

Cloud Studies: The Visible Invisible

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Clouds have long been objects of fascination, although their taxonomy was only established by early nineteenth-century meteorologists. For aestheticians and art historians, clouds also raise questions about painting's illusionistic uses of space. In John Constable's painting, clouds represent an "organ of sentiment"; his cloud sketches are exercises in representing space, mass, and mood. The poet John Clare also uses clouds to represent states of mind for which he lacked a language. Natural observation in Constable and Clare has different valences: for Clare, observation represents a form of defence against impingement; for Constable, "the man of the clouds," the science of cloud-watching gives rise to thought. The materiality of clouds (bearing dust and pollution) is a feature of nineteenth-century climatic accounts. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology offers a contemporary theory of clouds as embodied and related seeing. Constable's cloud-sketches suggest that clouds are not just objects, but a form of cognition.

A cloud is a visible aggregate of minute particles of water suspended in the atmosphere.

Thomas Forster¹

Cloud is a body without a surface but not without substance. . . . Although it has no surface, cloud is visible.

Hubert Damisch²

Clouds have always fascinated sky-watchers: forming, spreading, massing, dissipating in streaks and wisps; glowing at sunrise or sunset; processing lazily or purposively across the sky. Weighty and substantial bodies of minute droplets, they mysteriously combine visibility and volume without surface. Are clouds objects? Are they phenome-

1. Forster 31.

2. Damisch 137, 138.

na? The story of the “invention” of clouds has recently been told by Richard Hamblyn, and the rise in the popularity of cloud-spotting suggests that they hold more than meets the eye (Pretor-Pinney; Day).³ The principles of cloud-formation were first understood in the early nineteenth century, when Luke Howard produced his classification of clouds as part of the embryonic science of meteorology. Driven by the turbulence of high altitude winds and storms, bearing moisture or volcanic dust, clouds - we now know - form part of a global weather-system. For artists and poets of the Romantic period, they also provided a metaphor for mobility and transformation. Shelley found in clouds a swift-moving image of constancy-in-change - “I change but I cannot die” (“The Cloud” l.76). But he was a scientist as well as a poet, and his cloud-behavior was based on the taxonomy of Luke Howard’s early nineteenth-century *Essay on the Modification of the Clouds* (Hamblyn 215-16). The sky was more than a poetic workshop - it was a mobile laboratory for the study of air-borne bodies of water.

Clouds draw the eye upward: to movement, distance, height; to the dynamics of space and the overarching sky. For most of us, they provoke ideas about both transcendence and inwardness. When we look up, we lose ourselves. Clouds are associated with cosmology, but also with inner states. It is this combination of indeterminacy, space, and interiority that particularly interests me. Clouds, I want to argue, make us think not only about form and vacancy, mobility and change, but also about the peculiar realm of affectivity that we call “mood.” Whether we feel uplifted or depressed, we tend to take the ups and downs of internal states for granted; so much so that we scarcely notice them. Mood is like the weather, changing and unformed, yet always with us. In classical landscape painting, weather and mood converge on the drama of the sky. A cerulean sky spells calm; dark clouds indicate tempestuous events or passions. But in temperate climates, we most often experience an in-between state that is subject to subtle fluctuations of brightness and shadow, transparency and opacity. Englishness, and especially English landscape, has everything to do with changeable weather and the presence of atmospheric moisture - with updrafts and downpours, bursts of sunshine, sudden rain-showers, clouds and mists. For cloud painters like Constable, this environment formed what his first biographer called “a his-

3. Hamblyn provides an accessible and informative account of Howard’s legacy for meteorology and his impact on his contemporaries; Pretor-Pinney offers an instructive anecdotal study for the cloud-addict; Day testifies to the enduring popular science appeal of clouds.

tory of his affections” at once embodied and transient: “no two days are alike, nor even two hours” (Leslie 288, 273; qtd. in Haughton 73). It is no accident that the most detailed study of Constable’s cloud-studies is by a meteorologist, John Thornes.⁴

The object of keen meteorological observation during the Romantic period, clouds paradoxically serve to abolish the representational realm altogether. Goethe, in the series of poems inspired by his reading of Howard’s early nineteenth-century classification of clouds, wrote: “*Ich muss das alles mit Augen fassen, / Will sich aber niht recht denken lassen*” (“All of this I have to take in with my eyes, / But it will not let itself be grasped by thought”) (Badt 10, 13; Hamblyn 205-12). Goethe’s clouds offer a way to represent the mind to itself; however minutely or evocatively described, they (like the mind) evade the grasp of thought. The sky extends the mental sublime beyond itself as a form of nubific sublime. In the landscape of Kant’s sublime, nature represents the mind by analogy, while also manifesting that it has a mind of its own. Wordsworth’s poetry works on us because we recognize in his cloud-landscapes a similar representation - at once natural and transcendental - of how there is always more than the mind can grasp in nature, as well as in the imagination (just as in *The Prelude*, a sea of cloud usurps on a real sea). Looked at from the point of view of a more recent taxonomy, clouds may verge on the aesthetic of indeterminacy known as *l’informe* (a potent invention of twentieth-century modernism) - on chaos and shapelessness (Bois and Krauss). They thus lend themselves to being thought about in the philosophic domain that the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty calls “the visible invisible.” Clouds are confusing, not so much because they mix elements, or constantly change shape, but because they challenge the phenomenology of the visible.

What Forster (the nineteenth-century cloud-scientist who most directly influenced Constable) called “the nubific principle” can also be read as a principle of painting (Thornes 76; Forster 31). Viewed as a signifier, clouds have given rise to at least one counter-history of painting. Hubert Damisch’s study, *A Theory of /Cloud/* (1972), makes */cloud/* the sign of painting’s paradoxical combination of the ephemeral and the material. Above all, it sig-

4. The most authoritative and informative account of Constable’s cloud-studies is to be found in John Thornes, *John Constable’s Skies* (1999), to whose meteorological study of Constable I am deeply indebted, and in the catalogue for a National Galleries of Scotland exhibition, *Constable’s Clouds* (2000), edited by Edward Morris, which contains an essay by Thornes as well as accounts of the aesthetic aspects of his cloud-studies.

nals the escape of painting from the dominance of perspective and its historical transformation; the problem of surface became the problem of illusion. By the use of two forward slashes, Damisch transforms */cloud/* into an index or signifier, rather than a word denoting “cloud” in any descriptive or figurative sense (14-15). Enslaved to linear perspective (so Damisch argues), painting seeks another way of representing visual experience. */Cloud/*, whether rendered as the absence of sky or as deceptive *trompe l’oeil*, poses an alternative to the linear order. It becomes a sign of all that painting has to overcome. Instead of organizing the limits of a flat surface, the illusionistic clouds of the painted baroque cupola overflow their architectural frame (4-7). Correggio, according to Damisch, was the first to construct his pictures from the point of view of a Kantian subject for whom space is a constitutive aspect of consciousness (11).

