

# THE STORM-CLOUD OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

## LECTURE I

(Delivered on February 4, 1884)

1. LET me first assure my audience that I have no *arrière pensée* in the title chosen for this lecture. I might, indeed, have meant, and it would have been only too like me to mean, any number of things by such a title;—but, to-night, I mean simply what I have said, and propose to bring to your notice<sup>1</sup> a series of cloud phenomena, which, so far as I can weigh existing evidence, are peculiar to our own times; yet which have not hitherto received any special notice or description from meteorologists.

2. So far as the existing evidence, I say, of former literature can be interpreted, the storm-cloud—or more accurately plague-cloud, for it is not always stormy—which I am about to describe to you, never was seen but by now living, or *lately* living eyes. It is not yet twenty years that this—I may well call it, wonderful—cloud has been, in its essence, recognizable. There is no description of it, so far as I have read, by any ancient observer. Neither Homer nor Virgil, neither Aristophanes nor Horace, acknowledge any such clouds among those compelled by Jove. Chaucer has no word of them, nor Dante;<sup>2</sup> Milton none, nor Thomson. In modern times, Scott, Wordsworth, and Byron are alike unconscious of them; and the most observant and descriptive of scientific men, De Saussure,

<sup>1</sup> [Here, as always, a comparison of the final text with its earlier stages shows Ruskin's chastening upon revision. The proofs read: “. . . bring to your notice no pictorial images of political gloom, but only a series . . .”]

<sup>2</sup> [See Note 1; below, § 41, p. 42.]

is utterly silent concerning them. Taking up the traditions of air from the year before Scott's death, I am able, by my own constant and close observation, to certify you that in the forty following years (1831 to 1871 approximately—for the phenomena in question came on gradually)—no such clouds as these are, and are now often for months without intermission, were ever seen in the skies of England, France, or Italy.

3. In those old days, when weather was fine, it was luxuriously fine; when it was bad—it was often abominably bad, but it had its fit of temper and was done with it—it didn't sulk for three months without letting you see the sun,—nor send you one cyclone inside out, every Saturday afternoon, and another outside in, every Monday morning.

In fine weather the sky was either blue or clear in its light; the clouds, either white or golden, adding to, not abating, the lustre of the sky. In wet weather, there were two different species of clouds,—those of beneficent rain, which for distinction's sake I will call the non-electric rain-cloud, and those of storm, usually charged highly with electricity. The beneficent rain-cloud was indeed often extremely dull and grey for days together, but gracious nevertheless, felt to be doing good, and often to be delightful after drought; capable also of the most exquisite colouring, under certain conditions;<sup>1</sup> and continually traversed in clearing by the rainbow:—and, secondly, the storm-cloud, always majestic, often dazzlingly beautiful, and felt also to be beneficent in its own way, affecting the mass of the air with vital agitation, and purging it from the impurity of all morbid elements.

4. In the entire system of the Firmament, thus seen and understood, there appeared to be, to all the thinkers of those ages, the incontrovertible and unmistakable evidence of a Divine Power in creation, which had fitted, as the air for human breath, so the clouds for human sight and nourishment;—the Father who was in heaven feeding

<sup>1</sup> [See Note 2; § 42, p. 43.]

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day by day the souls of His children with marvels, and satisfying them with bread, and so filling their hearts with food and gladness.<sup>1</sup>

Their *hearts*, you will observe, it is said, not merely their bellies,—or indeed not at all, in this sense, their bellies—but the heart itself, with its blood for this life, and its faith for the next. The opposition between this idea and the notions of our own time may be more accurately expressed by modification of the Greek than of the English sentence. The old Greek is—

ἐμπιπλῶν τροφῆς καὶ εὐφροσύνης τὰς καρδίας ἡμῶν.

filling with meat, and cheerfulness, our hearts.

The modern Greek should be—

ἐμπιπλῶν ἀέμου καὶ ἀφροσύνης τὰς γαστέρας ἡμῶν.

filling with wind, and foolishness, our stomachs.

