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Solid Air: Victorian Atmosphere and Female Character in British Fiction 1847-1891

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in English

by

Justine Fontana Pizzo

2014

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2014

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Solid Air: Victorian Atmosphere and Female Character in British Fiction 1847-1891

by

Justine Fontana Pizzo

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Joseph E. Bristow, Co-chair

Professor Jonathan H. Grossman, Co-chair

“Solid Air” argues that representations of the atmosphere in novels by Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, and Thomas Hardy transform the physical and psychological stability of female protagonists. My examination of *Bleak House*, *Jane Eyre*, *Villette*, *The Return of the Native*, and *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* participates in a recent turn in literary scholarship that focuses on physical atmospheres in British poetry and prose of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Whereas many of these studies adopt an ecocritical approach by looking back to literary engagements with what we now term the Anthropocene (the geological period defined by human influence), “Solid Air” examines the indelible imprint atmosphere leaves on literary representations of the human. My historical research on Victorian science—including physiological psychology, meteorology, and molecular physics—demonstrates that women in the mid-to-late nineteenth century were often understood in relation to the weather.

Current narrative theory tends to understand characters as physically delineated subjects. By contrast, I argue that the hazy environments in Victorian fiction emphasize the dissoluble coherence of the female body and its surprisingly omniscient knowledge. My examination of theories of hysteria, “periodicity” (the biological fluctuations thought to govern female subjectivity from puberty to childbirth and beyond), and women’s limited energy reserves demonstrates that the close relationship between gender and climate science forms the basis of innovative—and often empowered—representations of the female self. The forms of solid air this project examines dissolve the distinction between in-here (character interiority) and out-there (atmosphere). This elusive, often opaque, characterization urges us to reconsider the transparent consciousness and embodied subjectivity critics often associate with the “round” or fully developed Victorian protagonist. Paradoxically, seemingly restrictive categories of scientific study allowed novelists to imagine a new diegetic subjectivity: one as diffuse as the air itself.

The dissertation of Justine Fontana Pizzo is approved.

Jayne Lewis

Joseph E. Bristow, Committee Co-chair

Jonathan H. Grossman, Committee Co-chair

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2014

To Travis Oliver Miles, partner in all

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Introduction

Climates differ and cause differences in character; the greater the variations in climate, so much the greater will be differences in character.

—Hippocrates, *On Airs, Waters, and Places*
(400 BCE)

Production of woman comes from a defect in the active power or from some material indisposition, or even from some external influence, such as that of a south wind, which is moist.

—St. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica*
(c. 1225-1274)

“Solid Air” focuses on the diffuse and changeable states of weather that epitomize female characterization in Victorian fiction. Dramatic displays of vapor, mist, and dew suffuse many of the most famous scenes in Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1853), Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853) as well as Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native* (1878) and *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891). Readers of these novels will immediately recall, for instance, Dickens’s protagonist and first-person narrator Esther Summerson standing amid the obfuscating smog known as a “London particular” in the opening pages of *Bleak House* (30). The fog-bound episode in “The Chase” that occurs at the end of the first volume of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* is equally well known. Tess’s tragic alteration from “The Maiden” to “Maiden no More” notoriously occurs within the significant break between the titles of the novel’s first two volumes; more immediately, though, her physical

dissolution into the atmosphere makes her indistinguishable from the “webs of vapour which . . . formed veils between the trees” (81).

As these pivotal scenes in the history of the British nineteenth-century novel demonstrate, physical atmospheres are more than mere aspects of mood or setting. They not only stand at the center of these novels’ plots, they also comprise a volatile female subjectivity: one that is as prone to sudden evaporation and condensation as moisture in the surrounding air. This dissertation examines the ways in which women become forms of solid air, characters whose subjectivity oscillates between environmental and embodied states. It asks what these substantive, yet ephemeral relationships between the human subject and the dense dark atmospheres around her teach us about the gendering of literary personhood. Why, even in such seemingly obscure scenes as the opening of *The Return of the Native*, do storms and winds invest Egdon Heath with an atmospheric consciousness derived from aspects of female physiology? How do these environmental conditions change the ways in which we speak about so-called realist representation and transparent accounts of the human subject? And to what ends do characters’ prophetic receptivity to climate in novels such as *Jane Eyre* alter our critical perceptions of first-person point-of-view and the representational limits of the female body and mind?

I argue that these questions can be answered by looking to the emergent disciplines of Victorian science that helped to establish this close association between women and the weather. The decades of the 1840s through the 1890s that this study covers ushered in such important developments as the first use of anesthetic ether to treat physical and emotional fluctuations of women’s bodies, the establishment of a state-funded discipline of meteorology, and the rise of molecular science, which understood humanity as both physically and psychically confluent with components of air. My examination of original writings by many of the era’s leading physicians, natural philosophers, and physicists allows me to elaborate the ways in which literary form is not just

in dialogue with these scientific achievements but is also—and more important—a practice of expanding, with artistic aim, the empirical knowledge fostered within the operating theatre and the lecture hall. In Victorian fiction, the diegetic innovations that result from this recasting of humanity within a mutually creative and scientific intellectual history demonstrate that literary character emerges from a cultural fascination with femininity in relation to changes within the physical climate.

In this introduction, I elaborate the ways in which “Solid Air” builds upon established discourses of literature and science, contributes to our current theories of character, and revisits prominent studies of female embodiment and subjectivity in British fiction. Section One: “Literature, Science, and The New Atmospheric” attends to recent approaches to the study of literature and science in the Victorian period and places my work within an increasingly prominent literary subfield on atmosphere in British fiction. The second section of this introduction, “Atmospheric Characterization,” provides an overview of my intervention in major theories of characterization from the eighteenth through the nineteenth centuries. The third section—“Disembodied Selves: Women and the Weather”—discusses major theories of embodiment in nineteenth-century fiction as well as the turn toward mental science in influential critical studies of subjectivity and sexual difference by feminist scholars of the 1980s and 1990s that this project revisits and revises. Finally, the concluding section, “Solid Air: Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, and Thomas Hardy,” offers an outline of the organization of the dissertation and sketches a précis of the arguments in each of the project’s three chapters. This section also charts the major phases of intellectual and scientific discovery relevant to my analysis of each novelist’s work.

1. Literature, Science, and the New Atmospheric

“Solid Air” participates in a body of scholarship on Victorian literature and science that has continued to develop since the influential work of scholars such as Gillian Beer and George Levine in the 1980s and 1990s. Both scholars are well known for their studies of evolutionary theory and

their respective examinations of the influence of Charles Darwin's thought on nineteenth-century British literature. Importantly, Beer and Levine respectively emphasize the interdisciplinary contexts that lead to the production and circulation of what Levine terms "the general view of the nature of 'reality' itself" (4).¹ This view of literature and science as interdependent and as widely available to the mid nineteenth-century reading public has since become something of a critical commonplace. As historians of science Katherine Anderson and Ursula DeYoung have recently demonstrated, scientific ideas about atmosphere in the mid to late nineteenth century were disseminated widely through almanacs, popular periodicals, and public events that included evening lecture series at the Royal Society in London for both high society and members of the working class.²

The conclusion we rightly draw from each of these scholarly studies, elaborated over the past forty years, is that literature and science were far less self-contained areas of intellectual engagement in the nineteenth century than they are today.³ The repeated impulse of physicists like

¹ Beer's *Open Fields* (1996) collects some of her major essays on topics ranging from evolutionary theory to solar physics and emergent theories of light, heat, and sound. Her earlier study *Darwin's Plots* (1983) focuses more specifically on evolutionary thought and resonances of Darwinian thought in novels by George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. Levine's influential monograph *Darwin and the Novelists* (1988) employs Darwinian theory as way of exploring questions relating to empiricism and natural philosophy particularly in the work of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and Anthony Trollope.

² Anderson's *Predicting the Weather* (2005) discusses the role of popular almanacs in Victorian concepts of weather prophecy and atmospheric change. See, in particular, chapter two. DeYoung's biography of physicist John Tyndall (celebrated for his studies of the atmospheric origins of light and sound) emphasizes his popularity as a public speaker. She discusses the wide-ranging effects of his lectures at the Royal Society, which were often delivered to audiences of a thousand people or more (14-18; 39).

³ For a similar point of view, see Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth (xv, xvii).

John Tyndall or James Clerk Maxwell, both of whom I discuss in this dissertation, to understand the origins of humanity not only in scientific but also in literary and poetic terms, informs the ways in which “Solid Air” demonstrates the mutually constitutive relationship between literature and science rather than the ability of authors and researchers to speak across disciplinary lines. Accordingly, my aim in this dissertation is not to create an analogy between developments in climate science and thematic representations of weather in literature. Instead, I reveal the ways in which a widespread cultural fascination with debates about the air and its relation to women’s embodiment transforms how novels represent who and what characters are.

In addition to the methodological influence that studies by Levine and Beer bring to bear on “Solid Air,” I wish to draw out one of the key differences between their studies and my own. Let us linger for a moment on an essential point Beer makes in *Darwin’s Plots* (1983). In this pioneering work, Beer establishes a connection between the “inextricable web of affinities” that Charles Darwin describes in *The Origin of Species* (1859) and the networks of character affiliation in the Victorian multi-plot novel. As students of nineteenth-century culture will recall, Darwin famously describes the “mutual affinities of organic beings . . . by which all living and extinct beings are united by complex, radiating, and circuitous lines of affinities into one grand system” (336). This concept proves vital to the intersection between natural science and narrative form that Beer identifies in *Darwin’s Plots* (1983). Her study claims that character systems in the multi-plotted novel assume a pattern of biological and social affinities that hark back to Darwin’s theory of natural selection. “The sense that everything is connected,” she argues, “was a form of plotting crucial to Dickens’s work, as we can see, for example in *Bleak House*, where the fifty-six named—and many more unnamed—characters all turn out to be related either by way of concealed descent (Esther and Lady Dedlock) or of economic dependency” (48). Beer subsequently traces this “matrix of possibilities, the outcome of multiple interactions between organisms and within matter” (18) to the latter part of the century,

citing an entry from Hardy's 1886 diary, which notes that "the human race [is] to be shown as one great network or tissue which quivers in every part when one point is shaken, like a spider's web if touched" (169).

In contrast to this notion of connection, "Solid Air" focuses on characters' dissolution. The atmospheric characterization I explore in these pages does not establish a conjunctive relationship between the human and her environment or between the individual and the organisms that surround her. Instead, I examine the ways in which fictive representations of people—especially women—become part of a volatile atmospherics that eradicates the surfaces and boundaries of the body. As we shall see, this is particularly relevant to characters such as Dickens's Esther Summerson and Hardy's Tess Durbeyfield whom I argue are less affiliated with the "great network" Beer finds in Hardy's personal writing than they are with the ephemeral atmospherics that inform the evaporation and condensation of his characters. As we see most acutely in Hardy's fiction, this formal instability reveals the underlying femininity of characterization itself. Faced with the challenge of bringing characters to life, Victorian novels often demonstrate the same concerns that men of science had about the unknowable psychology and unstable physicality of the female subject. Hence these characters' surprising feats of self-authoring omniscience, the sudden expansion of their knowledge and sensation into the all-pervading ether, and the periodic replacement of women's emotion with disembodied waves of sentience and feeling. These formal innovations are as much the product of a restrictive gender ideology as they are the grounds of literary possibility. For a character like Esther Summerson, I argue, such oscillation erodes the grounds of her subjectivity. For *Jane Eyre*, the dissoluble limits of the self provide her character psychic access to sights yet unseen and insight into events that have not yet occurred.

This volatile concept of literary personhood establishes a point of departure from recent studies within literature and science. Anna Henchman's recent monograph, *The Starry Sky Within*:

Astronomy and the Reach of the Mind in Victorian Literature (2014), for example, adopts a concept of human relations and literary characterization much like Beer's. Henschman sees individual characters in the multi-plot novel as part of a complex universe of shifting physical relationships. She argues: "In the nineteenth century a universe with many centers became the prevailing astronomical model" (1). In Henschman's view, this vital shift in popular perceptions of time and space elucidates "shifting networks of character relations, which are often figured as orbiting celestial systems" (2). Although not focused exclusively on characterization, Henschman's book elaborates the intra-diegetic "misperception of one's own centrality" and its likeness to the concept of parallax, which defines the accurate perception of bodies in orbit as comprised of multiple rather than solitary viewpoints (2, 5). In this regard, her discussion of characters' and narrators' points of view echoes the concepts of the "matrix" and the "network" that Beer emphasizes and that, as we shall see in the following section, proves vital to concepts of character theory within Alex Woloch's *The One vs. The Many* (2003).

Like most theorists who focused specifically on character, then, Henschman's notion that individual characters are unable to enter the minds of others, assumes that these characters are inherently embodied and able to possess an identifiable point of view (14). Her claim that analogies to astronomy within Victorian fiction locate "readers imaginatively in space without requiring them to choose between being localized in a single self or inhabiting a view from high above the earth" understands an essential dividing line to exist between what is out there (atmosphere and space) and in here (body and character). For Henschman, "characters in novels are like planets hurtling past each other, attempting somehow to observe the other as they move" (121). But as I demonstrate here, the volatility of Victorian atmospherics and their relation to female characters erodes this long-standing assertion of characters' trenchant physicality, clear-sighted perception, and distinctive interiority.

The ways in which atmosphere mediates between character and environment and dissolves the presumed physical and psychological boundaries between these entities, places my project within

a new atmospheric: a rising literary subfield that traverses literature and science, ecological studies, and cultural history. Prominent among these works is cultural theorist Steven Connor's study of atmosphere over the past two centuries, *The Matter of Air* (2010), which alerts us to a growing interest in theoretical and philosophical studies that reach beyond a strict history of pneumatic science.⁴ Likewise, German philosophers Hermann Schmitz and Gernot Böhme posit respective theorizations of an atmospheric phenomenology and aesthetics that have become influential in architectural, art historical, and environmental scholarship. While Schmitz's concept of a "new phenomenology" understands meteorological atmospheres to govern the "felt body"—an entity "spatially extended in a way similar to sound" (492)—Böhme argues that air mediates between "environmental qualities and human states" (114).⁵

The emergence of a new atmospheric within literary studies more specifically can be traced to Terry Castle's celebrated essay, "The Female Thermometer" (1987), which directs our attention to the facetious eighteenth-century conception that the sexual passions and capricious desires of the female body could be measured with the same mercurial instruments used to monitor the air. She further demonstrates how domestic, and yet nevertheless scientific, devices such as the thermometer and barometer abetted the cultural acceptance of the effeminate man of feeling: "the weatherglass

⁴ While historical studies of the air are too numerous to catalogue here, an authoritative source on Restoration-era experimentation may be found in Shapin and Schaffer. On Joseph Priestley's study of the air see Johnson. A history of meteorology in the seventeenth through early nineteenth centuries may be found in Janković and—in the Victorian period—Anderson.

⁵ Chandler elucidates the importance of atmospheric aesthetics for ecocriticism. For additional contributions to the history of thought on atmosphere see Sloterdijk's trilogy *Spheres* and his interview with Bettina Funcke in which he argues: "the 'essential' now dwells in lightness, in the air, in the atmosphere."

bore witness to this dramatic reinterpretation of the male psyche” (34). Also charting literary conceptions of atmosphere in the long eighteenth century, Jayne Lewis’s pioneering *Air’s Appearance: Literary Atmosphere in British Fiction, 1660–1794* (2012) argues that the ephemerality of air does not so much invite an analogy with the human body as mediate between folkloric beliefs in the spiritual contents of atmosphere (the supernatural) and emerging models of Enlightenment reason (ones scholars often link to the rise of the novel). Lewis claims that these concomitant forms of knowledge make atmosphere central to the “linguistic imagination” of the period (8).

Published the same year as Lewis’s study, Tobias Menely’s article on William Cowper’s six-book poem *The Task* (1785) adopts a more ecocritical approach to eighteenth-century atmospheric studies. His discussion of Cowper’s georgic establishes a connection between the unseasonably hot and foggy conditions following the eruption of volcanoes in central Europe, and the literary temporality associated with anthropocenic climate change. The simultaneity between Cowper’s publication of *The Task* and the rise of the Industrial Revolution (which geologists often deem inaugural to climate change) prompts Menely to explore the eschatological underpinnings of Cowper’s meditations on nature and their relevance to the global warming of today. Jesse Oak Taylor adopts a similarly ecocritical approach in his focus on nineteenth-century literature. In “The Novel as Climate Model: Realism and the Greenhouse Effect in *Bleak House*” (2013), he addresses questions about climate-based temporality similar to those Menely poses. His reading of *Bleak House* argues that the weather patterns of the mid-century—shaped in part by the artificial weather within Victorian glasshouses—create a human-centered concept of environment, one that redefines many of the central concerns of ecocriticism as well as modern concepts of literary realism.

Although “Solid Air” examines many of the same nineteenth-century weather patterns as critics of Victorian literature such as Oak Taylor, my emphasis in these pages is not on an environmentally-contingent literary history but rather an atmospherically-contingent concept of

characterization. My study defines what we might refer to as a literary “atmoscene”—a moment in the history of the novel that allows air to comprise fictional representations of the human. In sketching the atmoscene as a formal analog to recent anthropocenic approaches to literary studies, this study asks to what ends character forms the basis of narrative concepts of a volatile and disembodied femininity. As Nancy Armstrong famously argues, it is the diegetic fashioning of feminine difference—the definition of identity along sexual and economic lines—that gives rise to the conception of “masculinity” and “femininity” within nineteenth-century British culture at large.⁶ In a kind of inverse movement, I examine the ways in which scientific theorizations of the female body and mind—which held women to be as prone to sudden shifts as the air was to directional change—comprise atmospheric characterization. It is this elusive play between presence and absence, substance and instability that this project discovers to be at the very center of what the Victorian novel conceives of as female subjectivity.

2. Atmospheric Characterization

We often speak about the nineteenth-century novel in terms of transparency and legibility. The personality that a character’s facial physiognomy helps to establish, the transparency of her depth psychology, and the realism that narrative techniques such as third-person omniscience and free indirect discourse seem to establish have all become part of this critical commonplace.⁷ The

⁶ Armstrong notes: “[T]he representation of the individual as most essentially a sexual subject preceded the economic changes that made it possible to represent English history as the narrative unfolding of capitalism. Thus what began chiefly as writing that situated the individual within the poles of nature and culture, self and society, sex and sexuality, only later became a psychological reality, and not the other way around” (13).

⁷ On physiognomy (the notion that the face reveals the spiritual essence of the individual) as a defining feature of literary character inherited from the nineteenth-century novel and its debt to Johann Kaspar

sum of these formal traits has come to suggest Victorian fiction's self-evident investment in characters' embodiment and subjectivity.⁸ But it is this very assumption that atmospheric characterization radically unsettles by allowing air to stand in for the individual. At key moments in the novels I discuss, characters become fluid (or, more properly, vaporous), elusive, and perplexingly difficult to contain. They oppose the binary and hierarchical concepts of character that rely upon key terms such as "system," "network," "web," and "matrix" and that call upon works from E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) to Alex Woloch's *The One vs. The Many* (2003).

It is remarkable that E.M. Forster's binary account of flat vs. round characters in *Aspects of the Novel* remains vital to our current theories of literary personhood. The author and critic famously asserts, as many of us will recall: "We may divide characters into flat and round. Flat characters . . . are constructed round a single idea or quality: when there is more than one factor in them, we get the beginning of the curve toward the round" (67). Yet Forster's exemplary case of Charles Dickens

Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* (1783) see Rimmon-Kenan (65). On the emergence of physiognomy within nineteenth-century fiction more generally see Hartley and Woloch (14); in the eighteenth-century see Lynch (12). In regards to Brontë's work, see Shuttleworth (57-70); with respect to Hardy's fiction, Cohen (88). For a recent discussion of the ways in which free indirect discourse weaves the vantage point of narrators and characters in Hardy's fiction, see Henschman (13-14; 144-46).

⁸ Although discussions of psychological depth and embodied characterization in the period are too numerous to catalog here, notable examples may be found in Cohn, who finds in mid-century novels with authorial narrators (such as Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*) a resistance to "approaching another mind too closely and staying with it too long; for this other mind, contrary to [the narrator's] own disincarnated mental existence, belongs to an incarnated and therefore distinctly limited being" (25). For influential accounts of characters' psychological depth and distinctive physicality in nineteenth-fiction see Woloch (19), and Cohen (xii).

undermines this very distinction: “Dickens’s people are nearly all flat (Pip and David Copperfield attempt roundness, but so diffidently that they seem more like bubbles than solids). Nearly every one can be summed up in a sentence and yet there is this wonderful feeling of human depth” (71). According to Forster, Dickens’s characters are sometimes round but not solid: they appear to be flat but nevertheless undermine the definition of flatness that Forster wishes to put forward. Part of this instability, I wish to suggest, emerges from the tenuousness of the analogy between substance and shape in Forster’s analysis: Dickens’s characters are round but they are also comprised of air. Their diffident selfhood appears intact at one moment and in danger of popping like a soap bubble the next.

That Forster’s analogy underscores both Pip’s and David Copperfield’s subjectivity as a form of materiality volatility related to air is certainly notable. But what I wish to emphasize above and beyond Forster’s appeal to atmospheric ephemerality is the unstable ground upon which his now critically entrenched character binary rests. “The novel is a formidable mass, and it is so amorphous,” Forster complains. “It is most distinctly one of the moister areas of literature . . . occasionally degenerating into a swamp” (5). “How then are we to attack the novel—that spongy tract . . . ?” Forster later inquires (23). “Not with any elaborate apparatus. Principles and systems may suit other forms of art, but they cannot be applicable here” (23). The conclusion we draw from Foster’s assertion is that there is a “moistness”—a fluidity, and permeability—that, from the time of St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, has been associated with femininity and atmospherics and that Forster, in the early twentieth century, associates with the malleability of the novel form and the characters within it. My assertion, then, is that Forster is best appreciated not for what he offers to contemporary theories of character systems, but rather for acknowledging the difficulty of attempting to stabilize—in either formal or material terms, the unstable modes of literary personhood that we try to define as character. As the atmospheric scenes in the work of Dickens,

Brontë, and Hardy reveal, it remains difficult to speak about the presumed opposition between psychologically complex characters and hastily sketched types when the psychology and embodiment of those characters is in a state of constant flux.

These conditions of characterization oppose Woloch's celebrated concept of the "distributional matrix," which acknowledges the tendency of realist fiction to pull readers' attention in opposite directions. Woloch's matrix emphasizes the centrality of protagonist, on the one hand, and the proliferation of minor characters, on the other hand. His analysis thus focuses on the individual and his or her interior depth as a contrast to the broad social universe and inclusive view of human life that the nineteenth-century novels' minor characters help to draw out.⁹ He defines this "distribution of attention within narrative" through the neologisms "*character-space*" ("the encounter between an individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole") and *character-system* ("the arrangement of multiple and differentiated character-spaces—differentiated configurations and manipulations of the human figure—into a unified narrative structure") (14-15).

Woloch's project, much like Henchman's, preserves the idea of the major character as a human figure that possesses a coherent embodiment and communicable interiority. Although both critics oppose the individuality of one character to the others that surround him, they mutually preserve the concept of uniqueness and individuality that modern theorists of character including Deidre Shauna Lynch and Aaron Kunin refuse. Lynch's *The Economy of Character* (1998), contra Ian Watt's foundational *Rise of the Novel* (1957), asks what it might mean to separate concepts of literary personhood from "the rise of individualism" and the closely associated "rise of realism" (1).¹⁰ Her

⁹ On the relation of the "distributional matrix" to psychological transparency and omniscience, see Woloch (19).

¹⁰ On individual versus type in the early novel, see Watt (21).

analysis of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century character in fiction and popular culture works against the idea of character as realistic representation and focuses instead on the “pragmatics” that commodify this aspect of literary form, positioning it within a broader world of social and economic exchange (3). In Lynch’s account, the assumption that a character possesses a distinct interiority only emerges at the conclusion of the eighteenth century, with the growth of “cultural capital” and flourishing of Britain’s market economy (6). Lynch thus redefines “individuated, psychological meaning” not as a natural aspect of writers’ or readers’ concepts of character, but rather as a “social construction” (9). She rejects “binary terms such as *round* or *flat* or *external* and *internal*” that “Solid Air” also calls into question (10). Whereas Lynch locates a repudiation of these character binaries in the reading and reception history of an eighteenth-century audience, however, I find such repudiation in the elusive movements of air that blur the physical and psychological boundaries of the female subject within the pages of the nineteenth-century novel.

Like Lynch, Aaron Kunin also opposes Watt’s definition of character, which assumes that after the rise of realism in the nineteenth century, characters become particular and individual: that they oppose, in other words, the generic “types” favored by the early novel.¹¹ As Kunin argues, character is a formal device that consolidates multiple examples of a certain type of person within a single actant. According to this logic, Kunin claims that the character Boffin in Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) is neither flat nor round, but rather a figure for the character of “the miser” not just within Dickens’s novel, but within history and culture at large. In Kunin’s view: “Boffin gradually becomes not a miser but *the* miser: a representative figure . . . that makes it possible for the members of this collective to assemble, for the miser to be not more than one miser but all misers” (298). This concept of character as a collection—a gallery of types condensed into a single representative—seeks to understand characters not just within a specific novel or the history of the novel as a genre,

¹¹. See Lynch 1-3, Kunin 306-07, and Watt 19-21.

but across multiple forms of narrative—from plays to the seventeenth-century genre of “characteristic writing” (a form of early caricature) to comics. More than that, Kunin examines the ways in which characters in any one of these genres absorbs types from without. Hence his critique of Woloch’s book, which understands character-space as circumscribed by the plot of any given novel and therefore fails to account, in Kunin’s view, for the ways in which character collects identities from literary as well as non-literary culture. Kunin takes this argument a step further when he claims: “Character does not respect divisions between biological species, or between organic and inorganic nature, for that matter” (314). This assertion allows him to conclude that “[c]ommunities of character bridge . . . orders of reality such as history and fiction, given and made, and life and death” (316).

Kunin’s theory of character has much in common with the non-hierarchical concept of fictive personhood that “Solid Air” elaborates. But his account assumes a stability of presumed character type that atmospheric characterization dissolves (316). So too does it elide—as do almost all major works within character theory—the importance of gender in comprising a definition of fictional personhood. Kunin—much like Woloch, Lynch, and Forster before him—evades the significance of biological sex as central to what narrative representations of people do and how they are comprised. It is this crucial interdependence between the female body and atmospheric characterization—and its ties to earlier movements in feminist criticism of the Victorian novel—which I elaborate in the following section.

3. Disembodied Selves: Women and the Weather

In the 1980s and 1990s feminist criticism on Victorian literature and culture increasingly began to focus on the scientific history surrounding women’s embodiment. For writers such as Jenny Bourne Taylor, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Mary Poovey, Elaine Showalter, and Sally Shuttleworth, the mid to late nineteenth-century emergence of mental science proved central to

narrative representations of female identity. Showalter's *The Female Malady* (1985), for example, documents a cultural history based on "dual images of female insanity—madness as one of the wrongs of woman; madness as the essential feminine nature unveiling itself before scientific male rationality" (3). Though not a work of literary criticism, her study coincides with a concomitant interest in representations of femininity and mental illness in Victorian fiction, exemplified by Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). In their famous study of nineteenth-century women writers in general, and of Brontë's fiction in particular, Gilbert and Gubar argue that Bertha Mason, Edward Fairfax Rochester's mentally ill wife in *Jane Eyre*, is an "avatar" for Jane herself. Gilbert and Gubar's discussion of Brontë's work enfolds pathological female aggression into the protagonist's authorial self-expression and insists—in spite of its feminist bent—that the "predictive aspect" of Jane's narrative demonstrates "symptoms" associated with a gendered pathology and fractured subjectivity (359).

