine wallah!" as "a quack" (ibid). Incredulous, Saleem tries to discredit the doctor's report as the truly implausible take on his condition: "Believe this if you can," he writes, "the fraud has pronounced me whole!" (ibid) Still, Saleem is not so naïve as to deny the impact of the diagnosis as a refutation of his own fabulist account: "He impugned my state of mind, cast doubts on my reliability as a witness, and Godknowswhatelse: 'I see no cracks'" (ibid). That Saleem's

[5] In *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*, Chris Warnes hones in on Rushdie's ambivalence to the genre, as expressed by Rushdie himself: "In a 1983 interview with Chandrabhanu Pattanayak [Rushdie] comments on the similarities between his work and that of García Márquez by referring to both as magical realism. Talking to Ameena Meer in 1989, however, he distances himself from the term on the basis of its being applicable solely to 'a group developed and named of [sic] South American writers in the generation around Borges and after' (Meer 111). Later in the same interview, however, he indicates a rueful acceptance of the term in respect of his own writing by stating about his future intentions (in retrospect, ironically): 'no more magical realism' (122)" (Warnes 98).

body is, evidently, *not* cracking creates cracks in his story instead. But just because he is intact, this isn't to say that Saleem is not ill.

Recalling the hallucinatory effects of sunstroke that we've seen Saleem suffer before, a crucial detail in Saleem's frame tale is that he is writing his story whilst very much under the weather, in the haze of a fever that spans the duration of his narration. While Saleem himself "refuse[s] to take refuge in illness," and urges his reader not to "make the mistake of dismissing what I've unveiled as mere delirium," the reality – as the text repeatedly reminds us – is that Saleem is delirious (*MC* 229).[6] The reader becomes privy to this via Padma's regular response to each of Saleem's increasingly outrageous claims: that he is literally disintegrating; that he is handcuffed to history; that he is a radio transmitter for the thousand and one magical children of midnight who confer on the state of India *through* him. "My God," responds the equally dubious and worried Padma, "rushing for a towel to wet in cold water" (*MC* 224). As far as explanation goes, Saleem's fever becomes the narrative panacea: "Your forehead is on fire! Better you lie down now; too soon for all this writing! The sickness is talking; not you" (ibid). In Saleem's insistence to "press on…fever or no fever," *Midnight's Children* emerges as his literal fever dream – the thematic and formal manifestation of the mirage and heatstroke afflicted narrative that the narrator of *Shame* warns us about.

Using the extremity of the Indian heat to his own satirical ends, Rushdie creates a double bind of climatic determinism in *Midnight's Children*: either we accept that Saleem's physical body is being directly affected, splitting apart in the "skin-cracking heat"; or, we are forced to concede instead that Saleem's mind has been touched by the "noonday insanity of the sun," driving him into

[6] Despite Saleem's insistence that "illness is neither here nor there," the references to his fever and accompanying delirium are overwhelming in the narrative (*MC* 230). Padma serves as a helpful reminder of his condition, often exclaiming sentiments like, "You are sick; whatever have you said?" (*MC* 229) and "You don't know what you were talking in your sickness" (*MC* 239). Protesting perhaps a bit too much, Saleem nonetheless maintains that the Midnight's Children "must not become the bizarre creation of a rambling, diseased mind" (*MC* 230) and, he's "still got [his] wits about [him], fever or no fever!" (*MC* 239) He implores Padma: "Do not think…that because I had a fever, the things I told you were not completely true" (ibid).

the throes of a hallucinatory delirium (*S* 5, 4). Baligga may well be a quack, but in the writing of Army doctor Charles E. Woodruff, we find this second opinion on Saleem's diagnosis: "When there is a tendency to insanity, it often happens that the extra nervous exhaustion is due to hot weather. It is the final determining cause of the mental breakdown" (qtd. in Rogers 37). Indeed, Saleem seems to be in the haze of a certain heat-induced madness; critically, however, it is not only Saleem – but his narrative, as well – that this condition afflicts.

To his credit, Saleem is at least lucid enough to wonder, on one occasion, "Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything – to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role?" (*MC* 190) His use of the word "distort" here is loaded, at once evoking the specific illusiveness of the heat haze as a conceit, but also that less glamorous symptom of heat exhaustion. Markedly, this moment of self-doubt and uncertainty in Saleem's narration occurs in the midst of a heatwave, when he has just returned home from "having gone out into the boiling streets for a quick meal" (ibid). While the heat is always bubbling just under the surface of *Midnight's Children*, this passage marks Saleem's most explicit and sustained engagement with the subject. Several times he notes his own confusion, which he directly attributes to the "hot night" and its "bubbling air" (ibid); at one point, unable even to complete a full sentence, he simply brushes off whatever facts he may have distorted in his account with, "and the heat…a little confusion is surely permissible in these circumstances" (*MC* 189). Given the lethargy of his prose here, it comes as quite the surprise when, only a few paragraphs later, Saleem delivers his magnum opus on the topic; his is an ode to heat that wouldn't be topped until Gibreel Farishta came along to catalogue all the benefits of a tropical climate nearly a decade later, and perhaps not even then:

> What grows best in the heat: cane-sugar; the coconut palm; certain millets such a barja, ragi and jowar; linseed, and (given water) tea and rice. Our hot land is also the world's second largest producer of cotton…But the tropical summer grows stranger fruit as well: the exotic flowers of the imagination blossom, to fill the close

> perspiring nights with odors as heavy as musk, which give men dark dreams of discontent…Heat, gnawing at the mind's divisions between fantasy and reality, made anything seem possible; the half-waking chaos of afternoon siestas fogged men's brains, and the air was filled with the stickiness of aroused desires. What grows best in the heat: fantasy; unreason; lust. (*MC* 191)

Even before parsing its details, Saleem's meditation is striking on its face, the very fact of its extended length signifying deep consideration on Rushdie's part of the literal and metaphorical power of the heat, that indeterminate and indeterminist element. And, certainly, upon closer inspection, one immediately notices this toggling between the heat's real (i.e. cane sugar) and fantastic (i.e. flowers of imagination) agricultural byproducts. More crucial than the heat's apparent ability to move fluidly through borders, however, is its capacity to dissolve them entirely: to gnaw at the division, to blur the boundary, the erase the line, to collapse the partition. Interested as Saleem is in what grows best in the heat, *Midnight's Children*, I argue, cares more about what deteriorates in it; insofar as Rushdie's literary project might be read as aesthetic protest against the harmful divisions of Partition and partitioning, the infamously problematic heat becomes a natural solution, and sometimes resolution, for his generically teleological plots. As is only appropriate, Rushdie' heat muddles indiscriminately, flattening distinctions of place, of people, of the past and the present, and consequently, of cause and effect itself.

"Everywhere was now a part of everywhere else," writes Rushdie in *Shalimar the Clown*, "Our lives, our stories, flowed into one another's, were no longer our own, individual, discrete" (*SC* 37). As observed by Ian Baucom, Rushdie's tropicalizing of London in *The Satanic Verses* is a rewriting of "the cultural cartography of the city [that] erases its boundaries and collapses the distinction between the here and the elsewhere" (Baucom 212). By eliminating a division as natural and essential as the climate, the heatwave puts Rushdie's anti-Partition agenda into full effect, merging the two independent nations of England and India into one meteorological muddle. While Rushdie is thinking globally in *The Satanic Verses*, in *Midnight's Children*, the heat is acting locally: it is not nations

that are leaking into each other, but individuals. And there, in the midst of the muddle, is Saleem, "lost in the confusion of other people's lives which are blurring together in the heat" (*MC* 195). Gibreel is all business in negotiating the blurry and blurring effects of the heat; for Saleem, it's personal. Because, predictably, one of the hazards of Saleem's body slowly but inexorably cracking apart in Rushdie's heat is that he has become much more porous. "Things – even people – have a way of leaking into each other," writes Saleem (*MC* 37); and many, many people have leaked into him. This is, essentially, the story of *Midnight's Children* and of the Midnight's Children Conference.

Although I argue that all of Rushdie's novels are concerned with Partition, in varying levels of its abstraction, *Midnight's Children* is the one that deals with the violence of its consequences not just metaphorically, but literally; as such, it makes sense that this novel would be most resolute in Rushdie's corrective project of blurring of boundaries. Hence, Saleem's mind-melding superpower: the ability to hear the thoughts of and communicate telepathically with his fellow children of midnight, effectively destroying that most impenetrable border of one's own consciousness. Yes, there is much more to Saleem Sinai's story than Saleem Sinai, as he is the first to admit: "I have been a swallower of lives," he warns, "and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well" (*MC* 4). In this refrain of Saleem's – that to "understand just one life, you have to swallow the world" (*MC* 121) – we hear the echo of Henry James, reminding us that "relations stop nowhere" (James vii). As if taking James' mandate on the job of the artist as a personal challenge, Saleem does everything he can to avoid drawing that artificial line which would make those relations appear to end. The result? A terminally digressive narrative with so many characters that Saleem himself can hardly keep track of them all. It should hardly come as a surprise that sometimes, when one swallows the world, the different parts of one's "somewhat complicated life refuse, with a wholly unreasonable obstinacy, to stay neatly in their separate compartments" (*MC* 214). And in true *Tristram Shandy* fashion, it takes Saleem well over a hundred pages of herding his characters just to

get to the moment of his own birth in his biography. He spends chapter after chapter reaching back into the annals of his national and personal history, creating an intricate portrait of how fate and chance conspired to bring his grandparents and then his parents together, only to reveal that – spoiler alert – these people are not actually his biological relatives. So invested is switched-at-birth Saleem in illustrating the limitlessness of relations that he has gone to the trouble of creating the excessively branchy family tree of someone else entirely. Such is the way of Rushdie's tropicalized texts: when people get confused – as Saleem was for Shiva, and Shiva for Saleem – it can be difficult to make out where one ends and the other begins.

This is a difficulty that the reader must sort out, to be sure, but more importantly, it is one that plagues Saleem, who has leaked so completely into those around him that he becomes disassociated from himself. As with so many other things in *Midnight's Children*, Saleem's sense of fragmentation is literal, but also metaphorical. His is an identity in crisis. This is, in part, an unavoidable hazard of Saleem's chosen trade of first-person narration. Insofar as he must always be both Saleem the narrator and Saleem the protagonist of *Midnight's Children*, he is very much in the process of splitting apart throughout the entirety of his narrative (just as he claims). Commenting on how alienated he feels from this other version of himself, Saleem writes, "He and I, I and he…There are times when he feels a stranger, almost" (*MC* 90). But alas, leave it to the weather to blur these two distinct Saleems: "Different and similar, we are joined by heat. A shimmering heat-haze, then and now, blurs then-time into mine…my confusion, traveling across the heat waves, is also his" (*MC* 191). Compounding the confusion of the novel's characters, who are all blurring together in the heat, is this confusion of the novel's chronology, as the Saleem of the past melts into the Saleem of the present.

Although we know the weather to be intimately connected to time (one recalls, for instance, Michel Serres on *le temp* as both weather and time), its is a temporality apart from history, as Steven

Connor writes about in *The Matter of Air*: "The time of the weather is a time without retention. It is pure fluctuation…without duration or direction or progression" (Connor 176). Instantiating Connor's premise and signaling Rushdie's use of the weather to break away from the progression of linear narrative, the collapse of Saleem's past into his present is predicated on the heat's undifferentiated blanketing of both. "It was hot then; it is (unseasonably) hot now," he writes, explaining away the mysterious mechanics of memory with the palpable humidity of the Hot Weather, in which temporality becomes as glutinous as the air (*MC* 190). This is a phenomenon that David Shulman observes in his dairy of India, as well: "As the heat intensifies," he writes, "time is a sticky, undifferentiated mass…to name the day of the week is an effort" (Shulman 64). This hardly sounds like what Gibreel Farishta had in mind when calling for the clarity of the tropics. It is, however, more or less the campaign message of *Midnight's Children*'s Mr. Kemal, who wants to run on a platform of "Time Without Partitions" (*MC* 86). Kemal, for his part, is responding to the seemingly arbitrary decision that, along with the geographical disunion of the two independent nation, "the clocks in Pakistan would run half an hour ahead of their Indian counterparts" (ibid).[7] That time can be so artificially partitioned is proof enough for Saleem that it is "not a thing to be relied upon," and yet, *Midnight's Children*, perhaps more than any other of Rushdie's works, *does* rely on time. "Names contain our fates," cautions Saleem, the title of his own narrative only proving the rule (*MC* 348).

From the start, *Midnight's Children*, like Saleem himself, is running on a tight schedule, as its opening lines make clear:

> I was born in the city of Bombay…once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more…On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. (*MC* 3)

[7] For more on Rushdie's attempt at unstructured temporality, see Adam Barrows' "Time Without Partitions: *Midnight's Children and Temporal Orientalism*" (2012).

