Article

Cloud/land – An Onto-story

Julian Yates

Department of English, University of Delaware, Newark, DE.

Abstract Taking up Jane Bennett’s invitation at the end of *Vibrant Matter* to imagine an ‘onto-story,’ this essay travels our archives by way of the medial impressions generated by the co-presence of a human person and the phenomenon we name ‘cloud.’

postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies (2013) 4, 42–54.
doi:10.1057/pmed.2012.46

O! It is pleasant, with a heart at ease,
Just after sunset, or by moonlight skies,
To make the shifting clouds be what you please,
Or let the easily persuaded eyes
Own each quaint likeness issuing from the mould
Of a friend’s fancy; or with head bent low
And cheek aslant, see Rivers flow of gold
‘Twixt crimson banks; and then, a traveller, go
From mount to mount thro’ CLOUDLAND, gorgeous land!
Or list’ning to the tide, with closed sight,
Be that blind bard, who on Chian strand
By those deep sounds possessed with inward light,
Beheld the ILIAD and the ODYSSEE
Rise to the swelling of the voiceful sea.
– Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘Fancy in Nubibus,’ 29 October, 1817

Welcome to Cloud/land. Welcome to a *topos* and a topology that considers the mutual or medial impressions left by the confluence of a cloud and a human person – the imagination becomes weather report. By this (you need to understand) nothing will be solved. Cloud/land designates one trope, merely, by which the complexity of living systems codes one another. It produces nothing more durable than a series of cloudy impressions, a fleeting archive and an intimation of nonhuman agencies. Much can happen in the looking. By your naming of the shapes you say you see in the sky, whole worlds, gods, persons, and places will be made and unmade. You will find friends and foes. You will find yourself alone and in a crowd. One day, you will die. However, scan the skies, however you may, I defy you to discern a finite agency, the ‘hand’ of this or that divinity, of Providence, a final cause, human or otherwise, even as you place one there. The weather remains an open system – that by your gazing you reduce to a dwelling. Totalizing in its complexity, the weather yields only weak theories, botched or provisional universals. Clouds come. Clouds go. That is all. Causes uncouple from effects.

Welcome to my ‘onto-story’ or ‘onto-tale,’ as Jane Bennett (2010, 116) names the genre near the end of *Vibrant Matter*. It’s a type of writing that stands surety with a flat ontology that models the world as actor networks, assemblages or ecologies. ‘Picture an ontological field without any unequivocal demarcations between human, animal, vegetable, and mineral,’ she writes, ‘all forces and flows (materialities) are or can become lively, affective, and signaling. And so an affective, speaking human body is not radically different from the affective, signaling nonhumans with which it coexists, hosts, enjoys, senses, consumes, produces, and competes’ (Bennett, 2010, 117). Such materiality is ‘vital.’ However, what a challenge it poses to our powers of description. How do you write a story that is not even a story and continuously rewrites itself, multiplying its threads, most of which you are too limited to perceive? As soon as it begins, an ‘onto-story’ seems to stall, to peter out, coming to figure an impossible narration. Bennett (2010, 119) doesn’t quite name the ‘onto-story’ a cloud, but she may as well have done. ‘It is too close and too fugitive,’ she writes, ‘as much wind as thing, impetus as entity, a movement always on the way to becoming something otherwise, an effluence that is vital and engaged in trajectories but not necessarily intentions’. How, then, to write with the wind?

The final paragraph of *Vibrant Matter* offers hints. Bennett switches modes. The ‘onto-story’ becomes a litany and a *Credo*, ‘a kind of Nicene Creed for would-be vital materialists,’ a string of ‘beliefs’ – ‘in one matter-energy,’ ‘it is wrong to deny vitality to non-human bodies,’ ‘that a careful course of anthropomorphization can help reveal that vitality’ (Bennett, 2010, 122). These beliefs have the flavor of religion or moral philosophy but describe, rather, a re-orienting of perception, a neutral re-tying (*re-ligare*) of aesthetics that may (or may not) relate to ethics and politics. Bennett’s *Credo* seeks to empty eschatology even if it does not escape it, declaring nothing more than a set of conditions or constraints. The constitutive

'I believe' renders the 'human' an occasion, merely, a point of enunciation, an unreliable narrator, at best, a finite 'screen' (Yates, 2010, 228) on which the 'outside that's within' (Bennett, 2010, 113) plays out – that play both vital and deadly (which is to say differently vital or vital for something or someone else).

