

Obnubilation

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To buck ourselves up with the thought that every cloud has a silver lining is to acknowledge the ominous, baleful nature of clouds without that consolation. As Ivy Compton-Burnett's lugubrious butler puts it, 'the lighter the lining...the darker the cloud may seem' (Compton-Burnett 1969, 14). I have been thinking and writing for a number of years about the ways in which air and atmospheres are both themselves imagined and tutor the imagination. and it has been forcibly borne in on me how streakily the light and the dark are intermingled when it comes to the air, such that one cannot understand the meaning of the cloud, or the cloudy, in the collective imagination without recognising the sombre freight of fear, malevolence and ill-omen with which they are often charged.. So I'm minded in this talk to turn the lining inside out, in order to dwell on clouds as carrying gloom rather than trailing glory, and on the ominous rather than the numinous appearances of cloud.

Thunderclap

The power of clouds to terrify is nowhere more emphatic than in their association with storm, which many cultures have seen as the *Blitzkriegs* waged on mortality by the gods who, in the words of Dylan Thomas, are 'said to thump the clouds/When clouds are cursed by thunder' (Thomas 1985, 65). One of the most compelling accounts of the formation of thunder and lightning in the ancient world is to be found in Book VI of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*. This is a little odd, since Lucretius's express intent here, as throughout his poem, is actually to substitute a calm understanding of the physical causes of things for the fear and trembling induced by the thunderbolt-hurling tantrums of deities. His great poem is an exposition of the atomist philosophy of Epicurus, whom he praises early in his poem in terms that seem to make it clear that to awaken from religion is to stand up against clouds:

Whilst human kind
Throughout the lands lay miserably crushed
Before all eyes beneath Religion – who
Would show her head along the region skies,

Glowering on mortals with her hideous face –
A Greek it was who first opposing dared
Raise mortal eyes that terror to withstand,
Whom nor the fame of Gods nor lightning's stroke
Nor threatening thunder of the ominous sky
Abashed; ; but rather chafed to angry zest
His dauntless heart to be the first to rend
The crossbars at the gates of Nature old.

And yet, when he comes to account for the formation of thunderbolts in clouds, Lucretius does not stint a whit on shock and awe. The thunder is the most dramatic breaching of the distance between the realms of sky and earth, as evidenced also in tornadoes and waterspouts. It is as though the cloud were the visible form of the thunder, a kind of synaesthetic cauldron in which sound, fire and substance can all interfuse. For all his demythologising impulse, Lucretius cannot entirely hold at bay the idea that the massing of power in the thundercloud can threaten the cataclysmic coming together and tearing apart of worlds:

cavernous clouds hold seeds innumerable
Of fiery exhalations, and they must
From off the sunbeams and the heat of these
Take many still. And so, when that same wind
(Which, haply, into one region of the sky
Collects those clouds) hath pressed from out the same
The many fiery seeds, and with that fire
Hath at the same time intermixed itself,
O then and there that wind, a whirlwind now,
Deep in the belly of the cloud spins round
In narrow confines, and sharpens there inside
In glowing furnaces the thunderbolt.
For in a two-fold manner is that wind
Enkindled all: it trembles into heat
Both by its own velocity and by
Repeated touch of fire. Thereafter, when
The energy of wind is heated through
And the fierce impulse of the fire hath sped
Deeply within, O then the thunderbolt,
Now ripened, so to say, doth suddenly
Splinter the cloud, and the aroused flash
Leaps onward, lumining with forky light
All places round. And followeth anon
A clap so heavy that the skiey vaults,
As if asunder burst, seem from on high

To engulf the earth. Then fearfully a quake
Pervades the lands, and 'long the lofty skies
Run the far rumblings. For at such a time
Nigh the whole tempest quakes, shook through and through,
And roused are the roarings – from which shock
Comes such resounding and abounding rain,
That all the murky ether seems to turn
Now into rain, and, as it tumbles down,
To summon the fields back to primeval floods:
So big the rains that be sent down on men
By burst of cloud and by the hurricane,
What time the thunder-clap, from burning bolt
That cracks the cloud, flies forth along. (Lucretius VI.206-)