Just as its protagonist makes his entrance into the world "handcuffed to history," Rushdie appears to cuff his narrative with those same clock-hands that "joined palms in respectful greeting as [Saleem] came" (ibid). However, while Saleem embraces his entrapment (is desperate for it, even), there is more than a little resistance in the narration, out of which the precise time of Saleem's birth must be pried. This is peculiar, not least because it highlights an internal conflict in Saleem, who acts here as both the prodder and the prodded. But, beyond serving as an expression of Saleem's own neuroses, this tension bespeaks the narrative's ability to simultaneously occupy two seemingly distinct temporal spaces: to be, on the one hand, entirely outside of time; and on the other, fully enmeshed in it. These discrepant descriptors signify the two genres that Rushdie has blurred together (along with everything else) in *Midnight's Children*: the fairy tale, and the history. Nothing announces the commencement of fairy tale more quickly or unequivocally than that timeless phrase, "once upon a time" – timeless, not only because it is associated with some of our most classic stories, but more importantly, because insofar as the phrase is evocative of *any* time, it is beholden to *no* time. That is what Saleem prompts the reader to expect, then, by using the phrase in his opening line. Although, something is just a little off with this. We sense it first with the delay of the conventional opening until after Saleem's birth announcement, and then more fully when the narration begins explicitly pushing against its temporal ambiguity, demanding that the story be firmly fixed to a specific date. Saleem's final clarifying clause seems to clinch it: his story is to be read as a matter of facts.

Within these introductory lines, the two frameworks appear antithetical, historical record having no time for the timelessness of fairy tales. However, as modes of emplotment, the equally prescriptive fairy tale and history are more alike than they are dissimilar; a matter of fact (and of fiction), they are positively Aristotelian, each one moving in a linear fashion through a necessary beginning, middle, and end. In other words, their time is partitioned and their structures teleological. Although teleology is typically more closely associated with theories of history, the ahistorical genre

of the fairy tale nonetheless reinforces a notion of the world as a place of design, purpose, and above all, progress. Indeed, not only do we know that these types of plots are going somewhere, but we know where they are going: Once upon a time only ever ends in happily ever after; and by the time that Saleem gets around to recording his account in 1978, time has already told the preordained history of India as it will elapse over the course of his narrative. Which to say, both a fairy tale and a historical narrative are deterministic, and more than that, their inevitable conclusions are determinable from the start; in this, too, the genres enact the teleological structure, which Dorothy Hale concisely defines as "the seemingly necessary entailment of end from beginning and beginning from end" (Hale 278). Yet, however desperate Saleem is to make meaning of his life through an imposition of shape and form, Rushdie is decidedly against linearity, the partitioning of time and stories, and above all, that unavoidable convention of an ending, the necessity of which he recognizes even as he feverishly writes against it. By circulating the resolutely un-teleological element of the heat throughout his novel – an immaterial force that is as indeterministic as it is indeterminate – Rushdie is thus able to have it both ways, eluding the strict constraints of these formulaic genres even as he willingly imposes them on his narrative.

In the heat of its exceedingly warm reception, *Midnight's Children* – winner of both the 1981 Booker and the 1993 Booker of Bookers – blurred from a "his story" into a history. Though, certainly we recognize that important space between India and the refracted image that is the India of Saleem's prismatic memory, which exists (as Rushdie has also written of Pakistan) "at a slight angle to reality" (*S* 22). "Ironically," reflects Rushdie, "the book's success initially distorted the way in which it was read. Many readers wanted it to be the history, even the guidebook, which it was never meant to be" (*IH* 25). Still, Rushdie hedges a bit in further defining Saleem's narrative, clarifying, "His story is not history, but it plays with historical shapes" (ibid). As far as shapes go, surely history's is among the simplest, the arrow of time looking an awful lot like a line. And, in fact,

this is how Rushdie initially conceived of shaping *Midnight's Children*. As the author explained in an interview with Jonathan Noakes, "The first draft of *Midnight's Children* was not written retrospectively. It didn't have that whole Padma frame narration, it was just written straight from the beginning to the end" (Noakes 2003). In the spirit of playing with this linear historical shape, Rushdie opted instead for a form resembling that of oral narrative, the plot lines of which are far more acrobatic. In interviews about *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie is explicit in situating the apparent shapelessness of the oral narration against the linearity of the traditional plot: "I mean, the story does not go from beginning to the end but it goes in great loops and circles back on itself, repeats earlier things, digresses, uses sometimes a kind of Chinese-box system, where you have the story inside the story inside the story and then they all come back. It seems formless" (*Conversations* 76). This perfectly describes the structure of *Midnight's Children* and, although Saleem is technically writing down his story, Rushdie ensures the connection to the oral tradition by having him read it aloud to Padma. But the character of Padma has a more important job than that of simply standing in for the audience (or of tending to Saleem, for that matter). As Rushdie alluded to, there was no need for Padma in the original draft of the novel when Saleem's story was told in a straightforward fashion by a third-person narrator; however, when Rushdie outsourced the narration to Saleem himself, he also brought in Padma, seemingly as a signifier of the lingering pressure (which Rushdie is always resisting) to partition plot into those neat compartments of beginning, middle, and end. As the chronologically deviant narrator of *Shame* likewise notes, "Ends must not be permitted to precede beginnings and middles…that way madness lies" (*S* 16). By having Padma there to curb Saleem's madness, constantly "bullying [him] back into the world of linear narrative, the universe of what-happened-next," Rushdie is able to stage his ambivalence regarding modes of emplotment (*MC* 37). This ambivalence is not without some anguish, which we feel in Saleem's halfhearted pledges of course-correction whenever he goes wildly off track: "Everything must be told in

sequence," he says at one point (*MC* 386); at another, "I must tell it in the proper order" (*MC* 443). Over and over again Saleem repeats this mantra of proper sequencing, and each time, he uses the same word: must. In it, there is an air not only of responsibility, but of compulsion: "I must return (Padma is frowning) to the banal chain of cause-and-effect" (*MC* 338); "Effects must not…be permitted to precede causes" (*MC* 282). Strict causality, the *musts* suggest, is the rule of *Midnight's Children*; the rule of fiction; the rule of the physical world. But this simply is not the reality of the magically tropical and tropicalized worlds of Rushdie's narratives, in which the confusion of cause and effect becomes as inescapable as the heat itself.

The joke of Saleem's insistence that effects must not precede causes is built into its inverted syntax, with "effects" quite literally coming before "causes"; and examples like this are to be found all throughout *Midnight's Children*, the natural consequence of its past and present having blurred together in the heat. In his diary of India, Shulman expresses the foolishness he feels in trying to differentiate one day from another in the thick of the Hot Weather, "since chopping up time into such conventional fragments has become wholly artificial" (Shulman 64). Granted, such fragmentation is always artificial; however, it is through the heat shimmers of Saleem's Sinai desert of a narrative that we are able to see the illusion of sequence for what it is. Despite Padma's influence, *Midnight's Children* manages to tamper with the order of things just fine, with the precedent set by the opening sentence's inverted placement of "once upon a time" persisting throughout the rest of the narrative. Two hundred and fifty pages into his story, Saleem stops himself to say, "…but to begin with beginnings" (*MC* 250); only a few pages later, right smack in the middle of the novel, he introduces a nominally displaced chapter called "Alpha and Omega" (*MC* 255); and most conspicuously, the frequent, prophetic interruptions guaranteed by the framing device create the effect of Saleem's present self perpetually getting ahead of his past self, as if to fulfill his "irrational notion" of "grow[ing] illogically backwards in time" (*MC* 97). And indeed, the muddled causality of

Saleem's narrative mirrors the muddled causality of Saleem – not only in relation to Shiva, but in relation to himself: "He will have sons without having sons! He will be old before he is old! *And he will die*…*before he is dead*" (*MC* 96). Per prophesy, Saleem's destiny is the distortion of cause and effect.

In the last of the prophesy's clauses, there is a hint of the eventual capitulation to the convention of an ending that Rushdie will have to do, essentially letting Saleem make up and narrate his own death in advance since he will not be around to do it afterward. However, lest I likewise get ahead of myself, what I want to call attention to in closing this section is Rushdie's use of ellipses, which appear on nearly every page of *Midnight's Children*. Given Rushdie's investment in the climatically determined blurriness of contiguity, it is easy to see the utility of the ellipsis as a signifier of continuation that allows for all of his sentences – and by extension, all of his stories – to coalesce, with or without Padma's banal chain of cause-and-effect there to link them together. More important, then, is this emergence of the ellipsis as a type of punctuation that marks the site of a confused causality. We see this in its facilitating of Saleem's dying prior to his being dead, as noted; but we see it, also, in the announcement of Saleem's birth, which dislocates the "Once upon a time" opening that we expect to come first. Ellipses are able to function this way so effectively because of the chasm that they create where explicit causality would be. That is to say, insofar as a set of three consecutive dots is regularly used to signify a relationship between two independent clauses that should be understood from context clues alone, they represent a connection that may or may not be causal. More often than not, this is how Saleem uses ellipses, beginning many a paragraph with only the dots and no clear explanation of how, exactly, that which is to come follows that which came before. In opting for these elliptical non-sequiturs rather than providing logical transitions, Saleem's narrative reads more like a list of "this happened and this happened and this happened" than a plot that is concerned with explaining how "this happened *because* this happened *because* this happened." The presumption, however, is that when presented with these vacancies, the reader will supply cause

him/herself; this is the process that Seymour Chatman outlines in *Story and Discourse*, arguing that, "because our minds inveterately seek structure," we will infer causation even when it is not explicitly stated (Chatman 46). And after all, this, as the next section will explore, is exactly what Saleem Sinai does in reading causation into the suggestive, though possibly elliptical, connection that he has with his environment.

In afflicting his narrative with mirages and heatstroke, Rushdie invokes, once more, the notion of a formal climatic determinism that we have encountered in each previous chapter of this dissertation, effectively exaggerating its effects to his own blurry and blurring ends. Insofar as this project traces a progression of climatic determinism as a structural model over the course of the twentieth century, Rushdie's treatment of it finally emerges as the last (il)logical step: in Forster we found a straightforward formal appropriation of climatic determinism, which he used to initiate action and preserve some semblance of a causally connected plot; in the amorphousness of Woolf's cloudy prose, we saw her climatic indeterminism at work, her withholding of causes forestalling her plots; and in *Lolita*, Nabokov teased a possibility of climatic over-determinism, his supercharged lightning helping justify Humbert Humbert's argument that the conspiratorial skies were plotting against him. However, while Humbert wanted desperately to imagine himself as a cause without effects, Saleem Sinai wants nothing more than to take responsibility for everything – including the weather – even if it means taking the blame. In this next section, then, we will look at how Rushdie's heat-induced blurring of cause and effect ultimately amounts to an inversion of climatic determinism itself, his humanist-aspiring texts offering us fantasies of determined climates instead.

Rushdie's Determined Climates

That day she put our heads together,
Fate had her imagination about her,
Your head so much concerned with outer,
Mine with inner, weather.
– Robert Frost, "Tree at My Window"

There is a certain irony to Gibreel Farishta's insistence that "truth…is, in brief, heated" given just how untrustworthy perception becomes in Rushdie's heat (*SV* 365). While much ink has been spilled on the deleterious effects of the Indian heat on foreign interlopers, even the natives are susceptible to the sun's coups in the hyper-climatically determined world of *Midnight's Children*. Notably, Saleem is not the sun's only victim in the novel; his mother, Amina, has her own experience of being stricken by the sun when she wakes, as a newlywed, to the shocking discovery that it has flipped positions. "What's the sun doing here," she wonders aloud, "It's come up in the wrong place" (*MC* 70). Significantly, Saleem abruptly interrupts his own narration of this anecdote with his urgent PSA about that quack Dr. Baligga, the account of his mother's sun-induced confusion effectively overlaid by that of his own. Both instances of disorientation are representative of the sun's metonymic function in Rushdie's texts, reliably rising each day as a constant source of dizzying heat and blurry boundaries. Notably, however, Amina's shock occurs in what Saleem refers to as the "illusionist January" of 1947, "in the midst of the mirror-like stillness through which it was impossible to see the great machineries grinding" (*MC* 69). And, indeed, by the time that Saleem finally gets around to returning to his mother, whom he's left befuddled in her bed, she has sneaked a peek of the machinery at work:

> She understood how in this month of illusion she had fallen victim to a trick, because all that had happened was that she had woken up in Delhi, in the home of her new husband, which faced east towards the sun; so the truth of the matter was that the sun was in the right place, and it was her position which had changed. (*MC* 70-71)

One is struck by the rhetoric of this realization, which frame's Amina's mix-up as the result of some solar sleight of hand. Indeed, as this example succinctly demonstrates and this section will illuminate, Salman Rushdie uses his weather to play narrative tricks; to be sure, the greatest trick he pulls is not this one of his weather changing positions, but rather, that of changing his own position on the weather. That is to say, the apparent inversion of the sun in *Midnight's Children* is indicative of Rushdie's inversion of the very conceit of climatic determinism.

