The Age of Atmosphere:
Air, Affect, and Technology in Modernist Literature

By

Anna Jones Abramson

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
English
in the
Graduate Division
of the
University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:
Professor Elizabeth Abel, Chair
Professor C.D. Blanton
Professor James Vernon

Summer 2016
The Age of Atmosphere:
Air, Affect, and Technology in Modernist Literature

By

Anna Jones Abramson

Copyright 2016
Abstract

The Age of Atmosphere: Air, Affect, and Technology in Modernist Literature

By

Anna Jones Abramson

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Elizabeth Abel, Chair

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, new technologies drastically altered the relationship between humans and the atmosphere: poison gas, airplanes, and radio waves made air lethal and palpable in unprecedented ways while innovations in meteorological forecasting transformed the legibility of the sky. A surge of interest in perceiving the invisible world extended to affective atmospheres, with sociologists and psychologists developing tools to measure the public mood in urban crowds and morale on the frontlines of World War I. Modernist writers seized on the concept of atmosphere in a series of formal experiments designed to capture elusive phenomena that drift somewhere between conventional distinctions of setting, character, and plot. In *The Age of Atmosphere: Air, Affect, and Technology in Modernist Literature*, I trace this convergence of meteorological, affective, and aesthetic atmospheres in order to rescale modernism. Rather than emphasizing psychological interiority, I make a case for the centrality of vast transpersonal and environmental phenomena; and instead of following the traditional narrative of modernist shock and rupture, I examine gradual climatic fluctuations. I argue that, contrary to expectations, it was not literary impressionism or indeed any sort of painterly aesthetic which contributed most directly to modernism's construction of atmosphere. Modernist rendering of atmosphere was actually taking place within and through the experiments with literary form we are familiar with, but do not tend to associate with atmosphere: experiments with narrative framing, free indirect discourse, unreliable narration, reversals of background and foreground, and the temporal displacements engendered by flashbacks and forecasts.

My project is motivated by the conviction that we need a richer vocabulary and more robust set of conceptual tools to account for experiences that bypass a standard subject-object divide, the kind of profoundly immersive conditions that Woolf had in mind when she wrote of being “steeped in atmosphere.” An atmospheric intervention shifts conventional emphases in modernist studies: visible becomes palpable, shock becomes absorption, perception becomes attunement, fast becomes slow, event becomes environment.
Chapter One, “Fog,” argues that for Conrad, atmosphere is a way of gesturing at something larger than any local or individual experience, something that inflects human life but is always in excess of it. The striking persistence of meteorological and affective atmospheres throughout Heart of Darkness (1899) – the “brooding gloom” that recurs across narrative frames, temporal registers, and geographical locations – reveals atmosphere to be irreducible to setting in the manner of Dickens’ foggy London. I argue that it is not the text’s impressionist descriptions that contribute most directly to the construction of atmosphere, but rather the particular way that Conrad experiments with narrative framing. Conventionally, we expect frames to erect partitions between components of a narrative, yet Conrad’s atmosphere overflows all such divisions, rolling slowly through the text and refusing to burn off, much like literal fog. I suggest that because the narrative sections divide while still also remaining permeable, these frames provide a structural model of attunement, with the atmosphere of each section striking a chord with the others in resonant harmony. I propose that attunement can be applied to “reading atmospherically,” a practice that seeks to replace epistemological decoding with affective attunement. However, these discoveries introduce distinct ethical problems: because Conrad’s colonial violence is embedded in environment rather than events – an all-encompassing fog - it is difficult to see how one could ever step outside of it.

In Chapter Two, “Poison Gas,” Conrad’s creeping fog transforms into the lingering of lethal gas in World War I literature. Whereas the previous chapter examined the question of inhabiting atmosphere, here I turn to the problem of uninhabitable atmospheres. My readings expand upon philosopher Peter Sloterdijk’s assertion that the uniquely modern danger of gas warfare lies in its assault on the atmosphere rather than on human bodies. I begin by tracing representations of failed impact, splintering effects, and indirect experience in Siegfried Sassoon’s Memoirs of an Infantry Officer (1930) and Edmund Blunden’s Undertones of War (1924). I suggest that consistent emphases on oblique rather than direct experience challenge the widely accepted position that noncombatants cannot possibility understand war because they lack the sensory immediacy of “firsthand” experience. The problem might be not that we lack the imagination, I suggest, but that we have overactive imaginations that glide right past the sensory and atmospheric subtleties implied by a term like “undertones.” In my subsequent close reading of Blunden’s narrative, I suggest that the centrality of atmosphere to war experience makes the text’s use of the pastoral tradition seem less anachronistic, archaic, or escapist than some have assumed it to be. Rather than reading Blunden’s “pastoral” and “modernist” styles in opposition, I assert that the text’s seemingly archaic tone itself operates according to principles of atmospheric manipulation. Poison gas carves out pockets of air and is susceptible to “blow back” dependent on the direction of the wind, just as Blunden’s narrative follows anachronistic counter-currents and formally embeds pastoral microclimates within the prevailing climate of war and modernity. Similarly, Blunden takes the propensity of poison gas to “loiter,” “linger,” and “cling,” and applies these principles of slow pacing to his own writing style, consistently interrupting the forward march of narrative to notice affective fragments of the past still clinging to the present.

Chapter Three, “Heat Wave,” moves from the front lines to the home-front. While shock and distraction have long dominated the study of urban modernism, my reading of Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway (1925) shifts the focus to absorption. City dwellers absorb – and
are absorbed by – the city’s immersive environment. Furthermore, I suggest, the shock absorbing capacities one tends to associate with the psyche play out at the level of atmosphere: the city as a collective has absorbed the shocking blows of the recent past, becoming a kind of affective repository for history. It is no accident that the novel takes place on a summer day in which London is overwhelmed by a heat wave. On this day, there is no downpour, clouds are not bursting in the sky like bombs. Rather, the heat wave is slow moving, enervating, sluggish. It blankets the entire city rather than striking individual targets. I suggest that, while atmosphere often goes unnoticed, it becomes perceptible in moments of what I call “gentle turbulence” rather than “culture shock.” Throughout the chapter, I argue that absorptive processes are not just central to the novel’s historical thematics but in fact drive Woolf’s formal innovation. Woolf’s particular brand of free indirect discourse allows the narrator to simultaneously absorb and be absorbed by the novel’s extensive cast of characters. It is a narrative strategy that avoids shock, embracing gentle turbulence instead.

Chapter Four, “Snow and Wind,” begins by moving from London’s heat wave to the freezing cold snow of Dublin in “The Dead” (1914). In my reading of Dubliners’ final story, I argue that Gabriel is affectively tone deaf because he fails to recognize the precise distinction between decoding and attunement intuited by Marlow in Heart of Darkness. While decoding seeks to master its objects and to reduce distance, attunement facilitates intimacy not in spite of but because of difference. Gabriel’s attempt to read his wife’s mind and to “master” her mood is therefore misguided on two levels: it fails to preserve the distance necessary for attunement, and it centers on the problem of private minds while the real issue at stake is public moods. The character’s romantic fantasies about the snow similarly rely upon the assumption that environment can be controlled and molded by the human imagination. The famous epiphany featured in the story’s finale is not a vision but an act of auditory attunement: Gabriel listens to and is chilled by a snowstorm that cannot be coaxed into a human frame of reference. While such a nonhuman environment cannot be mastered, it can be moving, in both physical and affective senses of the word. “The Dead” leaves us with the sense that, despite common associations, snow is not frozen or fixed but slowly moving. Ulysses (1922) zeroes in on the way that air moves in its treatment of wind, with characters paradoxically locating a breath of fresh air in the emanations of dead bodies. Leopold Bloom is a kind of anti-Gabriel, forever attuned to the complex entanglement of bodies and environments: breath transforms into wind, stinking bodily emissions mingle with urban pollution, living subjects inhale and swallow air emanated from the dead, gas inside leaks out. Throughout, Joyce embraces disgust, thereby inverting an affective state that is conventionally all about the policing of borders. While Bloom and Stephen seem to be polar opposites, I argue that their respective concerns with disgust and inspiration point to a principle of underlying unity rather than dichotomy, for disgust and inspiration operate according to similar respiratory processes. I suggest that the structure and rhythms of breathing inform the text’s interest in the way that moving air troubles barriers without completely abolishing them: like Conrad, Joyce dismantles hard boundaries without dissolving everything and everybody into one atmospheric blur.

Chapter Five, “Clouds,” foregrounds the tension between spatial climate and temporal weather patterns that has been implicit throughout my study. The first section of Woolf’s To The Lighthouse (1927) begins with a forecast and conforms to the short-term
scale of weather’s day to day fluctuations. Weather should be something that one can perceive empirically – as opposed to climate, which is invisible and abstract – but here I show that the displacements engendered by forecasting make even the weather out of reach for first-hand observation. Drawing extensively on the history of meteorology, I show that characters’ attempts to forecast the weather run up against the precise limitations that were simultaneously motivating an early twentieth-century shift in the atmospheric sciences from individual observation to large-scale physical and theoretical modeling. Thus, while the novel has traditionally been read as nostalgic, I call attention to an affective atmosphere of anxious foreboding. Woolf’s second section, “Time Passes,” expands temporal and spatial scales in order to register gradual climate changes that cannot be perceived empirically as well as the slow violence of “weathering,” a phenomenon which I suggest brings weather and climate together. The novel’s third section, “The Lighthouse,” serves as a kind of bookend corresponding to the first section – but now, forecasting the weather has become remembering the atmosphere. Thus, I argue, Woolf depicts the displacements that distinguish modern weather forecasting at the level of the text’s own structure, which consistently expels characters and readers alike from the present moment and from a human frame of reference.

My afterword, “A slow, dripping loss: Time Passes, Climate Changes,” suggests that today’s debates over climate change center on many of the problems engaged by my dissertation, particularly issues surrounding atmosphere as a shared habitat, legible object, and invisible phenomenon. The striking and well-documented contrast between apathy in the face of climate change and rapid mobilization in response to discrete catastrophic events reflects the precise tension I study: shock, rupture, and immediate first-person experience on the one hand; ongoing, diffuse, impersonal atmospheres on the other. I surmise that World War II temporarily returned focus to the shock of weather (as anticipated by To The Lighthouse) and I make a case for the value of rediscovering the ways in which twentieth-century writers and thinkers grappled with their own problems of climate and atmosphere.
The Age of Atmosphere: Air, Affect, and Technology in Modernist Literature

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments iii

Introduction, Atmospheric Modernism

I. Arriving At Atmosphere 1
II. Affect: Public Moods 9
III. Aesthetics: Aura, Ambience, Tone 11
IV. Technology: Climate Control(s) 14
V. Meteorology: The Weather in Literature 18
VI. Atmospheric Temporality and Slow Violence 20
VII. Atmosphere and Environment in Interdisciplinary Context 22
VIII. Chapter Overview 25

Chapter One, “Fog”
Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1899); “The Tale” (1917)

I. “Enveloping the tale”: Fog, Frames, and Global Atmosphere 29
II. “As if the mist itself had screamed”: Affective Attunement 39
III. “An atmosphere of murderous complicity”: Readerly Attunement 45

Chapter Two, “Poison Gas”
Edmund Blunden’s Undertones of War (1924; 1928)
Siegfried Sassoon’s Memoirs of an Infantry Officer (1930)

I. “There’s something in the air”: The Great War In and On the Air 54
II. “A sort of slow poison”: Pastoral Nooks and Atmospheric Pockets 65

Chapter Three, “Heat Wave”
Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway (1925); “On Being Ill” (1926)

I. “An absorbing book”: From Shock to Absorption 78
II. “Fear no more the heat of the sun”: From Psyche to Atmosphere 89
III. “No scene, no snap”: From Culture Shock to Gentle Turbulence 98
Chapter Four, “Snow and Wind”  
James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914); *Ulysses* (1922)

I. “It’s the weather”: Snow, Sound, and Public Moods.........................105  
II. “Dead breaths I living breathe”: Wind, Respiration, and Inspiring Disgust.118

Chapter Five, “Clouds”  

I. “Vast clouds over this tiny world”: Forecasting the Weather................134  
II. “Arrow-like stillness”: Climate as Slow Violence..............................146  
III. “There must have been a shadow”: Remembering the Weather...........156

Afterword, “Slow, dripping loss”: Time passes, climate changes...............161

Works Cited.................................................................................................163
Acknowledgments

I will be forever grateful for the wisdom, guidance, and support of Professor Elizabeth Abel. She has gone above and beyond for me and for this project. If graduate school has certain “moments of being,” where everything becomes clearer and sharper, for many of us those experiences took place in conversation with Elizabeth Abel. In addition to pushing me to arrive at new insights I would not have thought possible, Professor Abel also set up a working group among her advisees, and I would like to thank my extraordinary colleagues from this group: Ireen Yoon, Jocelyn Rodal, Michelle Ty, Erin Greer, Rasheed Tazuden, and Gina Patnaik.

Some of my fondest memories of graduate school will involve time spent discussing my ideas with Professor Dan Blanton on the fourth floor of Wheeler Hall. Professor Blanton always had an incredible way of seeing that one thing I missed, connecting those threads I had struggled to weave together, and envisioning how an offhand comment could form the basis of a chapter. When I chatted about how strange the “absolutely absorbing” passage in Mrs. Dalloway seemed to me, Professor Blanton told me to go with it - and that hunch is now Chapter Three.

Professor James Vernon was a model of what interdisciplinary collaboration should look like. His thoughtful contributions from a historian’s perspective have been invaluable, and it was Professor Vernon who first helped me to see that what was once a smaller argument about shock in one text was in fact at the heart of the project as a whole.

I owe a debt of gratitude to all of the faculty and staff I have worked with in the Berkeley English Department. In particular, I would like to thank Jeff Knapp and Dori Hale for ongoing support and especially for giving me the confidence I needed as a first-year graduate student.

My partner, Erica Doudna, brightened even the longest days spent in the library and made the 26th mile of my Dissertation Marathon seem within reach. I could not have finished the project without her love, support, lasagna, sushi, or breakfast tacos. I know how lucky I am.

My parents, Jeffrey Abramson and Jacqueline Jones, are the best examples of what true passion and dedication in scholarship can look like, and I am deeply grateful for all of the opportunities they have given me, for making so much possible. I would also like to thank my other trusted advisors and best friends, Henry Halloran, Amelia Halloran, Steve Halloran, and Sarah Jones Abramson.

All of my grandparents contributed to my love for education. I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my grandmother Rose Abramson, and to the memory of my grandmother Sylvia Jones, for my grandmothers in particular instilled a deep love of storytelling in me. At 97, Rose Abramson has just recorded her stories - Bubbemeises: Stories my Mother Told Me - and she continues to be the most riveting and fabulous storyteller I know. Sylvia Jones was the proudest English major I have ever met, and she made me proud to be one, too. Included below is a poem she wrote during World War II; its resonance with my own project will be clear.

“For a Gunner”
Lord, Thy Glory fills the Heaven—
Will he ever find you there,
In his plan on war-bent mission
Speeding death bombs through the air?

What have You to do with bombers,
Lord, the God of peace and love?
Will you speed him on his journey?
Guide, protect him from above?

Lord, he doesn’t like the killing;
His was not the choice to fight...
It’s so hard to feel Your mercy
In the tense blackout of night.

Lord, Thy Glory fills the Heaven—
Let him glimpse You there on high;
Calm his fear and hate and turmoil
In the vast peace of Your sky.

- Sylvia Jones, circa 1944
Introduction: Atmospheric Modernism

I. Arriving at Atmosphere

*But the air! If you stopped to notice, was the air always like this?*
– Katherine Mansfield, “The Garden Party” (1922)

*This then has been going on all the time without our knowing it! — this incessant making up of shapes and casting them down, this buffeting of clouds together... The fact seems to call for comment and indeed for censure. Some one should write to The Times about it. Use should be made of it.*
- Virginia Woolf, “On Being Ill” (1926)

...The modernist sky is always falling. Virginia Woolf’s narrator takes off in the newly invented airplane and marvels, “it is true that the earth fell, but what was stranger was the downfall of the sky” ("Flying Over London" 203). Joseph Conrad’s Marlow sets sail “under a sky low enough to touch with the hand” (“Youth” 8) and James Joyce’s Gabriel traverses the dimly lit streets of Dublin, reflecting that “the sky seemed to be descending” ("The Dead" 212). The War writers feel it too: Siegfried Sassoon stumbles through No Man’s Land beneath a “low-clouded sky” (Memoirs of an Infantry Officer 163) while Edmund Blunden’s speaker notes simply, “the sky is gone” ("Preparations for Victory" 199).

Observations concerning the sky’s downfall cut across critical commentary on both high modernism and World War One literature. Paul Fussell famously argued that the Great War overturned romantic images of sky, sunset, and sunrise. While Fussell suggests that the grit of war brought the sky’s lofty symbolic connotations crashing down to Earth, Steven Connor asserts that twentieth-century airplane and radio technologies quite literally launched terrestrial beings into the sky: “the modernist haze is the loss of the sky... or at least, the loss of its distance”(192). My own project begins with the conviction that we need a richer vocabulary and more robust set of conceptual tools for theorizing the modernist preoccupation with air as an all-encompassing environment rather than perceptual object or image. The existing comparison to impressionism, a largely visual aesthetic equipped to render fleeting effects of light and shadow, is hardly adequate when the sky is not above but all around, when the sense of an enveloping medium is invisible or multisensory, and when the line between subject and object has been blurred beyond recognition. Woolf suggests that the mind receives “myriad..."

---

1 See Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975): “In the trenches, one is aware only of undifferentiated earth and sky above” (51).
impressions…from all sides they come” (“Modern Fiction” 9); Edmund Blunden reports that “on all sides at once a barrage began” (Undertones of War 152); Conrad’s Marlow is assaulted by a mournful uproar “from all sides at once” (Heart of Darkness 39).

If sky is not an adequate term for the modernist relationship to the air, how about something more immersive, like the weather, with its capacity to buffet the body from all directions? Indeed, this study will survey a range of meteorological conditions – fog, wind, snow, heat waves, and clouds all make appearances in the pages that follow. An existing body of research provides some fascinating accounts of famous weather events in literature: the storm in King Lear or the downpour in Pride and Prejudice, for example.2 My focus is slightly different: rather than attending to weather events, I am interested in meteorological conditions that prove quite uneventful. For a literary period long associated with the accelerated pace of modern life, modernist weather is surprisingly slow and sluggish. Conrad’s fog creeps across boundaries; Joyce’s snow falls gently, Woolf’s heat wave exhausts with its enervating intensity, and her clouds gather ominously but do not burst. These texts hover around the edges of weather events, in the clouds that gather before a downpour and in the dark shadows that linger after the storm has subsided. Most readers of Howards End will remember the novel’s famous umbrella – few will remember rain falling. The weather creeps in or it sneaks out. Modernism never seems to be in the eye of the storm.

If weather does not quite capture the modernist relationship to the air, perhaps we need to think in terms of something slower and less readily available to empirical perception, something like climate. Just as the multisensory assault of weather productively challenges the visual bias of literary impressionism, recognition of a climatic modernism addresses the limitations of impressionism’s inherently compressed temporal register. While impressionist painters sought to render the fleeting contingency of changing atmospheric conditions – a cloud passing here, mist obscuring the view there – modernist writers were every bit as interested in long-term climatic effects that strain or defy human perceptual capacities. Weather assaults the body from all sides at once, but climate is abstract, eluding empirical protocols. The challenge of capturing a cloud’s shifting shape as it passes fleetingly overhead is an altogether different task from rendering a decade-long process of weathering, as Woolf does in the “Time Passes” section of To The Lighthouse.

Still, climate does not quite capture the affective, aesthetic, and technological inflections that distinguish literary works of the early twentieth century. If climate in a strictly literal sense is not sufficient, we need to think also in terms of public moods, aesthetic ambiance or aura, and technologically mediated environments. Rather than

2 I will elaborate on this body of research below in the section “Meteorology: The Weather in Literature,” and throughout my chapters. The most comprehensive study of the weather in literature relevant to this dissertation is Alexandra Harris’ Weatherland: Artists and Writers Under British Skies (2015). In referencing weather events, I also have in mind Kathryn Schulz’ “Ten Best Weather Events in Fiction” piece in the New Yorker (November 2015), which includes events such as the storm in Bronte’s Wuthering Heights and the hurricane in Hurston’s Theirs Eyes were Watching God. In Chapter Four, “Snow and Wind,” I reference and comment on the British modernist weather events that are also included in that piece.
merely pointing to the figurative resonance between these concepts, I intend to scrutinize the dynamic interactions among them. For example, while modern technology’s intrusion upon the air is notorious when it comes to pollution, it is less well known that the air of early twentieth-century London was cleaner and clearer than the thick polluted fog made famous by Dickens, thanks to a series of major sanitation reforms and public health campaigns.\(^3\) I link this comparable level of air purity to a surge of writerly interest in invisible climates such as the mood in the city’s air or the aura of an artwork. I also investigate twentieth-century “climate control”\(^4\) as a process that spans the realms of technology, aesthetics, and affect. For example, the hostesses of parties in Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, Katherine Mansfield’s “The Garden Party” and Joyce’s “The Dead” all aim to cultivate an aesthetically pleasing ambiance: they regard a successful party as, not unlike the weather, an uneventful one. This privileging of the uneventful, rather than the event, confirms much of what we already know about modernism’s formal commitments. In fact, some of the most famous modernist self‐definitions invoke aura as an alternative to conventions of linear narrative:

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged: life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end (Woolf, “Modern Fiction” 9).

[T]he meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine (Conrad, Heart of Darkness 5).

Here, Woolf and Conrad are reaching for something less fixed and rigid than narrative conventions generally permit. The search for that elusive “something more,” in excess of the text itself, aligns with conceptions of “aura,” a kind of emanation or breeze.\(^5\) As I will

---


4 I am following the lead of several scholars who have used the phrase “climate control” not just in the narrow sense of air conditioning but as a broad articulation of the many ways that modern technology and climate interact. See Peter Sloterdijk, Terror from the Air (2009); Stephen Kern, The Culture of Time and Space (2003); Bruno Latour, “Atmosphère, Atmosphère” (2003).

5 The OED provides the following etymology for aura: “Latin, < Greek αὔρα breath, breeze” and definitions include 1a. A gentle breeze, zephyr and 2a. a. A subtle emanation or exhalation from any substance, e.g. the aroma of blood, the odour of flowers, etc. Psychiatrist and phenomenologist Hubertus Tellenbach writes that “this something-more…we can call atmosphere” (qtd in Griffiero 5). In Aesthetic Theory, Adorno suggests that an artwork’s auratic atmosphere emerges from those elements which “point beyond themselves,” alerting us to “the presence of the plus” (386; 117). Architect Mark Wigley describes the “edges of buildings glowing or surrounded by a kind of haze that blurs the edges of the object, merging it with the atmosphere” (19).
argue in my first chapter, however, these hallmark modernist halos represent more than a vague and elusive haze. Far from dissolving form altogether, the halo confers the form of a sphere, and this enveloping shape offers an alternative to what Woolf elsewhere calls “the formal railway line of the sentence” (qtd. in Bell 106). I will show that, in their well-known efforts to dispel with the sequential, event-based form of the realist novel, modernist writers seized upon a new spherical literary form, conceived in terms of both the aura’s emanating excess and ambience’s enveloping structure.

It is the potential for synthesis among these elements – weather, climate, technology, affect, ambiance, spherical form – that leads me to atmosphere. This conceptual integration, rather than a mere quibble with vocabulary, motivates my project. Alternatively, I could have framed this study in the terms of “environment” or “climate” and made a similar case for rescaling modernism along both spatial and temporal axes. Rather than emphasizing psychological interiority, I demonstrate the centrality of vast transpersonal and environmental phenomena; and instead of following the traditional narrative of shock and rupture, I examine gradual climatic fluctuations that unfold too slowly, or are too abstract, for any one person to register directly.

Of course, atmosphere provides an efficient shorthand for uniting the constellation of concepts I wish to explore; it also has the benefit of preserving the formal significance of a spherical shape in its etymological origins from the Greek, sphere of vapor. Therefore, while there will be instances in this discussion where the terms clearly matter - for example, when I want to drive home the relationship between meteorological and affective atmospheres – there will be other times where I use atmosphere, environment, and climate more or less interchangeably, in accordance with everyday usage.

This project is committed to taking seriously the multiple meanings and colloquial uses of the term atmosphere. Throughout, I examine both points of convergence and divergence between atmosphere in its various senses – meteorological, affective, aesthetic. Scholarship on atmosphere has been booming in recent years, yet many projects take it for granted that different forms of atmosphere can be detached from one another. For example, Alexandra Harris’ Weatherland: British Writers and Artists Under British Skies (2016) and Christine L. Corton’s London Fog: The Biography (2015), both excellent treatments of the literal weather in British literature, rarely touch upon atmosphere in its affective sense. Conversely, treatments of affective and aesthetic atmospheres tend to exclude meteorology. Tim Ingold, whose work stands out as one notable exception, has similarly noticed that “so far as the philosophers [of aesthetics] are concerned, this atmosphere may as well be airless” (“Lighting” 164) and that some of the most influential studies of aesthetic atmosphere “make no mention of the weather at all” (“Atmosphere” 80). While there are certainly benefits to a focused approach, I believe that narrow treatments have also obscured the fascinating interconnections that are constitutive of atmosphere.

---

6 *OED*, “atmosphere”: Etymology: < modern Latin *atmosphaera*, < Greek *ἀτμός* vapour + *σφαῖρα* ball, sphere.
This commitment to taking a comprehensive look at atmosphere aligns my work with that of theorists who have stressed the shared structural and spatial underpinnings of meteorological and affective atmospheres. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that a mood is not “psychical in the first instance, and is not itself an inner condition” but rather “a mood assails us” (229). Taking up Heidegger’s approach, Jonathan Flatley explicitly draws out the structural comparison to weather: “inasmuch as moods are an atmosphere, a kind of weather, they are not ‘psychological’, located in some interior space we can reach by introspection or self-examination. Moods are not in us; we are in them” (22). This core structural similarity – both moods and the weather constitute *public, habitable* environments – means that the terms’ frequent association in figurative language should not be readily dismissed as “only” metaphorical. In other words, it is not that the weather outside mirrors a psychic state on the inside, at the level of content; rather, affective and meteorological atmospheres are both outside, sharing the form of a spatial envelope. It is also not the case that different kinds of atmosphere are simply *like* each other; they actively interact *with* each other. In fact, I hope to show that it is in these atmospheric convergence zones that historical variability often becomes most readily apparent.

From the outset, I should stress that atmosphere – in any sense of the word - is by no means unique to modernism, or indeed, to any literary historical period. There are, however, some historically particular intersections between different types of atmosphere. Poison gas furnishes a particularly compelling illustration of the historically coded links between meteorological, affective, and technological atmospheres. On one level, lethal gas contaminated the literal air. However, the story is not so simple as a “technological atmosphere” usurping a “meteorological” one. For even as the environment came under new forms of control, technology itself remained at the mercy of the environment: poison gas was only effective provided that weather conditions and wind direction were favorable, and military commanders were routinely compelled to delay gas attacks in response to weather forecasts. Rather than simply asserting technology’s dominance over the natural world, I suggest that twentieth-century weather is also notable for its resistance to technological manipulation even as other aspects of daily life in the early twentieth century became increasingly mechanized and standardized. What’s more, in addition to spanning the realms of technological and meteorological atmospheres, poison gas inevitably also constitutes an affective atmosphere. While poison gas produced fewer fatalities than other weapons, it was devastating and unprecedented due to the extent of its ravaging assault on morale.

Scholars often dismiss any possible connection between meteorological and affective atmospheres because there is such trepidation about committing the pathetic

---

7 The phenomenon of “blow back” similarly demonstrates the capacity of the wind to act as an autonomous agent, delivering lethal blows in what amounts to a sort of aerial friendly fire. In *A History of Chemical Warfare*, Coleman writes that “the Germans waited a month for a favorable wind before launching their first gas attack on Ypres” (24).

8 Morale figured into both offensive and defensive strategizing. Coleman points out that the British cabinet first approved the use of chemical agents when it was reported that a “lack of offensive gas capability would seriously impair the morale of [troops]” (21)
fallacy or slipping into embarrassingly clichéd language. While most are comfortable with the idea that the weather affects mood, the notion that the weather could have anything to do with moods in the opposite direction seems to represent the worst kind of egoistic projection. The aversion to weather is particularly strong in the case of literary theorists, as Kathryn Schulz argues in a 2015 *New Yorker* piece:

As literary subjects go, weather has a terrible reputation. More precisely, it has two terrible reputations that do not get along. On the one hand, weather is widely regarded as the most banal topic in the world—in print as in conversation, the one we resort to when we have nothing else to say. On the other hand, it stands perpetually accused of melodrama. “It was a dark and stormy night,” begins Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s 1830 novel “Paul Clifford,” which goes on to invoke torrential rain, gusting wind, guttering lamplight, and rattling rooftops: weather as plot, setting, star, and supporting cast of what is, by broad consensus, the worst sentence in the history of English literature. (“Writers in the Storm”)

The idea that moods and the weather share some kind of magical sympathy is probably worth avoiding. And there really is something just too easy, too obvious, about setting a scene on a dark and stormy night. The problem is that avoiding that one kind of weather-mood encounter has foreclosed the opportunity to examine very different, very intriguing points of contact between meteorological and affective atmospheres. The literal air can respond to affect in ways that have nothing to do with sympathy or projection or personification. For example, Tim Ingold points out that, at a party, the dynamic air flow produced by a group of people chattering will actually make a balloon move, illustrating “the coming together of people and things… because of their common immersion in the medium. In short, to transcend the opposition between meteorological and affective we need to refill the atmosphere with the material stuff of air. (“Atmosphere” 81).

If we automatically dismiss the idea that weather has any intimacy with human moods, we also miss productive opportunities to understand precisely how and where these cleavages emerge. Indeed modernists are particularly intrigued by those instances where atmospheres fail to align. While Conrad’s Marlow connects the “brooding” atmosphere of the Thames to the brooding air of the Congo (*Heart of Darkness* 3; 34; 61), Joyce’s Gabriel seems entirely unmoved by the “gloom of the hall” (“The Dead” 210) and the “dull yellow light brood[ing]” (212), urging partygoers not to “brood” (204) on sad memories and promising to prevent “gloom” (204) from seeping into his speech.

To posit a relationship between atmospheres is not necessarily to suggest that they are identical or even harmonious. In fact, most atmospheric convergence zones involve considerable turbulence, and mirror images are much less common than points of partial overlap. Even in the case of the entanglement between technological and affective atmospheres (poison gas and morale), the connection is not one of straightforward equivalence. To the contrary, military strategists count on affective responses being wildly out of proportion with technology’s physical impact. In a discussion of aerial bombardment, Peter Adey notes a “scalar upshift of explosive material and affective energy…The material and morale effects of an air attack could be out of all proportion to their instigator” (*Aerial Life* 161). By its very nature, he argues, mass panic amplifies and
“propagates” the original sense of physical danger, resulting in a kind of rippling affective energy across a population.

My rescaling project aims to do more than add atmosphere to a long list of represented subjects that modernists found interesting, perplexing, or problematic. I want to suggest more fundamentally that atmosphere is inextricable from the representational practices employed in the course of modernist experimentation. I argue that, contrary to critical commonplace, it was not literary impressionism or indeed any sort of painterly aesthetic which contributed most directly to modernism's construction of atmosphere. Modernist rendering of atmosphere was actually taking place within and through the experiments with literary form we are familiar with, but do not tend to associate with atmosphere: experiments with narrative framing, free indirect discourse, unreliable narration, reversals of background and foreground, and the temporal displacements engendered by flashbacks and forecasts. Writing about James Joyce, W.B. Yeats implicitly links formal innovation not only to the construction of atmosphere but also to the emergence of a new kind of narrative altogether:

I think that [Joyce’s] book of short stories Dubliners has the promise of a great novelist and a great novelist of a new kind. There is not enough foreground, it is all atmosphere perhaps, but I look upon that as a sign of an original study of life. I have read in a paper called The Egoist certain chapters of a new novel, a disguised autobiography, which increases my conviction that he is the most remarkable new talent in Ireland today (qtd. in Ellman 391).

In arguing for an atmospheric rescaling of modernism, I aim to intervene simultaneously at the levels of content and form. For example, by positing a deep modernist preoccupation with long-term absorption rather than sudden shock, I shift attention away from the subject of fast-paced urban technologies, but I also redirect attention away from shock and fragmentation as formal techniques, instead calling attention (as I do in chapter three) to free indirect discourse as an absorptive form essential to the construction of atmosphere.

While modernism's preoccupation with atmosphere certainly spans all of its generic forms, the formal construction of atmosphere posited here is most salient in narrative. For example, Siegfried Sassoon’s war poems are known to be shocking both thematically and formally; readers learn to recognize the signature "punch" at the end of his poems. Yet when Sassoon wanted to render the war's atmosphere, rather than its shock, he turned to narrative. "I realize the difficulty of recapturing war-time atmosphere as it was in England then", he writes in the semi-autobiographical Memoirs of an Infantry Officer (1930), "[a] war historian would inform us that the 'earlier excitement and suspense had abated'...I want to recover something more intimate than that"(96-97). On the one hand, Sassoon's use of atmosphere aligns with what we might expect: it is something intimate yet elusive, palpable yet invisible, resistant to conventions of historical periodization. On the other hand, one might expect that rejecting strict linear sequence and plot-centric conventions of "excitement and suspense" would amount to a rejection of narrative form altogether. But of course, this is precisely what modernist novelists were seeking to invent: a form that does not adhere to strict chronology, is not sensational and suspenseful, bypasses the event in favor of the uneventful - yet remains a
form of narrative nonetheless. The slow-moving, invisibly unfolding nature of atmosphere demands a form equipped to render the gradual progression of time, no matter how distorted or nonlinear. All of the works I study experiment with time, but none dispenses with the forward-movement of time altogether. Indeed I will show that many of these writers grapple with the question of whether there can be any representation of climate without climate changes.

If atmosphere emerges most noticeably in the context of climate change, it makes sense to look at a transitional moment in literary history. It is precisely in the gap between narrative as we expect it and narrative as modernists reinvent it that atmosphere can be found: when plot breaks down, when one narrator usurps another, when frames do not work as they used to, in a moment of unsettling defamiliarization or abstraction. In other words, atmosphere becomes perceptible under certain conditions, and modernist experimentation constitutes particularly favorable conditions. In my readings of novels, I show that while atmosphere tends to be a transparent and overlooked fact of the background, fictional characters do become attuned to it in moments of collision, intersection, foreign exposure, and border crossings. On a larger level, the experimental “make it new” mentality of turn-of-the-century literature represents a similar kind of turbulence.

Thus the impression that modernism is “atmospheric” has surprisingly little to do with the rendering of sunsets or the impressionist setting of scenes. One of my related claims is that we need to rethink modernism as a kind of environmental literature. By “environmental literature,” I don't just mean involving the depiction of natural and meteorological atmospheres – though that is certainly part of it – I mean that narrative itself tends to be understood as an event literature, and part of what modernism did on a formal level was to turn it into an environmental literature.

In foregrounding the distinction between environment and event, I owe a conceptual debt to the work of Lauren Berlant, whose claim that an event is both affective and generic reinforces the idea that an argument about modernism as uneventful or environmental is an assertion about both feeling and about form. Berlant writes of the need to consider “processes that have not yet found their genre of event” (4) and coins the phrase “crisis ordinary” (9) to refer to systemic, ongoing, low-grade crisis; survival “in the present of an ordinary collective life suffused with a historic and historical crisis” (59). In recent years, scholars have made powerful cases for attending to experiences that do not constitute crystallized events, as well as to emotions that seem small, unimportant, or unsensational.9 In what follows I take up Berlant’s challenge to distinguish

9 “Rather than the rage, terror, grief, exhilaration, and shame that have been the subject of critical readings,” writes Elizabeth Abel, “I focus on those feelings that function beneath the threshold of conscious recognition and semantic legibility, those inarticulate, subliminal sensations that now go under the label of affect and that operate across the boundaries between mind and body, action and passion, self and other (“Affective” 37). Sianne Ngai looks at “moods like irritation and anxiety [which are] defined by a flatness or ongoingness entirely opposed to the “suddenness” on which Aristotle’s aesthetics of fear depends (7)
environments from events, “to enter experience without eventilizing it…knowing something is afoot without forcing prediction into being” (70).

II. Affect: Public Moods

*It is always an adventure to enter a new room; for the lives and characters of its owners have distilled their atmosphere into it, and directly we enter it we breast some new wave of emotion. Here, without a doubt, in the stationer’s shop people had been quarreling. Their anger shot through the air.*

– Virginia Woolf, “Street Haunting” (186)

Moods are expansive; they fill not just minds but entire rooms. In the above passage, the affective remnants of an argument infuse the room’s collective atmosphere. Changes in the state of matter are clearly at play here, with solid bodies and minds “distilling” into the shared atmosphere. Likening atmosphere to water, Woolf calls attention to air as an immersive medium – “some new wave of emotion” – and situates anger as a physical force in motion, something public which “shot through the air”. Notice that what the observer witnesses is not an event - we are explicitly told that she missed the actual argument - but rather an environment. When I speak of moods “in the air,” or affect in opposition to individuated emotion, this is the kind of scene that I have in mind.

“Affect theory” is a rather large umbrella encompassing a variety of traditions and theoretical orientations, and scholars differ when it comes to the extent of their concern with distinguishing among the concepts of emotion, mood, feeling, and affect. Many contemporary affect theorists are now looking back to Spinoza’s understanding of affect. In his “Notes on the Translation” to Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, Brian Massumi defines

**Affect/Affection:** Neither word denotes a personal feeling (*sentiment in Deleuze and Guattari*). *L’affect* (Spinoza’s *affectus*) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act. *L’affection* (Spinoza’s *affectio*) is each state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body (with body taken in its broadest sense to include ‘mental’ or ideal bodies) (xvi).

For me, the essential thing about affect is this idea that it is a force out there in the world rather than a strictly psychic state. The fact that affect can be pre-linguistic and pre-semantic, eschewing the taxonomies of discretely classified emotions, is another distinguishing feature I recognize, but I do not restrict my study to this type of “asignifying intensity” (Massumi “Autonomy” 102). While I certainly discuss affective energies that resist signification, I also devote considerable attention to emotions that we can find some good-enough way of collectively recognizing and communicating about, such as Conrad’s “mournful gloom” (*Heart of Darkness* 3). Therefore, for the purposes of this discussion, the most critical distinction between emotion and affect is not semantic or linguistic, but spatial and scalar: affect circulates outside the boundaries of an
individual subject. The crucial distinction between mood and emotion is temporal: speaking in the most general terms, emotion tends to signal a more discrete event or response to a stimulus, while moods are often free-floating, long-lasting background conditions. I liken this difference in temporal registers to that which distinguishes weather from climate.

I find the phrase “affective atmosphere” particularly helpful because it calls attention to affect as something public and habitable. But what does it really mean to say that a room has a mood of its own, or even that a mood is like a room of its own? Scholars who invoke such language often mean very different things. Hubert C. Dreyfus suggests that “[t]he mood in a room depends on a group of people sharing the mood, while the mood of a room, say, tranquil, energizing or oppressive, is there even if no one is in the room” (33). A reverential tower or a solemn church has more to do with formal features of design than the subjectivities of dwellers who might or might not be in that space, he explains. Architects are primarily concerned with the mood of a room and the attendant question of how mood can be built into structures and spaces. “Politicians, preachers, and masters of ceremonies understand and manipulate the mood in the room,” Dreyfus writes, but architects “produce the mood of the room itself.” (24)

For Teresa Brennan, moods are public because they are always being passed between subjects and among groups. In The Transmission of Affect (2004), Brennan argues that the notion of a self-contained subject is an entirely modern, Western construction and that affect is not something that begins internally but is rather “a process that is social in origin but biological and physical in effect” (3). Brennan’s proposed model of circulating affect suggests something like emotional contagion, but her theory extends well beyond models of sympathy and mimetic self-identification. Rather than two people sharing the same emotion, one person’s anger becomes another’s depression; or, Brennan explains, one might become the affective repository for the “dumping” of another subject’s unwanted affects. An understanding of affect as energy is crucial to Brennan’s model: “[t]his is why they can enhance or deplete” (6). Sarah Ahmed similarly stresses “the very public nature of emotions, and the emotive nature of publics” (14), but distinguishes her model even more sharply from emotional contagion, suggesting that “shared feelings are not about feeling the same feeling...it is objects of emotion that circulate, rather than the emotion as such” (10-11). In Ahmed’s understanding, “feelings do not belong or even originate with an ‘I’” (208), yet this does not mean that they are free-floating either. Rather, emotions “stick” with sometimes serious ethical and political consequences:

[O]nce someone or something is agreed to be the cause of tension, then shared feelings are directed toward that cause. Something ‘out there’ which is sensed and real, but also intangible, is made tangible...it is then as if fear originates with the arrival of others whose bodies become containers of our fear. Given that containers spill, fear becomes the management of crisis. (227)

---

10 See Ben Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres.”
For other theorists, moods are public because they structure not only shared space but also shared time. Affect offers a powerful alternative to the more temporally rigid conventions of historical periodization that usually dominate conceptions of what it means to inhabit a common historical moment. Raymond Williams coined the phrase “structures of feeling” to indicate the lived experience of history as “forming and formative processes” rather than “formed wholes” (128). Lauren Berlant similarly argues that “the present is perceived, first, affectively: the present is what makes itself present to us before it becomes anything else, such as an orchestrated collective event or an epoch on which we can look back” (4). Kathleen Stewart suggests that far from always crystallizing into a concrete, fully formed experience, affects “sometimes and for some people hang together to produce a felt, or half felt, or barely felt sense of something happening” (“Attunement” 449). One of my goals here is to give “something happening” the attention it deserves. Studying atmosphere requires the patience to refrain from automatically stamping a label on an experience or description simply because “vagueness” has such negative connotations in academic discourse. As Tonino Griffiero puts it, “[w]hy on earth, in fact, should solid and contoured bodies be more real than vague entities?” (10).

III. Aesthetics: Aura, Ambience, Tone

Fiction – if it at all aspires to be art – appeals to temperament. And in truth it must be, like painting, like music, like all art, the appeal of one temperament to all the other innumerable temperaments whose subtle and resistless power endows passing events with their true meaning, and creates the moral, the emotional atmosphere of the place and time.
– Joseph Conrad (“Preface” 120)

I have tried to make it anything rather than encyclopedic, topographical, or archaeological. To use a phrase of literary slang I have tried to ‘get the atmosphere’ of modern London.
– Ford Madox Ford (The Soul of London xi-x)

The thing to do would be to envelop each essay in its own atmosphere...and so shape the book.
– Virginia Woolf (A Writer’s Diary 58-29)

What does it mean to say that a work of art or literary text has a certain atmosphere? Gernot Bohme has been one of the most vocal contemporary philosophers in the field of atmospheric aesthetics. Bohme argues that while atmospheres actually tend to be quite vivid and palpable, their reputation for vagueness arises from ambiguity with respect to their ontological status: do they arise from objects or subjects, the environment itself or the viewer who comes upon the scene? Instead of arguing for one side or the other, Bohme seizes on this “peculiar intermediary status of atmospheres between subject and object” (“Aesthetics” 114). Indeed the idea that atmosphere can involve subjects without being subjective recurs in the work of several prominent theorists.
Bohme argues that we can only do justice to this peculiar intermediary zone by dismantling assumptions about both subjects and objects. On the side of the subject, Bohme critiques the projectionist fallacy that would reduce the sense of a serene valley to no more than a projection of a serene mood in the viewer. This explanation fails to account for instances where we find ourselves “seized,” grasped by an external atmosphere that is actually capable of triggering an unexpected change of mood (119). The experience of a mood is not necessarily an internal psychic state but is often the experience of feeling oneself in the presence of something larger. On the other hand, claiming that atmospheres exist as something real out there in the world does not mean dismissing the subject altogether. Rather, Bohme asserts, we must also revise certain assumptions on the side of the object, particularly “the classical ontology of the thing…a thing is thought of as that which distinguishes it, separates it off from outside and gives it internal unity. In short: the thing is usually conceived in terms of its closure” (120). In classical aesthetics, “primary” qualities are these exclusive, distinguishing aspects; examples include form and extension. Then, there are said to be secondary qualities “which do not belong to the thing except in relation to a subject” (121); these are the kinds of effects an object is capable of exerting. Bohme argues that these secondary radiating qualities – what he calls “the ecstasies of the thing” (121) – should be thought of as inextricable from the identity of an object. In fact, he suggests, the line between primary and secondary aesthetic qualities is already far blurrier than we tend to acknowledge. For example, one could think of blueness as something a cup has, specific to the cup and distinguishing it from other things, or something which “radiates out to the environment of the cup, colouring or ‘tincturing’ in a certain way this environment” (121). With this revised understanding of subject and object, we can step back and understand what it would mean to thoughtfully conceptualize atmosphere as this in-between phenomenon, as

the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived. It is the reality of the perceived as the sphere of its presence and the reality of the perceiver, insofar as in sensing the atmosphere s/he is bodily present in a certain way. The synthetic function of atmosphere is at the same time the legitimation of the particular forms of speech in which an evening is called melancholy or a garden serene. If we consider it more exactly, such a manner of speech is as legitimate as calling a leaf green. A leaf does have the objective property of being green. A leaf equally can only be called green insofar as it shares a reality with a perceiver. Strictly speaking, expressions such as ‘serene’ or ‘green’ refer to this common reality, which can be named either from the side of the object or from the side of

---

11 For many scholars, this capacity of atmosphere to both seize the subject, and to clash with human moods, is one of atmosphere’s most crucial defining characteristics. This is perhaps cited so frequently because such occurrences testify to the external, public, or indeed, “real” nature of atmosphere, complicating efforts to reduce the phenomenon to an individually bounded psychic state. Griffero provides the example of when “sadness is exacerbated by the joy we come across. The intensity of the atmospheric protest is indeed the best proof of the objective effectiveness of the atmospheres we react to” (135).
the perceiver. A valley is thus not called serene because it is in some way [the projection of a] cheerful person but because the atmosphere which it radiates is serene and can put this person into a serene mood (122).

Bohme argues that if we shift our thinking about both subjects and objects, atmosphere emerges at the heart of both aesthetic production and reception. The “old” Kantian aesthetics privileged judgment and criticism, he points out, but a much-needed “new” atmospheric aesthetics would focus on sensuous experience of presence, the way a work radiates out in space. Noting the tendency to regard atmospheres as vague and detached from objects, Bohme insists that we think of them “not as free floating but on the contrary as something that proceeds from and is created by things, persons or their constellations” (122). Atmosphere’s emanating capacity shifts focus from representation to a more direct kind of presentation.

The distinction between representation and presentation is equally critical in Hans Gumbrecht’s Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature (2012). For Gumbrecht, atmosphere provides a way of breaking the stalemate in literary studies between critical camps entrenched along the lines of Deconstruction on the one hand and Cultural Studies on the other. These orientations both privilege the question of reference, predicating their arguments on either an affirmation or rejection of literature’s capacity to make contact with the real world. Gumbrecht points out:

The German word Stimmung (which is very difficult to translate) gives form to the “third position” I would like to advocate…English offers “mood” and “climate.” “Mood” stands for an inner feeling so private it cannot be precisely circumscribed. “Climate,” on the other hand, refers to something objective that surrounds people and exercises a physical influence. Only in German does the word connect with Stimme and stimmen. The first means “voice,” and the second “to tune an instrument”…As the tuning of an instrument suggests, specific moods and atmospheres are experienced on a continuum, like musical scales. (3).

A musical model of atmosphere calls attention to the possibility that literature has a real physical effect on not only the minds but bodies of readers, and that this effect may be irreducible to semantic or linguistic signification. For Gumbrecht, such resistance neither affirms nor rejects the referential capacity of words, but rather bypasses the question of reference as central in the first place: “[a]n ontology of literature that relies on concepts derived from the sphere of Stimmung does not place the paradigm of representation front-and-center. ‘Reading for Stimmung’ always means paying attention to the textual dimension of the forms that envelop us and our bodies as a physical reality” (4-5).

Music has proved particularly valuable for scholars seeking to elaborate the nonrepresentational properties of literary texts. Sianne Ngai, for example, conceptualizes a work’s “feeling tone: its global or organizing affect, its general disposition or orientation toward its audience and the world…[what] makes it possible for critics to
describe a text as, say, ‘euphoric’ or ‘melancholic’” (28). Putting Ngai’s work alongside Dreyfus’ distinction between the mood in the room (linked to subjective content) and the mood of a room (linked to formal features), I aim to distinguish between the moods in a literary text and the more global mood(s) of the text as a whole. In other words, a text might represent a given mood within the world of the story, while leaving readers with the impression of an altogether different mood, one that cannot be strictly identified with a single character, setting, or plot point. In my analysis, scale once again figures as essential to the modernist strategies that go into creating a prevailing textual atmosphere. For example, Ford Madox Ford’s The Good Soldier (1915) famously opens with the line, “[t]his is the saddest story I have ever heard” (13) – then proceeds to tell what is arguably not the saddest story ever heard. The absurdity of Dowell’s assessment lies in its complete lack of affective proportion: “[s]ome one has said that the death of a mouse from cancer is the whole sack of Rome by the Goths, and I swear to you that the breaking up of our little four-square coterie was such another unthinkable event” (14). As a result, while the moods represented in the text are bleak and despondent – “a train of horrors, misery, and despair” (111), “the most horrible gloom” (155) - the mood of the text is humorous and playful, precisely because of the mismatch between the epic scale of a tragic mood and the banal frivolity of the novel’s cast of characters. Therefore, it is not just that Dowell is an unreliable narrator in an epistemological sense; he is also an out of tune narrator, failing to synchronize with the affective atmosphere of his own story. Dowell “hears” the story but does not attune to its atmosphere in the way that Conrad’s Marlow feels the atmosphere on the Thames strike a chord with the atmosphere of the Congo. Therefore, readers of The Good Soldier must not only read between the lines to deduce the “true” story from behind Dowell’s confused narrative but also feel between the lines in order to attune to a mood that is somehow present without ever being explicitly represented.

IV. Technology: Climate Control (s)

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, new technologies drastically altered the relationship between humans and the atmosphere. Poison gas, airplanes, and radio waves made air lethal and palpable in unprecedented ways while innovations in meteorological forecasting transformed the legibility of the sky. Between 1903 and 1906, engineers and architects introduced the first air-conditioned buildings and dew-point

---

12 As Ngai also notes, Mikel Dufrene has a similar theory of a work’s global atmosphere: “a higher principle of unity comes to the aesthetic object from the fact that it is capable of expression, that is, from the fact that it signifies not only by representing but, through that which it represents, by producing in the perceiver a certain impression. Thus the aesthetic object manifests a certain quality which words cannot translate but which communicates itself in arousing a feeling. This quality proper to the work-to the works of a single creator or to a single style-is a world atmosphere. How is it produced? Through the ensemble from which it emanates. (178)

13 For the difference between “hearing” and attuned listening, see Lisbeth Lipari’s Listening, Thinking, Being: Towards and Ethics of Attunement.
systems for controlling humidity, ushering in a new era of climate control. The period also saw a boom in what theorists have called the “aestheticization of atmosphere” (Bohme “Aesthetics” 123) in areas such as advertising, interior design, store layout and product placement, restaurant ambiance, theatrical and cinematic special effects. Rather than focusing on discrete technological innovations or instruments, this dissertation will primarily emphasize technologically structured and mediated environments - especially when the presence of technology is invisible and not localizable to a single site or function. For example, one might study any number of shock absorbing technologies in the modern city: the motor-car is one obvious example that comes to mind. But in my chapters on urban modernism, I primarily focus on the entire metropolitan environment as a shock absorbing technology – environmental rather than instrumental. While many technologies explicitly call attention to themselves, atmospheric technologies tend to be self-effacing. This is particularly true of literal climate control technologies designed to maintain homeostasis and eliminate the intrusive shocks of weather. “[H]ow far could the English in the twentieth century generate the kinds of weather they wanted?”, Alexandra Harris asks in *Weatherland*, summing up the contemporary attitude, “should modern lives be subject to the weather at all?” (332).

The tendency of atmospheric technologies to suppress and erase extends beyond literal forms of climate regulation. The mood lighting in a restaurant, the perfumed smell of a store, the background music at a party: these are all environmental technologies, designed to blend in rather than stand out. Sometimes, particularly after a climate change, atmospheric design becomes momentarily perceptible. In Paris, James Joyce wrote of city dwellers streaming by on the streets, “[t]hey pass in an air of perfumes” (qtd. in Ellman 170). Upon returning from India, *Mrs. Dalloway*’s Peter Walsh notices “there was design, art, everywhere” (71).

While other studies examine explicit representations of atmospheric technologies in works of the period – literary depictions of the radio or the airplane, for example – I tend to focus less on content and more on the subtle ways that such technologies seep into the text. For example, while Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse* makes almost no overt mention of twentieth-century meteorological technologies, I detect its presence in the anxious affective and temporal displacements engendered by the novel’s opening forecast. Following Sara Danius, I look at “the ever closer relationship between the habits of the sensorium and technologies of perception” (23). For example, in Woolf’s earlier *Night and Day* we are told of Ralph, “[a]lthough he was still under thirty, this forecasting habit had marked two semicircular lines above his eyebrows” (19).