In what follows, I argue that an 'onto-story' constitutes an infra-genre that subsists within and without texts of all kinds, whose surfaces it interrupts, coming and going, such as so many fugitive clouds. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Fancy in Nubibus' designates the *topos*, keyed for him to the question of Fancy and the Imagination and suggests a strategy for rendering the marks left on texts by an 'onto-story' sensible. Let's join him and go cloud hopping; travel by trope. My aim will be to configure a recursive archive of tropic instances of cloud gazing each tuned to its respective historical moment but also and always to an aesthetic, figural domain whose temporality and consistency remain all its own. Such a method assumes that an 'onto-story' shares the flavor of Derridian 'arche-writing,' of a 'writing that spells its symbols pluri-dimensionally,' in which 'meaning is not subjected to successivity' or the ratio of the line (Derrida, 1974, 85–86), and so which both resists and funds linear writing practices. The difference, if there is one, might exist in the way an 'intelligent materialism,' a materialism that considers matter as 'autopoietic' or self organizing (Berressem, 2005, 51), figures the relation between language and world. Following Michel Serres's (2000, 141) reading of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, this materialism holds that 'atoms ... are letters,' and 'their interconnection constitutes the tissue of the body, in the same way that letters form words, empty spaces, sentences, and texts'. Language emerges from the flux as one instance of generalized coding. 'Nature,' writes Serres 'is coded,' but it remains unreadable (Serres, 2000, 140), for 'sense appears [only] in the local, here, there, yesterday, tomorrow' (Serres, 2000, 146). 'Outside of the universal, there are indeed only versions, codes, and translations' (Serres, 2000, 146), a proliferation of backups held in various substrates (wax, skin, paper, analog and digital). Accordingly, we may say that an 'onto-story' exists everywhere as a sublimated fund from which finite genres are summoned, offering fragments, facsimiles, reflected shards of a pre-phenomenological instance in which language and matter emerge – the monism that Bennett takes as a fugitive given.¹

For Serres, our access to such givens derives always from our rootedness in a particular 'circumstance' (literally, the way *things* stand around). A 'circumstance' designates an eddy of negentropy amid the flux, a momentary stabilization or form that endures for a time. 'Circumstance' marks the 'place [also] where writing emerges as the mnemonic preserver,' writes Serres (2000, 148), and so 'things and words are negentropic tablets ... [that] escape, for as long as the code is memorized, the irreversible flux of dissolution'. These tablets do not tell the whole truth, but neither do they lie. It remains possible then, always and by the very limits imposed by our finitude, to read the traces left by an 'onto-story.' However, this reading requires something more than formal analysis. Each cloud requires

1 For an allied account of Serres in relation to Derrida, see Jonathan Goldberg's (2009, 31–62) fine treatment.

response and re-activation. ‘Better to “live” it through a kind of subjective participation guided by its movement and to recognize’ clouds ‘for what they are: *operators of elevation*,’ urges art historian Hubert Damisch in his *Theory of/ Cloud! Toward a History of Painting* (Damisch, 2002, 21).

Think of me, then, as traveling by way of the medial impressions clouds leave on discourse. If, on occasion, my ‘subjective participation’ leads me to misjudge the distance and hurtle earth wards, then consider that I have become some ‘clot’ (silly person) or ‘clod-hopper.’ The words ‘clod’ and ‘clot’ cohabit with ‘cloud’ in Old and Middle and Early Modern English (*OED*; Reed, 1983, 9) – terrestrial shapes just as massy as those shapes in the sky. So, if I appear to play the clown, the ploughman, the country lout, my head and heels sunk in an overly idiomatic soil, understand that an ‘onto-story’ requires the teller to strike strange poses, look askance and to run the risk of failing to produce a vendible narrative, a commodity that I can safely alienate and which you can put to use.