Miasma

Clouds inhabit the middle region between the upper air, domain of ethereal lambency, and the clammy earth. That the cloud is thought of more as earthborn than as airborne is suggested by the fact that the English word *cloud* comes from *clod* and is close kin to *clot*. Well into the fifteenth century, the word *cloud* could still be used to mean a hill, tumulus or mass of earth. Many mythologies of matter in many times and places have enjoined a contrast between the insubstantial and the solid, and have exhibited a preference for the volatile and evanescent states of matter over the sluggish, lumpy or slimy condition of that which lies indeterminately between air and earth. In this bodily spectrum of vital densities, in which things verily consist of their consistencies, cloud belongs with substances that cling, clog and block circulation or squat fatly on the aspiration of things.

Clouds were the outward and visible form of this contusion and resulting confusion of the body's ordering. They are at the heart of a conception of disease as putrefaction, the unknitting of the organism's wholeness and coherence, that governed medical and moral thinking for thousands of years, from the Hippocratic School of Ancient Greece until the development of bacteriology at the end of the nineteenth century. Disease was thought to have its seat in and be transmitted by noxious clouds and effluvia emanating from marshes, fens, drains, ditches and other places of rot and decomposition. Cloud is the oxymoronic embodiment of a body in dissolution. Elizabethan regimens of health regularly advised their readers to '[a]uoyde therefore suche places as be cloudie, mistie. &c. by reason of pooles and marrishes whiche be there at hande, for that ayre is corrupt, and encreaseth superfluous moisture' (Banister 1575, 107). In a chapter entitled 'Of Vertigo, and Swimming in the Head', Philip Barrough similarly urged 'let

the patient remaine in an ayer, that is temperate, pure, bright, and cleare, and let him eschewe grosse and cloudie ayer' (Barrough 1583, 15).

There was no complaint that evidenced the terrifying distempering of the body and mind more than melancholy, which many sixteenth and seventeenth-century writers saw as the effect of choking or bewildering fumes rising from the churning slum of the stomach to thicken and disorder the brain. Robert Burton reported in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* the prevailing opinion that

as a blacke and a thick cloud covers the Sun, and intercepts his beames and light, so doth this melancholy vapor obnubilate the mind, and inforce it to many absurd thoughts and Imaginations, and compell good, wise, honest, discreet men otherwise (arising to the Brain from the lower parts as smoak out of a chimney) to dote, speak and doe that which becomes them not, their persons, callings, wisdomes (Burton 1621, 258).

The royal physician Walter Charleton lapped similar sentiments in a characteristic fogbow of Latinity in his 'physico-theologicall Treatise' *The Darknes of Atheism Dispelled*:

the often Fermentations and Ebullitions of our *Melancholy*; to the tyranny of which faeculent and Saturnine humor both our native Temperament, and sedentary contemplative condition of life have aequally subjected us; could not but as often obnubilate the region of our Mind, and darken the prospect of our soul, by infecting the requisite purity and lucidity of our spirits, with thick clouds of opac and fuliginous Exhalations (Charleton 1652, sig C2v)

The vapours of melancholy were a curiously clogged or congestive kind of air, that had more in common with earth than the ethereal regions above. Thomas Adams wrote that '[m]elancholy men are (as it were) buried before they be dead; and as not staying for a graue in the ground, make their owne heauy, dull, cloudy, cloddy, earthen cogitations their owne Sepulchres' (Adams 1615, 81).

As a chthonic rather than a celestial cloud, the muddy miasma provides a classical example of matter out of place, the influential definition of the unclean offered by anthropologist Mary Douglas. The miasmatic phantasmagoria inspired an entire olfactory morality. The plaguey associations of clouds emerge clearly in Prince Hal's speech in Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part 1*; Hal compares his drinking-companions to 'base contagious

clouds', the 'foul and ugly mists/Of vapours' that appear to strangle the sun. Later, as the warlike King in the play *Henry V*, he will threaten the inhabitants of Harfleur with the 'filthy and contagious clouds/Of heady murder, spoil and villainy'. In Shakespeare's sonnets, clouds are similarly the 'rotten smoke' that hides the sun (sonnet 34), or the 'ugly rack' that stains it with 'disgrace' (sonnet 33).