---

15 Griffero writes that “the compulsion to design…today affects every place” (79). Sloterdijk notes “the design of breathing environments” in which “[a]ir design aims at directly modifying the mood of airspace users — it serves the indirectly manifest purpose of enticing a space’s passer-by with pleasant, smell-induced impressions of a situation, contributing to a heightened product acceptance and willingness to buy….to bind customers affectively to both the salesroom and the selection (94). Bohme lists “stage sets, advertising, the production of musical atmospheres [acoustical furnishing], cosmetics, interior design – as well, of course, the whole sphere of art proper” (“Aesthetics” 123).
Similarly, I interpret the parties in *Mrs. Dalloway*, ‘The Dead’, and “The Garden Party” as shock absorbing social technologies which resonate with contemporary interest in designing and cultivating environmental ambiance. The first sentence of Mansfield’s 1922 short story establishes a perfectly uneventful meteorological atmosphere: “after all the weather was ideal. They could not have had a more perfect day for a garden-party if they had ordered it. Windless, warm, the sky without a cloud” (38). Yet, from the outset, characters recognize that it is not sufficient merely for the weather to cooperate; aesthetic and affective atmospheres must be cultivated as well. The party’s outdoor garden setting represents not some untouched “natural” environment but rather a work of landscape design: “[t]he gardener had been up since dawn, mowing the lawns and sweeping them, until the grass and dark flat rosettes where the daisy plants had been seemed to shine” (38). The scene is also subject to the kind of careful aesthetic staging that characterizes interior design. A workman suggests “you want to put [the marquee] somewhere where it’ll give you a bang” (39), but Laura replies that his proposed staging will not do because “the band’s going to be in [that] corner” (39). When an alternative placement is offered, the problem is clearly aesthetic rather than logistical: “[a]gainst the karakas. Then the karakas-trees would be hidden. And they were so lovely, with their broad, gleaming leaves” (39). Aesthetic staging, by its very nature, is about concealing artifice – and this includes wiping away traces of the labor that contributed to it. That the scene is staged by workmen therefore calls attention to atmosphere’s capacity to conceal its own socioeconomic underpinnings and inequities.

Despite comprehensive efforts to ensure that the party runs smoothly, an event threatens to ruin everything: “[s]omething had happened” (44). It is an unmistakably modernist frame of mind that makes “something happening” seem so utterly repellent. Like modernist authors themselves, the party’s hostesses are committed to cultivating atmosphere and would rather not get bogged down by the happenings of plot and event. That the event is a death only makes matters worse; its gruesome nature is an assault on the party’s carefully cultivated ambience, and it reveals the seemingly insulated atmosphere to be more porous than previously believed. For her part, young Laura is attuned to the inappropriateness of the party’s atmospheric revelry clashing with the somber mood just down the lane, fearing it would amount to a kind of social tone deafness: “[t]he band and everybody arriving. They’d hear us” (46). By contrast, Mrs. Sheridan’s callous disregard for the fate of the young man, combined with her anxiety about the success of the party (she is relieved to discover the fatality was “not in the garden”, 46), says a great deal about the ethical risks involved in efforts to design and control atmosphere. As Sara Ahmed points out, “[t]hose who do not sink into spaces, whose bodies are registered as not fitting, often have to work to make others comfortable” (229). Indeed in Mansfield’s story, as in Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, there is a distinct sense that comfort has been achieved at the expense of others, as when the party gets underway and Laura thinks, “what happiness it is to be with people who are all happy, to press hands, press cheeks, smile into eyes” (47). When Mr. Sheridan mentions the brutal accident, he commits a noticeable faux pas precisely because it interrupts the party’s flow: an “awkward little silence fell…Really, it was very tactless of father” (48). And when Laura eventually ends up viewing the body of the dead man, she is flooded with a pleasurable sense of life’s beauty, much as Clarissa Dalloway realizes that Septimus’ death “made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun” (*Dalloway* 186). In
both works, characters find a way to assimilate even the dead into a pleasurable atmosphere.

And yet, while the objects of mourning are absorbed into the prevailing atmosphere, the subjects of mourning - those who express and display grief - remain inassimilable, a kind of unsightly blemish tarnishing an otherwise lovely atmosphere. In “The Garden Party,” the dead man’s wife stands out as the last remaining threat to atmosphere, with her “face, puffed up, red, with swollen eyes, and swollen lips, look[ing] terrible” (50). In contrast to the event of death itself, which has been fairly well absorbed, the presence of a mourning subject pollutes the affective atmosphere. This sense that the bereaved widow is essentially emanating affective toxins echoes the literal smoke described earlier in the story: “the greatest possible eyesore, and they [the modest cottages] had no right to be in that neighbourhood at all…The very smoke coming out of their chimneys was poverty-stricken. Little rags and shreds of smoke, so unlike the great silvery plumes that uncurled from the Sheridans’ chimneys” (45). Here is a moment where it is absolutely necessary to distinguish between different types of atmosphere, for Mrs. Sheridan’s disgust at the pollution would be an altogether different matter if her concern were the meteorological-technological atmosphere of literal pollution, and the socioeconomic causes and health consequences that come with it. Yet Mrs. Sheridan’s concern is with the polluting of affective and aesthetic atmospheres: never mind that others have to breathe the smoke, for the Sheridans, it is an “eyesore”. Indeed, one of my claims will be that atmosphere’s ability to modulate comfort levels is precisely what makes the phenomenon sometimes feel ethically uncomfortable.

As Peter Sloterdijk points out, in the twentieth century, life-saving and enhancing air technologies were often developed in tandem with equally life-threatening feats of atmospheric engineering. Soon after the twentieth-century invention of air conditioning, scientists invented what Sloterdijk calls “negative air conditioning”: the gas chamber (Terror 37-47). Conversely, poison gas created a toxic microclimate, while the gas mask constructed a life-preserving miniature atmosphere based on similar principles. Sloterdijk’s discussion of these dual impulses towards purification and contamination is troubling enough, but combined with the affective pollution and cleansing mentioned earlier, it becomes difficult to see any attempt at atmospheric purification without the shadow of its troubling opposite, as in Sloterdijk’s description of fumigation: “ventilation of a first area involved polluting the second” (Terror 33).

My argument thus departs from what is arguably the most famous meditation on modern technology’s relationship to atmosphere: Benjamin’s theory of the aura in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. For Benjamin, aura – an aesthetic object’s unique presence in space and time, its emanating air of original authenticity – “withers” (221) and “decay[s]” (222) in the context of mass technological reproduction. In my readings, technology often has the opposite effect of generating or preserving a sense of aura. For example, in Blunden’s Undertones of War, experience on the front-lines is characterized by anachronism and temporal displacements, which means that aura can continue to emanate even as the object it envelops begins to disintegrate. In contrast to Benjamin’s claim that “through gas warfare the aura is abolished in a new way” (242), Blunden, the victim of a gas attack, detects the persistence of aura despite the war’s destruction:
Some houses here, in the thick of it, yet retained their outline…I took a walk among their white shutters and painted garden railings in the thick mists of morning, with that compelled spirit of reverence which those village ruins awoke in me, more vividly perhaps than a Wren masterpiece can to-day. To visit such relics of a yesterday whose genial light seemed scarcely gone and for ages, relics whose luckless situation almost denied them the imagined piety of contemplation and pity, was a part of my war. There were other ruins, which we made less emotional; ‘Haunted House,’ an observation post, lacked the true phantom-air (54; italics added).

V. Meteorology: The Weather in Literature

The heat had leapt forward…they were aware of a common burden, a vague threat which they called ‘the bad weather coming’
– E.M. Forster (A Passage to India 123)

What’s in the wind, I wonder
– James Joyce (Ulysses “Aeolus” 103)

I have indicated some ways in which this project differs from studies of the weather in literature. Most importantly, my focus is on points of convergence among meteorological, aesthetic, affective, and technological atmospheres. In addition, I shift the focus on weather events, common in studies of other literary historical periods, to the seemingly uneventful nature of largely invisible, slow-moving climates. I also pay less attention to the weather as metaphor. Instead, I tend to swing between two extremes on either side of metaphor: sometimes, I insist on retaining the literal meanings of weather. When James Joyce wrote to his Aunt Josephine, “[d]o you remember the cold February of 1893?...I want to know whether the canal was frozen” (Letters 175), it was not because he was seeking to expand his arsenal of figurative language but rather because part of his ambitious plan required intimate knowledge of the city’s every last detail, right down to the weather. At the opposite end of the spectrum, I pay considerable attention to language that lacks even the grounding provided by metaphor. For example, many studies regard Dickens’ fog as a metaphor for the condition of London. In my reading of Conrad, presented in chapter one, fog is irreducible to a single setting; it does not “represent” anything or any place but rather presents an enveloping mood. The idea of an atmospheric text thus resonates with nonrepresentational aesthetic practices.

At the same time that this dissertation departs from conventions in the study of literary weather, it embraces and acknowledges its indebtedness to certain aspects of works that have covered similar territory. In Weatherland, Alexandra Harris argues that “as cultural preoccupations change, we find affinities with different kinds of weather” (14). Woolf’s Orlando serves as metaphor and motivation for Harris’ project: when

---

16 Christine Corton writes that fog in Bleak House is a “general metaphor for the state of London” (61). I elaborate on the question of place-specific atmosphere in the first chapter.
Woolf’s eponymous protagonist characterizes each century in terms of different weather, it is not that the weather itself truly changes, but that each successive generation endows certain climatic conditions with particular significance. Harris explains that her project responds to the question, “if I read straight forward through English literature, or at least if I tried to read in a roughly chronological way, would it be possible to feel the weather change?” (15). The injunction not just to read for the weather but to feel it is a fabulous one, and in this dissertation I try to follow that directive wherever possible.

I also find the implications of Harris’ focus on resonance quite significant, for the idea that different sorts of weather resonate with populations at different times is fundamentally a matter of attunement, a concept that will figure prominently in my work. In different historical and literary time periods, Harris finds writers attuned to a range of meteorological phenomena, particularly when it comes to preoccupations with a given season. In general, Anglo-Saxon poetry tends to take place in the cold, she argues, while medieval poetry bursts with springtime and rain showers. In her discussion of Elizabethan literature, Harris points to the period’s fixation on weather as violent spectacle, particularly “atmospheric freak shows” (91) such as fiery meteors or sudden lightning strikes. “On the evidence of much Elizabethan art and literature one would think that this was a time for incessant storms, comets, frosts, and lightning strikes, broken only by the arrival each year of a prodigiously lovely spring.” Harris writes, “[s]ymbol and spectacle were the order of the day, and the skies seems to be staging, for this most theatrical of societies, a tremendous cosmic show” (87). That sense of weather as spectacle provides an excellent contrast for my focus on the modernist preoccupation with weather’s slowness and subtlety: “the small daily variations in atmosphere go largely unrecorded” (89). I will argue that these small, quotidian fluctuations were of central concern to modernist writers.

In Harris’ discussion of the Romantics, I find impulses both contrary and complementary to the modernist atmospheres that will be traced throughout this study. What seems most similar is a fascination with states of immersion and envelopment. On the other hand, there is a fundamental tension between the modernists I study and the Romantics when it comes to the matter of atmospheric manipulation. In general terms, many Romantic writers give themselves over to atmospheric forces. For Shelley, Harris writes, the “wind was always connected with its unpredictability: to surrender to it meant yielding an invisible and unknowable force” (249). In the context of twentieth-century meteorological forecasting, the works I study will betray a far more ambivalent attitude about the predictability – and mutability – of atmosphere.

In a New York Times review of Weatherland, Andrea Wulf writes that “although [Harris] carries on into the 20th and 21st centuries, these last sections feel a little rushed. Harris’s narrative is strongest in the past, no matter if it’s icy Anglo-Saxon poetry or moist Victorian novels.” I think this sense of weakened weather sensibility in the twentieth century might have less to do with Harris’ attention and more to do with the shift from empirically perceived events to abstractions of environment that was in fact characteristic of the period. In a way, if Harris’ goal was to feel the weather, she gets it quite right by struggling to feel at all.

It is the reviewer, and not Harris, who suggests that Weatherland’s discussion of twentieth-century modernism lacks the kind of perceptual sensitivity displayed elsewhere. For her part, Harris does link modernist texts to certain sensations, particularly
the extremes of hot and cold. On the one hand, there was the sense of the new with “shimmering brightness, sharp outlines, a metallic glint”. Harris notes that an “intellectual landscape of ‘cold modernism’ has been charted, in which cold is an attitude rather than a temperature.” (334) The coldness of modern times was often linked to North American technologies: “visions of cool modernity where cars, conveyer belts, and air conditioning were all a step ahead…that the future arrived in the shape of the domestic refrigerator” (334-335). On the other hand, there is the dry heat and aridity of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*.

What the reviewer regards as a shortcoming in Harris’ work actually resonates with my claim that that atmosphere often defies empirical protocols, and that during this period in particular, atmosphere was coming to be understood as increasingly abstract. Early twentieth-century physics and meteorology initiated a major shift in the scientific study of weather from the sensible and empirical to abstract and calculable. Some technologies bring us closer to nature, but twentieth-century meteorological technologies did just the opposite, replacing the need to consult nature when one can consult the daily newspaper weather forecast. Modernist and war narratives of the early twentieth century cannot really be matched with a weather event, season, or temperature in the way that other literary historical periods seem to lend themselves to. But if different kinds of weather resonate with different literary historical periods, surely something resonated with the modernists? I propose that it was not a type of event, such as a storm, or a season, or even a temperature, that dominated the modernist imagination. It was, rather, the slow pace and vast scale of climate changes.

VI. **Atmospheric Temporality and Slow Violence**

*[The Gulf of Panama] is one of the calmest spots on the waters of the globe. Too calm. The old navigators dreaded it as a dangerous region, where one might be caught and lie becalmed for weeks, with one's crew dying slowly of thirst, under a cloudless sky. The worst of fates, this, to feel yourself die in a long and helpless agony. How much preferable a region of storms, where man and ship can at least put up a fight and remain defiant almost to the last.*

– Joseph Conrad (“Geography and Some Explorers” 5)

In the above passage, Conrad articulates the danger – fatal danger – of what seems to be uneventful weather. A “cloudless sky” is one which fails to betray even the specter of future meteorological violence. Here the doubly affective and meteorological state of “calm” is not a sought-after luxury but violently imposed imprisonment: “one might be caught and lie becalmed for weeks”. As I will argue throughout this dissertation, if any weather could be said to characterize modernism, it is the slow violence of this seeming non-weather. My claim is not just that modernism registers these moments of fatal calm in addition or in opposition to the overt violence we are more familiar with, but rather that even the violence we are familiar with is slower than has often been appreciated. In a line that is perhaps modernism’s most famous articulation of despair, Conrad’s Kurtz expresses not the shock of sudden annihilation but rather a weary recognition of attritional defeat: “he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath, ‘the horror, the horror!’” (70) The word “horror” triggers all sorts of catastrophic associations;
however, the expression of that word as no more than a “breath” tends to get overlooked.

My argument about atmospheric “slow violence” is particularly indebted to scholarship by Rob Nixon and Lauren Berlant, who define their slow subjects in the following ways:

By slow violence I mean violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales (Nixon Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor 2).

The phrase slow death refers to the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence (Berlant Cruel Optimism 95).

Nixon and Berlant shift attention from life-and-death catastrophes to life-sustaining or threatening conditions. While it seems obvious enough, acknowledging human life’s reliance on environment offers a powerful corrective to persistent binary distinctions between violence among human populations and contamination of the “natural” world. For Sloterdijk, it is this fundamental interdependence of environmental and human violence that makes poison gas the quintessential technology of the twentieth century. In Terror from the Air, Sloterdijk argues that the truly modern danger of poison gas stemmed from its assault on atmosphere rather than an individual target. Chemical agents moved modern warfare beyond not only hand-to-hand combat but the very idea of violence directed against individual bodies. While historically warfare had been characterized by “direct shots” and a “targeted object” (13), modern war is an “[a]tmospheric war…enveloping the enemy…within a noxious cloud” (18). Sloterdijk sees this shift, from an assault on an individual target to “assaults on the environmental conditions of the enemy’s life” (16) as part of a larger trend in the twentieth century.

In Aerial Life: Spaces, Mobilities, Affects, Peter Adey recounts the initial difficulty faced by a post-World War One research team tasked with studying the physiological mechanisms by which the body registers the force of bombs and other explosives. At first, the scientists could not understand why detonations simulated in the laboratory failed to produce the effects seen in the field, but then the team realized that in one crucial respect, the experimental blast was different:

It was a result of the direct action of blast upon the body, whereas in the outside world one was more likely to be injured or killed by other, more indirect means of an explosion. The environment or the circumstances in which the blast acts ‘are very unlike the experimental conditions that have been described.’ (159; original italics)
Shock has long been the dominant paradigm for theorizing both war literature and urban modernism, but throughout this study I question the privileged status of that term and a host of related concepts such as speed, immediacy, visibility, and impact. In fact, one of my central aims is to demonstrate that, while it seems noncontroversial enough to posit an “atmospheric modernism,” when we fully explore the implications of the concept, we arrive at a version of modernism that begins to look very different from the more familiar one with which we began. In other words, it seems intuitive to call modernism “atmospheric,” but one rarely stops to fully unpack what that means or how the multiple offshoots of that concept might bear on an understanding of modernist aesthetics. There is often a sense that atmosphere simply defies analysis, that we know it when we see it even if we cannot define it or explain it. This is an unfortunate assumption, for I hope to show that while we might know it when we see it, we probably do not really know what it is we are seeing. When we look a little closer, familiar terms begin to shift: shock becomes absorption, perception becomes attunement, fast becomes slow.

Existing efforts to dislodge shock from its privileged position in modernist studies tend to advocate a shift away from catastrophe, war, and trauma, to the less sensational, more quotidian aspects of “everyday life.” While my approach is similar, I am interested in a form of slow violence that spans the experiences of active duty soldiers and ordinary citizens on the home front. I am therefore reinforcing the argument that the violence of World War One plays a critical role in modern life and literary modernism, but the connecting link has shifted. Whereas traditionally the jarring collisions and speed of urban life are seen as parallels to shocks of battle, I argue that it is as war of attrition that World War I comes home to twentieth-century city dwellers. After all, the Great War was famous not for the rapidity of advance but for the slowness of entrenchment.

VII. Atmosphere and Environment in Interdisciplinary Context

“[T]he concept of atmosphere troubles architectural discourse – haunting those that try to escape it and eluding those that chase it”
- Mark Wigley (“The Architecture of Atmosphere” 18)

17 In Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces (2014), Tonino Griffero writes “we do indeed count on atmosphere – even if we cannot define it.” (2)
18 Ann Cvetkovich writes that her book Depression: A Public Feeling (2012), is based on the “premise that depression is ordinary, building on my previous work on both trauma and sensationalism, which has kept me intrigued by the relation between that which seems notable, catastrophic, or the visible sign of trouble and moments or experiences that are less remarkable and less distinct as events” (25-26). In Cruel Optimism (2011), Lauren Berlant writes that “[s]low death prospers not in traumatic events, as discrete time-framed phenomena like military encounters and genocides can appear to do, but in temporally labile environments whose qualities and whose contours in time and space are often identified with the presentness of ordinariness itself” (100). My slight modification involves including “military encounters”, specifically of the Great War, as exemplary of a kind of everydayness rather than an exception or contrast to ordinariness.
“Aerography substitutes the sphere of aer (Greek for air) for that of the earth (geo) in geography, thereby implying the question of how unexamined contemporary disciplinary assumptions would change if geography were less ostensibly geocentric and more focused on the aerosphere”

– Kenneth R. Olwig (“All that is landscape is melted into air: the ‘aerography’ of ethereal space” 519)

In recent years, atmosphere has captured the attention of scholars across an enormous variety of disciplines. Fields as diverse as geography, architecture, anthropology, sociology, environmental studies, and the mind sciences all make significant contributions to this dissertation. My intent is not merely to trace a common theme or vocabulary, but to examine the reasons underlying the concept’s broad appeal and the problems it responds to. One of the most crucial commonalities I have observed involves growing interest in atmosphere as a methodological principle rather than simply an object of study. Many researchers are turning to atmosphere as a way of rethinking the modes of inquiry most fundamental to their fields. For some disciplines, such as geography, an atmospheric turn is nothing short of revolutionary, precisely because it requires one remarkably simple substitution:

What if we began with a different element, one other than the earthy crust usually the focus of geographical thought?...Why not begin with air, the absent presence whose clearing and filling at the same time makes possible our earthly flourishing (Jackson and Fanin 438).

How, for example, would unexamined contemporary disciplinary assumptions change if geography were less ostensibly geocentric and more focused on the space of the aerosphere? (Olwig 519).

For many, an atmospheric methodology provides the opportunity to align phenomenological experience with scientific inquiry. Derek P. McCormack cites the model of 19th century aeronauts who combined upper air measurements with records of their own sensory reactions to ascending altitudes: “balloon flight, as the conduct of atmospheric fieldwork, required commitment to corporeal experience in ways that complicated any appeal to the figure of a distanced, disembodied scientific observer” (“Fieldworking” 43).

While I have noted the valuable contributions of scholars who explicitly deal with literary atmosphere, there has not been an equivalent call for an “atmospheric turn” in literary studies. Or at least, the call has not been unified, though scholars working separately on topics such as affect, tone, aura, and the environment are all already at work on various pieces of the puzzle. In my concern with moving modernism beyond the scale of the human, readers will likely detect echoes of any number of recent efforts to move beyond subjectivity and anthropomorphism: ecocriticism, “thing theory,” new materialism, speculative realism, object oriented ontology (OOO) - and the dizzying list continues.
The crux of my intervention is its insistence on synthesis: often, affect theory and environmental studies exist on opposite ends of the spectrum, one dealing with the minutiae and rhythms of bodies and emotions, the other dealing with vast impersonal spaces. Too often, I believe, scholars who share my resolve to move beyond individual subjectivity or interior psychology drastically move to the other end of the spectrum, banishing the significance of human bodies, moods, and minds altogether. To put it simply, I have no interest in eliminating humans here. I want instead to investigate how environments affect us and how affects are environments. If moods are spaces we inhabit, we need a comprehensive understanding of what it means to inhabit space, and that has conventionally been the domain of fields such as geography, environmental studies, and architecture. Meanwhile, if environments are thoroughly enmeshed with human bodies and minds, the scholar of environments is going to need the expertise traditionally associated with psychology, phenomenology, and affect theory.

My project also advocates a broad rethinking of what we consider “environmental literature.” While most scholars no longer exclusively apply that designation to works dealing overtly with “nature,” it remains true that disproportionate emphasis falls on literary movements most readily associated with “nature writing” such as transcendentalism and romanticism. Meanwhile, as a predominately urban aesthetic, modernism can sometimes appear to offer little to the scholar of literary environments. The most obvious way to challenge that assumption is to broaden our understanding of what constitutes an “environment” in the first place: accordingly, I join ecocritics and cultural geographers who recognize that the city is an environment, and that urban problems are environmental problems. Laurence Buell argues that an earlier “first-wave” ecocriticism has given way to a “second-wave” in which a “mature environmental aesthetics…must take into account the interpenetration of metropolis and outback, of anthropocentric as well as biocentric concerns”(22-23).

In addition to arguing that the city itself is fundamentally an environment, and that modernist texts register the inevitable enmeshment of human and nonhuman environments, I argue that even if we stick to a narrow and traditional understanding of a “natural environment,” modernist texts are filled with nonhuman forces and spaces. The wind blows, the sun beats down, snow settles across the metropolis. The trouble is when we think of a nonhuman environment as a geographically removed region – the woods on the outskirts of town, for example. I argue that the persistent association of the

19 Buell’s personal intellectual trajectory reflects a similar kind of evolution that I find helpful to keep in mind:

Once I thought it helpful to try to specify a subspecies of ‘environmental text’, the first stipulation of which was that the nonhuman environment must be envisaged not merely as a framing device but as an active presence, suggesting human history’s implication in natural history. Now, it seems to me more productive to think inclusively of environmentality as a property of any text – to maintain that all human artifacts bear such traces (25).
environment with that which is “green” has obscured all of the invisible, transparent natural forces, elements, and microclimates circulating within a city.

VIII. Chapter Overview

Chapter One, “Fog,” argues that for Conrad, atmosphere is a way of gesturing at something larger than any local or individual experience, something that inflects human life but is always in excess of it. The striking persistence of meteorological and affective atmospheres throughout Heart of Darkness (1899) – the “brooding gloom” that recurs across narrative frames, temporal registers, and geographical locations – reveals atmosphere to be irreducible to setting in the manner of Dickens’ foggy London. I argue that it is not impressionist descriptions of setting that contribute most directly to the construction of atmosphere, but rather the particular way that Conrad experiments with narrative framing. Conventionally, we expect frames to erect partitions between components of a narrative, and yet Conrad’s atmosphere overflows all such divisions, rolling slowly through the text and refusing to burn off, much as literal fog does. I suggest that because the narrative sections divide while still also remaining permeable, these frames provide a structural model of attunement, with the atmosphere of each section striking a chord with the others in resonant harmony. I propose that this same model can be applied to “reading atmospherically,” a practice that seeks to replace epistemological decoding with affective attunement. However, these discoveries introduce distinct ethical risks: because Conrad’s colonial violence is embedded in environment rather than events – an all-encompassing fog - it is difficult to see how one could ever step outside of it. I suggest that the novella ultimately forces readers to feel an uncomfortable sense of complicity, raising the question of whether there can ever be such a thing as an atmospheric bystander.

In Chapter Two, “Poison Gas,” Conrad’s creeping fog transforms into the lingering of lethal gas in World War One literature. Whereas the previous chapter examined the question of inhabiting atmosphere, here I turn to the problem of uninhabitable atmospheres. My readings expand upon philosopher Peter Sloterdijk’s assertion that the uniquely modern danger of gas warfare lies in its assault on the atmosphere rather than on human bodies. I begin by tracing representations of failed impact, splintering effects, and indirect experience in Siegfried Sassoon’s Memoirs of an Infantry Officer (1930) and Edmund Blunden’s Undertones of War (1924). I suggest that consistent emphases on oblique rather than direct experience challenge the widely accepted position that noncombatants cannot possibly understand war because they lack the sensory immediacy that characterized experience for those with real “firsthand” experience. The problem might be not that we lack the imagination, I suggest, but that we have overactive imaginations that glide right past the sensory and atmospheric subtleties implied by a term like “undertones.” In my subsequent close reading of Blunden’s narrative, I suggest that the centrality of atmosphere to war experience makes the text’s use of the pastoral tradition seem less anachronistic, archaic, or escapist than some have regarded it. If we consider war in terms of environment rather than event, aesthetic practices traditionally associated with “nature” begin to look surprisingly appropriate. Therefore, rather than reading Blunden’s “pastoral” and “modernist” styles in opposition, I assert that the text’s seemingly archaic tone itself operates according to principles of
atmospheric manipulation. Poison gas carves out pockets of air and is susceptible to “blow back” dependent on the direction of the wind, just as Blunden’s narrative follows anachronistic counter-currents and formally embeds pastoral microclimates within the prevailing climate of war and modernity. Similarly, Blunden takes the propensity of poison gas to “loiter,” “linger,” and “cling,” and applies these principles of slow pacing to his own writing style, consistently interrupting the forward march of narrative to dwell upon small details, and to notice affective fragments of the past still clinging to the present. Blunden’s aim is not to achieve the status of documentary realism but to actively remake and manipulate the atmosphere of war; in this sense I regard Blunden’s formal innovations as a kind of literary climate control.

Chapter Three, “Heat Wave,” moves from the front lines to the home-front. While shock and distraction have long dominated the study of urban modernism, my reading of Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway shifts the focus to absorption. City dwellers absorb – and are absorbed by – the city’s immersive environment. Furthermore, I suggest, the shock absorbing capacities one tends to associate with the psyche play out at the level of atmosphere: the city as a collective has absorbed the shocking blows of the recent past, becoming a kind of affective repository for history. It is no accident that the novel takes place on a summer day in which London is overwhelmed by a heat wave. On this day, there is no downpour, clouds are not bursting in the sky like bombs. The heat wave is slow moving, enervating, sluggish. It blankets the entire city rather than striking individual targets. While such invisible atmospheres often go unnoticed, characters gain an enhanced capacity to detect atmosphere at thresholds both large and small – ranging from street intersections and windowsills to national boundary crossings. Combining these observations about the necessity of some kind of clash or friction with my previous discoveries concerning absorption, I demonstrate that atmosphere becomes perceptible in moments of what I call “gentle turbulence” rather than “culture shock.” The similarities between these sorts of atmospheric epiphanies and those described in Woolf’s “On Being Ill” reinforce the sense that atmosphere tends to emerge not in the context of sensational violence but in relation to a much slower kind of attritional weakening or subtle change in temperature. In other words, it is through conditions, not events, that atmosphere shows up. Throughout the chapter, I argue that absorptive processes are not just central to the novel’s historical thematics but in fact drive Woolf’s formal innovation. Woolf’s particular brand of free indirect discourse allows the narrator to simultaneously absorb and be absorbed by the novel’s extensive cast of characters. It is a narrative strategy that avoids shock, embracing gentle turbulence instead.

Chapter Four, “Snow and Wind,” begins by moving from London’s heat wave to the freezing cold snow of Dublin in “The Dead” (1914). In my reading of Dubliners’ final story, I argue that Gabriel is affectively tone deaf because he fails to recognize the precise distinction between decoding and attunement intuited by Marlow in Heart of Darkness. While decoding seeks to master its objects and to reduce distance, attunement facilitates intimacy not in spite of but because of difference. Gabriel’s attempt to read his wife’s mind and to “master” her mood is therefore misguided on two levels: it fails to preserve the distance necessary for attunement, and it centers on the problem of private minds while the real issue at stake is public moods. The character’s romantic fantasies about the snow similarly rely upon the assumption that environment can be controlled and molded by the human imagination. The famous epiphany featured in the story’s
finale is not a vision but an act of auditory attunement: Gabriel listens to and is chilled by a snowstorm that cannot be coaxed into a human frame of reference. While such a nonhuman environment cannot be mastered, it can be moving, in both physical and affective senses of the word. “The Dead” leaves us with the sense that, despite common associations, snow is not frozen or fixed but slowly moving. *Ulysses* (1922) zeroes in on the way that air moves in its treatment of wind, with characters paradoxically locating a breath of fresh air in the emanations of dead bodies. Leopold Bloom is a kind of anti-Gabriel, forever attuned to the complex entanglement of bodies and environments: breath transforms into wind, stinking bodily emissions mingle with urban pollution, living subjects inhale and swallow air emanated from the dead, gas inside leaks out. Throughout, Joyce embraces disgust, thereby inverting an affective state that is conventionally all about the policing of borders. While Bloom and Stephen seem to be polar opposites, I argue that their respective concerns with disgust and inspiration point to a principle of underlying unity rather than dichotomy, for disgust and inspiration operate according to similar respiratory processes. I suggest that the structure and rhythms of breathing inform the text’s interest in the way that moving air troubles barriers without completely abolishing them: like Conrad, Joyce dismantles hard boundaries without dissolving everything and everybody into one atmospheric blur.

Chapter Five, “Clouds,” foregrounds the tension between spatial climate and temporal weather patterns that has been implicit throughout my study. The first section of Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse* (1927) begins with a forecast and conforms to the short-term scale of weather’s day to day fluctuations. Weather should be something that one can perceive empirically – as opposed to climate, which is invisible and abstract – but here I show that the displacements engendered by forecasting make even the weather out of reach for first-hand observation. Drawing extensively on the history of meteorology, I show that characters’ attempts to forecast the weather run up against the precise limitations that were simultaneously motivating an early twentieth-century shift in the atmospheric sciences from individual observation to large-scale physical and theoretical modeling. Thus, while the novel has traditionally been read as nostalgic, I call attention to an affective atmosphere of anxious foreboding. The precise sort of absorption in the here-and-now featured in *Mrs. Dalloway* becomes impossible in *To The Lighthouse*: clouds and forecasts both co-opt attention and direct it to the future. Woolf’s second section, “Time Passes,” expands temporal and spatial scales in order to register gradual climate changes that cannot be perceived empirically as well as the slow violence of “weathering,” a phenomenon which I suggest brings weather and climate together. The novel’s third section, “The Lighthouse,” serves as a kind of bookend corresponding to the first section – but now, forecasting the weather has become remembering the atmosphere. Thus, I argue, Woolf depicts the displacements that distinguish modern weather forecasting at the level of the text’s own structure, which consistently expels characters and readers alike from the present moment and from a human frame of reference.

My afterword, “A slow, dripping loss: Time Passes, Climate Changes,” suggests that today’s debates over climate change center on many of the problems engaged by my dissertation, particularly issues surrounding atmosphere as a shared habitat, legible object, and invisible phenomenon. The striking and well-documented contrast between apathy in the face of climate change and rapid mobilization in response to discrete
catastrophic events reflects the precise tension I study: shock, rupture, and immediate first-person experience on the one hand; ongoing, diffuse, impersonal atmospheres on the other. I surmise that World War II temporarily returned focus to the shock of weather (as anticipated by To The Lighthouse) and I make a case for the value of rediscovering the ways in which twentieth-century writers and thinkers grappled with their own contemporary problems of climate and atmosphere.
Chapter 1
Fog

I. “Enveloping the tale”: Fog, Frames, and Global Atmosphere

In *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad’s unnamed narrator famously invokes an atmospheric model of narrative:

To [Marlow] the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine (5).

The passage reads like a manifesto for modernist epistemology: meaning is diffuse, emanating from the narrative but not internal to it. At first glance, one might expect this emphasis on diffusion to foreclose the possibility of containment. But Marlow’s model subtly flips conventional terms, transforming the narrative container into itself an object contained – “enveloped” in a sphere of haze. Critics have recognized this structural inversion; nonetheless, most readings proceed to discuss the passage’s atmospheric language in the drastically different terms of formless diffusion, visual obscurity, and epistemological indeterminacy. In conventional accounts, the eye strains to see through “mist” and “haze,” the halo’s sketchy contours dissolve solid objects, and objective truth gives way to a sprawling, open-ended subjectivity. Yet Conrad’s passage does not describe structure on the one hand and atmosphere on the other. In fact, atmosphere is the structure here. Images of haze forming an “envelop[e]” and mist gathering into the shape of a “halo” figure atmosphere as an architectural enclosure. A brief tour through Conrad’s *oeuvre* confirms that the novelist regarded both meteorological and affective atmospheres as habitable structures: “a wall of fog” (“The Tale” 100); “the heavy warm fog...closing rapidly round him” (*Almayer’s Folly* 54); “gloom that seemed to envelop him from head

---

1 Ian Watt recognizes this structure when he writes that “Marlow’s tale will not be centered on, but surrounded by, its meaning” (169). While Watt’s reading productively points to both geometric structure and impressionistic diffusion, it is representative of the general problem because it separates rather than unites these two aspects of the passage. “The abstract geometry of the metaphor is symbolist because…the shell of the nut or the haze around the glow is larger than the narrative vehicle…but the sensory quality of the metaphor, the mist and the haze, is essentially impressionist” (169). Watt explicitly situates the passage’s atmospheric language in the context of French visual impressionism, referencing the “indefinite contours of haze”; “fitfully and tenuously visible” (169). “Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Conrad’s own writing,” Watt writes, “is its strong visual sense” (174).
Instead of atmospheric envelopment, critics often emphasize the quite different concept of “atmospheric interference.” This approach confuses the idea of atmosphere as something greater than a particular object with the idea that it is something vaguer. In contrast to the prevailing focus on atmospheric obstruction, my chief concern in this chapter will be atmospheric construction. Together, affect theory and architecture studies allow us to conceptualize moods as habitable structures. While affect studies addresses mood’s diffusion through the air – liberated from individual subjective containers -- architecture studies calls attention to alternative ways in which moods become shaped, contained, and structured.

The capacity to contain is as constitutive of atmosphere as its propensity to diffuse: etymologically, the term originates from an amalgamation of the Greek “atmos,” meaning exhalation or vapor, and “sphaire,” sphere or globe (OED “atmosphere”). Impressionist accounts of atmosphere tend to fixate on the first part of this definition (and its implications for visual obstruction) while overlooking the structural properties and multisensory experiences suggested by a habitable “sphere.” Yet as scholars including John G. Peters and H. Peter Stowell have argued, the reduction of literary impressionism to its visual counterpart is deeply problematic. I suggest that atmosphere provides a way of talking about the ambient effects that interested the impressionists while avoiding the visual bias and suggestions of problematic vagueness that have long plagued theorists of literary impressionism.

Instead of focusing exclusively on Conrad’s visual imagery, I pay attention to how certain formal strategies help create and sustain a sense of prevailing textual atmosphere. Although it has been widely recognized that a brooding and mournful tone pervades Heart of Darkness, and that Conrad uses a frame narrative structure as his primary formal strategy, the relationship between these two defining features has not been scrutinized. The novella opens with an unnamed narrator recounting his experience

---

2 In A Genealogy of Modernism, Michael Levenson notes two recurring images of modernity: haze and granite hardness. I am suggesting that these are not just dual impulses, but, more radically, that haze itself comes to look very much like granite hardness.

3 For example, Paul John Byrne writes of “ambient noise, distance, darkness, or other atmospheric interference” (17); Ian Watt writes that “one of the most characteristic objections to Impressionist painting was that the artist’s ostensive ‘subject’ was obscured by his representation of the atmospheric conditions” (169); Peter Stowell writes that “objects lost their clearly outlined shapes” (20-21) and “in that prismatic reality between subject and object all outlines become hazy” (34).

4 One scholar who has thought a lot about spheres is Peter Sloterdijk, though not in the context of modernism or literary impressionism. Sloterdijk contends that spheres are a basic existential condition: “[h]umans have never lived in a direct relationship with Nature… ‘being-in-the-world’ first of all and in most cases, means being-in-spheres” (46).

5 John G. Peters argues for a “definition of literary impressionism based upon philosophical groundings rather than upon the visual arts” (1) and argues that “any similarities between impressionist art and literature result from similarities in philosophy—not technique. Nor do impressionists simply represent visual perception; instead they render a much broader epistemological experience” (14).
on the Thames with the sailor Marlow. This first narrator describes the scene and the company assembled around Marlow on the boat; this is what I will refer to as the “outer frame.” While waiting for the tide to turn, Marlow offers to tell a tale. At this point, Marlow takes over as the narrator; the story that he tells, about traveling down the Congo and meeting Kurtz, I will refer to as the “inner frame.” The inner frame makes up the bulk of the novella, and many readers will primarily remember this section. The unnamed narrator occasionally interrupts, calling us back to the outer frame, and then closes out the work. My interest lies in how Conrad uses this story-within-a-story technique to create certain atmospheric effects.

The frame narrative shares certain formal properties with atmosphere: on one level, framing allows for diffusion—partitions are erected only to be permeated as the “brooding” weather and “ominous” mood overflow the frame and circulate throughout the entire text. Yet a sense of structure and division remains. I suggest that because the narrative sections divide while still also remaining permeable, these frames provide a structural model of attunement, with the atmosphere of each section striking a chord with the others in resonant harmony. Atmosphere is thus not only thematized in the text but illustrated by its formal apparatus as well. This discovery expands the notion of literary atmosphere well beyond the textual rendering of visual effects, and it challenges the notion that language is ill-suited to depicting atmosphere. Narrative structure actually enables, rather than interfering with, the construction of literary atmosphere.

Conrad’s frame narrative structure aligns with architectural and musical models of atmosphere much as a painterly aesthetic links with visual accounts of atmosphere. Attunement, we will see, is an essential strategy for apprehending one’s location in architectural space as well as for listening to ambient rhythms and moods. These are both art forms that cannot be visually perceived head-on. Similarly, while there are a variety of atmospheres that can be directly perceived in every text – explicit references to characters’ moods, the weather—there is also a more all-encompassing architectural atmosphere of a text, what Sianne Ngai conceptualizes as a work’s “feeling tone: its global or organizing affect” (28).6 Global is a particularly productive term because it suggests a definite spherical shape rather than limitless, free-floating diffusion. And as we will see, a global atmosphere cannot be seen directly in front of one; it must be sensed as something all around.

In this chapter, rather than reading “for” atmosphere in the narrow sense of content, I advocate “reading atmospherically,” a more participatory intervention concerned with how the atmosphere of a text affects and envelops us as readers. Instead of privileging visual perception or “decoding,” I emphasize attunement as a perceptual

---

6 As noted in the introduction, I originally arrived at this idea by way of Hubert Dreyfus’ architectural distinction between the moods in and of a room. Dreyfus suggests that a mood in the room emerges from the affective energy emanating from human subjects in that space; a mood of the room is what an architect formally constructs—a reverential tower or a solemn church, for example (24). Sianne Ngai’s theory of affective-aesthetic tone also implicitly points to atmosphere as a form facilitating both diffusion and containment. On the one hand, Ngai describes a diffuse property, something “general” and not localizable. But far from leading to a sense of formlessness, the generality of tone confers form—it is an “organizing” affect.
experience that captures the entangled relationship between text and reader. Reading atmospherically, we become attuned to what the text makes us feel as affective inhabitants – and these effects are surprisingly intense. In fact, atmosphere is arguably the least vague element in Conrad’s text; characters register its effects with vivid immediacy, and prove quite capable of articulating it in consistent language: “mournful,” “brooding,” and “ominous.”

The specificity of Conrad’s atmosphere also emerges from its temporality and pacing: the mournful feeling of glancing back at the past, the ominous feeling of anticipating the future. These orientations combine to express the mood of a transitional moment in which grief over a lost past bumps up against anxious expectations about an impending future. This double sense of temporal displacement, in which both the past and the future encroach upon the present moment, will be a recurring feature of subsequent modernist texts that we look at. Because a historical mood is something that always envelops its inhabitants but requires attunement to notice, the construction of a textual atmosphere is a particularly appropriate technique for capturing the phenomenological experience of history.7 Literary atmosphere thus positions readers in time as well as space. Because

Fog was rolling through the pages of British literature long before Conrad came onto the scene. Most readers will associate fog not with modernism but with Victorian literature, and more specifically, with Dickens’ London. In London Fog: A Biography (2015), Christine Corton provides evidence that the air of nineteenth-century London was quite literally distinct from the atmospheric conditions that prevailed both before and after that century. London’s geography makes it naturally susceptible to a misty type of fog, but it was only when that organic humidity combined with emissions from domestic coal use and factory smoke that the famously dense “pea-souper fogs” emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. These were fogs characterized by a “thick, yellow, sulphurous vapour that plunged the streets into darkness, choked the lungs, and turned day into night” (28). Subsequent public health reforms and restrictions on coal use led to a decline in such severe fogs and, Corton notes, “[a]lready by the beginning of the twentieth century fogs were becoming less frequent and less intense…The Meteorological Office observed in 1904 that the number of foggy days had been declining steadily since 1890” (215). That Heart of Darkness’ fog looks different than the urban pollution of nineteenth-century literature should be obvious from the outset. This is, of course, not a novel of London, and its turn-of-the-century publication places it – and all of the texts that will follow in this study – at a moment when the literal fog was just beginning to lift, as it would continue to do throughout the early twentieth century. Given this background, the ubiquity of white fog and white air in early twentieth-century literature is striking: Heart of Darkness features “blinding white fog” that is likened to cotton wool; in Forster’s

7 My discussion thus also contributes to recent critical dialogue on the affective “everyday” of history. Scholars writing in the tradition of Raymond Williams’ “structures of feeling” are increasingly turning away from clearly delineated events and firmly established institutions towards what Ann Cvetkovich describes as “the felt experience of everyday life” (12) and Lauren Berlant refers to as “crisis ordinary” (9) or “ordinary crisis built into everyday life.”
Howards End (1910) the “air was white…it tasted like cold pennies” (69); Katherine Mansfield writes that “a white mist rose and fell” (Stories “The Voyage” 108), and as we shall see in the next chapter, even Blunden’s Undertones of War depicts “white mist…like a rising shroud” (22).

These literal changes in the air provide only a partial account of what makes Conrad’s fog distinct. In existing scholarship, most have focused on fog’s symbolic function in literature. One of the most compelling aspects of Corton’s study is her investigation of the shifting nature of such symbolic imagery, both within the work of a single author and across authors and periods, but the fundamental idea of fog as a metaphor, particularly for blindness and the dissolution of form, persists throughout. In reading Bleak House, Corton notes that “characters’ attempts to gain a clearer vision are not only restricted by the fog but are also offset by the emphasis on blindness, darkness, and a bewildering of the senses throughout the text” (61). Similarly, Corton points to the ubiquity of fog in both nineteenth-century detective novels and journalistic accounts of crime and social deviance. “Fog became a symbol for the threat to the clear outlines of a hierarchical social order as it dissolved moral boundaries and replaced reassuring certainties with obscurity and doubt” (86), Corton writes. In Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, fog provides “a cloak for moral degeneracy, deviance, and murder” (127) and often, the “idea of the fog lifting [is] a metaphor for the mystery being cleared up” (84).

Fog’s association with perceptual obscurity and epistemological indeterminacy emerges in readings of Conrad as well. John G. Peters productively inverts the conventional relationship between these concepts, arguing for a paradoxical epistemological and existential illumination born of the blinding white fog in Heart of Darkness. Peters suggests that “the fog uncovers—rather than obscures—issues concerning western civilization and western world view” (“White Fog” 374). The fog cuts Marlow and his men off from their moorings, Peters writes, and “the displacement from the concrete that they experience serves as an extended metaphor for human existence…there is only the immediate because there is no transcendent” (385). In Peters’ conception, “the world has become for Marlow at once more clear and less clear… he better understands the world, but in understanding it he learns it is more incomprehensible than he had imagined” (385). While Peters argues that “the fog does more than merely obscure” (374) – a point that I strongly agree with - the logic of his claim still revolves around epistemology and its relation to an ocular centric spectrum of light and darkness.

A second and unsurprising refrain in the literature is that fog characterizes setting. Whether it represents the mood, morality, or literal weather of a region, many critics take it for granted that fog represents place. Corton reads the fog in Bleak House as a “general metaphor for the state of London” and notes that it “is a place where light is largely

---

8 For example, in the The Literary Symbol, York Tindall writes that certain “symbols distinctly anticipate the poetic novel of our day. The ‘London particular’ that fills the first chapter of Bleak House is a case in point. Fixing the atmosphere through which the narrative gropes, this fog suggests Jarndyce and Jarndyce, a trial as incomprehensible and monstrous as something from Kafka” (73).
denied to individuals” (61). Dickens uses place-specific nicknames such as “London particular” and “London ivy” to emphasize how characteristic fog is to London as a singular setting.

Aspects of these various critical observations are certainly at play in Conrad’s use of fog and atmosphere more generally. Yet the fog of Heart of Darkness is also doing something quite different in several fundamental, and related, ways: it emphasizes the construction of multisensory, architectural habitats more than the obstruction of vision; it cannot be anchored in one setting and is therefore global rather than local; it serves as a formal principle rather than a symbol or metaphor. The interdependence between these characteristics will become clear, but I will begin by looking at the shift from visual perception to multisensory envelopment and architectural construction.

Heart of Darkness picks up on the all-encompassing and subsuming nature of fog that is certainly already there in Dickens’ Bleak House. Yet far from dissolving form, as Corton suggests in her readings of Dickens, Conrad’s fog confers it. Marlow comments, for example, that the “fog did not shift or drive, it was just standing all around you like something solid” (39). This palpable solidity is at odds with conventional accounts of impressionism in which there is a loss of solidity. Whereas, according to H. Peter Stowell, impressionist “painters and writers were searching for a way to describe the same phenomenon—the death of matter” (49), here a change in the state of matter works in the opposite direction. Immaterial atmosphere materializes as “something solid” that is “all around you”, evoking the architectural image of enclosing walls. This enveloping structure affects all of the senses and dissolves the boundary between subject and object. Fog cannot be conceived of as an atmospheric condition intervening between a subject and object, for subjects are inside the fog. The use of fog here is different even when we compare it to Lord Jim, a Conrad novel which for the most part preserves the standard sense of fog as perceptual and epistemological interference: “[t]he views he let me have of himself were like the glimpses through the shifting rents in a thick fog” (Lord Jim 60).

In Heart of Darkness, perceptual objects might lose clarity and form, but in the process, the perceptual medium itself becomes more perceptible than ever. Air becomes palpable, tactile, and even audible. At the same time that the white fog makes one aware of otherwise invisible air, it also calls attention to the fact that one’s sense of inhabiting a world is strikingly dependent on scalar effects:

What we could see was just the steamer we were on, her outlines blurred as though she had been on the point of dissolving and a misty strip of water perhaps two feet broad around her – and that was all. The rest of the world was nowhere as far as our eyes and ears were concerned (5).

When we think of atmosphere’s characteristic “elasticity,” we tend to focus on its propensity to stretch and expand. Here, however, atmospheric elasticity means the capacity to shrink the world down to a few square feet. While at first glance this passage seems to be all about the dissolution of form and objects, that is only the case within a
strictly visual register. Rather than a world receding and dissolving, this is a world closing in claustrophobically, “choking warm, stifling” (43), one that is tactile and palpable as something “very warm and clammy” (39). Atmospheric and visual perception are often at odds because envelopment by its very nature makes it nearly impossible to step back and perceive one’s surroundings as a separate object. Architect Juhani Pallasmaa links peripheral vision to atmospheric perception because “[peripheral vision] integrates us with space and events while focused vision pushes us out of the space and makes us mere observers” (12). In other words, we can only see our own environmental embeddedness obliquely, never head-on. Conrad frequently invokes instances of strained or oblique vision in connection with fabric-like materiality: “the skirts of the unknown” (35); “curtain of trees;” (35; 66) “the edge of a colossal jungle…fringed with white surf” (13; all italics mine). Within a purely visual paradigm, one might conclude that such frequent references to the “fringes” of perception signify a kind of geometric horizon or vanishing point. But within the logic of an immersive atmosphere, the specifically textured, fabric-like material suggested by fringes becomes significant. On one level, these descriptions stress the strained vision that comes from trying to peer through curtains and see in the distance. On a deeper level, they suggest that the problem with atmosphere can be that it is too close – “all around you” – rather than elusive.

While peripheral vision may be the best we can hope for when it comes to seeing atmosphere, in the context of other senses, particularly touch, atmosphere is highly accessible. “I watched the fog for signs of lifting as a cat watches a mouse,” Marlow recalls, “but for anything else our eyes were of no more use to us than if we had been buried miles deep in a heap of cotton wool” (43). This image of burial in cotton wool does more than just suggest the impotency of vision: it also recognizes embodied immersion in a palpable texture. Similarly, while the novella opens with a famously impressionistic series of descriptions, Conrad is doing something quite different from those visual impressionists who sought to capture a scene under ephemeral atmospheric conditions. From the outset, Conrad’s impressionist aesthetic is tactile and architectural:

The sky without a speck was a benign immensity of unstained light, the very mist on the Essex marshes was like a gauzy and radiant fabric hung from the wooded rises inland and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds. (4)

Conrad’s synesthesia is on full display in this passage: the appearance of atmosphere conveys distinct textures such as “gauzy” and “diaphanous,” reinforcing the sense of atmosphere as a phenomenon that is palpable and haptic rather than visible. While there is an impression of smoothness - the sky is “without a speck” (4) and the “sky and sea were welded together without a joint” (3) - that precise evocation of surface gives way to

---

9 Architect Juhani Pallasmaa argues that “atmospheric perception…involves judgments beyond the five Aristotelian senses, such as sensations of orientation, gravity, balance, stability, motion, duration, continuity, scale” (“Peripheral” 231).
10 On the changing role of vision in the twentieth century see Martin Jay, Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought.
an acknowledgment of palpable texture, the potential for what, in a different context, Abel calls “wrinkles,” a “haptic allure that draws the viewer into the scene” (“Affective” 46). One detects textured materiality and a hint of interior design in the way these fabric-like textures seem to have been deliberately “hung,” “draping” in “diaphanous folds.” Far from formless and free-floating, then, air is structured like an architectural enclosure. When Conrad later describes a domestic interior, the description is strikingly similar: “dusk was falling… [in] a lofty drawing-room with three long windows from floor to ceiling that were like three luminous and bedraped columns” (73). This descriptive resonance between the outside air and a domestic structure affirms that Conrad’s aerial and architectural spaces are not opposites but parallels.

The capacity for architectural enclosure extends beyond the literal air and fog to include atmosphere in all of its senses. For example, Kurtz’ aura – his affective and auditory presence – is described in language that also echoes the above examples: “[h]e lived then before me…a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of gorgeous eloquence.” (72) Here a loss of visual clarity—“shadow darker than…night”— gives way to an intimate sense of tactile awareness and a surrounding environment—“folds of gorgeous eloquence.” That these are folds of “eloquence” speaks to the way that language envelops atmospherically. For Marlow – and for his listeners and for Conrad’s readers — language is something one becomes wrapped up in. The narrator is “wrapped up” because he is riveted, seduced by the power of oral storytelling, embedded in the narrative’s texture. Even the text’s colloquial use of the term “yarn” suggests the inadequacy of vision as an analogy for narrative, calling attention to narrative as a textured material one both spins out and is woven into.

Just as the fog fully envelops Marlow’s men on all sides, so do readers have the sense that Conrad’s signature atmospheric language surrounds us, with nearly identical descriptions creeping into multiple settings and sections of the text. Like Marlow’s men engulfed in the fog, we face the problem of not being able to step back and see atmosphere head-on. Rather, atmosphere inflects and seeps into the text’s many events, settings, and moods, while still remaining larger than any one of them. Here we arrive at the next major distinction of Conrad’s atmosphere, and that is its global nature. In sharp contrast to accounts of fog as a “signifier of London” (Corton 62), Conrad’s fog cannot be anchored to one specific setting. While we tend to think of atmosphere as place-specific, Conrad’s version is a global property of the text: though local manifestations bring it out in diverse and distinct ways, it can never be reduced to any one place. This stubborn atmospheric persistence defies traditional associations with ephemerality; atmosphere is in fact one of the only elements that traverses all levels of the text.

Conrad’s innovative distortions of framing are essential to his construction of atmosphere. In Heart of Darkness, the outer frame narrative with which the novella opens, sets a distinct atmospheric tone by blending descriptions of mood and weather on the Thames: “the air was dark above Gravesend…a mournful gloom brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth” (3). We expect frames to differentiate narrative layers by erecting walls between them, but notice how much this opening resembles meteorological and affective atmospheres subsequently attributed to the Congo in the inner frame: “stillness of an implacable force brooding” (34), “mournful stillness” (16), “mournful uproar” (34). As we read, we come to see that the opening passage does not set the scene so much as it sets all the scenes. Indeed, at various points throughout the
inner frame story, the original unnamed narrator interrupts, yanking the reader back into the distinct geographical and historical register of the outer frame, and yet atmosphere continues to permeate that boundary: “there was a pause of profound stillness” (47); “heavy night air” (27), “It...[was] pitch dark” (27). The narrative also returns to the original Thames setting in its conclusion, with the outer frame narrator writing that “the offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky – seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness” (77). This passage, of course, resounds with atmospheric echoes of the embedded story: “impenetrable darkness” (68), “so dark, so impenetrable” (55). “sombreness of the coast” (13).