5. You will not think I waste your time in giving you two cardinal examples of the sort of evidence which the higher forms of literature furnish respecting the cloud-phenomena of former times.

When, in the close of my lecture on landscape last year at Oxford,<sup>2</sup> I spoke of stationary clouds as distinguished from passing ones, some blockheads wrote to the papers to say that clouds never were stationary.<sup>3</sup> Those foolish letters were so far useful in causing a friend to write me the pretty one I am about to read to you, quoting a passage about clouds in Homer which I had myself never noticed, though perhaps the most beautiful of its kind in the *Iliad*. In the fifth book, after the truce is broken, and the

<sup>1</sup> [Acts xiv. 17.]

<sup>2</sup> [See *Art of England*, § 191 (Vol. XXXIII. p. 392).]

<sup>3</sup> [The reference is to some correspondence in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, which followed its report of Ruskin's sixth lecture on *The Art of England*. Sir Robert Rawlinson (November 21), in an interesting letter (headed "Clouds, Poets, and Painters"), said that "Mr. Ruskin never saw, other than in imagination, a fair-weather cloud remain motionless," and cited *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act iv. sc. 12. Another correspondent ("L," November 24) referred to "Mr. Ruskin's extraordinary remarks on stationary clouds."]

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Excerpt

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aggressor Trojans are rushing to the onset in a tumult of clamour and charge, Homer says that the Greeks, abiding them, “stood like clouds.” My correspondent, giving the passage, writes as follows:—

“SIR,—Last winter when I was at Ajaccio, I was one day reading Homer by the open window, and came upon the lines—

Ἄλλ' ἔμενον, νεφέλησιν εἰκότες, ἄς τε Κρονίων  
 Νηνεμῆς ἔστησεν ἐπ' ἀκροπόλοισιν ὄρεσσιν,  
 Ἄτρεμας, ὄφρ' εὐδῆσι μένος Βορέας καὶ ἄλλων  
 Ζαχρηῶν ἀνέμων, οἷτε νέφεα σκιόεντα  
 Πνοιῆσιν λιγυρήσι διασκιδνᾶσιν ἀέντες·  
 ὦσ' Δαναοὶ Τρῶας μένον ἔμπεδον, οὐδὲ φέβοντο.<sup>1</sup>

‘But they stood, like the clouds which the Son of Kronos establishes in calm upon the mountains, motionless, when the rage of the North and of all the fiery winds is asleep.’ As I finished these lines, I raised my eyes, and looking across the gulf, saw a long line of clouds resting on the top of its hills. The day was windless, and there they stayed, hour after hour, without any stir or motion. I remember how I was delighted at the time, and have often since that day thought on the beauty and the truthfulness of Homer’s simile.

“Perhaps this little fact may interest you, at a time when you are attacked for your description of clouds.

“I am, sir, yours faithfully,

“G. B. HILL.”<sup>2</sup>

6. With this bit of noonday from Homer, I will read you a sunset and a sunrise from Byron. That will enough express to you the scope and sweep of all glorious literature, from the orient of Greece herself to the death of the last Englishman who loved her.<sup>3</sup> I will read you from *Sardanapalus* the address of the Chaldean priest Beleses

<sup>1</sup> [*Iliad*, v. 522–527.]

<sup>2</sup> [George Birkbeck Hill, D.C.L.; for his winter sojourn in Corsica (1882–1883), see *Letters of George Birkbeck Hill*, 1906, pp. 145–146. He was an early admirer of Ruskin’s books: see *ibid.*, p. 60. Ruskin’s reply to this letter was as follows:—

“BRANTWOOD, 7th Dec. ’83.

“MY DEAR SIR,—I’ve just time to thank you, by this post—but please let me know if your address is permanent. I had totally forgot the passage!—but I don’t think the young generation will teach *me* much about clouds! It is a curious feeling in old age. Homer has his word about that too, hasn’t he?—that nobody knows one’s old sinews.—Ever gratefully yours,  
 J. RUSKIN.”