This indictment of clouds in bodily and mental sickness was carried across to spiritual matters. The seventeenth-century Puritan Richard Baxter declared that '[w]e are in a cloudy World and Body; and our sins are yet a thicker Cloud, between God's glorious Face and us' (Baxter 1683, 344). His contemporary and fellow-Puritan Anthony Burgess enlarged upon a phrase in the Epistle of Jude, comparing false teachers (he means Catholics of course) to 'clouds without water, carried along by winds' (Jude 12). This, he argued, denoted two things:

First, Their vain ostentation, as the cloud seemeth to bring rain, but yet emptieth none; and secondly, their instability, *They are clouds driven up and down* ... that is properly an impetuous turbulent winde; and as such clouds do both raise great tempests, and obnubilate the Sunne, so do false teachers make heavy storms and troubles in the Church, and withall bemist the glorious light of the Scripture (Burgess 1652, 187)

The telluric clouds of miasma came to signify brooding menace, as in Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher', in which the Gothic atmosphere is signified not just by the oppressiveness of the clouds that appear to weigh down upon the very turrets of the house, but also by the clinging atmosphere of the mansion itself, 'an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the grey wall, and the silent tarn – a pestilent and mystic vapour, and leaden-hued' (Poe 1902, 3.276).

Monstrosity

But clouds are more than just simply an inert blockage or occlusion, for they often figure a more active kind of malignity. Clouds are images of the formless, and engenderings of monstrosity. There is a Greek myth that tells how Zeus, hearing of the lust of Ixion for his wife Hera, made out of cloud a dummy form, which he named Nephele. Ixion's philandering led to him being bound for all eternity to a burning wheel, but not before he had had a chance to impregnate the cloud-phantom, who gave birth as a result to the

half-breed race of the centaurs. The imposture of Nephele is recalled in the tradition, reported by Stesichorus of Sicily and embodied in Euripides's *Helen*, that the woman whose theft brought about the carnage of the Trojan War was not the real Helen but a nebulous body-double, as Helen herself says at the beginning of Euripides's *Helen*, 'a phantom endowed with life, that [Hera] made in my image out of the breath of heaven...Hermes caught me up in the embracing air, and veiled me in a cloud' (Euripides 1891, I.322). The real Helen chastely sat out the siege in Egypt while bloody havoc was wrought around her cloudy changeling. Marlow may play with this tradition in his *Doctor Faustus*, in which the figure of Helen who appears to Faustus 'fairer than the evening air/Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars', and whose lips 'suck forth my soul', is in fact just a stubbly devil in a frock. In the prose narrative on which Marlowe's play was based, Faustus even has a son with Helen, though both mother and son vanish away on the day of his death (Anon 1592, 80).

Christian theology has often been perplexed by the problem of how to account for the power of evil, indeed to account for how evil can have any power at all, in a universe ruled by a God that is both loving and omnipotent. Under such circumstances, evil must be regarded as nothing, as pure void. One way out of the dilemma is to assert that the devil can only ever act by special permission of God. Another, somewhat less satisfactory solution, is to accept that evil can have no real efficacy, but that the devil has the contingent, halfway house power of simulating power – the capacity to turn the non-existence that is evil into a positive nothing, to give nothingness a form. A cloud seems like the correlative of such a diabolically embodied, nihilate body. It is the conjured form of a nothingness that, instead of dispersing, lingers and inheres, in a factitious thickness. Clouds are outsides without insides. You can never be properly in the space of interiority suggested by the outside surface of a cloud, since inside a cloud you are properly speaking nowhere, in a mist that flattens everything into grey propinquity, without edges, outlines or distinguishing features.