In *Step Across This Line*, Rushdie puts forth the notion that, insofar as a writer is a citizen of the "boundless kingdom of the imagination," "the creative spirit, of its very nature, resists frontiers and limiting points" (*SA* 250). Rushdie casts a wide net in generalizing about all creatives here, but what is demonstrably true is that *his* spirit resists frontiers and limiting points. Born in June of 1947 – only two months before the birth of his newly independent nation – Rushdie was raised in India, educated in England, and has lived and worked in the United States since 2000. Fancying himself a free agent, moving between countries as casually as Amina Sinai has moved between cities, Rushdie refuses to be determined: not nationally, not socially, and certainly not climatically. As part of both his postcolonial and his personal projects (which are, inevitably, also part of each other), Rushdie thus complicates his critique of climatic determinism by confusing its causality, creating fantasies in his fiction of individuals determining rather than being determined by their environments. It may be that such a scenario can only ever be a fantasy, as Rushdie's compulsive blurring of these causes and effects suggests. To be sure, as we saw in the previous section, whatever his stance on the antiquated and imperialist notions of climatic determinism, Rushdie knows better than to deny the realities of tropical weather as a muddling and distorting force. But, therein lies its exceptional utility as the harbinger of his magical causality: because, for Rushdie, the reality of the weather *is* its unreality. And no weather is more unreal than the heat, which becomes for him the lie that tells the truth.

To be clear, it is Amina Sinai who is wrong, not the sun; although, while hers is a perspectival failure, the illusoriness of this optical illusion is that her eyes and nature itself have coordinated in playing this trick on her. What Amina perceives is real, and is not real; the sun has changed places, and has not changed places; it was so, and it was not so. Or, as Saleem would say: "Certainly it was a hallucinatory time…but the hallucinations were not in my head" (*MC* 230). Implicit in Saleem's comment is the possibility that just because the thing you are seeing is not actually real, it does not necessarily follow that you aren't really seeing it. After all, this is how heat hazes (alternately called heat shimmers) work: their magic goes beyond the distortion of our perception of reality, to distorting reality itself. Taking my cue from Saleem, I am not speaking metaphorically here; I mean, quite literally, that hot air can refract light in such a way as to produce vaporous waves in the atmosphere which are not just visible to the human eye (susceptible as it is to trickery), but which can be captured through the objective lens of a camera. These heat waves are different from the one that affects London in *The Satanic Verses*, but their effect is the same: both stoke confusion and make us question our judgment. This is to say, theirs is the effect of a mirage.

Most commonly occurring in deserts, mirages are the result of an atmospheric border conflict, when extremely hot air rising off of the ground comes into contact with substantially cooler air in a higher stratum. In its entry "On the Mirage of India," *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* explains how when two such layers of sharply contrasting temperatures meet, the sky "acts precisely as would a mirror of glass similarly suspended: that is, it catches the reflection of distant objects and exhibits them hanging in reverse" (Abbott 162). Typically, because this reflected image is an inversion of the sky, it appears as a glistening lake, or what is sometimes referred to more poetically as "mimic water" (Alexander 71). However, the problem with these poetic puddles, particularly as they relate to Saleem Sinai's destiny as a disrupter of the strict parameters of causality, is that their boundaries are blurred: "Being slightly agitated by the air and by the action of the sun upon its upper

surface, [the mirage] slightly confuses every outline, giving a wavy appearance…The substance and its reflection are thus blended together at their respective summits" (Abbott 162). In its characteristic disregard of the boundary between substance and reflection, the mirage emerges as a broken mirror: prone to distortion and unable to distinguish cause from effect. So, too, for *Midnight's Children*, which, in its most elemental form, boils down to an exploration of the mysterious and muddled entwinement of an individual and his environment.

Salman Rushdie is in the business of broken mirrors. As a novelist, part of his project – even as it diverges from that of literary realism – is to fulfill that fundamental mimetic function of fiction: to hold a mirror up to nature. As an author of postmodern postcolonial texts, this may be doubly true, and doubly difficult. In *Salman Rushdie's Cities*, Vassilena Parashkevova comments on the proliferation of "distorting mirrors, inverting mirrors and mirrors reflected in other mirror [that] recur in Rushdie's texts," noting their symbolic power in representing an increasingly fractured reality (Parashkevova 23). Reflecting on his role as an "Indian writer who writes from outside India," Rushdie himself has spoken of what he perceives as the obligation to "deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost" (*IH* 11). In *Midnight's Children*, the broken (or at least, rapidly cracking) mirror that Rushdie is dealing with goes by the name of Saleem Sinai. Born at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947 – which is to say, "at the precise instant of India's arrival at Independence" (*MC* 3) – Saleem tumbles into the world destined to be "a mirror of the nation" (*MC* 292). So it is written, and so it must be. Written, not only by Saleem himself, but also by Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, who has this to say on the occasion of Saleem's birth: "Dear Baby Saleem, My belated congratulations on the happy accident of your moment of birth! You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own" (*MC* 139). Even as Saleem grows up and into his "role of mirror-of-the-nation" (*MC* 491), the haunting

question that is begged by the hedging clause in Nehru's note – the question that both Saleem and the novel share – remains: "*In what sense?* How, in what terms, may the career of a single individual be said to impinge on the fate of a nation?" (*MC* 272)

To begin with: in the most literal sense, and that which most directly fulfills Nehru's prophesy that Saleem would bear "that ancient face of India," Saleem's face, it turns out, is blemished in just such a way as to resemble "the whole map of India," complete with two birthmarks that represent the "stains" of east and west Pakistan (*MC* 265). But it is not just India that has marked Saleem Sinai; he is making his mark on India, as well. In fact, to hear Saleem tell it, the entire history of the nation, in its infinite complexity, comes down to this simple rule of inverted cause and effect: "Everything that happened, happened because of me" (*MC* 151). The triggering off of the violence that "ended with the partition of the state of Bombay?" "Directly responsible," says Saleem (*MC* 219). Nehru's death? "Can I avoid the conclusion," asks Saleem, "that that, too, was all my fault?" (*MC* 319) The Indo-Pakistani war of 1971? "Even in those depths of my withdrawal from responsibility," confesses Saleem, "I remained responsible" (*MC* 404). Utterly convinced of his being "handcuffed to history, [his] destinies indissolubly chained to those of [his] country" (*MC* 3), Saleem regularly finds himself obliged over the course of his narrative "to accept responsibility for the events of [his] turbulent, fabulous world" (*MC* 309). Notably, in all this talk of handcuffs and chains, we hear the clinking echoes of Nabokov's rhetoric of fate, with each inexorable incident forming another "link in the iron chain of tragic causation" ("Tragedy" 335). In Saleem Sinai, we see a mirror image not only of India, then, but also of Humbert Humbert, both of them "cling[ing] to the same old iron bars of determinism" ("Tragedy" 326). And yet, as in the case of so many of Rushdie's mirrors, this one, too, is inverted; while Humbert's goal is always and above all to disavow responsibility for his actions, Saleem, in contrast, is desperate to take responsibility, not only for his

actions, but for nearly every alteration in the literal and metaphorical atmosphere of the environment he inhabits.

Like Gibreel Farishta's London, Salman Rushdie's India is prone to abrupt and often drastic changes in climate, of both the political and meteorological variety. For this, too, Saleem holds himself accountable, his moods often informing those of the nation as he "warm[s] over all this cold history" (*MC* 216). While Humbert Humbert tried to convince his reader that the weather was plotting against him, Saleem is more interested in showing us how, as Neil Ten Kortenaar writes, "the course of [his] life can be plotted against the weather" (Kortenaar 212). In *Self, Nation, Text in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children*, Kortenaar begins to track how the air quality of India fluctuates with the quality of Saleem's personal circumstances: "In 1956 'unease was in the air'; in April 1965 'the air buzzed with the fallibility of sons'; in late 1970 irritation was 'in the air'" (ibid).[8] Given that his exceptional (and exceptionally large) nose exhibits actual superpowers throughout the novel, it is only appropriate that Saleem exhibits an extreme sensitivity to the odors that permeate the atmosphere, and is constantly commenting on the whiffs of "something hysterical in the air" or "finality in the air" that he detects and affects (*MC* 82, 488). Indicative of Rushdie's habitual blurring of the literal and the metaphorical, the emotionally-infused aura of *Midnight's Children* turns, as Kortenaar likewise points out, "on the two meanings of 'atmosphere': air and mood" (Kortenaar 56). Noting in his book, *The Aesthetics of Atmosphere*, that "the term atmosphere has its origin in the meteorological field and refers to the earth's envelope of air which carries the weather," Gernot Böhme tracks our reappropriation of the word back to the eighteenth century, when it began being used metaphorically "for the emotional tinge of a space" (Böhme 28).

[8] The States Reorganization Act made the Indian air of 1956 uneasy, as the nation faced further fragmentation; in England that same year, however, Parliament was making its first major effort to clear the air, setting a precedent of environmental regulation with the enforcement of the Clean Air Act.

Given Saleem's own investment in confusing the boundary between the literal and metaphorical, it is clear why the air – which operates in both rhetorical registers – would become an especially suitable medium of self-reflection. That said, it is also necessary to acknowledge that for all of his solipsism (something he and Humbert *do* have in common), Saleem is not the only character in *Midnight's Children* who seems to possess some paranormal command over the weather; just as she shared in Saleem's sun-induced confusion, Amina Sinai's mood at another point in the novel proves capable of directly transforming her surrounding environment, as she becomes encased in a "fog of guilt" which could grow so thick that "there were days when you could hardly see her head above her neck!" (*MC* 180) There is a sense here of the weather bending to the collective will – a sense of "the world tak[ing] on the character of the people in it" (Kortenaar 213); but as is now to be expected, the feedback loop of cause and effect perpetuated by this meteorological mirror can become a bit muddled, with people "secreting back into the environment emotions they had first absorbed from it" (ibid). This conceit of "the weather join[ing] in the mêlée" is perhaps most blatant when the atmosphere of India becomes saturated with an unquashable optimism in the midst of the 1962 Sino-Indian war, "curiously triggered off by the defeat of Thag La ridge" (*MC* 256, 343). While the community's hopefulness quite literally fills the air, Saleem complains of feeling as if he'll die of asphyxiation: "The air, thickened by optimism, refused to enter my lungs" (ibid).

Noticeably, the character of the air in the novel is routinely defined by a certain thickness, whether in the event of its being "thick with yells and missiles" or "thick with political, and other, chatter" (*MC* 491, 281). The inevitable byproduct of heat and humidity, this thickness seems to be the defining trait of the Indian atmosphere. Consistent with the perennially glutinous atmosphere of *Midnight's Children*, David Shulman likewise stresses this phenomenon in his travelogue, citing its smothering omnipresence: "One wakes to the thickness. The air is thick, saturated, heavy with heat, dust, light, existence" (Shulman 32). Shulman's own allusion to heaviness here echoes the

lamentations of a lethargic Saleem, weighed down with heat and delirious with sunstroke aboard the deck of that ship, anchored at the edge of the Rann. Staring at other boats through a "heat-haze," Saleem observes, "They seemed to be swimming through a dizzying haze" (*MC* 326). As if the stakes of suffocation and dizziness were not high enough, looking at the world through this "viscous wet heat" (as Shulman refers to it) has other consequences, which Kortenaar calls attention to in his reading of *Midnight's Children*: "The air is often laden with a miasma…that disturbs the perception of reality, and in particular of time" (Kortenaar 212).

If the heat flattens time in *Midnight's Children*, then it is the warm wetness of tropical rain that threatens to stop it completely. We see the first hint of this motif early in the novel, in the form of a broken down clock-tower that, according to Amina Sinai, was hit by a monsoon and never worked again. This detail of a meteorologically-induced disturbance of temporality becomes a prelude to the plot-stopping episode that is "In the Sundarbans," when Saleem – stripped of his memory and identity, now going by "the buddha" – loses himself (literally and metaphorically, as always) to the phantasmagoric chaos of the tropical jungle. Throughout his journey into this heart of darkness, Saleem repeatedly comments on the "historyless anonymity of rain-forests" and the "time shifting sorcery of the forest," concluding that "in the Sundarban time followed unknown laws" (*MC* 414, 423, 422). However, while it is true that the narrative loses track of time during this episode (context clues tell us that several months pass), it is not quite accurate to say that the laws of Rushdie's "dream-forest" are unknown; on the contrary, Saleem is clear in crediting the timelessness of the jungle to its tropical weather conditions. "The days passed," he reports, "dissolving into each other under the force of the returning rain" (*MC* 417).