Remember, nothing will be solved. We shall have to begin all over again, each and every cloud.

Initial Conditions (The Seaside: 1817/1948)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (2001, 16:2, 942) has been out walking. He finds himself, so the story goes, in ‘a lazy poetic mood.’ A sonnet gets written. He finds that he has resumed a certain ‘rhyming Idleness’ or cloud *otium*. ‘O! it is pleasant,’ remarks the speaker, ‘with a heart at ease,’ to ‘make the shifting clouds be what you please’ (Coleridge, 2001, 16: 942). And what a pastime it is! Pure holiday. You are a sovereign in small, controlling the skies – registering the shapes the play of wind and water vapor make when arrested by the eyes. For such shapes that are said to exist in clouds do so only in the exchange between cloud and viewer. Clouds have no boundary other than that which we give them by our perceptual limitations, by our finitude. Ask a meteorologist about cataloguing clouds, and ‘he might laugh in your face, or might patiently explain that in all the language of meteorology, there is no such thing as a cloud, defined as an object with a quasi-permanent identity’ (Wiener, 1948, 41). ‘A topologically inclined meteorologist,’ continues Norbert Wiener (1948, 41) in his *Cybernetics*, ‘might perhaps define a cloud as a connected region of space in which the density of the part of the water content in the solid or liquid state exceeds a certain amount, but this definition would not be of the slightest value to anyone, and would at most represent an extremely transitory state’. ‘What really concerns the meteorologist,’ he writes ‘is some statistical statement as “Boston. January 17, 1950. Sky 38 per cent overcast. Cirro-cumulus”’ (Wiener, 1948, 41).

For Wiener, the time of meteorology, its serial, punctual descriptions of a complexity that it does not reduce, provides an epistemological forbear for the cybernetics he introduces to the world. For Coleridge, the time of ‘CLOUDLAND’ is that of the imagination – or of the possible passage from

mere ‘fancy’ to higher things. Infinite possibilities inhere to this poem that describes no clouds but which, instead, offers orientations, instructions for making and becoming with the sky. The appositive, generative ‘ors’ foreclose nothing, offering instead pure potentiality, open time. The joyous infinitives beckon you to join in and recreate with the cosmos, but foreclose nothing. Look on or up, if you are alone. If you have company, laugh and give your eyes to the spoken words that render your ‘friend’s fancy,’ and make out what she says she sees. You may also, if you like, bend your head, and turn your cheek, and strike the pose the speaker recommends and go cloud hopping from ‘mount to mount,’ the world below rendered golden by the setting sun. Or, maybe you have closed your eyes and let your ears drink in the ‘tide.’ For then your ‘fancies’ may take on the aesthetic heft of Homer’s blind imagination. ‘Closed sight’ approximates the blindness of the bard whose presence on ‘the Chian strand’ tunes him in to the ‘deep sounds possessed with inward light,’ his *Iliad* and his *Odyssey* ‘rising,’ ‘swelling,’ to give him eyes to hear the ‘voiceful sea.’

Shifting clouds; moving water; liquid language – the sonnet begins and ends with a series of instructions on how to take impressions. Somewhere among and between the words that describe you and your friend’s fancies; Homer’s poems; Coleridge’s sonnet; somewhere in the weave of all this walking, talking, looking, listening, reading, re-reading, quoting and plagiarizing – the last five lines ‘belong’ to F. L. Stolberg’s ‘*An Das Meer*’ – lies Cloud/land. The pleasure? Quite precisely, that all of this solves nothing. No cause. No effect. Just possibilities. Such are, it may be said, the immediate conditions of ‘an onto-story’ or ‘onto-tale.’ However, why choose to remain so idle? Why settle for a ‘lazy poetic mood?’ What are Coleridge and Wiener up to?