"Solid Air" takes a very different approach to nineteenth-century discourse about physiological psychology and gendered subjectivity. It adopts some of the concepts central to these early feminist histories but demonstrates how they dissolve rather than uphold the embodied limitations of the self. The concept of female periodicity—which Poovey considers at some length in her study of gender in mid Victorian England (*Uneven Developments* 1988)—forms a crucial aspect of this portion of my argument. As Poovey demonstrates, periodicity denoted a physical and psychic "instability . . . inaugurated by puberty, signaled by menstruation and epitomized in childbearing" (36). But as I show in this dissertation, such instability proves central to the ways in which novelists imagine the female subject to be beyond the control of the very boundaries this gendered embodiment seems to imply. Paradoxically, it is the extreme opacity and volatility of cultural concepts of femininity in the 1840s through the 1890s that provide novelists with the opportunity of reimagining women's subjectivity in and through fictional narrative.

The primary texts in medicine, psychology, physics, and philosophy that I draw upon to make this point, sustain the interdisciplinary approach of earlier scholars of Victorian literature such as Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth. Their co-edited anthology *Embodied Selves* (1998) gathers primary texts on Victorian physiological psychology, which range from studies of physiognomy, phrenology, and mesmerism to tracts on menstruation, moral insanity, and hysteria. Although not focused exclusively on female embodiment, Bourne Taylor and Shuttleworth pay careful attention to the ways in which women's social identity in the mid-to-late nineteenth century was inextricably linked to contemporary developments in biology. The "emerging materialist science of the self" that informs their study proceeds, in many ways, from Shuttleworth's earlier monograph *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (1996) (xiii). There, Shuttleworth asserts that nineteenth-century transformations in "the boundaries of selfhood" rely upon "the perceived relationship between visible form and inner quality, social formation and individual subjectivity, or the lines demarcating the normal from the pathological" (1). But this definition of subjectivity, like those common to character studies, assumes a coherent and legible physical selfhood. Shuttleworth's claim that Brontë's novels are indebted to sciences such as "psychiatry and phrenology . . . dedicated to decoding the external signs of the body in order to reveal the . . . inner . . . forces which constitute individual subjectivity" fails to acknowledge the ways in which so many Victorian fictions, including Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, erode distinctions between subjectivity and atmosphere (1).

More recently, William A. Cohen's *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (2009) maintains that fictive subjectivity is contingent first and foremost upon characters' physicality. Although gender does not inform the main critical apparatus of Cohen's study, he discusses figures from Hardy's Eustacia Vye to Brontë's William Crimsworth and accounts for the attendant

differences in embodied representation that the gender of these characters immediately implies.¹²

For Cohen, however, the simple fact of characters' embodied state often supersedes the significance of their sex. He argues, for example: "If adopting a male narrator leads Brontë to contemplate embodiment . . . it also frees her from certain conventions More pertinent to her presentation of bodily invasion than a bifurcated model of gender are psychoanalytic accounts of masochism, some of which have helped to detach dominance status from gender" (41). Thus, Cohen's focus remains on "key moments, figures, and texts in the nineteenth-century exposition of ideas about bodily materialism," each of which he finds "exemplary of a particular mode of conceiving of the interior in relation to the exterior and of advancing the primacy of the body in the idea of the human" (xii).

Although I share Cohen's interest in materiality, my project locates that materiality in the air and its effect on the human rather than within a consistently legible body and corresponding interiority. Let me elaborate on this crucial point of difference. Cohen understands the senses to be the primary means by which characters encounter the world. However, the experience of Dickens's Esther Summerson, who cannot see or think clearly within the novel's obfuscating "London particular," teaches us that the atmospheric environments of Victorian fiction often undermine the sensory capacity of female characters. Similarly, the "undulations" of Hardy's Tess Durbeyfield—whose body becomes permeable to the strains of her lover Angel Clare's second hand harp, which

¹² More specifically, Cohen detaches Brontë's work from gender in his discussion of *The Professor* (1846). He argues that "bodily penetration is Brontë's dominant metaphor for access to human interiority" (49) but also asserts: "If adopting a male narrator leads Brontë to contemplate embodiment . . . it also frees her from certain conventions More pertinent to her presentation of bodily invasion than a bifurcated model of gender are psychoanalytic accounts of masochism, some of which have helped to detach dominance status from gender" (41).

“passed like breezes through her”—negates the dichotomy between inside and outside that Cohen’s analysis upholds (Hardy 138). My interest lies in what exists outside the body and passes through it rather than what we see on its surface or assume to be contained within its skin. In the chapter breakdowns below, I summarize how major developments in nineteenth-century science lay the intellectual groundwork for this materialist, yet atmospheric, composition of the fictional female self.

4. Solid Air: Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, and Thomas Hardy

Each chapter of this dissertation focuses on the work of a single author. The chapters trace the chronological developments surrounding atmospheric science and the development of the British novel over more than four decades. The first chapter focuses on Charles Dickens’s multi-volume novel *Bleak House* (1853), while subsequent chapters address two works by each author. Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853) are the subjects of the second chapter and Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native* (1878) and *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891) form the basis of the third.

As should be clear by now, the works I address in this study are those in which atmosphere allows for significant innovations in the representation of character. Accordingly, although many of the most memorably stormy, foggy, and ecologically focused writings of the mid to late nineteenth century form the basis of chapters in “Solid Air,” they deserve a prominent place in our environmental histories of Victorian literature and culture. Works such as Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and John Ruskin’s lecture on “The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century” (1884) remain at the periphery of this study. The ways in which Emily Brontë’s evocative depictions of violent storm and ceaseless wind suggest, and revise, the “appearances of things . . . under the influence of emotion, or contemplative fancy” that John Ruskin so passionately denounces in his essay on the pathetic fallacy, provide grounds for a very different conversation about atmosphere than the one here (70). Similarly, Ruskin’s prescient, and religiously fervent, lecture on the changes in

the nineteenth-century weather suggests Victorians' growing critical awareness of how national (and international) atmospheric patterns seemed to be changing with the advent of global commerce and steam-powered trade. His evocation of writings about meteorology by Tyndall alongside the works of Homer, Dante, Wordsworth, and Byron is an enduring testament to the ways in which the geological anthropocene has always been parallel to a developing literary atmosphere.

My historical and formal analysis of this era in British literature shows how central atmosphere is to writers' expressions of the human, and of women in particular. Chapter one, "Atmospheric Dissolution and the Insensibility of Female Character in *Bleak House*" argues that the dense, dark fogs of Dickens's celebrated novel occlude the physical and psychological particularity of its first-person narrator Esther Summerson and her mother Lady Dedlock. Although scholars consistently read the novel's polluted atmosphere as a democratizing force that unites disparate geographies, classes, and social institutions, I argue that the fog temporarily steadies the tenuous subjectivity of its female protagonists. Building on the emergence of medical anesthesia as a common treatment for the perceived instability of female embodiment and affect—from childbirth to "hysterical" outbursts—this opening chapter examines scenes in which atmospheric characterization emerges as an antidote to female protagonists' heightened emotions. Archival research on medical studies such as John Snow's *On the Inhalation of the Vapour of Ether* (1847), which discusses the changes in consciousness an etherized patient undergoes, further connect Dickens's experiments in form—which often afford Esther a surprising measure of disembodied omniscience—to popular concepts of chemical and atmospheric ether in the 1840s.

From the anesthetizing atmospheres of *Bleak House*, chapter two moves to the exhilarating air of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853). "Atmospheric Exceptionalism and Meteorological Narration in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*" considers the ways in which the sensual receptivity of Brontë's self-authoring protagonists affords them a prophetic connection to the air. By

examining the ways in which Brontë's fiction and non-fiction writing associates "weather wisdom" or embodied sensitivity to climate with literary genius, this chapter turns the atmospheric dulling of the authorial female subject's body and mind we see in *Bleak House* upside-down. Rather than attempting to control what Brontë describes in the 1848 preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre* as an "electric death-spark hid in [a] womb" of "summer cloud," her first and last published novels represent atmospheric subjectivity as an essential aspect of successful female authorship (5).

Contrary to earlier feminist readings of these novels, which paradoxically associate both *Jane Eyre*'s and *Lucy Snowe*'s climatic sensitivity with pathology, my analysis examines how early neurologists such as Thomas Laycock connect women's sensual response to weather with disease. My discussion of nineteenth-century meteorology, which understood the weather-sensitive body as gifted and prophetic, urges us to reconsider earlier readings of the novels that uphold the same diagnostic frameworks as nineteenth-century neurologists. My examination of the Victorian concept of "lunarism"—the pervasive belief that the moon controlled the weather—further demonstrates the ways in which *Jane Eyre* associates embodied femininity with atmospheric and authorial control.

My third chapter turns to two of the most prominent works that Thomas Hardy classed among his "Novels of Character and Environment." This final chapter, "Molecular Narration and the Condensation of Character in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*," demonstrates Hardy's enduring interest in the way atmospherics mediate between substance and appearance by making the invisible movements of molecules seemingly visible in air (in condensed forms of moisture such as fog or mist). The chapter examines many of the most recognizably atmospheric scenes in these novels—from the twilight and cloud-covered obscurity that destabilizes Egdon Heath in the opening scene of *The Return* to the atmosphere that "forms a prospect without aid from more solid objects" before Tess Durbeyfield's tragic transformation in Cranborne Chase (71). It argues that the lack of stability and coherence that defines character in these episodes

emerges from Hardy's interest in physical motility—associated in the 1870s—1890s with discoveries in molecular science. My examination of James Clerk Maxwell's 1873 address on "Molecules" emphasizes the ways in which the same material elements that comprise the inanimate world (molecules of oxygen, hydrogen, and water) constitute character in Hardy's fiction. The processes of condensation and evaporation, which physiological psychiatrist Henry Maudsley as well as philosopher Herbert Spencer employ as means of understanding human vitality and energy loss further demonstrate the ways in which Hardy's condensation of character understands femininity as vital to all literary characterization. Whereas Spencer and Maudsley employed the supposedly limited energy reserves of the female subject as an argument against her suitability for rigorous pursuits such as advanced education—much as early anesthesiologists aimed to control women's physical and emotional precariousness—Hardy's condensation of character incorporates these scientific concepts, and their ties to femininity, as the basis of literary characterization.

Thus, although my project begins by examining the ways in which the form of the Victorian novel responds to the scientific experiments that link air to insensibility in the 1840s, it travels through the intellectual developments that associated a highly sensible female embodiment with prophetic meteorology in the following decade, and closes with physicist John Tyndall's comparison of the embodied subject to the "streaks of morning cloud" that close his discussion of the nebular origins of human vitality in the "Belfast Address" of 1874 (65). By tracing this history of ideas about atmosphere and its evolving relationship to female subjectivity, "Solid Air" urges us to read the nineteenth-century British novel as an exercise in character experimentation: one that presents the volatility of the female body not as mere pathology but rather as the aerial element upon which literary realism unexpectedly rests.

Chapter One

Atmospheric Dissolution and the Ethereal Consciousness of Female Character in *Bleak House*

Characters in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) disappear into thick air. In both portions of the novel's dual narrative—the present tense story told by Dickens's unnamed third person narrator, and protagonist Esther Summerson's first person past tense account—the “fog” that famously goes “everywhere” encroaches, as this chapter will show, upon characters in ways previously unnoticed (5). More than just a metaphor for the corrupt social institutions and disease-bearing miasmas that bind London to the English countryside and individual characters to one another, the dense and dirty air that “rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city” and “flows among green aits and meadows,” evinces a second and more pressing diegetic function: the ability of atmosphere to determine who and what individual characters are (5).

This chapter considers how at pivotal moments in *Bleak House*, smog, rain, and haze occlude the conscious thought and dissolve the physical coherence of Esther Summerson and her mother Lady Dedlock—the novel's most significant female characters. These moments of what I refer to as “atmospheric effacement” force us to acknowledge that while critics have maintained that the major characters in *Bleak House* are consistently embodied and possess distinctive subjectivities, this is not entirely the case. The dense atmospheres that define the landscape of *Bleak House*, from a foggy London to a flooded Lincolnshire, reveal a central ambiguity about the physical and psychological particularity of female characters. Although the landscape has a substance that reflects the social institutions *Bleak House* critiques, Dickens's women protagonists periodically merge with the air. Accordingly, literary evocations of atmosphere within the novel are not merely metaphorical signposts, passive settings that elicit mood, or allusions that direct the reader's attention to subtleties

of character or plot. Instead, atmosphere in *Bleak House* plays an active diegetic role by establishing the volatility of Esther Summerson's and Lady Dedlock's embodiment and subjectivity.

This dissolution of the novel's female protagonists suggests we should expand previous readings of the novel's atmosphere that focus predominantly on fog as a metaphor for Britain's mystifying social systems and uphold the interconnectedness of individuals within those systems. More important, the dissolution of female protagonists in *Bleak House* raises questions about the psychological depth and embodiment we traditionally associate with realist character. As William A. Cohen contends: "In proposing the body as the source and location of human essence, literary writers established a mode of representation—typified by characterological roundness, depth, and interiority" (xi). But *Bleak House* challenges the supposed inseparability of body and self that critics such as Cohen deem "the hallmark of high Victorian literary accomplishment" (xi). The novel's aerial metaphors and meteorological conditions suggest that female characters are opaque and unstable literary signifiers of a problematically embodied selfhood.

As I contend throughout this chapter, literary atmosphere also reshapes the notions of major and minor characterization Alex Woloch sets forth in his study of nineteenth-century realist fiction, *The One vs. The Many* (2003). Woloch's study builds on E.M. Forster's description in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), of "flat" characters as types or caricatures "constructed round a single idea or quality" and round characters as those that possess a full-fledged interiority (Forster 67). Woloch productively complicates Forster's argument by interpreting the complex interplay between major and minor characters in nineteenth-century fiction, and in Dickens's novels in particular, as "inclusive aesthetics" distinguished by "dual impulses to bring in a multitude of characters and to bring out the interiority of a singular protagonist" (30). "The dynamic interaction between flatness and roundness identified by Forster," Woloch asserts, "facilitates social realism's dual focus on psychological depth and social expansiveness" (31). As I argue throughout this dissertation, however,

the influence of literary atmosphere on representations of female interiority and embodiment in realist fiction reveals an unexamined, gender-specific reshaping of major characterization.

More specifically, this chapter demonstrates that the assertion within Victorian medical discourse, that women's bodies are fundamentally changeable—characterized by a physical and emotional volatility that, as Mary Poovey explains, “is inaugurated by puberty, signaled by menstruation, and epitomized in childbearing”—creates the conditions of possibility for representing female characters, and indeed, narrators, as similarly unstable literary subjects (36). Within the pages of *Bleak House*, atmospheric conditions literalize women's physical volatility on the one hand, and control this instability through their dulling and disorienting effects, on the other hand. The anesthetizing vapors that surround Esther as a series of urban fogs and perplexing climatic phenomena—and the “extremely trying” weather that causes her mother to lose a sense of herself—flatten the interiority of both women. This atmospheric effacement severs emotion from embodiment and—as I discuss at greater length in the final sections of this chapter—adopts the clinical discourse used to describe the neurological effects of the drug ether, which was discovered as a surgical anesthetic in the 1840s and frequently used to treat female patients. The inhalation of ether, which produced insensibility in moments of extreme physical or emotional intensity (namely, during childbirth or bouts of “hysteria”) therefore provides an essential historical context for understanding atmosphere's interference with Esther's narration and characterization. Likewise, the weather patterns that make the secret of Lady Dedlock's motherhood a cause for her emotional and physical dissolution further reveal an association between female subjectivity and volatile states of air.

In *Bleak House*, the scientific and etymological ties between the aerial ether and the eponymous chemical agent adopt a cultural discourse that understood women's bodies as fundamentally changeable and in need of regulation. For this reason, the apparently contradictory position Esther occupies within the novel—sometimes acting as an embodied and perceptive narrator and

occasionally dissolving into the atmosphere—draws attention to the instability of her narrative position. At seeming odds with this ethereal insensibility, however, is the fact that atmospheric vapor not only dulls Esther’s senses but also intermittently affords her a partial omniscience that resembles the disembodied point of view of novel’s third-person narrator. As I argue in the final section of this chapter, this periodic omniscience is significant because it suggests that only by leaving the gendered self behind—only by experiencing the literary ether as an agent that separates consciousness from sensation in a way similar to anesthetization—can the female persona act as an authoritative narrative voice.

1. Esther vs. Krook: The Gendered Discourse of Atmospheric Dissolution

Atmosphere in *Bleak House* acts as an agent of characterological effacement: It decomposes women’s bodies into discrete material parts, sunders their individual perception from cognition, and decouples embodiment and emotion. But this expression of the air and its material qualities effects Esther Summerson differently than the character Krook. Krook’s spontaneous combustion and air-borne dissemination, undoubtedly the most famous instance of atmospheric dissolution in *Bleak House*, differs radically from Esther’s exposure to the dulling and disorienting effects of the novel’s climate. As the novel’s parodic “Lord Chancellor,” and owner of the rag and bottle shop opposite the Court of Chancery, Krook exemplifies the fictive reciprocity between corrupted and corrupting social institutions, vulnerable bodies, and the foul city air. To be sure, Krook’s combustion plays the same metaphorical role as the fog that fills the opening pages of *Bleak House* and exemplifies England’s archaic and destructive social institutions on the one hand, and contemporary beliefs about miasma and contagion, on the other.¹³ His spontaneous combustion, like the organizational

¹³ See Q.D. Leavis’s assertion: “the nature of the fog that emanates from and is concentrated in the heart of London’s Chancery Court,” acts as a “parable” for “the bearing of Justice and Equity on religion, morals, and ethics, and on social sanctions and institutions” (124-25). For evidence of Dickens’s concerns about

power of Chancery of which “the fog and dirt . . . are its first symbols” conspires, as D.A. Miller asserts, to “insinuate itself [everywhere in *Bleak House*] by virtue of its quasi-alchemical subtlety” (61).

In keeping with Miller’s notion of fog and dirt as indicative of Chancery’s overarching corruption, scholars such as Lauren Goodlad and Laura Fasick agree that the novel’s pervasive fogs, like the “suffocating vapor” and “tainting sort of weather” that issue from Krook’s defiled chambers, evoke Dickens’s critique of the Public Health Act of 1848: the nation’s institutional response to public health reformer Edwin Chadwick’s 1842 *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (Dickens 402, 394).¹⁴ This critical consensus about the reciprocity of pervasive and ineffective social systems and atmospheric pollution illustrates how Krook’s bodily dissemination simply makes literal what we already know to be metaphorical. As the double for the Lord High Chancellor who sits “in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog . . . in his High Court of Chancery” (5), Krook’s decrepit body unmistakably stands in for what Goodlad terms the “semi-reformed, semi-antiquated institutional foundation” of England (88). Dickens’s omniscient narrator emphasizes this substitution when he states that Krook: “The Lord Chancellor of that court was true to his title in his last act, [and] has died the death of all Lord Chancellors in all Courts and of all authorities in all places under all names soever, where false pretences are made, and where injustice is done” (403). In other words, the novel clearly associates the explosion of Krook’s contaminated body and the subsequent dispersion of its “foetid effluvia” above London’s legal

miasma and sanitary reform, see his 10 May 1851 speech to the Metropolitan Sanitary Association reproduced in Ford and Monod’s edition of *Bleak House* (915-16). See also Litsios.

¹⁴ While epidemiological readings of the novel are too numerous to catalog here, recent articles by Steinlight and Yeats demonstrate continued critical interest in atmosphere as a conduit for disease. On the historical coexistence of miasmatic and germ theories, see Durbach 150-51. For a discussion of these theories in *Bleak House*, see Choi. For more on Esther’s illness, consult Jordan *Supposing Bleak House* 24.

district with the fog-ensconced High Court of Chancery, the suit of *Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce*, and their mutually infectious destruction of the lives they touch. By making this corruption visible in the form of an airborne contagion, the novel echoes the author's concern with and advocacy for improved urban sanitation (404).¹⁵

The toxic dissemination of the so-called Lord Chancellor's body unambiguously demonstrates that the corruption wrought by England's antiquated institutional and social systems is literally in the air: characters can see it, feel it, and sometimes even taste it—not only in the “greasy” substance and “queer kind of flavour” that hangs above Lincoln Inns Fields after Krook's ill-fated demise, but also in the pestilential gases that emanate from the slum of Tom-All-Alone's and in the rainy “lead-coloured view” outside “my Lady Dedlock's own windows” at Chesney Wold (12). The inefficiency of the archaic legal system wreathed in fog at the novel's opening are manifest in both the tainted urban “winds” that act as messengers of “Tom's corrupted blood” and the “deadened world” of fashionable society that is “sometimes unhealthy for want of air” (553, 11). It is not surprising, then, that critical interpretations of atmosphere in *Bleak House* consistently rely on the paradigm of what J. Hillis Miller refers to as the novel's representation of “the interconnectedness of people in all levels of society” (30).¹⁶

Although the novel's foggy climes ridicule a condition of England in which the atmosphere itself has “gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun,” the physical and emotional dissolution of the novel's female protagonists represents a different kind of atmospheric meaning: one that does not define characters in terms of their contemporary social and organizational environment (5). The young orphan Ada Clare, to whom Esther acts as a beloved

¹⁵ On Krook's combustion as an example of miasmatic contagion, see Hack 50; as a reiteration of the novel's fog and its social implications, consult Denman 134.

¹⁶ Buzard elaborates the nationalist implications of “such everything-is-connected arguments” (114).

companion, memorably evokes this characterological effacement (and its difference from the novel's allegorical fogs) early in the novel when she employs weather as a means of describing Esther's maternal actions and effusive good will. In the moments leading up to Ada's prescient comment, she and Esther recall their impressions of the hapless Jellyby family and its matriarch's imprudent focus on the "natives of Borriboola-Gha, on the left bank of the Niger" (38). After demurely suggesting that Mrs. Jellyby's "telescopic philanthropy" has caused her to neglect her domestic affairs, Ada and Esther unwittingly encourage Jarndyce to propose a remedy suitable for the resulting "devilish state" of the Jellyby children. Alighting on the palliative effects of Victorian confectionary, Jarndyce exclaims: "Now, if it had rained sugar-plums, or three-cornered raspberry tarts, or anything of that sort!" Ada's prompt response to this conjecture startles Jarndyce and the reader alike: "O, cousin—" she hastily replies, "It did better than that. It rained Esther" (61).

Unlike Krook's combustion, which points to the corruption of England's institutional foundation, Ada's atmospheric metaphor bears no immediately familiar referent. Although the precipitation of Esther's body in this scene stands in for a diffuse goodness (much like Krook's explosion stands in for a pervasive badness), this dissolution is a recursive act that defines her character throughout the novel. Moreover, Ada's incomplete metaphor tellingly represents Esther's actions as spontaneous and unmotivated. Despite the fact that Esther nursed the Jellyby children, "coaxed them to sleep, washed and dressed them, told them stories, kept them quiet, bought them keepsakes"—the rhetorical transformation of her body into an inanimate precipitate uncouples these affectionate qualities from her characterization (61). This sundering of Esther's embodiment from her emotions diminishes her individual particularity and suggests that characterization is just one of the atmospheric effects that persists throughout the novel. In other words, Ada's comment, much like the atmospheres in Hardy's much later novels, renders bodily intention and human emotion akin to atoms: elements of matter that the air arbitrarily transmutes and disseminates. Thus, even

though Ada's noteworthy assertion that "it rained Esther" might initially seem to emphasize the maternal behaviors Esther exhibits towards the Jellyby children, this atmospheric metaphor ultimately reveals the instability of the emotive and caring persona we have come to associate with Esther's character. Such a climatic metaphorical displacement reveals the persistent contradiction of Esther's character: ostensibly a nurturing figure, Esther's physical and psychic coherence is repeatedly effaced by the atmospheric conditions that enfold her and that she simultaneously enfolds.

Ada's surprising metaphor reduces Esther's emotion to something that, like the weather, is beyond the latter's subjective control. The notion that Esther's affection resides outside her body, rather than within it, sunders individuality from embodiment in way that disrupts our notion of what comprises character in the realist novel. Moreover, this climatic diffusion suggests that Esther's internal state is best understood when an atmospheric agent disperses her (in this case, the agent happens to be metaphorical). In direct opposition to the extreme embodiment the novel associates with Krook's combustion—whereby his toxicity goes everywhere and fills the air with its insistent corruption—Esther's character periodically dissolves into the aerial environment. The contrast between Esther, who sometimes loses her body and subjectivity altogether, and Krook, whose metaphorical function is realized in a gross state of extra-embodiment, therefore sharpens the distinction between the novel's representations of gendered characterization and atmospheric states. The assertion: "It rained Esther" establishes that as character and narrator alike, Esther is defined by the emotionally dulling and physically dislocating effects of the pervasive ether.

2. Into the Fog: Esther's Narrative Dilemma

At once there and not there, the air in *Bleak House* becomes important at precisely those moments when it alters Esther's character and reveals the underlying formal structures of the novel itself. When Dickens's protagonist arrives in London at the opening of her narrative, for example,

she finds herself in the middle of an impenetrable fog. After being greeted by the legal clerk Mr. Guppy, she attempts to make sense of her environment:

[Mr. Guppy] was very obliging, and as he handed me into a fly, after superintending the removal of my boxes, I asked him whether there was a great fire anywhere? For the streets were so full of dense brown smoke that scarcely anything was to be seen.

“Oh, dear no, miss,” he said. “This is a London particular.”

I had never heard of such a thing.

“A fog, miss,” said the young gentleman.

“Oh, indeed!” said I.

We drove slowly through the dirtiest and darkest streets that ever were seen in the world (I thought), and in such a distracting state of confusion that I wondered how the people kept their senses . . . (28-29)

Esther’s contemplation of how “the people” can possibly “ke[ep] their senses” amid London’s noxious atmosphere of moist air, coal smoke, and dust signals a dilemma that arises throughout her narration. The “London particular” in this scene does more than just affect the nameless people Esther mentions: its mix of urban pollution and natural humidity launches an assault on her sense and sensation.¹⁷ The ambiguous syntax of the phrase “We drove slowly . . . through the streets . . . and in such a distracting state of confusion . . .” muddles the distinction between Esther’s personal mystification and the state of confusion within the city streets. In this instance, her statement of what and whom we find in “such a distracting state of confusion” is as indistinct as the foggy cityscape she struggles to describe.

¹⁷. For the environmental causes of the infamous “London Particular,” see Thorsheim 29-30.

As the narrator of the retrospective events the novel *Bleak House* records, Esther's task of explaining what she once could not see—as well as her character's task of keeping her senses amid the disorienting aerial environment—makes it impossible for either the narrator or the character Esther to make sense of the world around her. Esther establishes this dual inability to claim an unobstructed point of view by using indirect discourse in the scene above. Her recollection of inquiring whether there was a great fire anywhere thus aligns her present tense narrative voice with the character that would have asked Guppy directly if there was indeed a “great fire.” This narrative style joins Esther's past and present states of mind, suggesting that her inability to make sense of her experience is ongoing.

