

**Thomas H. Ford, *Wordsworth and the Poetics of Air: Atmospheric Romanticism in a Time of Climate Change*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. 269. £75. ISBN 9781108424950.**

In his prose and poetry, Wordsworth compares language to ‘the air we breathe’ and the Imagination to ‘an unfather’d vapour’. He was fascinated by the ‘smokeless air’ of London, the ‘misty air’ and the ‘hovering clouds’ of the Isle of Man. From the ‘wreathes of smoke’ to the ‘corresponding mild creative breeze’, the poet locates inspiration as he ‘wandered lonely as a cloud’. Wordsworth’s proven interests in the poetics of meteorological phenomena anticipate this book-length study of Wordsworth’s atmospheric or aerial poetics to be a valuable addition to the current Romantic scholarship.

Despite the emphasis on Wordsworth and air in the main title, Ford employs the conception of ‘atmosphere’ as the central locus of the book. Ford’s study of Romantic aerial writing establishes the atmosphere as ‘the primary medium of human perception and communication – and indeed life’ (52), and as ‘a language for conceiving what literature and science shared’ (5). Based on the atmospheric ‘qualities of indeterminacy, modifiability, vagueness, suspension and internal heterogeneity’ (204), Ford proposes the challenges of differentiating between ‘medium and message, breath and voice, literality and metaphor, the non-living and the living, nonhuman objects and human subjects’ (198). Ford’s book contextualises the Romantic transformations of the cultural and textual semantics of ‘atmosphere’ by tracing the historical emergence of atmospheric lexis from its first appearance in the late 1770s to our contemporary recognition of the language of anthropogenic climate changes. As a response to historicist and new historicist arguments, Ford establishes ‘historical reflexivity’ (18) or a totalising ‘atmospheric sense of history’ (76) as the key characteristics that distinguish Romantic weather poetics from aerial writings before the late eighteenth-century.

The first chapter opens with Ford’s interpretation of M. H. Abrams’s ‘The Correspondent Breeze’ (1957), a seminal examination of the poetic weather of Romanticism. Chapters 2 to 4 examine a specific form of communicative mediation or intervention with the idea of ‘atmospheric vagueness’ (97) or ‘mobility’ (96). With reference to metaphysical and theological theorisations of matter in aerial terms, chapter 2 explicates the suspended atmospheric interstate between the endurance and ephemerality of industrial history in Wordsworth’s ‘self-consuming’ (94) inscription writings. Dedicating a significant section of chapter 3 to Goethe’s meteorological modification of translation, and of chapter 4 to Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, Ford brings together the fields of meteorology, language, and aesthetic experiences by the indeterminacy of atmospheric Romanticism. Ford’s contextualisation of the paradoxical ambiguity of atmospheric aesthetics and science culminates in chapter 5, where he provides a reading of the ‘aerial environment’ (154) in Wordsworth’s ‘Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey’. Ford attempts to understand poetry as an atmospheric modification of prose by examining the communicative and performative function of Wordsworth’s metrically-patterned breathings and suspended voice. With reference to Keats’s conceptual association of mist with mystery and the unknowing, alongside his observation of the ‘atmospheric chamber of poetic experience’ (154), the chapter draws together the field of post-revolutionary radical medicine, meteorology, and literary history. In his conclusion, Ford evaluates the role of Romantic textual atmosphere as a representation of both historical continuity and discontinuity.

This book provides a comprehensive overview of the history of Romantic atmospheric discourses by engaging with a diverse range of subjects, such as meteorology, metaphysics, aesthetics, linguistics, translation, medical pneumatics, theology, politics, philosophy, media theory, and print culture. Ford’s wide repertoire of references, however,

obscures his focus on Wordsworth's poetry and poetics in general. Out of the five main chapters, two of them have no specific mentioning of Wordsworth or his works. Even Ford's minimal attention to the close readings of texts is shared among his analysis of other Romantic aerial figures. Ford's commentary on Wordsworth's writings mostly consists of locating the poet's employment of atmospheric language; more might have been done to highlight the unique significance of this atmospheric approach to our understanding of particular Wordsworthian passages. Moreover, Ford's almost synonymous use of various meteorological terms and phenomena, such as air and atmosphere, weather and climate, runs contra to his intention of approaching Romantic literary characteristics through actual scientific concepts and connotations. Overall, Ford's meticulous effort in contextualising the various ambiguities and paradoxes that govern the historical conception of atmosphere engages rewardingly with current ecological and eco-critical discussions to open up new avenues of atmospheric inquiry in Romantic literature and history.

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