In the first chapter of *Hermès IV: La Distribution* (Serres, 1977), Serres offers a reading of Wiener’s *Cybernetics*, finding it content with a merely cloudy, meteorological account of ‘immediate conditions’ ‘from which, nothing follows.’² It is, as Serres remarks, a ‘curious circumstance.’ Wiener (1948, 40) begins the first chapter of *Cybernetics* with an old German poem that asks ‘how many stars in the skies, how many clouds above the world? Do you know? God, our Lord, knows the count’. ‘Within limits,’ he writes, ‘the answer to the first question is that ... we do know how many stars there are,’ but, by contrast, we remain unable to count or archive clouds, hence the laughter of the meteorologist, who knows the vast expenditure it would take, the impossible set of circumstances required to do so (Wiener, 1948, 40). Necessarily provisional or projective, ‘meteorological forecasts precede astronomical prediction,’ explains Serres *et al* (1978, 13), ‘Why? Because the forecasts have more force, epistemologically speaking, because they mobilize a more complex knowledge, richer and less abstract concepts. Tuned to circumstances, to conditions it does not reduce, ‘meteorology is the repressed content of history’ (Serres *et al*, 1978, 13). He does not ‘mean the climate but *meteora*: clouds, rain and waterspouts, hailstorms or showers, the direction and force of the wind, here

2 References will be to an excerpt of *Hermès IV: La Distribution* (Serres, 1977), translated as ‘Human/Exact’ (Serres *et al*, 1978, 9).

and now' (Serres, 2000, 67). What happens if we pause with Coleridge and Wiener, and dwell among the cloudy 'here and nows' that mark our discourses, suspending, for a while, our desire for greater significance or narrative?

Of course, such a forceful and primary epistemology is not always 'pleasant' or 'golden.' Neither does it offer much by way of security: prodigies, monsters, plague and mushroom clouds beckon. Worse still, terrestrial soul that you are, you might look up and see nothing, draw a blank.

Distemper (London: 1665/1722)

You might, like H. F., the narrator of Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, come a cropper, end up solo, just some 'clod' or 'clot,' wandering the streets of London. Worse off than Crusoe, H. F. lives shipwreck as a constant. He lacks the store of provisions that would enable him to hold up and wait for Friday, so he shuttles between two apparent options: 'whether I should resolve to stay in *London*, or shut up my House and flee, as many of my Neighbors did' (Defoe, 2010, 9). He goes walking, exploring this or that part of the City, but 'terrified by those frightful Objects' he encounters, he 'retire[s] Home...and resolve[s] to go out no more.' Unable to 'keep those Resolutions for [more than] three or four Days' (Defoe, 2010, 66–67), during which time he prays, confesses his sins, fasts, H. F. ends up back on the streets where 'people fall ... dead' around him. No exact pattern or shape emerges from these movements, even as the *Journal* records the condition of H. F.'s soul.

One day, H. F. finds himself among a crowd of people 'all staring up into the Air, to see what a woman told them appeared plain to her, which was an Angel cloth'd in White, with a fiery Sword in his Hand, waving it, or brandishing it over his Head' (Defoe, 2010, 21). This woman describes 'every part of the Figure to the Life; shew'd them the Motion, and the Form; and the poor people came into it so eagerly ... YES, *I see it all plainly, says one. There's the Sword plain as can be.* Another saw the Angel. One saw his very Face.' H. F. looks up 'as earnestly as the rest.' However, as he says to them, 'I could see nothing, but a white Cloud, bright on one Side, by the shining of the Sun upon the other Part.' The woman shows him. She tries to make him say he sees what she says she sees. However, he cannot. He cannot, in Coleridge's terms, play the part of a friend; his eyes will not take her impressions. For if they did, he writes 'I must have lied.' And so she turns on him; looks him in the face; and 'fancy[-ing that] ... I laugh'd; in which her Imagination deceiv'd her too; for I really did not laugh,' calls him a 'profane Fellow, and a Scoffer.' The crowd jeers him away and returns to their vision.

