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Introduction
An Ecophilology of Atmosphere

When one speaks today of a cultural or political atmosphere, or of an atmosphere of hope or despair, the word 'atmosphere' tends to be taken as a metaphor. That is how the term has generally been used in literary historical studies, where it has enjoyed a long career without yet being subjected to any extended philological analysis. A representative example of such use can be found in Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, which credited Romanticism with having discovered 'the atmospheric unity-of-style of earlier periods', and also with having developed an 'organic comprehension of the atmospheric uniqueness of its own period in all its manifold forms'.[1] 'Atmosphere' here refers not to physical air but to a determining historical situation 'presented entirely by suggestive and sensory means'.[2]

These apparently straightforward metaphors, however, often encounter two related semantic complications. First, as 'sensory' presentations, such atmospheres remain difficult or even impossible to distinguish finally from literal atmospheres. Somatic, aesthetic and affective, they remain correlated with physical materiality, destabilising the very distinction of literal from figurative language that first licensed their expanded reference.

Second, the vocabulary of atmosphere often becomes recursive. Because atmospheric descriptions of a cultural-historical moment refer to a totality of meaning, 'atmosphere' must operate as both an element in that semantic universe and as the name for the universe itself. Both these properties – the blurred line between literal and metaphoric atmospheres, and atmosphere's conceptual recursivity – are evident in Auerbach's argument that in Romanticism 'Atmospheric Historism and atmospheric realism are closely connected'. In Balzac, for example, 'every milieu becomes a moral and physical atmosphere … and at the same time the historical situation reappears as a total atmosphere which envelops all its several milieux'.[3]

Atmosphere here is at once 'moral and physical', figurative and literal. It is also both singular and multiple: Balzac's writing presents a 'total

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atmosphere' that is made up of the regional atmospheres of plural milieux. Moreover, this Romantic literary atmospherics is itself understood as being shaped by an ambient historical atmosphere, so that the paradoxes of atmosphere are extended to the distinction between a text and its encompassing non-textual world. Balzac's atmospheric realism, Auerbach writes, is both 'a part and a result of an atmosphere'.[4] Atmosphere would seem to be multiple within the text, and also to be both inside and outside the text. It is communicated textually while also conditioning the forms and nature of that textual communication.

This book describes the historical emergence of these semantic paradoxes of atmosphere. It follows Auerbach in attributing to Romanticism a new and self-defining atmospheric sense of history. Compelling evidence for this attribution is available in the philological record: the phrase 'political atmosphere', for example, entered the English language in the later 1770s and became common in the 1790s, the decade to which 'moral' and 'literary atmosphere' can also be dated. In the years around 1800, atmosphere's field of reference was extended from its physical meanings in natural philosophy into this new sense of an environing mood or affective dimension that subtly conditions perception and communication while itself remaining largely imperceptible. Through the 1810s and 1820s, affective atmospheres of desire, sorrow, despair and so on also started to appear. Atmosphere thereby presented a new semantic figure that could designate the period's emergent sense of historical specificity, the spirit of its age. But it was also endlessly elusive and mobile – 'suggestive', in Auerbach's term, rather than definitive, a mediating and changeable element that lay in between stable objects and ephemeral states of being. It was implicated in paradoxes of self-reference, as in Auerbach's notion of a 'total atmosphere' of atmospheres. It was understood as both conditioning the subjects and objects immersed in it and as being conditioned by those subjects and objects. And in denoting a new sense of the singularity of a totalised historical moment, atmosphere could also set that historical specificity in motion.

The new vocabulary of atmosphere became prominent in these years as a vehicle for articulating the relationship between human meaning and nonhuman nature. It did this not least through its work in describing how the humanist disciplines, which examined historical structures of meaning, were diverging from sciences dedicated to knowledge of the natural world. In this way, around 1800, it provided an indispensable lexicon for theorising an array of processes, practices and instruments that are now more typically discussed under the rubrics of 'mediation' and the