Demons are often to be found wrapped in fogs, mist or clouds of dust, like the 'fiend hid in a cloud' of Blake's 'Infant Sorrow'. There is a legend of a black dog in Dorset that, if watched, will swell into the form of a large cloud, and then disappear (Michell and Rickard 2000, 227). The author of a seventeenth-century treatise on spectres and apparitions reported stories of strange and frightening creatures formed out of desert clouds:

And what shall we say to those vapors which do naturally happen in the desarts of *Libia*, neere vnto one of those great Sands of Barbarie, called *Syris Magna*: Those vapors doe make an impression in the ayre of sundry bodies and formes of many

creatures, which sometimes will seeme not to stirre a foote from the place where they are: and sometimes againe, will moove themselves verie strangely, as if they were either flying from or pursuing of some persons. Diodorus Siculus saith, that these impressions of formes are of an infinite greatnesse, and extending in great length, and that they doe bring great feare and perturbation of minde, to such as are not used to the sight of them. For they pursue men (saith he) and after that they have gotten to them, they doo disperse themselves over all their bodies in an extreame colde, which is the cause that Marchants, strangers, passing by that coast, are in great feare of them (Loyer 1605, 66)

When he undertook a systematic statistical analysis of the reactions among a group of young girls to clouds, the American psychologist G. Stanley Hall discovered that a large proportion of them saw in the spasmodic movements of the clouds the forms of nameless monsters (Hall 1902, 474-5). We may assume that many of the imaginary creatures that throng the submarine or subterranean places of the human imagination have their beginnings or counterparts in the ragged, cankerous, writhings of cloud-wrack in the sky. If clouds have often presented themselves to thought as the visible form of thoughts themselves, the celestial emanations of imagination, then often these thoughts will take contorted, scarcely-recognisable forms. Clouds transform the sky from a smooth meniscus of uniform azure into a crazy funhouse mirror of debauched warpings and distortions. Shakespeare's Antony gives us a typical cloud bestiary:

Sometime we see a cloud that's dragonish;
A vapour sometime like a bear or lion,
A towered 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. (*Antony and Cleopatra*, IV, xiv)

And yet the specific ethical cast of such cloud-creatures may depend upon prevailing meteorological conditions. In the arid regions from the mythologies of which many of our inherited gods and monsters have arisen, clouds are welcomed as a source of vitalising rain, rather than as the bringers of sterility and eclipse. In Norse mythology, demons are associated with the drenchings of the stormy blast; in Eastern and Middle Eastern mythologies, they are more likely to be identified with dryness, for example in the story of Indra, the Vedic sky-god who releases the cow-clouds held in custody by the Vritra, the demon of drought, bringing refreshing rain. Dragons, whose breath is often thought of as producing rain-clouds, are by no means always

terrifying (Ingersoll 1928, 74-6), and are venerated in China for just these associations of fertility.

Perhaps the Middle Eastern origin of Judaeo-Christian mythology accounts for the fact that its deity is so regularly associated with, rather than set against cloud. The Lord God in the Hebrew Bible is almost always shrouded in or accompanied by cloud, the 'Shekinah' or divine abiding in the pillar of cloud that led the Israelites out of captivity and afterwards settled in the tabernacle. Occasionally, the gathering of clouds can be a mark of divine anger, but more often they are the manifestation of the power and glory of the Lord. We read in Psalm 104 that he 'maketh the clouds his chariot, and walketh upon the wings of the wind', while in Psalm 65, the gravid clouds 'drop fatness'. Even the obscuring effect of the cloud can have a salutary inflection: 'I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins: return unto me; for I have redeemed thee' (Isaiah 44.22). Little wonder, then, that Revelation says of the Messiah that 'he cometh with the clouds' (Revelation 1.7).