Atmospheric permeation extends all the way to the literary and aesthetic works depicted within the world of Marlow’s tale (which is itself within Conrad’s fiction). For example, midway through his journey, Marlow meets a Manager and remarks of his oil painting, “the background was sombre - almost black” (25), a description that could apply just as well to any of the settings featured in any of the frames. Similarly, the outer frame begins in a “luminous estuary” (3); within the story, Marlow comes across a tattered book that is “luminous” (38) and also observes that Kurtz’ report “blazed at you luminous and terrifying” (50). There is no level at which one can escape the text’s prevailing atmosphere.

Furthermore, what constitutes a meteorological atmosphere in one place often reemerges as an affective atmosphere in another part of the text. In the opening outer frame, the literal “air” is “brooding”; in the embedded story, Marlow encounters a native woman who emanates “an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose” (61). Similarly, in the outer frame’s closing scene, the Thames is “sombre under an overcast sky” (77); within the story, Marlow describes a face “like the autumn sky, overcast one moment and bright the next” (53). In these examples, moods and the weather do not serve as metaphors for one another. Rather, it seems that both moods and the weather have been inflected by conditions even larger than either of them, something so global that it subsumes meteorology and affect alike. What these moods and the weather share is not so much content or valence (bad mood = bad weather), but a distinct kind of slow pacing. In other words, “brooding” does not tell us what these meteorological and affective atmospheres mean so much as the rate and manner in which they are moving. Indeed brooding is a motion so slow as to give off the appearance of motionless.

What Conrad mimics, then, is not the way that fog looks, but the way that it moves. By its very nature, fog defies the boundaries of a weather event; it is not something that announces an obvious beginning or ending. Instead, it unfolds and transforms along a broad spectrum, with changes occurring so slowly and subtly as to be nearly imperceptible. Conrad traces the manner in which fog inherently changes its state of matter and morphs into similar atmospheric conditions, for example thinning into “haze” or thickening into “thick, heavy, sluggish” air (33). When it absorbs water it becomes “mist”; when it absorbs sunlight it becomes “white fog”; when engulfed in darkness it “condense[s] into a mournful gloom” (3).

Similarly, I would suggest that the novella’s ample use of color and light/dark imagery is doing something other than painting a visual picture, serving a symbolic function, or illustrating epistemological enlightenment. What seems to matter instead is the pacing and lack of hard boundaries, the way that atmospheric conditions can subtly
merge into each other with such disturbing slowness: “[t]he long shadow had slipped downhill while we talked” (58); “in its curved and imperceptible fall the sun sank low” (4); “the darkness deepened” (75): “all this was in the gloom while down there [the trees] were yet in the sunshine” (58). I believe that this is also why Conrad so frequently refers to colors in mixed or hybrid forms: “the greenish gloom” (17), “so dark green as to be almost black” (13). It is not that these colors are visual symbols conveying some sort of emotional content; their significance lies in the implication of slow motion, the creeping pace by which one shade fades imperceptibly into the next. Similarly, the novella fixates on transitional times of day: dawn, dusk, and twilight dominate the settings featured. Fog is representative of the creeping encroachment and persistent envelopment that characterizes the text’s meteorological and affective atmospheres overall. These are not events which begin or end but rather conditions that roll throughout the text, undergoing gradual changes in state of matter or color at barely perceptible points. The striking persistence of Conrad’s atmosphere does not mean that it always looks identical, but that it defies the hard boundaries of event—as well as the borders of narrative frames.

Of course, there are other formal partitions in Heart of Darkness to which we should attend. For example, the entire narrative is divided into three subsections labeled with roman numerals “I,” “II,” and “III.” These partitions do not correspond to the boundaries of inner and outer frames, for the first section includes the outer frame and the beginning of Marlow’s story while the third section includes the end of Marlow’s story and the outer frame which concludes Conrad’s story. One might expect these numbered sections would succeed in atmospheric containment where the inner and outer frames have failed. They do not. There simply is no section with its own distinct, local atmosphere. Throughout his various novels, Conrad calls attention to what seem to be very simple and neat formal divisions, but end up feeling very messy and unbounded. In his next novel, Lord Jim, Conrad experimented with narrative framing much more overtly, dismantling the convention of neat bookends and creating an even more convoluted layering effect. I would argue that the seeds of that more radical project are laid here, with Heart of Darkness putting pressure on framing conventions while still seeming to have some use for them. The question then becomes, why use frames at all?

In order to approach this question, we need to scrutinize the precise nature of the relationship between the atmospheres of outer and inner frame. One might argue that the Thames’ atmosphere resembles that of the Congo only because the listeners have been imaginatively transported to another time and place, that the present day setting begins to feel gloomy and dark simply because the world of the story is gloomy and dark. Yet that cannot be the case because the text’s signature meteorological and affective atmosphere precedes the beginning of Marlow’s tale. Indeed, one can imagine that if the tale were told at a different time of day, or in different weather conditions, Marlow may have been prompted to tell a different story altogether—or no story for that matter. The discovery here is that atmosphere is the catalyst for the story’s production, not some decorative ornament that gets added in later. Marlow tunes into the atmosphere on the Thames and feels its resonance with the atmosphere of the Congo. Therefore, his aesthetic accomplishment is not really the creation of atmosphere so much as the connection he draws between them. This relationship of resonance is different from an act of reproducing or recreating atmosphere as described by Bohme:
The particular quality of a story, whether read or heard, lies in the fact that it not only communicates to us that a certain atmosphere prevailed somewhere else but that it conjures up this atmosphere itself. Similarly, paintings which depict a melancholy scene are not just signs for this scene but produce this scene itself (“Aesthetics” 124).

The situation with Marlow and his listeners is actually quite different from the one suggested by Bohme. It is not just that Marlow manages to recreate an atmosphere that resembles the one he experienced, a kind of faithful atmospheric copy of an “original” in a different time and place. His is not a feat of mimesis or conjuring but rather of atmospheric orchestration. Rather than reproducing the atmosphere of another time and place, Marlow lets one atmosphere strike a chord with another. Now we can appreciate why narrative frames still seem to have some utility for Conrad: they combine the separation and intimacy necessary for attunement (a concept we will explore in the next section). By using the frame narrative to dramatize narrative production of atmosphere, Conrad also permits readers a peek at the significance of seemingly extratextual elements. Instead of seeing the story as an isolated object, and suspending disbelief to fully buy into a hermetically sealed fictional world, we are encouraged to see the tale as having a relationship to its environment. This is a relationship of mutual resonance: the story resonates with atmosphere and the atmosphere resonates with the story. Here we arrive back at the “kernel and halo” passage with which we began: the atmosphere of a text is always larger than the text itself.

II. “As if the mist itself had screamed”: Affective Attunement

In Conrad in the Nineteenth Century, Ian Watt coined the influential phrase “delayed decoding” to describe the way that Conrad’s characters gradually and belatedly piece together sensory data. In a similar vein, Peter Brooks uses “primitive perception” (37) to indicate immediate impressions that are only later injected with cultural and semantic meaning. These approaches both place heavy emphasis on perceptual experiences unfolding in time. Watt’s central example is the episode in which Marlow and his men are attacked with arrows. Marlow registers an “initially inexplicable visual impression” (177), Watt writes, and the character only belatedly understands that the sticks whizzing through the air are in fact arrows. But I want to call attention to the presence of arrows in another scene that has received far less attention. Here, Marlow hears a cry “[i]nstantly in the emptiness of the landscape …whose shrillness pierced the still air like a sharp arrow flying straight to the very heart of the land” (59). In contrast to the temporal progression of Watt’s model, this atmospheric perception is immediate, striking “instantly”. And while Watt’s examples emphasize the mistiness of early impressions that only later open onto lucidity, this moment is notable for the clarity suggested by language such as “pierced” and “sharp” as well as the bulls-eye precision of “flying straight to the very heart”. One would expect to find vivid language in conjunction with the arrows of Watt’s example: after all, they are concrete objects, material, and visibly perceptible. One would also expect mistiness to align with the figurative arrows in my example: they are affective, aerial, and invisible. Yet atmospheric perception can be surprisingly sharp. This is one of several moments in the text in which
the sense of a mood in the air is not subtle but overwhelming. Descriptions of an “irresistible impression of sorrow” (43), a “terrible frankness” (37), and “phrases...[of] ominous and terrifying simplicity” (73) stand in stark contrast to the confused, delayed groping towards meaning emphasized in Watt’s model.

For scholars accustomed to privileging mediation, the idea of an “immediate” perception will be difficult to digest. Yet the seemingly instantaneous nature of atmospheric attunement can itself be understood in terms of the deep grooves worn by ongoing processes of social mediation. Attunement essentially reflects the capacity to slide into a familiar affective register—it is as if one has been pre-fitted for alignment with a given experience. Tonino Griffero writes that the perception of atmosphere “depends on the co-perception of past and/or expected atmospheres...when, for example, the atmosphere of a hospital is tense precisely because we anticipate the situation to follow...and we remember earlier ones” (125). Thus, while it is true that atmospheres tend to strike us instantly, that feeling of overwhelming immediacy often results from an extreme level of familiarity rather than novelty. For Watt, first impressions signify the vague beginning of a process, but in my reading such impressions mark the crystallization or culmination of a preexisting process. The feeling of being seized by something palpable tends to get dismissed as if it comes out of nowhere, but as Griffero insists, a “phenomenological aesthetics of atmosphere must rehabilitate the so-called first impression” (29). Architect Peter Zumthor similarly writes that “I have to admit that I am back to believing in first impressions. I enter a building, see a room— and in the fraction of a second— have this feeling about it” (12-13). I agree that these moments of profound recognition deserve our attention, for what feels like immediacy is likely the experience of suddenly tuning into something with a much longer history.

“Attunement” offers a more compelling way than perceptual decoding of theorizing the manner in which one registers atmosphere. The idea of “tuning in” suggests an affective-corporeal synchronization between subject and surroundings, a moment in which the subject hears and feels his entanglement with the wider world. The term also endows the perception of moods with a specifically musical quality, a connotation already lurking in the German “Stimmung” but lost in translation to the English “mood.” The model of tuning a musical instrument calls attention to a mode of

11 Lipari reviews scholarship on “the semantic fields of tempus, which resonate with embodied and material attunement: meteorological (temps, tempestus, temperature, intermperies), proportion or ratio (temperare, “temperament,” “tempestuous”), and occasional (printemps, “temporary,” “extempore,” “in tempore.” (169)

Peter Zumthor frames the experience of architecture as a kind of attunement when he writes:

What also comes to mind when I think of my own [architectural] work is the verb ‘to temper’—a bit like the tempering of pianos perhaps, the search for the right mood, in the sense of instrumental tuning...temperature in this sense is physical, but presumably psychological too. It’s what I see, what I feel, what I touch, even with my feet (35).

12 Heidegger writes of “the most familiar and everyday sort of thing; our mood, our Being-attuned” and points out that the “noun Stimmung originally means the tuning of a musical instrument...[I] call attention to the root metaphor of Gestimmstein by writing ‘being-
facilitating alignment without removing distinctions. In fact, the whole process is predicated on the preservation of difference:

Tuning an instrument requires an ability to listen and hear that each string is tuned to the correct pitch. Only when the instrument is correctly tuned can the strings resonate in a harmonious way…each string must be tuned individually, *while retaining the correct degree of difference* between the pitch of each string (Ash and Gallacher 73).

Furthermore, in contrast to the clearly demarcated temporality of a perceptual event whose onset is triggered by a discrete stimulus, attunement offers a way of thinking about one’s ongoing awareness of the background. Heidegger writes of “the most familiar and everyday sort of thing; our mood, our Being-attuned” (24). Kathleen Stewart characterizes atmospheric attunement not as a discrete event (of the sort Watt describes) but as the ongoing process of registering the “rhythms of living” (“Attunement” 445) where the “ordinary hums with the background noise….An atmospheric fill buzzes” (446). Finally and perhaps most significantly, attunement provides the necessary vocabulary for talking about the perception of a *medium* rather than an object.¹³ Attunement to the atmospheric medium resonates with a distinction Tim Ingold makes between touching and feeling: touching is one of the five senses—tactile contact with an object – while feeling is a more global awareness of the entire medium within which those five specific senses operate. We do not touch the wind, Ingold writes, “we touch in the wind” (“Earth Sky” 529).

Attunement is a particularly well-suited framework for theorizing the kinds of perceptual experiences that surround us.¹⁴ As Steven Holl points out, “sculpture and painting one can turn away from— but music surrounds us as does the space of architecture.” (12). The fact that attunement can cast atmospheres in such sharp relief requires us to reexamine the entrenched assumption that atmospheres are vague. A more nuanced account of what is and is not vague in atmospheres can be found in the work of philosopher Gernot Bohme:

> atmosphere indicates something that is in a certain sense indeterminate, diffuse but precisely not indeterminate in relation to its character. On the contrary, we have at our disposal a rich vocabulary with which to characterize atmospheres, that is, serene, melancholic, oppressive…. Atmospheres are indeterminate

---

¹² Attuned” (224-225). Hans Gumbrecht writes that “Only in German does the word connect with *Stimme* and *stimmen*. The first means ‘voice,’ and the second ‘to tune an instrument;’ by extension, *stimmen* also means ‘to be correct.’ As the tuning of an instrument suggests, specific moods and atmospheres are experienced on a continuum, like musical scales. They present themselves to us as nuances” (3).

¹³ As several scholars point out, Heidegger’s *Befindlichkeit*, often translated to “state of mind,” really means more specifically “how one finds oneself” (Wisnewski 61; Inwood 131), thus invoking a specifically embodied sense of space and place.

¹⁴ Architecture is an art form which has been described as “frozen music” (Rasmussen 105).
above all as regards their ontological status. We are not sure whether we should attribute them to the objects or environments from which they proceed or to the subjects who experience them. We are also unsure of where they are. (114).

Griffero makes a similar point when he writes that atmospheres cause us to debate whether they constitute a semantic or de dicto vagueness (the atmospheric description designates a given situation in a vague way) or instead, as we like to think, a metaphysical or de re vagueness (the atmospheric description designates a vague entity in a precise way) (7).

Following Bohme and Griffero, I would suggest that when Marlow registers a “curious, inexplicable note of desperate grief in this savage clamour that had swept by us” (42), it is not atmosphere per se which defies description. The affective atmosphere is unambiguously intuited and promptly named: “grief.” As a “note,” the cry is affectively vivid in much the same way that music is, while also not open to semantic “decoding.” In this scenario, it is clear what atmosphere is like. The ambiguity—what is “curious, inexplicable”—pertains to what atmosphere is and where it comes from. Marlow is unable to pin down the source of that grief which “had swept by us on the river-bank behind the blind whiteness of the fog” (42). Indeed auditory attunement consistently discloses a qualitatively distinct yet ontologically vague atmosphere:

A muffled rattle, a cry, a very loud cry as of infinite desolation, soared slowly into the opaque air. It ceased. A complaining clamour, modulated in savage discords, filled our ears. The sheer unexpectedness of it made my hair stir under my cap. I don’t know how it struck the others; to me it seemed as though the mist itself had screamed, so suddenly and apparently from all sides at once did this tumultuous and mournful uproar arise (39).

This cry affects the body—“filled our ears,” “made my hair stir,” “struck the others…from all sides at once”. While there is no indication of the scream’s ontological status or source, its bodily effect attunes Marlow to the mood of his surroundings. When it comes to articulating the expressive content of the experience, he has no problem: it is “a very loud cry of infinite desolation”; it is “mournful.” Mourning is a diffuse and enveloping affect, but that does not make it any less vivid. As opposed to the sticks that Marlow only belatedly recognizes as spears, or the knobs that he eventually recognizes as severed heads, atmosphere lends itself to instant recognition and precise naming. It is only in attempts to identify and locate a source for this atmosphere that the passage lapses into vague and uncertain language: “sheer unexpectedness,” “from all sides at once.” Notice how far we have come from seeing atmosphere: the air is something Marlow hears. To sense that it is “as if the mist itself screamed” is to tune into the air itself.

The sense that “the mist had screamed” also acknowledges that the cry cannot be identified with a particular subject or object, nor can it be localized to a specific place. It is clear that the atmosphere is one of grief and mourning, but whose grief, whose mourning? This persistence of ambiguity, even in the midst of affective clarity, further
distinguishes attunement from decoding, a process that aims to master ambiguity and to collapse the distance between perceiver and perceptual object. As previously mentioned, the musical act of tuning is predicated upon the preservation of distinctions. Lisbeth Lipari explains that when one tunes the strings of an instrument, “you want them to be in tune so that the notes that are supposed to sound the same actually do sound the same, and so the notes that are supposed to harmonize beautifully, or not, actually do” (36). Thus at the same time that attunement revises the decoding model of subject-object relations, it also resists a model of sympathetic identification between subject and others. Marlow’s overwhelming awareness of grief reflects attunement to a mood that envelops him and touches him but is not identical to him. In fact, as in the instrument tuning analogy, the affective atmosphere resonates because it is remains foreign.

This shift, from the decoding of events to atmospheric attunement, speaks to Conrad’s interest in slow violence – the kind of violence that is less like being bombarded by arrows and more like suffocating in a smothering fog. Marlow reflects that,

I have wrestled death. It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable greyness with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators, without clamour, without glory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere without the great desire of victory, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid skepticism…I had peeped over the edge myself (70).

This statement is somewhat surprising given twentieth-century literature’s perceived association with shock and violence. The description of a “sickly atmosphere” calls attention to a kind of chronic, slowly worsening condition rather than a single violent injury. Similarly, “impalpable greyness” suggests the barely perceptible fading of one shade into another, much as we saw earlier with respect to fog thinning into mist or condensing into dark gloom. This is precisely what makes slow violence disturbing: its changes are so subtle and slight that they can be missed altogether. Just as there are no hard boundaries separating one shade from the next, so is death not a dramatic rupture but “that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible” (70).

Similarly weary language characterizes what is perhaps modernism’s most famous articulation of despair: “he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath, ‘the horror, the horror’!” (69). That such a pronouncement unfolds as a sort of attritional decline, rather than in an explosion of spectacular force, illuminates the slow violence that informs Conrad’s understanding of colonial atmosphere. As we have come to see, the effects of colonialism reverberate beyond the discrete episodes of overt violence that have tended to garner critical attention: severed heads, flying arrows, surprise attacks. Rather than an object perceived or event witnessed, Conrad’s colonialism is an environment inhabited, captured by the brooding gloom and enveloping fog that roll slowly and steadily through the narrative. It seems at least possible to distance oneself from morally abhorrent events, but how does one create distance from an environment that is all-encompassing? “You stand the climate – you outlast them all” (32), the station manager tells Marlow, prompting one to wonder what it would mean to stand up to a climate, to resist its creeping encroachment and subsuming force.
The specific reference to breath suggests that Kurtz’ exhalation will continue to circulate as part of the larger environment. Far from a punctuated endpoint, death is simply the transfer of breath into the atmosphere, as in the recently titled *When Breath Becomes Air*, a reference to the seventeenth-century poem “Caelica 83”. Indeed Kurtz’ last breath does become air: “dusk was repeating [his last words] in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly like the first whisper of a rising wind. ‘The horror! The horror!’” (69).

There is in fact an intricate respiratory economy at play throughout the novella. Marlow recalls, for example, that the “crowd of savages was vanishing…as if the forest that had ejected these beings so suddenly had drawn them in again as the breath is drawn in a long aspiration” (59). In another instance, Kurtz “rose, unsteady, long, pale, indistinct like a vapor exhaled by the earth” (65). And, as we have already seen, Marlow’s crew “chok[es]” on the fog (43). Even the steamer exhales polluted air: “the splashing, thumping, fierce river-demon beating the water with its terrible tail and breathing black smoke into the air” (66). This pervasive circulation of air models a kind of eco-physiological organism that includes both the environment and human bodies. Thus far, I have mostly focused on the way that subjects are immersed in their environments. But if atmosphere swallows up subjects and objects alike, it is also true that subjects swallow atmosphere. As Pallasmee puts it with respect to architecture, “as we enter a space, the space enters us” (232). The sense of an overwhelming first impression signals more than just awareness that one is in atmosphere; conversely, atmosphere also “gets inside us” (Thibauld 206).

The idea of not just perceiving but breathing atmosphere begins to raise some serious ethical concerns: how can one ever object to or distance oneself from atmosphere? Can there ever be such a thing as an atmospheric bystander? When Marlow reflects that he had “never breathed an atmosphere so vile” (62), the very act of breathing means that as soon as he becomes aware of the objectionable atmosphere, it is *already incorporated as part of his own body*. Ben Highmore suggests that these opposing reactions—recoiling and realizing that the elicitor of disgust is inside my own body—are actually constitutive of disgust as a particular kind of affect: “the bio-cultural arena of disgust (especially disgust of ingested or nearly ingested foods) simultaneously invokes a form of sensual perception, an affective register of shame and disdain, as well as bodily recoil” (120). Far from delayed decoding where impressions gradually sink in, these are experiences where absorption has preceded awareness, as in the “smell of mud, of primeval mud…in my nostrils” (26). Here, mud no longer refers to the ground outside; by the time it is registered, it is already a part of the body’s respiratory and olfactory systems. Just as the enveloping fog closes in on the body, so does the body itself close in on atmosphere, inhaling and ingesting its particles.

---

15 “You that seek what life is in death,/Now find it air that once was breath./New names unknown, old names gone:/Till time end bodies but souls none./Reader! then make time while you be,/But steps to your eternity” (Baron Brooke Fulke Greville, “Caelica 83,” qtd. in *When Breath Becomes Air*, epigraph).
III. “An atmosphere of murderous complicity”: Readerly Attunement

Attunement and decoding represent not only distinct modes of perception but also contrasting methods of reading. Here I would like to take a brief detour to Conrad’s short story “The Tale” (1917), for I believe that it models the precise choice of reading practices we face in our encounters with Heart of Darkness and similarly atmospheric modernist texts. In this World War I era story, a naval vessel comes across an unknown ship shrouded in thick fog, the captain suspects the ostensibly neutral ship of supplying enemy ships with resources, and he must decide how he will “read” the narrative presented to him. Ultimately, the captain carries out what I believe constitutes an atmospheric reading -- he tunes into a feeling in the air -- but only after the story has staged considerable tension between methods of visual decoding and atmospheric attunement.

Conrad’s story first gestures to a more conventional model of reading when the captain has the opportunity to scrutinize visual and material evidence. The stranger presents him with logbooks, photographs, and various papers. “Your officer has seen the papers,” he says, “see for yourself” (104). This method of reading privileges visual mastery, and with it comes the language of decoding: “[n]othing suspicious to be detected anywhere” (102). The captain’s subordinate remarks, “You couldn’t prove it, sir” (102) and “I am afraid you couldn’t even make a case for reasonable suspicion” (101). In this scenario, where the reader examines empirical evidence and plays the role of judge and jury, the verdict seems to be a resounding “not guilty.”

Yet despite this wealth of technically exculpatory evidence, the captain senses a qualitatively different kind of affective evidence. He is “aware of an inward voice, a grave murmur in the depth of his very own self, telling another tale” (104). This “telling” seems to come from inside -- “in the depth of his very own self”—and yet reading on we discover that its origin is also in the air enveloping him-- “the atmosphere of murderous complicity [in the room] …surrounded him, denser, more impenetrable, more acrid than the fog outside” (109). While one might argue that the notion of an intuition “in the air” merely represents psychological projection, Conrad’s language clearly evokes an act of atmospheric attunement: “[h]e never faltered. At that moment he had the certitude. The air of the chart-room was thick with guilt and falsehood” (108). The captain’s intuitions lead him outside rather than in: guilt becomes an atmospheric condition rather than a state of mind. This is not the Victorian fog that obstructs vision and must lift in order for the mystery to be solved. Here, the thicker the fog, the stronger the sense of certainty.

Conrad’s captain does not observe atmosphere from a distance (the possibility of doing so is dubious in the first place); he attends to the way the air affects him, the stirrings of suspicion it immediately gives rise to. He takes seriously the way that the air feels – its “thickness” – and does not attempt to decode it or to translate it into something different. His approach in this way resonates with a variety of reading practices that can be loosely grouped according to such designations as “reparative reading,” “surface reading”, “weak theory.”

Though different in important ways, these practices share a

---

16 This approach has taken various forms in recent decades. In “Surface Reading,” Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus offer an alternative to “symptomatic reading, a mode of interpretation that
commitment to resisting a so-called “hermeneutics of suspicion.” In “The Tale,” however, those precise terms get twisted around so that taking seriously the captain’s impression of “suspicion” actually aligns more closely with what would usually be called a non-suspicious reading practice. Though this may sound bizarrely counterintuitive, the captain’s sense of suspicion does not arise from decoding or digging below the surface for concealed meaning. Rather, in this case, suspicion is what is most present, most directly perceptible, as plain and all-encompassing as the air itself. It can therefore be likened to Marlow’s sense of an affective atmosphere transmitting its “terrible frankness” (37) and “terrifying simplicity” (73). The captain is suspicious of the stranger, but he is not suspicious of the air: he tunes into a palpable affective atmosphere. By contrast, the “non-guilty” conclusion would be drawn only by digging well below the surface (or in this case, behind the air), deciphering log entries and decoding the contents of material evidence. Thus while many readers would consider the air merely a screen concealing or containing some other true meaning, the captain engages with the transparency of atmosphere on its own terms. He reads the fog; he does not attempt to clear it.

What this approach shares with surface reading is a commitment to taking seriously what is immediately present. Like “surface reading,” atmospheric reading practices reject “suspicious and aggressive readings” (Marcus and Best 11) in favor of “accepting texts, deferring to them instead of mastering or using them” (Marcus and Best 10). Yet while surface reading tends to privilege the text itself in a more conventional sense, urging readers to “stay close to our objects of study” (Marcus and Best 15), reading atmospherically makes readerly responses integral to a text’s meaning. After all, Conrad’s halo and kernel passage complicates assumptions about the boundaries of what we consider a textual “object” in the first place. If meaning is found not just in the text – or for that matter, on its surface – then sticking close to the text becomes a different kind

assumes that a text’s truest meaning lies in what it does not say, describes textual surfaces as superfluous, and seeks to unmask hidden meanings” (1). Their proposed model of surface reading “broadens the scope of critique to include the kinds of interpretive activity that seek to understand the complexity of literary surfaces— surfaces that have been rendered invisible by symptomatic reading” (1). See also Eve Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re so Paranoid, You Probably Think this Essay is About You” in Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity. Sedgwick asks, “what does knowledge do?” (124). In “Weak Theory in an Unfinished World,” Kathleen Stewart advocates “attending to the textures and rhythms of forms of living as they are being composed” (71), and in “Atmospheric Attunements,” she suggests that “things matter not because of how they are represented but because they have qualities, rhythms, forces” (445). Ann Cvetkovich advocates “attention to feelings as both subject and method” and writes that “Public Feelings takes seriously questions like ‘How do I feel?’ and ‘How does capitalism feel?’ as starting points for something that might be a theory but could also be a description, an investigation, or a process.”
of practice altogether. In other words, we need to expand the boundaries of the textual object to include its atmosphere.

This also means that affective responses should not be dismissed as distracting from the text at hand. If surface reading is about taking seriously what is present, I would venture that one of the most readily available materials we have are our own affective responses. Hans Gumbrecht similarly suggests that atmospheric reading practices make use of the affective responses readers always experience but critics undervalue: “[o]ften, we are alerted to a potential mood in a text by irritation and fascination provoked by a single word or small detail—the hint of a different tone or rhythm. Following a hunch means trusting an implicit promise for awhile” (17). This is just what the captain does: he notices “something subtly different in [the other captain’s] bearing” (106); he tunes into “the sound of a sharp breath indrawn through closed teeth” (107).

Atmospheric attunement also requires the captain to tune out conflicting evidence, as when “[the suspected villain] raised a big arm to point at a row of photographs…The movement was ponderous, as if the arm had been made of lead” (105). A more conventional reader might look at the collection of photographs and attempt to decode their meaning. The moving arm would just be a vehicle for getting to that evidence - the medium but not the message. Yet instead of following the arm to the photographs, this reader zeroes in on the movement of the arm itself. There, he finds a different kind of evidence expressed in the weight and pacing of the other captain’s arm movements — “ponderously…as if of lead.”

The image of following is crucial to our understanding of atmospheric reading as a participatory practice. If affect is inherently relational, we need to take stock of affective reactions in order to talk about affective atmospheres. Reading atmospherically, our bodies become instruments—what is the tone, the rhythm, the mood; what feels impending, what feels hauntingly persistent? Citing the science of sound, Lisbeth Lipari suggests that we need to reimagine attuned listening as fundamentally active rather than passive: “[w]hen we listen, our bodies move. We vibrate with the sound waves pulsing toward and then through us” (4). Sometimes atmosphere seize us, but attunement can be also be hard work, especially given that it requires a shift in habits that have become second nature to many of us. Kathleen Stewart focuses on the efforts of attunement at the level of the body writing that “bodies labor to literally fall into step with the pacing, the habits, the lines of attachment” (452). While many of the earlier examples we looked at made attunement seem effortless, it actually takes considerable effort to orient oneself in such a way that one can be seized. This means tuning out the little decoder we all have in our heads.

Like “The Tale,” *Heart of Darkness* dramatizes readerly attunement. Once again, Conrad’s use of metafictional narrative frames is central, allowing him to exhibit not just how atmospheric tales are produced, but also how they are received. It soon

17 A reference to Marshall McLuhan’s work.
18 Gumbrecht’s model of an atmospheric reader resembles the captain in “A Tale,” pursuing “hunches” and “[f]ollow[ing] configurations of atmosphere and mood” (12).
19 Flatley writes that “emotion is something that happens inside and tends toward outward expression, affect indicates something relational and transformative” (12).
becomes clear that, just as attunement is a crucial aspect of Marlow’s narrative production, so does tuning into the rhythm and mood of the tale characterize the readers’ experience. Readerly attunement replaces epistemological mastery with an intensity of feeling. More specifically, I would argue that for both the fictional readers depicted within the world of the narrative, and for actual readers of Conrad’s novella, the text’s pervasive language of brooding and mournfulness creates a distinct sense of unease.

Like other phenomena we have traced, uneasiness is affectively vivid and yet ontologically ambiguous. Almost by definition, the concept implies a sense of unknown origin: we feel uneasy when the intensity of an effect clashes with the vagueness of a cause. It is a vivid feeling of something vague. Not only do we sense that something is off, we feel the discomfort of knowing that we are a part of it, somehow implicated.20 There are several layers of uneasy readers to account for when considering affective atmosphere in *Heart of Darkness*. Within the inner frame, Marlow’s feeling of “uneasiness” coincides with his own attempts to “read” the surrounding atmosphere in Belgium:

I began to feel slightly uneasy. You know I am not used to such ceremonies and there was something ominous in the atmosphere. It was just as though I had been let into some conspiracy— I don’t know— something not quite right, and I was glad to get out...In the street—I don’t know why—a queer feeling came over me that I was an imposter (13).

Marlow’s uneasiness reflects a sense of acute affective envelopment, coming not from within but without—“a queer feeling came over me.” This uneasy sense of mystery emerges from a feeling of “complicity,” an excess of proximity rather than distance. In other words, while the cause is foreign (“I don’t know”, “I don’t know why”), the effect feels intimate. This language of cause and effect helps articulate what is and is not vague in Conrad’s text: causes remain shrouded in mystery, while effects are portrayed with vivid precision. Marlow’s sense of a “conspiracy” is particularly telling: as Tonino Griffero points out, the word “conspiracy” means “to breathe together”: “conspiratio, understood precisely as sharing of air”(65).21 From the inner frame to the outer frame, we find that the listeners on the boat experience a similar affective atmosphere in their own role as readers. The frame narrator remarks upon “the uneasiness inspired by [Marlow’s] narrative” (27), for example. Just as Marlow was inspired to tell the story because one atmosphere struck a chord with another, so does his story inspire uneasiness in his

---

20 Scholars have suggested that a mismatch between cause and effect helps explain the historical association of atmosphere with divine or supernatural forces In *Atmospheres*, Griffero writes of atmosphere in terms of “all those effects that, being out of proportion with respect to their causes, used to be attributed by pre-modern knowledge to a mysterious action” (1).
21 *OED*: < French *conspire-r* (15th cent. in Littré) (= Provençal *cospirar*, Spanish *conspirar*, Italian *conspirare*), < Latin *conspīrāre* lit. ‘to breathe together’, whence, ‘to accord, harmonize, agree, combine or unite in a purpose, plot mischief together secretly’.
listeners. Considering the etymology of “inspiration,” we could say that the story itself is “no more than a breath,” passed between storyteller and listeners.

Strikingly, if we continue to peel back the narrative layers to go beyond the outer frame, extending all the way out to the readers and critics of Conrad, uneasiness continues to characterize the affective atmosphere. To give a sense of the range I have noticed: Con Coroneos writes of Conrad’s “capacity to inspire unease among his readers” (12); Peter Brooks writes that reading Conrad is “unsettling”; Mark Wollaeger points to “the uneasy conjunction” (xiii) of aesthetics and philosophy; Geoffrey Harpham writes that “Conrad is uneasy in any company” [of writers] (12).” Uneasiness thus captures something about atmosphere at every level of the text—from the innermost story told by Marlow, to the outer frame narrator, all the way out to the affective responses of readers and critics responding to Conrad’s Heart of Darkness.

In this way the text is a kind of architectural space we come to inhabit—not a picture to be perceived and not a sign to be decoded. The reader’s affective experience mirrors that of the characters but not because Conrad has so faithfully represented the story’s environment as to transport readers imaginatively. The feeling—the way we are affected-- is the same or similar but for different reasons: characters feel uneasy when they find themselves in the “heart of darkness;” readers feel uneasy when they find themselves in Heart of Darkness. Thus the following passage, in which Griffiero describes an atmosphere of “unease,” could be applied to characters finding themselves in the Congo as well as readers finding themselves in Conrad’s textual environment:

[It is legitimate to expect that the unease and the feeling of being spied on aroused in us by a dark wood—not allowing free locomotion or observation (darkness, fog, badly outlined things like foliage, bushes, etc.) …the atmosphere of disquietude aroused by the wood does not derive from the thought of fear, but is rather the immediate irradiation of a quasi-thing…spatially poured out (51-52).

Here we can appreciate that Conrad’s atmospheric intensity does not derive simply from vivid imagery but rather from the architecture that the text builds up around us. The frame narrative structure is crucial to Conrad’s depiction of atmosphere because it leaves us with an uneasy feeling of being surrounded.

Tuning into one’s affective response is only the first part of reading atmospherically. Next, rather than searching for hidden clues to decode, an atmospheric reader might argue that what matters is the way Conrad positions us to feel uneasy, enveloped by a constant sense of gloom and doom. Approached from this perspective, the text does not have some secret message – condemning or celebrating Imperialism – its mood is readily apparent and affectively vivid. The work attunes us to a dark and ominous side of imperial conquest, and it implicates us, disseminating a sense of conspiratorial complicity. In this way, attunement eschews the kind of “mastery” that

---

22 OED, Inspire (v): Etymology: < Old French enspirer, inspirer (13th cent.), espirer (12th cent. in Littré), < Latin inspīrāre to blow or breathe into, < in- (IN- prefix) + spīrāre to breathe.
makes imperialism so problematic in the first place. Instead of attempting to decode or impose meaning, an atmospheric reading attempts to tune into a world in which causes are foreign even as effects are vividly intense. This sense of complicity exposes the ethical stakes inextricably linked to Conrad’s atmosphere. The fog is not something that one can step outside of, making it difficult to abdicate moral responsibility: everyone and everything becomes complicit when the horror is as pervasive as the air itself. Usually, when we recognize our complicity in colonialism and related forms of institutional violence, we think in terms of the circulation of goods and economic advantages. But alongside that economic circulation, which itself tends to remain as invisible as it is ubiquitous, we are wrapped up in larger systems even at the level of the very air we breathe. We should recognize, therefore, that Conrad’s text makes us uneasy not because we put ourselves in the shoes of the uneasy characters depicted, but because the affective atmosphere strikes a very real chord.

The fact that attending to the seemingly simple affective response of “unease” can lead to directly to the heart of the text’s political and economic concerns should help prove the point that in reading atmospherically, one does not relinquish a stake in the major ethical debates surrounding this much-discussed text. To the contrary, we enter into those enduring controversies with a new perspective. Focus shifts from where Conrad asks his readers to stand to how his work moves readers. Being moved can be ethical as well as affective.

It is critical to appreciate, furthermore, that atmospheric reading practices do not enforce hermeneutic conformity. I believe that Conrad’s textual rendering of atmosphere creates an uneasy sense of envelopment, and that this sense of complicity attunes readers to the difficulty of stepping outside of systems of slow violence. Yet, one could arrive at a different set of conclusions while still employing atmospheric reading methods. For example, a different reader might take the same steps I have taken in noticing the uneasiness of Conrad’s atmosphere, but then ask, at what cost? This reading might question the text’s willingness to use bodies in constructing affective and aesthetic atmosphere: “black shadows…in the greenish gloom” (17); “dark human shapes…flitting indistinctly against the gloomy border of the forest” (60). It is often difficult to dissociate bodies from the environment as when “[t]here was an eddy in the mass of human bodies” (67) or a “streams of human beings…were poured into the clearing” (59). One could argue that Conrad’s production of atmosphere is problematic because it uses human beings as atmospheric props. This reader might suggest that Conrad’s construction of atmosphere resonates with concerns over cultural tourism, the way that peoples and cultures are exploited as ornaments to satisfy visitors’ appetite for a certain mood or ambiance. This atmospheric reading would question the ethical implications of the enveloping gloom we feel as readers, wondering if it is a kind of affective indulgence.

That possibility highlights a more sinister problem lurking in Bohme’s observation that “atmosphere [tends to be] mentioned…from the perspective of the stranger;” that it is “produced by the locals through their lives, but…is noticed first by the stranger” (“Conversation” 46; 48). However, we also need to reexamine whether the moral disapproval of objectifying bodies necessarily makes sense within an atmospheric context. As this discussion has detailed, the enveloping nature of atmosphere dissolves the boundaries between subjects and objects, humans and environment, nature and aesthetics. In a way, every “body” is an atmospheric prop.
The aim of the present discussion is not to “solve” that particular debate, but to give a preliminary sketch of how, moving forward, we might envision atmospheric interventions contributing to some longstanding critical concerns. In the examples modeled above, two readers follow their affective responses to very different ends. The place where consensus does play a role is simply the starting point, for it is striking how a range of readers will describe the text’s atmosphere in similar terms, even when these figures hold vastly different theoretical or interpretive commitments. This is not to say that the text affects everyone in the exact same way: in keeping with the architecture analogy, subjects can have radically different perceptual experiences while still inhabiting the same structure. But for all of the diversity in conclusions drawn, and for all of the emphasis on the text as a generator of never-ending debate, it is important to recognize that as readers we do share a common habitat, that the atmosphere of the text circumscribes an affective readerly world. Even the most open-ended of modernist texts remains a container.
Chapter II: Poison Gas

‘There’s something in the air,’ he said
In the farm parlour cool and bare;
....
But still ‘There’s something in the air’ I hear,
And still ‘We’re going South man,’ deadly near.
-Edmund Blunden, “Two Voices” (1928)

Many instances came to notice of men’s eyes being strongly affected to such an extent that they could not keep them open. There seemed to be something in the air which made an unprotected man weep copiously if he tried to keep his eyes open, and of course if he closed them he could not see what he was doing.
-Samuel Auld, Gas and Flame in Modern War (76) (1918)

I. “There’s something in the air”: The War in and On the Air

In this chapter, we move from Conrad’s creeping fog to the lingering of poison gas. Heart of Darkness seems eerily to anticipate not just gas but the atmosphere of war in every sense of the word. Recall that for Conrad, the “air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish” (33); war poet and memoirist Edmund Blunden describes “sluggish, soaking mists” (101). Conrad’s Marlow was immersed in a “white fog” like cotton wool (39); Blunden feels “white mist…like a rising shroud” (22). For Conrad, blinding white fog reduced the world to “two feet…and that was all” (5); for Blunden, “the air’s near whiteness thickened into the impenetrable at a few yards’ distance” (186). The uncanny prescience with which Conrad’s fog anticipates poison gas as well as the affectively disorienting “fog of war”\(^1\) serves as a powerful reminder that the early twentieth-century literary preoccupation with atmosphere was overdetermined. What lines of causality did exist ran in both directions: modernists responded to the war and its new technologies, but war writers also responded to the work of early modernists who were already grappling with the representational problems posed by atmosphere and slow violence. In Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, for example, Siegfried Sassoon reaches for an unmistakably Conradian image to capture the enveloping bewilderment of war:

Out in No Man’s Land… I was in a sort of twilight, for there was a moony glimmer in the low-clouded sky; but the unknown territory in front was dark, and I started out at it like a man looking from the side of a ship (Sassoon 163).

\(^1\) A phrase generally attributed to Carl von Clausewitz’ On War (1832; in English 1873).
What we could see was just the steamer we were on, her outlines blurred as though she had been on the point of dissolving and a misty strip of water perhaps two feet broad around her – and that was all (Conrad *Heart of Darkness* 5).

While we will return to Sassoon in my preliminary discussion of atmosphere and the Great War, Edmund Blunden’s work is the primary focus of this chapter. Blunden was a British soldier and poet who subsequently became an Oxford English professor. He is thought to have seen more front-line action than any other Great War writer (Webb 50). I suggest that we need to think about why the war writer who had the most first-hand experience would compose an account that seems least scaled to an individual frame of reference and the conventions of documentary realism. Blunden often passes over the war’s most sensational events, while devoting long passages to highly stylized meditations on the serenity of bucolic landscapes. Paul Fussell famously called it “an extended pastoral elegy in prose” (254). In my reading, these asides, which might seem like digressions away from the war, are more like pockets embedded within the war. I argue that Blunden’s interest in nature is not just a nostalgic turn away from war, but a particular way of registering an atmosphere transformed by poison gas. While Blunden was the victim of a gas attack which he alludes to, he never recounts the episode directly. I argue that gas seeps into many of his environmental interludes, and even informs his distinct style. The text’s shifting tone itself operates according to principles of atmospheric manipulation: poison gas carves out pockets of air and is susceptible to “blow back” dependent on the direction of the wind, just as Blunden’s narrative follows anachronistic counter-currents and formally embeds pastoral microclimates within the prevailing climate of war and modernity. I am in partial agreement with Paul Fussell, who suggests that “Blunden’s style is his critique” (268), but instead of setting up an opposition in which the writer is “engaging the war by selecting from the armory of the past” (269), creating ironic juxtaposition, I argue that the modern and pastoral are thoroughly intertwined in the same atmospheric texture of war.

It is clearly an oversimplification to suggest that preoccupation with nature is somehow anachronistic. In this chapter, I am interested in exploring what happens when we extend the generic designations of “nature writing” and “environmental literature” to texts that would not traditionally be labelled as such. Blunden’s war writing is a kind of nature writing precisely because it is about war, not in spite of that fact. If we consider the Great War an environment as much as an event, it begins to make sense that war’s textual rendering would constitute a kind of environmental literature.

The narrative’s frequent use of the environment and geology as its respective spatial and temporal frames of reference also challenges the privileged status of first-hand or eyewitness memoirs. Blunden continuously gestures away from the time and space of his own experience, emphasizing failures of impact more than impact itself. I suggest that the problem we face when reading war literature is not that we lack the imagination to grasp the vivid sensations of first-person experience, but rather that we have overactive imaginations which tend to glide right past the kind of sensory subtlety implied by a term like “undertones.” To the well-worn discussion of the extreme perceptual burdens imposed on readers of war literature, I add the counterbalancing question of how we
might attune ourselves to all that bypasses conventional points of bodily and psychological access. Affective traces that are invisible, subtle, faint, slight, dim — these too are the domain of the war writer. *Undertones of War’s* distinct value lies not in the way it leads us inside the mind and body of an individual but the specific way it leads us out – into impersonal atmospheric spaces.

The invention of the airplane meant that World War I was waged not only on land but in the air. But this was also a war on the air. Poison gas furnishes the most strikingly literal example of the twentieth-century subject’s transformed relationship to atmosphere. Toxic chemicals cause air to materialize in new ways: air assumes a distinct taste and odor; it becomes audible as it whizzes out of holding canisters, and palpable in sensations ranging from the mist of dew to the fiery burn of blisters and skin sores. Phosgene and chlorine make the air visible in shades ranging from yellow to green to blue, while mustard gas is invisible (Coleman 20-25).

My discussion takes the work of historian and philosopher Peter Sloterdijk as its central point of departure. In *Terror from the Air*, Sloterdijk argues that the truly modern danger of poison gas stemmed from its assault on atmosphere rather than an individual target. Chemical agents moved modern warfare beyond not only hand-to-hand combat but the very idea of violence directed against individual bodies. While historically warfare had been characterized by “direct shots” and a “targeted object” (13), poison gas “targeted the air...fuzzing the notion of a ‘hit’” (18). Sloterdijk goes so far as to suggest that atmospheric manipulation is the single most distinguishing feature of twentieth-century modernity: “The 20th century will be remembered as the age whose essential thought consisted in targeting no longer the body, but the enemy’s environment” (14).

There are other ways in which the war was waged both in and on the air. Samuel Hynes calls death “an accident in the air” (71) and grimly observes, “[at] any moment, in any sector of the front, a shell or a bullet might be in the air, on its way to kill you” (70). That the fatal bullet might already be whizzing through the air, unperceived, reinforces the sense that war rarely conforms to the clearly demarcated boundaries of “event” or “battle.” War consistently defies the scales familiar to a human frame of reference; even one’s death could already be underway without the victim’s awareness. In the Great War, there was a very real sense of the air rather than enemy as the ultimate arbiter of death. Despite unprecedented human efforts to harness atmosphere, the fluctuations of weather continued to shape events in ways that could not be predicted or controlled. In many cases, a shift in the wind meant the difference between surviving or perishing.  

---

2 As alluded to in my introduction, the multi-sensory and multi-directional nature of bombardment further resonates with atmosphere’s etymological roots from the Greek “sphere of vapor.” In this respect, poison gas inevitably challenges ocular centric models of perception: just as Woolf suggests that the mind is assaulted by “myriad impressions...from all sides they come” (“Modern Fiction” 9), so does Blunden describe, “with a crash and flame on all sides at once a barrage began” (152).

3 Today we are likely to overlook the interdependence between the military and early meteorology: for example, “cold fronts” and “warm fronts” were observed during and named for World War One entrenchment; weather forecasting was originally part of the Department of War;
gas, for example, is only offensively effective when the wind direction is favorable; the phenomenon of “blow-back” becomes a kind of aerial friendly fire (Coleman 13). The reality of air as the most proximate cause of death extends beyond the case of noxious gases. In the case of explosives, the sheer force of air pressure is enough to kill even those whose bodies remain completely untouched by the blast or any of its fragments. Indeed, when Blunden describes the assault of air pressure, it hardly seems to matter where the shell lands: “I felt the air rush in hot tongues on us as shell after shell burst just at the exit” (26).

British military chemist Samuel Auld provides a stark illustration of how the air can kill in what amounts to no more than a casual side: “[one sergeant] was gassed through his helmet’s being holed by a bullet, though he himself was not wounded” (66). This grim picture puts the indirect nature of an atmospheric death on full display: “he himself was not wounded.” Particularly striking here is the way the helmet successfully does its traditional job of acting as defensive armor against bodily harm and yet cannot prevent an atmospheric leak. The helmet stops the bullet but in so doing opens up a passageway for air. But sparing the body at the expense of the air is pointless: injury to the air is injury to the body. That a hole in the helmet is just as lethal as a bodily wound provides a stark reminder of the human respiratory system’s complete dependence on its atmospheric habitat. The very fact that environmental contamination so effectively destroys human bodies complicates any attempt to conceive of an autonomous individual who could ever hope to stand outside of environment. In A History of Chemical Warfare, Kim Coleman explains the practical advantage of targeting the environment:

The weapons designers of 1914 soon realised that it was no easy matter to design a weapon that could deliver effective dosages of the agent to an enemy deployed over a distant target area. It seemed the only practicable way of delivering an agent was to contaminate the enemy’s surroundings, particularly the air he breathed, in hope that some of the chemical agent would eventually penetrate his body. It was realised that the performance of the potential weapon was crucially dependent on the state of the atmosphere (14).

Coleman’s account reflects a shift in scale from the nervous system to an entire ecological system. Or, perhaps more accurately, it reflects the nervous system’s participation in a larger ecology. As British historian and Great War combatant C.R.M.F. Cruttwell put it, “[if] the very air which he breathes is poison, his chance is gone” (qtd. in Hynes 57). It is this glaring sense of the body’s absolute embeddedness in environment that Sloterdijk has in mind when he writes that twentieth-century innovations make atmosphere “explicit” in unprecedented ways. Poison gas does not create the body’s dependence on air for survival, but it forces an encounter with the basic conditions sustaining human life; such “explication” reveals the everydayness of a respiratory

---

4 Coleman writes that “the Germans waited a month for a favorable wind before launching their first gas attack on Ypres” (24).

57
struggle to survive. It is only when the atmosphere is compromised that one pauses to recognize humanity’s complete reliance upon it. Thus, while poison gas might appear to be a threat unique to those who fought on the front lines, it highlights a struggle that is as everyday as they come.

Sloterdijk additionally argues that, in a sense, the interdependence of physiological and atmospheric airflow forces individuals to become “complicit” in their own deaths. While normally breathing should sustain life, breath itself becomes the agent responsible for delivering poison. Coleman alludes to this inversion when she points out that counterintuitively, for victims of gas attacks, strained breathing is a good sign. Victims of a chlorine attack tend to cough and choke — as a consequence of this fitful respiratory struggle, they inhale less poison, and are more likely to survive. By contrast, in a phosgene attack, victims find it easier to go on breathing, they therefore end up inhaling greater quantities of gas, and that is why casualty rates are significantly higher for phosgene victims (Coleman). In this strange upside-down world, suspension of breath becomes a way of preserving life while enforced breathing is a mode of execution. The gas mask provides another illustration of breath as newly lethal. It is precisely when the gas mask is performing its life-saving function that one is likely to experience the sensations we might expect from gas itself: suffocation, restricted airflow, etc. Historians of chemical warfare emphasize how effective gas masks are when worn properly; when wearers perish it actually tends to be because they frantically ripped the apparatus off in an attempt to breathe more air. It is not common for gas masks to leak; more frequently, it is the wearer who voluntarily breaches that seal.

A version of this distinction between “direct aim” and “atmospheric diffusion” shaped both the Hague Convention prohibitions (1899; 1907) of gas and the loophole it left open. Some have argued that the first use of poison gas did not technically defy the prohibition because the wording specifically banned the use of poisoned “weapons,” “army,” or “projectiles.” At Ypres on April 22, 1915, they point out, there were no projectiles to speak of: instead, canisters released a “chlorine cloud” directly into the air (Haber 19). The Germans did not — again, technically speaking — poison their weapons. The gas was not even aimed in the direction of the enemy; it shot straight upwards. Because military meteorologists had spent months forecasting weather conditions and

5 “Unable to refrain from breathing, [victims] are forced to participate in the obliteration of their own life” (Sloterdijk Terror 23).
6 The early gas mask “was hot, stuffy and emitted an unpleasant odour; it also offered little protection against dense concentrations of lachrymatory agents. A more efficient and comfortable concept of an impervious facepiece with eyepieces and the essential gas absorbents and filters incorporated in an attached container soon arose” (Coleman 36).
7 Respiratory struggles both in gas and within the gas mask itself were famously depicted in these stanzas from Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce Et Decorum Est”: “GAS! GAS! Quick, boys! — An ecstasy of fumbling/Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,/But someone still was yelling out and stumbling/And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime./Dim through the misty panes and thick green light/As under a green sea, I saw him drowning./In all my dreams before my helpless sight/He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.” (War Poetry 141: 9-16).
8 “The Contracting Powers agree to abstain from the use of all projectiles the sole object of which is the diffusion of asphyxiating or deleterious gases” (qtd. in Haber 18).
delaying the date accordingly, they correctly anticipated that the direction of the wind, combined with the sloping terrain and the heavier-than-air density of chlorine, would send the gas downhill into enemy lines. In some nitpicky way at least, they let the environment and laws of physics do the work.\(^9\)

The Hague Convention signatories made the precise distinction we have been tracking — they intuited that there is something fundamentally distinct about taking direct aim. But they got things backwards. Lacking the benefits of hindsight, they failed to see that a different kind of danger lay in the indirect use of chemical agents. The standard explanation for the prohibition - as well as the widespread revulsion towards chemical agents that persists to this day - tends to involve some version of a “poison taboo,” traced to various historical, religious, and mythological origins. The explanatory logic tends to go something like this: poison imparts an “unfair advantage” to one side, given its “insidious,” “treacherous,” and “invisible” nature. It is seen as cowardly and weak.\(^10\) In one sense, such fears rightly anticipate the absolute powerlessness of the individual against unbreathable air. Yet in another sense, such concerns with “sportsmanship” and “chivalry” (Haber 28) belong to a much older model of man-to-man combat, which was itself becoming obsolete in the Great War (Fussell).

If modern war is all about such indirect experiences, we have to readjust our notion of “first-hand” war experience accordingly. Consider the pervasive language of what Sloterdijk calls the twentieth century “fuzzy notion of the direct hit” in two canonical war memoirs” (18).

From Siegfried Sassoon’s Memoirs of an Infantry Officer:

“I am a lucky man as the bullet missed my jugular vein and spine by a fraction of an inch” (179).

“Explosives often arrived from the wrong direction” (7).

“Shells dropped short or went well over” (20)

“my success was only a lucky accident”(67)

From Edmund Blunden's Undertones of War:

“The shell struck just over my head” (159).