(*Talks about Autographs*, by George Birkbeck Hill, 1896, p. 26, where the letter is given in facsimile.)

<sup>3</sup> [See Note 3; § 3, p. 44.]

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to the sunset, and of the Greek slave, Myrrha, to the morning.

“The sun goes down : methinks he sets more slowly,  
 Taking his last look of Assyria’s empire.  
 How red he glares amongst those deepening clouds,<sup>1</sup>  
 Like the blood he predicts.<sup>2</sup> If not in vain,  
 Thou sun that sinkest, and ye stars which rise,  
 I have outwatch’d ye, reading ray by ray  
 The edicts of your orbs, which make Time tremble  
 For what he brings the nations, ’t is the furthest  
 Hour of Assyria’s years. And yet how calm!  
 An earthquake should announce so great a fall—  
 A summer’s sun discloses it. Yon disk  
 To the star-read Chaldean, bears upon  
 Its everlasting page the end of what  
 Seem’d everlasting; but oh! thou TRUE SUN!  
*The burning oracle of all that live,*  
*As fountain of all life, and symbol of*  
*Him who bestows it, wherefore dost thou limit*  
 Thy lore unto calamity?<sup>3</sup> Why not  
 Unfold the rise of days more worthy thine  
 All-glorious burst from ocean? why not dart  
 A beam of hope athwart the future years,  
 As of wrath to its days? Hear me! oh, hear me!  
 I am thy worshipper, thy priest, thy servant—  
 I have gazed on thee at thy rise and fall,  
 And bow’d my head beneath thy mid-day beams,  
 When my eye dared not meet thee. I have watch’d  
 For thee, and after thee, and pray’d to thee,  
 And sacrificed to thee, and read, and fear’d thee,  
 And ask’d of thee, and thou hast answer’d—but  
 Only to thus much. While I speak, he sinks—  
 Is gone—and leaves his beauty, not his knowledge,  
 To the delighted west, which revels in  
 Its hues of dying glory. Yet what is  
 Death, so it be but glorious? ’T is a sunset;  
 And mortals may be happy to resemble  
 The gods but in decay.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus the Chaldean priest, to the brightness of the setting sun. Hear now the Greek girl, Myrrha, of his rising:—

“The day at last has broken. What a night  
 Hath usher’d it! How beautiful in heaven!  
 Though varied with a transitory storm,

<sup>1</sup> [See Note 4; § 44, p. 44.]

<sup>2</sup> [See Note 5; § 45, p. 45.]

<sup>3</sup> [See Note 6; § 46, p. 45.]

<sup>4</sup> [Act ii. scene 1. The following quotation is from Act v. scene 1.]

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More beautiful in that variety:<sup>1</sup>  
 How hideous upon earth! where peace, and hope,  
 And love, and revel, in an hour were trampled  
 By human passions to a human chaos,  
 Not yet resolved to separate elements:—  
 'T is warring still! And can the sun so rise,  
 So bright, so rolling back the clouds into  
*Vapours more lovely than the unclouded sky,*  
 With golden pinnacles, and snowy mountains,  
 And billows purpler than the ocean's, making  
 In heaven a glorious mockery of the earth,  
 So like,—we almost deem it permanent;  
 So fleeting,—we can scarcely call it aught  
 Beyond a vision, 't is so transiently  
 Scatter'd along the eternal vault: and yet  
 It dwells upon the soul, and soothes the soul,  
 And blends itself into the soul, until  
 Sunrise and sunset form the haunted epoch  
 Of sorrow and of love."

How often *now*—young maids of London,—do you make *sunrise* the "haunted epoch" of either?<sup>2</sup>

7. Thus much, then, of the skies that used to be, and clouds "more lovely than the unclouded sky," and of the temper of their observers. I pass to the account of clouds that *are*, and—I say it with sorrow—of the *distemper* of *their* observers.

But the general division which I have instituted between bad-weather and fair-weather clouds must be more carefully carried out in the sub-species, before we can reason of it farther: and before we begin talk either of the sub-genera and sub-species, or super-genera and super-species of cloud, perhaps we had better define what *every* cloud is, and must be, to begin with.