By now, we are exceedingly well-versed in this move of blaming the weather; not only have we been through iterations of it with Forster, Woolf, and Nabokov, but we've also seen how profoundly the Indian heat compromised the constitution of Saleem's Sinai's body, as well as that of

his work. But perhaps more than any other of these examples, the Sundarbans episode is comparable to Rushdie's politically charged satire of climate determinism in *The Satanic Verses*, wherein Gibreel Farishta finds fault with the weather of London for posing this same threat of indistinguishableness, citing the "satanic confusions" of its constant rain (*SV* 364). As with Gibreel Farishta's tropicalization of dreary London, Saleem's dissolution in this "forest of illusions" is illustrative of Rushdie's habit of using the weather as an instrument of imperialist critique (*MC* 423). Just as Gibreel embraced the conceit of climate determinism to the point of absurdity, Rushdie's exaggerated depiction of the Sundarbans as ground zero of utter confusion and inevitable madness likewise leans into a stereotype of jungle fever that we might find – and that he no doubt found – in the colonial fiction of Conrad or Kipling.[9] And again, rather than debunk this notion of labyrinthine jungle, Rushdie hyperbolizes the conceit, the exotic trees of his Sundarbans growing to such heights as to swallow Saleem and his three companions (Ayooba, Farooq, and Shaheed Dar) whole, as they succumb to "turbid, miasmic state of mind which the jungle induced" (*MC* 417).

In what is evidently becoming a pattern, however, the Sundarbans episode does not simply speak to the author's inclination to invoke climate determinism: rather, as in the case of Gibreel and his incantatory tropicalization of London, it epitomizes his habit of inverting it. Because, after all, these two passages share another noteworthy parallel, with the tropicalization of the Sundarbans in *Midnight's Children* also being presented as the direct result of human meddling. In this case, it is Ayooba who, in breaking down and weeping "like a monsoon," somehow causes a monsoon to sweep through the jungle, the water from the skies mimicking the water from his eyes (*MC* 415). We're told: "Ayooba Baloch cried without stopping for three entire hours or days or weeks, until the rain began and made his tears unnecessary; and Shaheed Dar heard himself saying, 'Now look what

[9] Although Saleem notes that the jungle is "so thick that history has hardly ever found a way in" (*MC* 413), there is a long history of literature that goes inside the jungle. For a full exploration of the representations of the jungle as a primeval site of delirium in the twentieth-century novel, see Charlotte Roger's *Jungle Fever: Exploring Madness and Medicine in Twentieth-Century Tropical Narratives*.

you started, man, with your crying"'(ibid). Strange as it is, this notion of an ocean of tears is not unfamiliar; in flooding the Sundarbans with his crying, Ayooba operates as Rushdie's reimaging of Alice, whose own adventure in Wonderland involved crying a pool of tears that nearly drowned her, only to ultimately become the mode of her salvation. An instantiation of the pathetic fallacy at its most extreme, this monsoon of tears that Ayooba cries in his fit of emotion exemplifies Rushdie's blurring of the line between climate determinism and his determined climates in *Midnight's Children*, whilst simultaneously suggesting that such a thing is only possible in fairy tales. And indeed, prone as it is to this inverted causality and these meteorological mood swings, the India of *Midnight's Children* emerges retrospectively as but a prototype, the earliest iteration of Rushdie's preoccupation with this entanglement of individuals and their environment. While we see him toying with these ideas in *Midnight's Children* and returning to them in *The Satanic Verses*, it is not until *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* that Rushdie fully commits to this fantasy of a world in which the border between inner and outer weather is erased entirely.

Written during the years immediately following *The Satanic Verses* controversy and Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa against Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is at once the author's most and least overtly political novel – an allegory of the dangers of censorship and the destructiveness of ideological divisiveness disguised as a fairy-tale. Though *Haroun* fits more comfortably in the genre of children's books written for adults (a favorite for Rushdie, for whom all roads – yellow brick and otherwise – lead back to *The Wizard of Oz*), Rushdie wrote the novel for his son, Zafar, from whom he was separated when he was forced into hiding. As such, the plot tells of the tale of the great (but now silenced) storyteller Rahsid Khalifa and his son, Haroun, as they venture through enchanted lands trying to restore his gift of gab. Notably, the first province they visit is characterized by its markedly temperamental weather patterns. There, the initial unhappiness of the night air generates a "mist of misery," which abruptly turns into a "harsh, hot wind" as this sadness gives way to the

frustrations of the characters (*HSS* 47). Almost immediately, Haroun suspects that he must be in Moody Land. "The Tale of the Moody Land," we're told, "was one of Rashid Khalifa's best-loved stories. It was the story of a magical country that changed constantly, according to the moods of its inhabitants" (ibid). In normalizing the aberration that was India's mirroring of Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children*, Moody Land represents what looks to be Rushdie's ultimate inversion of climate determinism:

> In the Moody Land, the sun would shine all night if there were enough joyful people around, and it would go on shining until the endless sunshine got on their nerves; then an irritable night would fall, a night full of mutterings and discontent, in which the air felt too thick to breath. And when people got angry the ground would shake; and when people were muddled or uncertain about things the Moody Land got confused as well – the outlines of its buildings and lamp-posts and motor-cars got smudgy, like paintings whose colors had run, and at such time it could be difficult to make out where one thing ended and another began… (*HSS* 48)

In breaking down the rules of Moody Land, Rushdie is effectively describing the full breakdown of the boundary between inner and outer weather. This exploration of borders and the ways in which the weather can muddle them is made manifest in the behavior of Moody Land when its citizens become confused and its very contours become smudged. Reminiscent of its blurring function in *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie's use of the ellipsis here – which, rather than forcing a full stop, simply lets this sentence melt into the next – underscores the narration's observation of the difficulty of telling where one thing ends and the other begins. And as in *Midnight's Children*, this haziness is associated with the viciousness of the atmosphere; the "too thick to breathe" air of Moody Land is more than vaguely evocative of the thick air that nearly asphyxiates Saleem. In fact, so smothering is the thickness of Rushdie's air that it knows no national or narrative bounds; for this quality suffuses the atmosphere of *The Satanic Verses* as well, particularly "in the afternoon heat when the air turned glutinous" (*SV* 22). As Gibreel sees it, London is just another of Rushdie's moody lands, "refus[ing] to submit to the dominion of the cartographers, changing shape at will and without warning" (*SV* 337).

Resistant as it is to the dominion of cartographers, there is some indication that the inhabitants of Moody Land proper could anticipate its meteorological shape-shifting, contingent as it is on their own emotional well-being. Although, again, even the seemingly unidirectional causality of Moody Land is blurrier than its premise would initially suggest. As is clearly outlined (perhaps the only thing) in the Moody Land guidelines, yes, a feeling of collective joyousness directly results in constant sunshine; however, it is also specified that the weather will turn when – which is to say, *because* – this endless sunshine gets on the nerves of the people, thus bringing about a viscous night of irritability. In Moody Land, then, we discover another version of Rushdie's increasingly muddled brand of climate determin(ed)ism, wherein individuals and the environment take turns in a perpetual feedback loop of cause and effect. Alternatively, we might think of the magical causality of Moody Land more like another of Rushdie's broken mirrors, its weather and its inhabitants each the slightly distorted image of the other. Perhaps not just a mirror, then, but a mirage.[10]

In all fairness, even the fact of Moody Land as a geographical reality remains illusory throughout the passage. Though Haroun is convinced of its existence, when he asks his father whether he is correct in his suspicion – if this moody land is, in fact, *the* Moody Land – Rashid replies, "The Moody Land was only a story, Haroun…Here we're somewhere real" (*HSS* 48). Refusing to accept this answer and its disastrous implication of Rashid's disillusionment, Haroun attempts to convert his father to his belief in Moody Land by testing his hypothesis on Dull Lake, the fate of which, Haroun notes, is most certainly not contained in its name: "In fact," he exclaims, "it's positively Tempermental!" (*HSS* 47) Given the potential mirage of its behavioral causality, there

[10] Seemingly taking his cue from the ancient Vedantist philosophy of *maya*, which conceives of the physical world as a sort of magic show (and which Saleem explicitly references in noting the illusoriness of reality), Rushdie regularly describes the spaces and places that his characters inhabit as mirages: In *The Enchantress of Florence*, Sikri is introduced as a city that "would always look like a mirage" (*EF* 27); in *The Satanic Verses*, Gibreel moves between the "pandemonium of mirages" that is foggy London and sandy, shape-shifting Jahilia, that "mirage of a city shin[ing] below him in the sun" (*SV* 95); and in *Midnight's Children*, there is the quintessential "city of mirages," Karachi, "a hidden desert" whose residents "had only the slipperiest grasp on reality, and were therefore willing to turn to their leaders for advice on what was real and what was not" (*MC* 353).

is a certain irony to Haroun trying to prove his point by citing the mimicry of a body of water. But prove his point, he does. Recalling the beginning of the *The Tempest*, the scene opens with all of our characters aboard a boat on Dull Lake, which is becoming increasingly tempestuous, "as if it were responding to Buttoo's fury (and also, in point of fact, to Haroun's growing anger at Buttoo's behaviour)" (*HSS* 49). When the conditions become dire among the shrieks and yelps ("the rougher the waters became, and the hotter and more violent the wind"), Haroun puts his theory into practice, instructing everyone in his company to calm down and be completely quiet; sure enough, "at once the boiling breeze fell away, the thunder and lightning stopped," seemingly legitimizing the story of Moody Land and successfully convincing Rashid of its twisted causality (ibid). The all-too-appropriately named Snooty Buttoo, however, remains un-persuaded; evidently the proxy of Humean skepticism in the text, Snooty accuses Haroun of misreading causality into mere correlation.[11] "Surely you don't believe the lad's hocusing and pocusing?" asks Snooty, at once shaming Rashid for his gullibility and rhetorically dismissing Haroun's nonsensical thinking on the grounds of its being magical.

Confronted with the fantasy of an (over)determined climate, Snooty responds with what he insists is the reality of weather's randomness: "Freak weather conditions came, and then went. No more to be said" (*HSS* 50). Hard as he tries to shut down this conversation, partitioning individuals and their environments once and for all, Snooty remains the minority opinion in Rushdie's texts. Averse as Salman Rushdie is to the blatantly problematic notion of climate determinism, his chronic engagement with it would imply that he does subscribe to a fairly fundamental and widely held belief about the weather; specifically, he cannot seem to shake the deeply felt, but perhaps too complicated

[11] Philosopher David Hume has long been the touchstone for causal skeptics, having explored the topic in both *A Treatise on Human Nature* (1738) and *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748). Famously, Hume doubted the necessity of causal connection, arguing that cause and effect cannot be proven according to reason, but rather, can only ever be inferred through our experience of what he calls the "constant conjunction" (Hume 61). Insofar as causation is, for Hume, essentially a matter of belief, this speaks, further, to Buttoo's instinct to scoff at Rashid for believing the theory of necessary connection that Haroun has projected onto the behavior of Dull Lake.

to articulate, sense that there exists an undeniable connection between inner and outer weather. Insofar as this link remains a matter of some mystery, it supports what I argue is Rushdie's notion that there is something about the mutually determinative relationship between the metaphorical weather of one's psyche and the literal weather of the physical world that, in the end, only the magical causality of nature's sorcery can explain.

In all his talk of hocusing and pocusing, Snooty scoffs at the notion that the weather could be capable of pulling off a very good magic trick, let alone that it might be truly magical. But this is, after all, precisely how the weather performs in Rushdie's narratives. Most explicitly, the use of the phrase "hocusing and pocusing" in *Haroun* directly recalls the trickery of Gibreel Farishta's tropicalization of London in *The Satanic Verses*, wherein Rushdie casts a similar spell using this same language. But it is also evocative of that "magical jungle" of *Midnight's Children*, where we left Saleem and his comrades stranded, the water level continuing to rise with the torrent of Ayooba's tears (*MC* 419). In her reading of the scene, Ursula Kluwick likewise takes note of the situation's evident hocusing and pocusing, citing "the magical rather than logical cause-and-effect relationship between Ayooba's tears and the rain" (Kluwick 74). Though Kluwick's wording positions the two modes as mutually exclusive, Rushdie's magic causality is not apart from logic, but rather, is itself a alternative sort of logic: his is the "logic of the jungle" (*MC* 415); the logic of "see[ing] causal links where reason would see none" (Kluwick 74); the logic of a climatic determinism so radical that the differentiation of causes and effects has been made impossible.

In the psychedelic pandemonium of the tropical wilderness, nearly everything becomes more confused and confusing; and yet, in their extremity, the Sundarbans and its magical monsoon of tears help clarify the stakes of Rushdie's interminably temperamental weather. For all intents and purposes, the jungle marks a nadir of self-dispossession for Saleem, who has been divested of his name; his memories; his identity. He is, at this point, a man on the run, a refugee, completely

powerless over his fate. And this, of course, is Saleem Sinai's worst nightmare; he, who admits, "above all things, I fear absurdity" (*MC* 3). Throughout *Midnight's Children*, Saleem is vocal in expressing what he calls "his desperation for meaning" (*MC* 409). From the start, he is candid in recognizing this narrative reconstruction of his life for what it is: an exercise in meaning making. After all, what better way to assert dominion over one's world than to shape it into a story? Well, Rushdie's causally anarchic weather seems to say, perhaps there is one better way. To determine rather than be determined by the climate; to be the producer rather than the product of one's environment; to cause the monsoon rather than simply be swept away by it: it is through these inversions of nature's most basic laws that Rushdie's characters are able claim agency in a world bent on subjugating them.