\(^9\) These events are recounted in both Ulrich Trumpener’s “The Road to Ypres: The Beginnings of Gas Warfare in World War I” and Haber’s The Poisonous Cloud: 18-29.

\(^{10}\) See John Courtland Moon, “The Development of the Norm Against Poison: What Literature Tells Us,.” The idea that there is something fundamentally different about gas—and that countries have an ethical responsibility to draw a “red line” has emerged again with great urgency in contemporary international affairs, particularly in responses to violence in Syria. A September 6, 2013 New York Times article by Steven Erlanger, entitled “A Weapon Seen as Too Horrible, Even in War,” begins by quoting Wilfred Owen’s famous “Dulce Et Decorum Est.”
“One dull shell struck within a rifle’s length of us, and exploded something else” (141).

“A large ‘minny’ fell but did not explode” (29).

“An unexploded shell lay on the edge of the fragments” (13).

“The sprays of bullets rushed…just above” (15).

“The machine-gun bullets thumped the soft soil, missed us” (90)

“we seemed to be one shell-hole away, no more, from the latest” (90)

“A long-range trench mortar one afternoon fired with weary iteration and accurate inaccuracy” (137)

The familiar story is that combatants simply cannot find words vivid enough to capture the overwhelming immediacy of their sensory experiences. These accounts prompt one to wonder whether the challenge might revolve around the inherently indirect experience of war—even for those on the front lines. After all, we have an abundance of words to characterize recognizable sensations in their most extreme forms. What we have less access to is a vocabulary for imagining combatant experience in all its oblique, tangential, partial and splintered forms. We have language to characterize bombs that explode, but “dud” is a word that emerged in colloquial usage during World War One, defined in terms of a failure to impact.11 Similarly, in Undertones of War, Blunden’s accounts of failed impact often require that he invent entirely new words - or at least get creative with his prefixes. His use of “mis-hit” is one such example; in another instance, Blunden writes that “a rifle-grenade burst with red-hot fizzing in the parapet behind me and another on the parados behind him; and we were unhit” (45). Unhit: this is the kind of paradoxical terminology that captures the need for a language of violent experience without violent impact. While the addition of this particular prefix negates the direct impact, it also affirms that an experience has taken place.

In a strange distortion of traumatic temporality, Blunden describes being bothered -haunted really - by one particular unexploded shell lying around his trench. We might conclude that the object haunts him because it signifies traumatizing events he has endured or witnessed, or, we might revise the account of trauma to surmise that he is bothered not by memory but rather a kind of traumatic anticipation of events yet to come. I think it is more likely, though, that the object does not stand for any moment or event---it is neither memory nor forecast. Its significance lies in the everydayness of the object, the very fact of its ongoing presence as part of the environment. It does not need to

11 OED Entry “Dud” 1.5 (b): A thing which fails to function in the way that it is designed to do; a thing which is in poor condition. Cf. Dud adj. 3. During and after the First World War (1914–18) esp. with reference to explosive shells and other ordnance that fail to explode.
Samuel Hynes describes wartime death not as an event experienced by the soldier but rather a “kind of presence, unseen but always there” (70). The question then becomes, how does one represent ubiquitous presence? Certainly not in the way we are accustomed to thinking about first-hand accounts of assault and bombardment. Writers are therefore tasked with capturing what it feels like to live day to day in an atmosphere where “shells [are always] in the air around” (Blunden 171). Sassoon, for example, emphasizes the equally important and difficult task of recovering “the living texture” of war” (34) while Blunden tries to convey the “sense of the endlessness of the war” (12) in which “the sprays of bullets rushed as though endlessly” (15).

It is through this concern with duration and presence that narrative becomes formally distinct and useful for literary representations of war. While poetry is well equipped to represent the punctuating or shattering traumatic event – think of the impact at the end of a Sassoon poem- narrative offers the opportunity to meditate on events that unfold over a much longer temporal arc. The more obvious but equally important reason for memoirs’ notable preoccupation with indirect hits is that survival by its very nature means having missed the ultimate impact of death. By definition, a survivor is someone who nearly missed. For example, it is typical for Blunden to begin an episode by remarking, “[h]ad I come on trench watch two hours later…” (65). The experiences recounted in Underworld of War are often shaped and inflected by the events that did not take place, rather than those that did.

If in one regard atmosphere seems newly dangerous, it also becomes a defensive shield in several interesting ways. For example, atmosphere can serve as a shock absorber which absorbs and diffuses the worst blows, as a shelter in which to take refuge, or a kind of protective covering for concealment. Atmosphere can also ventilate: for all my focus on contamination thus far, there is equal cause to consider how central language of purification becomes in the Great War. A 1915 report in the British Medical Journal assures readers that the natural antidote to poison gas will be the purity of air itself: “due to the enormous ventilating power of the atmosphere there is no reason to fear that Zeppelins will drop poison bombs on London” (Hill 801). That same report goes on to discuss the dangers that ensue in spaces without adequate air supply:

The fumes of high explosives are set free in close spaces, such as cellars and the interior of warships, where the ventilating power of the atmospheric is absent, may poison those who are not actually put out of action by explosive violence. (801)

Like many of the examples we have looked at previously, this is one in which violence ensues despite a notable lack of impact. In this case, however, vulnerability stems from air’s suffocating stasis rather than its diffusion. Thus while at first glance it seems only

13 The case of the second German gas attack - against the Canadians at Ypres – offers a particularly valuable illustration. In that attack, allied soldiers were better able to withstand the chemical diffusion not because they took cover somehow but because many got out of the trenches and stood on top of them. This counterintuitive tactic worked because the chlorine hung so low and close to the ground. Soldiers able to ascend above their structures were able to avoid
that the diffuse and amorphous properties of atmosphere pose a new menace, here we can also detect significant anxiety surrounding the way air might behave like a solid object or habitable structure. For example, the 1915 British Medical Journal report cautions: “It will sink into trenches, shell-pits, mine-craters, cellars, and dug-outs” (802). The concern here is with what happens when air is stagnant, when it sticks and sinks, when it erects claustrophobic walls and barriers. The problem is not that air is so different from the kinds of structures we are used to inhabiting. It is too similar. This kind of solidity and persistence actually makes it possible to imagine a kind of atmospheric entrenchment. Like Conrad’s stagnant fog, erecting walls “all around you,” poison gas comes to signify a habitable environment rather than a passing event.

The war also underlined how affect could quite literally be in “in the air” rather than an individual’s psyche. To illustrate, we should start with the common observation that poison gas is more than anything else a psychological weapon. People panic; they overreact or underreact; they become crippled by fear and anticipation. The discovery that gas can be extremely effective even without hitting individuals justifies taking aim at morale itself. When Blunden writes that “the enemy spoiled an afternoon with gas” (111), he is actually referring to the threat of gas. Furthermore, when offensive assaults are launched against something as immaterial as mood, demand emerges for some kind of affective defense as well. Consequently, affective states such as “alarm” and “anxiety” become subject to external mechanization and control. Indeed the defensive protocols for gas attacks transformed the idea of “alarm” from a psycho-physiological state to a vast collective and technologically mediated system. Auld recounts how:

Arrangements were made to install alarms of various kinds in the trenches. Of course no reliance could be placed on any method of communication which involved the use of the lungs. A man cannot blow a bugle or a whistle while he has a helmet on, and if he waited to give a signal by such a method before protecting himself he would be almost certain to be gassed. What was done was to place bells and gongs made from shell cases up and down the trenches (47).

In Auld’s description, the transmission of signals in the nervous system plays out on a larger scale in a collective atmospheric system. With the diminished communicative capacity of human lungs, external objects such as bells and gongs coordinate the relay of nervous information. This kind of slippage between individual and collective alarm systems shows up in Blunden’s writing, though the effect is likely to be lost in the worst of it and take refuge in a purer air supply above. It was in the trenches that poison gas became stagnant—and more dangerous. See Haber, The Poisonous Cloud, 35.

14 Coleman writes that “[i]n the case of harassment, the British High Command, relying on its intelligence reports, would indicate what German units it wished to weaken or demoralise” (28).

15 Brian Massumi writes that “[w]hat is not actually real can be felt into being. Threat does have an actual mode of existence: fear, as foreshadowing. Threat has an impending reality in the present. Thus actual reality is affective. Fear is the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future. It is the felt reality of the nonexistent, loomingly present as the affective fact of the matter (“Future Birth” 54).
seeming simplicity of metaphor. The war, Blunden writes, “seemed to make large holes not only in the nervous but also in the trench system” (29). When a shell hits the trench, it “knocked the porch in, and some more of my nerve system with it” (153).

This substitution of interior air spaces with exterior ones takes on an additional basis in reality:

It was decided to adopt for gas alarms sirens worked by compressed air, which would make a noise sufficiently loud and distinctive to be heard long distances away. By turning them on when the noise of those in front is heard it is possible to pass the alarm in an incredibly short space of time (73).

Here alarm is “passed” as though it were a material object. Instead of the human respiratory system, “compressed air” becomes the technological basis for such a relay. Thus, both functions of the human lungs – breathing and communicating – are outsourced to atmosphere. The increased pace of airflow that characterizes panic is also a part of how that alarm is communicated to others. For Blunden, there is something otherworldly about this very system:

To hear the thin beating of the gas tom-toms for many an acre, and the mist lay heavily in the moonlight, traversing a silence and solitude beyond ordinary life, was fantastic enough. It was all a ghost story (36).

I read the ghostliness of the alarm system as a reflection of the strangely impersonal transmission of nervous energy. On a first look, this description seems to have all of the necessary elements for nervous energy: the rapid transmission of impulses, the “thin beating” which of course invokes the human heart. Yet despite this level of seemingly frenetic physiological activity, there are no human bodies or voices here. The beating is a mechanized alarm system rather than a human heart, establishing the rhythm of anxiety in the absence of anxious subjects. The moonlight, silence, and solitude further contribute to one’s sense of a world that is full of affect yet devoid of human beings. I read this not as a world of the dead but more like a world fast asleep. In fact, the majority of gas attacks took place at night, and both reasons for this were strategically atmospheric: from a meteorological vantage point, weather and visibility conditions were often best at night; from an affective angle, slumbering soldiers provided an ideal condition for surprise and panic (Auld 70). Recognizing that human alert systems go out of commission during sleep, the alarm systems were rigged up to transmit the message, thus waking up anyone whose physiological alert system had failed.

Of course, an excess of high alert is almost as dangerous as the lack of it. When Blunden writes that there “hung an atmosphere of anticipated terror thick as mist” (161), he provides a useful articulation of how affect itself can materialize into a palpable atmosphere. Once again there is a splitting off of distinct atmospheres: even when the literal air is not heavy with physical contaminants, “anticipated terror” itself takes on those precise properties: “thick as mist”. The affective conditions created by the mere anticipation of gas come to look just like the gas itself: both are thick, pervasive, and dangerous. The capacity for affective atmospheres to split off from their more literal atmospheric counterparts means armies have to fight wars on two fronts. Therefore, the
danger posed by free-floating affect lies not just in its potential to attach to any object in its path, but also to detach and materialize as its own object to be reckoned with.\(^\text{16}\) Military recognition that in many cases such “anticipatory fear [was] worse” (Girard 11) than the actual event further explains why alarm became subject to such precise systems of calibration and control. The construction of external alert systems involves not only intensifying alarm but also dampening it. Indeed such alarm systems seem like an effort to restore alarm - which has become a constant fixture of the environment - to the status of an event.

The sense that affect is in a very real way “in the air” has implications for how emotional states are communicated or transmitted. In many cases, affective states are contagious – airborne conditions that can be caught simply by breathing. This is the case, for example, when Blunden notices that his colonel “betrayed no such apprehension,” and then feels “this confidence…began to grow in me” (72) or when he writes that “[the soldiers’] demeanor sank into me” (3). The threat of contamination and contagion inflects the language of affective encounters in the text:

Three blue lights, it was half-humorously said, were the signal for peace; as time went on the definition was revised — four black lights. But superstition could not be altogether thrust back in this district of miasma and mist, and when one evening a wisp of vapour was seen by my working party to glide over the whole sky from west to east, preserving all the time a strange luminous whiteness and an obvious shape, as some said, that of a cross, as others antipathetically held, of a sword, then there was subdued conversation about it, which spread from man to man…[some] read coming disaster in this sword (20).

The “miasma” in this passage clearly applies to both physical and affective atmospheres. Vapour and superstition drift in parallel fashion: just as the mist spreads out, so do the rumors “spread from man to man,” infecting like an airborne disease. Anticipation is unleashed from the individual psyche, becoming a force that cannot be “thrust back”. Individuals in this passage are not really subjects, but merely conductors in the transmission of affective energy. Miasmatic transmission of disease poses a problem of containment. Superstition, meanwhile, is an effort to contain affect, to nudge it into a familiar code. Yet despite efforts to render the sky legible, the affective atmosphere remains as elusive as it is palpable.

Vulnerability to invisible airborne particles thus forges a link between affect and disease. At a time when the germ theory has replaced miasma in the biological literature, the latter, supposedly disproven theory nonetheless retains and even seems to pick up

\(^{16}\) See Freud’s account of free-floating anxiety: “[i]n the first place we find a general condition of anxiety, a condition of free-floating fear as it were, which is ready to attach itself to any appropriate idea, to influence judgment, to give rise to expectations, in fact to seize any opportunity to make itself felt. We call this condition ‘expectant fear’ or ‘anxious expectation.’ Persons who suffer from this sort of fear always prophesy the most terrible of all possibilities, interpret every coincidence as an evil omen, and ascribe a dreadful meaning to all uncertainty. Many persons who cannot be termed ill show this tendency to anticipate disaster.”
additional force as a model for affective contagion. Given what we know about atmosphere, it makes sense that the idea of air as the ultimate source of contamination would resonate. For example, instead of attributing his fragmented memory to psychic pathology, Blunden explains that “a fever was in the midsummer air, and it has left a disordered recollection of the sequence of events” (149). He even mentions the plight of the carrier pigeons in this diseased environment: “[they] suffered from the bad air of the place.” Bad air – that’s the assumption behind a theory of miasma, as well as the etymology of malaria: mala (bad) + aria (air). Here, then, we observe another split between biological and affective atmospheres. While in the former case miasma signals anachronism, in the latter sense it seems more appropriate than ever.

II. “A sort of slow poison”: Pastoral Nooks and Atmospheric Pockets

While Blunden’s memoir includes its fair share of death and destruction, its author insists that the front-line “was not a place in which all hours were poisonous” (46). The connection between poison and temporality took on new meaning in World War I. As Coleman points out, “phosgene often had a delayed effect and apparently healthy soldiers were taken down with phosgene gas poisoning up to 48 hours after inhalation” (24). Even more ominously, she notes, “mustard gas would freeze in the winter and still be toxic when it thawed in the spring” (25). Blunden later described the war as “a sort of slow poison” (qtd. in Atkin 122) and it is clear that he meant that both literally and figuratively. Frequent narratorial intrusions suggest that this is a disease which still very much afflicts the author at the time of writing. Yet if Blunden is the victim of a slowly released poison, he also finds ways of deliberately slowing the steady march of chronological time. Not all hours are poisonous because Blunden sometimes finds shelter in a pastoral refuge, as when he runs for cover:

Just in time; the most malevolent flattening crash follows one down the steps: one’s body tingles: the candles are out. This is the first line of a long monotonous poem, but we are inside, and can wait for the end. The roof-beam may be cracked, but that need not be one’s only thought. (28)

In this passage, Blunden flees into a shelter that suddenly transforms into “the first line of a long monotonous poem”; indeed the poem seems to be something “we are inside”. Frantic urgency gives way to monotony and leisure – “[we] can wait for the end”. There is an excising of personality here too, no “I” but only “one” and “we”. When I think about Blunden’s formal choices in Undertones, I always think of this passage, for it suggests a refuge embedded within the war, and it makes poetry itself habitable. This is one of those hours that is not poisonous. My interest lies in the way Blunden not only finds such spaces and times but actively carves them out. For example, when Blunden shifts into an elevated poetic register, time slows down, and he takes refuge in a poem: “[p]eaceful little one, standest thou yet? cool nook, earthly paradisal cupboard …After the pause, we went” (51). Here Blunden is recalling a peaceful little farmhouse he came

17 See Connor’s The Matter of the Air.
upon, and just as the subject of his reverie is a “nook”, so is this a kind of formal nook, for the shift in tone and diction provides a “pause”. Yet despite such reprieves, Blunden always returns to prose as well as prosaic reality. Therefore, to say simply that Blunden’s narrative is really a poem is to miss what constitutes an unmistakably modernist blending of genres.

Blunden’s aesthetic practice resonates with a recurring interest in “atmospheric pockets” I have noted across diverse scholarly accounts of air, affect, and war. In The Matter of the Air, Steven Connor describes the scientific challenge of extracting smaller air samples from the surrounding air in terms of the need to “invent and construct new world-spaces, new pockets of exception in the immersive totality” (30). Written from a military perspective, Haber’s The Poisonous Cloud similarly highlights microclimatic spaces: even the most devastating gas attacks, he points out, were met with “pockets of resistance” (37). Cultural geographer Peter Adey picks up on atmosphere’s uneven texture in a discussion of the contemporary urban trend toward “secessionary atmospheres” (“Megacity” 294), in which socioeconomic stratification corresponds to an unequal distribution of clean air. In contrast to the rough and turbulent texture of atmospheric inequality in economic terms, Adey also identifies an affective dimension that makes inhabiting one’s local micro atmosphere feel comfortably routine: “pockets of even atmospherics” (297). Kathleen Stewart distinguishes affective experience from more sharply defined and recognizable emotions: our encounters with affect do not take a definite shape all at once, she writes, but rather come into view gradually, like the “unfolding of a pocket” (“Attunement” 447). And Lauren Redniss writes of “deadly still air…the term ‘doldrums’ is used to describe windless pockets” (74). In these very different examples, the use of “pockets” helps dispel the myth of atmospheric homogeneity. Pockets - of exception and of resistance - exist within rather than apart from the prevailing climate. Perhaps most importantly, all of these formulations rely on aesthetic strategies; atmospheric pockets are “invented,” “constructed,” “cut out,” “sealed off,” “unfolded,” etc.

This interest in creating atmospheric pockets helps distinguish twentieth-century atmosphere from its nineteenth-century predecessors. As I have hoped to demonstrate, atmospheric contamination is far from new in the twentieth century – one has only to think of the pervasive smog in Dickens. Twentieth-century writers seem intent on moving past a realist or even impressionist concern with what it is like to (visually) perceive atmosphere and fixate instead on modes of atmospheric production and engineering. It is in this regard that I see Blunden’s methods as a mode of participating in his contemporary moment even when the content of the atmosphere in question may seem anachronistic. Instead of just mimetically reproducing or faithfully documenting atmospheric contamination, Blunden goes to great lengths to create alternative microclimates.18 In this sense, Blunden’s landscapes are artificially designed, though it is

---

18 Such efforts to carve out new atmospheric spaces participate in a larger contemporary trend, one that includes but also extends beyond the domain of literature. Stephen Kern and Peter Sloterdijk both discuss the twentieth century as an age of “climate control”, for instance. Newly engineered designs ranged from the luxuries and comforts of air-conditioning to the genocidal
easy to mistake them for romanticized depictions of untouched nature. This insistence on carving out atmospheric pockets is its own form of climate control. Blunden’s cultivation of alternative atmospheric pockets must be understood in relation to his preoccupation with the contamination of poison gas rather than in opposition to it. The effects of poison gas seep into many folds and crevices throughout the narrative, even in those moments when the text seems especially unconcerned with the war or its new technologies. Poison gas is never an event in *Undertones*, but it informs the text’s depiction of environment at every turn.

While the question of whether Blunden deliberately intended his use of language and formal techniques to resonate with gas warfare is largely irrelevant to my argument, it is worth noting that, biographically, Blunden had additional reasons to be particularly preoccupied with respiration and issues pertaining to contamination and purification. Blunden was severely asthmatic and had difficulty breathing throughout his life. After the war, his asthma was compounded by bronchitis, and “for over a year [he] rarely woke up without fighting for breath” (Webb 165). Furthermore, just a few years before *Undertones* was published, Blunden’s first child died after consuming contaminated milk. Thus, in addition to his experience with gas on the frontlines, there are biographical reasons to suspect that Blunden was keenly sensitive to the potentials for corruption in the very conditions that are normally supposed to sustain human life.

Throughout the memoir, Blunden’s battalion “occupies cavities of less or more insecurity” (128), aware that the boundaries of safety are always shifting. Thus, while it might seem that Blunden simply shuttles between polar opposites – the horror of war and the beauty of the natural landscape – a similar set of concerns with atmospheric properties and processes informs both preoccupations. Sometimes, “atmospheric pockets” indicate the pernicious capacity of gas to saturate and occupy even the smallest of spaces; at other times, such pockets represent the possibility of taking refuge in a zone of purity. The tendency of gas to linger and sink into hollows and dugouts was well-known and it could be fatal: “a toxic atmosphere may be set up which will envelope the whole target area, seeping into tunnels, bunkers, and buildings” (Coleman 5). On one hand, Blunden depicts the stifling claustrophobia of poison in a small space – “that cave of spoiled air” (140), “crowded airless shadows” (150) - and he registers a similar sense of unstoppable encroachment when the German lights “[seek] out all nooks and corners” (14). On the other hand, finding a pocket of pure air can mean the difference between life and death. Blunden joyfully regards “a surprising little nook in the trench” (135) as a kind of atmospheric stronghold, resistant to the contamination that is so diffuse elsewhere. Looking through a telescope, he is struck by the glimpse of a “pretty little nook among hazy trees, with the best part of a mill…still standing” (168). In Ypres, he jots “down a poetical hint” (137). And, he marvels, “[i]t was as though war forgot some corners of Flanders” (179).

The significance of such carved out zones is not only spatial but temporal as well. This is not simply a story of youthful innocence and pastoral beauty giving way to possibilities of the gas chamber. Even the gas mask is an artificially engineered atmosphere that essentially works by creating a separate breathing area.
maturation and environmental devastation. For Blunden, traces of both contamination and purity linger in atmospheric nooks and crannies from the first page to the last. Corruption and purification are always going on simultaneously. The war, in the form of a hovering aircraft, comes to interrupt “our pastoral retreat” (167) but so does a surviving “hint of pastoral” (133) sneak into a badly battered landscape. In much the same way that war casts doubt on the very existence of airtight spaces impervious to leakage, Blunden feels that he can “not keep out some thoughts of better days” (160). Like Conrad, Blunden is keenly aware that when it comes to atmosphere, conventional boundaries simply will not suffice.

Blunden seizes in particular on vocabulary of persistence and duration: “lingering,” “loitering,” and “clinging” are terms that become central to how the text engages with both contamination and purity. On the most literal level, this concern with slow pacing can be linked to poison gas, which was not only well known for its stubborn tendency to hang around but actually scientifically classified according to a measure of “persistence” (Haber 117). Blunden is interested in the capacity of air to settle and linger. Indeed, the air in Undertones is notably lethargic: “sleepy” (101) “sluggish,” “heavy and misty” (101). This combination of physical and affective torpor contributes to the memoir’s departure from models of direct impact. While conventionally we think of events playing out against an environmental backdrop, for Blunden the environment is itself an event in slow motion. Such emphasis on slow motion underscores the inadequacy of confining war experience to distinct episodes with clear spatial and temporal boundaries. For example, many of Blunden’s experiences revolve around the environmental encounters that follow any given moment of impact. In contrast to the language of shock and explosion that one tends to associate with war literature, Blunden often describes his experiences in the terms of lingering and leisure. Far from offering a reprieve, the leisurely pace of war often seems to be part of its cruelty, “that long talon reaching for its victim as its pleasure” (9). When reporting for a new post, he observes that:

the poisonous breath of fresh explosions sulked all about, and the mud which choked the narrow passages stank as one pulled through it, and through the twisted, disused wires running mysteriously onward, in such festooning complexity that we even suspected some of them ran into the German line and were used to betray us. Much lime was wanted at Cuinchy, and that had its ill savour, and often its horrible meaning. There were many spots mouldering on, like those legendary blood-stains in castle floors which will not be washed away (30).

In the phrase “the poisonous breath of fresh explosions”, a series of notable inversions takes place. First, the atmosphere, rather than an individual, exhales; it also not the human body suffering from restricted airflow but the trench passageways which are “choked.” Next, breathing becomes “poisonous” rather than life-sustaining, while “fresh” means something lethal and decidedly non-organic. In contrast to the “breath-stopping suddenness” (138) that characterizes more direct assaults recounted elsewhere, this is a lingering poisonous breath which “skulks about”, stubbornly saturating both air and ground. This is also a moment in which trenches fail to do their fundamental job of
dividing – the wires run “in such festooning complexity”, flowing into the German lines, not unlike Conrad’s atmosphere overflowing barriers. (Indeed elsewhere Blunden goes so far as to say, “straight lines did not exist” 52). What’s more, the image of “legendary blood-stains in castle floors which will not be washed away”, invokes a sense of Lady Macbeth-like traumatic repetition, but this is an atmospheric stain rather than a psychological one. Blunden was not present for the gas attack in question, nor was he involved in subsequent attempts to sanitize the trenches using lime. Instead of lingering in his mind, then, the remnants of that event linger in the space itself.

Atmosphere’s propensity to linger complicates claims regarding the archaic and anachronistic tone of Blunden’s work. There can be no doubt that the work often slides into a highly stylized poetic register, and yet anachronism itself captures something about the odd temporalities engendered by modern war technologies. For example, one can see, hear, feel, and smell a single explosion at separate times. In World War One, it was common for explosions to arrive “in advance of the sounds of their original detonation” (Schafer 8-9). Where and when do we then locate the firsthand experience in such cases?

The capacity for anachronistic persistence is particularly true for non-visual sensory modalities in the memoir. When the battalion takes over a previously occupied trench, they are aware both that the former tenants have disappeared from sight and of their clinging presence: “[t]he smell of the German dugouts was peculiar to them, heavy and clothy” (100). Here, once again, there is a sluggish heaviness to air: odor outlives the German bodies who emanated it, and indeed the use of “clothy” invokes the way smell can persist by stubbornly clinging to fabric. While in this case air’s invisible adhesion to material manifests through smell, in other cases that kind of clinging persistence is palpable in the sensation of “fog, dewing one’s khaki” (101).

On the most basic level then, Blunden’s sluggish air reflects the hallmark characteristics of literal poison gas. Notice the language used in two contemporaneous accounts of poison gas’ remarkable staying power:

[From The British Medical Journal]: “It will sink into trenches, shell-pits, mine-craters, cellars, and dug-outs” (802).

[From Auld’s 1918 Gas and Flame in Modern War] “[T]he vapour clinging to the earth seeking out every hole and hollow and filling the trenches…” (11).

Yet Blunden also takes the principle of atmospheric persistence and applies it in the other direction. He notes, for example, that an old village church “still had that spirit clinging to it” (87) and that, despite environmental devastation, “orchards yet clung to some pale apples” (151). In these cases, Blunden turns the idea of “clinging” on its head. The clinging persistence of atmosphere is particularly evident in the narrative’s preoccupation with architectural ruins. Upon first read, Blunden’s nearly compulsive attention to crumbling houses suggests a rather straightforward concern with war’s destruction. Yet if we attend to the language of slow motion and fragile adhesion, it soon becomes apparent that Blunden is actually fascinated with the way aura survives:

I took a walk among their white shudders and painted garden railings in the thick mists of morning, with the compelled spirit of reverence which those village ruins
awoke in me, more vividly perhaps than a Wren masterpiece can to-day. To visit such relics of a yesterday whose genial light seemed at once scarcely gone and gone for ages, relics whose luckless situation almost denied them the imagined piety of contemplation and pity, was a part of my war. There were other ruins, which we made less emotional; ‘Haunted House,’ an observation post, lacked the true phantom air (54; italics added).

In Blunden’s description, a meteorological atmosphere helps awaken an affective one: in the “thick mists of morning” he senses a “compelled spirit of reverence”. Blunden situates himself as an observer, submitting and surrendering himself to a work of art. The sense of light that seems “at once scarcely gone and gone for ages” reflects one of atmosphere’s great mysteries: is the perceived vagueness of atmosphere the expression of a slow awakening or a gradual fading? Blunden’s assertion that other structures lacked the “true phantom air” underscores a sense of atmospheric authenticity – haunting represents the lingering persistence of an original. Aura continues to cling even as architectural structures begin to erode:

I recall the singular, phantasmal appearance of another wealthy house in Mailly. The Engineers used it as a headquarters. Its large drawing-room was furnished in delicate Arcadian style, the suite and the curtains being of a silver-grey silk, the piano of a light volatile design and clear tinge answering it; the tall windows were blocked with sandbags thoughtfully painted white, as though they too would harmonize! Perhaps the hues of dust and dimness helped them somewhat in this impossibility. The room was unreal and supernatural, nor did I feel easy about the spirits’ attitude towards my drinking my whisky by that incredible piano. Surely strange music would begin in tones of protest and prophecy. How long, I wonder, was it before the spell was snapped and the day gaped impudently through irreparable shell-holes on those exorcized haunters? (82).

The house in Mailly is one of Blunden’s “pockets of exception”: with sandbags blocking out the larger atmosphere, dust and dimness accumulate to seal off an exceptional airspace - albeit temporarily. The obstruction of daylight encourages a turn away from the primacy of visual perception: in the absence of sunlight, Blunden’s eyes adjust to the hues of dust and dimness, and he instead tunes into the sonic-affective traces of music as well as “tones of protest and prophesy”. This is a manufactured space—I think it is no coincidence that Blunden bothers to mention that it is a headquarters for engineering. There is also a kind of sharpening of aesthetic sensibility at work here. It is not the home’s objects in and of themselves which strike Blunden but rather a highly aestheticized sense of their formal congruence – “design,” “harmon[yl],” “furnished,” “painted,” “hues”. While Conrad’s air seemed designed and structured like a house, this house seems like an atmosphere. The sense of “spirits” still lingering and a “spell” invokes a phantom presence, but we can also detect the other meaning of spell, a temporary suspension. The inevitability of eventually “snapping out of it” hangs in the air just as it would for an individual human temporarily riveted. Thus while it may seem that Blunden is mentally transfixed by the scene, the description more specifically situates the atmosphere itself as mesmerized. Blunden intuits that even if the house is not
destroyed in one fell swoop, the spell preserving its spiritual aura is fragile in its own slow motion way. Here, there is nothing eternal about the supernatural. It is rather a pocket of exception within nature itself. Eventually, the spell snaps and the light rushes in. The windows can either seal off the outside air or allow it to seep in.

Atmospheric pockets are made possible by the fact that material and affective atmospheres often have different rates of decay: some come and go while others continue to cling. By recognizing the divergence between that which is destroyed instantly and that which lingers on, Blunden discovers a formal possibility for representing pockets of persistence within destruction. This recognition of atmospheric heterogeneity sheds additional light on the significance of a concept such as “attunement” rather than empirical perception. With multiple atmospheres lingering and coexisting, different sensory or affective tunings will disclose different atmospheres.

If we approach atmosphere as one homogenous object, we are likely to miss the richness of the work’s texture, achieved in large part through the interweaving of heterogeneous atmospheres. Readers of Blunden must therefore attend to how a single image or description might convey more than one atmosphere. Discrepancies between a visual-meteorological atmosphere and its sonic-affective atmospheric “undertones” recur throughout the text. For instance, Blunden detects a “melodious existence, attained out of the black dreariness of trench warfare” (35; italics added), for instance. In this case, the sonic and affectively charged language of “melodious existence” emerges out of – rather than apart from - the visual and meteorologically dreary war atmosphere. In another variation, Blunden writes that the “sunset flared the brazen news that it would be a cold one, while the shifting wind whistled through the black chains and wagon-wheels of the waiting trucks. But it was a beautiful world even then” (109). In this passage, the visual register discloses an atmosphere that is cold and ominous, and it delivers a kind of stark, sobering “news”. Yet the sound of whistling wind (as well as the transgressive power of air to break “through black chains”) attunes our narrator to a different kind of atmospheric transmission. It is only after tuning into this sonic rather than visual atmosphere that Blunden feels compelled to proclaim the persistence of beauty. Words such as “but” and “even then” provide syntactical evidence that these different worlds are not mutually exclusive but rather part of the same tightly woven texture of a larger atmosphere.

Blunden’s willingness to move between vastly different scales is part of what allows him to carve out alternative spaces within the war’s larger prevailing atmosphere. The text’s recurring concern with “refuge”, for example, involves both spatial and temporal dislocation, as when Blunden locates “a nook of quietude and antiquity discoverable on the map some few miles behind St. Omer” (112). Blunden detects the past as a sound - “an insistent echo of old life still” (128) and as an odor, “the fragrance of ancient peace” (147). Here, attunement requires noticing the persistent sensory and affective fragments of an earlier atmosphere. The use of language such as “antiquity” and “ancient” also indicates a shift from memory on an individual scale to a larger, more impersonal sense of history. Instead of sensory experiences triggering personal memories encoded in the psyche at some point in one’s personal past – a common occurrence in literary modernism – powerful sensations thrust the perceiver into a radically dislocating encounter with an impersonal historical past. This sense of defamiliarization suggests that, for Blunden, taking refuge in an atmospheric pocket does not mean a corresponding
turn inwards. In fact, encounters with atmosphere can be strong enough to trigger a shift from first to third person narration, as when Blunden narrates, “the fog had lifted, offering a view of 2nd. Lieut Blunden between the British front and support lines to any interested Teuton” (81). In this moment, Blunden seems to be outside his own body, watching himself from enemy lines.

Blunden, like Marlow, listens to silence. It is this ability to tune out the noise of war, and not just the sight of persistent structures still standing, which makes him feel like a time traveler visiting the past in old country towns. In such experiences, the past ceases to correspond to an individual frame of reference:

There was in the town itself the same strange silence, and the staring pallor of the streets in that daybreak was unlike anything I had known. The Middle Ages here contrived to lurk, and this was their torture at last (120).

The “lurking” presence of the Middle Ages introduces atmospheric persistence on a larger scale than we have seen previously, and this scalar shift in turn triggers a kind of self-effacement. The past does not signal anything personally familiar; to the contrary it is “unlike anything I had known.” Paul Fussell points out that, unlike most other memoirists, Blunden includes virtually no reference to his past life or identity prior to the war. For Fussell, this makes Undertones seem more like the collective memoir of a battalion than Blunden’s personal story. But I see such overt refusal of the conventions of bildungsroman as indicative of an even more radical impersonality. In some places, where other memoirists might reflect on life prewar world, Blunden contemplates the life of a prehistoric world. Taking cover under heavy fire, Blunden writes that “[t]ime-values have changed for a moment from furious haste to geological calm when one enters that earthy cave” (85). This “earthy cave” is a temporal atmospheric pocket, one in which time does not stop altogether but slows to a geological pace. Similarly, when Blunden describes a battle finally ending “after any icy age at Peronne” (185), the frame of reference shifts from an individual life - or even a four-year war - to an entire planetary history.

The effect of slowed motion does more than facilitate atmospheric encounters with the past: it also heightens consciousness of the present moment. We tend to associate memories with perceptual fuzziness while attributing vivid clarity to the present moment. War offers a powerful reminder that proximity does not necessarily confer perceptual clarity. Observers have long noted the obscurity that comes with seeing war from up close —take the famous phrase “fog of war” generally attributed to Carl von Clausewitz. In addition to taking on a new shade of meaning in the hindsight of gas warfare, Clausewitz’s theory articulates the chaotic nature of perception in war. “[i]f we take a general view of the four elements composing the atmosphere in which War moves, of danger, physical effort, uncertainty, and chance,” Clausewitz writes, we can begin to appreciate that “in the twilight which surrounds everything a deep clear view is…difficult” (9).

Part of Blunden’s slow pacing involves not only the lingering persistence of past atmospheres, but also the slow emergence of new ones just coming into being. Kathleen Stewart discusses the phenomenological structure of the present in terms of an indeterminate sense of “something coming into existence” (445). She writes: “there are
always pockets of things left hanging in the air...things can remain ungathered into meanings and may not signify at all.” (452). Indeed, just as Blunden often arrives belatedly on the scene of what are ostensibly his own experiences, or seems to attune to a world that existed long before him, so does he sometimes come across experience prematurely, before it has fully formed or crystallized into an identifiable event:

What exactly was amiss at the line the adjutant, speaking in his dry, deliberate way, did not announce: there was something in the air, he admitted, and the battalion was to take over trenches south of the canal (22; italics added).

As we saw with respect to Conrad’s “The Tale”, the colloquial phrase “something in the air” turns gut instincts inside out, transforming a state of mind into the state of the atmosphere. Blunden and his comrades are often able to intuit or pick up on the trace of some coming event, but such super (or sub) sensory perception does not originate inside. The phrase also aligns absence and presence: “something” on the one hand confirms a kind of existence, but on the other hand confines it to obscurity.

This focus on the affective present lends new shades of meaning to the text’s pervasive language of ghostly and phantom presences. Defying expectations, Blunden’s use of “ghostly” reflects the nature of perception up close rather than at a distance. In other words, I do not see Blunden’s frequent invocations of phantom presences as a sign of trauma or memory but rather as a paradoxically appropriate language for capturing a sense of immediacy. For example, as the battalion flees a particularly deadly assault, a “phantom of short leafy trees in the mist showed that we were on the borders of life” (177). The language here echoes the peripheral vision that was a sure sign of Marlow’s atmospheric immersion in Heart of Darkness: “looking...at the edge of the forest” (Heart 33); “the edge of a colossal jungle...blurred by a creeping mist” (Heart 13). Just as Blunden can take refuge in the more peaceful atmosphere of the past, so can he take shelter in the experience of affect that precedes distinct perceptions or systems of meaning – if only for a split second. In other words, the affective experience of the present is also one of defamiliarization. We tend to talk about “horror” at the heart of first-person experience, but for Blunden there is a fleeting second before even that emotion – with its distinct social meaning and moral assessment – becomes available to consciousness.

Another way that Blunden controls climate, then, is by refusing to retrospectively overwrite affective atmospheres with details of events that came later. The immediacy of the present moment in this sense represents another atmospheric pocket. In the memoir’s closing paragraph, Blunden takes shelter in the refuge of the present moment:

...the willows and the waters in the hollow make up a picture so silvery and unsubstantial that one would spend a lifetime to paint it. Could any countryside be more sweetly at rest, more alluring to naiad and hamadryad, more incapable of dreaming a field-gun? Fortunate it was that at that moment I was filled with simple joy. I might have known the war by this time, but I was still too young to know the depth of ironic cruelty. No conjecture that, in a few weeks, Buire-sur-Ancre would appear much the same as the cataclysmal railway cutting by Hill 60,
came from that innocent greenwood. No destined anguish lifted its snaky head to poison a harmless young shepherd in a soldier’s coat (191).

At first glance, Blunden’s final passage seems to fully embrace the innocence and beauty of the pastoral mode. Yet Blunden is doing more than naively clinging to an outdated literary tradition. This is a pocket of purity that Blunden deliberately carves out despite full recognition of encroachment. The shadow of a bleak future hangs over the passage, with words like “still,” “too young,” “destined,” marking the writer’s full awareness of what is to come. As was the case with atmospheric pockets that allow the past to linger, these pockets of immediacy resist the encroachment of the future. Part of Blunden’s climate control involves restraint, an unwillingness to retroactively solidify and fill in an affective atmosphere that was, in lived experience, “silvery and insubstantial”.

The above passage also challenges the idea of affective forecasting, the sense that the future is legible in the air. For Blunden, this failure provides an opportunity for fidelity to the present, making the immediate moment important in and of itself (a pocket of exception, of resistance) rather than merely a sign or symbol of what comes next. Blunden refuses to assimilate atmosphere to a personal narrative of the war; the result is a deliberately uncomfortable mismatch between atmosphere and the biographical and historical events that are soon to follow.

Blunden’s refusal to be rushed is apparent in his style. As a writer, he is intent on lingering, even when that comes at the cost of chronological realism. “Do I loiter too long among little things?” he asks, before reflecting that “[e]ach circumstance of the British experience…has ceased for me to be big or little” (140). Here Blunden articulates a dramatic flattening of disparate scales. Blunden’s final acts - both as a soldier and as a writer - involve loitering. Before setting out for home, he reflects that “[s]ome unanalyzed notion led me to go through the battalion trenches thoroughly, the last day I was there” (189). This almost compulsive need to linger resembles a kind of traumatic repetition, and yet Blunden’s fixation is on the environment rather than the memory of an event. In his “Preliminary”, Blunden proclaims that “I must go over the ground again” (xvi), which seems to suggest that even at the time of writing, that last loitering look is still underway.

Lingering provides the precise kind of slowed pacing necessary to glimpse both war-torn and pastoral atmospheres. And just as the soldier pauses, so does the narrative voice linger over the final scene. As a narrator, Blunden is intent on clinging to this final image: “Let me look out again from the train on the way to England” (190). Lingering allows Blunden an alternative to the evenly paced, steady march of chronology. In other words, it is not just that Blunden faithfully reproduces the objects and atmospheres that lingered; he actively slows the pace of his own narrative to do the same:

The foolish persistence of ruins that ought to have fallen but stood grimacing, and the dark day, chilled my spirit. Let us stop this war, and walk along to Beaucourt before the leaves fall. I smell autumn again. (65)

Lingering informs both the subject of this passage and its self-conscious narratorial intrusion. Blunden’s pastoral mode is a kind of loitering not just in a general past but very specifically in a bygone literary tradition. That different atmospheres have very different
rates of decay and persistence is a fact that extends to literary atmosphere itself. While
writing a narrative of modern war, Blunden finds it possible to take refuge in pastoral
language still clinging to a scene of modern destruction.

While Blunden’s pastoral affinities are obvious, these temporal displacements
begin to look very modernist indeed: what could be more modernist than his self-
proclaimed method of a “deranged chronology and a dimmed picture” (148)? In fact,
when Blunden pauses to meditate on his formal choices, he sounds much more like the
writer of a modernist manifesto than a pastoral poet. In the following passage, it is
difficult not to hear echoes of Woolf’s diction as well as her formal ambitions:

[In this vicinity a peculiar difficulty would exist for the artist to select the sights,
faces, words, incidents, which characterized the time. The art is rather to collect them,
in their original form of incoherence…Let the smoke of the German breakfast fires,
yes, and the savour of their coffee, rise in these pages…(Blunden 141).

Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and
uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display…Let us
record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace
the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or
incident scores upon the consciousness. (Woolf “Modern Fiction” 9)

Directly preceding the above narratorial intrusion, Blunden had witnessed a “sentry hit by
a shell” (141), making Woolf’s description of the mind bombarded by atoms strikingly
literal, just as her use of “spirit” literalizes into Blunden’s “smoke of German breakfast
fires”. What is so interesting about Blunden is that, despite the fact that just about every
metaphor or image one can imagine becomes real and literal in war he sees no reason to
write in a style of documentary realism, and instead invokes both pastoral and modernist
voices throughout.

At this point it also becomes possible to step back and re-assess the boom in
survivor memoirs during the 1920s. There are logical enough explanations for this delay:
it takes time to recover before facing the past, and of course there are also the more
practical considerations of publishing a book-length manuscript. But it is also worth
noting that these texts themselves linger, indeed seem to have benefitted from the time
lag since the war. In his “Preliminary,” Blunden writes that “I tried once before…when
the events were not yet ended…But what I then wrote, and little enough I completed,
although in its details not much affected by the perplexities of distancing memory, was
noisy with a depressing forced gaiety then very much the rage” (xv). Here we see that
with closer proximity came noisiness. Only in retrospect is Blunden able to find the
signal in the noise, to listen to the war.

The idea that war might actually be best recounted from a point of removal
clashes with a long tradition of privileging the immediacy of the here-and-now. Yet no

---

20 Paul Fussell writes of a “metaphor caught in the act of turning literal” (61) and the various
symbols which in war became “joltingly literal” (5).
war memoirist demonstrates the significance of writing from a different place and time quite as powerfully as Blunden. After all, Undertones of War might seem to belong firmly to the English pastoral tradition—but it was written in Japan—in 1924 (first version) and 1928 (second). That makes Blunden an English author writing in Japan in 1924-28, drawing on a much older pastoral tradition to recount the English experience—that actually took place in Belgium—during 1916 and 1917. What is firsthand experience here? What would it mean to write in his “own” style? Anachronism and dislocation are as central to Blunden’s experience as they are to his form.

Revisiting the war from a vantage point of both spatial and temporal removal afforded Blunden an important opportunity for atmospheric attunement. Of his time abroad after the war, his biographer writes, “[t]he native culture of Japan was asserting its influence too, and particularly its art…he was to extend his enthusiasm to the wood-block prints of the Edo period, admiring the atmospheric world of Hiroshige and Harunobo and the careful figures in the paintings of Toyohiro” (Webb 147). Paul Fussell similarly notes that in “Tokyo, surrounded by unpretentious beauty, gentleness, ceremony, and courtesy, he composed Undertones of War” (256). Recall that in Heart of Darkness, Marlow tuned into the atmosphere on the Thames and connected it to the Congo atmosphere of his story. To say that the atmosphere of Japan inflected the narrative is not to say that Blunden retrospectively added something that was not there. Rather, like Marlow, he attuned to it.

Attunement can also shed light on the privileged status of firsthand war memoirs and the question of civilians’ capacity to imagine war. In a 2014 New York Times opinion piece entitled “After War: A Failure of the Imagination,” Iraq veteran and writer Phil Clay poses a challenge to the longstanding assumption that civilians can never imagine war, and that there is something ethical about respecting that boundary. When well-intentioned acquaintances tell him that they could never possibly imagine what he has been through, he is tempted to reply, “sure you could.”

If we fetishize trauma as incommunicable then survivors are trapped—unable to feel truly known by their nonmilitary friends and family. At a recent Veterans Day performance put on by Arts in the Armed Forces, Adam Driver, the organization’s founder, a former Marine turned actor, spoke of his feelings of alienation after leaving the corps. “Not being able to express the anger, confusion and loneliness I felt was challenging,” he said, until theater exposed him “to playwrights and characters and plays that had nothing to do with the military, that were articulating experiences I had in the military, that before to me were indescribable.”

It’s a powerful moment, when you discover a vocabulary exists for something you’d thought incommunicably unique. Personally, I felt it reading Joseph Conrad’s Lord Jim.

21 Clay’s reply is almost startling given the popular conviction that “war is not like anything except for itself” (Hynes 95). The need to respect the chasm between civilians and combatants is also apparent throughout the writing of Siegfried Sassoon.
We have come full circle now, arriving back at the observation that opened this chapter: Joseph Conrad seems, somehow, to have been a war writer before the war. What this veteran is describing is an act of attunement: in Conrad, he found a language that resonated, a “vocabulary…for something you’d thought incommunicably unique.” Thus, the model of attunement offers a powerful alternative to the tired old observation of a chasm between soldiers and civilians. One does not need to have had an identical experience to feel it strike a chord. Attunement simply opens the space for a relationship, for resonance. In the case of World War I, a war of attrition and entrenchment, where indirect and oblique experience replaced direct impact, it seems particularly likely that citizens on the home-front could attune to that atmosphere in some meaningful way. After all, if we understand the war as an environment rather than an event, it will not be contained by the boundaries of war any more than Conrad’s atmosphere was contained by narrative frames. This is the precise matter I will turn to next, as we move from the front-lines to the home front.
Chapter III

Heat Wave

I. “An absorbing book”: From Shock to Absorption

In one of Mrs. Dalloway’s (1925) opening scenes, Clarissa navigates the bustling London streets and reflects:

She knew nothing; no language, no history; she scarcely read a book now, except memoirs in bed; and yet to her it was absolutely absorbing; all this; the cabs passing; and she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that. (8; emphasis added)

Notice how Woolf links absorption to both domestic and urban settings in this passage. First, the narrative gestures to an image of Clarissa reading memoirs in her bedroom; sleeping and reading both invoke the temporary surrender of self that characterizes an absorptive experience. But as soon as the passage mentions absorption, the focus shifts back to the crowded city streets. One might suggest that Woolf puts these two images in quick succession to accentuate their differences: on one side of the “absolutely absorbing” clause, a sleepy and solitary Clarissa is tucked away in her private bedroom; on the other side, our protagonist is wide awake and intensely present in the vitality of urban life. Yet I would argue that the absorbing clause is a connecting bridge conceptually as well as grammatically. References to sleeping and reading prime us to notice that urban navigation is also an experience in which subjects vanish into an object of interest. This is the peculiar nature of absorption: mental presence pushed to its furthest extreme actually becomes a kind of mental absence. Clarissa is so thoroughly embedded in the urban milieu that she loses the distance necessary to situate herself according to semantic or social systems of classification: “no language, no history”; “she would not say…I am this, I am that.”

That sense of extreme self-effacement plays out even on the level of syntax. In the phrase, “to her it was absolutely absorbing,” it is difficult to say who or what is doing the absorbing and who or what is being absorbed. One might consider absorption a force acting on Clarissa — a kind of overwhelming magnetic pull to which she passively succumbs. But one could just as easily read Clarissa as the active subject, voraciously swallowing up the world around her. The problem is that we keep losing Clarissa in the larger absorptive experience: names and proper nouns are all centripetally pulled into that ambiguous “it.” The fact that Clarissa cannot step out of the experience underscores its affective immediacy, the kind of “prepersonal” or “asignifying intensity” that affect theorists distinguish from emotion. Clarissa’s first-person thoughts, as well as her absolute embeddedness in her environment, seep directly into the narrative, negating any need to stop and verbally articulate perceptual events or objects. Far from being the vague and generic pronoun we expect, then, “it” gestures to an experience that is extremely immediate and vivid. The part of speech associated with absorbing remains just as unclear: is it a verb describing an event or is it an adjectival description of how Clarissa perceives the world around her? The very fact that we find ourselves in such a
grammatical predicament proves the point: absorption obliterates sharp differences. Woolf consistently associates urban life with such out-of-body experiences. In “The Mark on the Wall,” the protagonist describes omnibus riders in terms of a “vagueness, the gleam of glassiness in our eyes” and writes of the desire “to slip from one thing to another without any hostility…to sink in deeper” (85). In “Street Haunting”, the city-dweller is a kind of sleepwalker drifting through a ghostly world: “wrapt…in some narcotic dream” (5), hypnotized by the “smooth passage…glossy brilliance” of the city’s visual delights. Mirroring the passage we began with, that story’s night wanderer loses herself in the metropolis much as she loses herself in a book. On city streets and around dark corners, she encounters strangers who disappear almost instantly; stepping into a bookstore, the experience is oddly similar, as one “form[s] sudden capricious friendships with the unknown and the vanished” (4).

In Absorption and Theatricality, Michael Fried studies paintings of subjects deep in scholarly concentration alongside representations of subjects lost in mental reverie or stupor. While Fried is largely unconcerned with the city and his historical subject is different, the approach of putting activity and inactivity on a shared spectrum offers a way of understanding how the modern city’s frenetic vitality might tip over into a kind of drowsy dream. Fried writes that the “condition of rapt attention, of being completely occupied or engrossed” (10) itself takes on an “almost somnambulistic character” (11), a kind of “self-forgetting, an obliviousness to [one’s] appearance and surroundings” (10).

The prospect of seamless integration is one striking implication of theorizing the modern city in terms of absorption rather than shock. With shock as the prevailing paradigm, the individual is perpetually at odds with the city, clashing with its many disruptive and jarring technologies. Emphasis falls on shock’s violence—its capacity to bounce off of surfaces, its very etymology from the French choquer, indicating a violent blow or collision between opposing forces1—while absorption at least creates the illusion of a capacity to smooth over differences. Of course, this observation does not absolve absorption of the charge of violence—absorption’s reliance on submission and power differentials is an issue we will look at later. But it does mean that a well-entrenched critical narrative privileging shock needs to be reassessed.

The familiar narrative, in its briefest and admittedly simplified form, goes something like this: shock encapsulates subjective experience in a fast-paced, technologically mediated, and constantly changing urban milieu. The subject is bombarded with novel sensory stimuli, in the words of George Simmel, at “every crossing of the street” (11). In his reading of Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin similarly suggests that “traffic involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions. At dangerous intersections, nervous impulses flow through him in rapid succession, like the energy from a battery” (“Motifs” 175). The individual adapts by maintaining a vigilant posture of self-defense. Without some sort of protective cushion to soften the blows of modern city life, the mind would simply fall apart. Freud proposes that the psyche acts as this much-needed shock absorber, with the outermost layer serving as “protective shield” (33). Psychic armor prevents most stimuli from ever “breaking through” (30) to the deeper recesses of the mind and memory. Shocks are intense, but they fade away just as

---

1 The Oxford English Dictionary locates the origins of shock in the French choquer.
swiftly as they appear (and if they do penetrate that barrier, they are lodged away deep in
the unconscious).”

In these accounts, there is a fairly tight parallel between shock as a technological
process and a psychological experience. Because urban technologies tend to exhibit the
physics of shock, some make the leap to assume that city dwelling is also characterized
by the psychology of shock. Modernist scholars often leave absorption to the romantic
-genius deep in contemplation. By contrast, in an urban environment, the need to remain
on guard and to respond to perpetually changing stimuli prevents absorption in the
contemplative sense—“There is no daydreaming surrender to faraway things in the
protective eye,” Benjamin writes (“Motifs” 191). Indeed, distraction has long been hailed
as the quintessentially modernist mindset.

