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Katherine May's *Wintering* and the Care of the Self

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on Katherine May's *Wintering* (2020), a self-help memoir that uses winter as a metaphor to explore an emotional state akin to depression. I situate the text in relation to autobiographical/critical work that reclaims rest and the restorative power of nature in contemporary life, as well as in relation to Michel Foucault's ethic of the care of the self. Comparing *Wintering* more directly to Ann Cvetkovich's experiment with memoir in *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), I examine how both writers' focus on affective experience and everyday practices intervenes in contemporary understandings of self-care, a concept with a radical history but ambivalent character. Drawing inspiration from nature and its intricate system of survival is at the heart of the poetic/pragmatic resourcefulness of May's memoir. I claim that rather than being a self-indulgent luxury, the process of wintering encourages a more generous stance to the world. However, I also address the limitations of May's universalising natural analogies. I conclude with some theoretical reflections on 'suspicious' and 'reparative' readings of *Wintering* that show the importance of maintaining the internal tension of self-care as both a potential tool of ideological oppression and a vital practice of freedom carrying ethical and political possibilities.

KEYWORDS

Katherine May; *Wintering*; self-care; rest; self-help memoir; nature

'Self-care is vitally important, not least of all as we go into winter when looking after ourselves and keeping healthy is so important.' These lines appear in an announcement of Self-Care Week 2018, an annual UK initiative (since 2011) organised in the month of November by the Self Care Forum, a charity that raises awareness about the benefits of self-care and what people can do to take care of their health.¹ Winter is flu season of course and requires additional cares, but Katherine May's memoir *Wintering* (2020) approaches winter not only as a season but also as an emotional state like depression.² *Wintering* is structured through monthly headings moving from October to March, but winter is figurative, a central analogy through which she understands the process of 'wintering'. As she defines it, 'wintering is a season in the cold. It is a fallow period in life when you're cut off from the world, feeling rejected, sidelined, blocked from progress, or cast into the role of an outsider' (May 2020, 9). Its onset, she tells us, can be

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marked by an illness, a life event like a bereavement or the birth of the child, and it can creep upon us slowly or arrive suddenly. May's own winter began one September as, approaching the age of forty, she faced several stressful situations in quick succession: her husband experienced a health crisis; she became ill soon after he recovered, taking sick leave, and eventually departing from her job as a university lecturer; and her son started to struggle with school.

Wintering's focus on the reparative work of daily living, the slow steady work of survival that is necessary during periods of wintering, has connections with Ann Cvetkovich's *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012) where she describes her own experience of the professional pressures within academia and creative anxiety that led to intellectual blockage while she was finishing her doctoral dissertation and writing her first book. Both accounts emphasise the forms of care and healing that can come from affective experience and ordinary life. Cvetkovich's bipartite study combines memoir ('The Depression Journals') and academic criticism as two different strategies for writing about depression. May's memoir does not draw on the experimental genres of queer cultures that Cvetkovich uses to explore depression as a cultural and political rather than medical phenomenon. Nevertheless, May assembles her own archive and resources to illuminate the felt experience of wintering. She sets out to understand it by talking to those who know it intimately: 'the Finns who start preparing to winter in August'; 'the people of Tromsø in Norway who don't see the sun from November to January'; 'people who have lived through illness, failure, isolation and despair and have come out renewed and the people who work most closely with the brutal processes of the natural world' (May 2020, 13–14). The memoir references these research methods (not only interviews, but physical travel to the North and studies consulted on the mind/body, and other topics that feature in it). In that respect it echoes books like Claudia Hammond's *The Art of Rest* (2019), Sue Stuart-Smith's *The Well Gardened Mind* (2020) and Jenny Odell's *How to Do Nothing* (2019) that integrate autobiography, cultural history and criticism, and scientific research.³ These books offer a philosophy of modern life by tackling problems such as the fetishisation of busyness, the attention economy, and the epidemic of anxiety. They propose new habits and attitudes that reclaim rest as 'the best kind of self-care' (Hammond 2019, 2) and reveal the restorative power of nature. Many of them draw on the self-help tradition (they can be viewed as highbrow 'how-to' books). Odell describes *How to Do Nothing* as activism 'disguised as self-help' (2019, xxii) even though she stresses that her book does not offer simple steps towards a better life. In her final chapter, Hammond offers a step-by-step guide aimed at maximising readers' chances of resting well (2019, 249).

Wintering can be located in this growing (but not new) hybrid kind of writing, but it can be more accurately described as a self-help memoir; a popular subgenre of contemporary self-help literature 'written in the first person rather than the second' that combines 'semi-literary pleasure with practical usefulness' (Tuhus-Dubrow 2013). In these 'discreet' memoirs, the promise of 'guidance excuses the indulgence of autobiography' (Ibid) even though there is typically less disclosure compared to more conventional memoirs focusing on personal experiences of trauma and illness; in *Wintering's* prologue May alludes to a bout of depression when she was seventeen that helped her 'get a feel for [her] winterings' (2020, 11) but there is little self-analysis or introspection about her past. Her memoir is written in the first person but there are frequent turns to the first person

plural; the focus is not on the author's inner consciousness or redemption but in the ways the lessons she has learned from her experience and from the stories she interweaves into the memoir can be shared and inspire change in all of us.

Wintering's onset is usually 'involuntary' but May asserts that we can choose *how* to winter (2020, 9, 12). She describes her winter as 'an open invitation to transition into a more sustainable life', a 'step into solitude and into contemplation' and adds: 'I am determined to go into it consciously, to make it a kind of practice in understanding myself better' (25). In other words, wintering is an individual ethical commitment she voluntarily takes up. Winter is 'a time for reflection and recuperation, for slow replenishment, for putting your house in order'—a time of 'withdrawing from the world' (13). But it also becomes associated with 'metamorphosis', 'transformation' (13) and 'revolutions' (41). These descriptions have links with Michel Foucault's ethic of the care of the self. Foucault's care of the self consists of 'a general standpoint' or 'an attitude towards the self, others, and the world' as well as a particular form of attention or 'looking' directed away from 'the outside, from others and the world [...] towards "oneself".' Finally, it involves actions or practices such as meditation and writing 'exercised on the self by the self ... by which one changes, purifies, transforms, and transfigures oneself' (Foucault 2005, 10–11).