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'medium'. The semantic figure of atmosphere linked these major Romantic areas of concern – nature, disciplinarity and mediation – together into a complex, dispersed unity or cultural climate. In reconstructing this climate, I seek to show that the atmospheric language of the Romantic period anticipated a long-standing paradox confronted by the historical study of Romanticism – that Romanticism names both a distinct historical period and also a historically mobile 'style or mode of artistic expression, a kind of atmosphere'.[5] This book provides a history of Romantic atmospheres by retracing the term's developments, exchanges and applications across its full discursive range, including physiology, chemistry, meteorology, anthropology, philosophy, aesthetics, politics and literary criticism. But it also aims to locate in Romanticism's atmospheric sense of history a material logic that could motivate Romantic lyric poetry's distinctive claims to transhistorical agency. For it was with poetry – and most specifically in the lyric poetry of William Wordsworth – that atmospherics and language were brought together into a new configuration that was seen as capable of communicating the otherwise indescribably unique feeling of a delimited historical moment to other worlds and other times; capable even of communicating how history shaded indiscernibly into nature. The book then seeks to understand a particular semantic figure in Wordsworth's poetry in terms of its emergence and effects within a much wider cultural climate, and so to give an account of both that poetry and its climate in a way which takes that climate as never having been simply, or solely, cultural.

The earliest published use of 'atmosphere' to mean 'the surrounding mental or moral element, environment' cited by the *OED* occurred in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* of 1817.[6] Wordsworth's poetry, Coleridge wrote, was distinguished above all by his

> original gift of spreading the tone, the *atmosphere*, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world around forms, incidents, and situations, of which, for the common view, custom had be-dimmed all the lustre, had dried up the sparkle and the dew drops.[7]

'Atmosphere' is presented here as being roughly synonymous with 'tone'. Both words may be understood as designating a distinctive quality or modulation of perception, feeling or mood that is both spatial ('the depth and the height') and temporal (for as Coleridge commented in the following sentence, it finds 'no contradiction in the union of the old and the new'). Coleridge's italicisation of 'atmosphere' in this passage potentially acknowledged that he was referring back to an earlier instance of the word being used in this extended sense: Wordsworth's 1802 revised 'Preface' to *Lyrical*

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Ballads, where he defined the domain of poetry as existing wherever the poet 'can find an atmosphere of sensation in which to move his wings'.[8] With Wordsworth, by becoming atmospheric, poetry became universal, a language potentially applicable everywhere. Romantic reformulations of imaginative literature – lyric poetry in particular – in these explicitly atmospheric terms reflected a pivotal change in the meaning of the term 'atmosphere' that made possible the later development through which it took on its doubled modern and still current sense, at once metaphoric and literal. The unparalleled poetic prominence of winds, clouds, fogs, mists, breezes, breaths and sighs reflected how poetry was being reimagined in this period as an aesthetic vehicle of aerial communication. But this new and specifically poetic understanding of atmosphere also reflected the broader semantic function the term assumed. For the Romantic reconception of imaginative literature as atmospheric was shaped by the same cultural practices and responded to the same concerns as the incipient disciplines of atmospheric science, then emerging as part of the general reorganisation of knowledge now often referred to as the second scientific revolution.

For instance, Wordsworth's identification of the realm of poetry with 'the atmosphere of sensation' – implying that poetry could carry 'sensation into the midst of the objects of Science itself' – was directly motivated by his interactions with Humphry Davy and Thomas Beddoes, chief investigators at the Pneumatic Institution established near Bristol in the late 1790s.[9] Through this and many comparable connections and exchanges, the literary history of Romantic atmosphere was intimately intertwined with the contemporaneous scientific reformulation of atmosphere as malleable, separable, even deconstructable, a material for experiment and artifice – and yet as natural and vital, the essential element of life. Romantic uses of the word 'atmosphere' were often neither metaphoric nor literally physical, but instead pointed to a zone of indistinction, or of as yet unsettled knowledge, somewhere between literality and figuration, between scientific concepts and poetic evocation.

Between about 1790 and 1830, the vocabulary of atmosphere was pulled in two contrary directions. On the one hand, atmospheric thinking was critical both for articulating theories of poetic autonomy and for the emergence of the atmospheric sciences in something like their modern disciplinary forms. Luke Howard's 1802 taxonomy of clouds, for example, provided meteorology with a closed and internally consistent system of concepts that was seen as necessary for disciplinary self-definition. Such developments have led Vladimir Janković and other historians of science to date the end of classical meteorology to around 1800, when the Aristotelian