Yet what I want to point out—and what I think Woolf detects submerged in the
work of her contemporaries and brings to the surface more explicitly in her own
writing—is that absorption is not antithetical to distraction. In fact, absorption does not
really have an antonym at all; it is a concept best characterized by the peculiar way it
combines concentration and distraction. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical
Reproduction”, Walter Benjamin draws a sharp distinction between concentration and
distraction. Yet he makes absorption central to both processes:

Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A
man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work
of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished
painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art. (“Work of Art” 239)

The partition Benjamin draws here is not necessarily intuitive. It is a bit surprising that
the seemingly passive “absorbed by” should be aligned with concentration while the
potentially more voracious act of consumption—“absorb it”—gets paired with automatic

---

2 In some accounts, this concept of shock is generalized to indicate the kind of violent upheaval
associated with rapid and radical transformations in social, political, or aesthetic conventions.
Adam Parkes historicizes the aesthetics of shock in relation to modern warfare and terrorism in
the early twentieth century. Parkes recounts how new aesthetic practices were received as a shock
to the senses as well as moral sensibilities. Impressionism was “frequently seen as an assault on
the audience,” he writes. Parkes quotes critics’ use of violent language: “[Manet] had declared
war on beauty” and “[Whistler] had ‘thrown a post of paint in the public’s face.’” Parkes also
points to the newspaper and sensationalized journalism to argue that twentieth century life was
characterized not only by immediate sensory shocks but something he calls “the shock of
information.” (See Shock 10, 99, 118). Others focus on the rhythmic attunement between city life
and mental life as evidence of the individual falling into step with the temporalities of industrial
work and capital. For Benjamin, both the city and factory demand a mode of automatic reactivity:
the “shock experience which the passer-by has in the crowd corresponds to what the worker
‘experiences’ at his machine” (“Motifs” 176). In a similar vein, Simmel characterizes urban life
in terms of a distinct “tempo,” one that provides a “deep contrast with the slower, more habitual,
more smoothly flowing rhythm of…small town and rural existence” (11).

3 Siegfried Kracauer writes of cinema as a “cult of distraction” (94) and Benjamin upholds the
modern value of “reception in a state of distraction” (“Work of Art” 240).
reception and distraction. However, Benjamin shows that the seemingly passive construction “absorbed by it” ultimately engenders an active aesthetic encounter—“he enters into this work of art….” This is absorption in its more engaging, contemplative sense. We allow ourselves to be absorbed in one object rather than fleetingly touching on many. In this form of absorption, one commits to an examination of depth. The phrase “absorbed by it” helps clarify the kind of suspended stance necessary to concentration.

While Benjamin assigns the active verb form of absorbing to the masses, their act of consumption is the more passive sort. They are moved, yes, but that is because they are carried along. The masses allow themselves to be flooded and thus swept away—in other words, distracted. They are unable to pause. The smoothness we have come to associate with absorption surfaces here in connection with the experience of being swept away in the fast-paced current of modern life. Thus while it is tempting to read Benjamin’s emphasis on distraction in the modern world as the antithesis of absorption, he quite explicitly makes absorption a central component of both distraction and concentration.

That absorption can seem like attention or distraction speaks to a fundamental split in its cognitive and affective signatures. Absorption captures what it feels like to attend in a certain manner. While absorption and attention resemble each other on a cognitive level, the discrepancy between the two becomes plainly evident as soon as one thinks about how mechanically attention can be “paid,” “directed,” or “given.” The more involuntary, consuming focus of absorption knows no such dutiful counterpart. Certainly, the behavioral manifestations of absorption can be feigned easily enough, but genuine affective experience is a defining characteristic of this state in a way it need not be for the instrumentality of attention. Absorption further differentiates itself from attention when it comes to feelings of being lost or irresistibly distracted. Once again the cognitive and affective dimensions cross and then split: absorption is a kind of mental focusing, but the heightened cognitive awareness that accompanies attention disappears in the more dreamlike state of absorption.

Jonathan Crary’s Suspensions of Perception further dismantles the over-simplification of modern distraction by making a compelling case for the historically specific significance of attention around the turn of the century, particularly in terms of its susceptibility to social norms and modes of technological manipulation. Crary locates capitalism’s exaltation of productivity, efficiency, and self-control at the center of this new kind of “attentive subject”. At the same time, he suggests, this emphasis on attention opened up opportunities for resistance and subversion, such as “intensive states of deep absorption and daydreaming” (4). Like Fried, Crary notices that the most intense and transfixed sort of attention often dissolves into something that begins to resemble distraction.

Throughout Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf exploits the peculiarity of absorption’s capacity to traverse the seemingly binary mental states of concentration and distraction. The urgency of absorption arises not simply because it is a fascinating psychological state in and of itself, but also because it looms large in this particular historical moment.4 A

---

4 Jonathan Crary’s Suspensions of Perception further dismantles the over-simplification of modern distraction by making a compelling case for the historically specific significance of
post-war novel by its very nature engages with the notion that shocks have a long afterlife, and that there is violence involved not only in the discrete events that jolt us but also in the gradual assimilation of shock into daily life. This is a moment that demands confrontation with shocks not just in the punctuated events of violence but also in the (seemingly) more peaceful aftermath of that violence. The question of how violent disruptions are registered, dampened, and redistributed is urgent in technological and historical matters both large and small: this is the era of the motor-car, with its shock absorbers designed to soften travel on a bumpy road.

It is no accident that *Mrs. Dalloway* takes place on a summer day in which London is overwhelmed by a heat wave. On this day, there is no downpour, clouds are not bursting in the sky like bombs. The heat wave is slow moving, enervating, sluggish. It blankets the entire city rather than striking individual targets. It is also invisible; characters do not register it as one discrete event, but rather slowly absorb its exhausting effects as the day goes by. Similarly, on a more expansive timescale, the sun’s heat only gradually and cumulatively becomes legible on the skin, and rates of exposure and absorption vary. While the youthful Elizabeth is like a “hyacinth which has had no sun” (123), Peter returns from India with “sunburnt face”, “rather shriveled-looking” (187); Lady Bexborough has “skin of crumpled leather” (10); Mrs. Dempster, a “creased pouch of her worn old face” (27). This is impact in the absence of immediacy. Even in the course of the single day, the heat wave’s influence is diffuse rather than targeted. Heat is not something that ‘strikes’ Peter at one particular moment; instead it is an ongoing experience that infuses the day with a particular kind of physical and affective density: “the weight of the day, which beginning with the visit to Clarissa had exhausted him with its heat, its intensity” (152). Far from a sharply delineated event, the heat wave is more like the kind of *attritional violence* characteristic of Rob Nixon’s “slow violence”. It is an environment - rather than punctuated event - which gradually drains the energy from these city dwellers. Human subjects absorb the heat, but the heat also seems to absorb *them*, siphoning off their vitality and subsuming them in a blanket of stupefying warmth. And even when characters do seem to be registering the heat as a discrete event, we know that it actually arrives at the human body not directly from the sun but filtered through the atmosphere; indeed absorption of the sun’s hazardous rays is a primary function of the planet’s atmosphere.

The fact that this is a single day novel should also alert us to the formal significance of a weighty day. For Woolf’s method to work, a single day must carry the burden of the past, must essentially absorb all other days into it. As Elizabeth Abel points out, “[a]lthough the Bourton scenes Clarissa remembers span several years, they partake...
of a single emotional climate that absorbs them into a homogenous backdrop for the present day in June” (Woolf 31). Indeed we can see this method of temporal absorption when Clarissa senses “the moment of this June morning on which was the pressure of all other mornings” (37). This sense of atmospheric weight challenges the weather’s connotations as light and transient. While weather conditions might be in flux from day to day, atmosphere begins to distinguish itself as something more lasting, a more sturdy repository for traces of the past. Just as characters who never meet share in the larger experience of the heat wave, so is there a pervasive feeling of weight and pressure that cannot be localized or pinned down. Lady Bradshaw, for example, does not know “precisely what made the evening disagreeable, and caused this pressure on top of the head” (101).

Woolf’s interest in absorption does not refute the significance of shock; rather, it follows shock to its logical conclusions. Part of that task involves thinking about how an entire city or nation absorbs shocking blows. Another part means delving into matters of temporality: Woolf realizes that shocks do not necessarily strike and then bounce off or fade away just as quickly. In the second part of my discussion, I will elaborate on the connection to trauma studies, but here it is sufficient to point out that Woolf’s interest has less to do with the exceptional experience of one individual’s traumatic past experience, and more to do with a diffuse atmospheric absorption of shock across the city on a thoroughly typical day.  

Clarissa’s sense that it is “dangerous to live even one day” (8) speaks to a particular kind of post-war psychological vulnerability. Woolf’s protagonist is not haunted by one traumatic memory from the past – her problems would not be solved if only she could live in the present moment - it is within the exuberant vitality of an ordinary June morning that she senses danger. The city is fast-paced and full of diversions; its capacity to absorb its denizens seems like a kind of death. This is why it is misleading to associate absorption only with the slow life a bygone era. Absorption is characterized by conflicting temporalities. On the one hand, absorption suppresses awareness of time, halting the sequential logic of narrative progression, and riveting attention in what seems like a suspended present moment. Yet for this very same reason, absorption speeds up time: hours pass like minutes, days like hours. When we snap out of an absorptive state, we are surprised to see how much time has passed. The pleasures of absorptive experience thus paradoxically align with a sense of mortal danger. Absorption is fundamentally a threat to consciousness. In contrast to affective states strongly oriented towards the future (anxiety, fear) or past (nostalgia, melancholy), absorption seems particularly well equipped for an encounter with the immediate present. We are accustomed to thinking of things vanishing into the past, but absorption suggests the

---

5 My discussion is thus in conversation with affect theorists who have argued for the need to look at how history plays out at the level of everyday Lauren Berlant directs our attention to “crisis ordinariness…crisis is not exceptional to history…but a process embedded in the ordinary” (10). She writes,” [i]n an ordinary environment, most of what we call events are not of the scale of memorable impact” Kathleen Stewart urges “atmospheric attunement” to “the rhythms of living” (445).
possibility of vanishing into the present. In this way, the city induces a kind of spellbound state in line with Crary’s discussion of the spectacles that captivated nineteenth- and early twentieth-century audiences: hypnosis, trance, sleep walking. Giving oneself over to the immediacy of the moment means risking a kind of loss that is foregrounded by pleasure rather than pain – the loss of time, of consciousness, of life. Absorption captures a fundamental incompatibility between the powerful existential desire for time to slow, and the tremendous pleasure one derives from the experience of its speeding up.

This sense of vulnerability helps illustrate one particular point where attention and absorption diverge. While attention implies methodical surveillance, absorption precludes that kind of hyper-vigilance. In other words, the absorbed cannot also be on guard. Take the following example:

Then, as the sound of St. Margaret’s languished, he thought, She has been ill, and the sound expressed languor and suffering. It was her heart, he remembered; and the sudden loudness of the final stroke tolled for death that surprised in the midst of life. (50; emphasis added)

Particularly striking here is the way that absorption precedes shock. In the conventional modernist narrative, shock comes first, with absorption following as a way of smoothing things out. But in the passage above, absorption actually paves the way for shock. It is the absorptive mindset that makes the clock’s tolling feel “sudden,” a “surprise”. In this way, absorption not only precedes but provides the necessary precondition for shock to feel shocking. One is shocked when one’s guard is let down, when attention is unexpectedly seized. If death can creep up upon the absorbed subject, vigilant attention becomes attractive not because it prevents death, but because it defends against the shock and surprise of death. Freud makes a similar point in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Fright, he writes, is “lack of any preparedness for anxiety” (36). Fright thus distinguishes itself on the basis of temporal sequence rather than mere content. Indeed, throughout Woolf’s novel, we can track the worry that absorption might be the kind of diversion that allows death to sneak in unnoticed. The mind occupied elsewhere leaves itself vulnerable to sudden invasion or seizure.

The use of a sonic cue is indicative of the kind of shock that, borne out of absorption, can creep up when our backs are turned. Optical clarity might provide a more comforting sense of control: one can anticipate the encroachment of a threat, close one’s eyes to avoid what is unpleasant, scale the world according to the parameters of a first-person perspective. Indeed, philosophers have traditionally metaphorized attention as a kind of spotlight or searchlight. While a spotlight radiates out from within, lighting a continuous passageway from mind to perceptual objects, an auditory model of attention more forcefully stages discontinuity. The sound of the clock emphatically signals an experience that is already underway, proof of time’s steady progression with or without one’s conscious awareness, serving as a kind of wake-up call from the absorptive dream.

---

6 “According to one familiar metaphor, the phenomenology of attention is that of a spotlight that highlights items in the perceptual field, making them sharper, more prominent, or more salient” (Mole et. al xv).
of harmony between self and world. Thus, throughout the novel, absorption signals an uncomfortable mismatch between phenomenological pleasure and existential terror. The joy of losing one’s self in the city is much like the experience of being caught up in a good book, but the persistent worry nags: when do we wake up?

The shadow that seems to hang over absorption is a reminder that seamless integration is often merely an illusion. While absorption creates the impression of a smooth surface, that is only because it seals up cracks and glosses over rough spots. The danger of being swept up in all this smoothness is a corresponding inability to step back or sense shock coming. At the same time, this proximity provides significant opportunities. For example, Woolf’s narrator seizes on this feature of absorption in the way that she discreetly slides between different minds and different spheres. The persistence of the narrator’s familiar diction, even as she picks up fragments from the mouths of her characters, helps smooth over the cracks and crevices between various voices.

For Woolf’s characters, absorption similarly blurs the line between being drawn in and being drawn out. Consider Peter Walsh: midway through the afternoon, he stops at his hotel for a bit of respite from the hot and crowded city streets. There, he weighs two options: “he might go to Clarissa’s party, or he might go to one of the Halls, or he might settle in and read an absorbing book” (157). The choices on either side of the seemingly exclusive conjunction “or” echo the passage we began with in terms of the contrast between solitary reader and the more socially inclined urban dweller. That distinction, however, soon crumbles. Peter’s thoughts gradually begin to indicate the role of absorption in both solitary and social contexts:

He never knew what people thought. It became more and more difficult for him to concentrate. He became absorbed; he became busied with his own concerns; now surly, now gay; dependent on women, absent-minded, moody, less and less able (so he thought as he shaved) to understand why Clarissa couldn’t simply find them a lodging and be nice to Daisy; introduce her. And then he could just—just do what? just haunt and hover (he was at the moment actually engaged in sorting out various keys, papers), swoop and taste, be alone, in short, sufficient to himself; and yet nobody of course was more dependent upon others (he buttoned his waistcoat); it had been his undoing. He could not keep out of smoking-rooms, liked colonels, liked golf, liked bridge, and above all women’s society. (158)

At first glance, it seems that absorption activates distinctly inward tendencies: it is a matter of “settling in”; Peter is “moody”, “busied with his own concerns”, longing to be “alone…sufficient to himself”. It is as if attention’s finite resources have all been diverted to this state of absorption, resulting in an inability to concentrate. Peter is absorbed not just with his thoughts, but in them. The very process of self-absorption infuses thoughts with an irritable moodiness; absorption’s affective charge has overtaken its cognitive utility.

Yet while absorption is initially posited as thoroughly anti-social—absorbed in a book, absorbed in one’s thoughts—by the end of the passage, the absorptive mindset leads outward rather than inward. Peter follows his moody thoughts deeper and deeper, but he ultimately comes out not in some buried recess of the psyche but outside, realizing
how utterly “dependent [he is] on others”. We see here how a state of inner absorption does not necessarily close off the outer world. In fact, it opens new points of access to it. If that seems surprising, we should remember that this is a novel in which the self is less a hermetically sealed interior and more like an atmospheric condition in its own right, a “mist [that] spread ever so far” (9). It thus becomes possible to see how self-absorption can actually lead towards social and environmental immersion. Peter’s experience resonates with scholarship that has followed Heidegger in detaching mood from individual interiority. As Jonathan Flatley suggests, “we find ourselves in moods that have already been inhabited by others, and that have already been shaped or put into circulation” (5). In this way, Peter’s drifting in the turbulent currents of a mood becomes an act of participation rather than seclusion. His feelings are not exclusively his own, but rather part of a larger circulating affective climate. The shift from Peter’s absorption in his own mind to absorption with the wider world once again troubles the conventional divide between solitary and urban contexts. While initially Peter’s mind and body are completely at odds, by the end of the passage, the mental and physical realms merge: Peter buttons his waistcoat while his thoughts concern themselves with society. It is only here and only temporarily that the content of his thoughts and the form of his actions find unity.

The split between mind and body throughout much of this passage also tells us something about how a narrator represents absorptive processes. Because Peter is so absorbed for much of the passage, he lacks the ability to step back and observe his own actions. We need the narrator to fill us in on details such as the movement of Peter’s hands because the character completes those tasks with the automatic obliviousness of one whose thoughts are occupied elsewhere. In this way, the narrator provides compensation for Peter’s attentional blind spots: while the character is elsewhere with his thoughts, the parentheticals intervene to narrate his various tasks. Here, Woolf’s use of free indirect discourse provides a fuller picture than either a traditionally third or first-person mode of narration ever could. The best vantage point for perceiving a mental state such as absorption or attention is not necessarily within the subject himself. As Paul North suggests in The Problem of Distraction, “to attention attention cannot be paid” (4); “[a]ttention can possess anything but itself” (3). One’s own attention cannot be attended to from within the structure of first-person experience. On the other hand, a strictly third person perspective is not sufficient either. As Abel points out (in a very different context), the aesthetic rendering of absorptive states poses the distinct challenge of approaching an “interiority that is both opaque and palpable” (“Affective” 54), subjects can be “set apart…by a quality of absorption” (48) in which “carefully guarded interiority holds the viewer at a distance” (51). Considering these dual obstacles, it makes sense that Woolf would need to develop a formal strategy that weaves together inside and outsides, proximity as well as distance. In this regard, we get the image of Peter’s mental state only because the narrator herself refuses to be fully absorbed by it. The parentheses are abrupt interruptions that fight against the hypnotic tug of absorption. Indeed, one of Woolf’s driving convictions is that narration is just as much about finding ways to create distance

7 For examples see Massumi, “Autonomy of Affect”; Brennan, The Transmission of Affect; and Ben Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres.”
as proximity. Free indirect discourse allows one to appreciate that the content of Peter’s thoughts and his attention are two very different objects, and as such, require different representational techniques. Free indirect discourse has these dual orientations, looking in and out at the same time.

On the one hand, free indirect discourse exploits third person narration’s capacity for detached observation: as Michael Fried suggests, an interior state of absorption betrays external legible marks, so that painting a face with a transfixed gaze actually becomes an effective way of rendering the psychological state of absorption, a kind of outside-in technique. Yet it is not just the subject who is transformed in an absorptive encounter; the world itself takes on new tones and shades of riveting affective immediacy. This is why, on the other hand, Woolf also needs the intimacy and proximity of first-person vantage points, a corresponding inside-out approach equipped to render a world altered by the absorptive encounter. Free indirect discourse accommodates absorption’s inevitable blurring of subjects and objects.

I have alluded to the fact that Woolf absorbs the voices and perspectives of her characters, but here I must point out that absorption is not a strategy Woolf embraces wholeheartedly at every turn. It would be more accurate to say that absorption is key to the narrator’s struggle, to her ability to pull off a delicate balancing act. While absorption creates an impression of equality, the very fact that it smooths out unevenness should remind us that there is a power differential at work. The individual or thing that is absorbed is subsumed into something larger. Absorption thus commits its own kind of violence, but unlike shock, it covers its tracks. For a narrator, absorption is risky. Woolf’s narrative style strives to selectively absorb elements of one’s characters without being absorbed or swallowed up by those characters.

The essential insight here is that absorption is not just part of the historical story but also a key element of Woolf’s formal innovation. The distinct way in which modern experience distributes shock outside of the individual mind calls for a formal strategy equipped to deal with a representational object that is neither wholly physical nor psychological. Free indirect discourse is a narrative strategy driven by the logic of absorption: the narrator absorbs and is absorbed by the voices of the novel’s extensive cast of characters. Rather than immersing herself fully in one consciousness, Woolf incorporates the moods, tones, and linguistic particularities of many into one narrative voice. Narrative voice is “in the air,” moving between subjects and drifting in the rhythms and currents of city life. Far from being tethered to a distinct subject position, the narrator’s voice is airborne, free to cross subjective boundaries and drift in London’s affective weather. Woolf’s narrator readily absorbs the particularities of her characters, but she insistently refuses to be wholly absorbed by them.

To illustrate, the following passage thematizes absorption in connection to a sort of post-war existential dread, but it also provides insight into the formal work of absorption:

But she feared time itself, and read on Lady Bruton’s face, as if it had been a dial cut in impassive stone, the dwindling of life; how year by year her share was sliced, how little the margin that remained was capable any longer of stretching, of absorbing, as in the youthful years, the colours, salts, tones of existence, so that she filled the room she entered, and felt
often as she stood hesitating one moment on the threshold of her drawing-room, an exquisite suspense, such as might stay a diver before plunging while the sea darkens and brightens beneath him, and the waves which threaten to break.... (30; emphasis added).

Rather than complete immersion—a kind of unselective and open floodgates for raw experience—the passage describes an aesthetically discriminating process of careful selection and guarded restraint. We are immersed in many things, but we find certain things absorbing. While the immersed subject is swallowed up by the sea, here the subject absorbs the sea, consistent with its etymological origin as a kind of “swallowing” or “taking in”. Absorption, in this context, is selective, allowing one to sift through the components of raw experience, to gradually receive experiences as they accumulate rather than in one blunt impact. There is often a leisure in this type of absorption, as indicated by its association with youth here. The language explicitly invokes aesthetic discernment: “the colours, salts, tones of existence”. Woolf frequently gestures at the subtle distinction between absorption and immersion in contrasting images of the hostess hesitating on a threshold and the diver who has plunged into the sea. While the diver is fully immersed in the water, the figure who hesitates on a threshold incorporates select elements from a distance. One is drenched and surrounded by sea water, the other absorbs particles of sea air—something like the sea’s aura. This image captures the essential features of narrative voice in this novel. Like the figure hesitating on a threshold, the narrator gains privileged access to her characters by hovering around them instead of simply plunging into them. The narrator is rarely fully immersed in her characters. Instead, she is more like that hesitating figure whose access to sea air simultaneously represents greater distance and greater intimacy. Sea air once again aligns absorption with sensory experience extending beyond the realm of the visual; distance allows one to take in the olfactory and palpable emanations of the sea, and to appreciate how the sea inflects its wider environment. A similar language of sea air and auratic attunement characterizes the relationship between Clarissa and Peter when he finds herself aware of “the brisk sea-salted air of their intimacy” (46).

This kind of selective absorbency is particularly appropriate for the kind of subtle affective shades and tones that Woolf wishes to capture in this novel. Full immersion in one character at a time would overwhelm not only the narrative voice but also the subtler

---

8 *OED*: Absorb, v. Origin: Of multiple origins. Partly a borrowing from French. Partly a borrowing from Latin. Etymons: French *absorber*; Latin *absorbēre*. Etymology: < (i) Anglo-Norman and Middle French *absorbir*, Anglo-Norman and Middle French, French *absorber* to engulf (mid 11th cent. in Old French as *assorber*; also c1200 as *assorbit* in this sense), to swallow, devour (2nd half of the 12th cent. in Old French as *assorbir*), to take in, assimilate (late 12th cent. in Old French), (of a liquid) to soak up (early 16th cent.), and its etymon (ii) classical Latin *absorbēre* to swallow down, devour, (of water) to engulf, submerge, to swallow up, to soak up < *ab-* *-AB-* prefix + *sorbēre* to suck in.

9 This combination of “proximity and distance” aligns with Walter Benjamin’s conception of the aura (217-238) in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”.

88
shades and tones of a given character. Woolf’s use of free indirect discourse is itself a process of “absorbing...the colours, salts, tones of existence.” The narrator prevents herself from being fully absorbed by her characters; her attention jumps but it is far from undiscriminating, and something of her familiar voice and diction always reemerges. In this way, the narrator herself seems to anxiously guard against the possibility of being drowned out—in both the aural and existential senses of that phrase. Thus the narrator’s efforts to absorb as well as her notable resistance to being absorbed work in tandem to construct atmosphere. Absorption is far from a simple “good”: it is central to this novel because it is a problem and a possibility at the same time.

The narrator’s object of concern is an entire affective climate rather than individual mind. This means that when we talk about atmosphere in the novel, we are not necessarily talking about the experiences of individuals. To construct atmosphere, Woolf needs to allow the narrative voice to drift in affective currents larger than any one individual. In other words, atmosphere is not just an object represented but a kind of literary weather circulating throughout the entire text, endowing the work with Ngai’s “feeling tone” much as a single day has its weather, a weather irreducible to one discrete event or perspective.10

This airborne mode of narration is more than just a way of capturing a huge range of individual characters. Woolf is interested in representing atmosphere itself, something that is more than the sum of the city’s subjective parts. That interest betrays still another step in Woolf’s departure from a more standard model of shock absorbency. Thus far, we have seen that, far from being banished from Woolf’s modernism, absorption plays a critical role both formally and thematically. Moving forward it becomes imperative to consider another revision to the prevailing narrative: Woolf transports the process of shock absorbency from the individual psyche to the wider atmosphere.

II. “Fear no more the heat of the sun”: From Psyche to Atmosphere

Thus far, we have mostly been concerned with how individuals absorb and are absorbed. But we have also repeatedly run up against the problem of experience’s excess — all that ‘overflows’ the absorptive capacities of a single subject. In this section I advance the claim that Woolf takes the defining psychological and aesthetic paradoxes that structure absorption and transfers them to the scale of a larger impersonal collective. In other words, Woolf grapples with how the peculiarities of absorption might apply to a non-psychological subject.

By arguing that Woolf’s city is itself a kind of shock absorbing technology, I am participating in a longstanding tradition of rescaling and tweaking what is meant by shock and trauma. Turn-of-the-century physicians tended to conceive of shock as a physical injury: railway and motor accidents were cited as prime examples of the body’s literal collision with new technology. Initially, thinking about wartime shell shock followed a similar logic: early medical diagnosis forms required a precise measurement of the victim’s proximity to an explosion as a way of proving direct neurological damage
Gradually, this physical conception of shock gave way to a more broadly psychological one. While the distinction between shock and trauma is not a hard and fast one (and is historically variable), modern conceptions of trauma tend to approach shock not as literal brain damage but in the more figurative sense of lasting damage to the mind (Freudians note its Greek etymology as a kind of wound), a scar on mental life. I see this expansion of shock from “brain” to “mind” as significant but incomplete. The additional step is from psyche to atmosphere.

My reading of an atmospheric shock absorber in Mrs. Dalloway draws on but also departs from prevailing theorizations of trauma. The common thread involves temporality, the sense that shock has a long, limping afterlife. Trauma foregrounds the problem of limiting our conception of experience to temporally bounded events. The difference in my approach concerns how and where shocks are encoded and preserved over this extended, ongoing stretch of time. In one major line of trauma theory, extending from Freud to Cathy Caruth’s Unclaimed Experience, trauma differs from shock in the way it so powerfully and unexpectedly breaks through psychic defense mechanisms. While shocks are experienced consciously in real time through the jolt produced by this psychic clash, the thinking goes, trauma penetrates into the psyche with such violent directness that the experience is missed in real time and can be accessed only retrospectively. In this way, trauma theory is all about retrieving lasting traces of the past on the inside. By contrast, my proposed model of atmospheric shock absorbency means looking for those affective traces outside. Instead of assuming that missed experiences will be found deep within us, this approach means taking seriously the possibility that some experiences remain on the outside, registering not upon any single mind but at the level of our environment and the shared air we breathe. It means that the individual is not necessarily the privileged site for theorizing shock absorbency.

We often think of technology as producing or amplifying shocks, but in Mrs. Dalloway, it is made clear that technology also dampens and muffles the violent shocks of modern life. The city is a kind of atmospherically controlled sensory chamber, capable of filtering and insulating against certain stimuli while cranking up and broadcasting others. This means that by the time characters register certain sensations, the larger atmospheric shock absorber of the urban milieu has often already reduced the impact, as in the following representative examples:

“No sound was to be heard above the traffic.” (28)

“Crowds were...obstructing him, blotting her out.” (53)

“[C]hildren’s voices, the shuffle of feet, and people passing, and humming traffic, and rising and falling traffic, humming traffic. Down, down he sank...and was muffled over.” (56)

“A sound interrupted him; a frail quivering sound” (80).

11 See Tim Armstrong, “Two Types of Shock” as well as Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle.  
12 See Caruth, Unclaimed Experience as well as Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle.
Obstructed, blotted out, muffled, frail – this is unmistakably the language of dampened experience. At first glance, such language seems to offer a familiar illustration of the urban flaneur absorbing the jerks and jolts of shock in order to navigate the city with ease. Yet the defensive function of absorption does not belong to the individual here. These sensations are reduced in intensity before they ever reach the mind or body. This is, then, atmospheric rather than psychic insulation: crowds and traffic do the work rather than the human brain. Here, what Freud describes as a psychic shield in *Beyond The Pleasure Principle* becomes an atmospheric shield. The modern subject’s ability to survive in the busy and crowded urban milieu thus seems contingent upon not just psychological but atmospheric adaptation. It is perhaps this sense of aerial defense which informs the novel’s refrain from *Cymbeline*, “fear no more the heat of the sun.” And if the psyche is not necessarily the privileged site for shock absorbency, it is also not necessarily where most memories of the past are encoded. Atmosphere itself becomes an affective repository for history: the wind is described as an “eternal breeze” (81). Sound is an “invincible thread [that] wound up in the air” (82) and Clarissa feels that the sky “held something of her own in it… this sky above Westminster” (185). Thus, regardless of what any given city dweller might have experienced as event with regards to the war, the recent past is still very much detectable and present as environment.

Much as the psychological defense mechanisms of repression and suppression generate their own set of problems and vulnerabilities, so does the atmospheric shock absorber expose inhabitants to new threats even as it defends against other hazards. In other words, atmosphere shields against the sun, but it does not in the same way shield against itself. Peter, for example, is baffled when he is “made to tremble and sob by the clouds” (142) and feelings are routinely described in the atmospheric language of “turbulence” and “pressure” (87). Thus just as psychological defense can lead to the kind of repression that prevents one from facing buried emotions, so can atmosphere result in a kind of physical numbness that seems to deprive one of sensation rather than simply defending against it. Therefore we have to wonder, is the atmospheric shield more like a form of public health, or collective pathology?

Like the memoirs of Edmund Blunden and Siegfried Sassoon, *Mrs. Dalloway* consistently meditates upon the idea of missed experiences. In so doing, it provides a

---

13 “This little fragment of living substance is suspended in the middle of an external world charged with the most powerful energies; and it would be killed by the stimulation emanating from these if it were not provided with a protective shield against stimuli…its outermost surface ceases to have the structure proper to living matter, becomes to some degree inorganic and thenceforward functions as a special envelope or membrane resistant to stimuli. In consequence, the energies of the external world are able to pass into the next underlying layers, with have remained living, with only a fragment of their original intensity…By its death, the outer layer has saved all the deeper ones from a similar fate — unless, that is to say, stimuli reach it which are so strong that they break through the protective shield. Protection against stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than reception of stimuli” (Freud *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 30). While for Freud a part of our psychological mechanism comes to resemble an external shield, in my examples from Woolf, the opposite is true: the exterior comes to resemble a psychological shield.
certain degree of freedom to think about experiences in the absence of subjects and to imagine violence unfolding at the level of environment rather than individual mind or body. Just as Blunden and Sassoon dedicate a surprising amount of attention to “duds” and near misses, so does Woolf characterize her shell-shocked soldier through the language of failed impact. Septimus survives precisely because “the last shells missed him” (96). This bodily sense of near-miss resonates at the level of affective experience as well: “he watched them explode with indifference…. He could not feel” (96). That even the shell-shocked soldier seems to only have experienced the war in partial, splintered ways, should cause us to question the solid partition readers tend to respectfully erect in order to firmly separate those who have “directly” experienced the war (in this case, Septimus) and those who have not (London’s citizens). We might begin to think of Septimus’ experience as part of a much larger modern experience of “near misses”; the survivor is, after all, one who nearly missed.\(^{14}\) And the very concept of survivorship is predicated upon unequal distribution of impact.

The idea that indirect experience characterizes the war itself has significant implications for how we understand the lasting effects of that violence for populations at home. Peter Sloterdijk’s *Terror from the Air* once again provides some helpful historical and philosophical scaffolding. Sloterdijk’s argument concerning poison gas is all about an expansion of scale, from the individual target to the diffuse contamination of an entire environment. I want to keep following that creeping poison gas, with its capacity to overflow the bounds of both space and time, into the urban environment of the post-World War I era. After all, the experience on the home-front cannot be understood simply as a dim or faded version of shock if shock was never the right language for characterizing modern war in the first place.

Mrs. Dalloway features a much-discussed scene in which the sudden sound of a backfiring car produces the kind of jarring shock one would associate with the battlefield and conventional accounts of shock. I want to focus on what happens next—the experiences of those who do not register the shock directly but rather experience it in a gentler, more mediated form:

\[\ldots\] Something had happened. Something so trifling in single instances that no mathematical instrument, though capable of transmitting shocks in China, could register the vibration; yet in its fullness rather formidable and in its common appeal emotional; for in all the hat shops and tailors’ shops strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire. In a public house in a back street a Colonial insulted the House of Windsor which led to words, broken beer glasses, and a general shindy, which echoed across the way in the ears of girls buying white underlinen threaded with pure white ribbon for their weddings. For the surface agitation of the passing car as it sunk grazed something very profound.

---

\(^{14}\) In fact, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the only death that is described in conventionally direct and shocking language, with a fully present eyewitness, is also the only pre-war death recounted in any detail. In contrast to the atmospheric haze of war, Clarissa’s sister Sylvia’s death seems eerily clear: “to see your own sister killed by a falling tree…before your very eyes” (78).
The words “surface” and “agitation” connote the direct tactile contact we might expect from a shocking encounter in the conventional sense. But the other something — “something very profound,” “something [that] had happened” concerns not the direct impact of that shock on any individual consciousness but rather the collective shock waves that create invisible currents of connection across the city (and indeed the Empire). We tend to think of shock in terms of a discrete location, both spatially and temporally. But here the atmosphere’s absorption of shock is all about a spreading out in space and time, the way that different affective and sensory fragments are prolonged and redistributed: “the car had gone…it left a slight ripple which flowed through glove shops and hat shops and tailors’ shops.” These characters do not register the initial shock and indeed they do not have to. What they sense is more like a subtle change in atmospheric conditions – much as we might become aware that the weather has altered without being able to pinpoint a distinct event or the precise moment things changed. Echoes in particular highlight the mediating nature of air: within a strictly visual paradigm, air’s invisibility creates the illusion of direct impact for what is actually always filtered transmission, just as for Blunden straight lines did not exist” (52). The echo calls attention to air waves ricocheting and propagating in all different directions. The coupling of “frail” and “whispering” with “expansion” helps emphasize how a shock thinned out on the dimension of intensity is at the same time spread out on the dimension of spatial reach. The passage’s reference to “something” is therefore deliberately vague: it captures the way subjects become attuned to affect in the present moment, before the imposition of semantic and linguistic signification. Indeed this language— “something happened”—captures the precise sense of affective living history emphasized by theorists writing in the tradition of Raymond Williams’s “structures of feeling” (128-135). Kathleen Stewart writes that we sense atmosphere when “the sense of something happening becomes tactile” (445). We do not experience our historical moment as a clear chain of discernable events, she writes, but rather sense it as “something coming into existence” (446).15 Surprisingly, then, “something” is the most specific and carefully chosen word Woolf uses in the passage.

Just as we have moved from a model of individual shock to atmospheric shock waves and absorption, the above passage signals a shift from intersubjectivity to transsubjectivity. When “strangers looked at each other”, they think not of each other but rather of national symbols. There is no “direct” intersubjective encounter here; a sense of community is created only indirectly, boomerang-like, through a shared exposure to atmospheric shock waves. The way that strangers looking directly at each other leads to a kind of distraction and abstraction marks this version of a face-to-face encounter’s departure from the Levinasian model. It is paradoxically because they do not register each other in any meaningful way that these characters’ thoughts end up drifting to the more abstract categories that in turn structure a sense of national community. This detour effect - whereby face-to-face subjects connect only indirectly through a shared

15 Lauren Berlant similarly writes that “trauma produces something in the air without that thing having to be more concrete than a sense of the uncanny-free-floating…the becoming-event” (80).
distraction - can be read as a variation on the notion that aura represents the kind of ‘returned gaze’ we expect from the human face. Walter Benjamin discusses this idea in “On Some Motifs In Baudelaire”:

Looking at someone carries the implicit expectation that our look will be returned by the object of our gaze. Where this expectation is met...there is an experience of...the aura to the fullest extent...Experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man...To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return (188).

The passage in Mrs. Dalloway does not follow the precise logic of Benjamin’s formulation, but it does reconfigure and draw on many of its key elements. While Woolf’s strangers technically do “look at each other”, the visual contact amounts to little more than vacant staring, and there is a sense of disappointment in the expectation of a returned gaze that aligns with Benjamin’s description. The experience of a returned gaze does not occur through the eyes or between two subjects; rather, it is through the echo that subjects in this passage pick up on the desired sense of returned acknowledgment. As in Benjamin, there is a crucial process of “transposition” whereby a substitute fills in to create the phenomenal experience of returned gaze. While these characters are relatively unmoved by the individuals standing in their midst, they are very much affected by the echoes rippling through the street and the bells tolling. These citizens “invest” these muffled signals with an almost magical capacity to perceive, to recognize, to acknowledge. The true moment of connection comes about through the mediation of inanimate objects and abstract ideas: “the dead...the flag...Empire.” The echo is an auditory aura, creating the impression that the city’s symbols and statues stare back. It is not so much that these subjects recognize these sounds as a sign of national unity, but instead that the sounds seem to recognize them as national subjects. It is a moment very much reminiscent of Big Ben’s reverberating echoes throughout the novel.

The order enacted here begins to tell us something about how larger social and national categories might come to overlay more basic experiences of shared atmosphere. We tend to think of patriotic symbols triggering an affective response, but here an affective atmosphere precedes the emergence of national symbols, categories, and abstract ideas. Instead of thinking that Big Ben is some kind of fixed symbol that citizens emotionally respond to, we can see that preexisting emotions attach to Big Ben. This reversal aligns with Sara Ahmed’s theory of the ways objects of emotion circulate: “[t]o say ‘the nation mourns’ is to generate the nation, as if it were a mourning subject. The nation becomes a shared ‘object of feeling’, through the orientation that is taken towards it” (13). Rather than regarding Big Ben as a trigger for affective responses, we could say that affective atmosphere creates Big Ben in the first place.

The potential optimism suggested by a “shared atmosphere” belies the degree of stratification, and potential for coercion, that structures such ostensible sharing. As Ahmed writes, one is in danger of being “alienated from the nation by virtue of not being affected in the right way” (228). Because the opportunity to “participate in national culture [requires] feeling right”, “the affect alien is...often a killjoy” (224). Indeed, in
Woolf’s post-war city, the distribution of affect is not egalitarian—it flows but it also gets stuck, rerouted, even hoarded. While Septimus cannot feel, his noncombatant boss is overcome by feeling when talking about the war: he “could not finish, so pleasurable was his emotion” (88). Brewer further observes that the “prying and insidious…fingers of the European War, smashed a plaster cast of Ceres, ploughed a hole in the geranium beds, and utterly ruined his cook’s nerves” (86). This sense of direct invasion – ‘tactile,’ ‘smashing,’ ‘ploughing,’ ‘unnerving’ – is precisely what Septimus does not experience (not even during combat). Thus there is something disturbingly out of tune about the way civilians image war ‘coming home’; it seems somewhat absurd to imagine that the “War…dropped a bomb at [Miss Parry’s] very door” (178). By contrast, Septimus experiences a sense of alienation and affective deprivation, as if others have hoarded the war’s emotional pains and pleasures, leaving none for the returning soldier. Woolf articulates this affective stratification in explicitly aerial terms. Septimus takes his last breath in the novel—a “suffocation of blackness” (184); by contrast, Doctor Bradshaw’s high society guests “breathed the air of Harley Street with rapture; which relief however was denied to his patients” (101).

This notion that affect is more accurately thought of a type of air force rather than mind’s property suggests that characters are often unknowingly swept up in emotions that are as external as weather conditions. In the world of Mrs. Dalloway, there is a direct link between access to affective plenty and airspace, particularly the capacity to navigate atmosphere. At her party, for example, Clarissa exhibits the “most perfect ease and air of a creature floating in its element” (174). For his part, Peter becomes aware of the “feeling at once frightening and exhilarating of being rushed through the air on the shoulders of people he could no longer see” (44). The way that these various characters are moved by affect in its aerial form reflects the often-noted dual meaning of emotion as “moving.” The distinction between perception or cognition and affective attunement is evident in the way that felt affective experience requires dynamic bodily and spatial motion rather than static apprehension or mechanical appraisal. After all, Septimus’ capacity to perceive emotion is entirely intact. Yet these perceptions lack their appropriate affective shading because they have been muffled and dampened to the point of near extinction:

She cried for the first time since they were married. Far away he heard her sobbing; her heard it accurately, he noticed it distinctly; he compared it to a piston thumping. But he felt nothing (71).

Septimus’ inability to feel is made all the more striking by virtue of its juxtaposition with his fully intact capacity to accurately perceive emotions. In fact, Septimus is not just able to register emotions—he is extraordinary able. Septimus’ perceptual capacities hum along with machinelike efficiency; it is the mechanism which allows one to be moved that seems to have malfunctioned. The way in which the experience of affect requires being moved — and therefore a kind of bodily extension in space —helps deepen our understanding of why air might be more than a convenient metaphor for affect. What we have begun to see is that the affective is constitutively aerial; being moved is not a side effect or consequence of emotion but precisely that which sets feeling apart from the merely mechanical perception of emotion at a distance.

The paradox is that one feels numb. Far from a completely neutral state,
numbness in *Mrs. Dalloway* actually conveys what it feels like to not feel. Numbness requires a felt awareness of inconsistency in the expected emotional response. For example, Septimus does not just observe his numbness but actually experiences it in highly affective terms “the panic was on him—that he could not feel,” “he had, especially in the evening, these sudden thunder-claps of fear. He could not feel” (86). While we might expect the refrain that “he could not feel” to indicate a complete dearth of emotion, what we actually find in Septimus’ experience is the highly charged experience of panic and fear that results from not feeling in any coherent or expected way. In a strange way, Septimus’ numbness seems affectively overloaded. In a national culture that prizes affective unity, not feeling in tune with the prevailing affective atmosphere might as well mean not feeling at all. The strange way that Septimus seems to feel his own numbness illustrates Ahmed’s point that nationally coded affects may be felt “by their members and even more by those external to them, who perhaps see in it the tangible mark of their exclusion” (70). The fact that Septimus registers experiences that should be his own as a kind of external weather makes Bradshaw’s narrow diagnostic focus —his “lightning skill, and almost infallible accuracy” a particularly inappropriate atmospheric intervention. Septimus does not suffer from a single interior wound that can be targeted directly. There is no one source of internal pain for lightning to strike.

The observation that even personal experiences seem external to some characters requires that we take seriously the idea of non-experience or partial experience—a far cry from the “jolt” of shock that so loudly announces itself as experience, as event. Many characters experience or drift through something that cannot quite be categorized as firsthand or direct impact—yet what they never experience as an event, they do nonetheless experience as lived environment. In other words, for many, the shocks of modernity are quotidian rather than exceptional, and as such they are assimilated into the fabric of everyday life. Woolf is interested in what it is like to live, day in and day out, in an atmosphere that has been saturated with shock and affect, regardless of what one’s individual biography might include. Thus, even the violence of recent history becomes an enveloping climate rather than sharply delineated four-year period - less a punctuated moment and more like the air one breathes.

Clarissa’s party is itself an aesthetic project aimed at cultivating a certain atmosphere, an “ambiance.” The goal of a party is, essentially, to eliminate shocks and offer guests atmosphere as experience. For Clarissa, the ideal party is one in which nothing dramatic happens—no shocks, no interruptions, certainly no death. And this should certainly sound familiar: it is common to hail a social gathering or journey as a success precisely because it is uneventful. The ideal hostess, in this sense, provides her guests with environment rather than event. This is, of course, the basic distinction that we have been tracking all along, but here Woolf focuses on that distinction as something one can actively create and shape. Earlier, I cited the major theorists of urban shock with their focus on street crossings and intersections. Indeed Woolf first pivots from Clarissa’s consciousness to another mind on the curb as Clarissa waits to cross the street. The party, by contrast, represents a different kind of intersection. Rather than a shocking collision, a party is a staged and orchestrated meeting place. It replaces shock with absorption. And yet, as we will see, Woolf is ambivalent about the capacity of absorption to fully counter the violent tension foregrounded by shock.

The party is an event that spans the domestic and urban spheres that we have seen
crisscross throughout this discussion. Hovering by the windowsill at one point, the narrator is uniquely poised to pick up on selective elements from interior and exterior spaces. The setting also provides a variation on the thresholds we have seen throughout: the hesitating diver, the hostess in her drawing room, the novel’s many figures loitering at corners, curbs, doors, and windows. While one might expect the party’s domestic setting to stand in sharp contrast with the weather outside, Woolf makes no effort to disguise the fact that meteorological and affective atmospheres circulate and permeate each other: after all, the window is open. What matters to her protagonist is simply that this intersection be absorbing rather than shocking. When a gust of wind blows into the house, Clarissa is tremendously relieved by the particular reaction of one guest:

The curtain with its flight of birds of Paradise blew out again. And Clarissa saw—she saw Ralph Lyon beat it back, and go on talking. So it wasn’t a failure after all! it was going to be all right now—her party. It had begun. It had started (170).

That the curtain not only “blows in” but is “beaten back” reinforces the bidirectional nature of absorption: the domestic space absorbs city air just as the city absorbs the air of Clarissa’s household. There is a clash of forces at work here, rendered momentarily visible, and yet this turbulence does not register with the violence of shock. Indeed the curtain materializes the image of ironing out a wrinkled texture. Clarissa’s satisfaction stems from this smoothing effect, the triumph of having seamlessly assimilated different spheres. Initially, the curtain blowing in alarms Clarissa because it threatens to disrupt and distract. Yet Ralph beats it back with the kind of absentminded gesture we have come to associate with absorption. He goes on talking, barely conscious of what his hand is doing (recall Peter in the earlier discussed scene). In other words, he is too absorbed to be bothered by the curtain. His mind is elsewhere: the party flows on. Ralph’s reflex-like response suggests that the disturbance—or potential distraction—is nothing like the jarring shifts of gear we have come to associate with shock. Clarissa’s relief therefore stems from a triumph of absorption in both its physical and psychological senses, the defeat of atmospheric shock and of mental distraction.

Noticing the centrality of absorption here means venturing a revision of the standard account of the party’s key moment: the utter shock that comes with the news of Septimus’ death. Readers tend to focus on the way that the news shakes Clarissa, yanking her out of her current mindset. Indeed, it is a moment that has the expected characteristics of shock—the flow of the party breaks down at a punctuated moment. Even the language echoes an earlier passage we looked at. Then, it was, “death that surprises in the midst of life”; now, it is “in the middle of my party, here’s death” (183). Yet in both cases, shock has the effect that it does precisely because of the way it emerges from the absorption preceding it. And just as soon as the shock makes its impact, absorption follows and takes over. On either side of shock, then, we find absorption.

In some ways, this is what makes absorption as disturbing as it is reassuring: the suicide is only shocking for a moment, but then it, too, is incorporated into the larger atmosphere. We might say that the party is itself a shock absorbing technology, dampening and muffling the blow of death. Septimus’ violent end might be stunning for a moment, but during most of the party it exists only through slight affective traces
permeating the party’s atmosphere—the chatter about war, the vague mood of nostalgia. The fact is, death is always in the midst of Clarissa’s party, but most of the time, absorption conceals its rough edges. And yet, there are these exceptional moments where one seems to catch absorption in the act. Much as Clarissa stands momentarily transfixed by the blowing curtain, Peter is captivated by

...windows lit up, a piano, a gramophone sounding; a sense of pleasure-making hidden, but now and again emerging when, through the uncurtained window, the window left open, one saw parties sitting over tables, young people slowly circling, conversations between men and women, maids looking idly out (a strange comment theirs, when work was done), stockings drying on top ledges, a parrot, a few plants. Absorbing, mysterious, of infinite richness, this life. And in the large square where the cabs shot and swerved so quick, there were loitering couples, dallying, embracing, shrunk up under the shower of a tree; that was moving; so silent, so absorbed, that one passed, discreetly, timidly, as if in the presence of some sacred ceremony to interrupt which would have been impious. That was interesting. And so on into the flare and glare.

His light overcoat blew open, he stepped with indescribable idiosyncrasy, leant a little forward, with his hands behind his back and his eyes still a little hawklike; he tripped through London, towards Westminster, observing. (163; emphasis added)

The structure of this passage is a perfect inversion of the party scene: from outside, Peter looks in to a party. The window featured in this scene does not have a curtain, and yet at the end of the passage, Peter’s own coat “blows open”; we see the effect of air from the other side as it flows out of a house rather than into one, as seen from the previous indoor vantage point. Just as Clarissa finds herself transfixed in the moment when the curtain is beaten back, so does Peter feel that this is the kind of experience that comes about only “now and then”; and when it does come about, he finds himself similarly arrested by the experience. Thus it is not just shock that elevates individual moments—absorption similarly creates a distinctly heightened sensation even in the absence of the overtly sensational. In contrast to the shocking urban language that has become all too familiar—“cabs shot and swerved so quick”—both minds and air drift gradually. The “loitering”, “dallying” couples as well as the “discrete” and “timid” approach of the spectator stand in stark contrast to the jerks and jolts of those cars. The sense that “to interrupt...would have been impious” further underscores a mode of gradual incorporation rather than violent confrontation.

III. “No scene, no snap”: From Culture Shock to Gentle Turbulence

We have seen that while one might associate atmosphere with a painterly impressionist aesthetic, Woolf uses the specifically literary technique of free indirect discourse. One also might associate atmosphere with vagueness, yet Woolf’s atmosphere materializes at sharply defined points of intersection – when atmospheric currents collide
at windowsills and street corners, for example. The novel’s metropolitan setting, with its many crosswalks and intersections, is therefore an ideal site for perceiving atmosphere, however much we might be accustomed to associating atmosphere with landscapes and the countryside. For example, Mrs. Dalloway first pivots from Clarissa’s mind to Scrope Purvis’ when “[s]he stiffened a little on the kerb” (4). And in “Street Haunting”, Woolf’s narrator similarly invites us to “hesitate on the kerb” (185), to be “blown about at so many street corners” (187). Placing the Dalloway and “Street Haunting” curbs side by side helps elucidate the capacity of free indirect discourse to enhance access to both psychological interiors and to atmospheric exteriors. While in the Dalloway example the curb propels the narrator into an individual mind, in the “Street Haunting” example the curb conversely releases the narrator out into the atmospheric currents of the urban environment. These dual preoccupations are anything but mutually exclusive; in many cases, the psychological peculiarities of Woolf’s characters drift and linger outside of the mind. Moods are expansive; they fill not just minds but entire rooms. The narrator in “Street Haunting” reflects that it “is always an adventure to enter a new room; for the lives and characters of its owners have distilled their atmosphere into it” (186). The outsider is in a privileged position to detect atmosphere, for crossing the threshold into that room, a sort of change in climate takes place. Similarly, in Mrs. Dalloway, atmosphere tends to become perceptible at thresholds between spheres and intersections of streets:

And Richard Dalloway and Hugh Whitbread hesitated on the corner of Conduit Street at the very moment that Milicent Bruton, lying back on the sofa, let the thread snap; snored. Contrary winds buffeted at the street corner. They looked in at a shop window; they did not wish to buy or talk but to part, only with contrary winds buffeting the street corner, with some sort of lapse in the tides of the body, two forces meeting in a swirl, morning and afternoon, they paused. Some newspaper placard went up in the air, gallantly, like a kite at first, then paused, swooped, fluttered; and a lady’s veil hung. Yellow awnings trembled. The speed of the morning traffic slackened and single carts rattled carelessly down half-empty streets. In Norfolk, of which Richard Dalloway was half thinking, a soft warm wind blew black the petals, confused the waters; ruffled the flowering grasses (112-113).

Atmosphere becomes palpable in this passage because of turbulence: “contrary winds buffeting the street corner”, “two forces meeting in a swirl”. Far from a single homogeneous object, atmosphere is the product of heterogeneous forces and currents bumping up against each other. Richard and Hugh are in a privileged position to sense atmosphere here because, like the “diver hesitating on a threshold” or the narrator hovering about her characters, they “hesitated on the corner”. As we have seen, atmosphere emerges not in moments of complete immersion but rather at those times when one stands ever so slightly to the side. On a corner, one straddles two different worlds, existing as neither insider nor outsider. There is an element of violence implied in these collisions of countering forces, but shock is a terribly inaccurate term for the subjective experiences of these characters. Richard and Hugh detect atmosphere in a subtle, subdued manner. Turbulence actually slows experience down, infusing the scene
with a hypnotic lull: “they paused”, “lapse in the tides of the body”, “the speed of the morning traffic slackened…half-empty streets”. The experience of registering atmosphere lacks the cataclysmic intensity of violent shock, and yet the sensation is revelatory in its own way. We can contrast the better known epiphanic shocks of modernism with what I call Woolf’s atmospheric epiphanies. These are moments of heightened perception and insight that characters experience less like a sledgehammer and more like a slight breeze.

Far from indiscriminately destructive, turbulence can actually help structure an atmospheric refuge. Septimus Smith sounds like Edmund Blunden when he decides he will

wait in this warm place, this pocket of still air, which one comes on at the edge of a wood sometimes in the evening…some arrangement of the trees (one must be scientific above all, scientific), warmth lingers, and the air buffets the cheek like the wing of a bird (144).

Here readers will likely be reminded of Blunden’s atmospheric pockets. In this passage, slowly moving air constructs a similar kind of temporary insulating architecture: “this pocket of still air”. Just as we have seen in other instances, aerial enclosure emerges not in spite of but out of turbulence. This is a gentle form of turbulence, but a form of turbulence nonetheless, unfolding at the “edge of a wood” much as atmosphere tends to become detectable at street corners and intersections as microclimates collide. The phrase “warmth lingers” quietly acknowledges dynamic movement underlying what appears still and isolated; the “wing of a bird” suggests a brush rather than jolt, while “buffeting air” similarly acknowledges that air continues to circulate. Far from hermetically sealed, Septimus’ atmospheric pocket is open to the gentle and almost undetectable intrusion of foreign air crossing over the edge of the wood (not unlike like the foreign air crossing the window threshold at the party). Just as the party scene relies upon air blowing in and out, so does Septimus’ refuge require proximity to the world it distinguishes itself from, the “edge” of a wood. That Septimus imagines such a safe haven in the particular terms of heat should further alert us to the ways in which London’s heat wave is itself a kind of atmospheric pocket created by turbulence, however sluggish a form it might take.