Northern nephologies, by contrast, emphasise the gloom and terror of clouds. Vikings who were slain in battle could look forward to a lagerlout afterlife of feasting and boasting in Valhalla, the hall of Odin. But those who succumbed contemptibly to mere old age or sickness were shuffled off to Niflheim ('cloud-world'), the eternal realm of cold and darkness, presided over by the hag-goddess Hel, offspring of Loki, the god of lies and epidemics. The Norse imagination was oriented by a kind of vertical compass, in which the south was identified with the high, clear heaven, whereas Niflheim was thought of both as northerly and as subterranean, being located at the root of the great world-tree Ygdrasil, and encircled by the dragon Nidhogg, 'the Gnawer'. Though the name of the goddess Hel was later transferred to the Christian inferno of eternal damnation, the shady Norse cloud-home is a place of more shivering and refrigerated misery.

Turbulence

Much of the enigma of clouds derives from the fact that they are a one from many, phenomena of pure and irreducible multiplicity. A cloud is the temporary coalescence of a crowd of particles, each too small to be seen in its singularity. It is a scalar hallucination, which mocks our tendency to try to pick out identifiable constituents from its complex ecologies of massing and multiplicity. God, Truth and Life present themselves to us in the form of unity, tending centripetally towards associations, convergences, singularities, simplifications. Clouds belong to the order of divergence, or of temporary

or purely accidental agglomeration; riddled with holes, they are for that reason less than whole, unholy. Clouds billow; their most salient feature is their apparent power to form themselves out of nothing and nowhere. If this gives them the value of the spontaneously generative, it also suggests the eyeless, mindless spawnings of the inessential, the arbitrarily, malefically *de trop*. Milton's Lucifer is surrounded by numberless multiplicities; when he summons his rebel angels in Book 1, it is in the form of 'a pitchy cloud of locusts, warping on the eastern wind' (Milton 1980, 482). Like Phineas Fletcher's ferociously anti-Jesuit poem *Locustae* (1627) which compares the devilish swarm of Catholic priests to a visitation of ravenous insects, Milton here recalls the locusts belched forth in a smoky cloud from the bottomless pit in Revelation 9.1-2. Fletcher may have this passage in mind too when he compares the voices of the devils amassed in hell to the buzzing of a cloud of flies (Fletcher 1627, 4). For the Romans, the crowd was the *turba*, the vortex of turbulence. Clouds are mobs, the name of pure motion, the real *primum mobile*. The aviator in W.B. Yeats's 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death' rhymes 'clouds' and 'crowds' tellingly in his attempt to draw out some clarity of purpose amid the chaos of conflict:

Nor law nor duty bade me fight
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds.
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds.

The terrestrial form of clouds is to be found in swarms and hordes, and the creatures who typically form or be formed from them. Legends abound of turbid clouds that disgorge showers, not of beneficent rain, but of maggots, frogs, fish, spiders or caustic blood (Michell et. al. 2000, 29-32). A Royalist pamphlet of the Civil War set out in verse (to be sung to the tune of Chevy Chase) an account of a fall of flies from a cloud on the town of Bodnam:

Some talke of battailes in the aire,
And Comets in the skies,
But now weell tell a tale more rare,
Of great and monstrous flies. ...

At mid-day when the skie was cleare,
A thick cloud did arise,
Which failing downe upon the earth,
Dissolved into flies.

The hell-bred Cloud did look so big,
So black and did so loure,

It could not rest untill her Panch
Those flies all out did poure. (T.W. 1647, n.p.)

Prodigy

Drawing parallels with the plagues of Egypt, *Strange and True Newes* set out the lesson that ‘*When Kings have lost their Reignes and Power, / Then Clouds upon us judgements showre*’ (T.W. 1647, n.p.) The clouds have often been the scene or source of visions of prodigious horror. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, the fall of Jerusalem was predicted by a vision of armoured soldiers and chariots in the clouds, recalling the prophecy in Jeremiah ‘Behold, he shall come up as clouds, and his chariots shall be as the whirlwind’ (Jeremiah, 4.13). In Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, the clouds furnish the nightmare dream-screen for a premonitory son-et-lumière of slaughter:

Fierce fiery warriors fought upon the clouds,
In ranks and squadrons and right form of war,
Which drizzled blood upon the Capitol;
The noise of battle hurtled in the air,
Horses did neigh, and dying men did groan,
And ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets.