Esther's partial understanding of and unclear suppositions about the fog therefore reinforce her continued inability to observe and reflect. Although her recollection—“We drove slowly through the dirtiest and darkest streets that ever were seen in the world (I thought)” — momentarily gestures toward a personal aside or promises to open a window onto her interiority, it ultimately begs the question ‘thought what?’ Esther's failure to clarify the content of her thought in this scene consequently discloses the opacity of her interiority. It also emphasizes her subjective uncertainty by suggesting that she could not then (and perhaps cannot now) compare the London streets to those of any other city. Esther's emotional and visual opacity in this scene therefore emphasizes the confusion that underlies even the most reflective moments in her narrative; it also demonstrates the essential role that literary atmosphere plays in thwarting her ability to understand. For instance, we might paraphrase her as saying: “The streets were so dark that I could not see clearly enough to judge how dirty or dark they actually were.” In this regard, Esther ascribes the origins of her visual and cognitive confusion to the dirty air around her rather than to a naive encounter with an unfamiliar urban terrain.

The constraints that literary atmosphere place on Esther's point of view provide an alternate, and previously unexamined, way of understanding the limited position that critics customarily attribute to her partial role within the novel's dual narrative. Esther's self-effacing excuses for her authorship, as well as her repeated attempts to excise her body from the narrative act, notoriously reinforce the limitations of her partial account. "It seems so curious to me to be obliged to write all this about myself!" she declares, "As if this narrative were the narrative of *my* life! But my little body will soon fall into the background now" (27). In this oft-discussed quotation, Dickens's protagonist signals the relative insignificance and instability of her own body by employing what Hilary Schor refers to as "the worst of female self-presentation" (103). Schor also notes, however, that "the 'place' [Esther] accepts is one that the split narration seems to need as well: it thrives on the contrast between the magisterial (a.k.a Dickensian) third-person narrator . . . and Esther's still, small voice—the voice of the least powerful person in the novel who is still capable . . . of penning a narrative" (103). While Schor focuses primarily on the institutional constraints, gender roles, and class ideologies that inform Esther's proclamation of her smallness, Helena Michie writes about Esther's self-effacement in relation to her disfigurement. For both of these critics, Esther's self-effacements are ultimately diminished by her overriding sense of self. For Schor, Esther's self-realization takes the form of a legacy of female authorship she inherits from her mother; for Michie, the unnamed disease that disfigures Esther allows her to "come into selfhood and physicality through scarring" (207).

As Esther's atmospheric sensitivities teach us, though, the novel's diegetic structures efface her narrative voice and character irrespective of her self-proclaimed insignificance or physical disfigurement. In other words, although Esther's body does fall into the background of the novel, the fact that she periodically recedes is not solely a result of self-effacement or limited position within the dual narrative. Nor can we completely recuperate Esther's character by examining her

empowering authorship or physical self-realization as Schor and Michie suggest we might. Instead, the novel's aerial environments create and maintain Esther's dissoluble subjectivity. Like the theatrical staging that placed characters in the "background" by locating them behind objects of greater attention, the environment in *Bleak House* ensures that Esther's body is a similarly diminished object of readerly attention.¹⁸

The ability of atmosphere to background Esther by periodically absorbing and dissolving her gendered embodiment and overshadowing her interiority also mitigates readings, such as John Jordan's that see her self-abasements as part of the psychoanalytic "formation of subjectivity" that *Bleak House* anticipates (Jordan 3). Jordan comments on Esther's pronouncement: "I have a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write my portion of these pages, for I know I am not clever" (17). He persuasively argues that "part of Esther's goal in writing is . . . to understand not the facts of her life but their meaning . . . in retelling [her story], she is in effect re-experiencing it as she writes" (5). This therapeutic process includes Esther's tendency to diminish herself for "when [Esther] says she is 'not clever' or 'not good' or do[es] not know' something, not only is the reverse often objectively the case, but the form and context of her statement seem to demand disconfirmation" (10). Jordan's approach to analyzing Esther's character as an embodied representation of an individual subject is echoed by Audrey Jaffe's interpretation of Esther's authorship in *Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative and the Subject of Omniscience* (1991). Jaffe suggests that Esther's self-effacement is part of "the construction of the social subject" that allows her to "structure herself as subject by structuring herself as object, directing the course of her narrative and articulating her own identity while claiming that it is articulated by others" (148, 135).

Among modern critics of *Bleak House*, then, there is a general consensus that Esther cannot help but become a more complete and coherent subject as she writes; her status as author forces her

¹⁸. See "background" *OED*. The definition dates from William Wycherley's play *Love in a Wood* (1672).

to embrace (and readers to acknowledge) her rich, if subtle, subjectivity.¹⁹ According to such readings, the restrained Victorian femininity inherent in Esther's self-effacements allows her to maintain an authorial (and authoritative) position in a novel shaped by conservative mid-century gender ideologies. Yet, if Esther understands—much like the scholars who deconstruct her—that her “little body” is inextricably bound to her ability to wield narrative authority, then the obfuscating fogs that surround and dissolve her body evince a form of narratological effacement that Esther cannot control. Recuperative readings of Esther's femininity and subjectivity, persuasive as they may be, overlook what the narrating Esther understands—that atmospheric conditions foreshorten her point of view. In the scene below, Esther describes her awareness of this predicament.

After their fog-filled and disorienting journey across town, Mr. Guppy, the law clerk, deposits Esther at the office of Kenge and Carboy's. Handing her a newspaper, he directs her attention toward a small looking-glass: “In case you should wish to look at yourself, miss, after the journey,” he remarks (30). As Esther waits to be received by her guardian's lawyer she explains:

Everything was so strange—the stranger from its being night in the day-time . . . that I read the words in the newspaper without knowing what they meant and found myself reading the same words repeatedly. As it was of no use going on in that way, I put the paper down, took a peep at my bonnet in the glass to see if it was neat, and looked at the room, which was not half lighted, and at the . . . piles of writings, and at a bookcase full of the most inexpressive-looking books that ever had anything to say for themselves. Then I went on, thinking, thinking, thinking; and the fire went on burning, burning, burning; and the candles went on flickering and guttering, and

¹⁹ See also Newsom's claim in “*Villette and Bleak House*” that Esther transforms from something of a “nobody” to a “somebody” through narration and middle-class social mobility (80-81).

there were no snuffers—until the young gentleman by-and-bye brought a very dirty pair; for two hours. (30)

On the one hand, the dark and hazy setting of Kenge and Carboy's extends the opening scene of the novel and uses fog as a symbol for the murky institution of the law. The "piles of writings" and "inexpressive-looking books" that Esther observes are legal documents whose arcane contents contribute to the transmission of text that makes *Bleak House*—as J. Hillis Miller famously remarks—a "document about the interpretation of documents" (29). On the other hand, her description of the offices focuses less on the institutional context of her foggy environment than on the paradoxical modes of signification that abound in such a disorienting atmosphere. Esther's attention to both the books that look "inexpressive," and the daytime curiously bereft of light, reveals her confusion about it being "night in the daytime" rather than her frustration with alienating practices of law. The peculiarity of this scene directs the reader's attention to Esther's paradoxical position of having to narrate from an obstructed vantage point. Insufficient illumination—the futile "burning, burning, burning" of the fire light and the impotent "flickering and guttering" of the candles—symbolize the unproductive quality of Esther's "thinking, thinking, thinking," which continues its fruitless process until Guppy's re-entrance at the close of the episode.

The faltering sources of light in this passage therefore direct our attention to the darkened atmosphere that hinders Esther's ability to see and think, which traditionally form cornerstones of first-person narration in the Victorian novel. Her recollection: "I read the words in the newspaper without knowing what they meant and found myself reading the same words repeatedly" invites us to consider the incongruity of reading without understanding and, by extension, narrating without observing. Importantly, the experience of reading without understanding is often an effect of undue attention to the subjective—a compulsory turn inward that occurs when an individual's errant thoughts overpower the printed word. By contrast, Esther experiences distraction as external rather

than internal: it is not the insistence of her thoughts that troubles her, but rather the exterior conditions of the air. In contrast to the round and full interiority we traditionally associate with the realist subject, the environment effaces Esther.

Esther's inability to make sense of the words she reads, just as she fails to understand how people can "make sense" of the city amid the fog, notably subjects written expression to the same atmospheric obfuscation as the landscape. The dual effacement of Esther's cognition and vision therefore threaten to render her narrative as useless as the legal texts that ought to be expressive but have little "to say for themselves." Consequently, Esther's persistence in the paradoxical process of reading without understanding and her frustrated realization that "it was of no use going on in that way," instances the struggle she has not only in "beginning to write my portion of these pages" but also in sustaining a subjective authorial perspective throughout those pages (17).

As the psychological effects of atmosphere in this scene suggest, dense fogs absorb Esther's attention and cloud her narrative point of view. Equally significant, is the ability of aerial conditions to obscure her embodiment. When Esther looks in the mirror Guppy points her towards, she does not describe a reflection of her face but only the image of her bonnet, as if the fragmented and material signifiers of an evaporated self are all that remain to mark the character "Esther." This phenomenon has been remarked upon by commentators on illustrations of Esther by Halbot K. Browne (a.k.a. "Phiz") published in the monthly numbers of *Bleak House*. As Richard L. Stein notes, for instance, Phiz's illustrations regularly replace Esther's face with a view of her bonnet. But what is less often remarked upon is the relationship between Esther's occluded embodiment in these illustrations and the presence of dense atmospheres that Stein notes. He associates Phiz's use of "sparse, suggestive outline" in the novel's first illustration (see fig. 1) with "hints of . . . atmosphere (the dim background through which a coach and buildings vaguely appear) [that] subtly evoke the foggy, claustrophobic world of the novel's opening paragraphs" (173).



Fig. 1 “The Little old Lady” Etching by Phiz (Halbot K. Browne) following chapter three of *Bleak House* London: Bradbury and Evans, 1853. Scanned Image by George P. Landow.

< <http://www.victorianweb.org/victorian/art/illustration/phiz/bleakhouse/2.html> >.

Stein goes on to note, without making any connection between the observations, that in this initial illustration “Esther’s face is averted, [and] hidden by her bonnet, suggesting the obscurity of her birth and what will increasingly be the importance of her features” (173-74). My contention is that the aerial conditions of this scene, like those in the scene at Kenge and Carboy’s, create—rather than form a backdrop for—Esther’s physical effacement.²⁰

Esther’s lack of coherent embodiment re-emerges in a subsequent scene in the early portion of *Bleak House* when Guppy escorts her to her temporary lodgings at the Jellyby residence located on “a narrow street of high houses, like an oblong cistern to hold the fog” (36). At this juncture, climatic conditions prompt Guppy to comment on Esther’s appearance for the second time:

“This is about a London particular NOW, ain’t it, miss?” He seemed quite delighted with it on my account.

“The fog is very dense indeed!” said I.

“Not that it affects you, though, I’m sure,” said Mr. Guppy, putting up the steps.

“On the contrary, it seems to do you good, miss, judging from your appearance.”

(36)

Guppy’s oblique compliment builds on the disembodiment suggested by Esther’s inability to see her reflection in the law-office glass: In the midst of such a thick “London particular,” he would not be able to see Esther clearly, if at all. Therefore his suggestion that the fog “does [Esther] good” emphasizes that the novel regularly represents Esther not as an embodied subject but rather as a psychologically opaque and invisible body. This tendency to focus on the insubstantiality of Esther’s

²⁰ See also Jordan’s chapter on illustration in *Supposing Bleak House*. There, he contends: “Esther’s bodily posture and averted face [act] as indications of her desire as both narrator and retrospective focalizer to hide herself from the reader/viewer” (36).

physical self and the inaccessibility of her interiority reveals an extra-diegetic truth we traditionally view as anathema to realist representation—the fact that “Esther” has no body at all. This physical and psychic instability of the female body informs the failure of the novel’s protagonists to occupy a stable embodiment or manifest the psychological depth critics continue to associate with major characters in realist fiction. This effacement, figured throughout the novel in terms of a marked sensitivity to ether, pinpoints female characters as problematic realist subjects.

Given the gendered weight of Esther’s atmospheric effacement, we should question readings such as Newsom’s that assert that the entirety of *Bleak House* stems from her consciousness. Attempting to forge an explanation for the oddity of Dickens’s double narrative—in which each speaker expresses an awareness of the story the other tells—Newsom argues that, “Esther, in particular, often falls into the voice of the other narrator, and this suggests that we may read them as alter egos” (*Romantic Side* 87). D.A. Miller makes a similar claim when he asserts: “the two narrations [tend] to converge as Esther’s account comes to include characters and information that at first appeared exclusively in the anonymous one. In other words, the novel dramatizes the liabilities of fragmentation and postponement within the hopeful prospect that they will eventually be overcome” (90). Each of these views grants Esther’s character a clear and coherent vision that the novel’s atmospheres repeatedly elide (87). Yet according to Newsom, “the only way to explain the double narrative according to even the loosest standards of ‘realism’ is to say that Esther has chosen to write in the first person, but has written an ‘other,’ third-person narrative to cover those events of her story in which she has not directly participated” (87). Schor concurs: “it seems to me entirely possible to read ‘his’ [the narrator’s] text as ‘her’ imaginings of those scenes from which she is absent . . . In fact, one could postulate that in writing the other narrative Esther has achieved what she claimed she wanted in her own: a text in which her little body will, in fact, ‘fall into the background’” (117).

Newsom's and Schor's respective assertions afford Esther a totalizing point of view that overlooks the degree to which her effacement is structural as well as characterological. In other words, for such an explanation of Esther's embodied authorship to be convincing, we must ignore the fact that the atmosphere acts as an active diegetic force that pushes her body into the environmental background. In light of Esther's inability to maintain an embodied selfhood amidst overwhelming literary climates, reading her self-alienation as part of a recuperative psychoanalytic process or an authorial sleight of hand ignores the characterological effacements that are not generated by Esther's claims alone, but built into the structure of the novel itself. Contrary to readings that interpret Esther's authorship as totalizing, the novel's dulling and obfuscating environments urge us to acknowledge that, contrary to what Newsom and Schor suggest, inside the fictional world, the omniscient narrator possesses an incorporeal voice that is more stable than that of the tentatively embodied female narrator.

Reading the entirety of *Bleak House* as a product of Esther's consciousness therefore entails overlooking the environmental conditions that undermine her character as well as her narration. These destabilizing conditions also disclose one of the underlying truths of literary realism: that extra-diegetically characters lack an actual body. The novel's environments draw attention to this fact by focusing on the physical instability and psychic opacity of female characters, thereby assailing the suspension of disbelief that allows readers to imagine that female protagonists are complete human subjects. Esther's effacement is particularly instructive because it demonstrates that atmosphere—specifically its ability to provoke disembodiment and dull individual emotion—mediates the relationship between volatile female bodies and realist modes of characterization. By adopting the anxiety surrounding female subjectivity in Victorian culture at large, *Bleak House* evinces the need for literary representations of the ether, like the contemporary application of ether gas, as a way to help stabilize and represent that subjectivity.

3. Esther's Ether: Narration, Nineteenth-century Science, and the Study of Vapor

As I have been arguing, Esther's physical and psychological instability is best understood in terms of her inability to negotiate the relationship between emotion and embodiment—a relationship that is consistently mediated by the disorienting effects of the literary ether. We have seen how Esther's initial encounter with the "London particular," confuses her sensual orientation and subsequently, her narration. In the following scene atmospheric vapor replaces Esther's embodied consciousness altogether:

At first I was painfully awake, and vainly tried to lose myself, with my eyes closed, among the scenes of the day. At length, by slow degrees, they became indistinct and mingled. I began to lose the identity of the sleeper resting on me. Now it was Ada; now one of my old Reading friends from whom I could not believe I had so recently parted. Now it was the little mad woman worn out with curtseying and smiling; now, some one in authority at Bleak House. Lastly it was no one, and I was no one.

The purblind day was feebly struggling with the fog, when I opened my eyes . . .

(45)

This passage initially reads as a realistic description of the interstitial state between waking and sleeping. Upon closer examination, however, we realize that the fog—which emerges in the un-narrated space between the paragraphs—coincides with Esther's transition from an unconscious to a conscious state. Her paradoxical statement, at the end of the first paragraph: "I was no one," not only suggests that her insensibility is preceded by a complete loss of self but also affords this physical and psychic instability narrative significance. The novel might well recount the transition from the first to the second day of its first-person narrator's experience by foregrounding her embodiment and consciousness. "I fell asleep" or "I awoke, when," would be far less remarkable significations of Esther's selfhood. Yet the focus in this scene on becoming "no one," adamantly

refutes the hyper-subjectivity critics such as Newsom bestow upon Esther when they contend she is the sole narrator of *Bleak House*. Her surprising statement instead draws our attention to the notion that Esther can possess a subjectivity that remains outside the bounds of her own narrative consciousness. In this moment, the narrator Esther announces the lack of equivalence between the first-person pronoun “I” and the assumption that this imagined “I” is anyone at all. In doing so, she acknowledges an underlying truth about her character and the condition of realist representation at large: namely, that “Esther” can never be anyone—that in fact, being “no one,” inhabiting a non-identity traditionally associated with disembodied omniscient narration, is a viable and desirable mode of self-representation. More than that, this becoming “no one” emerges as an essential characteristic of ethereal consciousness and female characterization.

When Esther once again becomes someone, atmospheric agency facilitates her reemergence: “The purblind day was feebly struggling with the fog, when I opened my eyes,” Esther explains. Not only does this description of the sun emerging from an atmospheric haze precede Esther’s own awakening, but as the chapter’s narrator, her relegation of that waking to an ancillary adverbial clause, places emphasis on the agency of the daylight and fog rather than on her own vision and cognition. This substitution of the “purblind day” for Esther’s subjective perception implicitly acknowledges the ability of atmosphere to depersonalize her narrative voice.

Esther’s paradoxical description of her transformation to “no one”—her loss of self-identification and sensation—accordingly draws our attention to contemporary discourse surrounding chemical anesthetization. John Snow—famously remembered as the anesthetist to Queen Victoria during her delivery of Prince Leopold in 1853 (also the year of *Bleak House*’s final number)—was the first doctor to apply the scientific method to the study of anesthesia. His treatise *On the Inhalation of the Vapour of Ether* (1847) fostered widespread use of the drug as a surgical

anesthetic in Britain.²¹ More to the point, Snow's study contributed to previous medical research by cataloging the effects of ether on individual consciousness and formulating what he called the five degrees of etherization:

In the first degree of etherization I shall include the various changes of feeling that a person may experience, whilst he still retains a correct consciousness of where he is, and what is occurring around him, and a capacity to direct his voluntary movements. In what I call the second degree, mental functions may be exercised, and voluntary actions performed, but in a disordered manner. In the third degree, there is no evidence of any mental function being exercised, and consequently no voluntary motions occur; but muscular contractions . . . may sometimes take place as the effect of the ether, or of external impressions. In the fourth degree, no movements are seen except those of respiration, and they are incapable of being influenced by external impressions. In the fifth degree (not witnessed in the human being) the respiratory movements are more or less paralysed . . . (1-2)

The "slow degrees" by which Esther loses her sense of self and the "identity of the sleeper resting on [her]" in the aforementioned scene, recall the language Snow uses to describe both the "degrees of etherization" and the changes in consciousness patients experience under its influence. Not only does Esther's description of her disordered thought reflect the "insensibility" ether produces, but her description of this insensibility as an anodyne to being "painfully awake" also draws attention to the drug's dulling properties. Esther's soporific recollection of her past life in

²¹. By November 1847, less than a year after Snow's initial experiments with ether, chloroform had emerged as a favorable form of anesthetic due to the ease with which it could be inhaled and its superior strength (Vinten-Johansen 133).

Reading as well as her fantasy of being with someone in authority at Bleak House—where she has yet to arrive—recall another common effect of etherization: “The dreams which patients so often say that they have had,” Snow explains, “take place only in the second degree of etherization . . . [these] dreams . . . often refer to early periods of his life; and a great number of patients dream that they are traveling” (11).

Critics have already noticed how Snow’s epidemiological studies influence Dickens’s representations of disease in *Bleak House*.²² As I suggest here, however, Snow’s study of atmospheric gasses and their consciousness-altering effects provide a vital means of understanding the novel’s aerial environments. His work is particularly important because it helps forge the popular association between aerial conceptions of the ether and the eponymous chemical agent. Specifically, Snow studied how ether evaporated. Although surgeons had previously administered the drug to patients by holding a treated handkerchief to their mouth or inserting an ether-soaked sponge into the bowl of a pipe, Snow developed an inhaler that regulated the ratio of “atmospheric air” to “vapourized” ether (fig. 2). As the patient inhaled, her breath drew the vapor of liquid ether through a spiral chamber warmed by a water bath; this process regulated the ether’s evaporation by insulating it from the temperature of the external air. In the following description of his inhaler, Snow notably compares the chemical and climatic formation of vapor. “When an inspiration is taken,” he explains, “the air, having entered by [a] tube . . . passes round four times on the surface of the ether and becomes saturated with its vapour, and expanded by it, in the same way that air gets saturated and expanded with the vapour of water in passing over the surface of the sea” (19).

²² See Pamela K. Gilbert chapters four and five. During the Cholera outbreak of 1849 Snow discovered that the disease was waterborne, predating the acceptance of germ theory by nearly twenty years. For an overview of his discovery, see Stephanie Snow. Although epidemiological readings of atmosphere in *Bleak House* are too numerous to catalog here, see for example, Steinlight.

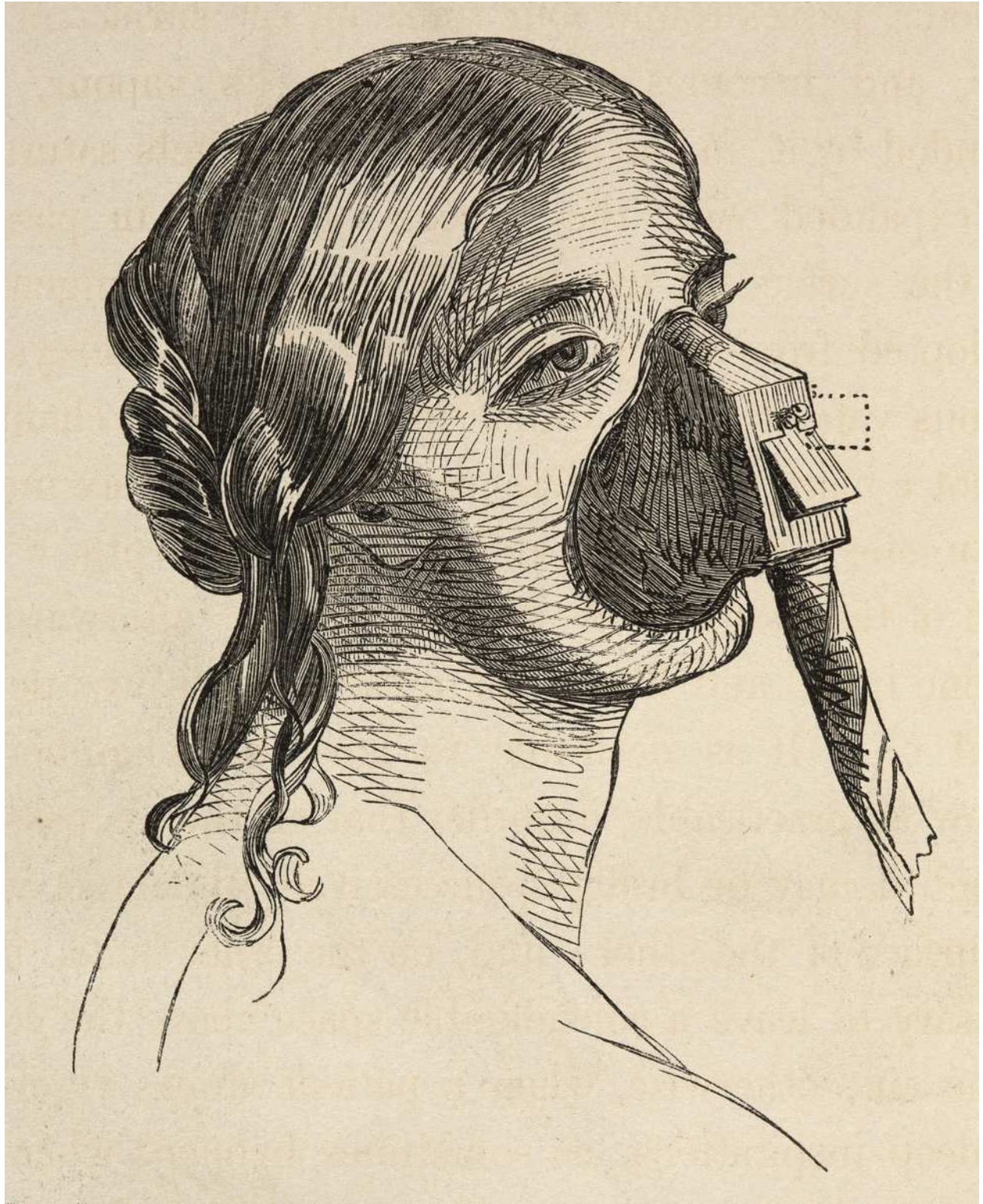


Fig. 2. Illustration of John Snow's ether apparatus. Engraving, from *On the Inhalation of the Vapour of Ether in Surgical Operations* (London: John Churchill, 1847), 18. Photograph courtesy of the History & Special Collections for the Sciences, Library Special Collections, UCLA.

Snow's association between atmospheric conditions and the medical application of vapor adopts a discourse central to eighteenth and early nineteenth-century physiology—in particular the study of “Pneumatic medicine” and the work of natural philosopher Joseph Priestley. Priestley's multi-volume publication *Experiments and Observations on Different Kinds of Air* (1774, 1775, 1777) describes the author's discovery of seven gasses including, most famously, the one French chemist Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier later named Oxygen. Following his investigations into the contents of the air, Priestley recommended that physicians experiment with the inhalation of gas as a treatment for respiratory illnesses including tuberculosis. Four years later, fellow scientist Humphrey Davy, discovered that the inhalation of nitrous oxide (one of the seven gases Priestly had discovered during the 1770s) could be used to alter consciousness and make people insensible to pain (Sykes 7).

By the beginning of the nineteenth century in Britain, scientific studies of the air and the discovery of atmospheric gasses as a means of altering individual consciousness were widely acknowledged. As historian Alison Winter points out, nitrous oxide and ether were “witnessed by virtually all ranks of society, and they could be obtained commercially” well before they were recognized as having anesthetic properties beneficial for surgery (34-36).²³ “Ether frolics” or social gatherings where guests would inhale the drug to produce euphoria (the stage of etherization preceding insensibility) were a relatively common occurrence.²⁴

²³. Although brief experiments with nitrous oxide in dental procedures were recorded in the early 1840s, the first public surgical use of ether took place in 1846 in Boston, Massachusetts. The painless removal of a tooth convinced the medical community of ether's efficacy; two months after Morton's demonstration, the British Surgeon and Dentist James Robinson successfully administered the drug in a public demonstration in London, which Snow attended (Sykes 11-15).


²⁴. Winter and Sykes have commented on the oddity of ether and nitrous oxide having been used for recreational purposes more than fifty years before they were used as an anesthetic. “One rather obvious

**A GRAND
EXHIBITION**

OF THE EFFECTS PRODUCED BY INHALING
NITROUS OXIDE, EXHILERATING, OR

LAUGHING GAS!