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study of sublunary phenomena was replaced by the modern science of weather as a planetary system of fluid dynamics.[10] Similar dates could also be given for the disciplinary inception of atmospheric chemistry and respiratory physiology – and indeed for the disciplinary category of literature itself, as Wordsworth's 1802 definition of poetry suggests.[11] But atmosphere also provided a language for conceiving what literature and science shared. As a site of convergent interests, atmosphere linked increasingly disparate communicative practices, forming a common idiom or point of intersection for the lexica of literary culture and late natural philosophy. Goethe's enthusiastic reception of Howard's work, for example, has been viewed as part of a 'meteorologisation of knowledge' that blurred the boundaries between scientific and poetic modes of knowing.[12] Barbara Stafford has similarly identified the emergence of a 'meteorological world view' towards the end of the eighteenth century, in which 'attention was increasingly displaced from replicable spatial objects to an intervening, intellectualized, and force-filled medium'.[13] So atmosphere was used both to articulate the divergent autonomous forms taken by the poetic imagination and the scientific disciplines, but also to mediate their continued communication. Atmosphere allowed the drawing of disciplinary divisions, fixing specialised discourses in their newly differentiated social locations. But it was also understood to be an underlying cultural element that allowed concepts, practices and ideas to move across the discursive boundaries it articulated. In a letter of 1800 to Davy, Coleridge praised Davy's pneumatic chemistry for uniting 'the opposite advantages of immaterializing mind without destroying the definiteness of Ideas'.[14] For this reason, he concluded, chemistry could be said to be poetic. Whether in poetry or chemistry, concepts were caught up in an atmospheric double movement of definition and dematerialisation, fixity and mobility, discrimination and indiscernibility.

In reconvening an atmospheric sense of history from these diverse materials, this book follows Kevis Goodman's call to attend more closely to the ambiguities implicit in that phrase, 'the sense of history', which oscillates between history's meaning and its elusive sensory mediations. Goodman links these ambiguities to Raymond Williams's notion of history as 'an ongoing inchoate present', and as an 'immanent, collective perception of any moment as a seething mix of unsettled elements'.[15] For Williams, this sense of history's mobile presentness was specifically attuned to unstructured and 'pre-emergent' feelings – those not yet stabilised into articulable forms, but which nonetheless might sometimes be glimpsed in the sudden proliferation of a particular semantic figure.[16] In identifying atmosphere as

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one such figure in British Romanticism, I want also to suggest that it can help unsettle what perhaps still remains the most prominent and distinctive semantic figure in our understanding of Romanticism, that of nature itself.

In his essay 'Ideas of Nature', which gave a philological overview of the historical transformations undergone by this most difficult concept in Western culture, Williams described some of the affective and aesthetic parameters of the new Romantic yearning for nature. This was an elective affinity that he understood as being premised paradoxically on a fundamental division between nature and humanity, social in origin and ultimately ontological in its effects. There were 'new feelings for landscape', Williams wrote, 'a new and more particular nature poetry; the green vision of Constable; the green language of Wordsworth and Clare'. In and after Wordsworth, nature appeared as 'a refuge from man; a place of healing, a solace, a retreat'.[17] This was the sense of nature as existential bedrock, a world apart from the otherwise inescapable antagonisms of modern social existence, which was invoked by Wordsworth to authenticate his prayerful knowledge in 'Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey' 'that Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her'.[18] But for Williams, the green language of Wordsworthian Romanticism, even as it formed the historical medium of this newly sympathetic natural relation, also communicated the doubts, ironies and contradictions that informed its generative social matrix. For as Williams pointed out, Romanticism's green language emerged alongside new practices of commodification, scientific rationality and biopolitical organisation, and its prayers to nature were often voiced by participants in historical processes of intensifying natural destruction. In the dialectical horizon of historical comprehension sketched out by Williams, Romanticism's nature, particularly when experienced in the mode of aesthetic consumption, was essentially continuous with modernity's ever expanding practices of extraction and domination.

But for Williams, the natural affects poetry presented were not simply ideological screens that masked new modes of heightened exploitation. In the complex double movement of the green language of Romanticism, which 'at once separated and affirm[ed] a submerged general connection' between natural being and historical meaning, he also identified what he called 'a new emphasis on the act of poetry itself, the act of creation'.[19] Language turned green, that is to say, through practices of poetic self-reflection. And in the linguistic self-reflexiveness of poetry's new emphasis on its own act, the Romantic nature lyric came to function not just as a vehicle for the love of nature in the mode of 'conspicuous aesthetic

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consumption'.[20] It also potentially mediated the complexities, ambiguities and affective dissonances that bound this new historical experience to its own negation, the material destruction of nature – and, even beyond that destruction, to nature itself.