Hopeless as his situation seems, Saleem does eventually manage to escape the atemporal miasma of the Sundarbans; or, more precisely, he is ejected from its territory, "impelled forwards and still forwards by the unimaginable power of the wave" that Ayooba's monsoon of tears has wrought (*MC* 423). This magic carpet of a tidal wave, which carries the characters into that whole new world of 1971 Bangladesh, is consistent with Saleem's conception of his own sovereignty over the weather. Not unlike the archangelic Gibreel Farishta, Saleem justifies his influence as nomenclaturally determined, conveniently reaffirming his theory of fateful names; "Sinai," Saleem tells us, "contains Ibn Sina, master magician" (*MC* 349). Not only that, but as Saleem reminds his reader on no fewer than three occasions, his nominal proximity to the Mesopotamian moon god, Sin, accounts for his power of "acting-at-a-distance and shifting the tides of the world" (*MC* 160, 199, 349). And yet, despite sitting (alongside Gibreel) right around that intersection of man, magician, and god, Saleem Sinai has nothing at all to do with the tidal wave that flushes him out of the jungle. In fact, when he looks to the local weather reports of October 1971 to substantiate his story of

torrential expulsion, Saleem is reluctantly "bound to admit…that there was no tidal wave recorded that month" (*MC* 423).

Implicit in this rare moment of meteorological fact checking is the suggestion that the magical monsoon of the Sundarbans is but an illusion, unimaginable because it is imaginary, no more real than the trick that the shifty sun played on Amina Sinai when she moved to Delhi. In the case of Amina, the novel explains away the illusion of the sun with the reality of her own position having changed; Saleem, too, manages to reposition himself, effectively moving out of the Sundarbans, but the undeniable reality of this effect only serves to reinforce the magical causality of the monsoon. Evidently, Rushdie is using the weather to play tricks not just on his characters, but with his plotting; for, it is not only Saleem who becomes stuck in the Sundarbans, but Rushdie as well, whose narrative comes to a full stop in the timelessness of that illusive jungle. What they need is a miracle. What they get is a *deus ex machina* in the form of the weather. Like Alice's escape via the pool of her own tears, the monsoon that Ayooba cries is the stuff of fairy tales. Taking its cue from this favorite genre of Rushdie's, the final section will attempt to sneak a peek, as Amina does, at the grinding of the author's narrative machinery – its natural disguise distracting us from the fantasy of strict cause and effect and the fiction of closure. For, as has become increasingly clear, in their reframing of tropicalized metropolises and temperamental monsoons as moments of dexterous authorial sleight of hand, Rushdie's tales of moody lands confirm what we have known about literary weather since at least 1900, when that preternatural cyclone first transported Dorothy into the wonderful wizardry of Oz: that it marks the site of a magical causality in the modern plot.

Weather ex Machina

Impossible things happen constantly, and quite plausibly, out in the open under the midday sun.
– Salman Rushdie on Gabriel García Márquez

As the first major weather event of twentieth-century novel, the cyclone that L. Frank Baum conjured to carry Dorothy Gale to Oz has all the markings of Prospero's seventeenth-century storm. As in *The Tempest*, Baum's plot is initiated by the occurrence of a seemingly natural disaster with a most unnatural consequence, each bringing the characters to a strange and unfamiliar land of enchantments. And as in the case of *The Tempest*, Baum is careful to code his conspicuously determined weather as accidental, stressing the randomness of Dorothy coming to Oz "by the chance of a cyclone" (Baum 22). This emphasis on the contingency of the weather and the dependence of Dorothy's fate on it is crucial, both in regards to the notion of a formal climatic determinism and to the recurring questions of agency and personal responsibility that this dissertation has been exploring. Notably, when met with the gratitude of the Munchkins, who credit the death of the wicked Witch of the East to her sorcery, Dorothy promptly denies her role in the incident, essentially scapegoating the weather via the novel's free indirect narration: after all, Dorothy was just "an innocent, harmless little girl, who had been carried by a cyclone many miles from home; and she had never killed anything in all her life" (Baum 13). In its repurposing of meteorological phenomena as at once a mode of emplotment and a means of challenging individual autonomy, *The Wizard of Oz* sets the precedent for the role of the weather in the novel as we have seen it elapse over the course of the twentieth century. However, while the cyclone's impact can be felt in the works of each of the previous authors, nowhere does Dorothy's gale have more of an effect than on Salman Rushdie.

Given Rushdie's personal history of making new homes in strange lands, it is perhaps not surprising that he would have been drawn as a child (and back again as an adult) to *The Wizard of Oz*,

which he singles out as his "very first literary influence" ("Magic" 9). In his essay, "A Short Text About Magic," Rushdie recalls the inspired title of his first story, "Over the Rainbow," and explicitly analogizes the England of his adolescent mind to Oz. He would have to learn the hard way (as Gibreel Farishta likewise must) that with its impossibly dreary weather, England more closely resembles the terminal greyness of the Kansas prairie than it does that Emerald City, in all of its Technicolor glory.[12] I purposely invoke this instance of movie magic here because Rushdie is clear in specifying that it was not Baum's book, but rather, the 1939 film version of *The Wizard of Oz* that had such a profound impact on him. And insofar as it is important to Rushdie to make this distinction, the differences between the book and its adaptation also take on greater significance.

As far as this project is concerned, surely the most relevant of these deviations involves the deliberate poisoning of the poppy field by the wicked Witch of the West, whose drugging of Dorothy into a deep sleep nearly ends our heroine's quest for good, effectively threatening the forward momentum of plot itself. Departing from the details of the book, the film resolves this obstacle with the addition of a second exceedingly strange weather event, as Glenda waves her wand and – abracadabra! – a light flurry of snow falls, immediately restoring Dorothy and the Lion to their waking (and walking) state. The curative effect of the snow is nothing short of miraculous; and rightly so, for if the bible taught us anything, it is that weather mastery is next to godliness. And yet, the text explicitly codes Glenda, "the Good Witch," in non-religious terms, relegating all of her supernatural authority to the realm of the magical. Anticipating the ambiguous divinity and meteorological hocusing and pocusing of Gibreel Farishta and Saleem Sinai, *The Wizard of Oz* thus provides a model for Rushdie's devising of magically manufactured weather as the *deus ex machina* of

[12] Interestingly, in Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, the sun has an identical effect on the landscape of Kansas as the fog and drizzle does in overcast London: "[Dorothy] could see nothing but the great grey prairie on every side…The sun had baked the ploughed land into a grey mass, with little cracks running through it. Even the grass was not green, for the sun had burned the tops of the long blades until they were the same grey colour to be seen everywhere. Once the house had been painted, but the sun blistered the paint and the rains washed it away, and now the house was a dull and grey as everything else" (Baum 2). That said, in Baum's book, Emerald City is hardly any better, its vibrant color just another optical illusion (a trick of the green-tinted eyeglasses that everyone there must wear).

a world abandoned by gods. Indeed, as the title of his essay implies, *The Wizard of Oz* is, above all, a text about magic for Rushdie, and he revels in the observation that "the film is breezily godless," with the hole in the story that might once have been reserved for God now overflowing with witches and fairies instead ("Magic" 12).[13]

Salman Rushdie knows all about god-shaped holes. In *Midnight's Children*, the patriarch Dr. Aadam Aziz is defined by a loss of faith that leaves him with "a hole in him, a vacancy in a vital inner chamber" (*MC* 4). According to Rushdie in his essay, "The Book Burning," he, too, "possess[es] the same god-shaped hole," evidently a consequence of his inability "to accept the unarguable absolutes of religion" ("Book Burning" 1989). Even amongst our coterie of avowedly secular novelists, Rushdie stands out as an extreme example here, at once the most and least devout of the bunch; for, in his constant disavowal of religion in his writing there is also the regular reminder of his preoccupation with it. In addition to the aforementioned "The Book Burning," Rushdie's complicated relationship with religion and all of its trappings serves as the topic of a series of essays that he wrote in 1990 (just after the fatwa), including "In Good Faith," "In God We Trust," and "Is Nothing Sacred?" Like Aadam Aziz, Rushdie considers himself marked by the cavity created when, as he writes, "God, Satan, Paradise and Hell all vanished one day in my fifteenth year" (*IH* 377). Corroborating this story elsewhere and firmly denying membership to all organized religions, he confirms, "I believe in no god, and have done so since I was a young adolescent" (*IH* 405). Although Rushdie insists that from this time on, he has "thought of [himself] as a wholly secular person," even this abrupt loss of faith could not rid him of his rhetoric of belief (*IH* 377). Notice, for example, the syntactically peculiar placement of the negative in Rushdie's profession of disbelief; rather than simply stating that he *does not believe* in any god, Rushdie frames his godlessness as its own

[13] As if to corroborate the Munchkin's characterization of her, Rushdie sees Dorothy as a sorceress of sorts, as well; noting her fateful surname, Rushdie suggests that "in many ways Dorothy is the gale blowing through" the text ("Magic" 17).

creed, effectively affirming his belief even as he denounces it: to believe in no god, as he puts it, is still to believe. And, in fact, the author seems to concede this much. While Rushdie describes himself as "living in the aftermath of the death of god," he nonetheless reasons, "It did not seem to me, however, that my ungodliness, or rather my post-godliness, need necessarily bring me into conflict with belief" (*IH* 416-17). This proclivity towards making believe in a world without god goes a long way towards accounting for Rushdie's devotion to the magical realism of fairy tales; and specifically, to the "joyful and almost complete secularism" of *The Wizard of Oz*, which in its swapping out of deities for witches, preserves all of the mystery of divine intervention with none of the divinity ("Magic" 12).

In his book, *Realist Magic*, Timothy Morton takes as his premise the presupposition that all works of fiction are necessarily explorations of causality. However, the trouble with these narrativized deconstructions of cause and effect, he reasons, "is that they edit out a quintessential element of mystery" (Morton 17). In prioritizing understanding, "causality theories are preoccupied with explaining things away, with demystification" (ibid). This compulsion towards explanation emerges as a concern for Rushdie as well, who, despite his dogmatic secularism, remains bewitched by the mysteries of faith. In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, no doubt his most earnestly magical novel, Rushdie concocts some bureaucratic jargon for such causal conundrums, officially referring to them as P2C2E: "Processes Too Complicated To Explain" (*HSS* 57). In offloading these processes onto a group of story technicians to whom his titular protagonist has no access, Rushdie effectively sidesteps any theorizing of causality, resisting what Morton identifies as the temptation to "show you how the magic trick is done" (Morton 17). More than that, by maintaining the illusion that the P2C2E are technological in nature – which is to say that they could, *technically*, be explained – but refusing to reveal the exact nature of that technology, Rushdie also appears to affirm Morton's hypothesis that "something crucial about causality resides at the level of the magic trick itself"

(Morton 17). Insofar as Morton's object of inquiry here is realist magic, it is perhaps not entirely surprising that he would come to a conclusion resembling that of the preeminent precursor of magical realism, Jorge Luis Borges. It was in his 1932 essay, "Narrative Art and Magic," that Borges first articulated this connection, proclaiming, "Magic is the crown or nightmare of the law of cause and effect, not its contradiction" (*Selected Nonfiction* 80). For Borges, as for Rushdie, the "unique causality" that we refer to as magic is the reality of all narrative fiction, though it is typically only the more fantastic genres that readily admit it (*Seven Nights* 51). Making way for Rushdie's own reverence for irreligious belief, Borges writes of magic in "Seven Nights": "It is the belief that besides the causal relations we know, there is another causal relation. That relationship may be due to accidents, to a ring, to a lamp" (ibid). In short: to a P2C2E. As conceived of by Borges and developed by Rushdie, magic thus emerges as what must surely be Morton's ideal theory of causality, always providing an explanation without ever truly explaining. It is a theory of causality that is multi-directional and entirely tautological, best summarized by *Midnight's Children*'s Saleem Sinai: "It happened that way because that's how it happened" (*MC* 530).

It is clear enough why a man like Salman Rushdie, a man as devoutly imaginative as he is dogmatically secular, would be drawn to magic as the dominant mode of causality in his texts; in the circularity of its logic and its overt demand for the suspension of disbelief, magical causality excuses the unnaturalness of Rushdie's purposeful confusion of causes and effects. What is more striking, it seems to me, is that a man like Salman Rushdie, a man of reason with all of the epistemological enlightenment that modern meteorology affords, should repeatedly choose the weather as the instrument of this magical causality. For all intents and purposes, the weather had become, by the latter half of the twentieth century, a process just uncomplicated enough to explain; and yet, time and again, we see Rushdie casting science aside, his weather happening the way it does because that's how it happens. Implicit in this inverted logic is the suggestion that, in fact, the more we learn about

the weather, the more magical it appears; that for all of the advancements in meteorology over the course of the twentieth century, the weather's mystery has only become more acute, its causes and effects still largely unpredictable.