WILL BE GIVEN AT *The Masonic Hall*
Wednesday EVENING, 15th



50 GALLONS OF GAS
will be
prepared and administered
to all in the audience
who desire to inhale it.

MEN will be invited from the audience, to protect those under the influence of the Gas from injuring themselves or others. This course is adopted that no apprehension of danger may be entertained. Probably no one will attempt to fight.

THE EFFECT OF THE GAS is to make those who inhale it, either
LAUGH, SING, DANCE, SPEAK OR FIGHT, &c. &c.
according to the leading trait of their character. They seem to retain consciousness enough not to say or do that which they would have occasion to regret.

N. B. The Gas will be administered only to gentlemen of the first respectability. The object is to make the entertainment in every respect, a genteel affair.

Those who inhale the Gas once, are always anxious to inhale it the second time. There is not an exception to this rule.
No language can describe the delightful sensation produced. Robert Southey, (poet) once said that "the atmosphere of the highest of all possible heavens must be composed of this Gas."
For a full account of the effect produced upon some of the most distinguished men of Europe, see Hooper's Medical Dictionary, under the head of Nitrogen.

Date: 1845 #403, Buck Hill Associates, Johnsburg, N.Y.

Fig. 3. American Imprint of British Playbill from 1845.

< <http://www.general-anaesthesia.com/people/laughinggas-poster.html> >

point,” Winter explains, “is that sensation and insensibility had a very different significance in the nineteenth century from what they have come to mean since anesthesia became a routine part of medical practice” (34).

So were “Grand exhibitions” like the one advertised on a British playbill from 1845, which promises a demonstration of the remarkable “effects produced by inhaling nitrous Oxide” (fig. 3). The bottom of the advertisement tellingly includes a quote from Poet Laureate Robert Southey claiming: “the atmosphere of the highest of all possible heavens must be composed of this Gas,” suggesting the prevalent literary notion that atmosphere could alter the senses.²⁵

Thus, while the pollution and fog of the “London particular” rendered the city’s industrial pollution airborne, trains and boats enabled many Victorians to visualize commercial progress in the form of steam. These contemporary notions of atmosphere and scientific progress are ones James Robinson, the first surgeon to use ether successfully as an anesthetic in England, emphasizes in a 1847 letter to *Medical Times*. Suggesting that the vapor of ether will revolutionize scientific studies of the body and mind just as the vapor of steam had revolutionized the modern world, he insists: “This new application of steam will be, indeed, a wide blessing and the steam of ether and other substances innumerable, if properly applied, may lead to results as new, whether in surgery, physiology, or psychology as the steam of water and its application has been in the physical, domestic, and social existence of mankind” (274).²⁶ Thus, although the mid-century air was thick with the haze of imagined miasmas and the visible signs of industrial pollution, it was also significantly seen as the origin of and repository for vapors that suspended sensation.

For these reasons, the double meaning of “ether” as referring both to the “colourless, light, volatile liquid resulting from the action of sulphuric acid upon alcohol” and “the upper regions of space beyond the clouds” are part of the cultural history that I am arguing shapes the atmospheric effacement of character in *Bleak House* (“Ether,” def. 2a). Critics have often associated Esther’s Christian name with the biblical queen, but read in light of the novel’s ongoing concern with

²⁵. For more on Southey and the rise of pneumatic science see Mike Jay.

²⁶. Also quoted in Vinten-Johansen 135.

atmospheric conditions, her name evinces a telling connection to the chemical substance ether and the upper aerial realms known by the same name.²⁷ “Ester”—a compound ether formed by Oxygen-acids—draws attention to both the atmospheric and chemical definitions of the term “Ether” that lie beneath the name of Dickens’s protagonist.

Etymologically, the chemical signification of an “ester” as well both aerial and chemical meanings of the term “ether” were fully known and decidedly associated with one another by the mid-Victorian period. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the earliest use of the word “ether” in a 1398 translation of the Latin scientific encyclopedia *De proprietatibus rerum* of Bartholomaeus Anglicus. Defined as “an element filling all space beyond the sphere of the moon, and as the constituent substance of the stars and planets and of their spheres,” this use of the term is derived from ancient cosmological speculation and was supposed by some “to be the constituent substance, or one of the constituents, of the soul” (“Ether,” def. 2a). The first known use of the word “ether” in a chemical context appears three hundred and sixty years later in an article in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* (1758) by the physician and experimental chemist William Lewis in which he describes the “the subtile fluid, prepared from vinous spirits with the vitriolic acid, called by the chemists æther” (“Ether,” def. 6a). In the following century, the word “ester” entered the English language and was first defined by Henry Watt in his 1852 translation of volume seven of Leopold Gmelin’s *Hand-book of Chemistry* 1848-1871. As Gmelin writes, “I formerly distinguished these compounds by the name of Naphthas produced by oxygen-acids (*Naphthen durch Sauers[A]offsäuren erzeugt*); but I now propose for them the term *Ester*” (“Ester,” def. 1a).

By the time Dickens was writing in the 1850s, Esther’s given name would have suggested both the chemical substance ester and the ether of which it was comprised. At seeming odds with

²⁷. For a thorough consideration of the significance Esther’s given name, surnames, and nicknames see Jordan (9-11).

the connotations of atmosphere and insensibility suggested by the etymological history of an ester, however, the surname “Summerson” evokes clear and unobstructed weather. This inherent inconsistency in Esther’s name reveals the instability of her identity and narrative function. Like the other forms of volatility Esther evinces—her awkward oscillation between character and narrator, bodily coherence and dissolution, being some one and “no one”—her relationship to the atmosphere, intrinsic in her character’s name, discloses the extent to which she is defined by the novel’s variations in climate.

Viewed in light of mid-Victorian biomedical perceptions of female embodiment, the opposing significations of Esther’s name and the instability we associate with her role as both character and narrator, suggest a characteristic female precariousness. As Mary Poovey explains, the contemporary medical profession represented women as physically and psychologically unstable and touted “periodicity,” the physical and emotional fluctuation governed by women’s life cycles, as a physiological basis for their perceived emotional instability. As Poovey asserts, “representing woman as an inherently unstable female body authorizes ceaseless medical monitoring and control” (147). This representation not only “mandates the medical profession’s superintendence of women” but also gives rise to the assumption that “woman’s reproductive function defines her character, position, and value, that this function is only one sign of an innate periodicity, and that this biological periodicity influences and is influenced by an array of nervous disorders. . . . This set of assumptions is also the physiological basis offered for what was generally held to be woman’s greater emotional volatility” (146).

The notion that women’s bodies were both defined by their reproductive function and physically and psychologically unstable, gives rise, as Poovey notes, to the Victorian discourse about women’s sensitivity to nervous disorders and hysteria which were viewed as a result both of periodicity and childbearing (147). Significantly, ether was used to treat both conditions: to control,

in other words, the vagaries of female emotion and embodiment. The administration of ether, and later chloroform, to anesthetize women during childbirth and subdue “hysterical” fits therefore emphasizes the degree to which women’s psychology and physicality were associated with sexuality and reproduction that required medical regulation.²⁸ The need for such regulation was inseparable, as Poovey and others helpfully demonstrate, from debates about the safety, propriety, and efficacy of using ether and chloroform to treat female patients.

Dickens was personally familiar with these contemporary debates and he went to great lengths to ensure that his wife, Catherine Hogarth, had access to chloroform during the delivery of their eighth child in 1848. In a letter to his friend William Macready announcing his son’s birth, Dickens writes: “I had made myself thoroughly acquainted in Edinburgh with the *facts* of chloroform—in contradistinction to the talk about it—and had insisted on the attendance of a gentleman from Bartholomew’s Hospital, who administers it in the operations there, and has given it four or five thousand times. I had also promised her that she should have it. The doctors were dead against it, but I stood my ground and (thank God) triumphantly” (*Letters* 5: 486-487).

Dickens’s letter makes clear that the gendered implications of the use of ether and its effects on women’s consciousness and embodiment were both widely known and of specific interest to him. Consequently, the ability of the ether to dull Esther’s consciousness and periodically transform her perception employs the cultural discourse that surrounds anesthetization as a form of gendered narrative instability. The tendency for atmosphere to mediate between Esther’s embodiment and interiority consequently evokes the ways in which the vapor of ether was seen as regulating women’s unstable bodies. This historical and cultural confluence becomes increasingly evident when we consider how Esther’s mother, Lady Dedlock, also experiences a lack of control over her emotion

²⁸. For more on ether as a treatment for hysterics, a practice adopted by neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot in his infamous treatment of hysterics at the Salpêtrière during the 1870s, see Didi-Huberman 276.

and embodied consciousness in the midst of overpowering atmospheric conditions.

4. Esther and Lady Dedlock: The Affective Precipitation of Female Character

Lady Dedlock is arguably the most significant maternal figure in *Bleak House*—in part because her motherhood is so intensely silenced. Unlike the nicknames “Mother Hubbard” and “Dame Durden” that characterize Esther as a mother before her time, the novel’s omniscient narrator initially portrays Lady Dedlock as the affective inverse of Esther.²⁹ In opposition to the excess of emotion that leads Esther to shower so much affection on the Jellyby children that her body metaphorically dissolves into a shower of sweets, Lady Dedlock is markedly “childless”; her character is defined not by an emotive dissolution but rather by a frigid solidity. In contrast to Alexander the Great’s tearful recognition that “he had no more worlds to conquer,” for example, Dickens’s narrator explains: “My Lady Dedlock, having conquered *her* world, fell, not into the melting, but rather into the freezing, mood. An exhausted composure, a worn-out placidity, an equanimity of fatigue not to be ruffled by interest or satisfaction, are the trophies of her victory” (13).

As this passage obliquely suggests, beneath Lady Dedlock’s “frozen” affect and childless character lies the history of an intensely emotive and sorrowful past. Readers of *Bleak House* will remember that her “secret”—her affair with Captain Hawdon and the subsequent birth of an illegitimate child she believes dead—informs one of the novel’s central plot lines. Lady Dedlock tries to conceal the details of this account until, in the novel’s fifty-fifth chapter, her secret comes to light and she writes a confession to Sir Leicester before fleeing her home at Chesney Wold. These details are revealed in two key scenes. In the first, occurs in chapter three when Lady Dedlock realizes that the legal writer “Nemo”—whose hand she recognizes in an affidavit—is her former lover. The second takes place in chapter thirty-seven when she realizes that Esther is her daughter. Each of

²⁹ In this connection see Jordan 11.

these scenes demonstrates that the telling of Lady Dedlock's story is markedly outside her control; her plot line is moved forward by the introduction of other characters' evidence (the lawyer Tulkinghorn's introduction of an affidavit; Guppy's recognition of the facial resemblance between Esther and her mother), and by her inability to maintain control of her own emotion, and subsequently, her embodiment. In the scene below, she begins to faint as Tulkinghorn reads the legal papers copied by Nemo. Significantly, Sir Leicester represents his wife's emotional and psychological flux as a response to atmospheric conditions rather than the excess of emotion the reader understands to be the cause of her fit:

Mr. Tulkinghorn reads again. The heat is greater, my Lady screens her face. Sir Leicester doses [*sic*], starts up suddenly, and cries "Eh? what do you say?"

"I say I am afraid," says Mr. Tulkinghorn, who has risen hastily, "that Lady Dedlock is ill."

"Faint," my Lady murmurs with white lips, "only that; but it is like the faintness of death. Don't speak to me. Ring, and take me to my room!" . . .

"Better now," quoth Sir Leicester, motioning the lawyer to sit down and read to him alone. "I have been quite alarmed. I never knew my Lady swoon before. But the weather is extremely trying—" (16-17)

Fainting in this scene is both a climactic and climatic action. Lady Dedlock's inability to control her emotion—and subsequently her story—manifests itself in a loss of bodily control that ultimately leads Tulkinghorn to discover her past. If fainting is commonly associated with changes in air quality or an inability to breathe properly, this scene demonstrates that atmosphere is more tellingly associated with an insensibility that attempts (in this case unsuccessfully) to counter or subdue an excess of female sentiment. Sir Leicester's suggestion that the "extremely trying" weather

causes his wife to “swoon” accordingly discloses atmosphere’s ability to mediate between female characters’ sensation and their gendered embodiment.

Notably, Lady Dedlock’s swoon immediately precedes the beginning of Esther’s narrative in chapter three and the introduction of the famous London particular that makes her wonder how “people kept their senses.” Sir Dedlock’s claim that his wife suffers from “extremely trying” weather is significant not only because it links the novel’s atmospheric conditions to female insensibility, but also because it conflates Lady Dedlock’s loss of bodily control with Esther’s obfuscated point of view in the next. This confluence is further supported by the unnamed narrator’s earlier description of Lady Dedlock as so thoroughly ensconced in the upper-class “world of fashion” that she experiences a lack of perception as acute as Esther’s experience of the disorienting London fog. The “evil” of the fashionable world, is that it dulls sense and sensation; it is “wrapped up in too much jeweller’s cotton . . . and cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds, and cannot see them as they circle round the sun. It is a deadened world, and its growth is sometimes unhealthy for want of air” (11). Lady Dedlock is so thoroughly ensconced in the stifling atmosphere of this milieu that, like Esther who “read the words in the newspaper without knowing what they meant,” she is deprived of an ability to “hear” or “see.” Accordingly, if the wet weather down in Lincolnshire dissolves the “freezing mood” that once allowed Lady Dedlock to author a suppressed version of her past, the fog that obfuscates Esther’s first-person point of view in London evinces a telling similarity to her mother’s effacement. For mother and daughter alike atmosphere acts as an insulating and disorienting agent: one that unyokes their embodied perception from their respective emotions and controls the stories they wish (or do not wish) to tell.

Just as Esther’s mothering of the Jellyby children results in her “raining,” once Lady Dedlock is forced to acknowledge her own motherhood she too experiences a dissipation of bodily coherence. In the following scene, Mr. Guppy reveals that Esther is Lady Dedlock’s daughter. At

this moment the “deadness” of Lady Dedlock’s solid and frosty condition dissolves, leaving in its wake not an emotive embodiment, but a diffusion of airborne atoms:

[She] sits . . . with her lips a little apart, her brow a little contracted, but for the moment dead. He sees her consciousness return, sees a tremor pass across her frame like a ripple over water, sees her lips shake, sees her compose them by a great effort, sees her force herself back to the knowledge of his presence and of what he has said. All this, so quickly, that her . . . dead condition seem[s] to have passed away like the features of those long-preserved dead bodies sometimes opened up in tombs, which, struck by the air like lightning, vanish in a breath. (362)

In this passage, Lady Dedlock’s “dead condition” is not a response to shock, but a semblance of her self-consciously controlled composure. Usually subdued by her icy demeanor, this dead condition suddenly dissolves when intense emotion moves her “like a ripple over water.” The disembodied effects of the air that strike the already dead mother “like lightening” initially seem to be confluent with this powerful emotion. Closer consideration reveals, however, that the air does not reverse the lifeless state Lady Dedlock has lived in for so long, but rather strikes her hermetically sealed body, causing it to disperse into airborne particles. In other words, the protagonist’s physical response to the shock of such overpowering emotion can result in nothing less than the complete dissolution of her subjectivity. Lady Dedlock in this scene, much like Hardy’s Tess Durbeyfield in *Cranborne Chase*, becomes most prominently atmospheric—most confluent with a molecular materiality—when the novel places her in conditions we would traditionally understand as affective.

From the point of this episode until Lady Dedlock’s death in chapter fifty-nine, the material conditions of the air sporadically stand in for her embodied particularity, marking the physical and psychological instability of her character. Her realization that the secret of Esther’s birth has become widely known prompts another moment of dissolution: “The complication of her shame, her dread,

remorse, and misery, overwhelms her at its height,” the novel’s narrator explains, “and even her strength of self-reliance is overturned and whirled away like a leaf before a mighty wind” (667). Female emotion “at its height” transforms the self-reliance we traditionally associate with Lady Dedlock’s character and renders her a province of the air. The reader last witnesses her living body at the end of chapter fifty-six when she “flutters away in the shrill frosty wind,” an assertion that recalls the narrator’s earlier analogy of Lady Dedlock (or, more properly, Lady Dedlock’s stoic reserve) blowing away like dust (667). It is no surprise, then, that three chapters later, Esther will find her mother’s corpse “On the step at the gate” of the burial ground that holds Nemo’s remains, “drenched in the fearful wet of such a place, which oozed and splashed down everywhere” (713). Finally given to “the melting mood,” Lady Dedlock’s emotion leads to her final bodily dissolution. The frozen and dead condition that insulated her from the dangerous fluctuations of an emotional and physical volatility are writ large in the saturated and stormy climate of the novel’s last chapters.

Esther’s claim to being “no one” which we see in her anesthetized disappearance into sleep during her first night in London thus bears a debt not only to the name of her deceased father, “Nemo,” but also—and more remarkably—to a matrilineal atmospheric effacement. Although Esther does not become a mother until the very end of the novel, the association between her affect and the novels’ obfuscating atmospheres suggests one of the ways in which her femininity threatens to destabilize the clarity of her point of view and the stability of her embodied narration. Accordingly, the atmospheric effacement of both Esther and Lady Dedlock suggests the anesthetizing and dislocating power of the ether as well as its special relevance to female subjects. The novels’ foggy and damp climate also points to an underlying diegetic truth: all characters’ bodies are fictive. As symbols of a pervasive physical and psychological instability, female protagonists in *Bleak House* disclose this truth despite their prominent position in the novel’s plot. As I consider in the final section of this chapter, Esther’s position as both a female protagonist and first-person

narrator occasionally aligns her physical instability with a disembodied voice typical of omniscient narration. What sets this occasional omniscience apart from the multi-sighted perception of the third-person narrator, however, is its association with an atmosphere that confuses self-perception and evokes dissonant sensations.

5. “Something Different from What I Then Was”: The Anodyne of Omniscience

Whereas Dickens’s omniscient narrator possesses an unproblematically abstract subjectivity, Esther is awkwardly embodied. At times she seems to leave her identity behind altogether (“Lastly, I was no one”) and, at others, she maintains a partial view of her self and the world around her. This uncertainty in Esther’s narration draws attention to the key difference between her dissolute embodiment and that of the omniscient narrator: although the third person narrator goes everywhere and sees everything, Esther’s “little body” is habitually entrenched in a disorienting ether. Despite the fact that she occasionally takes on the mantle of her narratorial counterpart by becoming “no one,” and aspiring to a semi-omniscient state, the novel’s obfuscating atmospheres ultimately prevent Esther from seeing or describing events as authoritatively as the novel’s other narrator does.³⁰

Thus, while omniscience lends the third-person narrator an un-occluded cognition and authoritative voice, Esther’s occasional disembodiment destabilizes her narration and sensation alike. This awkward narrative position evolves in the following passage, which scholars traditionally read as foreshadowing her illness:

I had no thought that night—none, I am quite sure—of what was soon to
happen to me. But I have always remembered since, that when we had stopped at

³⁰ Readers often associate the unnamed narrator of *Bleak House* with a male voice. I prefer to agree with Schor that the voice is simply one of “complete authority”: the “magisterial (a.k.a. Dickensian) third person narrator” (103).

the garden-gate to look up at the sky, and when we went upon our way, I had for a moment an indefinable impression of myself as being something different from what I then was. I know it was then, and there, that I had it. I have ever since connected the feeling with that spot and time and with everything associated with that spot and time, to the distant voices in the town, the barking of a dog, and the sound of wheels coming down the miry hill. (380)

Although the dissociative impression Esther ambiguously refers to as “it” is clearly associated with the “spot and time” she recalls, the feeling she experiences in this scene does not appear to be a “feeling” at all, but rather a sensation of selflessness and disembodiment: a feeling that lacks any proprioception. When Esther “stop[s] at the garden-gate to look up at the sky,” she experiences an alternate sense of self that is confluent with other moments of etherized female sensibility throughout the novel. She continues to allude to the dissociative effects of the vapor when, in the subsequent paragraph, she and her “little maid” Charley arrive at the slum of Tom-All-Alone’s to find that “a stifling vapour set towards us” (380). Esther’s disassociation from her self increases by degrees in the scene but as she meditates on the “lurid glare” of the sky “gleaming on all the unseen buildings of the city, and on all the faces of its many thousands of wondering inhabitants,” her point of view remarkably shifts from one of circumscribed first-person perception to semi-omniscient knowledge.

Esther’s claim that “I had no thought that night” identifies her narrative voice as embodied and attached to a particular human subjectivity. However, her subsequent description of disparate sights and sounds—“the distant voices in the town, the barking of a dog, and the sound of wheels coming down the miry hill” as well as the “unseen” buildings of the city—suggest a form of omniscience unlikely to produce the embodied impressions she recalls. On the one hand, Esther’s role as a present-tense narrator recalling past tense events might allow her to invent this simultaneity

of far-ranging sensations. On the other hand, the phrases “I have always remembered since,” “I know it was then and there,” and “I have ever since connected,” insist on a precise memory and temporal specificity associated with the perceptions she describes. That is to say, in this scene the character Esther insists on her own disembodiment—on her ability to mimic the diffuse and pervasive qualities of both the omniscient narrator and the atmosphere itself.

Critics such as Robert Newsom suggest that the purpose of this scene is to “anticipate the smallpox which is carried from Jo (the passage is immediately followed by Jo’s first meeting with Esther) to Charley to Esther, and which finally takes Esther back to Chesney Wold, where she learns that she is Lady Dedlock’s daughter” (*Romantic Side* 77-78). Indeed, Esther’s cryptic insistence that she experiences “being something different from what I then was,” presages the disfigurement she suffers as a result of her illness. Just as the scene ostensibly foreshadows the infection she is about to succumb to, her sudden separation from herself presages her later response to her scarred face: “I was very much changed—oh, very, very much” (444).

In this moment at the garden-gate, however, the character Esther has yet to fall ill and the reader has yet to learn of the events her encounter with the sky foreshadows. Esther’s “impression,” therefore, can only realistically result from the atmospheric effects she describes. Nevertheless, Newsom argues that the split in Esther’s self in this “entirely enigmatic” scene suggests that she writes “as an amateur psychologist of sorts,” connecting the division in her consciousness to “her illegitimacy and what she perceives as ‘the fault’ with which she had been born, and which she says made her feel at the same time ‘guilty and yet innocent’” (83). Newsom continues: “That ‘fault’ creates two Esthers—indeed, perhaps, innumerable Esthers—for it is a fault of such magnitude and centrality that it necessarily robs her self of any coherence and robs any self she might assume of coherence” (83). As I have been arguing, however, this split in Esther’s subjectivity is not produced by the transparent psychology we traditionally associate with protagonists in realist fiction but rather

by Victorian perceptions of women's unstable embodiment. Esther's vision of the sky affords a complete split between her self-perception and the alternate modes of consciousness she enters into, suggesting that disembodied narration—or partial omniscience—affords her a means of speaking and in spite of her self. In the same way that the Victorian medical establishment used anesthetizing vapours to stabilize fluctuating female bodies, Esther's relationship to the ether temporarily steadies the unevenness of her narrative voice by allowing her to leave her self behind.

The dissolution of embodied thought and emotion associated with the atmosphere in this scene becomes increasingly clear in the following passage, in which Esther describes the remarkable atmospheric conditions she observed on that fateful night:

It was a cold, wild night, and the trees shuddered in the wind. The rain had been thick and heavy all day. . . . The sky had partly cleared, but was very gloomy—even above us, where a few stars were shining. In the north and north-west, where the sun had set three hours before, there was a pale dead light both beautiful and awful; and into it long sullen lines of cloud waved up like a sea stricken immovable as it was heaving. Towards London a lurid glare overhung the whole dark waste . . . as solemn as might be. (380)

Instead of heightening pleasure and terror—affects often associated with eighteenth and earlier nineteenth-century notions of the Gothic and Sublime—Esther's description of the atmosphere in this scene, “beautiful and awful” as it is, leads not to an ineffable sense of beauty in terror, but rather to the narrative and characterological effacement of “being something different from what [she] then was.”³¹

³¹ Esther's dissassociative relation to atmosphere in this scene may be read in dialog with Hancock's claim: “the sublime pushes . . . towards a transcendent depth and interiority connected to the ultimate moral authority associated with the middle-class ideal of womanhood” (1).

One way of understanding the presence of anesthetizing atmospheres in *Bleak House*, then, is to compare their flattening of Esther's affect to the surfeit of emotion heroines in Gothic fiction experience under similar atmospheric conditions. As Jayne Lewis argues, atmosphere in the gothic novel "attracts emotion" (193). Describing the five novels published by Ann Radcliffe from 1789 to 1797, she asserts that "ambivalence, anxiety, trepidation, melancholy. . . . tend to be mixed, albeit not so much with each other as with thought. We should therefore call them moods. And anyone compelled to breathe Radcliffean air is bound to be moody. 'Gloomy ideas' lower upon her heroines like clouds" (194). Lewis's examination of how atmosphere incites thought and mood in Radcliffe's heroines foregrounds the substantial shift between representations of atmosphere in Gothic and Romantic literature and in the Victorian novel. If late eighteenth-century and earlier nineteenth-century fictions employ atmosphere as a means of amplifying and externalizing subjective emotion, the ether in *Bleak House* overtakes embodiment and effaces emotion. Whereas literary atmosphere transmits sentiment to Radcliffe's heroines, Dickens's female protagonist experiences atmosphere as something utterly overpowering, yet absolutely separate from herself.

Esther's muted consciousness and periodic disembodiment have previously been understood largely in terms of what Newsom refers to as her "trancelike" consciousness during her illness and the novel's indebtedness to the Freudian uncanny (as well as the depersonalization associated with hypnosis) (*Romantic Side* 78-80). Recounting her experience in the sick room, for example, Esther writes: "Dare I hint at that worse time when, strung together somewhere in great black space, there was a flaming necklace, or ring, or starry circle of some kind, of which I was one of the beads!" (432). To consider the use of empty space as a context for Esther's body that arises only with fever, however, is to overlook the numerous instances in which she describes a similar state prior to her illness. Esther's description of herself as a bead "in great black space" places her in a semi-conscious state characteristic of Snow's description of the second degree of etherization.

Notably, like the use of ether to subdue the intensity of biological and psychological fluctuations in female patients, *Bleak House* affords Esther omniscience at climactic moments in the novel's plot—just before and during her near fatal illness and in the moments leading up to her discovery of her mother's death. Esther describes each of these moments not from a position of self-conscious perception but rather as a subject acted upon and defined by the disorienting effects of the ether. Consider her muddled description of London during her search for Lady Dedlock in the novel's fifty-ninth chapter:

I have the most confused impressions of that walk. I recollect that it was neither night nor day; that morning was dawning, but the street-lamps were not yet put out; that the sleet was still falling, and that all the ways were deep with it . . . I recollect the clogged and bursting gutters and water-spouts, the mounds of blackened ice and snow over which we passed. . . . At the same time I remember . . . that great water-gates seemed to be opening and closing in my head, or in the air; and that the unreal things were more substantial than the real. (712)

While the weather draws all of Esther's attention to its insistent presence, to the abundant wet and cold that will soon reveal itself to be of the same insistent materiality as her "mother cold and dead," the phantasmal water-gates she imagines have no substance and are nowhere. Notably, Esther's transposition of the thoughts in her head and the phenomena she imagines filling the air evokes a singular image from Dickens's 1848 letter to Macready. After lauding the safety and efficacy of chloroform during Catherine's labor he describes the curious effect it had on her consciousness: "It spared her all pain," he writes, "(she had no sensation, but of a great display of sky-rockets)" (*Letters* 5: 487). Dickens's interest in his wife's loss of physical sensation and his focus on what replaces that sensation—"a great display of sky rockets"—arguably informs Esther's periodic experiences of being no one and no where.