Damisch’s semiotic analysis of pictorial production takes the theme and texture of */cloud/* as an indexical case-study for the development of painting, making */cloud/* the defining problematic of painting from the baroque to the present day. This “pictorial” or “painterly” space - what he calls “a free and unlimited depth, considered as a luminous and aerial substance” - is opposed to a modernist emphasis on linear style, with its flatness and overlapping forms (11). */Cloud/* is the sign of the volume repressed by modern painting’s fixation on the flatness of the representational surface. Its semiotics challenge the insistence of twentieth-century modernism on the representation of painterly space. Clouds round out pictorial space instead of flattening it; they point to the organization of the pictorial as a dialectic of surface and depth. */Cloud/* negates solidity and shape. Nebulous and indefinite, it signals an indeterminate volume, defying the medium and restoring painting to the realm of illusion. But */cloud/* also contains the paradox of form which signifies itself (29).

It may be a stretch to connect the vertiginous spaces of Correggio’s painting and Constable’s scientifically-informed naturalistic cloud studies, with their particularities of time, date, and weather conditions. But this connection is crucial to Damisch’s argument, and it informs mine. The painterly aspect of Constable’s clouds may serve as a reminder that even the most local and descriptive of painters can simultaneously strive for the dynamics of abstraction. Whether inspired by the flat Suffolk landscapes of his rural childhood, where his father was a prosperous miller (and both wind and water powered the mills), or by the views from airy Hampstead Heath overlooking London, where he spent his professional life, Constable had read meteorologists such as Forster, if not his precursor, Luke Howard (*Essay on*

the Modification of Clouds). His cloud studies record the formation and transformation of clouds in response to the air, wind, and sky for which Hampstead's height above the city provided a perfect viewing-point. But like Monet's water-lilies, the series of Hampstead cloud-studies that Constable painted during 1821-22 can be understood as a painter's reflections on problems of depth, space, and form. His records of transient weather-effects involve a painterly immersion, but in air rather than water. Clouds are notoriously hard to draw, not only because they change and move, but because of their technical demands. Their challenge to anti-graphic techniques and media, and their association with the brush, makes them a theme especially suited to ink wash, water-color, and oil sketches. Cloud-studies require attentiveness to subtle gradations of color and volume, along with swift, fluid, confident execution.

Clouds are to outline as color is to drawing: like Rothko's fields of color, they oppose line. Cloud-sketches also resemble the early nineteenth-century Romantic lyric - they record the moment as a rapid or slow-moving succession of feelings and thoughts. Clouds mount, mass, tower, or darken. They provide a barometer of feeling. As Constable famously wrote in a letter to his friend and patron the Rev. John Fisher in October 1821 (the period of his Hampstead cloud-studies), "painting is but another word for feeling." In the same letter, he added that the sky is not "a 'White Sheet' drawn behind the Objects" (like the backdrop to a painted scene), but rather "the 'key note' - the standard of 'Scale' and the chief 'Organ of Sentiment'" (Beckett, *John Constable's Correspondence VI* 76-78; Thornes 280). Clouds, for Constable, were a source of feeling and perception, an "Organ of sentiment" (heart or lungs) as much as meteorological phenomena. If painting is another name for feeling, and the sky an organ of sentiment, then his cloud-sketches are less a notation of changing weather-effects than a series of Romantic lyrics: exhalations and exclamations, meditations and reflections, attached to a specific location and moment in time. Constable's skies may sometimes lend themselves to allegory, as in the rain-cloud and rainbow over Salisbury Cathedral, or the storm-clouds that lower dramatically over Old Sarum (Thornes 142-46). But more often, they evoke fleeting states of mind, feeling, and atmosphere. As they mount or move across the sky, clouds become a language for inner activity: darkening here, lightening there, here an ascent, there a fraying or an accumulation of intensity; a passage of calm before a storm, or a glimpse of cerulean sky.

Constable's cloud-sketches express states of mind that are elusive and transient, yet their movement and rhythm evoke the familiar play of light and

shadow across a landscape. Clouds have a directional tendency, traveling on what are known to meteorologists as “streets.” Constable’s cloud-sketches catch something as indefinable yet ever-present as our own internal weather-tendency and mobility. How better to register the constantly shifting relation between perception and feeling, embodied consciousness and underlying emotional states? The sky, then, functions both as an organ of sentiment, and as a form of free-association - as both visibility and invisibility, form and *l’informe*; but above all as a mode of perception. But clouds also carry a material freight along with their aesthetic and emotional connotations. We shouldn’t lose sight of the great nineteenth-century changes - at once scientific and industrial - that formed clouds as we know them. Before coming back to Constable, I want to turn to his early nineteenth-century contemporary: the Northamptonshire laborer-poet, John Clare - famous for his poetry of detailed natural observation, for his madness, and for his long confinement in mental institutions. Clare, I want to suggest, not only observed nature minutely; he saw more than he knew, and perhaps knew more than he could see. This is especially evident when it comes to Clare’s clouds.

“Under a Cloud”

& we often see clouds which we identify by their curling up from the orison in separate masses as gass clouds which ascend into the middle sky & then join the quiet journey other clouds & are lost in the same colour.

John Clare, Northborough Oct./Nov. 1841⁵

John Clare, here adrift on a cloud journey, also experienced his depressions as being “under a cloud.”⁶ In what is probably his single most famous poem, the anguished “I am” of 1844, he describes himself as “like vapours tost / . . . Into the living sea of waking dreams” (ll.6-8; Robinson and Powell 2: 396). A near contemporary of the contrastingly upwardly mobile and professionally successful Constable, Clare shared with him an acute attune-

5. Grainger 337.

6. Clare’s confinement in two relatively humane mental asylums totaled twenty-seven years, until his death at seventy in 1864 in the Northamptonshire General Lunatic Asylum; he was a voluntary patient in Dr Allen’s asylum, High Beeches at Epping, from 1837 until his flight in 1841. Reviewing his treatment, Porter argues persuasively for Clare’s confinement as a contributory factor in his “madness,” and pointedly declines to offer any more definitive diagnosis than the elastic term “manic-depressive” combined with chronic economic difficulties (269-70).

ment to changing weather and seasons; so much so that his depressions were apparently exacerbated in spring and autumn by the seasonal affective disorder known as SAD (Bate 412-13). His poetry spans the Romantic period, with its impulse towards natural description and its evocation of inner states, and the arrival of the high Victorian age with its realism, its scientific impulse, and its emphasis on the individual's relation to society. His exquisite sensitivity to the sights and sounds of rural England - birds and their nests, the changing seasons, rural pursuits and occasions - reflects a two-fold taxonomic impulse. Recording natural phenomena such as weather variations was part of a growing movement to catalogue the environment that engaged both professional and amateur or local naturalists during the early nineteenth century (Jankovic; Anderson). But Clare's poetry also responds to the fact that the countryside was undergoing rapid change, under the double pressures of nineteenth-century agricultural capitalism, enclosure, and urbanization, as poorly paid agricultural laborers migrated to the new industrial and commercial centers. By the 1840s, the rural idyll had already become a nostalgic past for many urban immigrants, and even for agricultural workers like Clare who remained on the land.