Broadsheets giving news of various alleged prodigies in air multiplied during the seventeenth century, especially during the terrifying, topsyturvy years of the Civil War. People saw pantomimed in the sky religious scissions, political conflicts, last judgements and the teeming morphologies of monstrous forms:

there appeared several strange shapes one after another[r],
issuing out of the said Mountain, about the middle on the right
side thereof; the first seemed to be formed like a Crookedile,
with his mouth wide open, this continued a very short space,
and by degrees was transformed into the form of a furious
Bull, and not long after it was changed into the form of a
Lyon, but it continued so a short time, and was altered into a
Bear, and soon after into a Hog, or Boar, as near as those
could guess who were Spectators. (Anon 1661, 2)

Clouds are swollen with omen; they are tumid with temporality as well as tempest. Like many other quasi-chaotic aerial processes, such as the movements of smoke and the patterns of bird flocks, clouds have been used for divinatory purposes, with the shapes seen in clouds often suggesting terrifying portents. Aristotle observes that ‘clouds have often been observed

moving with a great noise close to the earth, terrifying those who heard and saw them as portents of some catastrophe' (*Meteorology*, 1.12). Gladstone, having in mind the shape of Ireland on the map, described it presciently in a letter to his wife of 12 October 1845 as 'that cloud in the west, that coming storm, the minister of God's retribution upon cruel and inveterate and but half-atoned injustice!'

If clouds are usually a disfiguring of the anthropomorphic face of the sky, one must suspect that it is the menacing expressiveness of clouds that actually allow the sky to be thought of as a face, a figure, in the first place. Clouds are often said to frown or 'lour', a word whose primary meaning is to crouch or lurk, but which has come to mean to glower or look threatening. Spelling 'lour' with a 'w' rather than a 'u' seems to encourage a coalescence with lowering, suggesting that the frown contains a threat to crush or pulverise. Mystical and religious literature is full of accounts of divine faces and forms seen in clouds; but the Rorschach blots of clouds can just as easily be read as forming the scowling or leering faces of demons, such as those seemingly captured in the black smoke billowing from the burning Twin Towers. Elvis Presley saw the face of Stalin in a cloud in 1965, and was terrified at the thought that this was a sign of God's displeasure with his success (Geller 2007).

Under a Cloud

In the last two centuries, clouds seem slowly to have changed their import. In line with the general disenchantment or demythologisation of the air, which has turned from the abode of gods and angels to a sick sink of effluents, the clouds have come to seem progressively less ethereal. The clouds have lost the Baroque bounce and tone celebrated by Marina Warner (Warner 2006, 86-8), and have become sullen, brooding, flabbily inelastic. Increasingly, the clouds signify declension rather than uplift, and are among rather than above us.

Few writers bear witness to the secularised sky better than the nineteenth-century art critic John Ruskin. He dedicated an entire book, *The Queen of the Air* (1869), to the mythical figure of Athena, whom he saw as embodying the spirit of the air, and, following the meteorological interpretations of myth current at the time, read Greek gods as embodiments of wind and storm. For Ruskin, the 'Lord of cloud' (Ruskin 1905, 324) is the figure of Hermes, the god who is most associated with trickery and concealment, features that derive from his role as the announcer of death in Egyptian mythology:

the snatching away by clouds is connected with the thought of hiding, and of making things seem to be what they are not; so that Hermes is the god of lying, as he is of mist; and yet, with this ignoble function of making things vanish and disappear, is connected the remnant of his grand Egyptian authority of leading away souls in the cloud of death (the actual dimness of sight caused by mortal wounds physically suggesting the darkness and descent of clouds, and continually being so described in the *Iliad*). (Ruskin 1905, 320)

Ruskin saw in Aristophanes's play *The Clouds* a foreshadowing of a modern mythology of clouds. Aristophanes's play shows the ridiculous attempts of an old man to escape his creditors by acquiring the skills, as he sees them, of false reasoning of the philosophical school of Socrates. The windy sophistries of Socratic method are satirised by presenting them as dedicated not to the gods but to a chorus of flatulent, and shiftily metamorphic clouds. Ruskin sees in the play an anticipation of the 'tumult in men's thoughts, which have followed on their avarice in the present day, making them alike forsake the laws of their ancient gods, and misapprehend or reject the true words of their existing teachers' (Ruskin 1905, 327). Ruskin foresaw for his time and ours a spreading plague of 'war...made by money and machinery' (Ruskin 1905, 398), with no conceivable defence 'against the multitude that is breeding and spreading, faster than the clouds, over the habitable earth' (Ruskin 1905, 398).