Yes, H. F. records a demystified attitude to the skies that the Enlightenment has emptied. The anecdote appears among a catalogue of 'breaches among us in matters of Religion.' However, what's key is the way these 'separate Opinions

[that] prevail'd among the People' (Defoe, 2010, 24) reveal the failure of sociality that grips a London that wrestles with the state of emergency occasioned by the plague and the bio-political recoding of its citizenry as diseased vectors. The City empties – its daily patterns recalibrated; its streets trafficked by the carts that collect the dead; the clandestine flow of the infected and the well to the countryside; and punctuated by the shutting up and opening of houses holding infected persons; the melancholy suicides; the wailing of the insane; the patient quiet of those few who manage to live on. *A Journal* catalogues these patterns, takes its structure from them. Such magic that the crowd saw in the skies migrates to the text, a narrative record of swellings and fevers, held together by the passage of the year and H. F.'s voice. It ends when the weather breaks and the plague departs. No *ataraxy* here, no lucid awareness such as Lucretius offers as the plague clouds loom over Athens (Lucretius, Book 6), just the facticity of breathing captured in the *envoi*:

A dreadful Plague in London was,
In the Year Sixty Five,
Which swept an Hundred Thousand Souls
Away; yet I alive! (Defoe, 2010, 212)

Friend and Foe (Elsinore/London: 1600)

Or, perhaps, you're having a bit of bother with your mother, your uncle and your dead Dad – who keeps on calling about something he got in his ear. Enter Polonius: 'My lord, the Queen would speak with you, and presently' (Shakespeare, 1974). Look down. Look anywhere. Look to the sky:

Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?'

Pol: By th' mass and 'tis, like a camel indeed.

Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel.

Pol: It is back'd like a weasel.

Hamlet: Or like a whale.

Pol: Very like a whale.

Hamlet: Then I will come to my mother by and by.

[Aside] They fool me to the top of my bent. – I will come by and by.
(Shakespeare, 1974, 3.2.374–385)

Hamlet is full of 'almosts' and 'likes.' He approximates; flags suggestions as suggestions; invites agreement; courts contradiction. Polonius, quite out of character if not of sorts, agrees. Come on Polonius, play at being H. F., disagree with me and I shall make a scene; call you a 'scoffer;' run off and away and escape speaking with my mother 'presently.' However, Polonius plays the friend; transubstantiates the 'almosts' and the 'likes' into the Presence (Real or

Commemorative) of camels; draws out the spine of the weasel, which he finds ‘back’d’ in the cloud that bodies it forth; finds the ‘whale,’ with emphatic redundancy, ‘very like a whale.’ He is too much the friend, too much the unfriendly friend to a foe’s fancies.

Hamlet, we know, apes the weather. ‘Mad north-north-west,’ ‘when the wind is southerly [he] knows a hawk from a hand-saw’ (2.2.377–378). Here he amps up his ‘antic disposition’ only to find himself provided with the too ‘easily persuaded eye’ of Polonius who phenomenalizes his figures. What can he do? Curse and moan. Whip himself up and down: ‘Now could I drink hot blood’ (3.2.390). The ‘walking shadow,’ player/spirit (clod or cloud), who bodies him forth on stage, will soon perform the terminal death effects of ending. Therefore, for now, he asserts his sovereignty by a strong reading of the heavens. He might do better to close his eyes, shut himself up, as H. F. thinks best. Blink. Blank out. Stay in bed.

Wink (‘The Sunne Rising’: Circa 1600)

Such it is that John Donne advises when the sun comes calling. Like it or not, you will blink, your eyelid closing to wipe away irritants and to spread moisture over your cornea. Therefore, why not play the sovereign and wink – you might, as Donne hopes, send the solar eye packing. ‘Busy old foole,’³ he writes, in his post-coital admonishing of a sun that intrudes through his window. ‘Goe chide/ Late schoolboys, and sour prentices’; ‘tell Court-huntsmen, that the King will ride,/ Call countrey ants to harvest offices’ (5–6; 7–8). ‘Love, all alike, no season knowes, nor clyme,/ Nor houres, dayes, moneths, which are the rags of time’ (9–10). Negentropic eddy that it is, love must be weatherproof. Donne winks, or says he would – ‘I could eclipse and cloud [thy beams, so reverend and strong] with a winke’ (13) – but can’t bring himself to do so for fear of losing sight of his lover. Instead, he tells the sun to come back ‘tomorrow late’ and tell him if ‘both th’Indias of spice and Myne’ are still ‘where thou left’st them’ or whether ‘they lie here with mee’ (16–18). Donne pushes back against diurnal inevitability by positing the lovers’ bed as a sovereign state; recoding and thereby demoting both sovereigns and suns, who, in Donne’s counter-Copernican revolution, come to revolve around the lovers’ bed that morphs geo-political and cosmological time into a perpetual sun/day or kairotic hiatus.