We see the cognitive dissonance produced by this wonderful unrealism of the weather in the Scarecrow's reaction to Glenda's magically manufactured snow in *The Wizard of Oz*. No sooner does the snow begin to fall than the Scarecrow begins narrating the three consecutive stages of his thought process aloud: "Maybe that'll help," he says immediately, instinctively expressing his own wishful thinking, along with that of the audience; then, catching himself and the impracticality of supposing that weather would have any such corrective effect, he hedges, "Oh, but couldn't help"; and finally, realizing that, in fact, the snow *is* having precisely this corrective effect, he exclaims, "Does help!" (Fleming et all 1939) Within a matter of seconds, the Scarecrow registers the preposterousness of the weather's behavior, and then promptly accepts it, no questions asked. Notably, Rushdie does off-handedly voice the glaring question raised by this "mysterious snowfall" in his essay, only to make like the Scarecrow and mindlessly press on: "(why *does* snow overcome the poppie's poison?)" Rushdie wonders parenthetically, at once struck by the clear contrivance of the solution and entirely uninterested in challenging it ("Magic" 50). Insofar as he remains committed to his own willing suspension of disbelief, Rushdie encourages his reader to be likewise satisfied with the little the film gives us in the way of an explanation, as the newly awakened (though far from woke) Lion simply says, "Unusual weather we're having, ain't it?" (Fleming et al. 1939). Indeed it is. Indeed it has been. And perhaps it was in our getting to used to the unusualness of the weather that it became such a successful successor to the *deus ex machina*, its magical nature making the illusoriness of its narrative trickery something we can believe in.

"As the sun rose to its zenith," writes Rushdie in *The Enchantress of Florence*, "the great bludgeon of the day's heat pounded the flagstones…weakening the border between sanity and

delirium, between what was fanciful and what was real" (*EF* 27). That even (and perhaps especially) the least metaphorical weather is as fantastic as it is real speaks to the trope's uncanny ability to naturalize the unavoidable construct of narrative emplotment. As this chapter has shown, in the most infamously problematic weather – that inescapable heat of the harsh tropical sun – Rushdie thus finds the solution to the Aristotelian partitioning of his plots. In *Midnight's Children*, he manages to simultaneously satirize imperialist notions of climatic determinism and to repurpose the blurring effects of the heat (the source of much heatstroke and many mirages) as a means of confusing his characters, jumbling chronology, and muddling cause and effect. But still Saleem must face that final and firmest border of *the end*, the point at which all plots must conclude. Like Saleem, Rushdie himself has spent the duration of the narrative writing against his ending. Given that this dissertation opens with Forster, who famously commented upon the artifice and arbitrariness of narrative beginnings, it is only fitting that it should close with Rushdie and his equal but opposite aversion to the contrivance of narrative endings.

As Saleem's likening of himself to Scheherazade would suggest, this disinclination towards finality is informed, as so much of the author's work is, by Rushdie's other favorite fairy tale; or rather, by his favorite thousand and one other fairy tales – those making up *The Arabian Nights' Entertainment.*[14] So-called for the supposed number of nights over which the condemned Princess Scheherazade is able to drag out her storytelling, *One Thousand and One Nights* (as Rushdie typically refers to it) is the ultimate elliptical text: not only because its episodes flow together without clear causality; not only because its chasms cultivate suspense; but also because, in its commitment to narrative deferral, it imagines what it might look like to put a "To be continued…" in place of where

[14] On BBC's "Desert Island Discs," Rushdie chose *One Thousand and One Nights* as the single book he would bring to keep him occupied whilst stranded, reasoning that is the story "contains all other stories" (Rushdie 1998). Unsurprisingly, nearly all of his own stories contain allusions to it. Most obvious, perhaps, is Rushdie's recent novel, *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty Eight Nights*, the very title of which adds up to that magical number; similarly conspicous, the protagonists of *Two Years*, *Shalimar the Clown*, and of course, *Midnight's Children* are all explicitly compared to Scheherazade.

an ending should be. Naturally, the name of the text contains its fate; as Bruno Bettelheim clarifies in *The Uses of Enchantment*, "The number 1001 is not to be taken literally. On the contrary, 'thousand' in Arabic means 'innumerable,' so 1001 signifies an infinite number" (Bettelheim 86). Mesmerized as Rushdie is by this fantasy of a never-ending story, however, he knows that it is only a fantasy. And Saleem, digressive as he is, understands this as well. But, "…how to end?" (*MC* 531) As Saleem narrates his own process of running through the possible ways of ending his story – happily? in melancholy? – he eventually comes to the inevitable conclusion of what all narrative conclusions must be: made up. "Bowing to the ineluctable Padma-pressures of what-happened-nextism" once and for all, Saleem closes his tale by conjuring up a imagined scenario of what will happen to him next (*MC* 38); it is an ending about endings, both because Saleem dies in it, trampled to dust in the Indian heat, and because it performs the contrivance of narrative closure itself.

In the final pages of *Midnight's Children*, the open-ended reality of history comes into conflict with the magical resolution of the fairy tale. Perhaps because the Aristotelian plot is itself a fairy tale, it is only in Rushdie's fairy tale that we find it. Muddled as the titular *Sea of Stories* itself is – "made up of a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents" – the clearly demarcated beginning, middle, and end of *Haroun*'s linear plot distinguish it as a structural outlier for Rushdie (*HSS* 72). Still, though the clarity of its narration is new, the threat of its plot is all too familiar: a partition. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* tells the tale of a land divided; on a magical Moon called Kahani (whose name happens to mean "story"), the cities of Gup and Chup have been partitioned, kept apart with "an unbreakable (and also invisible) Wall of Force" (*HSS* 80). Finally, in Gup and Chup, we find those "stark, imperative oppositions" that Gibreel Farishta so desired: "How many opposites are at war in this battle between Gup!" Haroun marvels. "Gup is bright and Chup is dark. Gup is warm and Chup is freezing cold. Gup is all chattering and noise, whereas Chup is silent as a shadow. Guppees love the Ocean, Chupwalas try to poison it" (*HSS* 125). But these partisan lands are not all

they're cracked up to be; as is gestured to in Haroun's cataloguing of their distinctions, there is a violent undercurrent to this forced separation of Gup and Chup, and the sea of stories is at stake. In *Haroun*, we are presented, yet again, with an allegory of the perniciousness of arbitrary borders and the destructiveness of artificial differentiation. And in *Haroun*, yet again, Rushdie's solution is dissolution. As in *The Satanic Verses* and *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie resolves the partitioned plot of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* by tropicalizing it.

"If only the sun would come out," thinks Haroun, stranded behind the enemy lines of Chup: "They'd all melt away, they'd become flat and shapeless, like the shadows they really are" (*HSS* 166). The "they" Haroun is speaking of here are the shadow soldiers of Chup, who have been ordered to destroy the sea of stories (in all of its perfectly muddled multitudinousness) by Khattum-Shud, "the Arch-Enemy of all stories" (*HSS* 39). Because his evil plan involves the artificial ending of stories, Khattum-Shud's name is used throughout the narrative "at the finish of everything," essentially coming to mean "The End" (ibid). Thus, Haroun's struggle against Khattum-Shud comes to represent Rushdie's own struggle against the ineluctability of narrative endings. As it was for Saleem in the Sundarbans and for Dorothy in the poppy field before him, the situation seems hopeless. And, as it was for Saleem and for Dorothy before him, the situation is resolved through the trickery of a *weather ex machina*. When Haroun finds a forgotten bottle of Wishwater in his pocket, he knows exactly what he has to do: he closes his eyes tight and conjures that "shadow-frying sun" that the narrator of *Shame* cautioned us about several novels ago (*S* 124). Sure enough, Haroun is able to wish the sun up, such that it shines down in full force – that "full, hot, noonday sun" – on the perpetually dark shadowland of Chup (*HSS* 171).[15] The effect is swift and predictable, for we know

[15] Curiously, although the very premise of Wishwater is inherently fantastical, the novel attributes no small amount of control to Haroun in his summoning of the sun, as Butt observes when looking on: "This will be pretty interesting. It's your willpower against the Processes Too Complicated To Explain" (*HSS* 171). Butt effectively sets this up as one of Gibreel's stark, imperative oppositions (in this case, of human agency vs. a more powerful supernatural force like god or fate); but, this binary seems to be made in bad faith, as the magic of the Wishwater is itself a process too complicated to explain, and Rushdie's reliance on it to help Haroun undermines the humanism of the text.

by now what happens to Rushdie's moody lands in the heat: "The sunlight hit them; and then both Chupwalas and horses grew fuzzy at the edges, and began, as it seemed, to *melt*…" (*HSS* 172). Rushdie's return to formlessness here is a return to form as well, as he again deploys the ellipsis to enact in his prose the same melting that is rapidly blurring the borders of Chup. "Shadows could not remain solid in that brightness," Rushdie writes, and even Khattum-Shud's ship "had started to melt, had started losing its shape, as if it were a mountain of ice-cream left out in the sun by mistake" (*HSS* 173). Of course, there is no escaping shape – *Midnight's Children* taught us that. And *Lolita*…and *To the Lighthouse*…and *A Passage to India* before that. But just as "the sunlight had undone the black magic of the Cultmaster Khattum-Shud," Rushdie finds a solution in the problematic heat, repurposing its illusory properties one last time to distort our sense of an ending (ibid).

"*And we all lived happily*…at any rate, even without the traditional last sentence fiction of fairy-tales," interjects Saleem Sinai, midway through his narrative, "my story does indeed end in fantasy" (*MC* 373). The ending of *Midnight's Children* is bound to be a fantasy inasmuch as the ending of any novel is bound to be a fantasy; that is to say, the fantasy of the so-called happy ending in fiction is not in its happiness, but in its ending. As Saleem's recitation of that most conventional closing line trails off, he puts an ellipsis (of course) where the "ever after" should be; though, in a way, this replacement is entirely appropriate, since the series of dots – in its rebellion against the full stop of a period – instantiates the same implied, unending continuity of "ever after." Reminiscent of the figurative infiniteness of the number, 1001, the fairy-tale (un)ending likewise signifies our unfulfillable desire for *real* narrative open-endedness, for a truly mimetic form of fiction that could represent the perpetual *in medias res*-ness of life itself. But, as Frank Kermode reminds us in *The Sense of an Ending*, "No novel can avoid being in some sense what Aristotle calls 'a completed action'" (*Ending* 138). In other words, novels have beginning, middles, and ends, "even if the world has not"

(ibid). Certainly, Salman Rushdie knows this as well as anyone, evidenced by his habitual commenting on the contrivance of the neatly resolved plot: "I think it's dishonest to create a happy ending where none exists in the world," says Rushdie, alluding in a 2005 interview to the fiction of closure (Tonkin 2005). And yet, Rushdie continues to believe that the lie of fiction – rightly told – can tell the truth, and thus happily creates these endings, as we see in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. And "create" is the operative word here, because, as the Walrus explains to Haroun regarding the possibility of his own happy ending, "We at P2C2E House have learnt how to synthesize them artificially. In plain language: *we can make them up*" (*HSS* 201). We recognize, of course, that this is what Rushdie has done with Haroun's tropicalizing of Chup, simply opting for some magical weather to naturalize the artifice of the plot's synthetic resolution. Except, while Haroun's summoning of this ersatz heat surely brings happiness to the newly blurred lands of Gup and Chup, it is not, in fact, where his story ends.

Serving as the voice of reason and of Rushdie (better still, of Rushdie's reasoning) in *Haroun*, the Walrus articulates this cardinal rule of narrative fiction and, for that matter, of chronology: "Happy endings must come at the end of something…If they happen in the middle of a story, or an adventure, or the like, all they do is cheer things up for a while" (*HSS* 202). Such is the case for Gibreel Farishta, whose tropicalization of London cannot save him from himself; and such is the case for Haroun, whose tropicalization of Chup does not solve the problems that started him on this adventure in the first place: specifically, that his mother left his father, abandoning them both in their "sad city, the saddest of cities, a city so ruinously sad that it had forgotten its name" (*HSS* 15). But how to resolve the plot once and for all? Recalling the tripartite structure of the seasons in *A Passage to India*, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* does not end with the Hot Weather, but with the rains. Indeed, when Rashid and Haroun return home, it is "raining cats and dogs" and "many of the streets [are] flooded" (*HSS* 207). But that is not all: Haroun's mother has returned; the city has

remembered its name; people are "running and jumping and splashing and falling…and dancing through the flooded, rainy streets" (*HSS* 208). "Has something happened while we've been away?" inquires Rashid, "A miracle, for example?" In his presumption of the miraculous, Rashid invokes that familiar trope of divine providence, upon which the meaningful conclusion of the novel had for so long relied. However, in the given response, that "It's just the rain…It's making everybody happy," Rushdie – indicative of the broader trend in twentieth-century fiction that this dissertation has been exploring – does away with the notion of providentialism once more, turning to the weather instead. It almost seems too good to be true. But, of course, it *is* too good to be true. As Haroun quickly realizes, "It's the Walrus, making my wish come true. There must be artificial happy endings mixed up with the rain…It's all fake" (ibid).