While the 'therapeutic label' seems applicable to May's narrative,⁴ I approach *Wintering* as a spiritual text, in the Foucauldian sense, not only because it considers the role of rituals and spirituality in a world increasingly divorced from them, but because May enacts or performs the kind of transformative healing that her memoir describes and encourages.⁵ Her account makes it clear that knowledge or a specific attitude alone is not enough; to gain 'wisdom' (a word that May doesn't hesitate to use in the memoir), one needs to go through the process of wintering, with all the practical exercises it entails. As I suggest below, the memoir captures the labours of such a process but also its sensuous pleasures and rewards, which the reader experiences vividly. This immersion is intensified by the memoir's privileged relation to lived experience as well as by May's enchanting descriptions of wintering.

The additional question I pursue in this essay, one which Cvetkovich is more conscious of while writing the memoir portion of her study, is to what extent *Wintering's* defence of a radical form of rest and retreat expands understandings of self-care beyond its contemporary absorption into the wellness industry and its association with neoliberal notions of subjectivity—entrepreneurial, individualistic, and competitive. Self-help narratives and memoirs have been read as 'technologies of the self' (Foucault 2000, 223) that reproduce such notions of subjectivity.⁶ Writing in the 1980s Foucault argued that 'we have nothing to be proud of in our current efforts to reconstitute an ethic of the self' but insisted that doing so remains an 'urgent, fundamental, and politically indispensable task' (2005, 251–252). Alluding to his work, Cvetkovich (2012) writes that on the one hand, building good habits has pragmatic value and can serve our wellbeing, but on the other hand it may lead to the internalisation of regimes of discipline that turn us into docile subjects. Cvetkovich writes her hybrid text with the intention of showing how small daily gestures that arise from everyday life can provide a model for building new ways of being in the world that can potentially resist such disciplinary regimes—an idea she captures with the phrase 'the utopia of ordinary habit' (191).

Turning to *Wintering* I ask if, alongside wellbeing, freedom can be found in ordinary habits, as Cvetkovich suggests, and what the conditions are for nurturing such an ethic of the self.

Wintering as self-help memoir: affective experience, enchantment, repair

Like Cvetkovich who depathologises negative feelings such as shame, depression and failure in *Depression*, May writes in the prologue that in our relentlessly busy contemporary world ‘the entirely ordinary process’ of wintering tends to be seen as ‘humiliation’, ‘a lack of willpower’ and as an ‘embarrassing anomaly that should be hidden or ignored.’ By deferring its onset, or not engaging with it mindfully, we fail to recognise the ‘wisdom’ that resides within it (May 2020, 11–12). In another section, she describes wintering as ‘the active acceptance of sadness, ... the practice of allowing ourselves to feel it as a need. It is the courage to stare down the worst parts of our experience and to commit to healing them the best we can. Wintering is a moment of intuition, our true needs feel keenly as a knife’ (139). Similarly, Cvetkovich describes her ‘performative’ memoir-writing as a form of ‘crafting a life that moves with and through despair’ (2012, 73). She also underscores the social effects of engaging with depression: ‘If we can come to know each other through our depression’, we will be able not merely to overcome our moments of impasse but also ‘understand impasse itself to be a state that has productive potential’ (23).

May mentioned during an interview that some readers were disappointed that her book doesn’t follow the formulaic ‘10 steps to be happy’ that compel readers to power through different crises.⁷ In a section of the memoir’s epilogue that amplifies this comment, she criticises Facebook posts offering unsolicited advice such as ‘Hang on in there!’ and ‘You are stronger than you know.’ She finds that the false positivity of social media posts ‘erases the dirty underside of real life’ and that the implicit message for those who cannot hang on in there is that ‘misery is not an option’ (May 2020, 265–266). She conjures a scene where the people who offer this advice ‘lean into her face, shouting Cope! Cope! Cope! while spraying perfume into the air to make it all seem nice.’ This is ‘the opposite of caring’, she concludes (266).

In some discussions of the differences between self-improvement and self-care, self-care is described as ‘softer, gentler, more forgiving than its self-flagellating forebear. Definitely more fun’ (Carraway 2019). We see this in Nadia Narain and Katia Narain Phillips’ practical guide *Self-Care for the Real World* where we read that ‘words like nourish, nurture, resource, recharge, refuel, love and kindness are the essence of self-care’ (2017, 8). For some commentators, this difference reflects an age of diminished expectations, where the best most people can hope for is to get through the day or endure. For others, this shift in emphasis towards ‘empathy, warmth, tenderness and inclusion’ becomes associated with the best aspects of the ‘millennial imagination’ (Carraway 2019). Sarah Sharma further distinguishes between self-care as a strategy of survival and what she calls ‘selfie-care’, a photo op or a hashtag, captured digitally and endlessly performed online (Sharma, Sainte-Marie, and Fournier 2017, 14). May certainly defends caring for oneself as a necessity rather than as a narcissistic act, thus clearing space for a more substantial or ‘real’ form of care: ‘Doing those deeply unfashionable things—slowing down, letting your spare time expand,

getting enough sleep, resting—are radical acts these days but they are essential’ (May 2020, 14).

Wintering invokes but defamiliarises various ‘aesthetic’ models of self-care that frame it as a lifestyle choice, as well as soft and fuzzy ideas that become attached to this concept, particularly on social media.⁸ For example, even as May alludes to the Danish term *hygge*, which was named the word of the year in 2016 by Oxford Dictionaries, the Scandinavians she interviews talk about their laborious preparations for winter not in terms of the cosiness associated with this term, but as necessary for survival. When she describes the almost spiritual significance of the sauna in the Finnish psyche, a practice rather than a building (which May tries unsuccessfully to import into her life in Whitstable, realising that one can’t adopt practices of the North wholesale), she notes: ‘This is not an indulgence. This is a stern, solid maintenance mode, a hardy response to the vagaries of existence. I am being practical’ (May 2020, 51). And from May’s epilogue again: ‘At its base, this is not a book about beauty, but about reality. It is about noticing what’s going on, and living it. That’s what the natural world does: it carries on surviving’ (269).