Of course it’s just talk, stacking up words against the heavens. However, in doing so the speaker posits the lover’s circumstance as an alternate polity that exerts a cosmological or geological agency – a global loving that warms their bed, all in order to archive their instant. Today the gentle rhetorical ‘push’ by which Donne defies gravity, is available to you for a modest sum by way of a vast technical relay and agglomeration of terrestrial resources projected as water

3 References to Donne’s ‘The Sunne Rising’ are to the *Poetical Works* (1985), hereafter cited parenthetically by line number (here, 1).

vapor hanging in the air, liberating your memory from the massy weight of external memory devices. No worries. Blink away. The i-Cloud archives all.

In the meantime, you will still need to make plans for an ending. For, while your data lives on, you will die. The temperature is rising.

***De Casibus* (Alexandria and London: 31 BCE/1607–1608)**

Cleopatra's Palace by way of the Globe or Blackfriars; the Battle of Actium has been lost. Caesar has won. Local time: mid to late afternoon. We have been hoping all day for clouds – but not for rain.

Antony has been raging – 'The shirt of Nessus is upon me,' 'The witch shall die/To the young Roman boy she hath sold me, and I fall/Under this plot; she dies for't, Eros, ho!' (Shakespeare, 1974, 4.13.43–49). Soon, he expects, he will vanish. Perhaps he already has:

Antony: Eros, thou yet behold'st me

Eros: Ay, noble lord.

Antony: Sometime we see a cloud that's dragonish,
A vapor sometime like a bear or lion,
A [tower'd] citadel, a pendant rock,
A forked mountain, or blue promontory
With trees upon't that nod unto the world,
And mock our eyes with air. Thou hast seen these signs.
They are black vespers' pageants.

Eros: Ay my lord.

Antony: That which is now a horse, even with a thought
The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct
As water is in water.

Eros: It does my lord.
(Shakespeare, 1974, 4.14.1–11)

Thus Antony fades. He does not describe what he sees. Instead he catalogs the shapes he might once have seen or fancies he saw. Such signs signify nothing more to him now than stage machinery – the *opera* of a masque or a mystery play – Evensong, the end of day. The sky becomes a portrait miniature in reverse. The working of paint and jewels and gold comes unfixed – a screen for moving images, fugitive pigments, as all shape is lost.

If Donne's 'The Sunne Rising' provides the script for most of the play, *Antony and Cleopatra* an extended *alba* against Caesar's rise, here Antony sings the serenade.

'Now thy captain is/Even such a body,' he continues, 'Here I am Antony,/Yet cannot hold this visible shape' (4.14.11–14). Antony evaporates, dies as cloud. If

only he could wink; if only he and Cleopatra could take to their bed, send the sun and Caesar packing. However, the deck was stacked for, so he thinks, Cleopatra has ‘pack’d cards with Caesar’s, and false-play’d [his]...glory’ (4.14.19–20). Eros weeps. ‘Nay, weep not, gentle Eros,’ Antony consoles, ‘there is left us/Ourselves to end ourselves’ (4.14.21–22). And so, we watch this extinction, courtesy of Plutarch’s prose become Shakespeare’s verse, the sky the occasion for a lesson in meta/meteorology *cum* moral philosophical calisthenics by which Antony salvages something of his unraveling sovereign ‘we’ to make an ending.