The horror that Ruskin attached to cloudiness is tightened to an almost hysterical pitch in his *The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*, first delivered as lectures in 1884. Ruskin informed his listeners of the appearance in the nineteenth century of what he insisted was an entirely new kind of cloud, unknown to Homer, Virgil, Chaucer, Milton or Wordsworth. He records his first sighting of the cloud on 1st July 1871:

[T]he sky is covered with grey cloud; -- not rain-cloud, but a dry black veil, which no ray of sunshine can pierce; partly diffused in mist, [32-3] feeble mist, enough to make distant objects unintelligible, yet without any substance, or wreathing, or colour of its own. And everywhere the leaves of the trees are shaking fitfully, as they do before a thunderstorm; only not violently, but enough to show the passing to and fro of a strange, bitter, blighting wind. Dismal enough, had it been the first morning of its kind that summer had sent. But during all this spring, in London, and at Oxford, through meagre March, through changelessly sullen April, through despondent May,

and darkened June, morning after morning has come grey-shrouded thus. (Ruskin 1908, 32-3)

Ruskin teases his audience, and perhaps also himself a little, with two contrary suggestions of the origin of the cloud – one that it is an effect of industrial pollution, the other that it is the becoming visible of a more supernatural kind of pollution of life by death:

It looks partly as if it were made of poisonous smoke; very possibly it may be: there are at least two hundred furnace chimneys in a square of two miles on every side of me. But mere smoke would not blow to and fro in that wild way. It looks more to me as if it were made of dead men's souls – such of them as are not gone yet where they have to go, and may be flitting hither and thither, doubting, themselves, of the fittest place for them. (Ruskin 1908, 33)

This featureless cloud, which reduces everything to dreary, sterile monotony, establishes a universal eclipse, leading Ruskin to his gloomily prophetic conclusion

Blanched Sun, – blighted grass, – blinded man. – If, in conclusion, you ask me for any conceivable cause or meaning of these things—I can tell you none, according to your modern beliefs; but I can tell you what meaning it would have borne to the men of old time. Remember, for the last twenty years, England, and all foreign nations, either tempting her, or following her, have blasphemed the name of God deliberately and openly; and have done iniquity by proclamation, every man doing as much injustice to his brother as it is in his power to do. Of states in such moral gloom every seer of old predicted the physical gloom, saying, “The light shall be darkened in the heavens thereof, [40-1] and the stars shall withdraw their shining.” All Greek, all Christian, all Jewish prophecy insists on the same truth through a thousand myths; but of all the chief, to former thought, was the fable of the Jewish warrior and prophet, for whom the sun hasted not to go down, with which I leave you to compare at leisure the physical result of your own wars and prophecies, as declared by your own elect journal not fourteen days ago, – that the Empire of England, on which formerly the sun never set, has become one on which he never rises. (Ruskin 1908, 40-1)

The prevailing tenor of murderous tedium embodied by cloud during the twentieth century and beyond seems to be adumbrated in Wilfred Owen's poem of the First World War, 'Exposure':

We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.
Dawn massing in the East her melancholy army
Attacks once more in ranks on ranks of shivering gray
And nothing happens. (Owen 2002, 80)

Other writers at the end of the nineteenth century became preoccupied with the threat of poisoning from clouds, fogs and smogs. Robert Barr's 'The Doom of London' (1892) is set in the future, and tells of 'a flood from the clouds', in the form of a lethal fog that gathers one day after London, formed from a combination of water vapour rising from the ground and smoke belched out from domestic chimneys, which asphyxiates all the inhabitants. M.P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901) begins with the extermination of the population of the earth through an unexplained cloud, which 'as it rolled travelling, seemed mixed from its base to the clouds with languid tongues of purple flame, rose-coloured at their edges', and gave off the cyanide odour of peach-blossom. Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Poison Belt* (1913) imagines the inhabitants of earth facing extinction through a belt of poison gas through which the planet passes.