Clare can be read as a social observer despite himself, as well as a close observer of the natural phenomena of early nineteenth-century rural England - recording what John Barrell has called "the dark side of the landscape" (*The Dark Side of the Landscape*). But, as Barrell has argued elsewhere, enclosure does not entirely explain Clare's alienated vision or his myopic and self-protective focus (*The Idea of Landscape* 109, 189-210). Clare lived on the margins of a London literary world that brought him notoriety and sales, but ultimately failed to provide his family with a steady income, exposing him to the fluctuations of literary taste (Haughton, Phillips and Summerfield 4-5). His early volumes - *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (1820), *The Village Minstrel and Other Poems* (1821), *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1827), and *The Rural Muse* (1835) - established him in the tradition of self-taught "ploughman" poets such as Robert Burns and Robert Bloomfield (a poet illustrated by Constable). But these rural poets had become less fashionable by the 1830s, the period that coincided with Clare's increasing destitution and depression. Arguably, both he and his poetry had already become an anachronism, awaiting discovery by twentieth-century writers such as Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin, and Ian Sinclair, for whom he became a poet's poet and naturalist, as well as a proto-environmentalist. Economic circumstances (not just bad weather) may have exacerbated both Clare's illness and his fixation on Lord Byron, the aristocratic out-

sider and *alter ego* whose *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan* he hectically rewrote in 1841, the year of his flight from Dr. Allen's asylum in Essex.

Clare's acute sensitivity to his surroundings - Northamptonshire hedgerows, fields, flowers, and birds - included England's moist climate and changeable skies. Weather is necessarily an object of minute observation to anyone who works on the land. He too may have known Forster's book, given his observations on atmospheric phenomena (Grainger 94n, 147n). But Clare, no less than Constable, uses weather as an internal barometer to register minute shifts in mood and feeling for which he had no other language, and for which the trappings of Byronic melancholy provided a clumsy substitute. Observing nature offered the resources of a finely calibrated vocabulary quite unlike the borrowed rhetoric of his *Child Harold*, with its "Hues of Hopeless Agony," or the uninflected Regency shorthand - "blue devils" and "black melancholy" - by which he refers to his depressions in letters (Porter 259-60). The language of journeying clouds provided an alternative means to record precarious emotional states, as well as minute changes in himself, via his surroundings. The alternation of sun and shower, settling and flight (typically the nesting and alarmed flight of birds) underpin the recurrent rhythms of Clare's poetry. His perspective is pedestrian: that of someone looking down as he walks, then up, skyward: "The grass below - above the vaulted sky" ("I am" l.18; Robinson and Powell 2: 396). But as John Barrell suggests, his penchant for minute particularity was also a drawback, functioning as a defense against other forms of encroachment from outside: "[Clare] is happy to look into the distance only if it is empty, if there is nothing there; and if there is a thing there, it destroys for Clare the illusion of space and depth, because it makes him want to examine it, in its particularity and detail, and thus he focuses on it too sharply" (*The Dark Side* 145-46). Barrell's perceptive comment suggests how the sky, with its emptiness, provides a temporary refuge from Clare's obsessively detailed close-up seeing. This is what another poet, John Ashbery, in "For John Clare," calls "The feeling that the sky might be in the back of someone's mind" (a "Clabbered sky") (103). Space and depth are impinged upon, close-up and spreading out in tension: "There is so much to be seen everywhere that it's like not getting used to it . . . There ought to be room for more things, for a spreading out" (103). The so much to be seen is too much.

Clare is anything but pedestrian, although his Journey out of Essex in 1841 - an escape from one asylum, before his twenty-two year re-incarceration in another - forms the defining journey of his life (Robinson 153-61; Bate). The stance I want to explore, however, is not that of the pedestrian poet

(feet and eyes on the ground) whose gift for observation places him, along with Constable, in the tradition of natural-history writers such as Gilbert White of Selborne. Rather, I want to catch Clare flat on his back, looking up at the sky - and at the clouds. In 1841, temporarily free from the asylum, Clare wrote that whereas close-cropped grass made him melancholy, “pieces of greensward . . . smooth & green as a bowling green” made him as happy as if he was “rambling in Paradise” (Grainger 336). In “The Meadow Grass,” written ten years previously, he takes a rest - a joyous, ecstatic rest, in the month of May: “I have no power / To tell the joys I feel & see” (ll.3-4; Robinson, Powell and Dawson 3: 505-8). It is springtime, and what he feels and sees are grassy meadows, “So sunny level & so green” (l.6). The grass is “waving angle high” (l.7) inviting him to “drop [him] down / & feel delight to be alone” (ll.9-10). But the down-drop (like that of a lark plummeting to its nest) is also a kind of uplift. He is simultaneously borne up by his own sky-ward look, raised out of himself by joy that is “half a stranger” to him. We experience a preternaturally bright side of the landscape - a buoyancy which nonetheless contains wistful undertones:

That happy sky with here & there
 A little cloud that would express
 By the slow motions that they wear
 They live with peace & quietness
 I think so as I see them glide
 Thoughts earthly tumult cant destroy
 So calm so soft so smooth they ride
 Im sure their errands must be joy (ll.17-24)

The grammatical non-sequitur (“They live with peace & quietness / . . . Thoughts earthly tumult cant destroy”) suggests a cloudscape impervious to the tumult that beset Clare at other times and in other moods. The sky is the upswing, cushioning the alternating rhythms, not of pedestrianism, but of elation and depression: “The sky is all serene & mild . . .” (l.25).

The syntactical movement of this stanza, with its cloudy lack of grammatical clarity, forms a correlative to the slow movement and transformation of a cloud-betravelled sky. As Clare writes, “Theres something more to fill the mind / Then words can paint to ears & eyes . . .” (ll.65-66). Notice the absence of sharply observed detail. Here there is no obsessive seeing or persecutory being seen; Adam Phillips acutely observes, apropos of this persecution by sight, that “John Clare has been celebrated as a poet who celebrates the pleasures of observation, but his poetry is equally alert to the terrors of

being seen" (180). The sky provides a relief from focused seeing and being seen, as well as a language for undirected states of thought and feeling. Clouds may move in "streets," but they don't flee or pursue as Clare himself had often fled or felt himself pursued. This space is "Entirely out of troubles way" (l.38), and "Strife comes but in the songs / Of birds half frantic in their glee" (ll.33-34). The light "Seems more than any common scene," unreal and transfiguring, like Wordsworth's "light that never was on sea or land" ("Elegiac Stanzas" l.15). Clare's vision of a "nature" (Nature) luxuriant and self-delighting - "Left to herself & solitude" (l.46) - surely personifies his own temporarily un-regarded and un-regarding state. Nature lacks the troubling consciousness that disturbs the scene, as distinct from the poet's own.