Welcome to cloud/land. You thought you could live elsewhere? Did you not recall, ‘humanity constructs weak coherences’? (Serres, 2000, 129–130). Cleopatra understands best, of course, that when Rome and history come calling, taxing your ‘niche’ with their eventful plots, you’ve got to ‘detour to escape ... deterioration’ (Serres, 2000, 178). You may, if you die memorably, live on in stories, but you have to make a lasting impression on the archive, living on and in and by your death. Antony goes first; tries hard; asks Eros to kill him; but Eros opts out; beats him to it. Antony must end solo; botches it; runs at his sword; does not die; lives on, still. Cleopatra does better. She narrates their extinction as she goes: ‘My desolation does begin,’ she says ‘to make/A better life’ (by which she means death) ‘Tis paltry to be Caesar’ (Shakespeare, 1974, 5.2.1–3). She will starve herself; end in a ditch or in the Nile, ‘nak’d and let the waterflies/Blow me into abhorring!’ (5.2.57–60) – death by vapor, becoming a host to an insect cloud. The Romans grab her; she evades; dies by asp. Thus Antony and Cleopatra live on as story for as long as there are those to tell it, which, already, Cleopatra begins to do, remembering Antony to her captors – his delights, she says, were ‘dolphin-like; they showed his back above/The element they lived in’ (5.2.89–90).

If meteorology is the repressed content of history, *Antony and Cleopatra* with its succession of short scenes, quick turns and lack of plot, desublimates that content, which takes the form of a series of aesthetic superlatives, of gilded if not golden clouds, impressing themselves upon its several audiences. Rome and Caesar and we watch remotely as the images rerun.

The Shirt of Nessus (Earth: The Anthropocene)

It would be tempting to end this essay by asserting some order of epistemological privilege to meteorology over and above its ability ‘to mobilize a more complex knowledge, richer and less abstract concepts’ (Serres *et al*, 1978, 13). The formal constraints of ending induce desires for moral philosophical or ethical scripts. However, I have not been composing a *de casibus* tragedy. I have merely been cloud hopping. If cloud/land permits nothing more than an accounting of initial conditions, then it would seem foolish to promise more. Clouds roll in and by and, if we follow Serres, indicate a complexity that we

cannot capture. Keyed to the limits of our perceptual apparatus, to the relation between the visible and the invisible, the phenomenal and non phenomenal, clouds present as a crossroads or crux in our discourses, demanding to be read and yet always exceeding the impressions with which they leave us. Accordingly, they assume a spectral quality, generating but also traumatizing our sense of futurity. They authorize only a recounting of what you perceive, here and now.

Such an orientation necessarily leads to a certain hesitance or reserve as to knowing more than my close/d readings permit. I remain sensitive to the concerns of critics and historians who seek to understand how 'climate change' or the less alliteratively calming figure of 'global warming' might refigure our shared protocols of reading and crafting histories, but cautious with regard to how such a refiguring relies on a discourse of impending apocalypse and a surety of referents. It seems to me that the clod hopping my 'onto-story' required of me, discerning that is the tropic work of clouds as writing machine, and the way the weather serves as index to questions of sovereignty, sociality, friendship and matters of security (the state, data protection and archive management), should make me wary of stagings of anthropogenic climate change, of human actions on a geological scale, as, an 'unfolding geo-tragedy' (Wood, 2007, 32) or as the inevitable consequences of the *de casibus* tragedy of the life of a species, 'our falling into the Anthropocene,' 'human freedom under the cloud of the Anthropocene' (Chakrabarty, 2009, 219, 212). That such emplotment augurs in so familiar a fashion suggests that however much I agree with Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009, 219) that we should take up the burden of 'relat[ing] to a universal history of life,' it will prove difficult to escape a certain generic predictability to the stories we will craft, and that those stories may still, by imagining that there could be an exit to such problems, shelter the 'human,' become climactic or geological agent, from the inhuman cast to the weather. Hence, the tentative, provisional form that my onto-story has taken, an inventorying of medial impressions, of the differently fleeting traces of persons and clouds, and the shifting, mobile politics those impressions occasion.