The “great water-gates” that Esther asserts are opening and closing either in the air or in her head suggest the uneasy equivalence of these two origins of subjectivity in *Bleak House*. Esther’s insistence—in this scene, as well as in those discussed throughout this chapter—that the “unreal things” are more substantial than the real, bespeaks a fundamental truth about representations of the female protagonist in nineteenth-century realist fiction: as a locus of embodiment, a “real” self who thinks and feels, female characters are as unstable as conditions of the air. In the disembodied voice of the other narrator, the authority of a pure and impossible omniscience, Esther and her readers therefore find the real guarantee of narrative authority.

Before settling on *Bleak House* as a suitable title for his ninth novel, Dickens considered a number of alternatives, two of which reveal the novel’s indebtedness to atmospheric representation. *The East Wind* and the lengthier title *Bleak House and The East Wind: How They Both Got into Chancery and Never Got out*, both draw attention to the leitmotif that represents John Jarndyce’s vagaries of mood. “I am always conscious of an uncomfortable sensation now and then when the wind is blowing in the east” the patriarch of *Bleak House* readily asserts (61). Interpreting this whim of her guardian’s for the reader, Esther rationally explains: “Ada and I agreed . . . that this caprice about the wind was a fiction and that he used the pretence to account for any disappointment he could not conceal, rather than he would blame the real cause of it or disparage or depreciate any one. We thought this very characteristic of his eccentric gentleness and of the difference between him and those petulant people who make the weather and the winds (particularly that unlucky wind which he had chosen for such a different purpose) the stalking-horses of their splenetic and gloomy humours” (75). Jarndyce’s “fiction”—self-consciously authored and facetiously willed—externalizes the cause of his emotional vacillation. As Esther asserts, this lighthearted and transparent ruse allows him to author the cause of his discomfort and, by ascribing his uneasiness to the fluctuations of the wind,

dismiss unpleasant feelings. For the female co-narrator of *Bleak House*, however, the emotionally dulling and physically disorienting effects of literary atmosphere cannot be controlled so easily.

The title *The East Wind* is not right for Dickens's novel, not because atmosphere fails to play a significant role in shaping its characters' subjectivities, but because as a domestic novel—a story co-narrated by a female character and named after the estate of her guardian and the eponymous little house he builds as a home for her “little body”—it conceives of another kind of atmosphere. Esther's ether is not one of self-conscious feeling or orchestrated authorship, but instead mediates between the emotional and physical fluctuations of her gendered subjectivity and the novel's conflicting desire to represent that subjectivity in the form of a character who possesses a legible interiority.

Esther's final words to the reader—the words that close the novel—respond to her husband Allan Woodcourt's assertion: “you are prettier than you ever were.” Esther responds to this compliment evasively as she explains to her reader: “I did not know that; I am not certain that I know it now. But I know that my dearest little pets are very pretty . . . and that my husband is very handsome, and that . . . they can very well do without much beauty in me—even supposing—” (770). Esther's final effacement communicates what the ether of *Bleak House* encodes: that the novel cannot fully suppose she does have a body. As the representation of an imagined female subjectivity, emotion “overwhelms her at its height,” and like the novel's other key mother, Esther can do no more than dissolve into air.

Chapter Two

Atmospheric Exceptionalism and Meteorological Narration in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*

In the January 1848 preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre* (1847), dedicated to William Makepeace Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë describes her fellow author as a prophet whose literary insight resembles the electrical surges of a storm-charged atmosphere. “Is the satirist of ‘Vanity Fair’ admired in high places?” she shrewdly inquires. “I cannot tell; but I think if some of those amongst whom . . . he flashes the levin-brand of his denunciation, were to take his warnings in time—they or their seed might yet escape a fatal Ramoth-Gilead” (4). Brontë’s assertion that Thackeray’s social critique sounds a prophetic warning akin to a lightning bolt or “levin-brand” suggests that the conditions of the atmosphere provide an essential insight into future events. Yet, for Brontë, Thackeray’s ability to wield this atmospheric charge does more than accentuate significant moments in his fiction: it maintains his prophetic role by comparing his accurate, if unpopular, critique of the British aristocracy in *Vanity Fair* (1847-1848) to the reviled predictions of the biblical prophet Micaiah, who foretells the death of the King of Israel in the battle of Ramoth-Gilead (1 Kings 22:1-12).

Although Brontë compares Thackeray to Micaiah, his prophetic insight is not simply an illustration of divine providence, which critics such as Heather Glen argue counterbalances the secular determinism of fate in Brontë’s fiction (264). Instead, Brontë describes the author’s talent as that which triumphs irrespective of divine will or literary inheritance:

They say he is like Fielding: they talk of his wit, humour, comic powers. He resembles Fielding as an eagle does a vulture: Fielding could stoop on carrion, but Thackeray never does. His wit is bright, his humour attractive, but both bear the same relation to his serious genius, that the mere lambent sheet-lightning playing

under the edge of the summer cloud, does to the electric death-spark hid in its womb.
(4-5)

In this striking passage, the “lambent sheet-lightning” or gently radiant flashes that illuminate contiguous clouds, represents what Brontë sees as the superficial satire of a novel like Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749). More than the distant and docile flashes of “wit,” “humour,” or “comic power,” that Thackeray shares with his predecessor, however, the “electric death-spark” of the later author’s “serious genius” affords him an unmistakable authority over his readers. Importantly, Brontë’s metaphor emphasizes the physical force of lightning rather than its beauty. Her fascination with electrically charged and overpowering atmospheres thus becomes a way of articulating the origins of artistic production.

In her 1850 preface to the new edition of Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Charlotte Brontë noticeably returns to atmospheric metaphor in defense of her sister’s talent and originality: “Having avowed that over much of *Wuthering Heights* there broods ‘a horror of great darkness’; that in its storm-heated and electrical atmosphere, we seem at times to breathe lightning, let me point to those spots where clouded daylight and the eclipsed sun still attest their existence” (21).³² As Brontë asserts, the “clouded daylight and the eclipsed sun” that partially obscure the “true benevolence and homely fidelity” of characters like Nelly Dean and Edgar Linton in *Wuthering Heights*, pale in comparison to the creative surges of an electric and storm-heated atmosphere. The later, she implies, are the mark of Emily Brontë’s power as an artist: a power that, much like Thackeray’s, sets her

³² For additional discussion of *Wuthering Heights* in terms of atmospheric see Charlotte Brontë’s letter to W. S. Williams of 27 September 1850. “It is my intention to write a few lines of remark on ‘W. Heights’ . . . its power fills me with renewed admiration—but yet I am oppressed—the reader is scarcely ever permitted a taste of unalloyed pleasure—every beam of sunshine is poured down through black bars of threatening cloud—every page is surcharged with a sort of moral electricity” (*Letters* 2: 479).

apart from her literary predecessors. “Had she but lived,” Charlotte writes, “her mind would of itself have grown . . . but on that mind time and experience alone could work: to the influence of other intellects it was not amenable” (21).

As in her 1848 preface, Brontë’s forward to her sister’s work returns to the notion that the author’s talent originates outside the body: “The writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master,” she proclaims (22). Unlike the muse of classical mythology—an embodied agent that bespeaks feminine artistic inspiration—the atmosphere possesses both masculine and feminine characteristics. The “electric death-spark” of Thackeray’s “serious genius” lies hidden in a “womb” of cloud, for example. These atmospheric metaphors allow Brontë to envision an artistic genius that transcends the gendered sphere of professional literary production. This transcendence takes on an added significance when we recall that Brontë wrote her 1848 preface to *Jane Eyre* approximately six months before she and Ann Brontë traveled to London to reveal the true identity of the “Bells” to their publisher.³³ The masculine pseudonym “Currer Bell” that appends Brontë’s first preface stands in telling opposition to her insistence that literary genius resides in an external and alternately gendered atmospheric source. This tension between the intra- and extra-diegetic worlds of the author’s work—between the atmospheric metaphors Brontë evokes and the social conditions that compromise women’s agency in mid nineteenth-century Britain—emerges at key moments not only in *Jane Eyre*, but also in *Villette* (1853). As we shall see, both novels reclaim the atmospheric receptivity of the female body, traditionally associated with illness or neurosis, as a means of creative inspiration. Although this characterization validates female authorship by privileging the diegetic insight and artistic talent of the novels’ first-person narrators Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe, it also bespeaks Brontë’s extra-diegetic

³³. See Barker for details of Anne and Charlotte’s trip to the offices of Smith, Elder & Co on 8 July 1848 and their meeting with George Smith (557-58).

concerns about her own authorship and her place as a woman in the male-dominated world of publishing.

As scholars consistently point out, Brontë's vehement rejection of criticism based on the gender of the artist informed her notorious disagreement with George Henry Lewes. Lewes, whose 1852 review of *Jane Eyre* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* in the *Westminster Review* was tellingly titled "The Lady Novelists," consistently argued for the influence of the author's sex on his or her literary production. Asserting that female writers possess a talent for "pathos and detail" and male writers for "the construction of plots and character," Lewes proclaims: "Such a novel as 'Tom Jones' or 'Vanity Fair,' we shall not get from a woman; nor such an effort of imaginative history as 'Ivanhoe' or 'Old Mortality,' but Fielding, Thackeray, and Scott are equally excluded from such perfection in its kind as 'Pride and Prejudice,' 'Indiana,' or 'Jane Eyre' (72). Yet Brontë's appeal to the overwhelming force of atmospheric agency in her prefatory remarks cannily maintains that artistic genius transcends the parameters of an author's sex. For Brontë, the "electric death-spark" wielded by Thackeray and the "storm-heated and electrical atmosphere" of Emily Brontë's fiction possesses the same transcendent energy. Her use of the term "levin-brand" from Sir Walter Scott's *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805) as an idiom that captures this external inspiration (and her association of Henry Fielding's prose with "lambent sheet lightning") both predicts and corrects the gendered argument of Lewes's essay.³⁴

Brontë's attempt to equalize the gendered critique of critics like Lewes predates the publication of his 1852 essay. Lewes's comments on Brontë's second published novel *Shirley* (1849), in *Edinburgh Review*, prompted the author famously to protest: "after I had said earnestly that I wished critics would judge me as an author, not as a woman, you so roughly—I even thought—so

³⁴ In *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* a dramatic "flash of lightning" with "thunder long and loud" destroys the mischievous "elvish dwarf" at the wedding feast in canto six, stanza 25 (45-46).

cruelly handled the question of sex” (Smith, *Villette* 523; *Letters* 2: 332-33). Brontë proclaims her vexation with Lewes by signing her letter: “I am yours with a certain respect and some chagrin” (*Letters* 2: 333). This vexation reemerges in *Villette* in the guise of the “dry, materialist views” of the “self-opinionated” doctor, Graham Bretton, who condemns the actress playing Vashti: a biblical queen noted for her refusal to display her beauty on command (260, 521). According to Brontë’s protagonist Lucy Snowe: “In a few terse phrases he told me his opinion of, and feeling towards, the actress: he judged her as a woman, not an artist: it was a branding judgment” (260). Yet, for Lucy, the performance of the actress playing Vashti (whom Brontë based on the famous tragedienne Rachel of the Comédie-Française) epitomizes an atmospheric intensity, one that the “self-opinionated” Dr. John cannot appreciate since he is unable to look beyond the sex of the actress: “for what belonged to storm, what was wild and intense, dangerous, sudden, and flaming, he had no sympathy,” Lucy concludes (259).³⁵

As this chapter argues, Brontë’s emphasis on the particular receptivity of the female body to atmospheric influence arises from contemporary cultural and scientific conditions that saw bodily responses to weather as a way of understanding both the local and the global environment. As her prefatory remarks also suggest, this embodied knowledge was widely associated with the ability to prophesy future events. As historian of science Katherine Anderson contends in *Victorians and the Science of Meteorology* (2005): “Prophecy . . . was not just about evidence but about leadership, or how to understand the active role of those who held special knowledge . . . the prophet . . . demonstrated the force of the divine in secular concerns” (38). Brontë’s use of atmospheric authority to portray Thackeray as a social critic akin to Micaiah, accordingly adheres to contemporary conceptions of the

³⁵ For historical details on Brontë’s visit to the London theatre where she saw Rachel perform, see Barker 677-78 and Stokes Chapter Two. For a detailed reading of the performance of Vashti in relation to embodied art and desire in *Villette*, see Matus 147-48.

prophet's "special knowledge" and its secular applications. The protagonists of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* evince a similar atmospheric exceptionalism, yet their ability to obtain an almost omniscient knowledge through bodily sensation accords with another Victorian debate about meteorology: the efficacy of weather wisdom—or the innate sensitivity of the exceptional human body and its nervous system to atmospheric change—in contrast to the more objective and quantifiable use of "instruments and precision" sanctioned by organizations such as the Royal Meteorological Society (Anderson 71). As Anderson also explains, despite the innovation of meteorology as an official state-funded science in the 1850s, many Victorians adhered to a long-held belief in the innate ability of those in intimate communication with the weather, such as sailors and shepherds, to predict atmospheric change (184). Those who were "weather-wise" could purportedly sense an approaching storm by reading signs in the sky or interpreting their bodily sensations (184-85).

For Brontë, then, the particular sensitivity of the female body and its receptive nervous system mediate between the personified viewpoint of first-person narration and an omniscient ability to know the world by knowing its weather. For a Victorian readership, the atmospheric knowledge that Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe possess would have resonated with mid-nineteenth century perceptions of an emergent meteorology as less effective than the heightened sensitivity of the exceptional "weather wise" body.³⁶ Accordingly, the debate about which groups of people were best suited to interpret the meaning of the air, and how they did so, was an issue of national and international significance in mid-century England. In particular, as trade routes along the Atlantic

³⁶ On meteorology as an emergent Victorian science see, for example, Luke Howard, "On the Barometrical Variation as Affected by the Moon's Declination" (1846), 443 and Anderson, 292-93. See also Jankovic on the institutionalization of meteorology in the Victorian period ("Gruff Boreas" 147).

continued to expand, public and professional interest in maritime storms fostered the demand for weather forecasting and state-funded meteorological departments.³⁷

For instance, noted scientist David Brewster argued for the practical benefits of a prophetic meteorology. His 1839 essay “Statistics and Philosophy of Storms” published in the *Edinburgh Review* more than a decade before the Meteorological Department of the Board of Trade was established asserts: “It belonged to the Governments of Europe and America, and pre-eminently to ours, whose royal and commercial marine almost covers the ocean, to encourage, by suitable appointments and high rewards, every enquiry that could throw light upon the origin and nature of those dire catastrophes by which in one day, hundreds of vessels have been wrecked—thousands of lives sacrificed, and millions of property consigned to the deep” (407). “Ours, at least,” he protests, “has no national institution to which they could intrust [sic] such an enquiry” (407).³⁸ Brewster’s emphasis on the scientific imperative to understand and predict “the gales and hurricanes that desolate the tropical seas” looms large in *Villette*, which famously concludes with the fateful sea voyage of M. Paul from Basse-Terre in the French colony of Guadalupe back to his native Labassecour (407). Because of the expansion of the British Empire referenced in both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, the need for institutionalized meteorological science and weather prediction continued to develop along with beliefs in the deleterious effects of foreign atmospheres on English bodies.³⁹ However, Brontë’s interest in colonial climates—famously encapsulated by Jane Eyre’s fear of the

³⁷. For more on the relationship of weather forecasting to British trade and the role of scientist see Anderson 287.

³⁸. See also, Jankovik who notes: “The business commentary in *The Times* was replete with reports on shipping disruptions and accidents occasioned by the north wind’s gusts” (“Gruff Boreas” 157).

³⁹. For examples of meteorological studies of the Indian monsoons and atmospheric variations in the 1840s-1870s see Anderson 253-56.

sultry Indian air, and insistence that hers is “not the existence to be long protracted under an Indian sun”—does more than just support the Victorians’ belief in medical geography, as critics such as Alan Bewell have insightfully suggested (Brontë 404).⁴⁰

I contend that the highly sensate nature of traditional weather prediction allows the characters Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe to experience meteorological phenomena as a means of authoring and authorizing the self. In both novels, the sensitivity of these female protagonists evinces an exceptional embodiment—one that channels traditional nineteenth-century assumptions about the heightened sensitivity of the female body and its pathology into expansive diegetic knowledge. Notwithstanding the empowerment of this atmospheric exceptionalism, which often exceeds the bounds of realistic first-person knowledge, Brontë scholarship continues to focus on both Jane Eyre’s and Lucy Snowe’s diseased or diminished embodiment. In his persuasive study of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, for example, Ivan Kreilkamp emphasizes the ways in which “the Victorian novel of the 1840s and 1850s, led by the example of Thackeray and Dickens, claimed for itself the status of an inscribed voice” (125). By contrast, he maintains, “Charlotte Brontë’s work distinctly evades the imperative to make fiction speak. Indeed, it implicitly argues that the gendered construction of this imperative forces women writers to embody and vocalize their writing when disembodiment might best serve their interests” (125). In order to resolve this conflict, Kreilkamp further maintains: “Brontë rejects a model of authorship based on voice and embodied personality” (125). By analyzing those moments in which the protagonists of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* find authority through reading or writing, rather than spoken language, Kreilkamp compels us to acknowledge the problems that female embodiment poses for Brontë and her female narrators.

⁴⁰ See Bewell’s article “Jane Eyre and Victorian Medical Geography” and his subsequent chapter in *Romanticism and Colonial Disease* (1999).

As I have been arguing, however, the challenges that character embodiment poses to Jane Eyre's and Lucy Snowe's self-proclaimed authorship does not result in a turn away from the physicality of the female body, and subsequently, toward the disembodied speech of the printed word as Kreilkamp suggests. Instead, the superior physical and psychological sensitivity of Brontë's female protagonists reframes the problems of gendered embodiment attendant to female subjectivity and authorship in Victorian Britain. For Brontë in particular, this type of atmospheric exceptionalism becomes a way of understanding women's bodies as being receptive without being passive. Jane Eyre famously remarks that "women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do" (109). As Brontë's prefaces mutually suggest, atmospheric energy affords women the opportunity to participate in this sphere of exercise and production. Simultaneously, though, Brontë's protagonists establish their narrative authority largely through subservience to the air that surrounds them. Taken together, the author's introductory statements and the dense mists, luminous storms, and driving rains in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* demonstrate that the voice of the controlling author and the narrative discourse of her female protagonists originate in the same atmospheric source as that of men such as Thackeray. At the same time, the novels afford their female protagonists and narrators extraordinary access to authorial agency. Paradoxically, then, it is the particularity of the female nervous system that frequently allows Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe to transcend their embodied limitations.

1. Depathologizing Brontë's Prophetic Narrators

Despite the atmospheric origins of artistic inspiration and narrative foresight in Brontë's work, there remains a dominant critical perception that both Jane Eyre's and Lucy Snowe's sensitivity to the weather evinces their pathological nervousness. In one of the most famous scenes in *Jane Eyre*, this atmospheric sensitivity invests Brontë's narrator with an important prophetic insight. In chapter ten of the novel's second volume, Jane's sensitivity to the wind precedes

Rochester's first wife Bertha Mason's nocturnal visit to her chamber and destruction of her bridal veil. "Just at sunset, the air turned cold and the sky cloudy," Jane explains to Rochester. "On sleeping, I continued in dreams the idea of a dark and gusty night . . . I dreamt . . . that Thornfield Hall was a dreary ruin, the retreat of bats and owls. I thought that of all the stately front nothing remained but a shell-like wall, very high and very fragile-looking" (280-83). Jane's dream, which prompts Rochester to deem her a "[l]ittle nervous subject!" emphasizes the sensitivity of her body to the surrounding climate (283). Yet the character's prophetic response to the properties of the air is not a sign of neurosis, as her "master's" comments suggest, but rather a heightened physical perception that enables her to prophesy future events: in this case, the impending ruin of Thornfield Hall (281). Moreover, the conditions of the atmosphere alleviate rather than exacerbate what Rochester and Jane mistake for a common case of "hypochondriac foreboding" (277, 279). "I am feverish[,] " Jane contends in the wake of her nocturnal encounter with Bertha. "I hear the wind blowing, I will go out of doors and feel it" (275). More than just a therapeutic breeze, in this episode—as in Jane's premonitory dream—the wind affords her a physical and psychological expansiveness: "It was not without a certain wild pleasure I ran before the wind, delivering my trouble of mind to the measureless air-torrent thundering through space," she recounts (276).

Although Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar note the "predictive aspect" of Jane's dream, they overlook the ways in which the narrator's atmospheric sensitivity activates her omniscient knowledge and attribute Jane's foresight to "a fragmentation of the self comparable to her 'syncope' in the red-room" (359). As readers of *Jane Eyre* recall, Jane's punishment for her retaliation against her cousin John Reed is imprisonment in the unused room where her uncle Reed "breathed his last" (12-14). Infuriated and physically injured by the blows of her "young master" (12) and frightened by an ambient beam of light she supposes might herald the appearance of "Mr. Reed's spirit," Jane experiences "a species of fit" in the red room and falls unconscious (17-18). Before her collapse, she

looks in the mirror and finds a “strange little figure there gazing at me”; It is this figure that, according to Gilbert and Gubar, first evinces Jane’s fragmented selfhood (14). “As Jane’s anger and fear about her marriage intensify, she begins to experience the dangerous sense of doubleness that had begun in the red-room” they contend (357). “[O]n a figurative and psychological level,” then, “it seems suspiciously clear that the specter of Bertha is still another—indeed the most threatening—avatar of Jane. What Bertha now does, for instance, is what Jane wants to do. Disliking the ‘vapoury veil’ of Jane Rochester, Jane Eyre secretly wants to tear the garments up. Bertha does it for her” (359). Gilbert and Gubar’s well-known argument, which sees Jane as an iteration of the subversive “madwoman in the attic,” therefore insists—in spite of its feminist bent—that the “predictive aspect” of Jane’s narrative demonstrates “symptoms” associated with a gendered pathology and fractured subjectivity.

This description of Jane’s dissociative identity, rather than the atmospherically associative one I articulate here, shapes Gilbert and Gubar’s reading of *Villette* as well: “Modern critics of *Villette* recognize the conflict between restraint and passion, reason and imagination (in Lucy Snowe),” they contend (403). “But its full significance depends on the way in which the other characters in the novel are used to objectify what amounts to this protagonist’s schizophrenia” (403). Accounts like this one build on earlier discussions, albeit not feminist readings, of Brontë’s protagonists, many of which insist on an unnecessary split between romance and realism. In his 1975 study, for example, Terry Eagleton encapsulates the well-established belief that Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe are divided by the conflicting impulses of reason and intellect, on the one hand, and passion and emotion, on the other hand. For Eagleton, the opposing forces “Romance” or “the passionate self’s free, eloquent expression,” and “realism”—which he defines as a form of

“calculative rationalism”—rupture the formal coherence of Brontë’s novels (76).⁴¹ According to Eagleton, Brontë’s “protagonists are an extraordinarily contradictory amalgam of smouldering rebelliousness and prim conventionalism, gushing Romantic fantasy and canny hard-headedness, quivering sensitivity and blunt rationality” (17). Eagleton is hardly alone in making this kind of claim. In a much more recent study, Heather Glen contends that the “interest” of Jane Eyre’s narrative “is less in rational enterprise, self-discipline, and achievement, than in an urgent, unfocused, but quite distinctive configuration of desire” (99).⁴² Although both Jane’s and Lucy’s reaction to atmospheric stimulus might initially seem to evince a Romantic, or predominantly emotive, response to nature these stimuli also contribute to their “rational” insights and occasional omniscience. To claim that Brontë’s female protagonists are divided between Romance and Realism, or reason and desire, is consequently to overlook the mutual influence of body and mind that constitutes their narration.

A better way of examining how the atmosphere produces narrative insight for Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe is to frame their predictive physical sensitivity against the fear and anticipation female characters often experience in the dense or gloomy airs of gothic fiction. Jane’s ability to see clearly beyond her own limited frame of reference opposes the fearsome climates that close in upon characters like Emily St. Aubert in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). Emily’s vigil over the body of her dead aunt, we may remember, is “rendered more awful by the tremendous storm

⁴¹. While discussions of Brontë’s protagonists in regard to the opposing forces of reason and passion are too numerous to catalog here, see also Heilman 119, Lodge 115, Benvenuto 630, and Maynard 106.

⁴². Much like Eagleton, Glen aims to reposition Brontë’s novels not as culturally and historically anomalous, but indebted to specific historical phenomena (3). Despite the differences between Eagleton’s Marxist approach and Glen’s emphasis on cultural history, both critics define Brontë’s protagonists by their relationship to the supposedly oppositional forces of rationality and desire.

that shook the air,” causing her to “address herself to Heaven for support and protection” (375).⁴³ By contrast, the gothic tropes in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* do not encapsulate or contain the significance of their atmospheres.⁴⁴ We should therefore pay close attention to the Brontë’s use of atmosphere as a formal rather than a merely thematic device. Just as Jane’s affinity with the wind expands her narrative point of view and contrasts the trepidation of heroines such as Emily St. Aubert, Lucy Snowe’s sensitivity to the weather occasionally allows her to exceed the boundaries of embodied knowledge. In chapter four of *Villette*, for example, Lucy listens to the sound of the wind outside the home of her first employer, Miss Marchmont, and understands what it forebodes:

One February night—I remember it well—there came a voice near Miss Marchmont’s house, heard by every inmate, but translated, perhaps, only by one . . . An accent keen, piercing, almost articulate to the ear; a plaint, piteous and disconsolate to the nerves, trilled in every gust . . . I had heard that very voice ere this, and compulsory observation had forced on me a theory as to what it boded . . . I fancied, too, I had noticed—but was not philosopher enough to know whether there was any connection between the circumstances—that we often at the same time hear

⁴³ For an extensive reading of air in Radcliffe’s fiction see Lewis who considers how the author incorporates the work of pneumatic chemists such as Robert Boyle (1627-1691) and Joseph Priestley (1733-1804) (3). Lewis’s discussion of Priestley experiments and prose and Radcliffe’s fiction reveals the dialogue between literary forms of the “experimental gothic” and eighteenth-century natural philosophy. See, for example, 219, 229, and 235.