It may be the case that there is no longer a god to come from the machine, but the machinery, Rushdie reminds us, is still very much in operation. As is his way, in *Haroun*, Rushdie literalizes the conceit of authorial machinations by imagining a factory – headed up by the Walrus, the Grand Comptroller of P2C2E – that specializes in the manufacturing not just of classic plots but of the classical plot itself. That the medium of its manufacture is the weather raises an entire separate set of issues for Rushdie, who is, in fact, writing against the backdrop of century in which great strides were made in the production of real fake weather, likely to dire ends.[16] Certainly, in Rushdie's invocation of industrialization and man-made weather, there are shadows of climate engineering and global warming that *Haroun* curiously neglects to shine a light on, despite its protagonist possessing full conjuring control of the sun. Likewise, in the determined climates of *The Satanic Verses* and

[16] For more on humanity's unremitting attempt to manufacture weather and control the climate, see James Rodger Fleming's *Fixing the Sky*. In it, he traces a century-long history of the "scientists, soldiers, and charlatans [who] have hatched schemes to manipulate the weather and climate. Like them, today's aspiring climate engineers wildly exaggerate what is possible, while scarcely considering the political, military, and ethical implications of attempting to manage the world's climate. This is not, in essence, a heroic sage about new scientific discoveries that can save the planet, as many of the participants claim, but a tragicomedy of overreaching, hubris, and self-delusion" (Fleming 2).

Midnight's Children, Rushdie's inversion of cause and effect emerges as a model of anthropocentrism, with the agency of his individual characters having immeasurable impact on their environments.

It bears saying, then, that fascinated as he is with changing climates, Rushdie remains conspicuously unwilling to make his novels about climate change. But even without explicitly engaging it, Rushdie's work anticipates the emergence of eco-criticism, and its ushering in of a new way of looking at and writing on the weather. Hopefully Oscar Wilde (if no one else) can take some comfort in knowing that when we talk about the weather now, we are very much talking about the weather. Useful as it was as a mediating trope throughout the past century, contemporary literature cannot continue to treat the weather as metaphor. And that is our fault. But like everything else in a work of fiction, the weather remains a device. And perhaps it is one deserving of some blame: not just for the moral fuzziness of the English, or for the feverish narration of Saleem Sinai, but for the apparent naturalization of what we all know to be the fiction of cause and effect in the twentieth-century novel. In other words, for marking the site of a collective cover-up on the part of Salman Rushdie, and of Vladimir Nabokov, and of Virginia Woolf, and of E.M. Forster – each of whose process involved emplotting the mysteries and muddles of meteorological phenomena in such a way as to magically resolve a crisis of causality that would be far too complicated to explain

Coda

The rest is weather.
– Toni Morrison, Beloved

In the beginning was the weather. And the weather was God…until it wasn't. As the four chapters of this dissertation have demonstrated, to track the weather of the twentieth-century novel is to witness the secularization of the skies. With mysticism giving way to the science of meteorology, modern authors responded accordingly, systematically evacuating God from the heavens. We saw E.M. Forster set this precedent of displacing God by way of the weather in *A Passage to India*, dubbing it the Alpha and Omega of the whole affair. There is no divine judge to be found in Forster's decidedly "translucent" sky, the utter emptiness of which is characterized by an "impartiality exceeding all" (*PTI* 40). In Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*, this impartiality evolves into outright indifference; as the devout Mrs. Swithin turns her gaze to the sky, searching for "God there, God on his throne," she sees only a distant, vacant cloud – one that "never fell as sun, shadow, or rain upon the world, but disregarded the little coloured ball of earth entirely" (*BA* 23). Unable to reconcile such cruel indifference with his own sense of tragic fatedness, Nabokov's Humbert Humbert resists this narrative of unmotivated weather, building his defense instead on what he insists is *Lolita*'s "plotting sky" (*L* 244). Taking his cue from Edgar Allan Poe, Humbert conjures a choir of envious angels who are determined to spoil the reenactment of his Riviera romance with constant bouts of fog and foul weather. But even Humbert cannot deny that this is a willfully anachronistic reading of the weather, elsewhere conceding to the reality of a "completely translucent sky (through which, however, nothing of importance showed)" (*L* 33). Nabokov's use of "translucent" here echoes Forster's own – each author suggesting the possibility of a concealed divinity only to reveal a god-shaped hole in the celestial space that our deities once occupied. Funny, then, that it should be the "proudly irreligious" Salman Rushdie who, in 1988, would effectively

undo the work of his predecessors by sending a god back into the sky and reinstating his control over the weather (*JA* 314).

Almost. As we saw in our reading of *The Satanic Verses*, Gibreel Farishta is not quite a god, his influence over the weather not quite divine. The ambiguity of Gibreel's (super)human status is critical here, as is the difficulty of discerning the extent to which he is, in fact, responsible for changing the weather in London. Of equal importance, though, particularly in contrast to all of this causal uncertainty, is that the weather in London *does* change. However direct or tangential Gibreel's involvement in the ensuing heatwave, what is undeniable is that the England of *The Satanic Verses* is getting hotter – its temperature, as Rushdie so often reminds us, slowly and inexorably continuing to rise over the course of the novel (*SV* 434, 466). Frequently figured by Rushdie as the element that blurs the border of fantasy and reality, the heat here is effectively doing just that; insofar as its gradually increasing temperature signifies a complex interconnectedness of individual agency and the natural world, *The Satanic Verses*' fantasy of a climate determined by a human with the impact of a god is, in fact, remarkably prescient of our current reality.

In 1968, editor Stuart Brand opened the inaugural issue of the ecologically minded *Whole Earth Catalogue* with a word of advice: "We are as gods and might as well get good at it" (Brand 2).[1] But we didn't get good at it; on the contrary, it turns out we are very bad at being gods. As Alexandra Harris writes in *Weatherland*, in the age of the Anthropocene we now understand that "human beings have agency after all," but our godly powers only go far: "We cannot significantly improve the weather," stipulates Harris, "but we can make it radically worse" (*Weatherland* 383). And so we have. Such that, in reconsidering the magically tropicalized worlds of Salman Rushdie's fiction

[1] There is some debate as to the specifics of this line. On essentially every occasion that it has been quoted (as encountered in my research), the line appears as "We are as gods and might as well get good at it"; further, as recently as 2013, Brand himself refers to this version. However, in the original catalogue, it appears as, "We are as gods and might as well get used to it." Suffice it to say, it seems we are neither good at nor used to our godliness, yet.

through a contemporary ecocritical lens, it is difficult to unsee that beneath the narrative solutions of his fantastical overheating is the all too real problem of global warming.

It isn't likely that Rushdie was writing with this in mind; to be sure, it wasn't until 1988, the same year that *The Satanic Verses* was published, that the Intergovernmental Panel On Climate Change (IPCC) was founded, with the intention of collecting data and objectively assessing the causes and effects of the changing climate. Only two years later though, in 1990, the IPCC established in its First Assessment Report that "since the industrial revolution the atmospheric concentrations of several greenhouse gases…have been increasing primarily due to human activities," and that "reductions in stratospheric O_3 can modify the surface temperature" of the Earth (Watson et al. 5, 27). By 2007, this possibility had taken on an air of inevitability, with the Fourth Assessment Report predicting "a probable rise in average global temperatures in the next century between 2 and 4.5 degrees centigrade" (Kerridge 361). Sure enough, both NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration have since reported "that the five warmest years on record all have taken place since 2010" (NASA 2018). The record-breaking summer of 2015, for instance, brought with it both the hottest July ever experienced in the United Kingdom, and an extreme heatwave in India that lasted for ten days, causing over two thousand deaths (Steffen & Fenwick 2016).

Global warming thus emerges in our contemporary context as the catastrophic literalization of what has been for Rushdie only a useful metaphor. So it is, too, for the case of the Sundarbans episode in *Midnight's Children*. In the novel, Rushdie imagines a tidal wave of tears that floods the forest, miraculously delivering Saleem and his cohorts from its phantasmagoric clutches. Framed here as another instance of Rushdie's magical weather, this flooding speaks now to the precariousness of the Sundarbans' continued existence in our rapidly changing climate. In *Rising Sea Levels*, Hunt Janin and Scott A. Mandia lament, "Long term prospects for the Sundarbans are, unfortunately, not very good"; studies show that, between the "sea level rise caused by global

warming" and the "flooding which often accompanies cyclones," the UNESCO World Heritage Site will be lost by 2100 (Janin & Mandia 93). There is a frankness to this reportage, a sense less of emotional resignation than of scientific inevitability. Unnatural natural disastrousness, we're to understand, is our new normal.

"We are now in an era," writes Indian author and culture critic Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement*, "that will be defined precisely by events that appear, by our current standards of normalcy, highly improbable: flash floods, hundred year storms, persistent droughts, spells of unprecedented heat, sudden landslides, raging torrents pouring down from breached glacial lakes, and, yes, freakish tornadoes" (Ghosh 24). In other words, we can expect many more of what we once might have earnestly referred to as acts of god. Antiquated though that notion now is, there is nonetheless something distinctly biblical about our contemporary weather model in regards to causality. Recalling the divine punishment of the Genesis flood, there is built into climate change science a legitimate understanding that we are now suffering the consequences of our collective misdeeds. As Kathryn Schulz likewise observes, "These days, the atmosphere really does reflect human activity, and as in our most ancient stories, our own behavior really is bringing disastrous weather down on our heads" (Schulz 2015). In willing this conceit of punishing weather into existence, we have no one to blame but ourselves.[2] We have acted as gods and it is time we get used to it.

This, then, is where we find ourselves, trying to adjust, in our lives and our art, to the idea that we are not just determined by, but further, have become a determining factor of our dangerously moody climate. All those years we spent blaming the weather, only to discover the shocking extent of our own inadvertent culpability: "Every human being who has ever lived has

[2] As John David Ebert summarizes in *The Age of Catastrophe*: "There is no longer any such thing as a 'natural' catastrophe, since all such catastrophes now occur on a planetary stage that has been tampered with by human beings…*All* disasters nowadays, to one degree or another, would seem to be man made" (Ebert 2).

played a part in making us the dominant species on this planet, and in this sense every human being, past and present, has contributed to the present cycle of climate change" (Ghosh 115). Over its four chapters, this dissertation has argued that weather solved a crisis of the novel in the twentieth century. But now we face a new question: can the novel, in turn, solve a crisis of the weather in the twenty-first? This is the question that the quickly expanding field of ecocriticism has taken up in recent years. Though its methods and aims are becoming increasingly varied, ecocriticism in its most fundamental conception, according to prominent proponents Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells, "seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis" (Kerridge & Sammells 5). To this end, as Kerridge expands upon in a subsequent essay, both ecocritical work and the works that invite ecocriticism can be read, and have often been advocated for, as a type of environmental activism (Kerridge 362).[3] This to say, critics and novelists alike have begun to explore how they might be part of a solution to our environmental crisis. Notably, the rise of ecocriticism has coincided with a rise in fiction with explicitly ecological themes; indeed, the proliferation of this trend in the past twenty years happened so swiftly that, in 2007, journalist Dan Bloom coined the term "Cli-Fi" as the official classification of this new subgenre.[4] And yet, despite this clear enthusiasm for and deep conviction in literature and literary criticism as somehow mitigating our global climate crisis, there exists, as well, a palpable anxiety as to whether the humanities are up to the task.

Ian McEwan's 2010 cli-fi novel, *Solar*, addresses this anxiety head-on. When the novel's protagonist, an eminent (if morally compromised) physicist named Michael Beard, attends an Arctic

[3] In "Ecocritical Approaches to Literary Form and Genre," Kerridge cites the commonality among a diverse group of ecocritics – among them, Glen A. Love, Lawrence Buell, and Stacy Alaimo – all of whom express a hope "to reach beyond their specialist academic audiences and contribute to a transformation of culture and behavior in response to the urgent environmental crisis" (Kerridge 363).

[4] A cli-fi canon is quickly forming, and typically includes such titles as Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003); Marcel Theroux's *Far North* (2009); Ian McEwan's *Solar* (2010); Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* (2012); Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013); and Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* (2017) (among others).

retreat on climate change (as McEwan himself did), he is baffled that so many people have been "seized by the same particular assumption, that it was art in its highest forms – poetry, sculpture, dance, abstract music, conceptual art – that would lift climate change as a subject, gild it, palpate it, reveal all the horror and lost beauty and awesome threat and inspire the public to take thought, take action, command it of others" (*Solar* 79). To be clear, McEwan's novel is a satire, and it leaves plenty of room for reading Beard's dismissal of the arts and humanities as a critique of Beard himself and the limits of the sciences. However, that this highly anticipated novel ultimately proved such a disappointment to ecocritics strangely works to validate Beard's take rather than undermine it.[5] And, in fact, not long before writing *Solar*, McEwan himself identified as a cli-fi skeptic; in a 2007 interview with *The Independent*, McEwan told Boyd Tonkin that in "all the reading that [he'd] done around climate change, none of it suggests anything useful in the way of approaching this novelistically" (qtd. in Garrard 709). As far as my own relationship to ecocriticism goes, this percolating sense that there is something about the novel as a form that makes it uniquely ill-equipped to address climate change emerges as an especially relevant concern.