One of the most memorable examples drawn from the natural world that debunks the idea that wintering is fun focuses on the wolf. Wolves are everywhere in the literature of winter and are ‘the ultimate fairy-tale villain’ (May 2020, 178). In her chapter ‘Hunger’, May addresses the ways wolves’ feeding habits and digestive systems are ‘adapted to a feast-or-famine existence’ (183), which explains why they will kill any prey, and the history of wolf populations which have been consistently subject to extermination. Ultimately, however, drawing on the ways the wolf is a reminder of our animality, ‘a mirror of ourselves as we might be, without the comforts and constraints of civilisation’ (179), she uses it as a metaphor or symbol ‘of the rapacious hunger of winter’ (178). ‘In the depths of our winters, we are all wolfish’, she writes (179). She follows this with a cautionary tale about human yearnings and addictions (with alcohol, shopping and other methods of numbing ourselves), only to finish her chapter with the message that we should learn to ‘respect our wolves’ rather than feel shame about our cravings (183–184). May’s treatments of animals more broadly in this memoir can be situated within the tradition of human psychology/philosophy borrowing from or being inspired by animal behaviour studies.⁹ Even though there is more to say about her uses of animals that is beyond the scope of this essay, her treatment of the wolf in this chapter is more idiosyncratic compared to the recent trend of self-care books such as the illustrated *Wisdom from a Humble Jellyfish and Other Self-Care Rituals from Nature* that take us on a ‘safari of self-care!’ (Shah 2020, xiv).

Unlike the more formulaic self-help genre with its lists, inventories of skills and life-planning exercises, *Wintering* offers practical self-help suggestions, but these are part of a personal narrative rather than drawn from generalised case histories. As Cvetkovich notes of her own memoir, the forms of self-help embedded in habits ‘cannot be named in the abstract’ (2012, 80) but instead must be integrated within a life story. Even when not focused on May’s own story, *Wintering* emphasises the importance of experience through the ways it links the care of the self to a process undergone by an individual. In that sense it provides texture that is missing from facts and advice in self-care manuals whose benefits are accepted in an abstract sense, rather than felt. For example, in the chapter ‘Light’ where she introduces us to

Grania who has Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), May notes of her self-care routine that it is not ‘the raw fact of the vitamin [D]’ that is enough but the ‘process that’s important, the experience of bathing in light. And this is what Grania shows me, when she talks about how she’s learned to cope with her SAD: bright pools of light, all through her home’ (May 2020, 107).

The link of affective experience to self-care applies to the experience of reading *Wintering* too. Reviewers have noted that *Wintering* has ‘the quality of a meditation, a peaceful rebuff to life in fast-forward’ (Kellaway 2020). Cvetkovich shares this interest in ‘slow life’ through her focus on daily activities, some of which are meditative (such as crafting, knitting and yoga), but many of her sections in her memoir also capture the dullness and banality of depression. Instead, May’s reviewers have described *Wintering* as a ‘reading cure’. Kate Kellaway (2020) writes: ‘Reading is like slipping into a fur coat. May could protectively convince us of anything—the pleasures of cold weather, slow days, dusty libraries. They all start to seem like prizes and her sensual connoisseurship a joy.’ Descriptions like this recall one of the ‘uses of literature’ that Rita Felski writes about, namely enchantment (2006, 51). May uses this word frequently in the memoir, beginning with her description of the changes that take place in winter as a kind of ‘alchemy, an enchantment performed by ordinary creatures to survive’ (2020, 13). Similarly, she infuses ordinary activities like cooking or swimming with wonder. Many of the moments she invites her readers to witness gather aesthetic, affective and at times metaphorical meanings as when she writes that robins have a habit of appearing ‘when you’re at a low ebb’ to remind us that there is ‘some magic left in the world’ (244) or of ‘sitting quietly in church’, gaining a ‘sense of welcome insignificance amid a congregation of people; a lifting of the obligation to endlessly do, if just for an hour; a gentle truce with myself’ (116–117). The sounds of the memoir’s words, the tactility of the language and the rhythm, which are hard to illustrate fully here as their effects are cumulative, also contribute to this sense of pleasure and enchantment: ‘Most of all, [*Wintering*] is about the comforts of language’, as Kellaway (2020) concludes her review.

Felski writes that the idea of enchantment, the ‘spell’ cast by books as if they are a form of ‘secular magic’ (2006, 60), is met with distrust in academic scholarship, but literary critics need to develop ‘a lexicon more attuned to the affective and absorbing aspects of reading’ that is not equated with a form of dangerous passivity or naivety (62). This is necessary to account for the more ordinary motives for reading, which is pertinent to a self-help memoir like May’s. I would add that more interdisciplinary research needs to be done, bringing together reader-response approaches, self-help literatures, bibliotherapy and studies of arts/cultural prescribing, to understand the role and implications (therapeutic, pedagogical, spiritual and so forth) of these affective and embodied textual responses, such as the ones that May’s reviewers have noted. To what extent can a narrative like May’s, which embeds its practical tips within a life narrative and exhibits the caring qualities it describes via its style, help with the challenges of activating self-care and integrating it in everyday life? Here we can invoke the aesthetic characteristics of May’s memoir not in order to distance it from the instrumentality of self-help that receives academic scorn, but to show how those characteristics may be pertinent to a more pragmatic use. Reversing Felski’s formulation in *Uses of Literature*, the *poetic* neither excludes nor destroys the *pragmatic* (2006, 8).