These smaller instances of “foreign air” play out on a larger scale throughout the novel. Travelers and foreigners are often the first to sense atmosphere precisely because they register a change in climate. It is tempting to call this phenomenon culture shock, but the accompanying language is consistently subtle and gentle.16 For example, when one of Mrs. Dalloway’s many minor characters, Maisie Johnson, arrives in London for the first time, she reflects that “all seemed, after Edinburgh, so queer”(26). The subsequent language describes not shock but a gentle experience of being carried away by the air: “she joined that gently trudging, vaguely gazing, breeze-kissed company…while the soft warm air washed over them” (26). Here, there is barely any distinction between London’s weather and its inhabitants. The passersby have absorbed the heat of the sun – “breeze-kissed” - while they are also immersed in a kind of oceanic

---

16 The OED records first uses of “culture shock” in the 1930s and 40s.
heat weave, “soft warm air washed over them”. As an outsider, Maisie enjoys an enhanced capacity for intuiting even the smallest shifts in atmosphere: “something was up, she knew” (27). Similarly, Peter and Rezia are well positioned to detect atmosphere, coming from India and Italy respectively:

[Peter] The amusing thing about coming back to England, after five years, was the way it made, anyhow the first days, things stand out as if one had never seen them. Never had he seen London so enchanting—the softness of the distances; the richness, the greenness; the civilization, after India (71).

[Rezia] I am alone; I am alone! she cried, by the fountain in Regent’s Park (staring at the Indian and his cross), as perhaps at midnight, when all boundaries are lost, the country reverts to its ancient shape, as the Romans saw it, lying cloudy, when they landed, the hills had no names and rivers wound they knew not where—such was her darkness (24).

These passages both describe a kind of heightened perception or jarring reorientation we might associate with shock, but the process is gentler—to the point of seeming more like a dream than a wakeup call. In Rezia’s passage, the capacity of the night wanderer or explorer to apprehend England’s “ancient shape” suggests that perceptual access to atmosphere requires a certain degree of defamiliarization. The outsider approaching English shores lacks sharp perceptual clarity but, for this very reason, is in a privileged position to detect atmosphere. In the absence of those categories that typically overlay our first sensual and affective responses—names, boundaries, directions—the Romans are able to glimpse England as close to pure atmosphere: “lying cloudy”. Conversely, increasing habituation and familiarity is likely to render atmosphere invisible. The arrival of the foreigner (Rezia), or the native Englishman’s return from foreign shores (Peter), is thus akin to the figure hesitating at an urban crosswalk. Peter senses atmosphere as a kind of palpable strangeness—“things stand out as if one had never seen them”, precisely because he is poised at intersections of both space and time, “after India”; “after five years”.

Clarissa’s exaltation of the present moment sometimes obscures the significant fact that she too is a kind of outsider—newly immersed in city life not because she has returned from abroad but because she has recovered from an extended illness. Her walk through London is in this way its own kind of atmospheric reentry characterized by a sense of novelty and wonder. For Woolf, illness creates a heightened sensitivity to atmosphere. Consider the striking similarities between the passages on foreign travel considered above and Woolf’s reflections in the essay “On Being Ill”:

[How the world has changed its shape; the tools of business grown remote; the sounds of festival become romantic like a merry-go-round heard across far fields; and friends have changed, some putting on strange beauty, others deformed to the squatness of toads, while the whole landscape of life lies remote and fair, like the shore seen from a ship far out at sea (8).]
Notice the language of abstraction and defamiliarization: “changed its shape,” “strange beauty”. Even the vantage point of ship far out at sea is the same here. Like travel, illness swaps the familiar for the foreign: “how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed” (“On Being Ill” 3). This emphasis on disclosure is another way of shifting attention from events to environments, for it is not so much that something has happened, as it is that one becomes attuned to an environment that has always already existed. Travel and illness call attention to the rhythmic attunement of body and environment precisely because they temporarily interrupt that otherwise taken for granted relationship. Whether it is illness or climate, there is a shared sense of prevailing conditions. The necessity of defamiliarization causes one to wonder whether climate can ever be perceived in the absence of climate change.

The defamiliarization of illness also grants access to a non-representational affective atmosphere stripped of semantic and linguistic coding, something very much like aura. Woolf writes that:

In illness words seem to possess a mystic quality. We grasp what is beyond their surface meaning, gather instinctively this, that, and the other—a sound, a colour, here a stress, there a pause...In health meaning has encroached upon sound. But in illness...words give out their scent and distil their flavour, and then, if at last we grasp the meaning, it is all the richer for having come to us sensually at first, by way of the palate and the nostrils, like some queer odour. Foreigners, to whom the tongue is strange, have us at a disadvantage. The Chinese must know the sound of *Antony and Cleopatra* better than we do (“On Being Ill” 21-22).

Here, Woolf meditates on the gains that come with semantic losses. The patient and the foreigner are two figures who enjoy privileged access to an affective atmosphere that is typically concealed behind structures of language and convention. Thus Woolf is imagining precisely the kind of force affect theorists have in mind when they refer to “effects below the threshold of meaning and ideology” (Leys 451) which “cannot be fully realized in language” (Leys 442). This appreciation for what the body registers – rather than merely what the eye apprehends – has significant implications for the narrator’s role in Woolf’s fiction. In order to represent her subjects adequately, Woolf’s narrator needs to do more than inhabit their minds or see through their eyes.

Woolf’s atmospheric epiphanies thus contrast with the sudden flashes of insight or violent impact we tend to associate with shock. When it comes to a fever or even a distinct smell, the experience is sensory and yet not localized to one specific spot on the body. Weather plays a similar role in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Bodies absorb heat gradually; the sun’s cumulative impact becomes legible on the skin. A similar process of slow and subtle discernment characterizes the way characters register not just the physical climate but also the affective atmosphere of the historical moment. Peter finds himself “[s]uspecting from the words of a girl, from a housemaid’s daughter---in tangible things you couldn’t lay your hands on—that shift in the whole pyramidal accumulation which in his youth had seemed immovable. On top of them it had pressed; weighed them down, the women especially” (162; my emphasis). Peter’s reflection implicitly contrasts the kind of tactile contact associated with shock with the more diffuse and full body experience of what I am calling an atmospheric epiphany. It is strange to think of
something that is tangible and yet not touchable; and yet, of course, that is precisely the case with atmosphere. Atmospheric conditions can be felt but not grasped: notice the similarity between Peter’s sense of the hot weather’s “weight” and the shift in social configurations which “weigh” them down. Once again, a more literal form of atmosphere tips over into its figurative counterpart.

Woolf uses similar language when she writes of Lady Bradshaw who “[f]ifteen years ago...had gone under. It was nothing you could put your finger on; there had been no scene, no snap; only the slow sinking, water-logged, of her will into his [Sir Bradshaw’s]” (100). Here once again is a physically registered force that nonetheless ‘you could [not] put your finger on’ – tangible but not touchable. And just as Peter senses a kind of slow, geological reshuffling of “the whole pyramidal accumulation” – so does Lady Bradshaw succumb to a kind of gradual erosion. This language goes out of its way to reject shock: no scene, no snap. It amounts to a rejection not only of shock as affect but the narrative conventions that align with shock, dramatic episodes or “scenes”. The way that Lady Bradshaw’s will “slowly sinks” into her husband’s returns us to absorption—and to its very real potential for violence. Before, we saw that absorption can be an alternative to the kind of full immersion in which one risks drowning. But here, the “water-logged” image invokes a kind of drowning that takes place from the inside out.

This emphasis on gradual rather than sudden change also highlights the role that time plays in structuring atmosphere. We have seen that atmosphere tends to emerge at spatial intersections – the collision of cultures, the buffeting clash of microclimates. Atmosphere also emerges at moments of temporal friction. In the novel’s opening scene, the sound of squeaking hinges causes a memory of the past to rub up against the sensations of the present moment. Clarissa recalls plunging “into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early m... the kiss of a wave” (3). Plunging, waves – the association is water, but Woolf’s subject is air. As the novel progresses the memory of Bourton continues to resurface – not as something shocking, not traumatic, but atmospheric. Clarissa asks, “do you remember how the blinds used to flap at Bourton?” (42). Later, Peter reflects that “he saw her most often at Bourton...hands clasped to her hair, her cloak blowing out” (154). Far from traumatic flashbacks, these are cases where the past and present drift together, buffeting with gentle turbulence.

In language evoking this sense of aerial friction, Clarissa steps outside and notices how “Arlington Street and Piccadilly seemed to chafe the very air in the park and lift its leaves hotly, brilliantly, on waves of that divine vitality which Clarissa loved” (7). This language of “chafing” further supports the notion that some sort of clash or collision is often necessary to bring the otherwise-invisible background of atmosphere into the foreground. There are many ways for distinct forces to collide, and violent shock is just one of them. Furthermore, the emphasis on texture and palpability continues to draw us away from a visually centered model of perception. And, of course, those “waves of divine vitality” call attention to air waves. In many ways this image captures the role of our narrator. On the one hand, this narrator positions herself at thresholds characterized by a kind of friction or chafing as different minds, places, and time frames all bump up against each other. On the other hand, for all that sense of conflict and turbulence, that strategy carries the narrator along and actually often creates a sense of smoothness. While a term such as “stream of consciousness” fails to accommodate the complexity of
Woolf’s free indirect discourse, this image of air waves captures the necessary combination of sharp clashes and fluid movement.

This discussion forces us to confront the possibility that we have been looking for traces of a violent past in all the wrong places—or at least, not in enough places. The convention has been to look at rupture, disintegration, fragmentation. But if the modernist period calls heightened attention to the way absorption both precedes and follows shock, we need to give the smooth textures the same scrupulous attention we bestow on the overtly bumpy ones. Instead of confining our attention to the individual mind or the discrete episode, we need to feel around for affective traces that have been woven into the fabric of quotidian life. This is what makes recent scholarship in affect theory and the everyday so exciting, and so promising for revising our understanding of modernist shock. Perhaps the next step will involve a clearer articulation of the readerly consequences of the turn from shock to absorption. It might help to recall one moment when Clarissa redefines the self as something aerial and diffuse rather than concrete and individual: “not ‘here, here, here’; and she tapped the back of her seat; but everywhere” (152).
Chapter IV
Snow and Wind

I. “It’s the weather”: Snow, Sound, and Public Moods

In this chapter we venture out into another twentieth-century atmosphere that seems strikingly clean compared to the smoggy industrial air of Victorian fiction: Joyce’s blanketing white snow joins Conrad’s blinding white fog and Blunden’s shrouding white mist. The snow in *Dubliners*’ final story has received its fair share of attention. It appears, for example, in a 2015 *New Yorker* article titled “The Ten Best Weather Events in Fiction.” While I agree with that assessment, I do think one crucial modification is in order: this snow in “The Dead” cannot really be called a weather event at all. While the story’s protagonist becomes particularly attuned to snow in the final two paragraphs, Joyce pointedly references snowy conditions from the first page all the way through to the last. Gabriel’s epiphany about the snow might be an event, but that is just the point: the weather cannot be made to conform to the scale or timing of one individual’s consciousness. In fact, the very choice of snow betrays Joyce’s interest in something that is more environmental than eventful. As Mary Favret so thoroughly explains in *War at a Distance*, “linguists insist that the meanings built into the ancient word for snow are not distinguishable temporally as snow falling and (then) snow having fallen” (104). In the winter settings of romantic poetry, Favret finds a notable “turn from the event and stages of snowfall to the very condition—the ground, as it were—of Winter” (99). Similarly, meteorologists recognize that there is something quite different about a snowstorm compared to a rainstorm. Weather forecasters tend to err on the side of exaggerating the probability of snow because “[r]ain goes down the drains but snow lays about for all to see.” (Watts 113) Snow pushes the spatial and temporal limits of the event, falling from the sky only to turn into a covering for the ground.

While Gabriel perceives snow intermittently throughout “The Dead,” he does not attune to it in any meaningful way until the story’s celebrated finale. It is only then that he achieves the alignment tempered by distance (rather than mastery) that defines attunement. Gabriel’s struggles span both meteorological and affective atmospheres. In my first chapter, I presented the case of a narrator, Marlow, who exhibits a remarkable capacity for atmospheric attunement. That reading left open the question of what happens when narrators and characters are not such keen atmospheric observers, an issue that “The Dead” now demands that we confront. In this chapter, I suggest that the problems of affective and meteorological attunement are intertwined, but in a lopsided way. Gabriel ultimately discovers that his affective life has been shaped by the weather far more than he ever imagined, and that the weather completely resists the symbolic meanings he has long assigned to it. I argue that critical efforts to decode Joyce’s snow as a “symbol” fall prey to the exact mistake Gabriel makes throughout much of the story.¹ Ultimately

¹ For example, Adam Parkes refers to Joyce’s “snowy symbolism” (“Moore, Snow, and the Dead” 266). Florence L. Walzl writes that scholars “have not agreed on…the principal symbol, the snow, which to some represents life, to others death, and to still others life or death depending
Gabriel attunes to snow; indeed snow is last referenced specifically as a sound. Snow is not an easy thing to hear: Gabriel is only able to do so because he relinquishes his quest for epistemological mastery and tunes in to the snow on its own terms. Readers must also attune to the story’s atmosphere, for with the incessant critical chatter about what the white snow “stands” for, it becomes very difficult to hear its gentle tapping at the window. Gabriel can never “fix” the snow as a static symbol, but he is moved by it, and indeed the snowfall itself calls attention to moving air.

“The Dead” leaves us with the sense that, despite common associations, snow is not frozen or fixed but slowly “moving” in both physical and affective senses. In the second part of this chapter, I argue that Ulysses (1922) zeroes in on the way that air moves in its treatment of wind, with characters paradoxically locating a breath of fresh air in the emanations of dead bodies. Leopold Bloom is a kind of anti-Gabriel, forever attuned to the complex entanglement of bodies and environments: breath transforms into wind, stinking bodily emissions mingle with urban pollution, living subjects inhale and swallow air emanated from the dead, gas inside leaks out. Throughout, Joyce embraces disgust, thereby inverting an affective state that is conventionally all about the policing of borders. While Bloom and Stephen seem to be polar opposites, I argue that their respective concerns with disgust and inspiration point to a principle of underlying unity rather than dichotomy, for disgust and inspiration operate according to similar respiratory processes. I suggest that the structure and rhythms of breathing inform the text’s interest in the way that moving air troubles barriers without completely abolishing them: like Conrad, Joyce dismantles hard boundaries without dissolving everything and everybody into one atmospheric blur.

Because the degree of overlap between affective and meteorological atmospheres is not immediately evident to Gabriel or even to the reader, I will proceed by examining moods and the weather separately, before ultimately turning to their crucial convergence. When readers first encounter Gabriel, he is “scraping the snow from his galoshes” (177), a piece of weather apparel that supposedly provides not one but two layers of insulation from the elements. From the outset, then, Joyce stages a fundamental tension between the desire to keep weather outdoors and the impossibility of doing so. “The next thing he’ll buy me will be a diving-suit”(178), Gretta teases, but she is quite right that Gabriel’s desire for airtight atmospheric insulation is one of the protagonist’s defining characteristics – and a problematic one at that. Despite the protective measures he takes, “a light fringe of snow lay like a cape on the shoulders of his overcoat and like toecaps on the toes of his galoshes; and, as the buttons of his overcoat slipped with a squeaking noise through the snow-stiffened frieze, a cold fragrant air from out-of-doors escaped from the

on the context of the passage” (19). Richard Ellman commences a discussion of “complex imagery” but takes the issue of symbolism as central, “[i]t does not seem that snow can be death, as so many have said, for it falls on the living and dead alike” (251).

Gretta’s lighthearted comment recalls Sloterdijk’s argument that gas masks do not only seal one atmosphere out, but attempt to create a separate artificial and hermetically sealed atmosphere for personal use (19-25).
crevices and folds” (177). The porous nature of crevices and folds reveals that Gabriel’s atmospheric defenses are not airtight after all: he has unwittingly smuggled in not only the snow but the “cold fragrant” air itself. While the snow will melt, the air will diffuse and circulate throughout the party, preventing any possibility of our speaking of a “domestic atmosphere” as something wholly separate from the prevailing meteorological atmosphere. The “squeaking noise” produced by the friction of the snow on the buttons of his overcoat also provides an early indication that atmosphere is something to be heard rather than seen. Joyce’s use of free indirect discourse suggests that Gabriel does hear the snow in some absentminded sense, but this manner of auditory perception illustrates the distinction between “hearing” and “listening” that theorists of sound have suggested. Listening connotes an active stance of attentive receptivity, while hearing is more a matter of merely registering sound.³

While Gabriel desires to keep the snow out, he is also enchanted by the image of snow outdoors and even fantasizes about immersing himself in the cold snowy landscape. Readers sometimes find these dual impulses contradictory, or shifting and “complex”⁴ at least, but I see them as entirely consistent in a fairly straightforward way. Gabriel’s vision of snowy immersion relies upon the precise logic of structural division implied by his galoshes. Gabriel only imagines snowy immersion, while taking up a fixed position inside at the windowsill. This window seems to function more as a divisional barrier than a portal to outside. Recall that in Mrs. Dalloway, the window was open, the air was rushing in. At that party, the curtain blew in, Ralph beat it back, shock was avoided, and fluid atmospheric circulation prevailed. At this party, we know that the window is closed because Gabriel touches the glass with his hand:

Gabriel’s warm trembling fingers tapped the cold pane of the window. How cool it must be outside! How pleasant it would be to walk out alone, first along by the river and then through the park! The snow would be lying on the branches of the trees and forming a bright cap on the top of the Wellington Monument. How much more pleasant it would be there than at the supper-table! (192).

Here Gabriel imagines a romanticized communion with nature. The insistently conditional tense – “would…would…would” – makes it difficult to forget that this scene is a product of the imagination. We do not need to say that sometimes Gabriel wants to insulate himself and other times he wants to immerse himself, because this is only a fantasized immersion, and as such, cannot truly be called immersion at all. In contrast to what we will discover later – “the snow was general all over Ireland” – this is a vision of solitude, with the individual fixed firmly as its center and protagonist, making his way through a peaceful, snowy world. In Gabriel’s mind, the snow crystallizes into familiar

³ See Lisbeth Lipari, Listening, Thinking, Being: Towards an Ethics of Attunement.
⁴ Richard Ellman writes that the snow “is part of the complex imagery that includes heat and cold air, fire, and rain…The relations of these are not simple. During the party the living people, their festivities, and all human society seem contrasted with the cold outside, as in the warmth of Gabriel’s hand on the cold pane. But this warmth is felt by Gabriel as stuffy and confining, and the cold outside is repeatedly connected with what is fragrant and fresh” (251).
shapes and objects, forming a “bright cap,” not unlike the overcoats and caps that the guests have recently removed. The image of his fingers tapping at the windowpane reinforces the sense that what Gabriel imagines as intimacy and immersion is actually predicated on distance and separation. Similarly, the coldness of the weather outside seems to rely upon the warmth of the party inside. It is as if the reflection, “how cool it must be outside” is dependent upon his “warm trembling fingers”.

What Gabriel seems to think of as immersion in nature preserves his belief in a world that is carved into distinct spheres of human and environmental. Certainly, he fantasizes about trespassing across that boundary – leaving the party and all domestic cares behind – but he does not fantasize about a world where such boundaries do not exist in the first place. Gabriel simply imagines himself on the other side of the boundary. Recall that in *Mrs. Dalloway*, we encountered Clarissa and Ralph at the windowsill watching the air blow in; in another scene, we found ourselves on the opposite side of the window, as Peter stood on the street witnessing the air blow out of a house. That narrative boundary crossing is different from what Gabriel is imagining here.

This shortcoming is Gabriel’s alone; for his part, Joyce consistently calls attention to atmospheric circulation, implicitly contrasting his protagonist’s fixation on atmospheric insulation with other moments in which the “piercing morning air came into the hall where they were standing so that Aunt Kate said, ‘Close the door, somebody’” (206) and characters recall last year’s journey home with “[c]ab windows rattling all the way, and the east wind blowing in after we passed Merion…Gretta caught a dreadful cold” (180). These images of open doors and rattling cab windows undermine Gabriel’s gentle tapping on the window; in Gabriel’s imagined frolic, wind is completely absent from the scene. When Aunt Julia reflects that, “[i]t’s the weather… “everybody has colds” (211), it becomes apparent that “cold” is not just something that these characters are in but something that they have. The circulation of freezing fragrant air thus extends well beyond the threshold of the front door; atmosphere has been absorbed into their very bodies. And as we saw with respect to *Mrs. Dalloway* and “On Being Ill,” there is an intimacy between the meteorological and physiological senses of a *condition*.

On the other hand, experience of weather in “The Dead” is also strikingly mediated. “They say,” Mary Jane begins, evoking an anonymous collective entity, “we haven’t had snow like it for thirty years; and I read this morning in the newspapers that the snow is general all over Ireland” (211). Here our protagonist receives this observation secondhand, from an informant who herself received it mediated through the news, in the form of an anonymous report, presumably founded upon decades of data. This is not just an anonymous observation of the present weather but the conversion of individual memory into a kind of statistical memory. As Peter Moore points out, prior to the mid-nineteenth century, “whenever the newspapers had wanted to emphasize extreme weather, they had always fallen back on the refrain, ‘In the memory of the oldest person living’” (129). In the twentieth century, with statistical aggregates and new physical models, it became less necessary to think of the weather as somehow conforming to the narrative arc of a human life. Indeed, this weather report contrasts sharply with other instances of personal memory in the story, such as when we are told that, “for years and years [the party] had gone off in splendid style as long as anyone could remember” (176).
In the case of both the weather absorbed bodily (the cold as illness) and the weather nationally distributed and highly mediated (the newspaper’s imagined community⁵), meteorological atmosphere is not something that can be perceived head-on as a discrete perceptual object. In the case of bodily illness, it comes too close; in the case of global or even national climate, it is too distant. Thus, Gabriel’s problem is not simply that he stays behind the window, set apart from the immersive world of weather outside. There is also a way in which he gets too close, and fails to engage the kind of abstract faculties that must be activated in order to imagine climate as a large scale phenomena inaccessible to empirical sensibilities. One suspects that Gabriel would have better luck understanding the weather if he picked up a newspaper rather than loitering by the window.

The intrusion of the newspaper is a clear sign that Gabriel’s fantasy of the natural world is not going to materialize in the way he imagined (one thinks of Helen Shlegel’s initial impression of Howards End: “it isn’t going to be at all what we expected” Forster, Howards End 3). In his fantasy, “the air was pure there” (202), but when Gabriel finally does step outside for the first time in the story (a brief episode that follows his movements from the party to the cab to the hotel), he finds a “murky morning sky” (214) and discovers that “it was slushy underfoot” (212). The illusion of snow’s pure whiteness is dispelled here, and yet the image Joyce evokes is not one of overwhelming industrial pollution. This lack of purity simply seems to reflect snow’s natural state a few hours after falling. And notice that it is the poles of sky and ground that stand out here. Gabriel’s earlier fantasy took the form of a static visual picture; actually stepping outside means plunging into a thoroughly multisensory, three-dimensional atmosphere, what Tim Ingold calls a “weather world.”⁶ Joyce’s use of free indirect discourse throughout the story makes it clear that Gabriel notices the slushiness underfoot, suggesting his protective footwear is not as insulating as he had hoped. Even if the boots succeed in protecting his feet from registering the cold wet sensation, there is a distinct sense that slushiness is inescapably audible. We can almost hear the sound of boots trudging through the slush, which raises the question of how one could ever properly insulate oneself from auditory atmospheres.

As mentioned previously, there is a difference between hearing and listening, and indeed the matter of attunement brings us to the story of affective atmosphere simultaneously unfolding throughout this story. Gabriel is one of the most tone-deaf protagonists in modern literature, and indeed “The Dead” specifically zeroes in on the

---


⁶ “Yet as we walk, we do not so much traverse the exterior surface of the world as negotiate a way through a zone of admixture and interchange between the more or less solid substances of the earth and the volatile medium of air. It is in this zone that all terrestrial life is lived. As inhabitants of this zone we are continually subject to those fluxes of the medium we call weather. (Ingold “Weather World” 122).
auditory and rhythmic dimensions of affective attunement. Just as the party’s hostesses never “miss even the smallest of grace notes” (193) in their singing, so is it true that “never once had [the party] fallen flat” (175). That the party is specifically an “annual dance” (175) reinforces the story’s insistent merging of social harmony and bodily attunement. By the same logic, social tone deafness can barely be distinguished from failures of auditory attunement. For example, while the alcoholic Freddy Malins does not make a scene as feared, he is consistently out of tune with the party’s rhythms: he oscillates between the extremes of “undertone” (185) and “high key (184)”, there is a “habitual catch in his voice”(185), and he “listened with his head perched sideways to hear her better [and] was still applauding when everyone else had ceased”( 193). Gabriel’s own struggles with attunement begin the moment he walks in the door. The scale of his initial failure is modest: the caretaker’s daughter takes Gabriel’s coat in the pantry, he asks about her prospects for marriage, and then “colour[s] as if he felt he had made a mistake” (178), realizing that he has “taken up a wrong tone” (179).

As the party gets underway, Gabriel struggles to attune to something a bit larger, something like the prevailing tone or mood of the social gathering. When his aunt plays the piano, he reflects that “he liked music but the piece she was playing had no melody for him” (186). And later, he notices his wife Gretta’s “stillness and strained his ear to listen also. But he could hear little save the noise of laughter…a few chords struck on the piano and a few notes of a man’s voice singing” (209). The chords are struck on the piano, but they do not strike a chord with Gabriel, who is only able to hear “noise”. In contrast to previous characters we have seen “seized” by atmosphere, Gabriel “strains” his ear, registering noise but no signal.

When the subject of Irish nationalism comes up, the scale and stakes of attunement expand. It is no coincidence that the issue of cultural attunement emerges in the context of Gabriel’s dance with the fervently nationalist Molly Ivors. In fact, I would argue that the content of their conversation is inseparable from the form of the dance: both are characterized by advance and retreat, with fleeting moments of intimacy abruptly ruptured: “their turn to cross”, “when they were together again she spoke” (188). These frequent interruptions and partings inflect the conversation with a choppy, anxious tone, preventing any sustained sense that the two figures are in step with each other. Pervasive language of advance and retreat makes it difficult to distinguish the dance steps from the maneuvers of rhetoric: “[Gabriel] did not know how to meet her charge” (188). When Miss Ivors leaves the party, her retreat simply sounds like another dance step: she “broke away from them” (195). Far from a neutral backdrop for the conversation, the dance structures the entire interaction, and is inextricable from Gabriel’s missteps.

This failure of national attunement intersects with related struggles on a geographical and cultural scale. For example, Gabriel plans to include a poem by Robert Browning in his speech, yet that reference is tone deaf both geographically (English rather than Irish) and aesthetically (poetry and “high art” over dance and popular culture). It is the sound of dance steps that first alerts Gabriel to potential problems with the speech he has prepared:

The indelicate clacking of the men’s heels and shuffling of their soles reminded him that their grade of culture differed from his. He would only make himself
ridiculous by quoting poetry to them which they could not understand. They would think that he was airing his superior education. He would fail them just as he had failed with the girl in the pantry. He had taken up the wrong tone (179).

These auditory and bodily cues - “indelicate clacking” and “shuffling” lead directly to Gabriel’s second thoughts about including Browning in his speech. Gabriel fears that the poet “would be above the heads of his listeners” (179), reinforcing a stark contrast between the clacking heels grounded down on the floor and the “airing” of poetry above heads. What should be merely a snobbish sort of metaphor begins to sound oddly literal, as if his poetry will never reach these “soles” on the ground.

Joyce’s consistent emphasis on auditory and rhythmic attunement calls attention to the public nature of atmospheres. At first glance, “The Dead” seems to be a story all about psychological barriers preventing interpersonal intimacy. Yet, the failure to connect has little to do with entering other minds; it is fundamentally a matter of keeping pace with a collective rhythm that exists outside of any one individual mind. Gabriel hovers on the brink of this epiphany throughout the story, exhibiting inklings of awareness that the problem is really not the privacy of minds at all, but rather the very public nature of moods. When he stands transfixed by Gretta as she listens to Bartell D’Arcy’s song, Gabriel is “trying to catch the air that the voice was singing and gazing up at his wife” (210). What he is trying to “catch” is not Gretta herself but the air, and here the double meaning of air as song and medium collapses into one and the same thing. The song has carved out a space in the air – and that little piece of atmosphere is Gretta’s mood. Gabriel longs for access not to his wife’s mind or even body but to the aerial medium she is so clearly immersed in. The seeds of his ultimate epiphany are planted here, with the vague dawning awareness that Gretta has not been where he thought she was – not in his heart, and not even in her own mind, but outside.

Gabriel famously misreads his wife’s mood. Yet it is not quite right to call these various stumblings instances of misreading or epistemological misinterpretation, for as we know, attunement does not require the decoding of semantic content. In my discussion of Heart of Darkness, I argued that while Marlow seeks epistemological mastery over discrete events and perceptual objects, his strategy for apprehending moods and environments is fundamentally different. Gabriel does not sensitively discriminate in a similar way; rather, he wants to be a decoder in all matters: “he longed to be master of her strange mood” (217). Such mastery is antithetical to attunement, which readers will recall is predicated upon distance and difference:

[A]ttunement can be defined as the capacity to sense, amplify, and attend to difference. From this perspective, attunement is not just a matter of ‘feeling the vibe in a room’ and adjusting our emotional sensibilities to fit that vibe, but also sensitizing our bodies to appreciate and understand the complex material forces that structure situations beyond the envelope of human emotion (Ash and Gallacher 73).

Ash and Gallacher argue that attunement’s particular value lies in its inclusion of both human and nonhuman elements in a given environment. With attunement, there is always a need to go beyond oneself. Yet instead of expanding his scope beyond his own and
Gretta’s interiority, Gabriel fantasizes about the moment “when the others had gone away, when he and she were in their room in the hotel, then they would be alone together” (214), imagining that “they had escaped…run away together” (215). His mistake lies in regarding music and ambience as mere background for the emotional intensity displayed by his wife. Gretta is in fact inseparable from the precise environmental context Gabriel hopes to whisk her away from.

Much as Marlow tuned into an atmosphere of grief, Gretta is responsive to a grief that is in the air itself, irreducible to semantic or linguistic signification: “[t]he song seemed to be in the old Irish tonality and the singer seemed uncertain both of his words and of his voice. The voice, made plaintive by distance and by the singer’s hoarseness, faintly illuminated the cadence of the air with words expressing grief” (210). Once again, an atmosphere of grief is palpable despite, or perhaps because of, a sense of “distance”. The singer can be “uncertain…of his words” without compromising his ability to communicate an affectively vivid atmosphere. This helps clarify why music and dance, classic examples of nonrepresentational art, play such a crucial role in Joyce’s story. Attunement is more like being carried away than carrying away, as Gabriel hopes to do by whisking Gretta away from the party. But there are hints of an alternative, the possibility of being moved by the music: “[t]o follow the voice, without looking at the singer’s face, was to feel and share the excitement of swift and secure flight” (193). When Gabriel sees Gretta so deeply moved by the music, he begins to glimpse something beyond linguistic signification, and reflects,

There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of. If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude. Her blue felt hat would show off the bronze of her hair against the darkness and the dark panels of her skirt would show off the light ones. Distant Music he would call the picture if he were a painter (210).

Gabriel seems torn between different impulses here, decoding and attunement, representation and nonrepresentation. He also seems fundamentally ambivalent about his choice of media. While he imagines a painting, the name that Gabriel chooses is Distant Music, invoking the classic nonrepresentational art form. Furthermore, the painting he envisions is highly tactile and textured, exhibiting the “dark panels of her skirt”. Throughout the story, there are other indications that Gabriel is enticed by nonrepresentational practices; for example, while his position as a book reviewer requires work that is as linguistically and semantically coded as it comes, “he loved to feel the covers and turn over the pages of newly printed books” (188). Yet as much as Gabriel is drawn to such aesthetic alternatives, he perpetually pulls back: the imagined painting must be, he assumes, a “symbol of something.”

When he asks “himself what a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow [is].a symbol of”, Gabriel persists in his attempts to “master” his wife’s mood as meaning. He assumes that the atmospheric effect of a woman “in the shadow” must mean something, must stand for some other, larger meaning. Here we get a preview of To The Lighthouse, in which Mr. Bankes asks, “[w]hat did she mean to indicate by the triangular purple shape” (52) and Lily asks “what did it mean then, what can it all mean?” (145). What
Woolf said about her own work—“I meant nothing by the lighthouse” (Letters 3 385)—is clearly not something that Gabriel is yet prepared to grasp. When his wife leaves the room, “Gabriel asked himself was he the cause of her abrupt departure” (196); this fixation on causes makes him oblivious to the atmospheric effects in his midst. We can also look back to Heart of Darkness and recall that Marlow’s attunement to affective atmosphere was often preceded by the work of tuning into silence itself. But at the dinner table in “The Dead,” when “silence came…” Gabriel pushed back his chair and stood up [to give his speech]” (201), another indication of this character’s almost compulsive need to assign language and to impose meaning.

The story’s finale stages a collision between these dual problems of meteorological and affective attunement. Indeed, the interconnectedness of these two types of atmosphere is part of what Gabriel ultimately comes to appreciate. It is not that Gabriel has previously been completely oblivious to a connection between the two, but rather, he expected them to align in a very neat and particular way. Reminiscent of the weather when he was first falling in love with his wife, Gabriel falls prey to a kind of pathetic fallacy: “[b]irds were twittering in the ivy and the sunny web of the curtain was shimmering along the floor: he could not eat for happiness” (213). Here, Gabriel imagines that the weather obeys moods rather than vice versa. In contrast to Marlow, who understands that atmosphere precedes his story as something larger than the narrative itself, Gabriel begins his speech by proclaiming “I will not linger on the past. I will not let any gloomy moralizing intrude upon us here to-night” (204). Yet that precise “gloom” cannot be mastered or contained, for despite such efforts at atmospheric insulation, it continuously seeps into the party: there is the “gloom of the hall” (210) and the interaction with Lily which “cast a gloom over him” (179). While Marlow tunes into the atmosphere on the boat and selects a story that will strike an atmospheric chord with his listeners, Gabriel is oblivious to the gloomy mood of nostalgia circulating throughout the party. The sense of Marlow’s affectively attuned improvisation is entirely absent from this scene, as Gabriel goes over prepared notes in his head. And while Marlow noticed the brooding mood and made use of it, Gabriel simply says, “were we to brood upon [sad memories] we could not find the heart to go on” (204), despite the fact that a “dull yellow light brooded over the houses and the river, and the sky seemed to be descending” (212). Marlow connects more than he creates; Gabriel fails to connect. But this failure of connection is not Forster’s “only connect,” if we take that to mean individuals connecting with each other. The work of attunement in this case would require connecting not people but atmospheres.

Gretta, on the other hand, has connected the atmospheres. For her, the music, the weather, and the ambiance of the party all combine to strike a chord with one particular atmospheric memory. The story of Michael Fury is itself all about exposure to the elements: she recalls “the poor fellow at the end of the garden, shivering” (221). In contrast to Gabriel’s perpetual safety behind the partition of windows, Gretta recalls that the “window was so wet I couldn’t see so I ran downstairs [and outside]” (221). At this point, it is clear that Gabriel’s estrangement from his wife and from the environment are part of the same problem. Gretta’s memory is inextricable from its environmental context. He has been “shy of intruding on her grief” (222), but her grief itself is something larger, something in the air. Gabriel thought moods were private: they are not.
In other words, it is not the privacy of moods keeping the two apart; it is his belief in the privacy of moods that estranges the couple.

Up until this point, Gabriel has taken a position of aggressive offense, wanting to “catch” (210) the air that his wife is wrapped up in and to “defend her against something” (213), hoping that Gretta will “yield wholly to his arm” (218), that “something in his voice would strike her” (214). In the final scene, that precise language of force gets turned back upon Gabriel as object rather than subject: a “vague terror seized Gabriel at this answer as if, at that hour when he had hoped to triumph, some impalpable and vindictive being was coming against him, gathering forces against him in its vague world” (220). Gabriel, who earlier seemed to believe so firmly in the privacy of moods, begins to experience even his own emotions as issuing from an external force: “a shameful consciousness of his own person assailed him” (220).

Earlier, we looked at a passage in which Gabriel’s fingers tap the window as he gazes outside. At the end of the story, a crucial reversal takes place: the snow itself taps at the window from the other side: “[a] few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again” (223). Subtle as this change is, it encapsulates a fundamental transformation in Gabriel’s relationship to the environment. Not only does the snow seem to have more agency than Gabriel at this point, the weather is also capable of capturing and redirecting his attention. As I argued in the previous chapter, auditory interruptions call attention to a world that precedes one’s attention, in contrast to the philosophical analogy of attention as spotlight, which allows the individual to illuminate or extinguish objects at will. That the snow is falling “obliquely against the lamplight” (223) suggests that this weather condition cannot be perfectly assimilated into Gabriel’s conventional frames of reference, and that his attention is not master of the scene. Indeed, this scene stages the sense of subtle temporal discontinuity between attention and environment that we also saw in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Gabriel notices that it had “begun to snow again” which is quite different from saying: “it began to snow again.” The “had begun” reveals that Gabriel’s attention is not perfectly co- incidental with the snowfall; the falling of snow precedes Gabriel’s awareness of it, slight as the temporal gap may be. Similarly, the inclusion of “again” reminds us that the snowfall has been occurring steadily on-and-off throughout the entire story, and as such can hardly be considered an event in the sense of a temporally bounded phenomenon. Variations on the refrain “softly falling” and “falling softly” continue to underscore the sense of snow as an ongoing condition with no clear beginning or ending, in contrast to the alternative of a more condensed language that would tell us, for instance: “the snow fell.” To call the snow an event would be to reduce it to the terms and scale of human perception. Just as we observed that Gabriel has been scraping snow from his galoshes from the outset, so is he realizing that the snow precedes his awareness – and will outlast his consciousness as well.

The differences between hearing snow and seeing snow also become important here. Earlier, Aunt Julia had remarked, “I love the look of snow” and Miss O’Callaghan joined in, “so do I. I think Christmas is never really Christmas unless we have snow on the ground” (211). In those visual examples, the gap between snow’s existence and one’s awareness of it does not register: “the look of snow” collapses the perceptual act and object. The romanticized image of a white Christmas similarly confines snow to a human scale and calendar.
Far from the romantic communion with nature that Gabriel imagined previously, the perception of snow triggers an increasingly abstract and mediated relationship to the weather as he reflects in the story’s final paragraph:

Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Fury lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead (224).

This moment is famous for Gabriel’s expansive epiphanic “vision,” but the specifically auditory nature of the experience should not be overlooked. Not only does Gabriel hear the snow, he listens to it, and it is this act of attunement which discloses a larger world. If vision privileges distance, and immersion conversely collapses it, attunement strikes a balance that allows for both intimacy and distance. Hearing snow brings us back to the matter of nonrepresentational aesthetic practices. While Aunt Julia declared “I love the look of snow” (211), most of us do not have strong associations with the way snow sounds. The sound of snow does not immediately conjure up a host of symbolic associations the way its visual appearance seems to scream “purity” or “Christmas.” And snow is quiet, almost silent. Winter and snow have long been associated with silence, and for good reason: “snow absorbs sound” (Schafer 20). The repetition of “softly” helps define this as a moment of attunement, an instance in which the world’s quiet background is suddenly amplified and made strikingly present. Indeed, I read this as a moment in which the way that Gabriel is moved is far more significant than the epistemological clarity he seems to gain.

Gabriel is moved by the nonrepresentational, affective force of sound; furthermore, the vision that he does have is abstract, a “greyness” irreducible to sign or symbol. This impulse towards abstraction revises the model of romantic snowy immersion he had in mind. Not only does the epiphany move from the empirical to the abstract, it also comes into being through highly mediated, insistently public channels, putting an end to any lingering speculation that genuine atmospheric attunement requires direct experience of, and solitude in, nature.

For all the emphasis on blanketing and effacement, it is critical to recognize that Gabriel’s entire epiphany takes place from his position inside at the window. Yes, he becomes aware of a world without himself, but only obliquely, as we saw with respect to the snow quietly tapping at the windows. The final scene is thus not quite the dramatic rupture it initially seems to be. Gabriel had imagined such a rupture when he fantasized

---

7 For example, Walzl writes that “commentators agree on the central significance of the snow vision” (17).
8 Schafer writes that “hearing and touch meet where the lower frequencies of audible sound pass over to tactile vibrations…Hearing is a way of touching at a distance” (11).
about breaking free of the domestic sphere, immersed in the snowy world of a purely “natural” environment. The real moment of access to a nonhuman environment takes place not in some removed snowy field but indoors, and through a variety of mediated channels. One might expect these scenarios to be reversed, for the epiphany to come only when Gabriel steps outside of this anthropocentric world of hotel rooms and newspaper reports and past lovers. But privacy has been the problem all along; it is not the solution.

That Gabriel’s ultimate discovery is not the result of atmospheric immersion resonates with a contemporary source of contention in ecocritical studies regarding the value (or even possibility) of “direct” encounters with nature. As Laurence Buell describes, many environmental activists promote immersion in outdoor spaces, while others criticize such a model, scorning the idea that “more can be learned from the ‘black hole’ of a weasel’s eyes than from, say, the just-closed eyes of a child of the ghetto killed by lead-poisoning from ingesting the peeling paint in his/her immediate environment” (Future 23). The point is that an “encounter” with environment is never so simple as the kind of contemplative walk through the snow that Gabriel imagines, and in fact such environmental immersion can start to look very much like self-absorption. Scale is once again at the heart of the issue: immersed in the snow, one is susceptible to tunnel vision, making the self and one’s immediate environment all the more present. The world shrinks down to the immediate; foreign air circulating on the other side of the globe or the city seems more distant than ever. The problematic spotlight model of attention again applies here, in the sense that the world gets scaled down to the parameters of an individual fixed in time and space. Immersion can make the world much smaller indeed. The sound of snow tapping at the window, or even a newspaper report citing decades of data, actually provides the more chilling suggestion of a world beyond the human realm, a greater challenge to abstract thinking and ethical attunement. Snow is not something we are supposed to hear. But there it is.

Furthermore, the ecocritical example of the ill child alludes to the distinction between atmospheric causes and effects we have considered previously: while the former can be elusive, the latter tend to strike with palpable affective force. Attunement to atmospheric effects can mean relinquishing the search for atmospheric causes. Ultimately, it does not prove possible for Gabriel to go out looking for nature; rather, nature has to seize him precisely where he is.

Snow has long been associated with erasure, death, blankness, and blindness. 9 “If Dubliners begins with the black-out represented by the darkened blind, it concludes with the white-out of the snow” (121), Maud Ellman writes, connecting the freezing of snow to the text’s recurring preoccupation with paralysis. In some ways, Gabriel experiences a sense of snowy self-effacement: “[h]is own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself which these dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling” (223). Here, Gabriel is himself “dissolving” much as

---

9 For example, Adam Parkes writes that “the blanket of snow, which not only covers the land but engulfs the skies, appears to signify a freezing of all possible action” (“Moore, Snow, and the Dead” 268).
snow does. Furthermore, the revelation amounts to a retrospective erasure of his past, as Gabriel comes to realize “[h]ow poor a part he, her husband, had played in her life” (222). This profound sense of diminishment stems not just from the fact that Gretta has loved another individual, but from the kind of massive rescaling that encounters with meteorological atmospheres tend to trigger. In his earlier imagined communion with the snowy weather, atmosphere shrank to the size of his own world. Now, Gabriel must shrink to accommodate a newly enlarged world. The chilling comparison here is not really between Gabriel and Michael Fury but between Gabriel and snow. In other words, Gabriel’s significance is diminished not because of the particulars in Gretta’s story but regardless of particulars.

As he becomes aware of a world without himself, Gabriel’s perception of a partition between the weather outside and the atmosphere inside begins to break down. In earlier scenes, he imagined a stark contrast between the coldness of the air and the warmth of the party; here “the air of the room chilled his shoulders” (223). Scholars have pointed out modernism’s “coldness” in a variety of senses and contexts. Alexandra Harris writes that, at the turn of the twentieth century, “[a]wareness of the present moment would strike with a cold gust of wind, inducing shivers of anticipation. For some thinkers cold was the ideal modern condition; others yearned for heat” (332). Similarly, one might say that Gabriel experiences something like what Peter Sloterdijk, in Spheres I, describes as “the cosmic frost infiltrating the human sphere through the open windows of the Enlightenment” (24). Sloterdijk describes the trajectory of modernity as leading “from the caves of human illusion into the nonhuman world outside…[with increasing awareness of] the inhumanly remote galaxies and the most ghostly components of matter. The cold new breath from outside was sensed early on” (Spheres I 20). To compensate, we all devise our own forms of comforting climate control, he suggests, constructing artificial shells of security both large and small. This is why the image of a bubble bursting is so powerfully appropriate for Gabriel’s experience: “[i]n structural terms, what we call the end of the world is the death of a sphere. This small-scale emergency is the separation of the lovers, the empty apartment, the torn-up photograph” (Spheres I 48).

But I do not see Gabriel’s ultimate epiphany in quite such frosty terms, particularly because, as mentioned, he remains inside and at the window. It is a mistake to assume that awareness of a wider, nonhuman meteorological atmosphere automatically cancels out the very human affective atmosphere depicted throughout. Gabriel’s epiphany seems to be both that there is an atmosphere always ongoing without him and that he is always in that atmosphere, no matter how much he may have failed to attune to it up until this very moment. This seeming paradox makes sense if one acknowledges the lopsided relationship between moods and the weather. The weather is chillingly indifferent to human interests: it precedes and exceeds Gabriel’s consciousness and very existence. The same kind of neutrality cannot be asserted in the opposite direction, for affective atmospheres are responsive to the larger environmental context which always includes the weather.

---

10 Sloterdijk is referring to the destruction of a longstanding belief in protective celestial domes, “spherical forms like warming heavenly mantles” (Spheres I 23).
Here Gabriel finally begins to resemble Woolf’s characters similarly perched at windowsills, momentarily attuning to the intrusion of foreign air. Just as in the past two chapters we saw that local microclimatic pockets rely upon blowback from alien environments, here we can appreciate that the chill of meteorology does not necessarily prevent, and might actually be necessary for, the warmth of the party’s affective atmosphere. I have argued thus far that Gabriel has a dual problem with attunement, struggling to tune in to both the weather outside and the moods inside. The epiphany is therefore equally double in nature, a moment of attunement to meteorological and affective atmospheres.

As I suggested in my introduction and have alluded to throughout, it is possible – and necessary - to conceptualize a nonhuman environment that is not a geographically separate sphere. Instead of a contemplative walk through the woods or a desolate snowy landscape, this is a moment where the nonhuman environment materializes through a gust of foreign air that enters the room and even bodies. However, the fact Gabriel cannot escape meteorological atmosphere does not mean that meteorological atmosphere cannot escape him (recall the opening scene: cold fragrant air escaped). That colds can enter the body, that snow can leak out of creases and crevices, that cold air can circulate through warm domestic rooms – none of this means that such atmospheric phenomena will cease to exist without Gabriel or indeed any human being. The relationship between humans and the weather is fundamentally uneven. We cannot live without air: the air can live without us. This is why I read Gabriel’s realization as a kind of double epiphany, including recognition both of an intimacy unappreciated before and an impersonal distance previously unthought of. Thus Sloterdijk suggests that “[s]ince the start of the Middle Age, the human world has constantly…had to learn to accept new truths about an outside not related to humans” (21), that idea of nonrelation only works in one direction.

And yet, the chill of “The Dead” is not unwelcome. In fact, characters in most all of the other stories in Dubliners confront the opposite problem of atmospheres that are stuffy, stale, and stagnant. For example, the narrator of “Araby” observes that the “[a]ir, musty from having been long enclosed, hung in all the rooms” (29). Upon hearing a familiar song outside, the protagonist of “Eveline” reflects that “she knew the air” (40), a statement that also applies to the stifling claustrophobia of the life she has spent dusting her father’s house (an atmospheric chore if there ever was one). As critics have noted, it is no accident that Eveline hopes to escape to Buenos Aires, literally “good air” (Jackson and McGinley 32). This is why I ultimately disagree with the argument that the coldness of “The Dead” is simply another version of paralysis. The cold air moves. It might be slow, softly falling and falling softly, but it moves. Yet readers are still left wondering how, exactly, old air gets converted into new air. And why is it death, indeed a story entitled “The Dead,” that seems to finally make a breath of fresh air seem possible? Ulysses can help answer these questions.

II. “Dead breaths I living breathe”: Wind, Respiration, and Inspiring Disgust
Photosynthesis and respiration would balance one another were it not for death. Much of a dead being is dissolved into the air again, but some is not. The release of oxygen in photosynthesis thus exceeds the release of carbon respiration. The atmosphere is about 20% oxygen because of the dead.


Ulysses’ “Aeolus” episode explicitly thematizes the wind and indeed much has been made of the parallels between the air’s circulation and the circulation of newspapers. Yet the formal apparatus most distinctive to that section is one that I would group with shock and rupture: the capitalized headlines are famously jarring, and the lack of consistent connections between the titles and subsequent sections means that they interrupt the narrative’s progression more than they facilitate it. Indeed, readers have long associated the “Aeolus section” with an abrupt shift of gears, moving as it does from the more conventional “initial style” (a combination of third person narration, stream of consciousness, and free indirect discourse), to a series of increasingly experimental styles. But drawing a solid line between any of the novel’s sections is not really in keeping with the capacious and inclusive spirit of *Ulysses*. I would suggest instead that we take a cue from one particular moment in “Aeolus” when Bloom observes that the “door of Ruttledge’s office whispered: ee: cree. They always build one door opposite another for the wind to. Way in. Way out” (VII.97). Here, as in *Mrs. Dalloway*, an architectural threshold facilitates atmospheric circulation rather than hermetically sealing interior space. That the phrase “for the wind to” remains unfinished is typical of the way words blow about in all of *Ulysses’* sections, but of course it is particularly striking when atmospheric form and content collide, as when Lenehan calls “for a fresh of breath air” (111) as if the very words have blown out of place.

Ruttledge’s windy corridor provides a helpful model for the text’s structural design on a larger level. The windy language of “Aeolus” blows back into earlier sections, just as much of the language from those previous chapters blows forward into “Aeolus.” This is most evident in the relationship between “Aeolus” and the “Hades” section directly preceding it. These two sections have often been set in opposition to each other: not only does the Hades-Aeolus boundary mark a major shift in the text’s form, but the subjects and settings of the two episodes seem to be as different as they come. While the former takes place in a graveyard, the latter is set within the bustling vitality of a busy newsroom. But if we approach Joyce’s divisions less like solid walls and more like the creaking door of Ruttledge’s office, we soon see that atmospheric circulation extends well beyond the bounds of “Aeolus,” and that atmosphere itself dismantles the divide between life and death.

It is well known that Joyce’s novel stages a series of encounters between the everyday and the epic; a similar principle of scale juxtaposition allows microscopic and macroscopic atmospheres to circulate as part of the same environment. Breath and wind typically fall on opposite ends of an atmospheric spectrum: one is bodily, the other is meteorological; one is the stuff of organic life, the other is what is left “when breath
becomes air,” as we saw in the context of Kurtz’ death in Chapter 1’s discussion of *Heart of Darkness*. The resulting associations - between atmospheric pollution and bodily emissions, wind and flatulence, dead bodies and dead meat – are disgusting. But I would suggest that Joyce embraces an aesthetics of disgust with an unmistakable sense of purpose. Disgust is an affective state dedicated to policing boundaries: its signature recoil enforces one’s sense of what belongs inside and outside, what can be incorporated and what must be violently rejected. In one sense then, disgust defends against absorption. But disgust can also be seductive, and *Ulysses* features a protagonist with a capacity for olfactory and gustatory attunement unprecedented in any of our previous texts. If Woolf’s characters tend to become absorbed in and by the city, Leopold Bloom absorbs the city itself with relish. Indeed, this is our first introduction to Bloom: “[he] ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls” (45). Because Bloom advances where others would retreat, the novel makes strategic use of disgust to violate bodily integrity as well as the line between life and death. The air is at the heart of both violations, for if bodies are in air, it is also true that air is in bodies. Only Joyce could take what should be the most neutral and inoffensive of objects – the air – and turn it into something disgusting. But, I will show, this is done for a purpose: unlike shock or horror, disgust renders slow violence visible.

The affective atmosphere of “Hades” cannot really be called mournful or melancholy. Rather, the episode brims with an odd affective mixture of amusement, wonder, and disgust. As the funeral procession makes its way to the cemetery to bury Patrick Dignam, Bloom commences what will constitute a chapter-long contemplation of a sort of secular afterlife, recalling that it is possible to keep the fingernails of the dead “in an envelope. Grows all the same after” (72). The kinds of existential questions that have long plagued philosophers take a strikingly material and physical form in the mind of Joyce’s modern hero. For instance, Bloom continues to entertain the possibility that death is not the punctuated rupture we expect it to be when he imagines Dignam’s casket overturned in the street:

Bom! Upset. A coffin bumped out on the road. Burst open. Paddy Dignam shot out and rolling over stiff in the dust in a brown habit too large for him. Red face: grey now. Mouth fallen open. Asking what’s up now. Quite right to close it. Looks horrid open. Then the insides decompose quickly. Much better to close up all the orifices. Yes, also. With wax. The sphincter loose. Seal up all (81).