The intruder here is the alienating aspect of consciousness which haunts Clare's poetry: striving, care-ridden, manifested by the burden of too much seeing. We might call it the compulsion to observe: "I seem myself the only one / Intruding on her happy mood" (ll.47-48). Observing, noticing, looking, all characterize this over-alert and intrusive self-consciousness. A more relaxed and long-sighted form of observation is made temporarily possible by states of mind (calm rather than agitated) that contrast with the polar opposite of a "clouded mind":

I feel so calm I seem to find
A world I never felt before
& heaven fills my clouded mind
As though it would be dull no more
An endless sunshine glows around
A meadow like a waveless sea
Glow green in many a level ground
A very paradise to me (ll.73-80)

Here the clouds that "live with peace & quietness" relieve a mind rendered "dull" (depressed, in nineteenth-century parlance) by the weather that the poem allows us to glimpse as the dark side of Clare's internal landscape.

Clare's clouds can also approach the nubific sublime. Another poem of the same period, "A Beautiful Sunset in November," rivals the sunsets of his contemporary, Constable, for whom they were similarly freighted with emotional and atmospheric meanings:

Behind the distant spire the sun
Sinks beautiful - & rolled
In smoky folds cloud-mountains run
All edged with peaks of gold

& now an orange splendour comes
 & looses all the blue
 Again a grove of roses bloom
 & splendid is the view

Now crimson lines awhile remain
 & cut new mountains high
 They leave us when we look again
 & all is like the sky

Yes that bar that stretched for miles
 & through such splendid crowds
 Of hills is gone like favours smiles
 & turned to common clouds (Robinson, Powell and Dawson 3: 575-76)

The closing stanza has a dying fall, beyond mere disappointment or the cliché of habitual disillusion. “Common clouds” - clouds that are no longer cloud-mountains, peaks of gold, blooming like roses, crimson and splendid - belong to a world that fades into the light of common day. Or, as Clare wrote while suffering from a “confounded lethargy of low spirits,” depression “at times makes me feel as if my senses had a mind to leave me” (Porter 259). This is how clouds appear when sunset fades. It is like being abandoned by one’s senses.

The brilliance of Clare’s sunset testifies, unexpectedly, to the materiality of cloud-phenomena. A crimson sunset is the agricultural worker’s weather forecast. But his first stanza contains an interesting word: “smoky” - “& rolled / In smoky folds cloud-mountains run . . .” Atmospheric pollution has a distinct effect on the colour of the sunset. For a country worker during the 1820s and 1830s, urban and industrial air pollution from the burning of fossil fuels would have been much less visible than for later Victorian artists and writers who celebrated the smoky sunsets of London - as Constable was already doing by the 1820s. But as the meteorologist John Thornes has shown, the first half of the nineteenth century had seen an intensification of sunset colors from a natural pollutant: volcanoes. It has been argued that Turner’s spectacular sunsets were affected by the eruption of Mount Tabora in 1815 (Thornes 33, 103, 184). Volcanic eruptions that included three eruptions of Vesuvius between 1810 and 1820, eruptions in the West Indies, the Azores, and across the world (ten eruptions in two decades) led to the lurid sunsets recorded in and around London during the early decades of the nineteenth century. A spectacularly brilliant autumn sunset belonging to the autumn of 1820 (or possibly 1821, after Russian volcanic

eruptions) is recorded in a Constable sketch where smoky clouds are also visible (Morris 61 and catalogue no. 33; Thornes 212-13 and Plate 90) (Figure 1). Nothing makes it clearer that we live in a global climate system. Clare may well have known - as Constable almost certainly did, since the effects of volcanic eruptions were well-documented at the time - that his own rural skies were colored by volcanic dust.



*Figure 1. John Constable, Hampstead: Evening, 28 October, 1820.
Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.*

Manic-depressive rhythms and atmospheric pollution converge in the baroque folds of Clare's clouds. His poetry allows us to glimpse not only a rural idyll already in the process of erosion, but the start of a much longer journey from one kind of landscape - or skyscape - to another altogether: that of twentieth-century environmental protest. Ian Sinclair, walking the route of Clare's *Journey out of Essex*, follows a map that is disfigured by modern motorways and bypasses, made noisy by thundering lorries, fetid with polluted streams, its tracks and paths blocked by the obstacles of modern transportation systems and industrialized agriculture (Sinclair 2005). Clare returns to us as the poet persecuted not only by the so (too) much to

be seen, by rural enclosure, or by the economics of the book-trade, but by the modern transport revolution and the unforeseen effects of unchecked carbon emission.

“The Man of Clouds”

You can never be nubilous - I am the man of clouds.

John Constable to John Fisher, Nov. 1823⁷

John Ruskin, in *Modern Painters* (1856), suggests that if a name were needed to characterize modern (by which he means nineteenth-century) landscape painting, it would be “the service of clouds” (Cook and Wedderburn 5: 133). Ruskin’s disquisition on “cloud beauty” is partly mystical - “Between the heaven and man came the cloud. His life being partly as the falling leaf and partly as the flying vapour” (133) - but he also offers a meditation on the mysterious aspects of cloud phenomena. At once material and immaterial, Ruskinian clouds have a way of “mixing something and nothing” that for him requires explanation (137). The atmosphere (transparent or opaque, blue when rain is imminent) causes him to question the nature of air itself, about which we know nothing: is it water that makes the air blue? Why are the furthest clouds the most crimson? And so on (139). Clouds are for him - lacking knowledge of the great cloud-systems that encircle the globe - the great unknown: “lastly, all these questions respecting substance, and aspect, and shape, and line, and division, are involved with others as inscrutable, concerning action. The curves in which clouds move are unknown: - nay, the very method of their motion, or apparent motion, how far it is by change of place, how far by appearances in one place and vanishing from another” (140-41). Clouds have to do with both scientific speculation and mystery; but - as for Goethe before him - they tend to make his mind spread away, into the stratosphere of visionary prose.

Ruskin’s addiction to line and design, however, runs contrary to the very indeterminacy of cloud formations about which he himself speculates in such exalted terms. Words provided him with a better medium than line. Paradoxically, the prose of *Modern Painters* is dedicated both to the taxonomy of clouds and to the difficulty of defining them. There may be only two species - massive and striated - but in the same breath Ruskin suggests (in an embellished cliché) that clouds are “fleecy”: “The fleece may be so

7. Beckett, *John Constable’s Correspondence VI* 142.

bright as to look like flying thistle-down, or so diffused as to show no visible outline at all. Still if it is all of one common texture, like a handful of wool, or a wreath of smoke, I call it massive" (144). Ruskin records his observation of smoke-polluted London where two out of three sunrises are now obscured, then obsessively counts the ranks of cirrus on a purple ground: "the average number was 60 in each row, rather more than less" (146). But what follows is figurative: "Flocks of Admetus under Apollo's keeping"; Apollo, banished from heaven, tended the flocks of Admetus (147n). Clouds are sheep, or else skilled mechanical workers, lace-makers and spinners at their machines: "Busy workers they must be, that twine the braiding of them all to the horizon" - "Looped lace as it were, richest point - invisible threads fastening embroidered cloud to cloud" (148). Ruskin's metaphors are laboriously spun out of the technologies of nineteenth-century industrial production.