Drawing on Jane Bennett, Felski argues that ‘an affirmation of wonder is potentially enlivening, energising, even ethical, encouraging a stance of openness and generosity to the world’ (2006, 58). May confirms Bennett’s (2001) idea that whilst, following Max Weber’s thesis, the majority in the West have internalised the idea that the modern world is disenchanted, we are still prone to experiences of enchantment that can function as a positive resource. In the chapter ‘Midwinter’ she expresses shame at being drawn to rituals. Citing Carol Ann Duffy’s poem ‘Prayer’, which opens with the lines ‘Some days, although we cannot pray, a prayer/utters itself’, she describes prayer as an act that happens without her intervention. As a rational individual, her desire to pray seems ‘to represent an atavistic impulse ... a desire to find life in the world around me, the trees and stones and bodies of water, the birds and mammals that enter my line of sight. Mine is a personal animism, hushed by my conscious brain, nurtured by my unconscious’ (May 2020, 133). Here we have an indication of how, despite being undertaken for its own sake, care of the self is not intrinsically self-centred. Instead, the passage demonstrates a kind of openness towards the world: prayer and other enchanting rituals create a space where May can contemplate all those phenomena—such as the passing of time or change—that ‘are bigger than I am and more than I can hold’ (135). In *Wintering* care of the self is about retreat but it also leads away from the self towards others as in ‘the loose communities that we find in spiritual or religious gatherings’ (134); or in cold-water swimming, presented as ‘an act of faith’ (217) that May undertakes with others near her home in Whitstable. This self-care routine offers ‘an ideal window’ in which people who barely know each other’s name can ‘loosen [their] tongues, and then tighten them again’ by briefly sharing their most vulnerable thoughts (219).

Felski’s affirmation of wonder is similar in sentiment to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s argument that it is ‘not only important but *possible*’ to find ways of attending to reparative motives, not only when reading academically but also in terms of how we make sense of ourselves and the world’ (2003, 150). Sedgwick’s reparative reading mode was influenced by psychoanalyst Melanie Klein’s ‘depressive position’. In a statement that complements how Klein’s depressive position is usually described, Sedgwick writes that the depressive position ‘inaugurates ethical possibility’ that is ‘founded on and co-extensive with the subject’s movement toward what Foucault calls “care of the self”, the often very fragile concern to provide the self with pleasure and nourishment in an environment that is perceived as not particularly offering them’ (137). May describes the moment when her wintering starts as a kind of ‘falling through’ into a gap that ‘exists at a delay’ so that you can’t quite keep pace ‘to the here and now, where everyone else carries on’. But as she adds, confirming the movement towards self-care that Sedgwick writes of, ‘I was surprised to find that I felt at home there’ (8). Sedgwick makes it clear that the reparative impulse is not intrinsically conservative (2011, 136). For May, embracing wintering is an opportunity to build a different kind of person—she describes this opportunity as ‘a crossroads ... a moment when you need to shed a skin’, and as the most important choice ‘you’ll ever make’; if the choice is not taken, ‘that old skin will harden around you’ (2020, 14).

Sedgwick describes the reparative position as ‘no less realistic’ and ‘no less attached to a project of survival’ than the paranoid position (2003, 150). May’s gravitation towards rituals in the memoir points to a deep human yearning; she is not deluded that

enchantment is the answer to her wintering or to the larger problems of the world. In the chapter 'Light' she recalls attending the annual Sankta Lucia service at a Swedish church in London, noting that 'Saint Lucy didn't cure me. I didn't dance back up the aisle, having miraculously found my way. But she brought a little light. Just enough to see by' (May 2020, 117). Similarly, if readers become enchanted by the scenes May so lyrically portrays, their experience need not be 'tied to a haze of romantic nostalgia' (Felski 2006, 76) about a premodern self or to a transcendent experience. As in Cvetkovich's study that explores the 'sacred everyday' of home and habit (2012, 81), May's self-care practices emphasise ordinary acts. Even when spiritual experience partakes of the transcendent, as in some of the scenes described above, it is rooted in the ordinary and is about paying attention to what is immediately present. For example, even though cold-water swimming is presented as an enchanting act (May 2020, 216), a step into an alternative world, May notes that encountering the extremes of cold drew her into 'that most clichéd space, The Moment' where the only thing you can do is attend to your body 'right here, right now' (218).

The pleasures of *Wintering*: inertia at work and small acts of defiance

One of the central interventions of *Wintering* is to carve a radical space where people can feel entitled to slow down and take care of themselves. Although May's focus on endurance and survival that is inspired by nature counters the softer as well as commodified discourses of wellness that circulate in contemporary culture, the question of pleasure is not irrelevant and does not undermine her more pragmatic project. In her prologue she writes that her memoir is about learning to recognise and engage mindfully with wintering and even to 'cherish' it (May 2020, 12). Later she wonders if there could be any pleasure in wintering (25). Her lyrical meditations cultivate new and imaginative vocabularies for the care of the self that depart from both the austere self-discipline that we find in Foucault's descriptions of ancient practices of the self and the connections many contemporary self-care manuals draw to 'office work'. For example, in *The Little Book of Self Care: The Tiny Everyday Habits that Will Transform Your Life* Mel Noakes invites her readers to 'conduct a life audit' (2017, 138) every six months to address in which area of one's life (health, relationships, career and so on) balance needs to be redressed. Some of these descriptions remind readers that self-care entails labour and discipline to build good habits (just like in Foucault's examination of ancient practices). However, as Micki McGee has argued, often in these labours 'that are purported to be labours of self-creation', the exercises provided maintain 'existing notions of the self and its relation to the social and political worlds' (2005, 162). This takes us back to the tantalising question whether the care of the self can provide a model for new ways of living rather than simply reproducing the status quo.