---

11 This phrase was a reference to the recent memoir *When Breath Becomes Air*, a title which is itself a citation from “Caelica 83.”
12 Rachel Herz writes that “a primary objective of disgust is to keep the outside away from our inside” (*That’s Disgusting: Unraveling the Mysteries of Repulsion* 103). In *The Anatomy of Disgust* (1998), William Ian Miller writes that disgust is “something perceived as dangerous because of its powers to contaminate, infect, or pollute by proximity, contact, or ingestion” (2) and that disgust “also has a key role to play in the civilizing process, working as it does to internalize norms of cleanliness, reserve, and restraint so as to help create the desire for a private sphere distinct from the public world of shame and humiliation” (20).
On multiple levels, this passage displays Bloom’s skepticism that a body can be contained. When he imagines the casket opening, there is also a kind of release at play in Bloom’s own consciousness, with his thoughts shaking themselves loose from the restraining social conventions that provide an ornamental covering for the disgusting realities of death. When Bloom then reflects, “[q]uite right to close it. Looks horrid open”, he is not only imagining the sealed coffin but, in essence, putting a lid on his own thoughts. Yet just as bodies in *Ulysses* prove to be porous rather than hermetically sealed, Bloom’s mind can never stay closed for long. For as soon as he imaginatively closes the casket, he opens up the body itself, envisioning an even more radical failure of containment. Within the space of just a few words, the phrase “close up” shifts its referent from the material coffin to the physical body: “Much better to close up all the orifices.” This impulse to “seal up all” resonates with an understanding of disgust as, fundamentally, a strategy for containment. As Carolyn Korsmeyer sums up: “[p]hilosophers and psychologists alike agree on the basic things that trigger [disgust]—the filthy and foul, the insides of the body that have burst free from their containment, the loss of bodily integrity and the means by which it came about, objects that infect and contaminate” (122). The failures of containment in “Hades” thus anticipate a similar kind of inadequate structural design in “Aeolus.” Just as coffins and bodies are bursting open in the earlier section, in the latter section, doors cannot stay closed but are perpetually blown open by the wind: “[t]hat door too sllt creaking, asking to be shut” (100).

Porous bodies are not unique to the dead. As William Ian Miller points out, bodily orifices and excretions are some of the strongest elicitors of disgust because they call attention both to the penetrability of the body and the vulnerability of the environment to pollution by the body. In other words, they dispel the comforting fiction of the body as a reliably sealed container. Miller notes that oozing on the skin’s surface is considered particularly disgusting, perhaps because the skin so strongly marks what we imagine should be a hard corporeal boundary. He cites “[p]us, running sores [and] skin lesions” (53) as prime examples. Thus, when Woolf wrote in her diary that reading *Ulysses* made her feel “irritated, & disillusioned as by a queasy undergraduate scratching his pimples” (*Diary 2* 188), her own “irritation” is matched by the reference to skin irritation, and the punctured, oozing violation of the body’s surface. I will return to Woolf’s diary entries shortly, but suffice it to say that what seems like a casual insult or convenient metaphor is strikingly appropriate for the very specific kinds of disgust that Joyce deliberately elicits.

It is also true that what might seem like the gratuitous inclusion of disgusting episodes in *Ulysses* actually serves a larger philosophical purpose. From the very beginning of the novel, when Stephen recalls his mother’s death and the “green sluggish bile which she had torn up from her rotting liver by fits of loud groaning vomiting” (5), readers are prompted to question not only the distinction between corporeal and environmental – after all, there is also the “snotgreen sea” (4) – but also the line separating life from death. Buck accuses Stephen of not granting the wish his mother made “with her last breath” (5), but in “Proteus,” Stephen reflects that, “dead breaths I living breathe” (42). The exhalations of the dead become the inhalations of the living. Perhaps there is no such thing as a “last breath” at all.

While Stephen’s mind converts sordid details into fodder for aesthetic and intellectual production, Bloom exhibits a degree of radical openness to disgust in all of its raw viscerality. Indeed, this is a character who often seems incapable of being disgusted.
Crucially, though, he does register the initial twitches of disgust, as when he feels it is “quite right” to “seal up all”. And yet he tends to follow up on that initial retreat with a curious advance. This can make for an uncomfortable reading experience, as readers are likely to feel torn between a personal impulse to recoil and the text’s insistence on following Bloom’s mental advances. During the funeral service, Bloom notices the bloated face of the undertaker and wonders:

What swells him up that way? Molly gets swelled after cabbage. Air of the place maybe. Looks full up of bad gas. Must be an infernal lot of bad gas round the place. Butchers, for instance: they get like raw beefsteaks. Who was telling me? Mervyn Browne. Down in the vaults of saint Werburgh’s lovely old organ hundred and fifty they have to bore a hole in the coffins sometimes to let out the bad gas and burn it. Out it rushes: blue. One whiff of that and you’re a doner (86).

Here, again, we have the unsealing of a casket – “bore a hole in the coffins” – followed by an even more radical unsealing of the body itself– “let out the bad gas.” That the image is triggered by the face of the (living) undertaker and that the gas is connected to (the living) Molly makes it clear that gas overflows the boundaries of life and death as well as the distinction between corporeal and environmental. The passage describes a kind of intricately connected system of circulation involving bodies and the air as well as the dead and the living. When Bloom reflects, “[a]ir of the place maybe. Looks full up of bad gas”, he is speculating that Corny’s body has itself absorbed the bodily emissions of the dead. A clear line between body and environment cannot be drawn here: “looks full up of bad gas” applies both to the bloated undertaker and the “air of the place”. Corny is immersed in the air of the place, but the air of the place is also in him. The fact that “[o]ne whiff” will make “you a doner” completes the cycle: the dead live on in the air and in the bodies of the living; meanwhile, the living, inhaling this air, are soon dead. Thus while Bloom reflects that coffins are a “waste of wood. All gnawed through” (90) and that you “can’t bury in the air however” (94), the text suggests that in a very real sense the dead are in the air, circulating among and inhaled by the living.

Bloom takes pleasure in courting disgusting objects. Indeed scholars have noted the way that disgusting objects often seem to be paradoxically seductive by their very nature.13 Food provides the classic illustration of this phenomenon. As Carolyn Korsmeyer points out in Savoring Disgust: The Fair and Foul in Aesthetics, the gustatory tastes deemed most sophisticated or cultivated often require attunement to the rank and repulsive:

13 William Ian Miller writes that “we cannot avoid one of the most troubling aspects of so much of the disgusting: it attracts as well as repels. The disgusting has an allure; it exerts a fascination which manifests itself in the difficulty of averting eyes at a gory accident [etc]” (22). The idea that disgust is paradoxically seductive is also central to Korsmeyer’s argument in Savoring Disgust.
Decomposing flesh is another exemplar of the disgusting, producing among the most revolting odors one can encounter. But sometimes we eat it willingly if it has not progressed to a completely unusable stage. This culinary fashion waxes and wanes, but many older books of household management instruct one to hang game until it has started to “turn” in order to bring out the deeper aspects of its flavor. This may even involve washing away maggots or mold before cooking, indicating the degree to which the meat has decayed. Good steak is aged just like good cheese and wine, and since the aging process begins at death, the more time that goes by, the more rotten the meat. We call this “high” meat; in French it has achieved *haut goût*, and it is an irony of metaphor that the closer the substance comes to sinking back to original clay the more elevation its flavor achieves (66).

Bloom is keenly aware of the role that aging and decomposition play in the production of the delicious, reflecting, “[a] corpse is meat gone bad. Well and what’s cheese? Corpse of milk” (94). It becomes increasingly difficult to say whether Bloom’s tastes are disgustingly animalistic or exquisitely cultivated. In our first encounter with the character, we are told that “he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine” (45). This might seem like an odd, uncultured predilection but in her discussion of gourmet delicacies, Korsmeyer cites Alexandre Dumas’ *Grande Dictionnaire de Cuisine*: “kidneys are at their best when they are prepared so that a whiff of urine flavor remains in them” (81).

Understanding the continuity between disgust and delight can help us understand *Ulysses* itself as an acquired taste. Once banned and denigrated as a perverse object of disgust, the text is now largely celebrated as a work of high art, accessible only to those with the most cultivated literary palette. One might assume that when *Ulysses* strikes readers as sophisticated, it is because of its densely allusive structure. But thinking with this model of intimacy between disgust and savor, it seems just as possible that its reputation for sophistication has grown out of, rather than in opposition to, initial impressions that the text is disgusting. Thus, it is not quite right to say that Joyce juxtaposes “low” and “high” cultural material side by side; he also captures the ways in which one register can easily slide into the other. Seen in this context, Woolf’s famously disgusted initial reaction to *Ulysses* is actually quite perceptive. The text deliberately elicits the repulsion Woolf describes, and the analogy to raw meat is particularly appropriate:

An illiterate, underbred book it seems to me: the book of a self-taught working man, & we all know how distressing they are, how egotistic, insistent, raw, striking, & ultimately nauseating. When one can have cooked flesh, why have the raw? But I think if you are anemic, as Tom is, there is glory in blood. Being fairly normal myself I am soon ready for the classics again. I may revise this later. I do not compromise my critical sagacity. I plant a stick in the ground to mark page 200. (qtd. in Heffernan *D* 2: 188-89)

How does the disgusting become the delicious? Social and cultural norms obviously play a major role in a range of culinary (and literary) trends as well as historically and cross-culturally variable conceptions of what constitutes cultivated
taste. But there is another intriguing explanation for the particular connection between the disgusting and the delicious: some suggest that the presence of death is not just one subcategory of disgusting object but is in fact constitutive of disgust as a distinct and paradoxically alluring affective category. Korsmeyer subscribes to this theory when she argues that foods get converted from disgusting to delicious not in spite but 

*because of* the lurking “presence of death” (85). She considers it no accident that cross-culturally, foods considered delicacies tend to display, rather than concealing, the animal lives and deaths that contributed to them: shellfish, raw meat, kidneys, hearts. That this “kind of a meal involves awareness, however submerged, of the presence of death amid the continuance of one’s own life” (Korsmeyer 84), echoes Bloom’s experience in the cemetery: “[i]n the midst of death we are in life” (*Ulysses* 89). But the encounter with death that occurs in the presence of disgusting objects is a very particular sort, one that is focused on the ongoing process of decomposition rather than the dramatic rupture of death. Korsmeyer suggests that our discomfort with the blurred line between life and death helps explain why bodily emanations and rotting corpses are considered so disgusting while other physical manifestations of death, such as bones, do not trigger the same sort of revulsion. This is where disgust can be differentiated from the fear and shock that might also be registered in an encounter with death:

Disgust is more of a response to the transition between life and death—to that which has recently died and is falling apart, to waste that was food and is now used up, to the mindless life-forms that invade and complete the process of disintegration. The fact that disgust registers the process that death initiates rather than the state of being dead marks another difference between disgust and the other affects that take note of mortality. Bones are relatively clean and permanent; flesh is not. (Korsmeyer 122-123)

Thinking with Korsmeyer, I want to suggest that disgust renders slow violence visible. As readers, we are only granted the opportunity to perceive the slow violence of disgust because we have access to the consciousness of a character who advances with curiosity where most would recoil in disgust. Because decomposition is the kind of slow violence that takes place out of sight and out of mind, we need access not just to Bloom’s “point of view” in the narrow sense of his empirical perceptions, but to his imaginative faculties more specifically. In the following passage, Bloom’s tolerance for the disgusting thus brings into view a slow process that would otherwise remain invisible:

I daresay the soil would be quite fat with corpsemanure, bones, flesh, nails. Charnelhouses. Dreadful. Turning green and pink decomposing. Rot quick in

---

14 Those who study it tend to point out the odd way in which disgust seems to exist at two extreme ends of a spectrum – visceral and universally physiological on the one hand, unmistakably socially coded and culturally specific on the other (Kelly 11). Korsmeyer also points out that while tastes of course vary cross-culturally, the same fundamental split between what is to most of the population and under most circumstances “disgusting” and to a subset of “cultivated” elites “delicious,” takes place within cultures.
damp earth. The lean old ones tougher. Then a kind of a tallowy kind of cheesy. Then begin to get black, black treacle oozing out of them. The dried up. Deathmoths. Of course the cells or whatever they are going on living. Changing about. Live for ever practically. Nothing to feed on feed on themselves. But they must breed a devil of a lot of maggots. Soil must be simply swirling with them (89).

This passage depicts a process that is about as far from final, fatal rupture as one could imagine. Even after the moment of death, narrative progression continues: “Then…Then”. Once again, the event has become the environmental, and that is precisely what elicits discomfort and disgust. Because the fermentation process can only begin after death, it is perfectly logical for Bloom to imagine the dead’s conversion into something “kind of cheesy.”

For William Ian Miller, slow decomposition suggests that what truly disgusts is actually “the capacity for life…for it is decay that seems to engender life…Death thus horrifies…because it is not an end to the process of living” (40). This is precisely what happens in the above passage: slow violence is disturbing because it is simultaneously a kind of slow regeneration. Maggots feed on bodies, incorporating the dead into new life. The soil seems not only to absorb the dead but to gorge itself, becoming “fat,” a sure sign of the kind of surfeit that can turn the delicious into the disgusting. It is almost as if the decaying body is itself pregnant, “breed[ing]” new life. It’s *The Waste Land’s* “The Burial of the Dead,” without all the poetry (“April is the cruellest month, breeding/Lilacs out of the dead land… feeding/ A little life with dried tubers” 1:1-6). As Miller points out, under normal circumstances plants and vegetation are much less likely to elicit disgust than animals and humans, but they do become disgusting in the case of “generative rot…teeming animal life generating spontaneously from putrefying vegetation” (40-41). This is precisely what Bloom tunes into when he reflects that cells are always “changing about. Live forever practically.”

A similar thought process informs Bloom’s earlier reflection that the “Botanic Gardens are just over there. It’s blood sinking in the earth gives new life.” (89) On one level, the gardens are contaminated because death seeps into them, but thinking with Miller we might also say that they seem just as much polluted by new life. This is a vision in which nothing stays in its proper place: life and death, graveyard and garden, here and there. Even the ground will not stay put, for Bloom perpetually returns to the emanating smell of rotting corpses, “gas of graves” (89). What is in the ground is therefore also in the air. When he reflects that there would be “[m]ore room if they buried them standing…His head might come up some day above ground in a landslip with his hand pointing” (89), the image simply dramatizes what Bloom already knows to be true, that the dead are always rising up out of their graves and into the air. Burial is another failure of containment, another impossible attempt to “seal up all,” to draw a boundary between life and death.

In “The Dead,” we saw how coldness blurs the line between life and death: on the one hand, it has been associated with erasure, effacement, and paralysis; on the other

---

15 On surfeit and disgust, see Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust.*
hand, it evokes efforts to preserve and prolong life by halting organic decomposition - refrigeration and freezing, for example. Conversely, in Ulysses, that fuzzy border between life and death emerges in the context of hot, teeming rot and decomposition. What Joyce seems to have discovered is that it is not necessary to arrest processes of decay in order to glimpse ongoing life. When we first encounter Bloom, for example, we are told that “[g]elid light and air were in the kitchen but out of doors gentle summer morning everywhere” (45). Here, the cold/warmth divide has been reversed, and Bloom eagerly steps outside of the cold kitchen, which seems to be a kind of refrigerator in its own right.

Thus far, we have primarily encountered the problem of shock’s accelerated speed and immediate impact. Yet if dramatic shock artificially accelerates the rate of organic decline, freezing artificially slows it down, suggesting complete paralysis where there is actually slow violence. As Gabriel himself came to realize, the image of pure frozen snow is only ever an illusion anyway, as it gradually dissolves, becoming “slushy underfoot” (“The Dead” 212). Just as shock tends to be sensational and highly visible, so does ice form an inherently crystallized image. Because slow violence is gradual but not inert, it occupies an uncomfortable intermediary zone and poses distinct perceptual challenges. Joyce makes us realize that there are ways to see slow violence, but most individuals turn away in disgust when the opportunity presents itself.

It is not just that disgusting objects undergo and exhibit slow deaths of fermentation and decay; disgusted subjects are also slowed down in a way that differs from similar sorts of negative emotion. Korsmeyer calls attention to “the pause between reactive recoil and that second curious look” (121) and suggests that the pleasures of disgust are located in this “reflective aftermath” (121). While we might recoil in disgust, we are apt to re-approach the disgusting object slowly and cautiously. Thus while the initial reaction to a disgusting stimulus looks very much like the jolt of shock, disgust has an afterlife that can be likened to the absorptive processes that followed shock. The first response aligns with an understanding of “pure disgust [as] a fundamental recoil, a radical no,” (Korsmeyer 50), but that retreat is often followed by a pause indicative of lingering interest or fascination, in contrast to the adrenaline fueled fight-or-flight response seen in fear (Korsmeyer 56). We see the slowed pace of disgust’s aftermath in “Hades” when the mourners decide to linger a bit longer. “We have time,” Hynes says, and a few lines later the mourners are described “following their slow thoughts” (92), the kind that come with morbid fascination. For many readers, “that second curious look” will also resonate with the experience of rereading Ulysses itself.

For Korsmeyer, the surprising capacity of disgust to make one stop and linger is what makes it a genuine aesthetic emotion. We tend to think of disgust as defending against absorption, particularly bodily incorporation, but the pause after the recoil indicates “appreciative aesthetic absorption” (Korsmeyer 115). In this way, Woolf’s initial disgust does not constitute a misreading; it is a fitting response for a text that ultimately begs for a second look, a mandatory re-reading. Here it might help to think in terms of Heidegger’s conception of moods as facilitating “openness” to the world, as affective dispositions that allow the surrounding environment to show up in an interesting way. The visceral initial recoil of a disgusted emotion seems to close off the world, but perhaps the lingering second look that follows afterward represents something closer to a
disgusted mood, one that structures a surprisingly open and curious relationship to the world.

The text constantly requires readers not only to take a second look, but also to admit the sights and smells we might normally draw back from. *Ulysses* thus calls attention to the ethical stakes involved in atmospheric attunement. Indeed, part of what makes the text so capacious is its commitment to tuning in to that which we often deliberately tune out. Human sensory organs do not function like open floodgates, allowing the world to freely pour in; to the contrary, the senses serve as gatekeepers, discriminating and selecting from the raw material of environment. We close our eyes, plug up our ears, hold our noses – particularly in the presence of disgusting objects. These acts differ from the more neutral lack of attunement seen in everyday consciousness, the sort where one barely pauses to recognize atmosphere as the background that is always already there. More than just an oblivious lack of attunement, these examples represent concentrated efforts to block attunement. As we have seen in previous chapters, attunement is a kind of intimate relationship achieved not in spite of but because of difference. The performance of sensory aversion – the plugged ears or pinched nose – is therefore a deliberate turning away from difference, a turning in on oneself, a closing off of the wider world. Joyce’s celebratory aesthetics of disgust is, in this way, a performance of radical inclusion. Joyce’s pupil Georges Borach recorded the writer’s pronouncement that, “I find the subject of *Ulysses* the most human in world literature,” elaborating that *Ulysses* “wishes to and must listen; he has himself tied to the mast.” (qtd. In Ellman 416-417). In “The Dead”, we followed a character who had to learn to listen, but *Ulysses* listens to the world through its characters’ already attuned ears. Homer’s tale of *Odysseus* tied to the mast in “Sirens” concerns the pleasurable seduction of sensory stimuli, but there is something very similar about an aesthetics that embraces disgust, as both combine tantalizing exposure with an inability to turn away. Indeed, we could think of the entire text as an experiment in imagining a world where all sensory organs are compelled to admit instead of repulse.

Reading with “Hades” in mind, one can appreciate that Bloom’s capacity for gustatory and olfactory attunement underlies not just his attraction to disgusting objects, but his openness to atmosphere more generally. Bloom’s fundamental sense of embeddedness in environment makes him a kind of anti-Gabriel, succeeding in the precise places where the protagonist of “The Dead” failed so spectacularly. For example, while Gabriel committed the pathetic fallacy of imagining sunny weather and birds chirping while he fell in love with his wife, Bloom has a more honest atmospheric memory of falling in love: “[w]indy night that was I went to fetch her…Sheet of her music blew out of my hand…Remember her laughing at the wind, her blizzard collar up. Corner of Harcourt road remember that gust. She did get flushed in the wind.” (128)

Rather than forcing the weather to submit to his personal scene of domestic bliss, Bloom acknowledges the separate existence and random contingency of meteorological activity as it really unfolded then. Bloom’s crucial achievement lies in his willingness to abstain from reducing the wind to a single symbolic meaning. His concern is not what the wind stood for but how it moved them both, a response that aligns with the understanding of affect as “a set of flows moving through the bodies of humans and other beings” (Thrift 236). As Jean-Paul Thibauld puts it:
We may now define ambiance as a motor stimulation in the sense that it activates sensorimotor processes through which we engage with the world. In this respect, perception cannot be reduced merely to passive contemplation of the world – it involves moving in a certain way. (211; original italics).

Conversely, critics of Dubliners have dedicated a great deal of time to discussing and debating the symbolic import of the East and West directions\(^{16}\) which makes it tempting to read “the east wind” (180) as symbolic in that text. But because symbols by their nature fix in place, that impulse prevents the wind from moving.

While Gabriel knows nothing of the cold, rainy night that so powerfully defined his wife’s youth (and actually seeks to extract Gretta from her environmental context altogether), Bloom always sees Molly in terms that thoroughly blend the corporeal and environmental: “[t]he warmth of her couched body rose on the air, mingling with the fragrance of the tea she poured” (52); her “ample bedwarmed flesh” (50). Bloom’s sense of smell enables him to perceive the body’s extension in space in a way that vision could never adequately register, for olfactory emanations complicate any sense of a partition between body and the air.

In “Calypso,” Bloom takes a flower and “smelt its almost no smell” (64), another illustration of the character’s remarkable attunement not just to what is invisible but to a scent so slight that most noses would not detect it at all. Bloom is discriminating in a distinctly ethical way, for his ability to pick up on and distinguish between even the smallest of sensations ultimately allows him to make room in his consciousness for the uniqueness of all that he encounters. For readers, the tradeoff seems to be that we are going to be exposed not only to the perfumed air of a loved one and the sweet scent of a rose but also to “the sweet oaten reek of horsepiss” (63), “morning mouth” (50), even “his own rising smell” (56) in the outhouse. It’s a fair deal.

That “high art” can come out of such “low” sensations is reinforced by the way that disgust provides a connecting link between Bloom’s physicality and Stephen’s aesthetic sensibilities. Stephen’s experiences in “Proteus” anticipate those of Bloom in “Hades”: he imagines a dead body pulled from the water as a “bag of corpsegas in foul brine” (41), he notices a dog “vulturing the dead” (41) as well as the “bloated carcass” (37) of another dog. Here, once again, the living feed upon the dead while dead bodies

\(^{16}\) For example, Richard Ellman writes that, “west is savagery; to the east and south lie people who drink wine and wear galoshes” (248) and that “the cliché runs that journeys westward are towards death, but the west has taken on special meaning in the story” (249). Walzl suggests that “the directional symbolism seems that of the earlier tales: the east is the direction of Gabriel’s holiday escapes to freedom on the continent, the center of Dublin is made the scene of his revelation, and the west is associated with his final vision of the graveyard. However, it soon becomes evident that Joyce is developing, side by side with this east-west symbolic pattern, another one that is its opposite in certain ways…” (22)
are bursting at the seams with an excess of air, bloated and gassy. And when he imagines the corpse pulled from the sea, Stephen too thinks of death as a kind of ongoing life:

A quiver of minnows, fat of a spongy titbit, flash through the slits of his buttoned trouserfly. God becomes man becomes fish becomes barnacle goose becomes featherbed mountain. Dead breaths I living breathe, tread dead dust, devour a ruinous offal from all dead. Hauled stark over the gunwale he breathes upward the stench of his green grave, his leprous nosehole snoring to the sun (41-42).

This passage contains just about all of the elements that theorists mention in studies of disgust – the tactile squishiness of solids becoming spongy liquids, bodily orifices as threats to corporeal containment (to drive home the point, nose becomes “nosehole”), the blurring of lines between life and death, the foul odor of rot and decay made clear by “stench of his green grave”. Here Stephen both inhales and ingests the dead, “dead breaths I living breathe” and “devour a ruinous offal”.

The sustenance that Stephen gains from “dead breaths” extends beyond oxygen alone, for Joyce makes it clear that the language of the dead circulates in the air. For example, one might say that Stephen is buffeted by fresh air when “nipping and eager airs” (32) surround him, but that language is itself recycled from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: the words of the dead are not only about the air but *in* it. The young man’s desire for fresh air is particularly pronounced in “Proteus”, and at moments, he resembles the frustrated characters of *Dubliners*, subject to the claustrophobia of stale and stagnant air. For instance, as he walks along Sandymount Strand, there is a sense that the air itself might be rotting, subject as it is to recirculation of the city’s waste products: “[u]nwholesome sandflats waited to suck his treading soles, breathing upward sewage breath, a pocket of seaweed smouldered in seafire under a midden of man’s ashes” (34). And yet, as Stephen walks along, mentally jumping from one dead author or ancient tradition to the next, he becomes energized where many in *Dubliners* felt enervated. He walks all the way down to the edge of the sea and there, “[t]he new air greeted him, harping in wild nerves, wind of wild air of seeds of brightness” (37). This breath of fresh air – “new air” – actually comes from old air. As Gifford and Seidman point out in their annotations,

Stephen cites fabulous accounts of impregnation by wind as in Virgil…and as in the legend of Zephyrus, the west wind, who fathered Achilles’ horses. Other myths of impregnation involve a shower of seeds from the sun or the stars or the bright sky, as Zeus (413).

Here, Stephen’s poetic vision and philosophical musings do not seem all that different from Bloom’s vision of dead bodies “breed[ing]” new life. Once again, Joyce sets up a continuum leading from low art to high art, death to life, and the disgusting to the delicious. Stephen’s lofty goal of making something new out of inherited literary

---

17 Reference from Gifford and Seidman’s annotations: “Horatio and Hamlet as they watch on the battlements for the appearance of the Ghost” (48).
tradition is founded upon a much more literal and physical sense of “inspiration,” from the Latin inspīrāre to blow or breathe into (OED “inspire”). Like Bloom, Stephen is fixated on the question of how old air becomes new air.

Sloterdijk’s discussion of inspiration is instructive here:

Its medium is not its master, and its recipient is not its producer. Whether it is genius that whisper the idea to its executor or chance that makes the dice fall as they do…the receiver always knows that, in a sense, beyond their own efforts, they have housed visitors from elsewhere in thought…Something foreign passes through the door of the own and acquires validity…Whoever experiences inspired ideas can, even in post-metaphysical or hetero-metaphysical times, understand themselves as a host or matrix for the non-own (Spheres I 30).

Inspiration occurs when the body itself becomes a medium, relinquishing the precise kind of “mastery” that thwarted Gabriel’s early efforts at attunement in “The Dead”. Yet here inspiration begins to sound surprisingly similar to disgust. Being disgusted and being inspired are both fundamentally experiences of being invaded by the foreign, the “non-own”. Thus in “Aeolus,” when Joyce on the one hand references a letter to the editor regarding a “cure for flatulence” (98), and on the other hand has one character complimenting the “divine afflatus” of another (115), the shared etymology seems no accident. Joyce seizes on the possibility of an inspiring disgust, that is, the possibility that disgust can be inspired (taken in) rather than rejected (cast out). If disgust is always on some level about death, there is inspiration in expiration.

The primary difference between inspiration and disgust involves the speed of foreign encroachment. As Sloterdijk points out, inspiration tends to strike immediately, or at least that is what it has a reputation for doing. Meanwhile, as we know, the disgusting is often made so not just because of its external origin but because of its slowly moving pace: it is creeping; therefore, it is creepy. Creepiness returns us to the tactile language of “irritation,” indicating both skin laceration and affective discomfort. Here, Joyce expands upon Conrad’s model of creeping fog. The way that outsides become insides was already implicit in Heart of Darkness: Marlow first observed a “creeping mist” (Heart 13), then referenced “creepy thoughts,” (37) only to finally and most intimately reflect, “[it] made you creepy all over” (Heart 48-49). Towards the end of “Hades,” Bloom thinks to himself:

Back to the world again. Enough of this place. Brings you a bit nearer every time. Last time I was here was Mrs. Sinico’s funeral. Poor papa too. The love that kills. And even scraping up the earth at night with a lantern like that case I read of to get at fresh buried females or even putrefied with running gravesores. Give you the creeps a bit (94).

That visiting a graveyard “[b]rings you a bit nearer every time” reminds us that death is not the equivalent of sudden rupture. It may creep up, it may seize us unexpected, but its advance in the world of Ulysses is surprisingly slow. In chapter one, we noted that when Marlow reflects that he had “never breathed an atmosphere so vile,” disgust was inextricable from inhalation. The result was a disturbing sense of atmospheric complicity:
the body in atmosphere as well as atmosphere in the body. Indeed, inhaling something disgusting does not offer the same opportunities for recoil that sight does. In other words, there is always a sense of it being too late in the case of disgusting odors.

Citing Genesis’ creation story of God breathing animating life into Adam, Sloterdijk argues that there is no such thing as one-sided breathing: “[t]he breath is hence conspiratory, respiratory and inspiratory from the outset; as soon as breath exists, there are two breathing...Breath science can only get underway as a theory of pairs” (41). Joyce’s *Ulysses* is, of course, a novel of pairs, structured around the double modern heroes of Stephen and Bloom. Thus, the “windy rhetoric” of “Aeolus” is not the only, or even the primary, way that the text unites atmospheric form and content. *Ulysses* is a novel about doubles, structured according to the two-sided rhythms of respiration. The combination of third person narration and stream of consciousness (which constitutes the “initial style” of the episodes discussed here) is also a formal strategy built around the logic of two-sidedness. Combining third person narration with stream of consciousness allows readers to see everything from two sides: the inhaled and exhaled, inspiration and expiration. In shuttling back and forth between insides and outsides, Joyce essentially refuses, on a formal level, to “seal up all”.

Sloterdijk’s account of the biblical “first breath” thus resonates with the “last breaths” that so preoccupy both Bloom and Stephen. Sloterdijk emphasizes that the story of creation is itself structured according to a principle of doubles, involving both clay sculpting and inspired breathing: “breath was the epitome of a divine technology capable of closing the ontological gap between the clay idol and the animated human with a pneumatic sleight of hand” (*Spheres* I 37). The difference between the clay Adam and the breathing, spiritual version is that “[w]ithout the completion of the clay body through breath, Adam would forever have remained merely a bizarre work of earthen art” (*Spheres* I 36). Sloterdijk elaborates that:

> [t]he Hebrew text refers to the living being with the word *nefesh*, which means something like ‘that which is animated by a living breath’; according to Hebrew scholars, this is largely synonymous with *ruach*, meaning ‘moving air, breath, breath of life, spirit, feeling and passion, thought. A two-phase process in procedural terms, this anthropoësis escalates from the creation of vessels to the creation of spirit beings…the breathing-in of life (36).

I want to stress the significance of *moving air*, for here we have another kind of gentle turbulence capable of triggering not just epiphanies but life itself. In the first fourteen stories of *Dubliners*, characters feel trapped in pools of stagnant air; by the time we get to “The Dead,” air is moving but our protagonist is oblivious to that fact, initially fixated on a visual image of pretty but lifeless snow. In *Ulysses*, characters are finally fully attuned to air in motion, always blowing from two directions at once. The text zeroes in on doubles and two-sided structures as a fruitful site for creativity and aesthetic production: breath, wind, gas, windy corridors, double protagonists, echoing episodes like “Aeolus” and “Hades”, third person narration mixed with stream of consciousness, “death in life” (89), Homer’s *Odyssey* and Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Like Ruttledge’s corridor providing a “way in. way out”, the respiratory rhythm of Joyce’s epic allows for air to flow in two directions. Perhaps this is also why Joyce loves palindromes. For example, in “Aeolus,”
when the characters are discussing a well-regarded Dublin lawyer named Richard Adams (Gifford and Seidman 143), the image of God breathing life into Adam prompts another kind of linguistic creation:

---Dick Adams, the besthearted bloody Corkman the Lord ever put the breath of life in, and myself.
-Lenehan bowed to a shape of air, announcing:
-Madam, I’m Adam. And Able was I ere I saw Elba. (113)

Here, an allusion to Genesis leads directly to the generation of similarly two-sided creations, palindromes. That Lenehan bows to a “shape of air” first speaks to the connection between air and aesthetic production; it also echoes Stephen’s thought upon seeing a midwife in “Proetus”: “creation from nothing” (32; Gifford and Seidman point out that this too is an allusion to Genesis).

Then there is another question of doubles to be explored: the relationship between Woolf and Joyce. Suzette Henke writes that “Woolf always regarded Joyce as a kind of artistic ‘double’…In her own life, Joyce played the role of alter-ego that Septimus Smith had played for Clarissa Dalloway” (41). This language of doubles is somewhat misleading insofar as it encourages direct comparisons or the impression that the writers shared a similar style. But much like attunement, breathing facilitates a relationship that is based just as much on difference as equivalence. Both Woolf and Joyce render atmosphere by violating the boundaries of inside and outside, combining first and third person narration, and utilizing absorptive principles—but it is in attending to these very similar elements that the authors’ differences come into sharp relief.

In my reading of Mrs. Dalloway, we saw that free indirect discourse is an inherently absorptive strategy, and indeed it does just exactly what disgust, in its initial recoil, tries to defend against: it mingles interiors with exteriors, it absorbs the foreign and the unknown, it violates boundaries of flesh and body. Readers might recall my assertion that Woolf exhibits a notably ambivalent attitude towards absorption. I argued that Woolf’s free indirect discourse seeks to pull off a carefully calibrated balancing act, constantly shifting between absorbing and being absorbed. Whenever Mrs. Dalloway's narrator becomes too swept up in the language or thoughts of a given character, a familiar narrative voice reasserts itself, fighting against the smooth, soothing consistency that threatens to submerge and drown that voice. When Miss Kilman tells Elizabeth that she “must not let parties absorb her [while] fingering the last two inches of a chocolate éclair” (Dalloway 131), Woolf implicitly contrasts two different types of absorption, one corporeal and the other aesthetic. The aesthetic absorption that Miss Kilman warns against is the sort that Woolf celebrates; meanwhile, the somewhat glutinous enthusiasm with which the character absorbs her food is what Woolf tries to avoid in her own writing, aiming rather to “absorb[ ] the salts, tones, colours of existence” (Dalloway 30). This is why Woolf sticks to a highly controlled form of free indirect discourse in which the narrator is never subsumed into one consciousness for long.

Ulysses makes no distinction between the corporeal and aesthetic senses of absorption. For Joyce, the real danger is not being swept away with but rather repelled away from. Joyce combines third and first person narration by putting them next to each other and shifting between them rather than by intimately weaving them together in the
controlled manner of Woolf’s free indirect discourse. The crucial difference is that Joyce allows his narrator to be swept up, fully absorbed in the minds and voices of his characters for long stretches of time. When Joyce leaves third person narration behind, he truly leaves it behind.

Woolf’s signature mode of absorption takes place at windowsills: her characters (and her narrator) perch on thresholds and selectively absorb, rather than plunging like divers into the sea. In “The Dead”, Joyce similarly positioned his protagonist at the window, receptive to foreign air without ever being fully immersed in it. But things changed between “The Dead” and Ulysses. In Ulysses the window is gone, and all that remains is wind. This altered relationship to the air, indeed this different kind of breathing, is precisely what Woolf objected to:

[It] seems to me the conscious and calculated indecency of a desperate man who feels that in order to breathe he must break the windows. At moments, when the window is broken, he is magnificent. But what a waste of energy! And, after all, how dull indecency is, when it is not the overflowing of a superabundant energy or savagery, but the determined and public-spirited act of a man who needs fresh air! (qtd. in Heffernan)

Woolf had no objection to fresh air; she wanted to break out of the stifling houses and carriages of nineteenth-century realism just as much as Joyce did. It was with respect to the method of getting out of the window that they differed. How does one get a breath of fresh air without breaking the window? We will consider this question by giving Woolf a chance to reply in To The Lighthouse, the first section of which is titled, of course, “The Window”.
Chapter V

Clouds

I. “Vast clouds over this tiny world”: Forecasting the Weather

“No part of the world’s weather is an island”
– Alan Watts, The Weather Handbook (140)

Virginia Woolf’s To The Lighthouse opens with a weather forecast. The novel’s first three words are cheerfully optimistic—“Yes, of course”, Mrs. Ramsay assures her young son James – but that sense of optimism is immediately qualified as the statement slides into the conditional mood, “if it’s fine”. By contrast, Mr. Ramsay’s forecast is brutally declarative, pronounced in the assured and direct tone of the future tense: “but…it won’t be fine” (4). Mr. Ramsay’s protégé concurs, citing empirical evidence: “‘It’s due west,’ said the atheist Tansley, holding his bony fingers spread so that the wind blew through them…That is to say, the wind blew from the worst possible direction for landing at the Lighthouse” (5). At first glance, the two men seem to take the more dispassionate and scientific approach here, while Mrs. Ramsay seems naïve or willfully ignorant. Yet the men’s posture of absolute certainty is problematic.

In the early twentieth century, meteorology was undergoing a revolution precisely because of its turn away from first-person observational techniques. The new science of forecasting focused on large-scale physical and theoretical modeling1; this was a moment of serious doubt concerning the very idea that a single “window” – an eye, a vantage point, a data reading at one location – could suffice to predict the weather. Therefore, while we first encounter Charles Tansley as the “atheist Tansley,” one wonders whether his faith in atmospheric legibility is really so different from more traditional practices of reading divine omens in the sky. Mrs. Ramsay notices that her husband’s predictions are accepted and amplified by his disciples as a kind of divine prophecy: “he said it would

1 “The character of weather forecasting changed after 1914,” Robert Friedman writes, elaborating that “important breakthroughs occurred especially between 1918 and 1925 when a group of Scandanavian researchers under Bjerknes established a new conceptual foundation for atmospheric science”(xi); “the challenge was to achieve precision and reliability on a scale hitherto never attempted’(119). Robert J. Reed distinguishes between the period “extending from 1860 to 1920 in which forecast practice was based almost entirely on human experience and skill, [and] a second [period] extending from 1920 to 1950 in which physical concepts received increasing emphasis”(390); “the era from 1920 to 1950 saw dramatic breaks with the past”(393). Harper writes, “Once an art that depended on an individual forecaster’s lifetime of local experience, meteorology has become a sophisticated, theoretical atmospheric science” (1). Katherine Anderson writes that, beginning in the 19th century, meteorology began “working on a scale that any one individual could not match” (292). In The Marvelous Clouds, John Durham Peters writes that “Only in the twentieth-century did nonoptical sensing of celestial bodies become possible, first with radio astronomy…Prior to that, all access to the heavens passed through the eye”(170).
rain; they said it would be a positive tornado” (15). To be sure, Mrs. Ramsay is trying to protect the youthful hopes of her son. But if her use of the conditional tense is an act of love and kindness, it is no less scientifically sound for being so: “The wind often changed...it might be fine tomorrow. So it might” (31-32). Indeed, the central role of physics in shaping modern meteorology meant that elements of chance and uncertainty were becoming more, rather than less, pronounced.  

Mr. Ramsay tries to settle the matter by citing the authority of the household barometer: “Not with the barometer falling and the wind due west” (32). For centuries, weather forecasting had been not only a local but a thoroughly domestic practice: soon after the barometer’s invention in the 17th century, the instrument became a popular household fixture in England. But starting in the mid 19th century, meteorology was increasingly becoming the domain of trained experts, and families were growing accustomed to consulting newspaper forecasts rather than the household barometer, or, for that matter, their own eyes. When the first news print weather forecasts in the world appeared in The Times of London in 1861, they were regarded with widespread suspicion and ridicule, and were controversial enough to be temporarily suspended. Therefore, Woolf’s generation would have been the first to experience the regular incorporation of news forecasts as an accepted part of daily life.

This shift from amateur forecasts at the household level to professional forecasts for the entire nation was part of a larger trend of expanding the scale of atmospheric science. Many earlier weather technologies served as prosthetics for the human body; the telescope extended vision, the thermometer and barometer felt the minute atmospheric changes the body might miss. The technologies that ushered in what was arguably the next major moment for meteorology, in the mid 19th century, were not designed with the weather in mind at all, nor were they outfitted for use by one individual. Instead, technological innovations in transportation (railway) and communication (telegraph) facilitated the collection, transmission, and coordination of atmospheric data on an unprecedented scale. Even in the absence of any new technology explicitly designed to measure the weather, forecasting was revolutionized because the telegraph allowed for real-time tracking of storms moving across both time and space. The disembodied perspective of the synoptic map – a kinds of bird’s eye view of weather moving across

---

2: “Quantum theory, chaos theory, complexity theory [which demonstrate] the critical roles that chance and uncertainty play [highlighted] the essential limitations to what can be known” (xvii). “Some algorithms were verbal lists of conditional if-then statements,” Mark Monmier writes in Air Apparent: How Meteorologists Learned to Map, Predict, and Dramatize the Weather. Writing on Jacob Bjerknes, Friedman notes “each forecast was actually an investigation: candid expressions such as ‘probably,’ ‘possibly,’ ‘I guess,’ and ‘in all likelihood’ appear often in Jacob’s diary” (124).

3 “The weather was literally brought indoors,” Jan Golinski writes in British Weather and the Climate of Enlightenment, “domesticated as part of the quotidian routine of many households” (109).

4 See Peter Moore, The Weather Experiment.

5 On 19th century weather forecasting, and the roles of railway and telegraph, see Katharine Anderson, Predicting the Weather: Victorians and the Science of Meteorology; Moore’s The Weather Experiment; Monmier’s Air Apparent.
space⁶ – is fundamentally incompatible with the observations of a single observer from a single location. In the opening of To The Lighthouse, Tansley’s outstretched hands signify an attempted act of attunement, but whereas Conrad’s characters attune to a remarkably persistent and stagnant climate, Tansley is attempting to gauge the inherently unstable nature of weather as it passes through.⁷ The volatility of weather transforms attunement from an act of falling into line with one’s surroundings into an act of willed displacement, revolving around “direction[s]-” where the wind came from and where it is headed.

One might view the shift represented by early twentieth-century meteorology either quantitatively or qualitatively. In the former sense, the massive atmospheric rescaling of the 19th century continued, with technologies of transport and communications still leading the way: this time, the airplane emerged to provide unprecedented access to data from upper air regions and from the air above the ocean, and radio technology allowed for enhanced means of both collecting and transmitting data. Physicists developed new models of a dynamic, three-dimensional atmosphere: if nineteenth-century meteorology was horizontally expansive, then early twentieth-century meteorology was vertically so. But I think it is important to recognize the qualitative shift that the contributions of physics marked. In addition to an empirical databank sourced from far flung observation stations, twentieth-century meteorologists increasingly aspired to a highly impersonal perspective. In other words, a removal of eyes was just as important as a multiplicity of them. Meteorology had to move beyond the empirical data provided by the 19th century’s (tellingly named) “observation stations” and “weather watchers”, to embrace unseen physical and theoretical principles. One of the most important breakthroughs of the period involved a shift in conceptual rather than empirical perception. Prior to the war, meteorologists had been working on cyclone models but as Robert Marc Friedman explains, “fronts were not discoverable in the sense of a phenomenon waiting out there to be seen, they were an interpretation…[meteorologists] had to learn to conceive of three-dimensional atmospheric structures” (128; 134; original italics). Early twentieth-century meteorology was thus abstract in a way that forecasting practices had never been before, with physicists and mathematicians leading the way. In this new twentieth-century atmospheric renaissance, there was a need not just for tools that could extend the capacity to see and touch the weather, but also for the mathematical knowledge to enter a domain imperceptible to human senses, to calculate the weather. This was a move beyond what many eyes could collectively see to what no eye could ever see.⁸

This larger context should make us question the assumption that the novel’s famous window connects individuals inside to the weather outside in any straightforward way, particularly when that contact is framed in the terms of visual perception. John

---

⁶ On the synoptic map see Monmier’s Air Apparent.
⁷ Katherine Anderson defines climate as “weather over the long term”( 8).
Durham Peters sums it up concisely when he remarks that “moderns are people who would sooner check the weather report than stick their heads out the window”(254). We have to think about the weather not in terms of immediate observation but in relation to the kind of spatial and temporal displacements engendered by newspaper forecasts and predictions calculated from data across space and time. This issue might seem irrelevant to the novel at hand, given that the window features so prominently, but I believe that Woolf stages this precise tension between older and newer means of relating both to the sky and the future. While the technology explicitly referenced in the opening of To The Lighthouse belongs to that older class of first-person observation tools (the barometer), I would argue that the technologically induced sense of displacement caused by more contemporary technologies permeates the scene in subtle and significant ways.

In the above citation of Mr. Ramsay’s forecast, I bracketed what happens between “but and “it won’t be fine”, yet what happens in between is critical: “‘But,’ said his father, stopping in front of the drawing-room window, ‘it won’t be fine.’” Mr. Ramsay stands in front of the window, blocking his son’s view. During the subsequent dinner party scene, our other confident forecaster, Tansley, similarly obstructs Lily’s access to the outside world: “he sat opposite her with his back to the window precisely in the middle of the view” (85). These highly mediated encounters with the weather resonate with the twentieth-century subject’s transformed relationship to atmosphere: the forecast of weather comes to replace the weather itself. Indeed, for a section that seems to be all about the weather, there is very little weather in “The Window”. While the weather forecast dominates the discussion, the actual experience of weather barely registers. The language of the predictions is also notably vague, admitting only two general options from a potentially rich array of atmospheric conditions – “fine,” “not fine.” These words are drawn from the official language of forecasting, a practice that boils down the incredible spectrum of weather to its basic components. The first published weather forecast in The Times read:

North—Moderate westerly wind; fine.

West—Moderate south-westerly ; fine.

South—Fresh westerly ; fine.

---

9 Similarly, Halpern writes that “with the rise of modern technology, contact with the natural environment has diminished, and interest in techniques that rely on observations of nature has consequently declined” (16).
In addition to obstructing the spatial coordinates of a first-person vantage point, Mr. Ramsay’s position in front of the window causes a temporal disruption. Instead of looking out the window to see the weather of the here-and-now, James looks at the window and sees the forecasted future. This interruption of the present moment has distinct affective consequences. While the forecast is powerless to change the weather outside, it can and does alter the mood in the drawing-room. As we saw in Mrs. Dalloway, the pleasure of absorption requires a kind of obliviousness; by its very nature,
a forecast yanks one from such absent-minded reverie. There, we saw absorption as an alternative to the jarring jolts of shock. Here, that same logic plays out when we are told that Tansley “looked out the window and said, all in a jerk, very rudely, it would be too rough” (86; italics added). Shock is a rude awakening from the dreamlike state of absorption. For this precise reason, Mrs. Ramsay imagines Tansley as one who is likely to disrupt to the sleep of her children: “since he said things like that about the Lighthouse, it seemed to her likely that he would knock a pile of books over, just as they were going to sleep, clumsily sweeping them off the table with his elbow” (116). At first glance, this appears a rather odd line of reasoning — since he said things about the Lighthouse, he will knock books over? But then we realize that ‘saying things like that about the Lighthouse’ signifies a propensity for violent interruption, making Tansley precisely the kind of guy you wouldn’t want around at bedtime. Thus for the particularly sensitive James, the spatial and temporal displacements engendered by forecasting prevent absorption in the here-and-now, as he

belonged, even at the age of six, to that great clan which cannot keep this feeling separate from that, but must let future prospects, with their joys and sorrows, cloud what is actually at hand…any turn in the wheel of sensation has the power to crystallise and transfix the moment upon which its gloom or radiance rests (3).

The blurred line between meteorological and affective atmospheres is as illuminating as it is complex. In the context of the family’s discussion of forecasting, one expects words such as “cloud” and “gloom” to signify the literal weather; instead, these words describe the way a meteorological forecast creates a distinct affective atmosphere. In fact, while we have a general impression that the weather outside is cloudy, Woolf never tells us so: the word instead shows up as a verb in this section. The association between cloudy weather and a cloudy mood is more than just a convenient pun or metaphor. In earlier chapters, I suggested that mood and the weather recruit a common vocabulary not simply because of content or valence – bad weather = bad mood – but because meteorological and affective atmospheres share a similarly enveloping spatial structure. Here it is again form rather than content that explains the intimacy between moods and the weather; but now, it is a temporal structure that connects atmospheric and psychological conditions: physical and affective clouds both involve a displacement from the present moment. In a setting with no clouds, it is easier to abstain from thinking of the future, yet when clouds form on the horizon, one can hardly help but think of what is to come. Clouds are not only of the present moment; they signal rain in the future in a way that other conditions, regardless of whether we class them as good or bad, do not. Perhaps the most significant detail in the passage is that James’ present is clouded whether he is anticipating future sorrows or joys. The surprising inclusion of joy that “clouded” refers to the temporal interruption caused by a forecast, irrespective of that forecast’s content or valence. Therefore, a cloudy mood is not simply a bad mood, but one that lacks the unobstructed immediacy and transparency of absorptive experience. It is this intrusion that consistently disturbs James: “he hated [his father] for interrupting” (36). When Mr. Ramsay stands in front of the window, he obscures not only the view outside but also the
lived experience of the present moment. In this way, all forecasts could be said to cloud the present moment.

By their very nature, clouds loom from above, calling attention to a frame of reference that does not privilege the human body or align with the gaze of the eye. They remind us of a larger world out of view. Thus while we have seen other atmospheric conditions disrupt transparency – fog is the obvious example – the overhead position of clouds creates a distinct kind of obfuscation. One is immersed in and engulfed by fog, but clouds show up to us in two different ways. They loom above, slightly or completely out of view, and in this way they are oblique rather than immersive. But while one can look away from the cloud itself, the shadow it casts on the world beneath is less easily escapable. When the ground is darkened, one is reminded of a larger world out of view, a world that does not conform to the scale of the human body. The world is then inflected by another one looming from above and from the future. We see the jarring way that clouds shift one’s sense of the environment when Nancy kneels down by the tide pools and “brooding… changed the pool into the sea, and made the minnows into sharks and whales, and cast vast clouds over this tiny world by holding her hand against the sun” (75). Clouds trigger a striking shift in scale. Indeed, those characters most associated with affective clouding have a similar effect: Tansley “upset the proportions of one’s world” (196). The centrality of casting – whether of clouds or of forecasted weather – calls attention to that term’s original meaning as a kind of violent throwing. This is what forecasts do: they throw us into the future.

Forecasts thus trigger multiple displacements: spatial, temporal, affective. In this context, Mrs. Ramsay’s opening statement can be understood as one of many efforts throughout the novel to arrest the flow of time: her use of the conditional “if” is an attempt to preserve the present moment for her young son, to hold the future at bay as something that is not known, not seen, not here yet. Mrs. Ramsay understands that, by standing in front of the window, her husband is disrupting time as much as space. When she remarks, “perhaps you will wake up and find the sun shining and the birds singing” (15), she invokes the sleeplike trance of absorption and insists on deferring the disruption of “waking”. In her refusal to use direct future-oriented phrases such as “when” or “will be”, Mrs. Ramsay not only holds open possibility, she also holds onto the present moment itself. The future tense catapults one forward in time, relying on the logic of

---

10 The *OED* defines cast as “to project (anything) with a force of the nature of a jerk, from the hand, the arms, a vessel, or the like; to THROW v.” and provides the following etymology: Middle English cast-en , < Old Norse kasta weak verb to cast, throw (Icelandic and Swedish kasta , Danish kaste , North Frisian kastin ); compare kōs (kasu ), kōstr ( < kastuz ), pile, heap thrown up, which has been compared with Latin gerēre (ges- ) gestus . It took in Middle English the place of Old English weorpan (see WARP n. ’), and has now in turn been largely superseded in ordinary language and in the simple literal sense by THROW n. ’, q.v. ‘Cast it into the pond’ has an archaic effect in comparison with ‘throw it into the pond’. But it is in ordinary use in various figurative and specific senses, and in many adverbial combinations, as cast about. General arrangement: I. To throw. II. To throw down, overthrow, defeat, convict, condemn. III. To throw off so as to get quit of, to shed, vomit, discard. IV. To throw up.
certainty and inevitability, but the qualifier “if” subtly undermines that sense of a legible future. Mrs. Ramsay insists on saying “simply that it might be fine tomorrow. So it might” (32). While Mr. Ramsay feels that she “told lies” (31), there is a way in which her statement is always true, regardless of the actual weather events that materialize. In the present moment of uttering the sentence, the possibility still exists. To remove any doubt would be to abolish the present moment.

Mrs. Ramsay’s desire to preserve the mood of the present moment – and her husband’s willingness to manipulate it – underscores a crucial difference between meteorological and affective atmospheres. While the weather outside is immune to human intervention, the mood in the drawing-room is responsive to even the slightest emotional fluctuation. Like so much else in this novel, the affective atmosphere is at risk of being spoiled or extinguished from one moment to the next. Mrs. Ramsay understands that the assembled family members are not mere observers of the prevailing domestic mood. Rather, they are active participants, creating atmosphere with their words, including the pronounced forecasts. Therefore it is not just that Mrs. Ramsay is trying to keep the weather of nature out of the domestic space of home, but also that she is trying to maintain a partition between meteorological and affective atmospheres. The story she is reading to James echoes the narrative she herself struggles to construct around him, a narrative capable of insulating him not only from the weather outside but also from the encroachment of the forecast itself:

‘But outside a great storm was raging and blowing so hard that [the fisherman] could scarcely keep his feet; houses and trees toppled over, the mountains trembled, rocks rolled into the sea, the sky was pitch black, and it thundered and lightened, and the sea came in with black waves as high as church towers and mountains, and all with white foam at the top.’ (60-61).

This attempt to seal off a domestic atmosphere from the outside weather proves difficult, and ultimately, as the story suggests, it is perhaps futile. And yet while meteorological and affective atmospheres cannot be severed, neither can they be easily joined. For while the weather might alter the mood, moods do not alter the weather.

The weather is consistently described in To The Lighthouse as impersonal and distant: “the perfectly indifferent chill night air” (116); “the peace, the indifference, the air of pure integrity” (129). Woolf is interested in this lopsided relationship, the way it makes weather both distant and intimate at the very same time. We are intimate with the weather; the weather is indifferent to us. Notice how this profound sense of indifference diverges from longstanding conceptions of a mutual sympathy between human beings and the weather, an idea that has emerged in some form in many different historical periods and contexts. In contrast to the affective tempest stirred up by Mr. Ramsay’s prediction, the forecast in no way creates the literal storm to come. This is what makes modern meteorology so strange: it is a remarkably powerful science of observation, but it is just as strikingly powerless to intervene. Lighthouses provide warnings precisely so that one can alter course. The difficulty with meteorology is that even the most powerfully accurate predictions will not stop or change the weather. Mr. Ramsay has a sort of arrogant confidence in the accuracy of his forecast; yet for that very same reason,
he feels “somehow entirely defenceless against a doom which he perceived, his wife and son, together, in the window” (33).