⁴⁴ A number of critics have discussed the ways in which Brontë re-imagines the Gothic and its effect on the female protagonist. Christine Alexander defines the Gothic in Brontë as that which “instills into her novels heightened emotion that borders on the surreal and on psychic disorder” (409). Toni Wein argues that *Villette* revises key plot elements of Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796) (734).

of disturbed volcanic action in distant parts of the world; of rivers suddenly rushing above their banks; and of strange high tides flowing furiously in on low sea-coasts. “Our globe,” I had said to myself, “seems at such periods torn and disordered; the feeble amongst us wither in her distempered breath, rushing hot from steaming volcanoes” (38-39)

Unlike the disembodied voice of knowledge we traditionally associate with omniscient narration, Lucy’s subjective and embodied perception allows her to sense changes in the global weather. Her exceptional perception of “an accent keen, piercing, almost articulate to the ear[.]” relies upon her sense of hearing as well as the “disconsolate” effect of disparate climates on her “nerves.” As the exuberant rhetoric of this passage suggests, despite Lucy’s claim that she is not philosopher enough to “know whether there [is] any connection between the circumstances” she describes, she is remarkably receptive to the physical effect of these cataclysmic events. This sensitivity is more than just a common anxiety about insalubrious air. Like the “suffocating vapor” and “tainting sort of weather” that Charles Dickens’s narrator describes in *Bleak House* (5), published the same year as *Villette*, Lucy’s assertion that “the feeble amongst us wither in [the globe’s] distempered breath” evokes the common mid-century anxiety about noxious and disease-carrying miasmas (37). Yet, Lucy’s ability to use her bodily sensitivity to predict future events suggests a narrative response to the “coming state of the atmosphere unpropitious to life,” as it allows her to foretell the imminent death of Miss Marchmont and the future events of her life (as plot). The quick responsiveness of her nervous system therefore helps to establish her atmospheric exceptionalism: the message carried on the wind is heard by all, but “translated” only by one. Put another way, it is not the nervous illness of the female body that makes it respond to storms; instead, the atmosphere invests the gifted individual with keen narrative insight.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ See in this connection, Jankovik who discusses how “‘human barometers’ suffered from a ‘nervous’

Yet, for many critics, developments in Victorian physiology and the emerging discourse of psychiatry—imbricated, in its early development, with neurology—is an essential context for understanding the correspondence of Lucy’s response to storms and her physical and mental illness.⁴⁶ As Athena Vrettos maintains: “[i]n *Villette*, thunderstorms and ocean tempests both express and provoke the violence of Lucy’s illness” (63). In such accounts, critics collectively contend—as Rochester does of Jane—that Lucy is a nervous subject: a hysteric whose illness informs her perception of narrative events. “*Villette* merges nervous sensibility and narrative sensibility,” Vrettos writes, “by confronting the reader with the hysterical first-person narrator—Lucy Snowe—and by tracing how hysteria informs her acts of narration and, in turn, how narration expresses and embodies her hysteria” (50). Although Vrettos is right to point out that nineteenth-century medicine fostered the notion that women were especially susceptible to hysteria and mental illness, her analysis privileges pathological diagnosis over and above the insights Lucy gains from her interactions with the air. In other words, despite Vrettos’s argument that Lucy possesses great narrative agency, she tacitly adheres to the patriarchal medical establishment’s assertions that women’s biological fluctuations had to be carefully monitored to preserve their mental and physical health.

The widespread belief in the authority of medical science that Vrettos’s analysis relies upon can be charted through the Brontë’s own reliance on Thomas John Graham’s medical handbook *Modern Domestic Medicine* (1827). As Shuttleworth explains: “the constant presence of illness in the

disease which made them exceptionally attuned to the ‘vicissitude’ of the weather” (“Gruff Boreas” 150).

⁴⁶ As Janet Oppenheim explains: “The psychiatric profession in Great Britain was slow to assume a coherent identity in large part because, for decades, it remained unsure of its goals and functions. Neurotic disorders, including severe depression, raised questions that belonged at the very heart of that uncertainty” (16). See also Shuttleworth 4.

Brontë family ensured that the medical man held a dominating, authoritative position in their household, but his pre-eminence was reinforced by Patrick Brontë's respect for medical science. . . . Every symptom, whether of mental or physical ill-health was . . . checked against the near-infallible word of his secular Bible, Graham's *Domestic Medicine*" (27). As Shuttleworth further remarks in reference to *Villette*: "In naming Dr. John Graham Bretton after her father's treasured medical tome, Brontë was giving embodiment to the system of medical surveillance which had governed her own life" (222). This crucial intersection, between Brontë's character Dr. John with his "dry materialist views" and the medical authority of the nineteenth-century physician Thomas John Graham is, for many scholars, an invaluable context for interpreting the pathological nature of Lucy's unsettled physical and psychological state (260). As Miriam Bailin argues, "physical disorder is directly identified with psychological distress in *Villette* through the use of the available diagnostic nomenclature of the day. Dr. John sees in Lucy signs of nervous disease, of the dreaded 'Hypochondria' which responds to neither pill nor potion" (63).

I wish to stress here that although Lucy's behavior evinces the contemporary language of pathology in guides like *Modern Domestic Medicine*, developments in Victorian meteorology allow Brontë to employ an alternative language of scientific authority: one that views an embodied sensitivity to weather as a claim to prophetic insight and authority rather than physical and mental infirmity. In other words, interpreting Lucy Snowe's sustained affinity with the atmosphere as a sign of hysteria unhelpfully aligns our analysis of *Villette* with the domineering views of those "contemporary alienists" that Shuttleworth cites. Recent feminist criticism that attempts to recuperate Brontë's representation of Lucy as hysterical or neurotic subject by reading her "illness" as a claim to narrative authority has therefore considered only one component of the novel's scientific context. By focusing on the dialogue between meteorological and biological science in the first and last novels published during Brontë's lifetime, we better understand the correspondence

between the broad field of mid nineteenth-century science and the author's complex representation of female subjectivity and embodied narration.

Unlike the anesthetizing atmospheres in *Bleak House* that seek to control the perceived psychological and physical instability of women's bodies (as I showed in the first chapter), the powerful and sensually charged atmospheres in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* allow Brontë's protagonists to achieve knowledge through sensation. Rather than characters fractured by the opposing forces of "quivering sensitivity and blunt rationality," as Eagleton suggests, Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe experience atmospheric stimulus as the origin of narrative insight and desire, closely aligned in both novels with self-knowledge and the power of choice (17). By making these physical sensations and drives external and complementary to the female nervous system, Brontë crucially validates the sensitive embodiment that responds to them, as we shall see in the following section.

2. Atmospheric Exceptionalism and Lunar Influence in *Jane Eyre*

Jane Eyre famously opens with a description of the weather. "There was no possibility of taking a walk that day" Jane recalls (7). "We had been wandering, indeed, in the leafless shrubbery an hour in the morning; but since dinner . . . the cold winter wind had brought with it clouds so sombre, and a rain so penetrating, that further out-door exercise was now out of the question" (7). These initial observations do more than just evoke a sombre mood or describe a characteristically damp English setting: they establish Jane's characterization of herself in relation to her perceptions of the atmosphere.⁴⁷ From the earliest lines of her narrative, Brontë's protagonist ties her first-person perspective to an atmosphere that orients her point of view. She then quickly establishes the physical and intellectual effects of the aerial climate on her embodied subjectivity. The rain which is "so

⁴⁷ This reading complicates much extant criticism on Brontë's response to nature. See, for example, Enid Duthie's emphasis on weather in relation to characters' internal states (135). See also Maynard 115 and Lodge 121.

penetrating,” that it prevents “further out-door exercise,” turns out to have a physical effect on Jane that it does not have on her more physically robust cousins. “I never liked long walks,” she continues in the opening pages of chapter one, “especially on chilly afternoons: dreadful to me was the coming home in the raw twilight, with nipped fingers and toes, and a heart saddened by the chidings of Bessie, the nurse, and humbled by the consciousness of my physical inferiority to Eliza, John, and Georgiana Reed” (7).

Notably, Jane’s supposed physical inferiority to the Reeds—the sensitivity of her fingers and toes to the frosty air—turns out to be a sign of physical and psychological exceptionalism rather than insufficiency. First, this “inferiority” seems at odds with Jane’s physiognomical description of the little “tyrant” John Reed, whom she portrays as markedly deficient. Not only does “master Reed” become a “dissipated young man” who takes his own life, as we learn in the tenth chapter of volume one, but he is also “large and stout for his age, with a dingy and unwholesome skin; thick lineaments in a spacious visage, heavy limbs and large extremities” (91, 9). Although Jane’s physical description of John Reed, whom she fears with “every nerve [she] had” (9), predates Cesare Lombroso’s theory of criminal atavism by almost two decades, the marked difference between her slight and sensitive frame—which responds immediately to the weather—and the insensitivity of her violent cousin—marked in part by his “thick lineaments” and “heavy limbs”—helps to establish the protagonist’s exceptionalism from the very beginning of her narrative. Second, Jane’s heightened sensitivity to the conditions of the air, while they might damage her body under conditions of direct exposure, are also—from her position as a privileged observer—a means of writing the world. Put another way, Jane’s insightful observation of the weather facilitates her narration. When she famously describes her younger self “enshrined in double retirement” between the window of the Reed’s breakfast room and the red moreen curtain that encloses it, Jane is also positioned between two complementary and stimulating atmospheres—the one depicted in the copy of Thomas Bewick’s

History of British Birds (1797-1804) that she secrets from the Reeds' bookcase, and the one she gazes at from behind the panes of glass:

Folds of scarlet drapery shut in my view to the right hand; to the left were the clear panes of glass, protecting, but not separating me from the drear November day. At intervals, while turning over the leaves of my book, I studied the aspect of that winter afternoon. Afar, it offered a pale blank of mist and cloud; near a scene of wet lawn and storm-beat shrub, with ceaseless rain sweeping away wildly before a long and lamentable blast. (8)

Jane's observation of the "drear November day," with its "pale blank of mist and cloud," complements and completes the cold and somber climate depicted in Bewick's vividly illustrated volume. The introductory pages of this history, which capture the young Jane's attention, describe: "the vast sweep of the Arctic Zone, and those forlorn regions of dreary space—that reservoir of frost and snow, where firm fields of ice, the accumulation of centuries of winters, glazed in Alpine heights above heights, surround the pole, and centre the multiplied rigours of extreme cold" (8). For Jane, then, the literary atmosphere represented in Bewick's history lends added meaning to the physical atmosphere outside the breakfast-room window. "The words in these introductory pages connected themselves with the succeeding vignettes," she explains, "and gave significance to the rock standing up alone in a sea of billow and spray . . . to the cold and ghastly moon glancing through bars of cloud at a wreck just sinking" (8). Here, Jane's description of the relationship between image and text exemplifies the ways in which atmospheric perception and sensation inform her "autobiography": the descriptions of "dreary space" in the introductory pages of Bewick's volume teach her how to relate fictional images to corresponding events just as the "drear November day" structures the beginning of her own narrative. In this regard, her simultaneous

comprehension and composition of a story, as well as her physical concealment and protected exposure to the weather, produce the “double retirement” she takes pleasure in.⁴⁸

While critics have astutely pointed out the emphasis on printed text and creative individualism in this well-known scene, the ways in which the atmosphere structures and authorizes Jane’s narrative have passed undetected. For example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak persuasively argues that “‘the drear November day’ is rather a one dimensional ‘aspect’ to be ‘studied,’ not decoded like the ‘letter-press’ but, like pictures, deciphered by the unique creative imagination of the marginal individualist” (246). For Spivak, Jane’s status as a “marginal individualist” ultimately reinforces the problematic notion of “feminist individualism in the age of imperialism” (244). From Spivak’s perspective, then, the “private grammar of the creative imagination . . . in the novel’s opening”—which would seem to represent a “feminist” scenario—buckles under the weight of Britain’s “imperialist project” and Brontë’s tacit adherence to its nationalist ideology (249). Similarly although Ivan Kreilkamp does not adopt an imperialist critique of this famous scene, he argues for a limit to the originality and creativity of Jane’s vision similar to the one Spivak identifies. “‘Contained’ in a series of enclosures, protected by a pane of glass, Jane as she reads very much resembles a prized volume,” he argues (128). Yet, to emphasize Jane as a character representative of British imperialism, or a “prized volume” encased and protected from the natural elements, is to overlook the ways in which her physical exceptionalism is anomalous to her gender rather than universally characteristic of it. This is not to say that Jane’s sensitivity to the weather is not a part of her gendered subjectivity but rather that her atmospheric exceptionalism fails to align her with the traditional limitations of femininity. Spivak’s claim that Jane’s “feminist individualism” is shaped by

⁴⁸ For a reading of this scene as an instance of “the seductive world of early nineteenth-century day-dreaming” quite different than the focus on atmospheric expansiveness I propose here, see Glen on romantic escape and nineteenth-century annuals (117-18; 122).

the reproductive and spiritual imperatives of empire—like Kreilkamp’s assertion that Brontë’s sex leads her to emphasize textual over embodied speech—limits our readings of Jane’s character to her supposed adherence to a contextual femininity rather than her meaningful departure from these models.

In my view, Brontë’s protagonist demonstrates an affinity with the sensual stimulus of the weather that exceeds the social and family structures that critics such as Spivak and Kreilkamp claim define her character. During her departure from the Reeds’ home, the wind lulls her to sleep as if in place of a parent’s song. Recounting her coach journey from Gateshead to the Lowood School, Jane describes how “[t]he afternoon came on wet and somewhat misty: as it waned into dusk . . . I heard a wild wind rushing amongst trees. Lulled by the sound, I at last dropped asleep” (42). Similarly, after Jane arrives at Lowood, she redefines the kinship structures that, according to Spivak, form the “family/counter-family dyad” (246) and “imperialist axiomatics” (248) of Jane’s feminist individualism (247). Consider the extra-human kinship Jane forges with the wind in the following passage:

I wandered as usual among the forms and tables and laughing groups without a companion, yet not feeling lonely: when I passed the windows, I now and then lifted a blind, and looked out; it snowed fast, a drift was already forming against the lower panes; putting my ear close to the window, I could distinguish from the gleeful tumult within, the disconsolate moan of the wind outside.

Probably, if I had lately left a good home and kind parents, this would have been the hour when I should most keenly have regretted the separation; that wind would then have saddened my heart; this obscure chaos would have disturbed my peace! as it was, I derived from both a strange excitement, and reckless and feverish, I wished

the wind to howl more wildly, the gloom to deepen to darkness, and the confusion to rise to clamour. (54-55)

Separated from the “obscure chaos” and “howling” wind by a pane of glass, as in the earlier scene at Gateshead Hall, Jane nevertheless engages in a sensual exchange with the stimulating air. As in the aforementioned episode, her controlled exposure to the weather stimulates the domestic portions of her narrative rather than isolating her from the elements. Her responsiveness to the wind outside and her interest in the permeability of the domestic sphere to the external air therefore disrupts traditional notions of interior space in Victorian domestic fiction as that which circumscribes or characterizes the female subject. For instance, Spivak discusses the organization of domestic space in the opening scene of *Jane Eyre* in terms of traditional Victorian family structures (246), while Nancy Armstrong claims that in *Jane Eyre* “Brontë . . . bonds domestic space to the woman who inhabits it in a way that had never been so represented before” (207).⁴⁹ In opposition to these views of Jane as a domestic subject thoroughly ensconced in the rituals and practices of the home, the sensory experience of hearing the “disconsolate moan of the wind,” which takes the place of a “good home and kind parents,” allows her to author an alternative reality: one in which a physical and emotional identification with the atmosphere counters the lack of either inner “peace” or human “companion.”

On the one hand, the physicality of Jane’s character is inextricably linked to the wind in this scene: pressing her ear to the glass, she finds both sympathy and stimulation in the personified howling and moaning of the air. As the novel’s narrator, she also finds an external source of

⁴⁹ The exchange between inside and outside in this scene also represents a significant ideological departure from eighteenth-century notions of domestic space. See, for example, Jankovik’s description of how “Eighteenth-century sociability (salons, libraries, lectures, card routs, dancing, clubability)” is a result of “environmental improvements designed to provide thermal equability in interiors whose calms and comfort contrasted with the wind-bruised English outdoors” (“Gruff Boreas” 151).

authority in the environmental surroundings that resonate with her subjective and emotion and desire.⁵⁰ The externalization of Jane's interiority acts as more than a mere objective correlative for her subjectivity; it transforms her embodiment, making her feel "reckless and feverish" and providing a "strange" physical "excitement."⁵¹ On the other hand, her feverish yearning for "the gloom to deepen to darkness, and the confusion to rise to clamour" expresses a narrative desire for an atmospheric force to overmaster her physicality, recalling the author's assertion in the preface to *Wuthering Heights* that "[t]he writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master" (22).

In this scene, Jane's response to the natural element synonymous with her family name reinforces her atmospheric exceptionalism. Just as her weather-chapped appendages help to establish her physical distinctiveness in the opening lines of her story, her first days at Lowood disclose her embodied sensitivity to and sympathy with her atmospheric surroundings. In subsequent episodes, the protagonist's physical and psychological sensitivity emphasizes her dissimilarity to her fellow students. As many readers have noticed, the miasmatic and damp atmosphere marked by the "drizzling yellow fog" (48) surrounding Lowood, which is situated amid a "forest-dell" that "was the cradle of fog and fog-bred pestilence" (75), presages the typhus fever

⁵⁰ See, in this connection, Cohen. While I focus here on the objectification of interior states through an external materiality (the substance of the air), he concentrates on "Brontë's practice of precariously piling up objective metaphors gives vivid form to the idea of embodied human subjectivity, of an interior with the properties of a material entity" (45).

⁵¹ For discussion of the earthly elements as objective correlatives for Jane's emotion, see Lodge 120 and Duthie 136-41.

that many of the school's pupils contract.⁵² As Jane pointedly observes in chapter five of the first volume, "[t]he stronger among the girls ran about and engaged in active games, but sundry pale and thin ones herded together for shelter and warmth in the verandah; and amongst these, as the dense mist penetrated to their shivering frames, I heard frequently the sound of a hollow cough" (48).⁵³ Despite Brontë's earlier emphasis on Jane's perception of her own "physical inferiority," and regardless of the slight build that characterizes Jane throughout the novel, she fails to fall ill. Instead, the protagonist's physical and spiritual affinity with the atmosphere discriminates her receptive yet hearty embodiment from the fragile physicality of many of her schoolmates, including her closest friend at Lowood, the consumptive Helen Burns.

For the devout and self-denying Helen, embodiment is of diminished importance. As she piously tells Jane: "the sovereign hand that created your frame, and put life into it, has provided you with other resources than your feeble self, or than creatures as feeble as you" (69). Yet for the young

⁵² For an insightful reading of Brontë's interest in sanitary reform and national health in relation to atmosphere see Bewell (*Romanticism and Colonial Disease* 292-95).

⁵³ As Elizabeth Gaskell and Juliet Barker note in their influential biographies of Charlotte Brontë and her family, Lowood is based on the Cowan Bridge School for the daughters of Clergymen, or Clergy Daughters' School—as it was also known, which the four eldest Brontë sisters attended from 1824 to 1825. Around the time that typhus spread at the school, the eldest of the Brontë children, Maria, fell ill with consumption (138). Maria was sent home to Haworth parsonage shortly before her death from consumption in May of 1825, followed by Elizabeth who died of the same affliction less than a month later. Just before Elizabeth's death, Patrick Brontë removed Charlotte and Emily from the school (Barker 138). In her biography, Gaskell takes some pains to distinguish Charlotte's first-hand accounts of Cowan Bridge from her own research about the institution including its sanitary conditions and management. Gaskell nevertheless corroborates that Charlotte's accounts of Lowood in *Jane Eyre*, including the typhus outbreak, are based on the actual events at Cowan Bridge (46-58).

Jane, as well as for the mature narrator who crafts her life story, pain, denial and rebellion are fundamentally embodied registers of feeling and knowing. “To gain some real affection,” she tells Helen, “I would willingly submit to have the bone of my arm broken, or let a bull toss me, or to stand behind a kicking horse, and let it dash its hoof at my chest,—” (69). For Jane, unlike Helen, life is lived through its sensual and emotional rewards and sacrifices. Helen’s abnegations therefore constitute a bodily as well as a spiritual enterprise.⁵⁴ “We are, and must be, one and all, burdened with faults in this world,” Helen asserts. But, “we shall put them off in putting off our corruptible bodies . . . sin will fall from us with this cumbrous frame of flesh, and only the spark of the spirit will remain” (58). Jane meets Helen’s devout admonishment with this defiant proclamation: “I was no Helen Burns . . . fury . . . bounded in my pulses” (65). For critics such as Richard Benvenuto, the opposition between Jane’s stolid embodiment and Helen’s spiritual self-abnegation evinces a metaphysical and theological difference that upholds Jane’s divided subjectivity. From his perspective, the character of Helen Burns represents “grace” as opposed to “nature” and is consequently emblematic of the extremes that Jane oscillates between (623). Nevertheless, I wish to suggest that Helen’s assertion that the spirit can be separated from the flesh and Jane’s counter-insistence that physicality is fundamental to her epistemology, defines the model of embodied atmospheric exceptionalism that Brontë’s novel develops.

In particular, Jane’s narrative relies upon the notion that women’s bodies are especially receptive to an atmosphere that is regulated by the feminine agency of the moon. As we shall see, lunar agency in *Jane Eyre* mobilizes the nineteenth-century cultural belief that the moon controlled aerial “tides.” According to this widely received logic of “lunarism,” the moon exerted a gravitational pull on the atmosphere, regulating its ebb and flow in the same way that it controlled oceanic

⁵⁴ Critics frequently discuss the relationship between Jane Eyre and Helen Burns in terms of spiritual and material philosophy. See, for example, Barbara Hardy (65-80), Yeazell (140), and Benvenuto (10, 18-19).

movement.⁵⁵ Accordingly, popular belief and meteorological theories of lunar influence mutually averred that changes in the lunar cycle presaged changes in the weather. We see this ideology represented by the celestial body of the moon in *Jane Eyre*, which controls the weather and, in doing so, also controls Jane's story.

In the opening scene of the novel, for instance, we recall Jane's attention to the presiding figure of the "cold and ghastly moon" in the illustrations in Bewick's *History of British Birds*, which is "glancing through bars of cloud at a wreck just sinking" (8). Just as this image contributes to the ordering and authorization of Jane's narrative, the meteorological influence of the moon continues to influence her representation of femininity throughout the novel. That is, the moon controls both Jane's embodied narration and her perception of herself in relation to other women: most notably, the novel's surrogate mother figure Miss Temple. In the following episode, after the head of Lowood Mr. Brocklehurst's public denunciation of Jane as a liar, the shifting wind and clouds conspire with the light of the moon to reveal Jane's benevolent teacher:

Resting my head on Helen's shoulder, I put my arms round her waist. She drew me to her, and we reposed in silence. We had not sat long thus, when another person came in. Some heavy clouds, swept from the sky by a rising wind, had left the moon bare and her light, streaming in through a window near, shone full both on us and on the approaching figure, which we at once recognized as Miss Temple. (70)

In this episode, Jane associates "the rising wind" that parts the clouds with the feminine body of the moon and "her light streaming in through a window." The moon appears to orchestrate both the movements of the changeable air and the highly embodied experience of feminine camaraderie in

⁵⁵ See Anderson for a discussion of the central tenets of lunarism and their dissemination through popular print media throughout the 1830s and 1840s (49-55).

this scene. As Jane rests her head on Helen's shoulder and encircles her friend's waist, she becomes part of a sensual exchange presided over by the moonlight. These instances of lunar influence connect Jane's highly feminized embodiment with the atmospheric exceptionalism that earlier draw her to the lunar vignettes in Bewick's volume.

Jane's association between celestial influence and the female body continues throughout the remainder of her narrative. After Miss Temple's marriage and departure from Lowood, for instance, Jane observes: "I . . . found . . . that . . . my mind had put off all it had borrowed of Miss Temple—[O]r rather," she corrects herself, "that she had taken with her the serene atmosphere I had been breathing in her vicinity—and that now I was left in my natural element, and beginning to feel the stirring of old emotions" (84). As in the previous scene, Jane associates Miss Temple's presence with the controlling body of the moon, recalling nineteenth-century meteorologist Luke Howard's claim in his 1841 essay on lunar influence: "We have here, I think evidence of a great tidal wave or swell in the atmosphere, caused by the moon's attraction, preceding her in her approach to us, and following slowly as she departs . . ." (279). Miss Temple's influence over the state of Jane's air is accordingly part of a larger pattern of lunar influence and atmospheric determination that develops throughout Brontë's novel. As she contemplates what she will do after Miss Temple's departure and how she will adjust to the subsequent change in atmosphere, for example, Jane proclaims: "I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped" (85). Yet the vague prayer she makes for this liberation "seemed scattered on the wind faintly blowing" (85). Likewise, Jane's "humbler supplication; for change, stimulus . . . [is] swept off into vague space" (85).

Much later, in the novel's third volume, after Jane has found her way to Thornfield Hall and accepted the marriage proposal of her master Edward Fairfax Rochester, she finds herself in the sway of maternal lunar influence once again. Having just learned of Rochester's existing marriage to Bertha Mason and inwardly bidding her beloved "Farewell, for ever!" Jane retires to her chamber

(319). There, she dreams of the red room at Gateshead but, unlike the “species of fit” (18) occasioned by the ambient beam of light she previously experienced, the mature Jane receives the moral imperative of the moon with receptive obedience:

That night I never thought to sleep; but a slumber fell on me as soon as I lay down in bed. I was transported in thought to the scenes of childhood: I dreamt I lay in the red-room at Gateshead; that the night was dark, and my mind impressed with strange fears. The light that long ago had struck me into syncope, recalled in this vision, seemed glidingly to mount the wall, and tremblingly to pause in the centre of the obscured ceiling. I lifted up my head to look: the roof resolved to clouds, high and dim; the gleam was such as the moon imparts to vapours she is about to sever. I watched her come—watched with the strangest anticipation; as though some word of doom were to be written on her disk. She broke forth as never moon yet burst from cloud: a hand first penetrated the sable folds and waved them away; then, not a moon, but a white human form shone in the azure, inclining a glorious brow earthward. It gazed and gazed on me. It spoke to my spirit: immeasurably distant was the tone, yet so near, it whispered in my heart—

“My daughter, flee temptation.”

“Mother, I will.” (319)

Jane’s verbal response, “Mother, I will,” uttered after awaking from the “trance-like dream” she describes, reestablishes the confluence between the maternal body and the guiding influence of the moon discussed above (319). As in earlier episodes, this dominant force shapes the teleology of the novel’s remaining chapters by directing Jane’s action and the outcome of her story. Regardless of whether Jane’s response supposes the spectral appearance of her biological mother or an abstract

maternal presence, this scene affirms her susceptibility to the meteorological imperative of this celestial female body.

Despite the tendency of aerial conditions to determine the course of Jane's narrative, however, scholars who discuss the moon in *Jane Eyre* tend to interpret it as yet another signifier of Jane's divided subjectivity. In his influential essay on "Reason and the Moon" in Brontë's fiction, Robert Heilman argues that "few artists can have been so beset as [Brontë] was by the competing claims of the rational and the nonrational upon art and life" (283). Using the tenets of Robert Graves's study of poetic myth, *The White Goddess* (1948), which suggests that solar influence is aligned with reason and lunar influence with imagination and poeticism, Heilman reads what he calls "the lunar muse" (292) in Brontë's work as a "symbolic presence" (299). But this idea of signification separates the moon from its literary referents, whereas atmosphere (and its association with lunarism) does not stand in or symbolize but rather invests characters with a physiological and psychological agency. Consequently, Jane's sensitivity to atmosphere fails to adhere to Maynard's reading of the moon as representative of Jane's "intuition and expansive imagination" (115) or David Lodge's evocation of the pathetic fallacy (140).⁵⁶

This critical consensus that the figure of the moon signifies the intuitive or non-rational aspects of Jane's personality inadvertently upholds debates about lunarism within nineteenth-century meteorology. For natural philosophers from 1830s through 1880s, discussions about whether the moon's cycles could predict storms revolved around an age-old conflict between folkloric or intuitive perceptions of the moon's influence and the Victorian belief in rational or scientific order. In *The Moon and the Weather: The Probability of Lunar Influence Reconsidered* (1885), British meteorologist Walter L. Browne passionately contends that the "popular belief in [the moon's] influence is no proof of its truth, any more than the universal belief in witches during the Middle Ages is a proof of

⁵⁶ For a factual and historical reading of the moon and its calendric cycles in *Jane Eyre*, see Nockolds.

the truth of witchcraft” (15). Yet he proceeds to argue for a national interpretation of this age-old belief in the moon’s influence. “[A]t the end of the nineteenth century we seem returning to several of the old beliefs and superstitions,” he observes. “[O]nly there is this difference: they are coming back clad in the garb of science. . . . [I]f the moon’s influence be a superstition or a fallacy,” he continues, “then let it stand its chance with other revived superstitions and fallacies, and let it be examined in the light of modern science” (15). The comparison Browne makes between lunarism and “witchcraft” tellingly references the moon’s association with pagan femininity, an association that Heilman relies upon in his analysis of *Jane Eyre* almost a century later. For Victorian meteorologists, as well as twentieth-century literary critics, then, the moon evocatively mediates between practices associated with the human imagination and analytical reasoning. Yet, in order to understand the diegetic significance of the moon in *Jane Eyre* it is necessary to move beyond this dichotomy between reason and imagination and consider the varied fields of study that surrounded nineteenth-century views on lunarism.