Like Cvetkovich who prioritises forms of agency that are 'e-motional' (in that they involve literal movement) and tactile in her 'Depression Journals' (2012, 21), in one domestic scene, May invites back into her life 'those quiet pleasures' that had disappeared: the 'still, rhythmic work with the hands, the kind of light concentration that allows you to dream.'¹⁰ She is making gingerbread men with her young son, taking excessive care of them, and imagines each one 'as a small act of defiance' against the purposeful life she has been leading before (May 2020, 22). Like Odell (2019) who questions the idea of

endless productivity and optimisation in *How to Do Nothing*, May here defends a space for non-instrumental, ‘pointless’ activity (2020, 22). She recounts the addictive work pattern she fell into when she started working again, after the birth of her son, when everything seemed urgent, and she could never do enough. Even though being away from work now allows her to embrace slowness, it is hard to challenge the kind of punitive relationship that many people have with their need to stop; while taking a walk down Whitstable beach, a text arrives from a colleague, and she grows paranoid: ‘Can I justify taking a walk when everyone else is doubling up to cover my job?’ (35). She is simultaneously tormented with feelings of guilt about the labour of others and determined to ‘give an account of herself’ (via this memoir, we could add) to ‘force everyone else to understand.’ During her walk, she sees the sky filling up with starlings: ‘I have used up all my energy just to see this, and it’s worth it. But how could I ever justify that to the outside world? How could I ever admit that I chose the muffled roar of starlings over the noisy demands of the workplace?’ (35–36). Cold-water swimming in later chapters is similarly described as an act of defiance: ‘Our town, with all its stresses and responsibilities, rises at the other side of the beach, but we have put a barrier in place to stop it reaching us, just for now ... We have crossed a glorious, brave, unspoken line’ (216).

In moments like these May recalls Josh Cohen’s study on the creative possibilities of stopping in *Not Working: Why We Have to Stop*. Stopping ‘in the intransitive sense, one with no direct object’ becomes ‘an assertion of autonomy’ (Cohen 2018, 218), an antidote to a culture enforcing the tyranny of doing, whether through production or consumption. As a psychoanalyst Cohen has encountered many people who find themselves ‘suspended between a compulsion to do too much and a wish to do nothing’ (xix). His study turns to four types who for different reasons resist work (the ‘burnout’, the ‘slob’, the ‘daydreamer’ and the ‘slacker’) extracted from his clinical experience. Rather than providing ideals for life, he uses this typology to explore some provocative questions about contemporary living. He combines this with biographical sketches of four literary and artistic figures whose imaginative and creative acts express scepticism towards action and purpose. May mobilises similar scepticism towards action in *Wintering*: ‘I always mean to work on these days [between Christmas and New Year], or at least to write, but this year, like every other, I find myself unable to gather up the necessary intent. I used to think that these were wasted days, but I now realise that’s the point’ (May 2020, 149). Wasted time becomes reframed as necessary rest.

Cohen writes that not working has not been valued for its own sake but to the extent that it serves the cause of work. His proposition is more radical than the rhetoric of healthy work-life balance, or of taking time out to benefit creative work which is typical of self-help movements (2018, 175). Slowing down gives May a glimpse of a different way of living that challenges the conception of human beings as endlessly task-driven, but she doesn’t go as far as Cohen in her critique: ‘I am not slacking; I’m just letting my attention shift for a while, away from the direct ambitions of the rest of my year. It’s like revving my engines’ (May 2020, 149). This analogy, not dissimilar to recharging one’s batteries, suggests that rest and repair may be indispensable but are temporary states, to be deployed in difficult times only. However, as in Odell’s *How to Do Nothing* which opens with a similar removal from the sphere of familiarity, even brief retreats can change our perception of everyday life on return. May’s memoir doesn’t endorse repair as a way of maximising efficiency and focus, as when mindfulness and

wellness packages increasingly become managerial tools to repair psychic labour capacity. Like Cohen's brief discussion of education in his conclusion, May's chapters on teaching her son the art of wintering, when she decides to home school him, expose the failure of education systems to offer self-care resources and address vital questions of life beyond the pursuit of knowledge and achievement. In the chapter 'Song' she notes that when she sings with her son, she doesn't teach him 'words and lyrics, but how to survive' (May 2020, 260). In choosing to give her son a space for reflection where he can build his resilience, rather than follow the official curriculum, May brings us back to Cvetkovich's idea of the 'utopia of the ordinary habit': she writes that her son and she found new creative solutions by changing the focus 'away from pushing through with normal life, and towards making a new one' (May 2020, 140).

Like art, which has a prominent place in his book, Cohen notes that psychoanalysis encourages us to think and speak in the rhythm unique to us rather than to adapt ourselves to someone else's notion of the best way to live (2018, xxxiii). Here he not only links psychoanalysis with the older tradition of the care of the self but with Foucault's conception of it as a 'personal ethics' (2000, 261), whose goal is to cultivate interior freedom. If Cohen's study illustrates how psychoanalysis and art can help us explore the creative possibilities of a state of inertia, May shows how nature can teach us to do something similar through the states of hibernation—the dormice, an 'icon of indolence, drowsing away the winter as if oblivious to the future' (2020, 93); the 'liminal space' of snow that invites us to step out of the ordinary (192); and the borderland between wake and sleep, an hour or more of wakefulness known as the 'watch', which was a normal practice before the Industrial Revolution. May references historians such as A. Roger Ekirch who has studied people's sleep patterns at a time in which 'the night was really dark' and people would sleep early to save the price of candles. As Ekirch argues, before the Industrial Revolution, it was customary to divide the night into two periods of sleep: the 'first' or 'dead' sleep, lasting from the evening until the early hours of the morning; and the 'second', or 'morning,' sleep until daybreak. In between, there was the 'watch.' This pattern of sleeping has disappeared in our over lit age. Rather than causing anxiety, as sleep deprivation often does, this very ordinary part of the day is characterised as contemplative and restful, like a form of meditation (May 2020, 96).