The industrial arts enter in the form of a footnote in which Ruskin attacks the use of the brush in sketching clouds, insisting that "a dark pencil, which will lay shade with its side and draw lines with its point, is the best instrument" (150n). The translation of pencil sketches into something more permanent involves either delicate and expensive engraving or "the finer and uncloudlike touches of the pen" (150n). This is Benjamin's work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. The most powerful cloud-painter for Ruskin was, of course, not Constable, but Turner - "this power," he says "coming from his constant habit of drawing skies, like everything else, with the pencil point" (156). Ruskin gives his readers the embroidered sublime (embroidered by his own pen and by his interest in modern engraving technology). The illustrated cloudscapes of *Modern Painters* are typically Alpine, with peaks and castles (rather than trees or horizons) giving the measure of their vertiginous height. His clouds are "cloud-chariots" or else "The Angel of the Sea," driven by the power of dreams, roiling like airborne oceans - visionary "messengers of fate" that offer a tumultuous accompaniment to momentous events. Yet they are simultaneously imbued with the values of an industrial age: not just the steam, speed, and fire that so fascinated Ruskin when it came to "Turnerian Light" and "Turnerian Mystery," but the techniques of Victorian engraving and engineering. Ruskin's claustrophobic "rectilinear" and "curvilinear" clouds are designer clouds - as schematic and machine tooled as designs for iron bridges or cast-iron decoration. What interests him is cloud-perspective, its fixity, weight, and architectonics. We can hardly tell girders from clouds. (Cook and Wedderburn 5: Plates LXIV, LXV) (Figures 2 and 3).

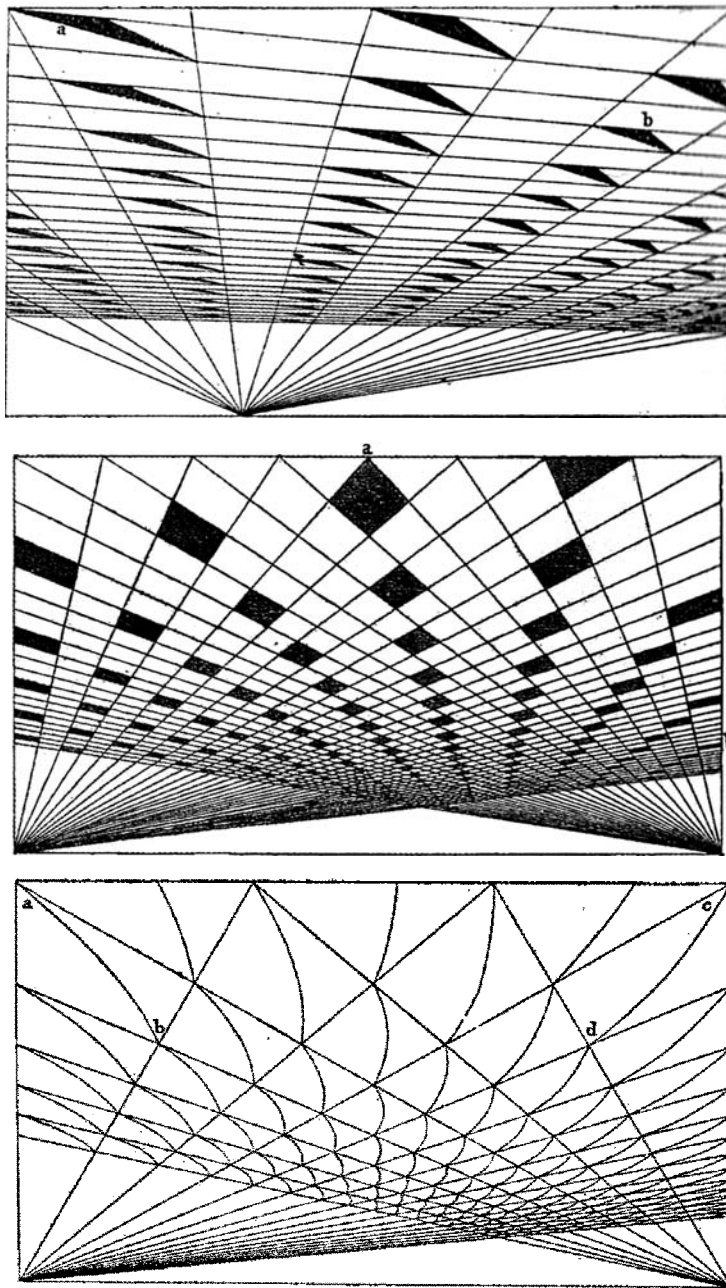


Figure 2. John Ruskin, Cloud Perspective: Rectilinear.
(Modern Painters, Vol. V, Plate LXIV).