Derivative and inconclusive though it may be, Browne’s work is important because it attempts to advance scientific analysis of the data collected by earlier nineteenth-century meteorologists such as Luke Howard and William Bayley Webster. Howard, who gained fame with his 1802 essay, “On the Modifications of Clouds,” in which he coins the names and definitions of cloud formations still in use today, was also the author of numerous studies of the moon’s potential influence on the weather. These included a chapter in *The Climate of London* (1818) titled “Influence of the Moon on the variable Pressure of the Atmosphere, on the Temperature, Winds and Rain,” as well as an 1841 essay read before The Royal Society proposing that the moon influenced barometrical pressure over a “lunar cycle of eighteen years” (278). Howard’s final treatise, *Barometrographia* (1847), published the same year as *Jane Eyre*, further developed these theories of

lunar influence.⁵⁷ Howard, like Browne, held that the gravitational pull of the moon was expressed in periodic cycles. “The barometric mean in our climate is depressed (on an average of years) by the moon’s position in south declination,” Howard argues (“On a Cycle of Eighteen Years” 279). “This depression is gradual,” he continues; “it commences with the moon in full north declination and proceeds through her remaining positions to the time when she again crosses the equator to return north; at which season the whole weight that had been abstracted is suddenly restored” (279). The feminine body of the moon, according to Howard, also controlled atmospheric currents, which he believed operated like an aerial tide. “The influence of the Moon on the Temperature and density of our local atmosphere, appears . . . to be exercised chiefly through the medium of the winds,” he writes. “It is a secondary effect of her varied attraction; which continually tends to change the bearings of the different currents in motion in the great body of the atmosphere” (238).

Howard’s thesis that lunar periodicity controlled the wind and weather attests to the staunch belief of many lunarists that observation and analysis of the moon’s cycles promised to predict global weather patterns. For example, Webster’s 1857 publication *The Recurring Monthly Periods and Periodic System of the Atmospheric Actions*, demonstrates the sustained relevance of the tenets that Howard set forth in the 1840s. Arguing, first, for the study of monthly rather than the eighteen-year lunar cycles that Howard proposed, Webster contends: “We have . . . a long roll of years of antiquity down to the present time, all testifying to the influence of the moon upon the weather . . . the eminent and learned—have not disproved it, although they have not approved of it, except in some few instances. Whatever may be the merits or demerits of the lunar influence, it positively bespeaks recurring monthly periods” (169).

⁵⁷. For a more thorough description of Howard’s contribution to modern meteorology and cloud classification, see Hamblyn (169-73).

Meteorological debates such as the one between Howard and Webster continued to dominate discussions about weather prediction throughout the nineteenth century and would have been familiar to a lay audience, particularly avid readers such as the Brontës, as well as to the broader scientific community. Popular reviews of meteorological studies treating lunar influence appeared in newspapers such as the *Times*, which reviewed Howard's "Cycle of the Seasons" on 8 June 1842. A review of his book "Seven Lectures on Meteorology" also appeared in the *Athenaum* on 8 July 1843 just three years before it reviewed the Brontë's published collection of poems.⁵⁸ The purported effect of lunar cycles on the weather was also disseminated in popular household almanacs and domestic guides.⁵⁹ *Loudon's Encyclopedia of Gardening*, first published in 1822, for instance, cited famed scientist and astronomer Sir William Herschel as a source for their "account of lunar influence" in an 1835 edition. Four years after Brontë's death, in 1859, *Loudon's* continued to account for lunar influence in its comprehensive section on "The Atmosphere." In the section titled "Of the Means of Prognosticating the Weather," Loudon writes: "Although the moon only acts (as far at least as we can ascertain) on the waters of the ocean by producing tides, it is nevertheless highly *probable* . . . that, in consequence of the lunar influence, great variations do take place in the atmosphere, and consequently in the weather" (445).

I wish to emphasize that despite the insistence of both scientific men like Webster and practical philosophers like Loudon that the influence of the moon on the weather had neither been proven nor adequately refuted at mid-century, these debates were very much a part of everyday discourse about the weather. Brontë's own interest in weather prediction marks her as an amateur meteorologist familiar with such debates. As Elizabeth Gaskell writes in a letter recounting her first

⁵⁸. See Hervey, "Review of Poems by C., E. and A. Bell."

⁵⁹. For a comprehensive discussion of the prominent role almanacs played in nineteenth-century weather prediction and the dissemination of theories of lunar influence see Anderson (41-51).

introduction to Charlotte Brontë: “I was struck by Miss Brontë’s careful examination of the shape of the clouds and the signs of the heavens, in which she read, as from a book, what the coming weather would be. . . . She said. . . I had no idea what a companion the sky became to anyone living in solitude—more than any inanimate object on earth—more than the moors themselves” (363).

The more we follow these long-standing debates and popular speculation about lunarism, acknowledging meanwhile Brontë’s personal interest in weather prediction, the more we are able to perceive the physiological concerns underlying Brontë’s representation of the moon in *Jane Eyre*. In addition to the moon’s repeated influence on weather and wind in the novel—its ability to glance through “bars of cloud,” conspire with the wind to sweep clouds from the sky, and sever vapours—this celestial body also influences Jane’s receptive psychology and embodiment. Although historical research on female periodicity, or sexual life cycles, is well known, the ways in which the physiological study of women’s bodies corresponds to contemporary developments in meteorology is less often remarked upon. Victorian medical practitioners, especially neurologists, were especially concerned with the cycles of the moon and argued that lunar periodicity controlled a woman’s reproductive cycles and the nervous disorders attendant to it. As historian Janet Oppenheim explains, the supposed periodicity of the female body was believed to be an integral part of women’s susceptibility to illnesses such as hysteria or neurosis: “Victorian and Edwardian medical advisors typically subsumed their diagnoses of nervous maladies in female patients under the general category of ‘feminine disorders,’ related to menstruation, pregnancy, or lactation,” she contends (181). In keeping with the known rhythms of the lunar cycle, nineteenth-century physicians upheld the belief

that sexual periodicity regulated a woman's physical and psychological state, and that this condition consequently put remarkable strain on her nervous system.⁶⁰

Menstruation, commonly associated with the monthly cycle of the moon, was often the stronghold of Victorian theories of nervous illness in part because, as Oppenheim also points out: "While only some women experienced pregnancy, the vast majority experienced the monthly menstrual cycle" (189). Moreover, physicians almost invariably understood the effect of the atmosphere on the female body as fundamental to this monthly cycle. Thomas John Graham, whose well-documented influence on the Brontës' medical knowledge and on Charlotte's writing in particular we have discussed in the earlier portion of this chapter, upheld this purported connection between climatic influence and female physiology. In *Domestic Medicine*, he asserts: "The time at which the menstrual discharge commences varies from many circumstances, chiefly, however, from those of climate, and of peculiarity of constitution. In warm climates menstruation appears as early as at eight or nine years of age; for here the general growth of the body advances more rapidly than in colder quarters and the atmosphere is more stimulant" (415). Furthermore, Graham characteristically associates hysteria with female periodicity: "Hysterical affectation occurs much more frequently in the unmarried than in the married, and most commonly between the age of puberty and that of thirty-five years; and they make their attack oftener about the period of menstruation than at any other time" (351).

Like Graham, mid-century physician Thomas Laycock, a forefather of modern neurology, also focused on the significance of atmospheric phenomena and its relation to physiology. In 1855 Laycock became Professor of Medicine at Edinburgh and published widely on the human nervous

⁶⁰ Oppenheim quotes from W. Tyler Smith: "Periodicity is . . . more indelibly marked upon the female than upon the male constitution; and periodic tendencies are as distinctly seen in the diseases, as in the functions, of the female economy" (601).

system and related disorders, including hysteria, throughout his career (F. E. James 491).⁶¹ His first book, *A Treatise on the Nervous Diseases of Women; Comprising an Inquiry into the Nature, Causes, and Treatment of Spinal and Hysterical Disorders* (1840), includes an extensive study of the similarities between the periodicity of the female body and the cycles of the moon. He argues first and foremost for the confluence of menstrual periods and neurological disorder: “The phenomena of menstruation, like others depending upon the ovaria . . . recur usually at periods of a lunar month, and continue three or four days,” he writes. “There are frequently hysterical symptoms of different degrees of intensity; the patient is whimsical, irascible, and capricious; is affected with vomiting, neuralgic pains in the head, face, side, or legs and any disease to which she is subjected is at this period aggravated” (45). These observations bear an intellectual congruence with contemporary developments in the physical sciences and demonstrate the way that Victorian physiologists thought about the decisive connection between the lunar and female periodic cycles. Just as meteorologists Luke Howard and William Bayley Webster quibbled over the length of the lunar cycle, Laycock focuses an analogous debate about the importance of weekly or “hebdomadal” phases of body and mind:

The hebdomadal changes have been noticed from an early period of the medical art; probably by the ancient Egyptians. . . . Connected with these weekly periodic movements was the opinion of the moon's influence on the system, which is equally founded on observation. I would only remark here, that the time of each new and full moon, and of each change, are the central points of the lunar influence, as the equinoxes and solstices are of the solar influence. The menstrual must be considered,

⁶¹. For further discussion of Laycock's study of the female nervous system and his writing on hysteria, see Oppenheim (28-29) and Poovey (36). Laycock wrote a study of hysteria published the same year as his *Treatise on the Nervous Diseases of Women*.

for the reasons before given, as nothing more than a multiple of the hebdomadal period. (146)

Laycock subsequently ties this hebdomadal period to predictable patterns of nervous illness:

The doctrine of a periodic monthly change in the system of the human female is so universally known and acted upon as to require little notice. . . .The possibility of hysteric disease assuming this type should not be overlooked. . . .The fourth day, and the seventh, eleventh, and fourteenth are critical days, and connect the doctrine of crises with the menstrual period. . . . Just as the menstrual discharges occasionally do, so will paroxysmal diseases recur every three weeks . . . It is exceedingly useful to notice these periodic movements in the treatment of hysteria. They may be observed in every grade of intensity. (150-51)

The synthesis between lunar and female periodicity in these passages seamlessly weaves together meteorology with physiology, as well an emergent discourse of neurology. In other words, Laycock makes explicit the lunar influence over the atmosphere and the female body that is implicit within Jane's first person narration. This is not to say that the pathology Laycock associates with biological and meteorological periodicity is congruous to lunar influence in *Jane Eyre*. Although Brontë emphasizes the mutual agency of the moon and Jane as an authorial female subject, physiologists such as Laycock noticeably avoid associations of the female patient's similarity to a dominating celestial force. Women, according to Laycock, are powerless receivers of atmospheric control. In the following passage, he asserts:

Nervous diseases are continually influenced by atmospheric changes. . . . Now, the greatest atmospherical changes occur about the changes of the moon. . . . That state of the atmosphere in which thunder-storms prevail most, has a remarkable effect upon nervous people. In one of my patients it excites diarrhoea and cephalaea; in

some it produces clonus; in others a sensation of heavy weight on the vertex, of general uneasiness, of intense headache, and occasionally dyspnoea, and even the phenomena of an ague fit. The general lassitude experienced is well known. (149)

Rather than provoking symptoms associated with this catalogue of nervous diseases, Jane's repeated climatic encounters with what Laycock terms the "influence of the moon," and the "state of the atmosphere in which thunder-storms prevail most," stimulate her senses. The moon's influence on both creative inspiration and the female body in *Jane Eyre* provides us with a substantially different critical apparatus than that which critics such as Sally Shuttleworth use to discuss the influence of Victorian psychology on Brontë's work. Shuttleworth's analysis differs from mine in that it applies Laycock's theories of female psychosis in *An Essay on Hysteria* to Jane's supposed emotional instability (69). She maintains that "[a]s Thomas Laycock, one of the most pre-eminent Victorian experts on the female body, observed, with reference to . . . the menses: 'The first appearance of this secretion is almost always accompanied with symptoms of hysteria, more or less severe; recurring also occasionally at each monthly period.' Inner excess and uncontrollable flow gives rise to outward symptoms of disorder (a similar association can be traced in the imagery which surrounds Jane Eyre's first explosion of passion, and subsequent imprisonment in the symbolic red room at Gateshead)" (78). Yet, as the previous reading of Jane's encounter with the moon attests, her mature response to atmospheric stimulus is a fundamentally more empowered sensual response than the "syncope" or "species of fit" she experiences in the red room.⁶²

Jane's description of her initial introduction to Rochester is perhaps the most compelling demonstration of how atmospheric conditions mediate her response to sexual desire. As in earlier portions of her story, the feminine light of the moon presides over the following scene. Here,

⁶² Shuttleworth cites, in this connection, Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (113-15).

though, Rochester is a palpable force whose effect on the atmosphere and Jane's body rivals that of the moon:

On the hill-top above me sat the rising moon; pale yet as a cloud, but brightening momentarily, she looked over Hay, which, half lost in trees, sent up a blue smoke from its few chimneys: it was yet a mile distant, but in the absolute hush I could hear plainly its thin murmurs of life. My ear too felt the flow of currents . . . A rude noise broke on these fine ripples and whisperings, at once so far away and so clear: a positive tramp, tramp, a metallic clatter, which effaced the soft wave-wanderings; as, in a picture, the solid mass of a crag, or the rough boles of a great oak, drawn in dark and strong on the foreground, efface the aerial distance of azure hill, sunny horizon, and blended clouds where tint melts into tint. (111)

In this scene, the moon maintains its influence over the atmosphere, its pale form presiding over the "absolute hush" of the scene and the "fine ripples and whisperings" of the sound waves that emanate from the nearby town of Hay. The moon's quiet and consistent atmospheric control coincides here, as in earlier scenes, with Jane's embodied response to the air around her. Her perception of ambient smoke emerging from distant chimneys and the sensitivity of her ear to the gentle stirring of air currents recalls the "serene atmosphere" she associates with Miss Temple's presence at Lowood. But the "rude" sound of Rochester's approach opposes the feminine-oriented lunar control evident in this scene and at previous moments in the novel. Indeed, it "effac[es] the soft wave-wanderings" of the hushed atmosphere like an unrefined crag or rough-hewn tree trunk that "effac[es] the aerial distance" in a pictorial work of art (111).

Rochester's "metallic clatter" demonstrates that as Brontë's Bildungsroman advances, Jane's atmospheric sensitivities change with her maturing embodiment. Over the course of the novel, companionate desire begins to replace the protagonist's longing for a "good home and kind parents"

(55). Accordingly, the atmospheric sensations Jane associates with narrative inspiration and female kinship take on an increasing eroticism after her arrival at Thornfield Hall. When Jane pencils a portrait of her master using a black, “broad point” befitting his “broad and prominent forehead and . . . square lower outline of visage,” in the novel’s second volume, she insists that she must take special care to render Rochester’s “irids lustrous and large,” making “the shades blacker, that the lights might flash more brilliantly” (233). Here Jane continues to associate Rochester’s embodiment with a physical force and electric energy that recall the sensual atmospherics of his initial appearance in the fields beyond Hay. Similarly, when she recounts her attempt to evade the society of Thornfield’s drawing room, she describes the powerful check Rochester’s physicality has on the air and her volition:

“Now is my time to slip away,” thought I: but the tones that then severed the air arrested me. Mrs. Fairfax had said Mr. Rochester possessed a fine voice: he did—a mellow, powerful bass, into which he threw his own feeling, his own force; finding a way through the ear to the heart, and there waking sensation strangely. I waited till the last deep and full vibration had expired. . . . (180)

In this episode, Jane once again experiences Rochester’s presence as an atmospheric “force” that “sever[s] the air.” The imbrication of her embodiment, heightened sensation, and affinity with the air in this scene elaborates her erotic responsiveness to Rochester. “I have something in my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves, that assimilates me mentally to him,” she muses from across the drawing room (175).

Jane’s physical “assimilation” to her master and its physiological effect on her “blood and nerves” mimic her keen sensual responses to atmospheric force. We should consequently examine Brontë’s declaration that the “storm-heated and electrical atmosphere” of novels like *Wuthering Heights* demonstrates the author’s submission to a “creative gift . . . of which he is not always master”

in light of Jane's romantic desire (22). The concept of mastery in the novel draws our attention to the sexual dominance of the literal "master," Edward Fairfax Rochester in relation to Brontë's non-fictional treatment of the authorial process. During the violent electrical storm that accompanies Rochester's marriage proposal in book two, these opposing forces emerge within a narrative framework:

"Come to me—come to me entirely now," said he; and added, in his deepest tone, speaking in my ear as his cheek was laid on mine, "Make my happiness—I will make yours." . . .

But what had befallen the night? The moon was not yet set, and we were all in shadow: I could scarcely see my master's face, near as I was. And what ailed the chestnut tree? it writhed and groaned; while wind roared in the laurel walk, and came sweeping over us.

"We must go in," said Mr. Rochester: "the weather changes. I could have sat with thee till morning, Jane."

"And so," thought I, "could I with you." I should have said so, perhaps, but a livid, vivid spark leapt out of a cloud at which I was looking, and there was a crack, a crash, and a close rattling peal; and I thought only of hiding my dazzled eyes against Mr. Rochester's shoulder. The rain rushed down. He hurried me up the walk, through the grounds, and into the house . . .

. . . loud as the wind blew, near and deep as the thunder crashed, fierce and frequent as the lightning gleamed, cataract-like as the rain fell during a storm of two hours' duration, I experienced no fear and little awe. Mr. Rochester came thrice to my door in the course of it, to ask if I was safe and tranquil: and that was comfort, that was strength for anything.

Before I left my bed in the morning, little Adèle came running in to tell me that the great horse-chestnut at the bottom of the orchard had been struck by lightning in the night, and half of it split away. (256-57)

Although many of the aforementioned atmospheric events allow Jane to make sense of diegetic events, here her embodied desire causes her to turn away from the “livid, vivid spark” of lightning and “close rattling peal” of thunder and hide her “dazzled eyes against Mr. Rochester’s shoulder.” Her physical connection to Rochester and her assertion that his presence “was comfort . . . was strength for anything” consequently overshadow her receptivity to atmospheric event. Likewise, her proclamation that she experiences “no fear and little awe” is incongruous with her previous sensitivity to atmospheric events and their diegetic power. The primary importance of this shift in Jane’s perception is that it encourages her to privilege her desire for Rochester over a premonitory insight.

Many critics deem the thematic implications of the chestnut tree scene *de rigueur*, claiming that it demonstrates what John Maynard terms “that barely undergraduate device they call foreshadowing” (94). Indeed, the metaphorical significations of this episode are clear to most readers of *Jane Eyre*. We effortlessly glean, as Maynard does, that the storm evinces “supernal displeasure with Rochester’s bigamous defiance” or mobilizes the partially split chestnut tree as a symbol of “the ultimate forgiveness that will keep the two lovers together at their roots even in their separation” (94). Yet, in spite of the overt significations of atmospheric disturbance in this scene, Brontë emphasizes her narrator’s inability to comprehend. Jane’s questions—“what had befallen the night?” and “what ailed the chestnut tree?”—are significant blind spots in a narrative otherwise concerned with the protagonist’s sensual and cognitive response to meteorological signs (94). In other words, by turning towards Rochester’s shoulder, Jane embraces an embodied desire that is not atmospheric. The turbulent climate in this scene encourages her to privilege sexual desire over the

air's portentous signs: a decision that the subsequent revelation of Rochester's preexisting marriage proves ill advised.

In contradistinction to the competing sensual impulses in the proposal scene, when Jane later returns to the ruined Thornfield Hall in search of Rochester, she heeds an impulse that relies upon both her sexual desire with her atmospheric exceptionalism. As she attempts to reach a decision about St. John Rivers's marriage proposal, she experiences the interdependence of these dual forms of sensual receptivity in the form of a "mysterious summons" (448). This seemingly enigmatic passage is deeply familiar to readers of *Jane Eyre*:

I contended with my inward dimness of vision, before which clouds yet rolled. I sincerely, deeply, fervently longed to do what was right; and only that. "Show me, show me the path!" I entreated of Heaven. I was excited more than I had ever been; and whether what followed was the effect of excitement the reader shall judge.

. . . My heart beat fast and thick: I heard its throb. Suddenly it stood still to an inexpressible feeling that thrilled it through, and passed at once to my head and extremities. The feeling was not like an electric shock, but it was quite as sharp, as strange, as startling: it acted on my senses as if their utmost activity hitherto had been but torpor, from which they were now summoned and forced to wake. They rose expectant: eye and ear waited while the flesh quivered on my bones.

"What have you heard? What do you see?" asked St. John. I saw nothing, but I heard a voice somewhere cry—

"Jane! Jane! Jane!"—nothing more.

"O God! what is it?" I gasped.

I might have said, "Where is it?" for it did not seem in the room—nor in the house—nor in the garden; it did not come out of the air—nor from under the

earth—nor from overhead. I had heard it—where, or whence, for ever impossible to know! And it was the voice of a human being—a known, loved, well-remembered voice—that of Edward Fairfax Rochester; and it spoke in pain and woe, wildly, eerily, urgently.

“I am coming!” I cried. “Wait for me! Oh, I will come!” I flew to the door and looked into the passage: it was dark. I ran out into the garden: it was void.

“Where are you?” I exclaimed.

The hills beyond Marsh Glen sent the answer faintly back—“Where are you?” I listened. The wind sighed low in the firs: all was moorland loneliness and midnight hush.

“Down superstition!” I commented, as that spectre rose up black by the black yew at the gate. “This is not thy deception, nor thy witchcraft: it is the work of nature. She was roused, and did—no miracle—but her best.”

I broke from St. John, who had followed, and would have detained me. It was *my* time to assume ascendancy. *My* powers were in play and in force. (419)

Although this scene has been the focus of much critical consideration, scholars have consistently overlooked how it relates it to a larger pattern of atmospheric events within *Jane Eyre*.⁶³ My contention is that the obliteration of boundaries between embodied and omniscient knowledge in this episode evinces Jane’s authorial receptivity to aerial stimulus. Although she does not identify the

⁶³ Influential readings of this scene are too numerous to cite in full. For prominent examples, see Ruth Bernard Yeazell who discusses the “mysterious summons” in *Jane Eyre* in light of Romantic convention (129); Srdjan Smajić, who argues that Jane’s “clairaudience” is a supernatural trope common in realist fiction (16-17); and Richard Menke, who contends that the near-electric charge in this scene reimagines contemporary communication technologies (81).

atmosphere as the source of this “mysterious summons” her inability to identify the exact origin of the voice she hears combines the embodied sensation and disembodied knowledge she associates with atmospheric events throughout the novel. Jane insists the sound “did not come out of the air” but we later learn it originates from the Rochester’s residence at Ferndean, suggesting a sonic transference akin to the ones that “efface the aerial distance” as her master first approaches Thornfield Hall or that “sever the air” when his powerful bass resonates through the drawing room. To be sure, Jane cannot locate a precise source for this sign that Rochester is alive and waiting for her return. Nevertheless, she cannot help but look to the aerial environment for the source of this knowledge. Entering the garden outside the Rivers’ home she audibly inquires of the vacant space “Where are you?” and, in response to this aimless inquiry, she hears only the echo of her own voice and the sighing of the wind.

In opposition to St. John’s assumed spiritual and moral authority, Jane’s remarkable assertion: “It was *my* time to assume ascendancy. *My* powers were in play and in force,” demonstrates an insight that transcends the spatial and cognitive boundaries of first-person narration. The indistinguishable origins of this knowledge are a testament to the precise form of power Jane possesses: it is neither a *sui generis* production of her nervous system nor an instinctive obedience to the commands of God or nature. Instead, Jane’s gifted body transforms sensation into meaning: the “fast and thick” throbbing of her heart is not contained in her frame but manifests itself as an external phenomenon. This unnamed “feeling” suggests a physical response to the stimulus of lightning or thunder in that it is “not like an electric shock, but . . . quite as sharp, as strange, as startling.” *Jane Eyre* ultimately suggests that the receptivity of women’s senses does not limit them to a circumscribed heterosexual embodiment but instead enables them to experience creative inspiration. In contrast to her avoidance of the prophetic atmosphere in the aforementioned proposal scene, at the conclusion of her narrative Jane regains her ability to combine physical

exceptionalism with romantic desire. This authoritative sensuality stands in direct opposition to mid-nineteenth-century beliefs that women's physical and mental health depended on their sexual practices. Although physicians often made simultaneous and contradictory claims that sexual desire disrupted a woman's nervous system while celibacy caused hysteria, Brontë circumvents this restrictive logic by unyoking companionate from creative desire.⁶⁴ Rather than avoiding the problem of gendered authorship, as Brontë does in her pseudonymous preface to *Jane Eyre*, her novel demonstrates how sensitive female embodiment informs prophetic narration. As the first-person narrator of a self-titled "autobiography," Jane Eyre embodies the controlling voice of the author. Her prophetic responses to the weather therefore help establish the authorial success that Brontë discusses in her extra-diegetic remarks.

The watercolors Jane produces during her holiday at Lowood, and later displays to Rochester, solidify the degree to which her authorship corresponds to atmospheric events. In the following well-known scene, Jane retrieves her portfolio for Rochester to view and demurely contends: "In each case I had imagined something which I was quite powerless to realize." Yet Rochester recognizes Jane's untutored ability to depict what lies beyond her immediate frame of reference (126). "Who taught you to paint wind?" he gruffly inquires. "There is a high gale in that sky, and on this hill-top. Where did you see Latmos—for that is Latmos" (126). Although Rochester condescendingly attributes Jane's ability to her sprightly charm—her ability to "exist in a kind of artist's dreamland," as he puts it—the watercolors ultimately reinforce the atmospheric nature of Jane's creative insight (126). In addition to Jane's ability to depict the subtle movements of the wind, Rochester's reference to Mount Latmos alludes to lunar control within the scene. According to classical mythology, Selene, the moon, falls in love with Endymion, king of Elis and the grandson of

⁶⁴ See Oppenheim 204-06. Feminist literary scholars also discuss the connection between women's unfulfilled sexual and maternal drives as a cause of hysteria. See Showalter 130-31 and Shuttleworth 228-29.