We can think of the practitioner of the watch as the night version of Cohen's 'daydreamer' in his typology but May shows how such an experience is not exclusive to artists (Cohen offers a biographical sketch of Emily Dickinson to illustrate his typology of the daydreamer). May's description of her night-waking as 'a luxurious space in which I can drink in the silence ... in a world where it's hard to feel alone, this finally is solitude' (2020, 94) recalls Sara Maitland's life experiments with silence and solitude documented in *A Book of Silence* (2008). Sleep is the one state in which we cannot be put to work and as such intrinsically incompatible with 24/7 capitalism, to echo Jonathan Crary's work (2014). May does not address sleep under capitalism explicitly but asserts that it 'is not a dead space' (2020, 99). Her account of the modes of sleeping during winters presents the world expanding beyond the narrow sphere of purpose, or, we could add, a culture of endless production and consumption. The 'free, extra space' May finds (95) captures both Cohen's dreamy, creative possibilities of a different rhythm of life and the utopian elements that Cvetkovich

associates with ordinary habit. Neither a time to catch up on work nor a form of escape, the watch is a reflective and restorative time full of unexpected insights; May describes it in terms of ‘revelling in the play of my own absorption’, with her dreams ‘still present like an extra dimension to my perception’ because ‘my sensible daytime self, bossy and overbearing, still slumbers. Without its overseeing eye, I can see different futures and make imaginative leaps’ (95).

As a practice that May actively adopts, the mid-night watch not only nurtures a sense of freedom that can offer resources for imagining a different future, but also more practically allows her to reappraise her relationship to insomnia. In research that draws on qualitative evidence from interviews on the experience of self-care reported by individuals and families, Christina Maria Godfrey has argued that individuals who are able to find ‘symbolic meaning in their illness/disability or reframe the implications positively are more capable of adapting and maintaining their focus on caring for themselves’ (2010, 25). Towards the end of her chapter on the mid-night watch, May wonders whether our insomnia during winters might not actually emerge from an unconscious desire for a space of ‘intimacy and contemplation, darkness and silence’ (2020, 99). Rather than a pathology, she speculates that insomnia could be an expression of our yearning for our own comfort or self-care. She emphasises the ways waking thoughts during insomnia can become a subtle form of self-care, an act of provision and meaning making in that they make space, swallowed up by the productive day, to reflect and ‘repair the fragmented narratives of our days’. And yet ‘we are pushing it away, this innate skill we have for digesting the difficult parts of life’ (100). What constitutes healthy sleeping is widely debated; there are numerous studies from experts on sleep and a plethora of TED talks on the subject with titles such as ‘How to Beat Anxiety and Insomnia’ and ‘Sleep is your Superpower’ by neuroscientist Matthew Walker. Many people use an app to monitor their sleep and identify aberrations. May is offering an alternative interpretation that emphasises the personal meaning rather than normative ideas of good or bad sleep. Her invocation of the old practice of the watch may be provocative for some people, but it is a potentially valuable strategy for reframing one’s perspective on a situation like insomnia that can cause additional anxiety. Even if it might not cure insomnia, May’s own terrors about that state disappear when she ‘turns insomnia into a watch: a claimed, sacred space in which I have nothing to do but contemplate’ (100).

While the majority of self-care rituals that are presented in this memoir are not mediated by health professionals, May addresses the role they can play in bridging the gap between medical care and self-care, and changing the mindset of their patients so that they become more actively involved in decisions over their health. An article by Nicholas Woolley, Kat Deyes and Matthew Bell (n.d.) corroborates that self-care is more effective when encouraged and supported by healthcare services and offers some suggestions on how health professionals can ‘activate’ their patients in that direction. As *Wintering* shows, the issue is not only about health literacy and access to information but also about self-awareness, confidence and agency; the realisation that patients have the power to influence their own health. In the chapter ‘Cold Water’ May introduces us to Dorte, a member of a Polar Bear Club, a group of people committed to sea swimming all year round, who has been living with bipolar. Dorte’s psychiatrist kept telling her that it was a matter of finding the right combination of medication to ‘fix’ her, but

the change in her happened when she stopped believing in being fixed. As in the example of the watch, Dorte found ‘a fresh perspective on her situation that changed how she conceptualised it’ during a consultation with a doctor she hadn’t met before. We may view his advice to ‘live the best life [Dorte] can with the parameters you have’ (May 2020, 207) as a platitude, but the effect of his words was profound. Following that consultation, which in effect gave her permission to prioritise her needs and live a life that she can cope with as opposed to what other people want (207–208), Dorte researched the beneficial effects of cold water on anxiety and integrated cold-water swimming into her life alongside a series of other changes. Dorte is now medication-free, but the journey is not over. As she says, ‘keeping well is almost a full-time job, but I have a wonderful life’ (211). Crucially her self-care routine is pleasurable rather than only therapeutic which increases the intrinsic motivation to maintain it.

Follow nature’s patterns? The politics of self-care

Drawing inspiration from nature and its intricate system of survival is at the heart of the poetic/pragmatic resourcefulness of this memoir, and in this sense *Wintering* offers a more literary version of ‘personal development’ books such as Sarah Spencer’s *Think Like a Tree: The Natural Principles Guide to Life* (2019) that contains chapters titled ‘follow nature’s patterns’, ‘find slow and small solutions’, ‘feed your roots’, ‘tune into natural cycles’, and ‘ten everyday ways you can live like a tree.’ Nevertheless, Rebecca Foster (2020) has noted in a review that the links between literal and metaphorical winter occasionally feel contrived or clichéd. In the memoir we find sentences such as: ‘Perhaps I need to feel the true cold before I can warm up again’ (May 2020, 55); ‘I too have shed some leaves ... Winter is asking me to be more careful with my energies and to rest a while until spring (84). Leaving aside questions of literary taste and creative originality, cliché is the ultimate ‘usual suspect’ for a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (Namwali Serpell 2017, 153). In May’s case, that suspicion could be directed to the message of patience and acceptance which her universalising analogies reinforce as when she writes that ‘plants and animals don’t fight the winter; they don’t pretend it’s not happening and attempt to carry on living the same lives that they lived in the summer. They prepare. They adapt’ (May 2020, 13); or that what matters is seizing ‘control, not of the seasons, but of our response to them’ (146). When wintering might be the result of systemic inequalities that continue year after year, a kind of ‘slow death’ (Berlant 2011, 95), being told to adapt or change your attitude to receive the ‘gift of winter’ (May 2020, 140) and the light of spring that eventually follows glosses over that violence and flattens discussions of wellbeing. Analogies such as ‘You apply ice to a joint after an awkward fall. Why not do the same to a life? (46) or ‘The needle breaks the fabric in order to repair it. You can’t have one without the other’ (77), when read suspiciously, recall neoliberal discourses that encourage individuals to become more resilient so as to take more pressure or oppression in the face of systemic uncertainty and precarity.