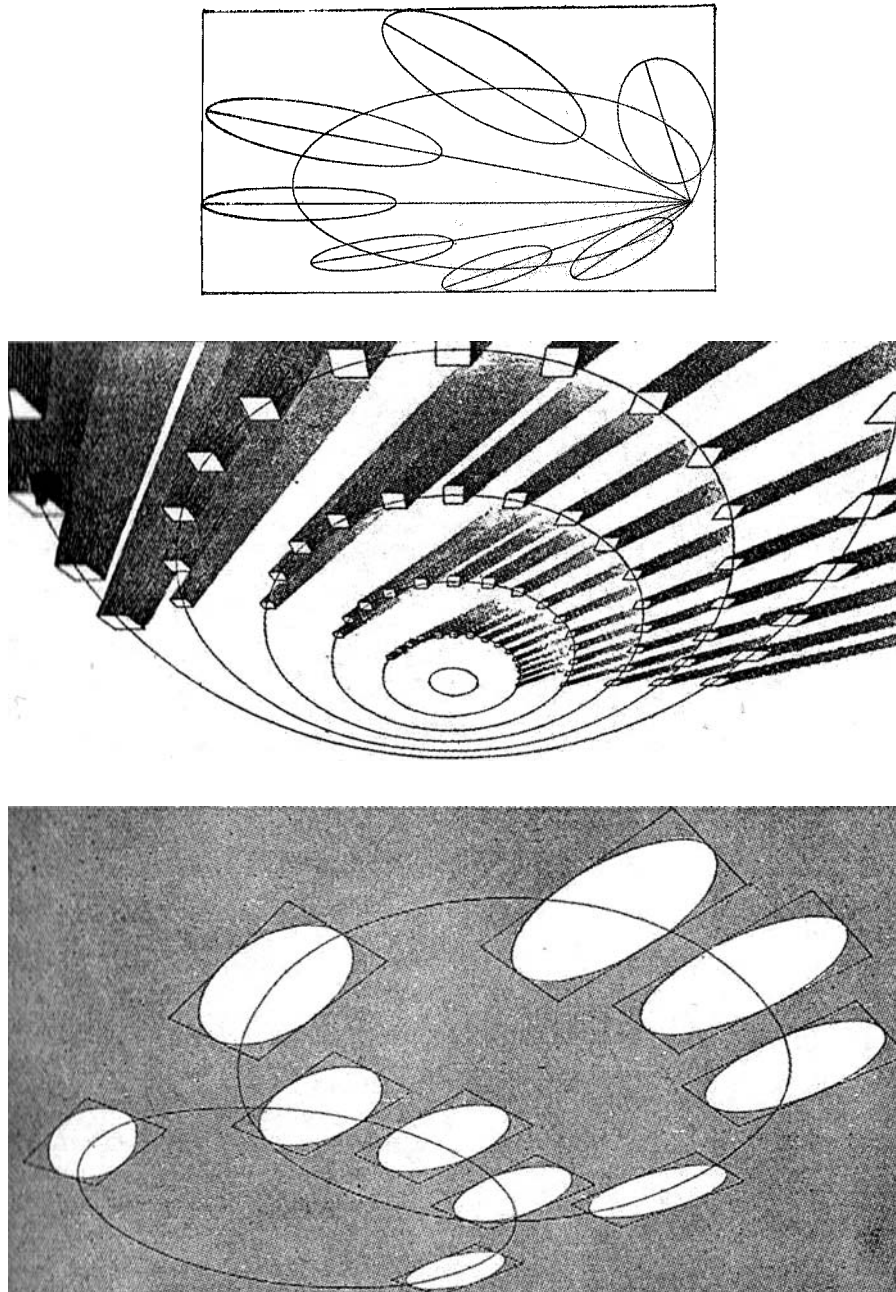


Figure 3. John Ruskin, *Cloud Perspective: Curvilinear*.
(*Modern Painters, Vol. V, Plate LXV*).

Constable's cloud-studies belong to a very different tradition. Looking back to the huge skies of Dutch landscape painting, his painting is also inflected by the great artists of the past (Titian, Salvator, Claude) while simultaneously imbued with a Romantic aesthetic of direct observation from nature (Lambert 119). These strands combine a classical approach to landscape, where visual pictorialism goes hand in hand with pastoral activity, and a Romantic individualism that emphasizes the artist's subjective feelings; truth lies both in the universality of landscape, and in the artist's first-hand seeing (96, 76). But Constable too can be seen as a modern painter (although not for Ruskin), shaped by the early nineteenth-century emphasis on scientific observation. Just as he meticulously records the working scenes and water technologies of the Stour valley, from which his family earned their prosperity, he was a proto-scientist who made his "Obtrusive" skies the so-called "keynote" of his paintings (Beckett, *John Constable's Correspondence VI* 77), backing up his keen interest in weather-effects with studies in nineteenth-century meteorology. We know, for instance, that Constable read and annotated the second edition of Thomas Forster's *Researches about Atmospheric Phenomena* (1815), a popularization and extension of Luke Howard's 1804 *Essay on the Modification of the Clouds* (Thornes 68-80; Morris 123). This is the nubilous Constable, or self-professed "man of clouds" (Beckett, *John Constable's Correspondence VI* 142). In addition, he may well have read Howard's collection of meteorological data in *The Climate of London* (1818-20), published just before the intensive period of his Hampstead cloud sketches of 1821-22, with their careful meteorological annotations (Thornes 117). Constable's interest in composition and his refusal to make his sky simply "a 'White sheet drawn behind the Objects'" speak, in a different sense, to the materiality of his clouds - to their compositional role in the landscape paintings by which he made his living. As Constable wrote, clouds were "a very material part of [his] composition" (Beckett, *John Constable's Correspondence VI* 76-77; Thornes 278-80). Clouds are both a form of scientific "matter," and the material of his painting.

Whether for the scientific observer or for the painter, clouds pose particular problems. As Forster notes, they are capable of becoming lighter and darker according to their relation to the sun (the light-source for a landscape artist), and they may be operated on by "the nubific principle" (thought to be an electrical principle) (Thornes 39, 76). For Badt, a pioneering writer on Constable's clouds, Howard's taxonomy provided the basis for what Goethe had called "limiting the indefinite, the unstable and the unattainable" (Badt 51; Thornes 117). Arguably, cloud-classification made the indefiniteness

and instability of the sky attainable by means of a scientific regime, or taxonomy, much as Ruskin had attempted by means of metaphor and line. This regime was at once material and aesthetic. Clouds are not solid but they are (literally) heavy, because of their water-content. For the painter they are both visible and three-dimensional, forming a system of depth and movement, light and shadow, illusion and perspective. The depiction of clouds involves sophisticated solutions to problems involving the representation of space and volume - as well as the skill to capture transient effects, whether in their own right, or as studies or notations for future paintings. Constable preferred clouds in motion, on windy days, as his meticulous annotations of his Hampstead cloud-sketches of 1921-22 show. But he was not simply writing a cloud-journal for his own artistic purposes. Perhaps there is another way to think about the tension between competing views of Constable's art (at once universal and particular; classical and Romantic, scientific and subjective). For Constable himself, his cloud studies formed part of a global skyscape. Even temperate skies were lined with the sublime.

Constable drew a line in the margin of his copy of the second edition of Forster's *Researches about Atmospheric Phaenomena*, against his prefatory remark that whereas the botanist and naturalist must confine their observations to specific habitats, the meteorologist takes the entire world as habitat - a form of the meteorological sublime. Here is Forster:

But on the barren mountain's rugged vortex, in the uniform gloom of the desert, or on the trackless surface of the ocean, we may view the interesting electrical operations which are going on above, manifested in the formation and changes of the clouds, which bear water in huge masses from place to place, or throw it down in torrents on the earth and waters; occasionally creating whirlwinds and water spouts; or producing the brilliant phaenomena of meteors and of lightening; and constantly ornamenting the sky with the picturesque imagery of coloured clouds and golden haze. The atmosphere and its phaenomena are everywhere, and thunder rolls, and rainbows glitter in all conceivable situations, and we may view them whether it may be our lot to dwell in the frozen countries of polar ice, in the mild climates of the temperate zone, or in the parched regions which lay more immediately under the path of the sun. (vi-viii)

At first reading, Forster's reflection evokes Turner's visionary landscapes rather than Constable's windy Hampstead, or the river-valleys of the Stour. But I think there is a rationale to be found in Constable's marginal mark. The

specificity - the temporality and locality - emphasized by his cloud-sketches is part of a larger atmospheric picture in which the temperate zone is linked to the tropics. Water-bearing clouds are aspects of a climatic system just as regional effects form part of a global weather map. The artist's eye may be on the clouds of Hampstead or the windy skies of Suffolk, but cloud-formations are distributed across the globe: "The atmosphere and its phaenomena are everywhere."