Due to its recursive emphasis on its own making or coming-into-being, Romanticism's green language presented a particular register of what Williams elsewhere termed 'social experiences *in solution*, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been *precipitated* and are more evidently and more immediately available' to historical knowledge.[21] Such history 'in solution' lay for Williams 'at the very edge of semantic availability', which was why artworks, in their indeterminacy of meaning and openness to interpretation, so often communicated 'elements of social and material (physical or natural) experience which may lie beyond, or be uncovered or imperfectly covered by, the elsewhere recognizable systematic elements' of a given historical formation.[22] Understood in these terms, Romanticism's green language potentially figures an otherwise unassigned or inaccessible sense of history that is even continuous with a sense of nature: an 'inalienably physical' sense, in Williams's words; a sense, unfixed yet specific, that preceded the structured oppositions through which it might later be comprehended, including those between subject and object, experience and belief, feeling and thought, and even between historical meaning and natural being.[23]

Williams's metaphors here ('*in solution*', '*precipitated*') are drawn from analytical chemistry. They mark a contrast between this evanescently perceptible historical dimension – non-isolable, mobile and yet singular, and all the more significant for its intangibility – and the fixities of institutions, formations and traditions. In the Romantic period, particularly when it came to poetic self-reflection, this contrast was typically drawn in atmospheric terms – in the terms not of analytical but of pneumatic chemistry. It was described, for instance, as the distinction between an atmosphere and a thing, rather than one between experience in solution and experience precipitated out.

In Romanticism, the colours of language – the colour green, above all – seem to have been perceived principally via language's reflective mediation in the poetics of air. Wordsworthian poetry committed to reworking atmosphere as a linguistic medium that lay indeterminately between substance and appearance, and between social structures (most prominently the codes and inscriptive technologies of textuality) and the material flux of the natural world. Writing in 1815, Wordsworth claimed that 'in nature everything is distinct, yet nothing defined into absolute independent singleness'.[24] Far

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from being a comment about the metaphysics of nature, this statement in fact concerned literature. Wordsworth's suggestion, in effect, was that in poems too everything should be distinct yet not single, singular yet not independent, and that this paradoxical relation held not just within poetic texts, but also between texts and whatever lies beyond them. Whether textual or natural, atmospheres provided the primary media for articulating this paradoxical condition of simultaneous singularity and submerged connection. Atmosphere was seen to be specific and irreducible, but also fragmented and internally multiple; it was material but also vague and indefinite, an interplay of absence and presence.

In the late eighteenth century, 'pneumatics' named both the theological doctrine of souls and the study of the physical properties of air, suggesting continuities between subjective identity and the drifting fluidity of winds and clouds. Understood in aerial terms, ideas and perceptions were at once material and spiritual: to speak or write about atmospheric phenomena was always also to speak or write about consciousness, and so also about speech and writing. Howard's typology of clouds, for example, was as concerned with the cloudiness and flux of language as it was with actual clouds. As Marcel Beyer has noted of nineteenth-century meteorology, 'when it comes to clouds, any object description involves self-description', and this positioned atmosphere as an omnipresent laboratory for the investigation of 'the mutual dependency of imaginative and observational labours'.[25] A basic correlation was established between the weather outside and the weather within. And this affinity was not – or at least, not simply – a Ruskinian pathetic fallacy, the unwarranted projection of social categories onto the natural world. For the vocabulary of atmosphere was used to mark and explore far more complex and dialectical intertwinings of materiality and meaning, of phenomenality and mind, as Ruskin himself argued in describing what he called 'modern art', but which we would now call 'Romantic art', as 'the service of the clouds'.[26] The conceptual vocabulary of atmosphere was necessarily reflexive because atmosphere was understood as belonging to both consciousness and the object-world. And in consequence, as Novalis wrote, 'the theory of thought corresponds to *meteorology*'.[27] Atmosphere framed materialist understandings of the transmission of ideas because it reframed materiality as a realm of transient effects, affective states and volatile gases, projecting a malleable aestheticised universe of protean forms, borderless appearances and liquid states of mind.