Every cloud that can be, is thus primarily definable: "Visible vapour of water floating at a certain height in the air." The second clause of this definition, you see, at once implies that there is such a thing as visible vapour of water which does *not* float at a certain height in the air. You are all familiar with one extremely cognizable variety of

<sup>1</sup> [See Note 7; § 47, p. 46.]

<sup>2</sup> [Compare the "Notes on a Word in Shakespeare," below, p. 535.]

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that sort of vapour—London Particular;<sup>1</sup> but that especial blessing of metropolitan society is only a strongly-developed and highly-seasoned condition of a form of watery vapour which exists just as generally and widely at the bottom of the air, as the clouds do—on what, for convenience' sake, we may call the top of it;—only as yet, thanks to the sagacity of scientific men, we have got no general name for the bottom cloud, though the whole question of cloud nature begins in this broad fact, that you have one kind of vapour that lies to a certain depth on the ground, and another that floats at a certain height in the sky.<sup>2</sup> Perfectly definite, in both cases, the surface level of the earthly vapour, and the roof level of the heavenly vapour, are each of them drawn within the depth of a fathom. Under *their* line, drawn for the day and for the hour, the clouds will not stoop, and above *theirs*, the mists will not rise. Each in their own region, high or deep, may expatiate at their pleasure; within that, they climb, or decline,—within that they congeal or melt away; but below their assigned horizon the surges of the cloud sea may not sink, and the floods of the mist lagoon may not be swollen.

8. That is the first idea you have to get well into your minds concerning the abodes of this visible vapour; next, you have to consider the manner of its visibility. Is it, you have to ask, with cloud vapour, as with most other things, that they are seen when they are there, and not seen when they are not there? or has cloud vapour so much of the ghost in it, that it can be visible or invisible as it likes, and may perhaps be all unpleasantly and malignantly there, just as much when we don't see it, as when we do? To which I answer, comfortably and generally, that, on the whole, a cloud is where you see it, and isn't where you don't;<sup>3</sup> that, when there's an evident and honest

<sup>1</sup> [Dickens's phrase for London fog; coined in *Bleak House* (1852), ch. iii.]

<sup>2</sup> [On the general subject of the scientific questions which Ruskin asks in these lectures about the clouds, see the Postscript to ch. i. part vii. of *Modern Painters* (Vol. VII. p. 141), and compare the correspondence of 1885 with Sir Oliver Lodge (Vol. XXXVII.)]

<sup>3</sup> [For a reference by Ruskin to this passage, see § 60 (below, p. 55).]

thunder-cloud in the north-east, you needn't suppose there's a surreptitious and slinking one in the north-west;—when there's a visible fog at Bermondsey, it doesn't follow there's a spiritual one, more than usual, at the West End: and when you get up to the clouds, and can walk into them or out of them, as you like, you find when you're in them they wet your whiskers, or take out your curls, and when you're out of them, they don't; and therefore you may with probability assume—not with certainty, observe, but with probability—that there's more water in the air where it damps your curls than where it doesn't. If it gets much denser than that, it will begin to rain; and then you may assert, certainly with safety, that there is a shower in one place, and not in another; and not allow the scientific people to tell you that the rain is everywhere, but palpable in Tooley Street, and impalpable in Grosvenor Square.

9. That, I say, is broadly and comfortably so on the whole,—and yet with this kind of qualification and farther condition in the matter. If you watch the steam coming strongly out of an engine-funnel,<sup>1</sup>—at the top of the funnel it is transparent,—you can't see it, though it is more densely and intensely there than anywhere else. Six inches out of the funnel it becomes snow-white,—you see it, and you see it, observe, exactly where it is,—it is then a real and proper cloud. Twenty yards off the funnel it scatters and melts away; a little of it sprinkles you with rain if you are underneath it, but the rest disappears; yet it is still there;—the surrounding air does not absorb it all into space in a moment; there is a gradually diffusing current of invisible moisture at the end of the visible stream—an invisible, yet quite substantial, vapour; but not, according to our definition, a cloud, for a cloud is vapour *visible*.