"What a glorious morning is this for clouds." So wrote Constable in 1833 to the London bookseller from whom he probably acquired Forster's work (Beckett, *John Constable's Correspondence IV* 146). Whether or not his interest in clouds was inflected by his meteorological studies, Constable's cloud sketches of 1821 are usually inscribed with time, date and weather as if they were scientific journal entries, in the manner of Howard's data on the climate of London: "Sept 24th . . . 10 o'clock morning wind S.W. warm & fine till afternoon, when it rained and wind got more to the north" (Thornes 230, Plate 100) (Figure 4). "Noon 27 Sept very bright after rain



Figure 4. John Constable, Study of Sky and Trees, 24 September, 1821.
Courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



*Figure 5. John Constable, Cloud Study: Horizon of Trees, 27 September, 1821.
Courtesy of the Royal Academy of Arts, London.*



*Figure 6. John Constable, Cloud Study, 28 September, 1821.
Courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection,
USA / The Bridgeman Art Library.*

wind West” (Thornes 235, Plate 103) (Figure 5). “Sep. 28 1821 Noon - looking North West windy from the S.W. large bright clouds flying rather fast very stormy night followed” (Thornes 238, Plate 105) (Figure 6). Constable usually records, as a minimum, the details of time, date, and wind direction, and often specific aspects of cloud behavior or weather. Sometimes he records the temperature or the colour of the sky, along with a brief comment on the overall aesthetic effect (“fine and grand”). The aesthetics of clouds, however, are inseparable from the range and tonality of their colour, and the degree to which Constable’s studies provide an impression, whether of speed, direction, mass, or colour. Beyond developing his expertise and providing the raw material for larger landscape studies - the ambitious six-footers for The Royal Academy through which he made his reputation and his living - what did Constable, as artist rather than a scientist, find so fascinating about clouds?

Could it be that what drew Constable to study clouds was the opportunity they provided not simply for capturing rapidly changing weather effects, or representations of objects in space (clouds, or */clouds/*), but a representation of thought itself? The spaces of Constable’s cloud-studies are replete rather than vacant. One thinks, without discomfort, of Ashbery’s “feeling that the sky might be in the back of someone’s mind” (“For John Clare” 103). Unlike Clare’s, the sky of Constable’s cloud-studies is like a mind filled by and interested in its own thoughts - a mind in contact with itself through what it sees. Let’s look more closely. Four birds tumbling in a windy sky, with just a band of blue horizon at the foot of the paper, creates a sense of windy height and tumbling movement (*stratocumulus*) while still being anchored securely to the ground (Figure 6). Subtle gradations of light and dark offer a vista of massing clouds (*cumulus*), dramatically backlit, obscuring the sky and foretelling rain, yet the drama is confronted head on, without dismay (Figure 7). Fair weather (*cumulus*) creates a display as “streets” of baroque clouds move on an easterly air-stream in a high, exquisitely coloured sky; their movement is purposive, quietly occupied, a record of distinct cloud episodes (Figure 8). Striking in all these sketches is Constable’s use of space and volume - the piling, depth, and effect of movement - along with the differentiated or combined effects of lightness and weight (what Ruskin calls “fleecy” and “massive”). The unexpected feature, since these are cloud-studies, is that Constable appears to be interested in weight, as well as in volume and three-dimensional mass; his silver clouds often have a leaden lining. “Heavy clouds” (rain-bearing clouds) produce weighty effects: high



Figure 7. John Constable, Cloud Study, 27 August, 1822. Courtesy of the Tate Gallery, London.



*Figure 8. John Constable, Study of Cumulus Clouds, 21 September, 1822.
Courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, USA / The Bridgeman Art Library.*

pressure, on the other hand, produces a sense of lightness and buoyancy rather than elation. Communicating a weather-related sense of mood, as well as describing cloud-phenomena, Constable's cloud-studies resemble what Wordsworth called "Moods of [his] own mind": lyrics lightly tied to the specificity of time, place, and occasion - the fleeting thoughts or emotions of the moment, or the hour, passed out of doors, arising spontaneously, susceptible to the chances of breeze and location. Constable's clouds, read as a sequence, represent the passage of moods, thoughts, and feelings as they follow one another through the mind. His cloud-studies are the equivalent of lyric poems, and cloud-forms are his stanzas.

Constable never delivered his planned lectures on the science of painting the sky and his "observations on skies and clouds" have not survived (Leslie 241). But in his lectures on landscape, he argued that landscape painting "is a science and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature" (Beckett, *John Constable's Discourses* 69). He continues: "Why, then, may no landscape be considered as a branch of natural philosophy, of which pictures are but the experiments" (69). Constable was a philosopher in the sense of being interested in the forms of knowledge associated with perception. In another lecture on Dutch landscape painting, he wrote: "*We see nothing truly till we understand it,*" quoting these lines: "It is the Soul that sees; the outward eyes / Present the object, but the Mind descries" (64). This famous remark suggests that Constable had more in mind than meteorology - that for him, seeing was a mode of cognition: "the Mind descries." Where Wordsworth - who can be descriptive too - tends to lose himself and landscape in an inward look (seeing into the life of things), Constable's is always an embodied consciousness, firmly rooted in space and time. In his painting, perception is seldom transcendental, although it may be dramatic and even allegorical. Observing and understanding the sky relates to its function as an "organ of feeling," a palpitating organ that makes landscape live and breathe. This is what "observation" meant to him. Here Constable has something in common with the twentieth-century phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose unfinished and posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964) inspired both Lacan and Derrida to reflect on the nature of vision as a form of understanding (in Lacan's case, misunderstanding). I want finally to turn to Merleau-Ponty as a way to address the philosophy of clouds.