"The novel itself," writes Astrid Bracke, "has proven to be an obstacle to ecocriticism: of all genres, it is most frequently judged to be unsuitable, or at least problematic, for ecocritical analysis" (Bracke 424). In her essay, "The Contemporary English Novel and Its Challenges to Ecocriticism,"

[5] Ian McEwan, and *Solar* in particular, makes for an exceptionally interesting case study here. In many ways, McEwan is what Forster might have called the "spiritual heir" to this project (*HE* 84). As with our previous four authors, he defines himself by both his atheism and his sense of mystery; recalling Nabokov, in particular, McEwan explained in interview: "I've always has a great love of science, and yet I've never been convinced that rational explanations are enough" (Zalewski 2009). Further, throughout his career, McEwan has consistently shown an investment in questions of blame and personal responsibility, and more important still, has several times explored these themes in relation to the weather. We saw a glimpse of this in the heat of *Atonement*, which is presented as a factor that leads to Briony's fateful but false accusation; more conspicuously, the inciting incident of *Enduring Love* involves a few particularly consequential gusts of wind. All this to say, some ecocritics hoped and expected (not without reason) that McEwan would be the person to write a realist novel about climate change in a satisfying way. In fact, Greg Garrard was so confident in this that he wrote an entire essay *before* the novel came out ("Ian McEwan's Next Novel and the Future of Ecocriticism") anticipating what it would do for the field. However, as both Kerridge and Astrid Bracke discuss, "once *Solar* was published, it soon became clear that it was not the environmental(ist) novel that ecocritics had been hoping for: although dealing in a secondary fashion with climate crisis, this theme is always made subservient to Beard's messy private life and moral failings" (Bracke 432). Though this, as Bracke's reading likewise suggests, seems to me entirely the point of *Solar*, and the very thing that arguably makes it a successful climate change novel.

Bracke recaps the ecocritical conversation around this issue of the novel's unsuitability; in particular, she cites Dominic Head's routine declaration of "the (im)possibility of reading novels ecocritically" (which he attributes to the form's emphasis on the human and urbanization), and Greg Garrard's postulation that, alternatively, "traditional novelistic plots may provide insufficient scale" (ibid). To my mind, the most compelling voice in this conversation is the aforementioned Amitav Ghosh, whose 2016 non-fiction work, *The Great Derangement* (published later and therefore not referred to by Bracke), proposes several convincing explanations for the incompatibility of the novel (specifically, the realist novel) and climate change.

By all accounts, as Ghosh acknowledges, the novel is premised on exactly the conditions that the climate crisis calls for: insofar as "the great, irreplaceable potentiality of fiction is that it makes possible the imagining of possibilities," it ought to be able to envision "other forms of human existence" in the face of imminent environmental catastrophe (Ghosh 128). However, for Ghosh, it is precisely because the modern novel (as a traditionally bourgeois form) was built on the privileging of the everyday over the catastrophic that it now finds itself entirely unqualified to deal with a reality as preposterous as the one we currently face. In other words, today's *actual* weather has become so incredible that simply to represent it faithfully in a plot would offend our sense of the plausible, reading instead as the height of novelist contrivance.[6] In line with this, essential to my own reading of the weather as a device that was uniquely capable of naturalizing the contrivances of narrative emplotment in the twentieth-century novel was that the weather of the twentieth-century remained largely inconspicuous. I specifically chose to focus on what would be considered more or less ordinary weather (rain, clouds, wind, lightning, heat, etc.) rather than catastrophic weather events to

[6] Ghosh makes this point by taking a real example from his own life, detailing the completely improbable experience he had of being caught in an unprecedented cyclone in Dehli in 1978; it is an experience, he explains, that he has never been able to represent in his fiction: "What would I make of such a scene were I to come across it in a novel written by someone else? I suspect that my response would be one of incredulity; I would be inclined to think that the scene was a contrivance of last resort. Surely only a writer whose imaginative resources were utterly depleted would fall back on a situation of such extreme improbability" (Ghosh 16).

illustrate how ready we are to overlook authorial manipulations of the weather – as Miranda does in *The Tempest* – so long as these meteorological phenomena remain within the realm of the probable. The main problem for the literary novel today then, as Ghosh sees it, is that "the weather events of this time have a very high degree of improbability," and thus their incorporation into a plot immediately diminishes our willingness to suspend disbelief (Ghosh 26). This paradox raises for Ghosh the great irony of the modern "realist" novel, which this dissertation confirms: namely, that "the very gestures with which it conjures up reality are actually a concealment of the real" (Ghosh 23).

What, then, is the role of the novel in the age of Anthropocenic weather? And further, what is the role of the weather in the age of the Anthropocenic novel? Insofar as "the concealment of its scaffolding of events continues to be essential to [the modern novel's] functioning," authors can no longer turn to the weather – as I argue Forster, Woolf, Nabokov, and Rushdie have done – as a believable providential force. On the contrary, Ghosh is suggesting that novelists are deliberately turning *away* from the weather, and specifically, from our global climate crisis. It is to this willful evasion that Ghosh is referring when speaking of "the Great Derangement"; imagining what future "readers and museum-goers" will think when they look to our art and literature "for traces and portents of the altered world of their inheritance," Ghosh supposes that they will "conclude that ours was a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight" (Ghosh 11). While I do think there is a case to be made against Ghosh here, particularly given what we know about the influx of both ecocritism and cli-fi novels in recent years, I am not going to make it; instead, I want to return one last time to Salman Rushdie, whose 2015 novel *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* seems to me to instantiate and illuminate the concept and consolation of Ghosh's Great Derangement.

As I discussed in the fourth chapter of this dissertation, Salman Rushdie has spent his career writing against the ending, aided by his ritual figuring of himself as a modern-day Scheherazade. And, in fact, Rushdie is unique among the four authors considered in this project precisely because his work as a novelist hasn't yet reached its end. Rushdie is still very much alive, and still publishing. But because of that, he now faces the task of writing against another ending: our own. I explained in my introduction that I did not want to read an ecocritical response into the works of these authors that couldn't possibly be responding to our current climate crisis, as we now understand it. What is particularly interesting to me about *Two Years*, then, is that (seemingly corroborating Ghosh's point) it signifies a deliberate decision on Rushdie's part *not* to deal with our changing climate, despite his evident familiarity with the situation.

As with all of Rushdie's novels, *Two Years* is…involved. It is deeply interested in the author's usual questions of faith and reason, of magic and reality, and of the singular power of storytelling; and it explores theses questions in the usual structurally intricate ways, with broad chronological jumps and a myriad of embedded narratives. On the most basic level of plot, though, *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* is about a catastrophic weather event: one day, a great storm hits New York, "such a storm as could shake loose the moorings of the world" (*TY* 84). This is the inaugural event that heralds what the novel refers to as "the strangeness" – a period marked by a series of several natural disasters, along with a few seemingly supernatural disasters, that lasts "for two years eight months and twenty-eight nights" (*TY* 20). Which is to say: for 1,001 nights. As remarkable as the novel's apocalypse-adjacent weather itself is, what I am especially interested in here is Rushdie's decision to use the term "the strangeness" as his designation for this era; significantly, Ghosh uses this same word in *The Great Derangement* when searching for the language to describe the escalating uncanniness of our contemporary weather, as he contemplates "the *strangeness* of what is unfolding around us" (Ghosh 30, my emphasis). Considering this, it seems to me entirely possible to read

Rushdie's novel, should we so choose, as an allegorical engagement with the climate crisis; after all, magical realism is still realism, and perhaps a generous reading would argue that *Two Years* is Rushdie's roundabout way of contending with the realization that his most potent weather metaphors have literalized.

Except. Rushdie does not contend with this. Not quite. As the "the strangenesses [start] multiplying," with "superstorms devastat[ing] Fiji and California" and "giant fires spreading across Australia and California," Rushdie explicitly evokes the concept of climate change, but only to dismiss it (*TY* 83). "Perhaps this extreme weather is just the new normal," supposes one character, "Or perhaps this is evidence of something much worse" (ibid). This attempt at making sense of the strangeness is indicative of what becomes a central preoccupation of the novel and its characters: that age-old question of causation. "How were such things to be understood?" writes Rushdie (*TY* 93). Earnest as its questioning may be, though, it is in its failure to provide an equally sincere answer that *Two Years* ultimately makes clear that the incompatibility of climate change and the novel is as much about the perennially-fraught issue of narrative causality as anything. Insofar as the novel is an exercise in meaning making, the exceedingly complex causality of climate change appears to pose a new challenge to the form, its senselessness resisting the sensible chains of cause and effect that emplotment imposes. For, as we are only now learning, in the strangeness of our contemporary climatic crisis, even "the meanings of words – *possible, impossible* – were changing" (*TY* 98).

"Everything is connected to everything else" (Egan 126). Such is the first law of ecology, as introduced by Barry Commoner, one of the early leaders of the environmental movement. There is a certain irony to the law's echo of E.M. Forster's epigraphic decree to only connect, particularly given just how difficult the complex interconnectedness of the ecological world makes it to hold anyone personally responsible. Nonetheless, recalling the usefulness of blame as a means of enforcing of causal chains in Forster, Rushdie likewise cites the "quest for scapegoats" that the catastrophic

climate of the strangeness brings: "It was important to know whose fault all this was. It was important to know if things were going to get worse" (*TY* 85). To Rushdie's credit, *Two Years* does tell us whose fault all of this is, hard as "the truth" might be to believe: "Namely," he writes, "the growing interference of the jinn in the daily life of the world" (*TY* 93). That's it. For all the eco-critically charged undertones of the novel's many climatic strangenesses, Rushdie opts to explain our crisis away as the meteorological manifestation of an ongoing war between a few petty genies. Seemingly extending Ghosh's theory of the great derangement to the genre of magical realism as well, it happens then that this Rushdie novel of the twenty-first century turns *back* to gods where the "proudly irreligious" man once turned to weather (*JA* 314). As if to say that actual deities interfering in our weather affairs would be more believable than to accept that somehow, in this "wrought-iron world of criss-cross cause and effect," we brought this crisis on ourselves; as if to say, if only it were that easy (*L* 21).[7]

Once, in the days of modern meteorology's development in the twentieth century, we might have found it comforting "not to think of the weather as metaphor" for divine intervention: "Wise voices calmed our ancestors," observes Rushdie's narrator, writing from a time a thousand years hence. "It was neither a warning or a curse. It was just the weather. This was the soothing information they wanted" (*TY* 51). But now, we long for the days when we could look at the weather as a metaphor; now, we long for such soothing information as the news of warring weather gods. Because, as both the title and retrospective narration of *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* implies, such circumstances signify the certainty of resolution. A resolution that we ourselves

[7] Recalling Ghosh's own incredulousness regarding today's weather, Slavoj Žižek writes: "We *know* the (ecological) catastrophe is possible, probable even, yet we do not believe it will really happen" (qtd. in Kerridge 365).

are far from guaranteed.[8] Importantly, Rushdie's title refers to what turns out to be the limited duration of the strangeness, after which, evidently, human existence on the planet simply resumed as usual. Yet, what we also know from our study of Rushdie and *The Arabian Nights* is that, in fact, 1,001 is not meant to mark a terminus, but rather, "signifies an infinite number," open-endlessness itself (Bettelheim 86). The happy ending of *Two Years* is no more real than that of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, with its equally strange weather.

This is finally, for Richard Kerridge, the criterion that challenges the very composition of the climate change novel: "Conventional plot structures require forms of solution and closure that seem absurdly evasive when applied to ecological questions" (qtd. in Garrard 99). The conflict-crisis-resolution structure of the Aristotelian plot – by which the novel, as we've seen throughout this dissertation, has defined itself for centuries – simply cannot be reconciled with the irresolvable narrative our current climate crisis, for which there is no foreseeable fix. "Time," writes Kerridge, is "rapidly running out" and "unless we mobilize every kind of effort to stabilize global CO_2 emissions and then, in the developed world, bring them into steep decline, and do all this in a very short period…severe climate change will probably occur" (Kerridge 362). Even then, it may already be too late; it may be that, as in the case of even the most responsible literary characters, our fate has been determined.[9] Indeed, it would appear, as Bill McKibben writes, that ours is an "almost-but-not-quite-finally hopeless situation" (McKibben 2012). What we need now, what our novels have always needed, is a *deus ex machina*.

This time, it won't be the weather.

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[8] There is notable reassurance in the promised future of *Two Years* that speaks back to the paradoxical optimism of Ghosh's imagining of future "readers and museum-goers"; in both cases, this fantasy of continued existence works to somewhat undermine any indictment of the present that the authors might be making.

[9] For more on the likely irreversibility of our environmental trajectory, see Geoffrey Maslen's *Too Late: How We Lost the Battle with Climate Change* (2017).

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