10. Then the next bit of the question, of course, is, What makes the vapour visible, when it is so? Why is the compressed steam transparent, the loose steam white, the dissolved steam transparent again?

<sup>1</sup> [See Note 8; § 48, p. 46.]



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The scientific people tell you that the vapour becomes visible, and chilled, as it expands. Many thanks to them; but can they show us any reason why particles of water should be more opaque when they are separated than when they are close together, or give us any idea of the difference of the state of a particle of water, which won't *sink* in the air, from that of one that won't *rise* in it?<sup>1</sup>

11. And here I must parenthetically give you a little word of, I will venture to say, extremely useful, advice about scientific people in general. Their first business is, of course, to tell you things that are so, and do happen,—as that, if you warm water, it will boil; if you cool it, it will freeze; and if you put a candle to a cask of gunpowder, it will blow you up. Their second, and far more important business, is to tell you what you had best do under the circumstances,—put the kettle on in time for tea; powder your ice and salt, if you have a mind for ices; and obviate the chance of explosion by not making the gunpowder. But if, beyond this safe and beneficial business, they ever try to *explain* anything to you, you may be confident of one of two things,—either that they know nothing (to speak of) about it, or that they have only seen one side of it—and not only haven't seen, but usually have no mind to see, the other. When, for instance, Professor Tyndall explains the twisted beds of the Jungfrau to you by intimating that the Matterhorn is growing flat;<sup>2</sup> or the clouds on the lee side of the Matterhorn by the wind's rubbing against the windward side of it,<sup>3</sup>—you may be pretty sure the scientific people don't know much (to speak of) yet, either about rock-beds, or cloud-beds. And even if the explanation, so to call it, be sound on one side, windward or lee, you may, as I said, be nearly certain it won't do on the other. Take the very top and centre of scientific interpretation by the greatest of its masters :

<sup>1</sup> [See Note 9; § 50, p. 48.]

<sup>2</sup> [See Note 10; § 51, p. 48.]

<sup>3</sup> [See Note 11; § 52, p. 49.]

Newton explained to you—or at least was once supposed to have explained—why an apple fell; but he never thought of explaining the exactly correlative, but infinitely more difficult question, how the apple got up there!

You will not, therefore, so please you, expect me to explain anything to you,—I have come solely and simply to put before you a few facts, which you can't see by candlelight, or in railroad tunnels, but which are making themselves now so very distinctly felt as well as seen, that you may perhaps have to roof, if not wall, half London afresh before we are many years older.

12. I go back to my point—the way in which clouds, as a matter of fact, become visible. I have defined the floating or sky cloud, and defined the falling or earth cloud. But there's a sort of thing between the two, which needs a third definition: namely, Mist. In the 22nd page of his *Glaciers of the Alps*,<sup>1</sup> Professor Tyndall says that “the marvellous blueness of the sky in the earlier part of the day indicated that the air was charged, almost to saturation, with transparent aqueous vapour.” Well, in certain weather that is true. You all know the peculiar clearness which precedes rain,—when the distant hills are looking nigh. I take it on trust from the scientific people that there is then a quantity—almost to saturation—of aqueous vapour in the air, but it is aqueous vapour in a state which makes the air more transparent than it would be without it. What state of aqueous molecule is that, absolutely unreflective<sup>2</sup> of light—perfectly transmissive of light, and showing at once the colour of blue water and blue air on the distant hills?

13. I put the question—and pass round to the other side. Such a clearness, though a certain forerunner of rain, is not always its forerunner. Far the contrary. Thick air is a much more frequent forerunner of rain than clear air. In cool weather, you will often get the transparent

<sup>1</sup> [The references are to the first edition (1860) of *The Glaciers of the Alps*.]

<sup>2</sup> [See Note 12; § 54, p. 51. Also Note 14, § 57, p. 53.]