“Space Where the Heart Feels”

the space of modern painting is “space which the heart feels,” space in which we too are located, space which is close to us and to which we are organically connected.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty⁸

Merleau-Ponty insists that “at the horizon of all these visions or quasi-visions it is the world itself I inhabit, the natural world and the historical world . . . as if my vision of the world itself were formed from a certain point of the world” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 5-7). In this, he is a materialist. We know what we know from the evidence of our sight and touch. We are always embodied. *The Visible and the Invisible* sets out to define the folded, chiasmic nature of this dual mode of perception. What Merleau-Ponty means by the invisible is not a transcendental or mystical realm, but rather the point at which one is linked to the world by what one cannot perceive: that is, oneself in the act of perception. The body perceives, yet effaces itself in perceiving. The analogy he invokes is that of the blind spot in the eye that marks the place where the eye is linked to the optical nerves, what he calls the *punctum caecum* of consciousness (248). Philosophy is distinct from a conception of objective science, Merleau-Ponty argues, since philosophers believe themselves to be implicated in the questions asked. The physicist who is self-situated physically, as an observer, or the psychologist who self-situates in the socio-historical world, have both abandoned the idea of an absolute knowledge: they are part of the world they observe and to which they belong. In the same way, Merleau-Ponty insists, philosophers “enjoin a radical examination of our belongingness to the world before science” (27). And again, “Our eyes are no longer the subjects of vision; they have joined the numbers of things seen” (29). In a lucid account of his ideas delivered in lectures on the radio during the late 1940s, Merleau-Ponty contrasts the peaceful world of classical perspective that stretches to infinity - Poussin’s world, for instance - with the successive snapshots of perception that, in his words, “recapture and reproduce before our very eyes the birth of the landscape. They have been reluctant to settle for an analytical overview and have striven to recapture the feel of perceptual experience itself” (*The World of Perception* 53-54). Merleau-Ponty’s subject here is space, and the painter he has in mind is not Constable but Cézanne. This space of modern painting,

8. *The World of Perception* 54.

he notes (quoting Jean Paulhan), is no longer that of the absolute observer, but “‘space which the heart feels,’ space in which we too are located, and with which we are organically connected” (54).

Merleau-Ponty identifies philosophy with “a disclosure of the ‘unknown,’” which is “the attitude of reflection at its best” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 181). What interests him is the passage from perception to reflection or thought: “With the conversion to reflection, perceiving and imagining are now only two modes of *thinking*” (29). Embodied perception has the potential to become a mode of thinking, as well as a mode of identity: “I am a knowing” - his pregnant phrase - replaces the Cartesian “I think therefore I am.” Being, for him, is the basis for knowing, not thinking for existence (32). Like Merleau-Ponty, and in marked contrast to Clare’s alienated “I am,” Constable too offers us a mode of knowing that is related and shared. It involves what Merleau-Ponty defines as “the intertwining of my life with the other lives, of my body with the visible things, by the intersection of my perceptual field with that of the others” (49). Unlike Clare, who persistently finds his commonalty with birds and animals rather than with people, Constable is a profoundly sociable painter, even when his subject is a sky emptied of humans. The small figures who set off his rural landscapes with their flecks of red, like so many punctuation marks, are the inscription of this sociability - and of visibility. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “A punctuation in the field of red things,” connecting with other reds and with “the field of red garments,” is also “a momentary crystallization of colored being or of visibility” (132). In Constable, the obsessive close-up of Clare’s seeing becomes expansive - yet insists (in Merleau-Ponty’s words) that “our relationship to space is not that of a pure disembodied subject to a distant object but rather that of a being which dwells in space relating to its natural habitat” (*The World of Perception* 55). The habitat is relational and has other lives in it - working or at rest, reaping, sleeping, or leaping.

The look, for Merleau-Ponty, “envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 133). That enveloping palpation of the visible world by the eye (for the artist, by means of light) constitutes not just an essential aspect of cloud painting, but its figurative meaning. Clouds are untouchable; yet (like the eye) they envelop and palpate the visible sky, creating depth and feeling. We can’t experience the thickness of a cloud and see it at the same time; once in a cloud, we have lost sight of it. Clouds puzzle us by representing, not so much the mind in a state of reflection, as the latency involved in all visible representation - not fullness versus flatness only, as Damisch argues, but absence itself; the ungraspable; what we can’t see as well as the visible. Clouds provide a metaphor for what Merleau-Ponty

calls an element or incarnate principle (like water, air, earth, fire) “midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea” (139). This is his description of the embodied being, or flesh, that occupies the ground-breaking final chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible* (“The Intertwining - the Chiasmus”). Central to this concept of embodied seeing is the idea of a shared landscape. One’s own landscape exists in the knowledge that there are other landscapes; hence what he calls the “intercorporeality” of vision. Such an idea contests the notion of an isolated or purely subjective and private vision, sometimes thought of as synonymous with Romanticism. When I speak of a landscape to another, writes Merleau-Ponty, “this individual green of the meadow under my eyes invades his vision without quitting my own. I recognize in my green his green” (142). He might have been writing with Constable’s green in mind - or even Clare’s. But where Clare’s meadow is his own (recovered) *paradis vert*, free of others and of the complexities of adult sociability and sexuality, Constable’s companionable vision locates us in the same space with him; a working space as well as a relational one. But as Merleau-Ponty notes, abandoning Cartesian models also makes room for the non-normativity that he calls “knowledge of the natural world riddled with gaps, which is how poetry creeps in” (*The World of Perception* 73). In his own way, Clare - along with Cézanne - occupies that poetic gap.

Merleau-Ponty’s definition of vision has provided the starting point for discussions of vision by philosophers and theorists as different as Jacques Lacan on one hand, whose 1964 seminars on the Gaze argue with Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and the Invisible*, and on the other, Jacques Derrida, whose *Memoirs of the Blind* (his 1991 catalogue for an exhibition of drawings at the Louvre) and posthumously published *On Touching - Jean-Luc Nancy* (which also tussles tangentially with Merleau-Ponty), meditate on the relation of seeing to blindness and of vision to touch. In *Memoirs of the Blind*, Derrida singles out a key passage from *The Visible and the Invisible*, part of which I want to quote by way of conclusion: “But what is proper to the visible is . . . to be the surface of an inexhaustible depth: this is what makes it able to be open to visions other than our own. . . . For the first time, the seeing that I am is for me really visible; for the first time I appear to myself completely turned inside out under my own eyes” (Merleau-Ponty 143; Derrida 52-53). The fascination of Constable’s cloud-painting, I suggest, is that it represents the surface of this inexhaustible depth. In so doing, it pre-empts (along with Merleau-Ponty) the denigration of vision that has been seen as endemic in twentieth-century French thought (Jay). Constable’s cloud-studies allow us to see ourselves

turned inside out under our own eyes - our interiority revealed in our seeing. Clouds are the realm of the visible invisible, both what we can and what we can't see; their representation involves the double relation of the work of perception and the work of art, along with our complex, feeling, yet pre-determined relation to both. For Merleau-Ponty, finally, the work of art resembles the object of perception and can be understood as "a totality of flesh in which meaning is not free . . . but bound, a prisoner of all the signs, or details which reveal it to me" (*The World of Perception* 95). This tension between the inexhaustible and the bound lies at the heart of the distinct forms of seeing, the signs and details, that are so differently articulated in Clare's poetry and Constable's painting. Whether under a cloud with Clare or drawn to the clouds with Constable, the nubilous man of clouds, we explore the inexhaustible depth of the object-world through eyes at once other and our own.

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