Woolf’s characters wonder what it would be like to break free from this tyranny of forecasted futures. Mrs. Ramsay associates the possibility of escaping the future with revisiting the past. Remembering friends she has not seen in twenty years, she feels a keen sense of pleasure, “for there was no future to worry about. She knew what had happened then, what to her. It was like reading a good book again, for she knew the end of the story” (93). It is somewhat counterintuitive to think of the past as a time with “no future”; shouldn’t that be when the future was wide open? In lived experience, the future may well have felt radically open to endless contingencies, but as a memory, and only as memory, the specter of future unknowns loses its power. In a strange way, one is able to be most present in the past. This is because as a memory, the recalled scene can be isolated and extracted from the sequence of time, relived not as it was but as it might have been or even should have been without the distractions of anticipation. Memory provides for the tapping of a latent phenomenological pleasure that was inaccessible in the moment itself. The analogy to rereading a book is significant on several levels, for it addresses the kind of absorption that becomes possible only when narrative sequence and closure have ceased to matter, when the richness of the scene is not crowded out by the forward march of narrative. It is because she “knows” what will happen that there is no future, almost as if for Woolf the word “future” is synonymous with uncertainty, rather than signifying a temporal register or the events belonging to it. Once the future is known, it is no longer a future. We observed in the Mrs. Dalloway chapter that Woolf associates absorption with reading as a kind of self-surrender, and here it seems that rereading enhances the pleasures of absorptive experience still further. Notice how different this model is from the concept of “backshadowing,” which also concerns itself with the link between retrospection and narrative structure. In the case of backshadowing, one adopts 20/20 hindsight and highlights warning signs retrospectively. Backshadowing injects the future into the past, but Mrs. Ramsay’s is an act of *erasing the future* from the past. Backshadowing rewrites the past; Mrs. Ramsay rereads it. This is also very different from “side-shadowing,” the concept typically invoked as an alternative to backshadowing. 11 In fact, it is perhaps *most* different from side-shadowing, which insists upon endless avenues and open contingencies.

The allure of a time with “no future” runs throughout Woolf’s work. In “Street Haunting” (also 1927), Woolf’s narrator pauses outside having recently visited a second-hand bookshop (another nod to rereading) and reflects:

> The sights we see and the sounds we hear now have none of the quality of the past; nor have we any share in the serenity of the person who, six months ago, stood precisely where we stand now. His is the happiness of death; ours the insecurity of life. *He has no future; the future is even now invading our peace.*

---

11 On backshadowing and sidesshadowing respectively, see Michael Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* and Gary Saul Morson, “Sidesshadowing and Tempics.”
It is only when we look at the past and take from it the element of uncertainty that we can enjoy perfect peace. As it is, we must turn, we must cross the Strand again, we must find a shop where, even at this hour, they will be ready to sell us a pencil (“Street Haunting” 489, italics added).

The key here is that snatching of an “element of uncertainty.” Surprisingly, the sense of a foreclosed future can feel as liberating as it does damning. For Woolf, futurity is by its very nature violent: it “invades” the present moment, spoiling the “peace” of absorption in the here-and-now.

Woolf’s forecasting is also crucially distinct from foreshadowing. Foreshadowing assumes that some all-knowing narrator has planted hints of what is to come for the attentive reader to notice. Foreshadowing thus narrows the possibilities, in some sense, forecloses the future. Woolf’s forecasting in no way guarantees an outcome, and indeed, forecasts often prove to be inaccurate throughout the novel. In one way, then, Woolf’s forecasting preserves the sense of endless possibility that foreshadowing limits. And yet, while forecasting leaves the future open, it has a definite and real effect in the present moment of its utterance. Brian Massumi theorizes the present reality of future-oriented affective states through the concept of “threat”:

What is not actually real can be felt into being. Threat does have an actual mode of existence: fear, as foreshadowing. Threat has an impending reality in the present. Thus actual reality is affective. Fear is the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future. It is the felt reality of the nonexistent, loomingly present as the affective fact of the matter (“Future Birth” 54).

While Massumi uses “foreshadowing” in a more general manner, his account of affective atmosphere actually informs the distinction between forecasting and foreshadowing in To the Lighthouse. There is no correlation between the affective palpability of a forecast and the likelihood of its occurrence. While Mrs. Ramsay might at times seem to possess some sort of uncanny prevision, it is important to recognize that her predictions are not always born out. In the novel’s first section, mother silently addresses daughter, “[y]ou will be as happy as [Minta] is one of these days. You will be much happier” (109). Later, we find out that nothing could have been further from the truth: Prue dies young in childbirth. As illustrated by Massumi’s threat, though, there is an independent affective reality to what is promising, regardless of the outcome. The narrator of “Time Passes” announces Prue’s death and yet in the very same parenthetical sentence reaffirms the separate affective reality of what had once been promising:

[Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said, everything, they said, had promised so well.] (132).

This phenomenon - let’s call it the affective palpability of forecasts – accentuates the distinction between environment and event I have been tracking throughout this study. Both moods and the weather can range from event to environment or somewhere in between. The weather on a given day can be threatening even if the anticipated downpour
never comes, just as a life can be promising even if that promise is cut short. “Rain” is an event, but “threatening” is an environmental condition, albeit one defined by its supposed relationship to a future event (and one can become the other, as in a rainy day or week). Even if it does not rain tomorrow, today will still always have been threatening. Mrs. Ramsay’s sense that her children are all “full of promise” (58) is, more than anything else, an observation about the present moment, fullness being more of an adjectival description than a forecast of something to happen. Indeed, just a page later, she continues to reflect, “they were happier now that they would ever be again” (59). On the surface, the two statements seem completely at odds with one another: how could one who is full of promise already have reached the height of happiness? But then, Mrs. Ramsay understands that a “promise” need not come true in order to be affectively true. While Mrs. Ramsay’s cheerful demeanor on the opening page makes her seem almost naively optimistic, “it is odd; and she believed it to be true; that with all his gloom and desperation he was happier, more hopeful on the whole than she was” (59). For while she hopes to protect her children, preserving the space of the present through the conditional tense, to herself she quietly wonders “why must they grow up and lose it all?” (60). To The Lighthouse often strikes readers as Woolf’s most nostalgic and elegiac work, but I would insist that it is more specifically a novel about anticipated loss. Mrs. Ramsay is mourned in the novel’s final section, but Mrs. Ramsay herself mourns in the first section.

In Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, and Encyclopedic Form, Paul St. Amour historicizes this precise kind of anxious expectation, arguing that in the decades between world wars, air raids and drills lent such psychological states particular urgency. St. Amour is careful to insulate his argument from the pitfalls of backshadowing and hindsight, pointing out that the interwar period was “understood by many from its midst, even from its inception, as an interval between the First World War and its likely sequel” (34). In other words, had the Second World War never come to pass, the mood of the interwar period would still have been one of looming terror and nervous anticipation. St. Amour theorizes a kind of “pre-traumatic stress syndrome” characterized by a “blurring of the line between anticipation and event…The warning is the war; the drill and the raid are one” (13) As in Massumi, the affective atmosphere of anticipation is separate from the events which may or may not later materialize. St. Amour provides a compelling chronology of Woolf’s work: the menace of war in “The Mark on the Wall” (1917); the airplane soaring above in Mrs. Dalloway (1925); air raid drills in The Years (1937); the airman in “Thoughts on Peace During an Air Raid” (1940). To The Lighthouse is never mentioned, an omission that is as striking as it is expected. With its pastoral setting, lack of explicit mention of modern technology, and only oblique references to the first war, the 1927 novel tends to get classed separately. Yet I believe that To The Lighthouse also belongs to what St. Amour so compellingly characterizes as the “doubly haunted temporality of the interwar years…at the interface between traumatic memory and catastrophic anticipation” (62).

That readers could disagree so radically about whether this novel is best characterized as backwards or forwards looking is indicative of the ways in which the past and the future converge for Woolf: both memory and forecasting signal displacement from the present moment. This association perhaps belongs to a larger history. As Peter Moore points out, beginning in the 19th century, forecasting and evolution became strongly linked in the public imagination: “science with its forecasts was threatening to
explain the future just as the theory of evolution had explained the past” (6). This association makes sense philosophically, but was also firmly reinforced by the biographical fact that Robert FitzRoy, the meteorologist responsible for the first newspaper forecasts published in the world, had also been the captain of Darwin’s famed Beagle. “If Origin was scientific trespass on the past, on ground that had been held for a millennium by the Church,” Moore writes, “then logically the forecasts [Fitzroy] had in mind would mean trespassing into the divine future. Forecast and evolution were scientific twins…One wrenched away the past, one wrenched away the future” (489). I would make a modification, however. In To The Lighthouse, it seems more appropriate to say that the present is wrenched away, squeezed on either side by the encroachment of both past and future. Even at a grammatical level, the novel exhibits a perpetual struggle to remain in the present. For example, the future-oriented conditional tense of the first section – “if it is fine” – transforms into the past conditional tense by the final section, “he should have been a great mathematician” (194). Here, mourning is both backwards and forwards-looking, fixated on the loss of a potential future. The “might” and “should have” function as grammatical bookends to the text, and yet “should” carries a distinctly more insistent tone and normative sense, suggesting that the inherent contingency of the future does not necessarily confer equal status on all possible futures. No future can be guaranteed or predicted with certain accuracy, but it seems that while some futures are simply never born, others are violently torn away.

Whose forecast turns out to be correct? By most accounts, the answer would be Mr. Ramsay’s: it is not fine the next day (we assume), the trip to the lighthouse is deferred. But that sense of deferral is itself a reminder of the distinction between weather and climate: while the volatile fluctuations of short-term weather events spoil the weather and journey planned for the next day, in the long-term, climate stabilizes back to a baseline.12 In fact, we never technically see the “tomorrow” belonging to the immediate present of the novel’s first section; the next full day we witness is one that belongs to a much more distant future. It is a fine day years later, and the trip to the lighthouse proceeds according to plan. There is more than one future in To The Lighthouse: there is the short-term future of tomorrow’s weather, as well as the eventual, long-term leveling out of climate. Thus one of the novel’s opening passages can be read in different ways, depending on the scale one adopts:

To her son these words conveyed an extraordinary joy, as if it were settled, the expedition were bound to take place, and the wonder to which he had looked forward, for years and years it seemed, was, after a night’s darkness and a day’s sail, within touch (3).

James’ youthful sense of time turns weather into a kind of climate – “for years and years it seemed.” All of time seems to collapse into this particular moment, with days feeling like years. It is just weather, but for a child it has the weight and eternity of climate. Conversely, Mrs. Ramsay has an expansive sense of time: she is able to foresee events that are years in the future as if they were tomorrow, the imminent next event in a
narrative sequence. She thinks, “and even if it isn’t fine tomorrow…it will be another day” (26). While James turns weather into climate, Mrs. Ramsay turns climate into weather.

II. “Arrow-like stillness”: Weathering as Slow Violence

“Weather is just what happens in the atmosphere as time passes”
– Jan Golinski, British Weather and the Culture of Enlightenment (77)

If weather is what happens in the atmosphere as time passes, the same can be said of climate. Atmosphere is the object and both weather and climate are its activities; the difference lies in a matter of scale. Weather is the more fleeting, and its adherence to a relatively compressed temporal register means it punctuates daily human life in recognizable ways. The weather is also more immediately evident to the senses. The wind is something that Tansley can feel with his outstretched hand, for example. By contrast, “atmospheric scientists distinguish short term weather events from long term climate patterns” (Strauss and Orlove 2; my emphasis). This distinction between event and pattern means that climate is something more abstract and cumulative, the “characteristic weather” (Williams 121) of a given region. The novel’s first section, “The Window”, revolves primarily around weather. Its aptly titled second section, “Time Passes”, continues to track the fluctuations of weather events, but it also registers the slower manifestations of climate. This shift requires the text to juggle drastically different scales and paces.

Somewhat counterintuitively, the rapid and compressed temporality of weather affords “The Window” the luxury of a leisurely pace. “The Window”’s 121 pages are scaled to a single day, leaving plenty of time to register its effect on individual bodies and minds. Conversely, the slow temporality of climate often forces the pace of “Time Passes” to quicken, as if the narrative must hurry itself along in order to glimpse climate. This acceleration progressively gains momentum over the course of the section. On page 129, time passes “week to week”; on page 132, spring becomes summer within a few sentences; by page 134, seasons elapse within a single sentence: “Night after night, summer and winter…” (134). It is precisely because climate change is slow that the narrative must adapt by speeding through seasons and years in hopes of catching up to the subtle changes that cannot be perceived from day to day. In “The Window”, a day and night feel like “years and years” (3) to James; here, a drastic shift in scale prompts the reflection, “but what after all is a night? A short space” (128).

Of course, it is not that climate was somehow nonexistent in “The Window”. While weather is more readily perceived than climate, characters do occasionally become attuned to a different temporal register. They reflect, for example, that “there were little sandy beaches where no one had been since the beginning of time” and that on an “evening like this…the little island seemed pathetically small” (69). Lily feels a pang of sadness contemplating that “distant views seemed to outlast by a million years…the gazer, and to be community already with a sky which beholds an earth entirely at rest” (20). And Mr. Ramsay ponders, “what are two thousand years?…What, indeed, if you look from a mountain top down the long wastes of the ages” (35).
If other parts of the novel do register climate, it is also true that “Time Passes” does depict weather in its more familiar forms – rain, storms, wind. It would therefore be a mistake to simply suggest that the novel’s second section represents climate. I would argue instead that “Time Passes” foregrounds the challenges of representing both climate and weather. For example, while some parts of “Time Passes” speed through seasons and years, other portions shift the scale and pace in the opposite direction, zooming in rather than out, and slowing so as to register the most minute and fleeting fluctuations of “stray airs” (129) drifting about the house. And it is not just that Woolf alternates between these scales. There are also portions in which the two seem ambiguously to run into each other. For example, in the description “[n]ight after night, summer and winter, the torment of storms, the arrow-like stillness of fine weather” (134), one could discern a representation of either weather or climate depending upon the scale adopted, “night after night” or “summer and winter”. In the latter sense, from the removed distance of seasons passing, this is climate: “storms” and “stillness” balance each other out, they are extremes that find an average, evening out to give us the “characteristic weather” of the region. On the other hand, the scale of “night after night” invokes the temporal register established by the activities of the Ramsay family in “The Window”. To zoom in to this scale – to pause on “night after night” -- would mean attending to an individual storm and an instance of stillness as events that matter in the lives of individuals. From the more zoomed-out climatic perspective, the consequences of that weather seem negligible, and one storm or fine day is no different from the next. The coupling of storms and stillness here also calls attention to a curious thing about weather, and that is how “bad” weather is more readily perceived as an event whereas good weather seems to constitute a nonevent. (This is actually established practice for professional meteorologists.) There is a similar bias in the way we think about weather and climate, with the force of a hurricane being easily understood as violent whereas climate seems peaceful, even though its actions over the long term are more destructive and consequential for human life.

In “Time Passes”, Woolf shuffles these conventional associations. For example, in the beginning of the section we read that, with “the lamps all put out, the moon sunk, and a thin rain drumming on the roof a downpouring of immense darkness began” (125). Notice the reversal here in which the discrete weather event becomes relatively benign – a ‘thin’ rain – whereas the word we expect in connection with rain -- ‘downpour’ -- is attributed to the seemingly empty or neutral state of darkness. Indeed this section goes out of its way to diminish the sorts of weather events that disrupt human lives, as in the strange formulation, “flights of small rain” (132). What exactly is small rain?

While individual storms come and go leaving very little damage in their wake, the mere fact of time passing proves to be violent and destructive. In Conrad, we saw that “arrows” of grief were more forceful than the violent shock of material arrows. Woolf’s “arrow-like stillness” implies a similar sense of underlying violence in that which seems invisible and slow. The section’s sustained emphasis on “corruption and rot” (139) shifts focus away from the sudden and spectacular violence of weather events. There is a sort of cruelty to the little airs not in spite of their leisure but because of it, “smoothly brushing the walls, they passed on musingly as if asking the red and yellow roses on the wall-paper

---

13 See Gary Fine, *Authors of the Storm: Meteorologists and the Culture of Prediction*. 147
whether they would fade, and questioning (gently, for they had time at their disposal) the torn letters in the waste-paper basket, the flowers, the books...How long would they endure?” (126) The implication here is that everything will be destroyed in a matter of time (even time itself will be “disposed” of). Weather and climate converge in the phenomenon of weathering, a concept that only has meaning so long as time passes. Weathering cannot be reduced to a discrete event such as a hurricane or a downpour. We can never really see it, only its effects. Time passing is responsible for the fact that “the books and things were mouldy,” (135) that there are “swollen sea-moistened woodwork” (126), “blanched...apples” (127). Over a longer span of time, that which might seem like nothingness in fact constitutes the closest thing to the something of a weather event. Like climate, something changes, but we can never quite perceive it directly or pinpoint when the change happened. Mark Everard refers to weathering as “aeolian erosion” (18): “weathering processes break down rocks and soils into ever smaller fragments” (19). Thus weathering accomplishes the destructive fragmentation we associate with modernism, but at a much slower pace. While the result of shattered wholes might look similar to shock and rupture, the process is different – slower, leisurely even.

Throughout the novel, and particularly in part two, there are recurring images of materials swaying and flapping – the “swaying mantle of silence” (129), the flapping wallpaper (126), Mrs. Ramsay’s swaying shawl. In contrast to the violent destruction evoked by an image of shattering or crushing, we get this crucial model of flapping wallpaper, hanging on by a thread, swaying slowly in the breeze –for months? years? – with the airs themselves wondering, “would it hang much longer, when would it fall?” (126). The text enacts this precise process of gradual swaying by repeatedly dangling variations on this image in front of the reader (rather than giving it a firm entrance and exit or dedicated scene), continually returning to the shawl as it gradually loosens, with long periods in between where nothing seems to happen. Thus every time we forget about these materials, they sway back into our view, reminding us of an ongoing process, until, “once in the middle of the night with a roar, with a rupture, as after centuries of quiescence, a rock rends itself from the mountain and hurtles crashing into the valley, one fold of the shawl loosed and swung to and fro” (130). Here the text invokes slow erosion on a geological timescale as well as sudden shock and rupture. But because the reader has seen this image dangled so many times already (beginning in “The Window”), one can appreciate that such climactic rupture is only the final moment of a long drawn out process, and that the fall could not have happened without the gentle swaying that preceded it. In other words, the rupture only seems exceptional in its violence because it conforms to the human mind’s scale: it happens quickly, in a timeframe that allows for witnesses; it is available to sensory and auditory perception. Therefore, what seems sudden is only the phenomenal experience of witnessing something crossing the threshold into a scale and frame of reference that allows the human mind to perceive it. Before long the event seems to have passed, and the narration continues with the image out of view, only to be interrupted by the swaying once again, “the rock was rent asunder; another fold of the shawl loosened; there it hung, and swayed” (133). This repetition of supposed rupture contradicts any sense of the exceptional and dulls it, calling attention to a much longer and slower process of violence happening out of view. The rupture we can perceive is like the tip of a much larger iceberg. The section is at pains to acknowledge that there are moments of shock and rupture when something crashes to the
ground or breaks through to human consciousness, but these instances of perceived violence are the expressions or outcomes of a much longer process of slow violence, and even when we do perceive them, they are often dampened by distance.

The narration continues to dangle the shawl, registering “ominous sounds like the measured blows of hammers dulled on felt, which with their, repeated shocks, still further loosened the shawl” (133). There is a “thud of something falling” (133), and in the next sentence we learn of the shell explosion that killed Andrew – one can deduce that the young man’s death is this same “thud of something falling.” What seemed like violence before – a rock falling, a shawl swaying – suddenly feels woefully inadequate to describe the death of this character (who somehow feels like a beloved character even though he only appears in a handful of sentences prior). What had seemed like build-up is now a disturbing instance of tearing-down, as Andrew’s death is reduced to a thud, barely registering as a signal in the noise of the war’s vast climate. The scale has once again shifted, to jarring effect. Yet I would argue that for readers, this is a moment of rescaling in two opposite directions. In one sense, Andrew’s death has been reduced to no more than a thud. In this way, “Time Passes” is disturbing not just because of the way it exposes the seemingly tranquil as an agent of destruction, but also because, conversely, it diminishes the violent loss of human life. But from a different scalar vantage point, one could also say that the consequences of human action have been amplified to an exceptional degree here: the nonhuman climate itself registers the violence of a human war. The air itself is shaking. Woolf seems to be aware of a kind of manmade climate change – not the type we speak of today, to be sure, but she shares the concern that at a certain threshold, human action might actually reverberate with geological force. Thus while it is tempting to talk about “Time Passes” as the novel’s elimination of the human, a climate without any (or few) human characters still registers the effects of human agency (this is of course the foundational idea of the Anthropocene).

The surprising thing about this unpopulated world is how much it differs from what Lily imagines when engaging Mr. Ramsay’s philosophical thought experiment of a kitchen table with nobody there. Lily envisions a sterile world scrubbed clean of atmosphere. In “Time Passes”, we glimpse that abandoned world, “a form from which life had parted” (129), but atmosphere – even when we understand it not just in its meteorological sense but as a kind of aesthetic ambiance too -- seems to have more vitality than ever. Notice the difference.

[Lily imagines]:

The kitchen table was something visionary, austere, something bare, hard, not ornamental, there was no colour to it, it was all edges and angles, it was uncompromisingly plain (155).

[“Time Passes” describes]:

14 “[T]he Anthropocene [is] the current epoch in which humans and our species have become a global geophysical force” (Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeill, “The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Force of Nature?” 614).
Those stray airs, advance guards of great armies, blustered in, brushed bare boards, nibbled and fanned, met nothing in the bedroom or drawingroom that wholly resisted them but only hangings that flapped, wood that wreaked… shadows of trees, flourishing in the wind, made obeisance in the wall, and for a moment darkened in the pool in which light reflected itself; or birds, flying, made a soft spot flutter slowly across the bedroom floor. (129)

The weather is conspicuously absent from Lily’s kitchen table scene, and the space is also devoid of atmosphere in its more aesthetic sense Woolf discovers that by shifting the scale – zooming both in and out but firmly rejecting the centrality of human characters and their daily concerns – atmosphere becomes more rather than less perceptible. Woolf’s empty house shows us that even without human beings, the weather keeps blowing, and a distinct tone or ambiance continues to pervade the scene. And yet I would argue that while atmosphere precedes and exceeds the human, it nonetheless also continues to include human elements: there are moods and bodies and voices in “Time Passes”, and they contribute to the overall atmosphere presented to readers, as do the air and wind and darkness. Woolf could have continued to narrate the section with no humans – no Mrs. McNab, no Lily coming up to the house – but she did not. The project is therefore not a matter of removing the human but of rescaling the human’s place in a larger atmosphere.

This is why “Time Passes” fixates on partial perception rather than trying to erase perception all together. The result is a sense not of the “world seen without a self” (The Waves 287), but of strained perceptual faculties, a sense that only part of the world is perceptible, while something else lies outside of one’s perceptual field. When Mrs. McNab comes on the scene, we readers have been privy to climatic activities both so small and so large as to elude normal human perception. The sensory experiences she has thus seem partial and incomplete:

And now as if the cleaning and the scrubbing and the scything and the mowing had drowned it there rose that half-heard melody, that intermittent music which the ear half catches but let’s fall; a bark, a bleat; irregular, intermittent, yet somehow related; the hum of an insect, the tremor of cut grass, dissevered yet somehow belonging; the jar of a dor beetle, the squeak of a wheel, loud, low, but mysteriously related; which the ear strains to bring together and is always on the verge of harmonising, but they are never quite heard, never fully harmonised…

This passage captures not the complete failure of perception but rather the lived experience of perception pushed to its extremes. This is perception that remains capable of picking up on partial cues, a “half-heard,” “half catches,” “strain[ed],” “on the verge.” There is much that lies outside of the perceptual field in question here, but crucially, the perceiver is aware of that sensory world that continues beyond the frame. There is therefore an acknowledgment that there are orders and systems of meaning incompatible with and irreducible to human perception: “somehow belonging,” “mysteriously related.” References to sounds that are “loud, low” underscore a sense of scalar incompatibility, as when certain tones and frequencies are perceptible to animals but not to human beings.
Woolf carves out a kind of intermediary perceptual zone in this passage, and throughout *Time Passes*, one that includes but also exceeds the human.

Uninhabited spaces bring habitats from the background to the foreground. We see this phenomenon with the way the empty house comes into focus in “Time Passes”, and we also see it in terms of atmospheric habitat. A house or room cleared of its inhabitants and furniture becomes prominently present to an observer; the same is true of an atmosphere that has been emptied. The first few sentences of “Time Passes” stage the loss of consciousness as a plunge into darkness. “It’s almost too dark to see”, Andrew says (it is the last time he will speak in the novel) and then, “[o]ne by one the lamps were all extinguished” (125). The reader is subsequently immersed in an elemental darkness that is far from synonymous with emptiness or nothingness. It pours over like a liquid, a “flood, the profusion of darkness” (126). Air becomes palpable as a medium.

*To The Lighthouse* appears to be a novel awash in water imagery, but closer analysis reveals that Woolf’s waves and currents are as likely to be aerial as liquid. We are told that characters “div[e] into the evening air” (32), for example. In “Time Passes”, the air seems especially sea-like. Mrs. McNab moves through a “yellow haze…like a tropical fish oaring its way through sun-lanced waters” (133) and “she lurched (for she rolled like a ship at sea) and leered” (130). By turning air into water, Woolf evokes the sense of an immersive, three-dimensional atmosphere. Air is the medium that all characters are moving through. Thus even in Woolf’s novels that seem most concerned with the properties of water, *To The Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, the most important element might actually be air.  

From a historical standpoint, it is significant that Woolf aligns air with ocean more than with sky. While the sky traditionally connotes vertical distance, the sea is more frequently associated with immersion on all sides. The twentieth-century invention of the airplane played a major role in scrambling these associations. Powered flight shattered the illusion of a grounded, vertical division between observer and the sky. For meteorologists, the airplane as well as balloons provided the means to gather upper-air measurements that had long been off-limits. With this data came an enhanced understanding of air as three dimensional and composed of heterogeneous layers. Steven Connor writes that “[t]he modernist haze is the loss of the sky -- or, at least, the loss of its distance, its aura of unapproachability”(192). Aviation called attention to layers and levels of atmospheric currents, breaking apart the idea of a single homogenous “sky”. Rather than an overhead canopy or flattened object in the distance, atmosphere

---

15 Ann Banfield suggests that the “waves’ ubiquitousness in the Woolfian universe is an allusion to physical theory” (123).

16 In *The History of the Weather*, James Thaxter Williams writes that following World War 1 there emerged a “stream of marvelous new instruments for observing upper-air conditions”. Friedman writes that strategy relating to airplanes and poison gas attacks drew new attention to “a three-dimensional atmosphere” and “small-scale atmospheric phenomena, such as turbulence and eddy motions in the layers of the air”(106) and that scientists made use of “a steady increase in the availability of upper-air observations”(176).

17 “Air is no longer the beyond, but the between,” Connor writes (281).
was increasingly understood as an architectural structure. In the 1926 publication *Man and Weather*, Alexander McAdie wrote,

Our atmosphere may be likened to a six-story building. That is, there are six concentric aerospheres or air floors. In this edifice the ground floor will be the troposphere, or airsphere, where there is much bustle and confusion or, as aerographers say, much convection and turbulence. (37).

If the air-as-sky had once been that which is off limits to touch, Woolf’s air-as-ocean is as tangible as any object, capable of being sliced like water, as when “the air was shoved aside by [birds’] black wings” (80). This image of the air being shoved aside – it’s so violent and yet so casual – stands in stark contrast to a long tradition of associating air with the divine and inaccessible realm of sky and heavens.

I would argue, however, that Woolf’s writing did not respond to the technology of aviation in any directly causal manner. Instead, it seems that the idea of aerial navigation resonated with the way Woolf already and always understands phenomenological experience. When she imagined flying, Woolf did not discover something new so much as she detected a fitting model for a more fundamental and quotidian relationship to the atmosphere. In “Flying Over London” (published posthumously), Woolf initially describes the experience as entirely new and different, but her descriptions actually coincide with those we have been examining. The essay also concludes by confessing the entire experience to have been imagined, further suggesting that the phenomenological experience of atmospheric immersion is not as dependent on the technology of the airplane as it might seem. Thus we can read the inclusion of this confession not just as some technicality – technically Woolf had never flown before – but as essential to appreciating that, for Woolf, the aviator’s experience resonates with the aerial rhythms of daily life. She writes,

It is true that the earth fell, but what was stranger was the downfall of the sky. One was not prepared within a moment of taking off to be immersed in it, alone with it, to be in the thick of it. Habit has fixed the earth immovably in the centre of the imagination like a hard ball; everything is made to the scale of houses and streets. And as one rises up into the sky, as the sky pours down over one, this little hard granular nob, with its carvings and frettings, dissolves, crumbles, loses its domes, its pinnacles, its firesides (“Flying Over London” 203).

The striking thing about this passage is the extent to which Woolf’s previous writings suggest that she was prepared for this experience, that the airplane allowed her to visualize and articulate a phenomenal experience that extends well beyond the actual

---

18 Here I am in agreement with Peter Sloterdijk’s notion of “atmospheric explication” in *Terror from the Air*. Sloterdijk suggests that 20th century atmospheric technologies “made explicit” conditions which were already there.
technology. She claims to be stunned by the “downfall of the sky”; in To The Lighthouse, “the clouds had dropped down into the sea” (182) and the “sea and sky looked all one fabric” (182). In the airplane, “the sky pours down over one”; in the Ramsay boat moving through both sea and sky, the party is “swallowed up in that blue” (191). Even the shift in scale, which might seem so particular to the airplane’s vertical vantage point, appears in the sail to the lighthouse. Cam takes note of the “composed look, of something receding, in which one no longer has any part” (166) and feels that it “was very small; shaped something like a leaf stood on end” (188). Cam’s defamiliarized sense of the island’s smallness is not just a kind of optical illusion created by spatial distance, but also an embodied and existential shift in frame of reference. Thus the vertical shift in perspective engendered by flight is not all that different from the horizontal perceptual modulations experienced in the boat as it sails away from the island. Much of the commentary on aviation has focused on this vertical dimension, either a bird’s eye view vantage point or the experience of grounded observers looking up to the sky. For example, Gillian Beer writes of “the communal act of sky-gazing” (160) and argues that a vertical vantage point challenged the “fiction” of England as island: “the island could be seen anew, scanned from above” (159). Certainly, that was the case with the airplane overhead in Mrs. Dalloway. But in “Flying Over London”, “the eye felt as a fish feels when it slips from the rock into the depths of the sea” (207). We tend to think of these scalar effects in terms of the visual optics of distance, but I also think that the key involves the disorientation of suddenly noticing one’s embeddedness in and reliance on an environment, as happens during a flight or a sail. It also happens in reading “Time Passes.”

The spatial rescaling of immersive travel is also a temporal rescaling. As the airplane ascends, Woolf’s observer sees “the River Thames was as the Romans saw it, as Paleolithic man saw it” (204). Time contracts in the other direction when the plane descends: “civilization in short emerged…the centuries vanished and the wild rhinoceros was chased out of sight forever” (205). When human life departs, so do its temporal rhythms, and a sense of climate emerges. Just as we saw that the habitats of an empty house and atmosphere suddenly became visible in new ways as soon as “life had parted” (129), so do both the airplane and boat journeys bring the background of environment into the foreground.

“Flying Over London” registers the entangled feelings of exhilaration and anxiety that come with departing from a human frame of reference. Both here and in To The Lighthouse, Woolf seems to ask with nervous excitement, how far can one go? This aerial impersonality facilitates a relationship between human and the weather that is the inverse of conventional attempts to anthropomorphize the weather: instead of bringing the sky down to earth, the subject drifts into the sky, as if relinquishing a human dimension all together. Notice how the impersonality of flying echoes Mrs. Ramsay’s experience of solitude:

19 The persistent association between air and death thus extends beyond literal loss of life to encompass a broader set of disorienting experiences that come with the exposure and rescaling triggered by awareness of atmosphere. Ann Banfield makes a similar point in The Phantom Table when she links the elegy form to the “strangely impersonal world revealed by modern physics” (123).
It was a moment of renunciation...It was the idea of death that now suggested itself; not being received and welcomed; not immortality but extinction. For the clouds above were black...Life ends; life is dowsed in that cloud as lamps are dowsed with a wet sponge. That extinction has become now desirable. For it was odd in this voyage to note how blindly the tide of the soul and its desires rolled this way and that, carrying consciousness like a feather on top, marking the direction, not controlling it. And so we swept on now up to death (“Flying Over London” 205).

To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others...this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures. When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless...this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures (To The Lighthouse 62).

Painting, Lily is launched on an immersive journey not dissimilar from these airplane and boat voyages. She feels that “this rhythm [of painting] was strong enough to bear her along with it on its current” (155) and that, “[o]ut and out one went, further and further, until at last one seemed to be on a narrow plank, perfectly alone, over the sea” (172). In some sense, then, Lily too leaves Earth behind. Painting is partially responsible for Lily’s heightened awareness of an enveloping medium:

One glided, one shook one’s sails...between things, beyond things. Empty it was not, but full to the brim. She seemed to be standing up to the lips in some substance, to move and flow and sink in it, yes, for these waves were unfathomably deep (192).

Throughout To The Lighthouse, contact with the air elicits terror and elation in equal measure. Like Woolf’s airplane voyager, Lily feels, as she paints, “a few moments of nakedness” as if she were “hesitating on some windy pinnacle and exposed without protection to all the blasts of doubt”(158). In these moments of exposure, characters suddenly become aware of defenses that otherwise tend to get overlooked. For example, when Mr. Ramsay reaches out for a wife who is no longer there, he touches only an abyss of air. His despair is the result not only of what he does not touch (his wife), but also what he does touch – the air. He finds himself in a newly vulnerable position, exposed completely to the indifferent “arrow-like stillness” of the “Time Passes” section. We tend to think of air as that which exists between people, but here, it seems that people put others between themselves and the air. Characters lean on other subjects as well as material objects in an attempt to insulate themselves and remain buoyant. We see Lily “grasping her paint brush”(153) much as Mr. Ramsay longs to grasp his wife. Before Lily immerses herself in the dynamic act of painting, the brush seems to provide distance from the air while itself partaking of the kind of thrilling terror that comes with atmospheric immersion: “it stayed trembling in a painful but exciting ecstasy in the air” (157). In To
The Lighthouse, Woolf asks what it means to be thrust out, unprotected, into the open air. In other works, her narrators and characters reach for the safety provided by a plank in turbulent waters – “I feel that I have grasped a plank in the sea” (“The Mark on the Wall”), “We are whirled asunder...grasping tightly all that I possess—one bag” (The Waves 72), “this is the puddle...Unless I can stretch and touch something hard, I shall be blown down...What then can I touch? What brick, what stone?” (The Waves 159); “I will drop a twig in as a raft for a drowning sailor...I will plant a lighthouse” (The Waves 18). Here, Woolf seems to wonder what kind of lifeline might be available to one drowning in air.

As dangerous as it is to venture out on a plank over the sea or air, Woolf finds great creative potential in just such a risk. In the essay “Poetry, Fiction and the Future,” (again, 1927!) Woolf writes that the modern novel of the future “will be written standing back from life” (438), adding that it “will show itself capable of rising high from the ground, not in one dart, but in sweeps and circles” (438). (This sounds rather like an airborne novel.) Describing the power of prose narrative, Woolf invokes language that is strikingly similar to that of “Time Passes”:

Prose is so humble that it can go anywhere; no place is too low, too sordid, or too mean for it to enter. It is infinitely patient, too, humbly acquisitive. It can lick up with its long glutinous tongue the most minute fragments of fact and mass them into the most subtle labyrinths, and listen silently at doors behind which only a murmur, only a whisper, is to be heard. (436)

The aerial perspective of “Time Passes” enacts this precise sort of free-ranging diffusion. While one might expect a perspective from the air to constitute a kind of “bird’s eye view”, Woolf’s aerial narration proceeds not from above but through the air, harnessing both its subtle sensitivities and the precise freedom to trespass unhindered invoked above:

Certain airs detached from the body of the wind...crept round corners and ventured indoors ...the little airs mounted the staircase and nosed round bedroom doors ...here surely they must cease... (To The Lighthouse 126)

In “The Window”, Charles Tansley used his body to measure the direction of the wind; here, the wind itself is referred to as having a body. When darkness comes “creeping in at keyholes and crevices” (126), Woolf takes a familiar metaphor for human perception and (the limits of) intersubjective access and shifts it to an entirely different scale. “Keyholes and crevices” only pose a problem regarding access within a human frame of reference. For the profusion of atmospheric darkness, keyholes and crevices are easily invaded. Thus we see that a shift in scale fundamentally alters, or even renders irrelevant, some of the problems posed in “The Window”. Earlier, when we are told that “Mr. Ramsay slammed his private door on them” (25), it is easy to take that familiar metaphor at face-value. A change in scale is not just a shift in perspective; it amounts to a fundamental transformation of the environment, a different world with different problems and possibilities. There is a tremendous loss of the world that one is familiar with, but then, Woolf associates this loss with possibility. As we will see, Lily’s experience reflects both the artistic and intersubjective possibilities of immersion in weather and climate.
III. “There must have been a shadow”: Remembering the Weather

Trevor A. Harley (for what it’s worth, he dubs himself “the world’s only psychometeorologist”) notes the statistically verified tendency of subjects to report nostalgia for weather events they rarely actually experienced (such as British citizens’ longing for a bygone “white Christmas”) as well as the sense that winters or summer seasons are “not what they used to be,” an impression that is also completely unsupported by meteorological records. It is important to note that this phenomenon amounts to more than a rose-colored glasses effect, as people are as likely to falsely remember cold winters as warm summers. Much of this tendency can be understood in terms of media’s capacity to create a mythology of atmosphere in the public imagination, such as Dickens’ literary white Christmas (Harley 109). But in addition to our ever-mediated relationship to the weather, Harley suggests that two potential memory biases might shed light on this phenomenon. One explanation is that “people may remember the average tendency, even though the average of many instances may not itself have actually occurred” (113). What I take from Harley’s emphasis on aggregates is that memory itself can be climatic, or at least, that memory strives to recreate climate, a difficult task considering one never perceived it directly in the first place. Then there is another seemingly opposite possibility, which I think still illustrates that same basic struggle to reconcile weather and climate. This is the case in which one extracts a “generalization from one or two prominent unrepresentative examples” (113). To me this possibility resonates with the eventfulness of weather taking precedence over the seemingly uneventful nature of climate. In either case, the mind struggles to remember that which can never directly be perceived. In the former scenario of aggregates, one turns climate into weather (remembering an event that never happened because of a pattern that did); in the latter case of extremes, one turns the weather into climate (remembering as pattern that which was event). Thus when Harley writes that “people also remember exceptions, and if all they remember are exceptions, they might come to think of those exceptions as typical,” (113) he is basically describing the conversion of weather into climate.

If “The Window” was about looking forward to weather, “The Lighthouse” is (among other things) about looking back at weather. Forecasting and memory provide bookends of temporal displacement. Part of Lily’s keen acuity in the novel’s final section stems from her ability to supplement climatic memory with a weather-like memory, indeed to resist the bias Harley describes:

But it would be a mistake, she thought…to simplify their relationship. It was no monotony of bliss—she with her impulses and quicknesses; he with his shudders and glooms. Oh, no. The bedroom door would slam violently early in the morning. He would start from the table in a temper. He would whizz his plate through the window. Then all through the house there would be a sense of doors slamming and blinds fluttering, as if a gusty wind were blowing and people scudded about trying in a hasty way to fasten hatches and make things shipshape (199).
Here, Lily recognizes the climatic default of a retrospective vantage point. Correcting for this bias, she fixes her memory on the violent volatility that tends to get smoothed over. Indeed, even though readers might think of Lily as striving to locate something essential and eternal in the novel’s final section, she also makes a sustained effort to remember the particularities and ephemerality of weather events. For Lily, these are not antithetical projects. She recalls “there was the scene on the beach. One must remember that. It was a windy morning” (160). Here, Lily focuses on the weather as it really was that day, in all of its fleeting contingency. The return of this scene confirms one of Mrs. Ramsay’s predictions in the novel’s first part: “[t]hey would, she thought...however long they lived, come back to this night; this moon; this wind; this house; and to her too” (113). There is an insistence on specificity here—this moon, this wind, this house. Throughout the novel’s third section, Lily returns to these demonstratives: “The faint thought she was thinking of Mrs. Ramsay seemed in consonance with this quiet house; this smoke; this fine early morning air” (161). Such insistent particularity stands in stark contrast to the abstractions and aggregates of climate. However, weather memories are not in and of themselves sufficient. Lily must also access something more permanent and lasting: “[i]n the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability” (161). Thus Lily’s dissatisfaction with impressionism (and Woolf’s, I believe) is not just a concern about visuality but at heart an objection to its treatment of time. She wants to capture the weather as it passes through, but she also wants to capture something more lasting—something like climate. Throughout the novel’s third section, Lily alternates between the particular—“[Mrs. Ramsay] was in grey that day” (177) and the general—“that essence which sat by the boat, that abstract one made of her” (178). Another way of putting this is that Lily makes use of both the atmospheric displacement discussed in the first section of this chapter and the atmospheric immersion discussed in the second section.

Lily’s dual attunement to weather and climate contributes to a series of triumphs that span the realms of aesthetics, memory, and intersubjectivity. In both memory and art, Lily is able to access and recreate not quite Mrs. Ramsay herself, but something of her atmosphere. Mrs. Ramsay can be said to have an atmosphere on several different levels. Throughout the novel, Woolf makes us aware that characters exude a certain aura, as when “[t]here rose from the lake of one’s being, a mist” (64). There is a sense that Mrs. Ramsay emits a kind of lasting residue, causing Lily to wonder, “[W]hat was the spirit in her, the essential thing, by which, had you found a crumpled glove in the corner of a sofa” (49). But atmosphere is not just something internal or personal that radiates out; it is also a character’s embeddedness in an environment. In other words, it is not simply that Mrs. Ramsay has an atmosphere, but also that a larger atmosphere has Mrs. Ramsay as one of its components. This complicates the reduction of atmosphere to pure aura, in the sense of a character’s psychology spilling out into the air. Even when a critic such as Martha Nussbaum productively challenges a psychologically penetrative model of intersubjectivity, there remains a sense that the air is just a medium for receiving messages from the other. When Nussbaum writes that characters “hover around one another, they allow signals from the other to pull them out of themselves,” (746) there is an implication that the air around the other is simply a place where one gets really good reception. It is as close as one can get. Nussbaum shows that it is not always possible or
desirable to enter the psyche of another. In one of her many examples of small triumphs or partial breakthroughs, Nussbaum writes that, “The image of the shadowy wall shows us that barriers are never removed--but somehow the walls become more like shadow than like substance, and she can feel the action of his mind as if it stood between her and life, casting protection over her mind” (748). Implicit but not fully developed here is the idea that the shadow in and of itself is significant. It is not just a possibility or an obstacle on the journey to another mind, but an alternative to the problem in the first place. It calls attention to the possibility of both subjects being out of their minds, so to speak, meeting in a larger impersonal atmosphere.

In fact, it is this precise atmospheric effect – a shadow – that serves as a breakthrough for Lily’s painting.

Suddenly the window at which she was looking was whitened by some light stuff behind it. At last then somebody had come into the drawing-room; somebody was sitting in the chair…Mercifully, whoever it was stayed still inside; had settled by some stroke of luck so as to throw an odd-shaped triangular shadow over the step. It altered the composition of the picture a little (201).

On the one hand, the shadow recreates what was simply a fleeting and trivial atmospheric effect at a particular time and place, produced by the positioning of bodies and objects - “(It must have altered the design a good deal when she was sitting on the step with James. There must have been a shadow)” (161). In this sense, the shadow is not some profound essence but more like the kind of volatile weather Lily is determined to remember: “[o]ne forgot the little agitations; the flush, the pallor, some queer distortion, some light or shadow, which made the face unrecognizable for a moment” (177). Yet the triangular shaped shadow is also, of course, reminiscent of Mrs. Ramsay’s “wedge-shaped core of darkness” (62). Indeed, just after Lily reflects on the shadow as “queer distortion,” she adds, “yet [it] added a quality one saw for ever after” (177). The weather of that long gone day refuses to remain weather – weather in the sense of something fleeting, something that matters much more when it is in the future and not the past. Ten years have passed, but Mrs. Ramsay continues to “cast her shadow on the step” (202). James remembers his father’s shadow, “something, he remembered, stayed and darkened over him” (186). Mrs. Ramsay was thus correct when she predicted that James “will remember that all his life” (62). Woolf suggests that climate is not antithetical to the fleeting contingencies of weather, but is itself made out of weather.

The survival of the shadow is also a reminder that temporal displacements work both backwards and forwards. The future overshadows the present and the past casts a long shadow on the present. There are shadows on both sides. Thus, the novel’s first and third sections are mirror images, one overshadowed by the future and the other shadowed by the past. The loss of the present is never resolved, only turned on its head. Forecasting becomes remembering.

Some form of intersubjective intimacy becomes possible when characters harness these temporal atmospheric displacements rather than resisting them. As Lily discovers, attunement to the atmosphere of another person is largely a matter of timing: “her sympathy seemed to be cast back on her, like a bramble sprung across her face” (156); “the urgency of the moment always missed its mark” (178). She comes to realize,
however, that different characters lend themselves to different atmospheric temporalities. Mrs. Ramsay functions as a kind of climate in the text. (She has been casting a shadow for ten years, after all). She is the one attuned to the “still space that lies about the heart of things” (105). While Lily associates Mr. Ramsay with slamming doors, Mrs. Ramsay has a different tempo and pace: “She opened bedroom windows. She shut doors (So she tried to start the tune of Mrs. Ramsay in her head)” (49).

By contrast, Mr. Ramsay possesses the unpredictable volatility of weather—“he changed from one mood to another so suddenly” (45), “for some reason he was no longer in the mood” (93). Indeed Mr. Ramsay functions as a kind of weather in the lives of other characters. Cam remembers the “tyranny of his which had poisoned her childhood and raised bitter storms” (170); when they set off for the sail it is a calm day but their father’s presence makes Cam and James’ “heads…pressed down by some remorseless gale” (163) and Lily registers his groan with “the force of some primeval gust” (151). Mr. Ramsay’s moods are comparable to the weather not just because of their temporal volatility but also because of their public nature; these “bitter storms” are not some psychologically interior state. His children remember growing up not with but in his moods. The way that one person’s mood is another person’s environment suggests that sometimes the problem of other minds is not the problem at all. It is certainly true that there are instances where characters find it excruciatingly difficult or impossible to reach others, but there are also cases in which living in another’s atmosphere is inescapable. The shifting nature of Mr. Ramsay’s moods leaves those around him either underprepared or overprepared (a familiar feeling to anyone who has ever packed – or forgotten to pack - an umbrella). Still, there are brief moments when another character seems to briefly share in this weather that is always changing as time passes. In one of the novel’s trademark moments of a sort of subtle miracle, “[t]hey had reached, she felt, a sunny island where peace dwelt, sanity reigned and the sun forever shone” (154). The language here obviously invokes the journey to the lighthouse. But throughout this discussion, we have seen the spatial become the temporal: a flight is a journey back in time, looking out the window means being cast forward in time, etc. Here too, the safe arrival at a “sunny island” is a convergence of atmospheric temporality as much as space. While the climate on the imagined island might always be sunny, for these human characters it is only weather, experienced briefly as both pass through. Indeed just a short while later Lily finally works up the sympathy Mr. Ramsay seems to be craving only to discover “[h]er feeling came too late; there it was ready; but he no longer needed it” (154).

Yet part of what Lily also realizes in the final section is that there is more than one way of sharing atmosphere with another. There are the more grand and profound moments, such as when Lily’s thoughts of Mrs. Ramsay seem “in consonance” (161) with the air. These can last years or span generations. But there are also the more fleeting moments in which the best we can hope for is simply to share the daily weather. Reflecting on her relationship with Mr. Carmichael, Lily realizes:

\[\text{\textsuperscript{20}}\] Martha Nussbaum’s attention to the “more modest goal [of] knowing ‘one thing or another thing’” (742) helped alert me to the possibility of more modest atmospheric goals as well. Nussbaum sums up the novel’s quite modest triumphs of intersubjective epistemology thus: “it is sometimes possible for some people to get knowledge of one thing or another thing about some
They only mumbled at each other on staircases; they looked up at the sky and said it will be fine or it won’t be fine. But this was one way of knowing people, she thought: to know the outline, not the detail (194-195).

Here, Lily reflects upon the most basic and quotidian of human interactions, the kind of connection we might call empty or cliché. Some suggest that the reason for “weather chat”’s ubiquity is its simple ability to connect people in space, particularly over noncontroversial issues: “the sky provides common ground” (Fine ii). But this is also a moment of connecting in time, of sharing the sense of the present as invaded by a common looming future. Even more importantly, this fundamental discussion – they looked up at the sky and said it will be fine or it won’t be fine – is what set the entire novel in motion in the first place. Just as it is difficult to know which shadow or storm we might end up remembering our whole lives, one really never knows which weather chat will come to mean much more, will in some sense shape the climate one lives in. Earlier, I suggested that Woolf wonders what kind of lifeline might be available to those drowning in air rather than water. Weather chat is one of these planks.

In a 2015 New York Times review of Lauren Redniss’ Thunder and Lightning, Sadie Stein has this to say about the history of idle weather chat:

To think: There was a time when weather was safe! As a noncontroversial counterpoint to dinner-table hot buttons like religion and politics, weather has probably played analgesic for generations of families. And then, of course, weather turned into climate, which combined all of the above, and suddenly there was nothing less safe in the world.

For the Ramsays, the weather was always a dinner-table hot button. And for Woolf, the weather was never safe.

other people; and they can sometimes allow one thing or another thing about themselves to be known” (752).
"Slow, dripping loss": Time Passes, Climate Changes

In May of 2011, *The New York Times* published a Room for Debate column called “The Age of the Anthropocene: Should We Worry?” That title resonates with the complex entanglement of environmental, affective, and cognitive problems that I have explored throughout this dissertation. Global warming poses a staggering challenge to the imagination: it is invisible, it moves both too quickly and too slowly for human witnesses, and it unfolds on a scale that no individual can perceive directly. Even if we could wrap our minds around the threat, it does not feel threatening because the very concept and affective charge of threat is predicated on imminent danger.¹

The striking and well-documented contrast between apathy in the face of climate change and rapid mobilization in response to discrete catastrophic events reflects the precise tension I study: shock, rupture, and immediate first-person experience on the one hand; ongoing, diffuse, impersonal atmospheres on the other. Natural disasters, such as earthquakes and storms, tend to invoke a sense of moral obligation, as evidenced by the outpouring of donations and vocal support in the wake of recent events. The less visible, long-term effects of climate change fail to elicit such a widespread response.²

Since the individual cannot see, think, or feel climate change directly, imagination and fiction inevitably mediate any human encounter with global warming. Studies have found that factual accounts of the problem largely fail to engage the public (Marshall), and this makes sense: realism is clearly not the remedy for one of the most abstract problems of our time. Atmosphere requires a willingness to think abstractly, to push past the bounds of conventional representational practices — and that is where modernist fiction is uniquely valuable.

Some have noted that, paradoxically, the most evocative representations of global warming involve snow and cold:

[T]his focus on what is vanishing means that we are perpetually looking backward rather than forward, gazing at what might be gone rather than what might come into being… ‘It’s a visual iconography that speaks of loss, and is tinged with melancholy… How powerful an image ice is for slow dripping loss…How many of our emotions are frozen too, along with this imagery. We stand at the brink of something, hoping it can be prevented.’ (Marshall 137)

---

¹ See George Marshall, *Don’t Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*.
² Environmental scientists and psychologists have both referred to twentieth-century climate change as a “creeping problem.” The description helps scientists liken global warming to other slowly unfolding environmental phenomena such as drought, and to distinguish it from events of rapid onset and termination such as a hurricane. Psychologists use it to articulate the cognitive burden imposed by a threat that does not announce itself as such. Stewart J. Cohen and Melissa W. Waddell write that “creeping environmental problems are not like floods, which take place relatively quickly with highly visible short-term effects” (137). George Marshall writes that climate change is “called by some psychologists a ‘creeping problem’” (63).
We can listen for this “slow dripping loss” in modernism. Throughout, I have argued for the value of attunement. I showed that Marlow attunes to the atmosphere of the Thames and feels it strike a chord with the atmosphere of the Congo. I suggested that Blunden tuned in to the atmosphere in post-war Tokyo, and noticed undertones in his war experience that had previously gone undetected. We have an opportunity to do the same by noticing the resonance between our own atmospheric challenges and those that so powerfully shaped the works of a generation of writers over a century ago.

The value of making an atmospheric connection does not lie in reducing modernist literature to its utilitarian value for environmental activists. For literary scholars, what is most valuable is the defamiliarization that allows us to reread texts that we have been accustomed to reading in a certain way. Woolf wrote that every so often we have to shake ourselves out of perceptual and readerly habits, that “[w]e have to remind ourselves that there is such a thing as atmosphere” (“On Being Ill” 24). Looking back from our contemporary vantage point, it becomes possible to notice an atmospheric modernism that has largely been obscured by attention to private interiority and dramatic rupture. Before there was the age of the Anthropocene, there was the age of atmosphere.


------------------.


------------------.

“Footprints Through the Weather-World: Walking, Breathing, Knowing.”


------------------.


------------------.


------------------.


Terror from the Air. Los Angeles : Cambridge, Mass: Semiotext(e) and MIT Press, 2009.