Namwali Serpell argues that it is important to apply to cliché a lens other than critique or recuperation, as also suggested earlier with regards to enchantment. Clichés and tired analogies can be ‘useful rather than just used up’ (2017, 177). The cyclical metaphor of life may draw us into a clichéd space but, as May notes referring to the importance of this

idea in ancient folklore, we are no longer accustomed to thinking in this way. We are instead in the habit of ‘imagining our lives to be linear; a long march from birth to death in which we mass our powers, only to surrender them again. This is brutal untruth. We have seasons when we flourish, and seasons when the leaves fall from us, revealing our bare bones. Given time, they grow again’ (May 2020, 78). Even though the memoir includes some discussion of the Sámi people, this passage does not acknowledge alternative perceptions of time and cultural differences, including Indigenous approaches where reciprocity with the natural world remains a vividly experienced reality. May draws here on nature to problematise Western modes of living—ideas of the self-mastering self, inherited from Enlightenment philosophical traditions—which in our modern late-capitalist world appear to be ‘natural’ or inevitable. Her image of the seasons offers a welcome alternative to another set of even more tired analogies that recur in the mainstream self-care literature. For example, in *The Self-Care Prescription*, Robyn L. Gobin draws on the common metaphor of the body as machine. She invites her readers to think of the dimensions of self-care like a car. Each part of the car plays a vital role in the overall functioning of the vehicle and just like a car requires periodic maintenance, our bodies, minds and spirits require the same level of upkeep (2019, 5). It could be argued that a metaphor like this is more relatable given the ways life for many, especially in urban centres, is increasingly divorced from nature. However, May’s description of a tree waiting and making ready during the winter, ‘getting on with [the business of survival] quietly’ (2020, 81) is more realistic than the quick fix that the metaphor of the car repair invokes, even if both metaphors are designed to remind us that self-care is an ongoing process.

In one of the most political sections of *Wintering* from the chapter ‘Survival’, May deploys Aesop’s fable of the Ant and the Grasshopper. After confessing her anger as a child over what seems to be the problematic moral of the story (be more like the ant, when in fact the ant is ‘mean and sanctimonious, possibly genocidal’), she takes us through the resonances of this fable in contemporary politics:

The grasshopper is the universal vagrant: the layabout, the benefit-scronger, ... [t]he people who think the rules don’t apply to them; the cheats and the criminals; the mothers, who, we’re told, have babies just to procure a council flat, ... [t]he slackers and the hangers-on ... and the millennials who are so busy eating avocado toast that they have to rely on the Bank of Mum and Dad. The economic migrants, the refugees ... This great, amorphous crowd, knocking on the doors of the decent folk who work for a living and who always pay their way. (May 2020, 225-226)

Correcting these moralising discourses that can be summarised with ‘if only everyone could be the ants’, she offers an alternative ‘if only’: ‘if only life were so stable, happy and predictable as to produce ants instead of grasshoppers, year in, year out’ (227).

While this would have been an opportune moment in the memoir to address systemic issues that are obscured by discourses that put the blame on ‘the grasshoppers’, May moves away from the socio-economic contexts that she has opened for us through the fable. She neutralises a more political discussion on survival and on the unequal distribution of privilege and bodily vulnerabilities, which we find in the ways many intersectional feminists and artists have engaged with

discourses of self-care,¹¹ through yet another analogy that returns us to the rhythms of nature:

The truth is that we all have ant years and grasshopper years; years when we are able to prepare and save, and years where we need a little extra help. Our true flaw lies not in failing to store up enough resources to cope with the grasshopper years, but in believing that each grasshopper year is an anomaly, visited only on us, due to our unique human failings. (May 2020, 227)

This revised moral of the fable, however welcome it is for advocating kindness rather than stigma and blame, seems to ignore that ants and grasshoppers can be, and increasingly are, different groups of people rather than a version of the same individual in different times.

Conclusion: reading reparatively

Sticking close to the memoir's analogy of natural cycles may be one of the reasons why *Wintering* is unlikely to resonate strongly with those readers who might be looking for alternative conceptualisations of self-care, such as the ones we find in Audre Lorde's *A Burst of Light*, where self-care is presented as a form of 'self-preservation' that is an act of 'political warfare' (1988, 131). But reading reparatively might encourage us to focus on the ways that May's interest in wintering's emotional dynamics and in slow personal transformations is *good enough* rather than sentimental, naïve or moralising. The key message that emerges from *Wintering* is that experiences that wear us down can also give us resources, and that we need to engage with this process rather than ignore it: 'Change will not stop happening. The only part we can control is our response' (May 2020, 264). It is true that 'life is more secure for some people than others', as May acknowledges, (264) and as a result some people need to become more inventive to survive. As Sara Ahmed (2014) writes in 'Selfcare as Warfare', 'when a whole world is organised to promote your survival, from health to education, from the walls designed to keep your residence safe, from the paths that ease your travel, you do not have to become so inventive to survive ... The benefits you receive are given as entitlements, perhaps even as birth rights.'

However, May's message of 'making ready' (the title of one of her chapters) and of self-care, is elastic and does not foreclose forms of resilience that seek to defy hostile structures such as patriarchy, white supremacy, economic austerity and heteronormativity, and where the right of self-care becomes an expression of a collective will and a strategy for activism. In fact, interventions like Lorde's, Ahmed's and Sedgwick's into discourses and practices of self-care demonstrate that it is a tool that can be 'sharpened,' as Ahmed (2014) puts it, in precisely those directions rather than dismissed altogether. For those who might still read *Wintering's* defence of rest and retreat as self-indulgent luxuries, coming from a place of privilege, Odell's response, formulated in a different but related context, is apt: 'just because this right is denied to many people doesn't make it any less of a right or any less important' (2019, 12).