If, like Antony, 'the shirt of Nessus' is upon us, the fabled poisoned tunic that kills Hercules, a trope of looming fatality, an unavoidable unraveling of circumstance, I should like to hear by that invocation not Antony's sovereign extinction but the terror of an Emmanuel Levinas as he attempts to define responsibility. 'Responsibility prior to any free commitment,' he writes, 'the oneself outside of all the tropes of essence, would be responsibility for the freedom of others. The irremediable guilt with regard to the neighbor is like a Nessus tunic my skin would be' (Levinas, 1989, 99). As Jacques Lezra (2010, 21) notes in a dazzling commentary, this tunic, soaked in the tainted blood of the centaur Nessus, 'is not a trope, or not only a trope ... but also reveals the concept's essence.' For Levinas, this responsibility constitutes a given, 'it is pre-supposed' (Lezra, 2010, 21). This hybrid-skin tunic, this habit world that you may not remove, that was given to you, that you find yourself

inhabiting, constitutes the defining predicament of an existence without exit. It has been there since our beginning, permitting the production only of weak universals, fragmented axioms and imperfect fractured narratives that inquire into every here and now. Such is the way an ‘onto-story’ as infra-genre marks our discourses. Such is the story I have attempted to write.

What do you see in the clouds? It is not, perhaps, such a bad place from which to begin.

Acknowledgement

My thanks to Tobias C. Menely in sharing his essay ‘The Present Obfuscation: Cowper’s *Task* and the Time of Climate Change,’ forthcoming in *PMLA* and also to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Lowell Duckert, Charles E. Robinson and Richard Burt.

About the Author

Julian Yates is an Associate Professor of English and Material Culture Studies at University of Delaware. He is the author of *Error, Misuse, Failure: Object Lessons from the English Renaissance* (2003), which was a finalist for the MLA Best First Book Prize in 2003. His recent work focuses on questions of ecology, genre and the post-human. He is currently finishing two books: *What’s the Worst Thing You Can Do To Shakespeare?* co-authored with Richard Burt and *The Multi-Species Impression: Renaissance/Organics* (E-mail: jyates@udel.edu).

References

- Bennett, J. 2010. *Vital Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Berressem, H. 2005. Incerto Tempore Incertisque Locis: The Logic of the Clinamen and the Birth of Physics. In *Mapping Michel Serres*, ed. N. Abbas, 51–71. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Chakrabarty, D. 2009. The Climate of History: Four Theses. *Critical Inquiry* 35(2): 197–222.
- Coleridge, S.T. 2001. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Vol. 16, ed. J.C.C. Mays. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Damisch, H. 2002. *A Theory of /Cloud/: Towards a History of Painting*, trans. J. Lloyd. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Defoe, D. 2010. *A Journal of the Plague Year*, ed. L. Landa. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Derrida, J. 1974. *Of Grammatology*, trans. G.C. Spivak. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Donne, J. 1985. *Poetical Works*, ed. H.J.C. Grierson. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

- Goldberg, J. 2009. *The Seeds of Things: Theorizing Sexuality and Materiality in Renaissance Representations*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Levinas, E. 1989. Substitution. In *The Levinas Reader*, ed. S. Hand, trans. A. Lingis 88–125. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Lezra, J. 2010. *Wild Materialism: The Ethic of Terror and the Modern Republic*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Reed, A. 1983. *Romantic Weather: The Climates of Coleridge and Baudelaire*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Serres, M. 1977. *Hermès IV: La Distribution*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.
- Serres, M. 2000. *The Birth of Physics*, trans. J. Hawkes. Manchester, UK: The Clinamen Press.
- Serres, M., W. Woodhull and J. Mowitt. 1978. Exact and Human. *SubStance* 6/7(21): 9–19.
- Shakespeare, W. 1974. *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G.B. Evans. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co.
- Wiener, N. 1948. *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*. New York: The Technology Press.
- Wood, G.D. 2007. Constable, Clouds, Climate Change. *Wordsworth Circle* 38(1–2): 25–34.
- Yates, J. 2010. It's (for) you; or, the tele/t/r/opical post-human. *postmedieval* 1(1/2): 223–234.