No cloud has ever loomed more upon our house than the 'mushroom cloud' of the atom bomb. The distinctive shape of the mushroom is common to many powerful explosions, and in fact the first reference to a 'mushroom cloud' recorded by the Oxford English Dictionary is from 1909 and refers to the eruption of the volcano Mt Pelée. The cloud following an atomic explosion only regularly began to be designated as a 'mushroom cloud' during the 1950s – early observers spoke of 'cauliflower' and 'raspberry' shapes. But it is the mushroom that most aptly suggests the cloud's characteristically hypertrophic proliferation, a word that has become associated with the spread of nuclear weapons in particular. The image conjoins a rapid and terrifyingly uncontrollable process of growth with the bomb's sinisterly lingering aftermath, associated both with radioactive fallout as the cloud begins to curl back to earth, and with the sombre shadow of apocalypse under which humanity has lived since 1945. And yet the mushroom can also have homelier associations (nobody seems ever to have thought to call it 'toadstool cloud'), and the cap of the cloud has even, bizarrely been taken to signify a kind of protective shelter or umbrella. The Walt Disney cartoon *A is for Atom* (1953) shows a mushroom cloud suddenly expanding into the figure of a muscular colossus standing with arms folded, both domineering and protective (Weart 1988, 402). Henry Moore's sculpture *Nuclear Energy*, which was installed in 1967 on the site of

the first self-sustaining chain reaction produced in the University of Chicago, is a visual pun, in which what appears to be the huge bulb of a mushroom cloud takes on the brooding look of a skull perched on the stalk of a neck. The pun seems to embody a choice, offering us either the sight of the mind horrifyingly transmogrifying into the great cloud of death, or the cloud being contained by the powers of the human mind. As Charles Fort wrote in 1931, 'clouds and brains are of an underlying oneness' (Fort 1931, 778)

The mushroom cloud seems to undo the distinction between technology and meteorology. The clouds under which we huddle and tremble are increasingly clouds of our own making – the clouds of chlorine that appeared for the first time in on the battlefield in 1915, the Seveso disaster in 1976, the chemical poisoning at Bhopal in 1984, the poison gas attack at Halabja in 1988, the meltdown at Chernobyl in 1986, and other industrial and military spillages and disasters. These all seem to be cumulated in the mysterious Airborne Toxic Event of Don De Lillo's 1984 novel *White Noise*:

It appeared in the sky ahead of us and to the left, prompting us to lower ourselves in our seats, bend our heads for a clearer view, exclaim to each other in half finished phrases. It was the black billowing cloud, the airborne toxic event, lighted by the clear beams of seven army helicopters. They were tracking its windborne movement, keeping it in view. In every car, heads shifted, drivers blew their horns to alert others, faces appeared in side windows, expressions set in tones of outlandish wonderment.

The enormous dark mass moved like some death ship in a Norse legend, escorted across the night by armored creatures with spiral wings. We weren't sure how to react...The whole thing was amazing. They seemed to be spotlighting the cloud for us as if it were part of a sound-and-light show, a bit of mood-setting mist drifting across a high battlement where a king had been slain. But this was not history we were witnessing. It was some secret festering thing, some dreamed emotion that accompanies the dreamer out of sleep. (DeLillo 1984, 127-8)

One recent account of the rivalry between systems for providing so-called 'cloud services', meaning services distributed throughout the internet rather than locally concentrated in individual devices, warned darkly that 'the next war is the cloud war' (Gardner 2008). DeLillo's cloud is a compound of numb chemical facticity and nameless, drifting dread, the off-centred

centrepiece of a world of white noise in which pollution and rumour – rumours of pollution, the pollution of rumour – blindly brew and breed from each other.

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