The interpermeation of subject and object this implied carried political implications. Atmospheres had certainly been politicised before the 1790s;

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Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer established that air was a critical site for the rhetorical differentiation of scientific knowledge from political authority in an earlier moment of the construction of modern scientific rationality.[28] But the radical ambiguity at work in the new cultural functioning of atmosphere challenged this earlier discursive settlement. Atmosphere's paradoxical conjoining of opposing currents of communicative differentiation and unification corresponded to a newly heightened sense of the fraught inextricability of science and politics, knowledge and power. For Edmund Burke, Joseph Priestley's pneumatic experiments, radical Enlightenment politics and dissenting theology together formed a single revolutionary atmospherics. All were equally inflated by the 'spirit of liberty … the wild *gas*, the fixed air, is plainly broke loose'.[29] Revolution called into doubt existing boundaries between scientific practices and socio-political organisations, inspiring Burke to condemn the revolutionary constitution as 'a theoretic, experimental edifice'.[30] Georg Christoph Lichtenberg similarly equated English pneumatic medicine with French revolutionary politics, finding in both the promise of 'an imminent return of the Edenic state of innocence and equality'.[31] In the 1790s, radicals, reformers and counter-revolutionaries all saw the analysis and mixing of atmospheres as political acts. English pneumatic theory, Lichtenberg explained, posited that the body was surrounded by an atmosphere of influence and activity, an intermediary zone through which internal processes transpired out into the environment, which in turn acted aerially upon the body's interior. Through this atmospheric interchange, 'pure, dephlogisticated air is transformed in much the same way as through inhalation and exhalation'.[32] When Wordsworth came to reformulate the lyric as the communication of the atmosphere that surrounded the poetic object, he drew inspiration from this aerial biopolitics of the 1790s, which forms an indispensable historical context for the interpretation of his writing. It links the date, for example, in the title of 'Lines' – July 13, 1798, the eve of the anniversary of revolution – to that poem's ambition to 'see into the life of things' by suspending, almost but not quite, 'the breath of this corporeal frame'.[33] For Wordsworth, as indeed for Priestley, the metrical attenuation and regulation of the breath formed a set of physiological practices and technologies of the body for communicating the revelatory breath of knowledge.

In recent decades, the history of scientific ideas and practices has become central to literary studies of the Romantic period. Scientific concepts have been shown to have provided a crucial resource for the formulation of Romantic theories of poetic autonomy, motivating historiographical claims for 'the inseparability of politics, nature, science, and

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the imagination'.[34] Turning to atmosphere qualifies this claim for inseparability, for atmosphere communicated both the conceptual convergence and the discursive disarticulation of literature and science. Aerial vectors of conceptual mobility and decontextualised citation met cross-winds of disciplinary differentiation and the division of intellectual labour. Atmosphere was able to perform these complex and even contradictory communicative functions because it was positioned as society's general medium or *Leitmedium*. For it was not simply a vocabulary that could be figuratively applied to culture: it was also understood as the material medium that was the precondition of any discourse whatsoever. Johann Gottfried Herder declared breath to be 'the best medium of our thoughts and perceptions'.[35] Even the phatic nature of everyday conversation about the weather – so prominent in Jane Austen, for example – reflected the meta-medial status of atmosphere at the time.[36] These atmospheric terms of Romanticism's self-mediation then allow Romantic-period culture to be understood historically, and not just metaphorically, as a climatic system – a complex field swept by winds of change, by sudden currents of influence and streams of conceptual transformation. Indeed, when the word 'climatology' first appeared in English, in an 1800 translation of Herder, the field of study to which it referred was focused on the complex aerial interactions between thoughts, feelings and the material circumstances in which they occur.[37] Climatology incorporated what we now call cultural history.

As Mary Favret has shown with reference to the literature of war, atmosphere in Romanticism conveyed distant sentiments and scenes, translocating historical experience.[38] It placed readers in new climes, and it conveyed the breath of the past, as with Walter Scott's novels, which William Hazlitt described as transporting Scottish 'mountain air' in 'ship-loads' for sale to London readers.[39] It also bore the inspiration of revolutionary futures, as with Shelley's west wind. And while atmosphere could bring distant experience home, it also made the familiar distant, allowing speculative and critical totalisations of the system of one's own time. Hazlitt himself was engaged in this literary transport of air, in that his title, *The Spirit of the Age*, invokes a play on *spiritus*, or 'breath', an important etymology for radical theology and Enlightenment demystification in the late eighteenth century. Atmosphere installed a difference within the self – or staged a distance from the self – at the same time as it mediated between self and other, intimate and universal, animal life and the cosmos of ideas. Atmosphere coloured the blue distances in which, as in Novalis's famous fragment, mountains, people, events, everything becomes Romantic.[40] Like Hazlitt, Novalis appealed to the vocabulary

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