More than an invitation to narcissism and egoism *Wintering* frames the care of the self as an essential individual as well as relational/communal act. We see this most vividly in the cold-water swimming scenes where May writes of the importance of sharing the burden of self-care with others (2020, 135), but also in the ways a pedagogical and

ethical desire underlies her narrative. May asserts that ‘you will find wisdom in your winter, and once it’s over, it’s your responsibility to pass it on’ (142), as she does with her son and, of course, through her memoir. Foucault’s analysis of Greco-Roman practices of the self acknowledges the pedagogical and social dimension of the care of the self, whether it is by exploring the role of the other as the guide or correspondent to whom one writes or as helpful friend and relative (2005, 536–537); unlike common misperceptions the care of the self does not separate us from the world. Echoing Cvetkovich’s belief in the ‘forms of sociability’ (2012, 23) that depression can foster as a public feeling, May describes people’s winters as ‘social glue’ (2020, 237). In emphasising the learning from, and passing of, the wisdom of wintering, she further suggests that we can break the life-long habit of looking at other people’s misfortunes harshly because we feel certain that they caused them in ways we wouldn’t. She finds this unkind attitude harmful because it stops us from reaching out to people who are suffering (142–143). As she concludes these reflections, ‘Watching winter, and really listening to its messages ... we learn to look kindly on other people’s crises, because they are often portents of our future’ (142–143). This statement about the ways wintering can encourage a reparative or more generous stance to the world resonates with the ethical possibility many detect in Klein’s depressive position, in the form of an ‘empathetic view of the other’ who is recognised as both good and bad, and requiring and eliciting love and care’ (Sedgwick 2003, 137). But as already noted, and as May seems to confirm above, such ethical possibility is founded on and coextensive with the subject’s movement towards the care of the self. Of course, there is no guarantee that such kindness towards others will be activated by the wisdom of wintering or that it can become the basis for acknowledging systemic problems that undermine survival and wellbeing for many people. The degree to which self-care is a driver or offshoot of the care for others and the world is a much larger conversation about the relationship between ethics and politics that is beyond the scope of May’s project.¹²

Even though she hadn’t set out to write a memoir,¹³ May doesn’t express the kind of ambivalence that Cvetkovich does about her ‘Depression Journals’ when she refers to the problematic place of memoir within therapeutic culture. Cvetkovich is acutely aware of the ways memoirs tend to circulate in ‘sensationalizing and personalizing ways that don’t lend themselves to the social and political analysis’ that she is looking for (2012, 16). Some reviews of her book have picked on that criticism, which extends beyond the memoir part, suggesting that Cvetkovich doesn’t carry through on the book’s original ‘political’ promise, namely to look more closely and critically at the cultural components of depression, at how it really is a public feeling in a neoliberal capitalist world (Zambreno 2013).¹⁴ Seeming to anticipate such responses, Cvetkovich defends her decision to produce this hybrid work as part of a *reparative* scholarly project (2012, 26) that rejects a range of master narratives (personal, medical and social) that circulate about depression. As she writes:

Ideally, I’d like those forms of testimony to offer some clues about how to survive those conditions [cultural forms of violence that lead to depression] and even to change them, but I’d also settle for a compelling description, one that doesn’t reduce lived experience to a list of symptoms and one that provides a forum for feelings that, despite a widespread therapeutic culture still haven’t gone public enough. (15)

May's memoir provides such a forum to name and share our 'personal winters ... the words [that] feel barbed in our throats: grief, rejection, depression, illness. Shame, failure, despair' (2020, 273). However, she doesn't frame her project in the same way as Cvetkovich. In exposing her memoir to the scepticism that surrounds the concept and politics of self-care, my aim was to show not only how investigating self-care and affective tools of transformation more broadly often draws literary critics into these more suspicious readings, but also that it is possible and important to cultivate a reparative practice. Such a practice not only allows us to engage with a narrative like May's on its own terms, but crucially maintains the ambivalent character of self-care as both a potential tool of ideological oppression and a vital practice of freedom carrying ethical and political possibilities.

Notes

1. See <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2018/11/encouraging-people-to-choose-self-care-for-life/>.
2. Her earlier memoir *The Electricity of Every Living Thing* (2018) also weaves together a physical and emotional journey. May sets out to walk the 630-mile South West Coast Path but the book tells the story of the year she came to terms with a late diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome too.
3. This is reinforced by the subtitle of May's paperback edition, *The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times*.
4. In a virtual chat with May organised by Lindum Books (20 January 2021), counsellors and psychoanalytic therapists in the audience drew attention to the links *Wintering* has with the therapeutic process.
5. In his lectures that he gave at the Collège de France in 1981–1982, Foucault considered a bifurcation in Western intellectual practice between spirituality and philosophy. While philosophy is "the form of thought that asks what it is that enables the subject to have access to the truth" spirituality is "the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth" (2005, 15).
6. See Rose 1989; McGee 2005; and Brown 2013.
7. 'A Zoom chat with Katherine May—*Wintering*', 20 January 2021. Lindum Books.
8. Such aesthetic models can be found in Foucault's notion of the ancient care of the self as the 'aesthetics of existence' (2000, 271). For a critique of such an understanding, see Hadot 1995.
9. For self-help literature inspired by wolves, see Schaffner 2021, 109–111. May also engages with the genre of fable, as discussed later, which has a long literary history.
10. On daydreaming as a form of rest see Hammond 2019.
11. See Lorde 1988; Ahmed 2014; maree brown 2019; Hedva 2015; and Sharma, Sainte-Marie, and Fournier 2017 for some examples.
12. See Myers 2013 and Lefebvre 2018 on the different ways this relationship can be conceptualised.
13. 'A Zoom chat with Katherine May—*Wintering*', 20 January 2021. Lindum Books.
14. See also Stark's review (2015) that concludes with the suggestion that despite their promises, academic projects like Cvetkovich's are not adequate for radical and transformative work.

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