Aeolus, god of the winds. Multiple versions of the legend recount Endymion's plea to retain his youth by asking for perpetual sleep. His eternal slumber, granted by Zeus or Selene according to different versions of the myth, was carried out on Latmos where Selene paid him nocturnal visits (Tripp 222, 525).

Many accounts of Jane's watercolors discuss this reference to Latmos as a prophetic warning. Thomas Langford, for instance, reads the watercolor Rochester remarks upon as Jane's presentiment of their future relationship: "the effect of Rochester's identification of the hill with Latmos is to heighten the suggestion of the developing relationship between the two, a relationship destined for disaster" (232). Rather than positioning Jane as Selene to Rochester's Endymion, however, the paintings reveal the telling imbrication of her narrative insight, susceptibility to atmospheric influence, and artistic representation. They are not a prophecy of a specific event or relationship, so much as an indication of Jane's ability to reach beyond her immediate frame of reference—to paint the wind upon Latmos—with a pervasive and lunar atmospheric energy. Close attention to the paintings reveals that each depicts a character—female personas in the first two watercolors and a figure of indeterminate gender in the third—which, like Jane, is subject to the stimulating atmosphere that surrounds her. As Jane, explains:

The first represented clouds low and livid, rolling over a swollen sea: all the distance was in eclipse; so, too, was the foreground; or rather, the nearest billows . . . a drowned corpse glanced through the green water; a fair arm was the only limb clearly visible, whence the bracelet had been washed or torn.

The second picture contained for foreground only the dim peak of a hill, with grass and some leaves slanting as if by a breeze. Beyond and above spread an expanse of sky, dark blue as at twilight: rising into the sky was a woman's shape to the bust, portrayed in tints as dusk and soft as I could combine. . . . the lineaments

below were seen as through the suffusion of vapour; the eyes shone dark and wild; the hair streamed shadowy, like a beamless cloud torn by storm or by electric travail. On the neck lay a pale reflection like moonlight . . .

The third showed the pinnacle of an iceberg piercing a polar winter sky: a muster of northern lights reared their dim lances, close serried, along the horizon. Throwing these into distance, rose, in the foreground, a head—a colossal head. . . . Above the temples, amidst wreathed turban folds of black drapery, vague in its character and consistency as cloud, gleamed a ring of white flame . . . (125-26)

Of particular interest here is the way that the bodies within each of the images are subordinate to the atmospheres that surround them. Jane describes “clouds” as the subject of the first picture, their “low and livid” appearance eclipsing both the turbulent ocean and the lifeless female body partially submerged in its swell. In the second painting, a woman’s bust rises “into the sky” merging with the dark “expanse”; her “lineaments” are seen only “through the suffusion of vapour,” her hair resembles a “cloud torn by storm or electric travail,” and her neck reflects the dominant moonlight presiding over the scene. In the third image, although an androgynous “head” throws the sky and its northern lights into the distance, Jane Eyre focuses on these atmospheric details as the dominant ones. Even the mysterious “ring of white flame” that the “colossal head” dons is “vague in its character and consistency as cloud” (126).

Previous discussions of these illustrations have focused on their visual and literary antecedents. In her analysis of Charlotte Brontë’s indebtedness to nineteenth-century annuals and Gothic literary tradition, for example, Christine Alexander asserts that throughout the author’s career: “Fantastic sublime landscapes were in vogue: the Brontës themselves owned four large engravings of [nineteenth-century artist John] Martin’s extravagant landscapes His seascapes in

particular combined with those of Bewick to inspire . . . the . . . visions in *Jane Eyre*” (416).⁶⁵ In addition to the sublime imagery of artists like John Martin, Brontë’s love “of the exotic, the licentious, and the mysterious,” Alexander elaborates, owes much to literary ‘annuals,’ or bound volumes of engravings and literature popular from the 1820s to the 1840s (427). In similar vein, Heather Glen discusses how the romantic images of the “exotic, of the stirring, of the sublime” that dominated these annuals found a particular audience with female readers, including the young Brontës (108, 135). Although the watercolors Jane shows Rochester evince a “triumphant self-sufficiency,” Glen argues, the “female agency” underlying these works is undone by the character’s subsequent sketches which uphold moral and gender imperatives common to the annuals (129).

Jane’s ability to step outside the bounds of her first person point of view—to understand diegetic events as part of the larger narrative structure that contains them—allows her to maintain the “female agency” Glen sees as compromised. The “electric death-spark” of genius Brontë imagines nestled in a feminine “womb of cloud” takes fictional shape in the atmospheric exceptionalism of her female protagonist. Put another way, Jane’s gendered receptivity to external creative energy demonstrates a model of authorship that is facilitated rather than constrained by her sex. Just as the narrator’s sensitive embodiment allows her to escape a circumscribed point of view, Brontë evades the perceived parameters of female authorship. She does this not only by masquerading as Currer Bell, but also by imagining a model of inspiration that does not begin with the body but within the air itself. At the same time that this creative stimulation circumvents a human origin, it is the particular receptivity of the protagonist’s physicality in *Jane Eyre* that sustains her occasionally prophetic points of view. What is particularly important about atmosphere in *Jane Eyre*, then, is its ability to liberate the narrating and authorial subject from the constraints of a

⁶⁵. For a more complete consideration of Martin’s influence on Brontë’s work, see Alexander: “‘The Burning Clime’: Charlotte Brontë and John Martin.”

circumscribed femininity. Within the novel, Jane's insightful responses to atmospheric force afford her an occasionally omniscient power that exceeds the bounds of a traditional first-person point of view. On an extra-diegetic level, Brontë's emphasis on atmospheric event within *Jane Eyre* allows her to demonstrate the model of artistic inspiration she establishes in the novel's preface. By affording Jane a prophetic authority, Brontë makes a tacit claim for her own artistic power. If the body no longer remains the source or essence of authorship, the pseudonymously composed novel stands as its own testament to artistic success irrespective of the gender of its "unknown and unrecommended Author."

3. Atmospheric Electricity and the Meteorological Nervous System in *Villette*

Six years after completing *Jane Eyre*, Brontë published her final novel, *Villette*. More ambitious than *Jane Eyre* in its thematic and geographic scope, this 1853 work follows its protagonist and narrator Lucy Snowe from her home in the English Midlands to the fictional town of Villette in Labassecour, an unflattering pseudonym for Belgium (Labassecour notoriously translates as "farmyard"). Although *Villette's* protagonist experiences atmospheric conditions that magnify the prophetic elements we see in Brontë's 1847 Bildungsroman, in the later novel, the spiritual and intellectual education of the protagonist relies on an atmospheric energy that is far less controlled than in the previous work. As I argue in the following pages, the storms that punctuate the plot of *Villette* emphasize Lucy Snowe's involuntary and often wrenching responses to an atmosphere that imposes rather than invites prophetic knowledge. In opposition to the maternal lunar control that helps advance the marriage plot of *Jane Eyre*, *Villette* envisions unpredictable atmospheric electricity (and the occasionally omniscient insights it affords the protagonist) as an analog to the creative process. Although both novels adopt elements of the traditional Bildungsroman, Brontë's final work resists the conclusive teleology of the marriage plot that *Jane Eyre* ultimately embraces. If the discourse of meteorological lunarism in *Jane Eyre* evinces Jane's receptivity to a controlled aerial

climate, the thunderstorms, lightning and electrified air in *Villette* are a testament to the narrator's emotional and physical volatility as well as the novel's lack of diegetic resolution. Rather than psychic distress, however, Lucy's sensitivity to these turbulent states demonstrates the vagaries of the authorial process. In addition to negotiating the parameters and perceived limits of female embodiment, *Villette* portrays the mental and physical demands of a creative process that takes hold of and exceeds the individual authoring (or narrating) body. For this reason, electrified atmospheres continually provide Lucy with a prophetic insight and control over the novel's formal structure that exceed a circumscribed first-person point of view.

In chapter four of *Villette* Lucy tellingly describes the powerful influence atmospheric events have over the shape of her life and, consequently, her narrative. We have seen how the storms in *Jane Eyre* catch the protagonist unawares, tacitly encouraging her prophetic visions and quietly controlling her ability to order and relate narrative events. By contrast, Lucy explicitly describes the importance of storms within a sequential narrative structure. From the very beginning of her account, she asserts that atmospheric events are not only diegetically significant—incidents that “crucially substitute for event” as Penny Boumelha puts it (106-07)—but are also formally constitutive. Storms call Lucy's life story into being: they allow her to make sense of a series of events that might otherwise fall outside the unity of a self-consciously structured plot: “Three times in the course of my life,” she contends as she listens to the storm outside her employer Miss Marchmont's house, “events had taught me that these strange accents in the storm—this restless, hopeless cry—denote a coming state of the atmosphere unpropitious to life” (37). Although Lucy never articulates which events she refers to in this portentous scene, the narrative arc of *Villette* is arguably shaped around three atmospheric events “unpropitious to life.” The first is the storm that coincides with Miss Marchmont's death, which indirectly encourages Lucy to seek employment abroad. The second is the tempest that concludes the first volume of the novel when the Protestant

Lucy makes a desperate confession to Père Silas at the Catholic Church and feverishly collapses in the midst of a torrential downpour. She reawakens, as readers of *Villette* will recall, at the home of her old friends the Brettons in the opening paragraph of the novel's second volume. The last of these inauspicious aerial events is the maritime tempest that, in the last chapter of the novel, Lucy obliquely reveals as the cause of her lover M. Paul's death.

As the following discussion will elaborate, Lucy's nervous system responds actively to these formally and thematically significant storms. Her empowered response to climatic energy allows her to author the self, a process that goes against the critical consensus that the storms in *Villette* establish Lucy's debilitating mental illness. Shuttleworth adamantly contends, for instance, that "the responsiveness of [Lucy's] physical frame to the wind and storms outside" supports the views of "contemporary alienists" who believed these events "occasion[ed] and exacerbate[ed] insanity" (234). Similarly, scholars from Beth Torgerson to Vrettos understand the long vacation Lucy spends alone at Madame Beck's school as the catalyst for a nervous breakdown that culminates with her confession and physical collapse at the end of volume one. On a diegetic level, the novel reinforces this analysis: "My nervous system could hardly support what it had for many days and nights to undergo in that huge empty house," Lucy asserts (157). Louisa Bretton indirectly confirms this diagnosis when she invokes the medical opinion of her son Dr. John Graham: "He says, Lucy, he thinks you have had a nervous fever, judging from your look,—is that so? I replied that I did not quite know what my ailment had been, but that I had certainly suffered a good deal especially in mind" (180).

Lucy's anxious anticipation of a letter from Dr. John seemingly supports these characterological diagnoses of nervous illness and noticeably links them to the weather: "I had now for some time entered into that dreary fellowship with the winds and their changes, so little known, so incomprehensible to the healthy," she informs the reader (271). However, critics who believe the

weather in *Villette* physically provokes and metaphorically stands in for Lucy's mental illness, problematically uphold the character's unreliable self-diagnosis. This view is troubling for two reasons: first, because we know Lucy's self-perception to be consistently flawed; and secondly, because critics upholding such a view adopt the language of medical pathology the novel self-consciously and often critically incorporates.⁶⁶ As such, these readings fail to account for the formal structures that afford Lucy an occasionally empowered physicality and semi-omniscient point of view.

Close examination of Lucy's response to the weather reveals that her receptivity oscillates between stimulation and dejection: extremes Brontë herself associated with the writing process. Despite the flashes of lightning the author uses to evoke literary inspiration in her non-fiction prose, many of the letters she wrote while composing *Villette* between 1850 and 1853 link her authorial difficulties with changes in the weather. As she writes to her friend Laetitia Wheelwright in April of 1852: "I struggled through the winter and early part of the spring often with great difficulty Some long, stormy days and nights there were when I felt such a craving for support and companionship as I cannot express. Sleepless—I lay awake night after night—weak and unable to occupy myself—I sat in my chair day after day—the saddest memories my only company" (*Letters* 3: 39). Similarly, Brontë's view of authorial inspiration as akin to atmospheric force she evokes in the prefaces to *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* manifests itself as a source of anxiety during her work on *Villette*. Writing to Margaret Wooler in March of 1852, she describes her halting progress on the novel as "a matter not wholly contingent on wish or will but lying in a great measure beyond the reach of effort and out of the pale of calculation" (*Letters* 3: 29). Even as *Villette* drew closer to

⁶⁶ See, in this connection, Oppenheim's discussion of the critical drawbacks of viewing Victorian women's nervous illness as a form of rebellion or empowerment (229).

completion in September of 1852, Brontë admits to her closest companion Ellen Nussey: “I feel fettered—incapable—sometimes very low. . . . Less than ever can I taste or know pleasure till this work is wound up” (*Letters* 3: 67). Sentiments such as these are not unfamiliar to students of Brontë’s work. Scholarship has often addressed the depression and isolation that haunted the author following the death of her three siblings Branwell, Emily, and Anne between September 1848 and May 1849 and her subsequent struggle to write *Villette* without their support and collaboration.

Although Lucy claims, in chapter seven of her narrative, “Of an artistic temperament, I deny that I am” her sensitivity to the weather suggests a keen capacity for artistic production in keeping with the author’s (60). As Lucy self-consciously elaborates: “yet I must possess something of the artist’s faculty of making the most of present pleasure: that is to say, when it is of the kind to my taste” (60). She then goes on to describe her initial journey to the city of *Villette* in terms of her sensual response to the atmosphere: “I enjoyed that day . . . though it was cold, though it rained . . . The sky, too, was monotonously gray; the atmosphere was stagnant and humid . . . what with a thick fog and small, dense rain—darkness, that might almost be felt, had settled on the city by the time we gained its suburbs” (60). The palpable darkness of the air in this scene, and Lucy’s evocative description of it, counter her claim that she is not “of an artistic temperament.” Indeed, this physical and sensual response re-emerges in the narrator’s extensive contemplation of her artistic temperament in chapter thirty. In this metaphorical description of the authorial process, Lucy suggests that atmospherics imbue her with a torturous inspiration. Her resistance to M. Paul’s request that she improvise a composition in French for public examination is therefore grounded in her relationship to the weather and its control over the elusive “Creative Impulse”:

I knew what the result of such an experiment would be. I, to whom nature had denied the impromptu faculty; who, in public, was by nature a cypher . . . who needed the fresh silence of morning, or the recluse peace of evening, to win from the

Creative Impulse one evidence of his presence, one proof of his force; I, with whom that Impulse was the most intractable, the most capricious, the most maddening of masters (him before me always excepted)—a deity which sometimes, under circumstances—apparently propitious, would not speak when questioned, would not hear when appealed to, would not, when sought, be found; but would stand, all cold . . . and again, suddenly, at some turn, some sound, some long-trembling sob of the wind, at some rushing past of an unseen stream of electricity, the irrational demon would wake unsolicited, would stir strangely alive . . . calling to its votary for a sacrifice, whatever the hour . . . treacherously promising vaticination, perhaps filling its temple with a strange hum of oracles, but sure to give half the significance to fateful winds, and grudging to the desperate listener even a miserable remnant . . .

(356)

The convoluted syntax and elaborate symbolism of this passage emphasize Lucy's claim that writing is a complicated, lengthy, and unpredictable process beyond authorial command. She describes the personified "Creative Impulse"—a cold and commanding deity of uncertain origin—as both "demon" and "master": a figure that withholds his "force" only to "stir strangely alive" at "some long-trembling sob of the wind, at some rushing past of an unseen stream of electricity." Although Lucy understands herself as the "desperate listener" in an authorial process dominated by a male deity "sure to give half the significance to fateful winds," her ability to heed the oracles that turbulent atmospheres occasion at different points in *Villette's* plot evinces the power of "vaticination" she describes in the passage above. In other words, Lucy's prophetic powers bring her narration in line with Brontë's definition of authorial "genius" in the preface to *Jane Eyre*. What I wish to emphasize here is that the implicit connection between atmosphere and authorship Brontë establishes in *Jane Eyre* are explicitly thematized in *Villette*. The progression from Brontë's 1848

preface to her 1853 novel thus establishes that over the six year period between the novels, atmospheric inspiration remains a central concern for the author: one that affected her personal relationship to the writing process as well as her characterization of the first-person female narrators in her fiction. Although Lucy might not otherwise appear a prophetic author in the vein of Thackeray, her relationship to intense moments of atmospheric electricity invests her with an unmistakable power of self-authorship.

The climatic storm scene at the end of *Villette's* first volume, traditionally read as the culmination of the protagonist's nervous breakdown, further demonstrates Lucy's ability to become her own author. As the following scene illustrates, the interdependence of atmospheric inspiration and artistic subservience propels Lucy (as well as her reader) into the second volume of *Villette*. Here, the exhilarating rather than debilitating force of the atmosphere in the chapter titled "The Long Vacation" electrifies Lucy, allowing her to expand the parameters of her embodiment rather than crippling her with physical and psychic debility. After what she describes as "a day and night of peculiarly agonizing depression . . . succeeded by physical illness" Lucy begins to explore the nuances of her physical relationship to the environment, characteristically expounding upon the effects of the air (159). "About this time," she explains, "the Indian summer closed and the equinoctial storms began; and for nine dark and wet days—bewildered with sounding hurricane—I lay in a strange fever of the nerves and blood. Sleep went quite away" (159). Reminiscent of Brontë's letter to Laetitia Wheelwright, in which the author details lying awake on "long, stormy days and nights," this passage conflates atmospheric event with personal turmoil. Emphasizing more than just biographical connection, though, Lucy's account also stresses a powerful relationship between subjectivity and atmospheric force. "I do not know why that change in the atmosphere made a cruel impression on me," she muses, "why the raging storm and beating rain crushed me with a deadlier paralysis than I had experienced while the air had remained serene; but so it was; and my nervous

system could hardly support what it had for many days and nights to undergo in that huge empty house” (157). This expansive description leaves little doubt that Lucy links changes in the air to the sensitivity of her nervous system. Yet, it is also the case that her atmospheric response does not confine her physically or mentally but rather coaxes her out of Madame Beck’s “huge empty house” and into the intensity of the night air:

One evening—and I was not delirious: I was in my sane mind, I got up—I dressed myself, weak and shaking. . . . It rained still, and blew; but with more clemency, I thought, than it had poured and raged all day. . . . from the lattice I saw coming night-clouds trailing low like banners drooping. . . . the weight of my dreadful dream became alleviated I was sure this hope would shine clearer if I got out from under this house-roof, which was crushing as the slab of a tomb, and went outside the city to a certain quiet hill, a long way distant in the fields. (160)

Discussions of this scene and Lucy’s supposed nervous breakdown crucially omit the fact that she seeks the twilight streets of Villette in “sane mind,” not desperately to seek solace in the Catholic Church, where she will eventually end up, but rather to commune with the weather. Just as the character’s “compulsory observation” of the wailing wind in the first chapters of the novel facilitates her knowledge of future events, her “wild longing to breathe this October wind on the little hill far without the city-walls” is at first “an imperative impulse” (163). Given Lucy’s affinity with the atmosphere, we should understand the “strange fever of nerves and blood” she associates with the “sounding hurricane” as stimulating rather than debilitating. In this famous scene, Lucy is arrested by “the bells of a church” and enters as the evening Mass is concluding. Lingered with the remaining Catholic worshipers preparing for their confessions, Lucy enters the confessional, famously declaring: “Mon père, je suis Protestante” (161). After this dramatic and seemingly

irrational act, she reenters the night air and finds a source of inspiration there that the priest within confessional cannot not provide:

Strong and horizontal thundered the current of the wind from north-west to south-east; it brought rain like spray, and sometimes a sharp hail, like shot: it was cold and pierced me to the vitals. I bent my head to meet it, but it beat me back. My heart did not fail at all in this conflict; I only wished that I had wings and could ascend the gale, spread and repose my pinions on its strength, career in its course, sweep where it swept. While wishing this, I suddenly felt colder where before I was cold, and more powerless where before I was weak. I tried to reach the porch of a great building near, but the mass of frontage and the giant spire turned black and vanished from my eyes. Instead of sinking on the steps as I intended, I seemed to pitch headlong down an abyss. I remember no more. (163)

Lucy's reaction to the hurricane in this scene evinces a dual subservience ("I bent my head to meet it, but it beat me back") and desire ("I only wished that I had wings and could ascend the gale"). Her longing to evade the limits of embodiment—to "ascend the gale"—consequently links her characterization and narration to the extra-diegetic world of *Villette's* production. For both Lucy Snowe and Charlotte Brontë (Currer Bell), escaping the perceived limitations of the gendered body is an essential part of the authorial process. The separation of Lucy's body and soul—the "divorced mates, Spirit and Substance" (165)—allows her to harness a disembodied atmospheric energy that the novel, like Brontë's non-fiction prose, associates with literary production. In this vein, Lucy's sinking into the "abyss" in the aforementioned passage does not mark a simple descent into unconsciousness, as critics such as Penny Boumelha suggest (108). Instead, the un-narrated transition between volumes one and two allows Lucy to achieve the physical and mental liberty she seeks in the storm. The final words of chapter fifteen ("I remember no more") and the opening

sentence of chapter sixteen (“Where my soul went during that swoon I cannot tell”) suggest an atmospheric experience that the first-person diegesis of *Villette* realizes most fully as a lapse in narration. Tess Durbeyfield’s atmospheric transformation from “Maiden” to “Maiden no More”—which I discuss in the following chapter—occurs in a similar, un-narrated break between the first and second “phases” of Hardy’s novel. For both Lucy and Tess, atmospheric characterization entails a release from the somatic structures we traditionally understand as binding character to a human form.

Lucy crucially describes her return to embodiment as process marked by intensity and anguish. Speaking of her soul she remarks, “I know she re-entered her prison with pain, with reluctance, with a moan and a long shiver. . . . The returning sense of sight came upon me, red, as if it swam in blood; suspended hearing rushed back loud, like thunder; consciousness revived in fear” (165). This overwhelming surge of sight and sound suggests the contradictory implications of literary atmosphere in *Villette*. On the one hand, storms suggest the liberating possibility of leaving the body behind. On the other hand, electrified atmospheres create a sensual longing associated with Lucy’s highly responsive embodiment. In the following scene from chapter twelve, Lucy describes her response to atmospheric stimulation:

A moon was in the sky, not a full moon, but a young crescent . . . I had seen that golden sign with the dark globe . . . in Old England, in long past days . . .

Oh, my childhood! . . . when I thought of past days, I *could* feel. About the present, it was better to be stoical . . . I studiously held the quick of my nature.

At that time, I well remember whatever could excite—certain accidents of the weather, for instance, were almost dreaded by me, because they woke the being I was always lulling, and stirred up a craving cry I could not satisfy. One night a thunder-storm broke; a sort of hurricane shook us in our beds . . . the tempest took hold of

me with tyranny: I was roughly roused and obliged to live. I got up and dressed myself, and creeping outside the casement close by my bed, sat on its ledge, with my feet on the roof of a lower adjoining building. It was wet, it was wild, it was pitch-dark . . . I could not go in: too resistless was the delight of staying with the wild hour, black and full of thunder, pealing out such an ode as language never delivered to man—too terribly glorious, the spectacle of clouds, split and pierced by white and blinding bolts. (109)

Although the moon presides over this scene as it does many in *Jane Eyre*, the maternal femininity Jane associates with lunar control is markedly unlike the “delight” Lucy experiences during this “wild hour, black and full of thunder.” If the thunder in this scene exceeds the lyric form by “pealing out such an ode as language never delivered to man,” Lucy proves herself uniquely responsive to this non-linguistic stimulation as she is roused and “roughly . . . obliged to live.” In this scene, as in those discussed above, Lucy’s body reacts almost automatically to hurricane and storm. Just as her “wild longing to breathe this October wind” coaxes her out of the Madame Beck’s school, her exposure to the weather in this episode emphasizes the sensual communication between body and air.

Such heightened sensuality urges us to consider how Brontë understands Lucy’s embodiment in relation to both sexual and creative desire. Whereas *Jane Eyre* demonstrates how the protagonist’s attraction to her human “master” Edward Fairfax Rochester threatens to overpower atmospheric stimulus, *Villette*—and this scene in particular—emphasizes the supremacy of electrified atmospheres over companionate desire. If we examine the scenes that develop Lucy’s romantic attraction to Dr. John Graham and M. Paul Emanuel, we find that *Villette* embraces the stimulation associated with atmospherics and rejects the teleology of the traditional marriage plot. Consider the following scene in which Lucy acknowledges Dr. John’s growing affection for Paulina de

Bassompierre and attempts to bury her sexual feelings for him along with his letters.⁶⁷ After securing her treasured epistles in a glass bottle, Lucy entombs them in the hollow of the pear-tree outside the school:

This done, I rested, leaning against the tree; lingering, like any other mourner, beside a newly-sodded grave.

The air of the night was very still, but dim with a peculiar mist, which changed the moonlight into a luminous haze. In this air, or this mist, there was some quality—electrical, perhaps—which acted in strange sort upon me. I felt then as I had felt a year ago in England—on a night when the aurora borealis was streaming and sweeping round heaven . . . I felt, not happy, far otherwise, but strong with reinforced strength. (296)

Lucy's ability to suppress her sexual desire and draw on an electrified atmosphere that makes her "strong with reinforced strength" recalls the "mysterious summons" that causes Jane Eyre to assert: "*My powers were in play and in force*" (419). Like the aural stimulation Jane describes as "not like an electric shock, but . . . quite as sharp, as strange, as startling," Lucy's perception of the "quality—electrical, perhaps—which acted in strange sort upon me" combines her embodied sensitivity with narrative control. Her recollection of the aurora borealis—a luminous electrical phenomenon above the earth's magnetic poles—connects this garden scene with an earlier episode in which the northern lights prompt her to leave England and seek an independent life abroad.⁶⁸ In both instances, the protagonist's relationship to the atmosphere shapes the outcome of narrative events. In the first

⁶⁷. For readings of this scene that emphasize Lucy's divided subjectivity and repression of sexual desire, see Gilbert and Gubar 427 and Tony Wein 737.

⁶⁸. The aurora borealis is the visual effect of charged solar electrons interacting with the wind in the earth's upper atmosphere ("aurora" def. 5).

episode, she begins a life that constitutes the majority of her narrative account. In the second, she chooses independence and self-sufficiency over unrequited romantic desire. Each of these sensual responses to the atmosphere privileges an inspiration and clear-sightedness the novel associates with authorial control rather than heterosexual longing. In this regard, Lucy's remarkable separation of creative from sexual inclination represents a more complete break between the two than Brontë's protagonist is able to muster in *Jane Eyre*.

Given Lucy's physical affinity with the atmosphere, however, it is fitting that her impressions of her lover M. Paul echo her sensual responses to storm and strife. This romance, though it stands at the center of *Villette's* plot, is a secondary rather than primary register of Lucy's sensual desire. As she develops a mutual intimacy with her fellow teacher and mentor, her descriptions of his moods and appearance begin to resemble meteorological events: "He quelled, he kept down where he could," she notes of this "fiery and grasping little man . . . where he could not, he fumed like a bottled storm" (154). Later she notices his frequent "passions and hurricanes" (382) and remarks, as she overhears "the crescendos and cadences" of his voice in the "neighbouring classe": "There was a good strong partition-wall between me and the gathering storm, as well as a facile means of flight . . . in case it swept this way" (323). On a school outing to the countryside she describes how M. Paul's teasing "went off . . . as mildly as the menace of a storm sometimes passes on a summer day. I got but one flash of sheet lightning in the shape of a single bantering smile from his eye" (380). This comparison of M. Paul's docile humor to "sheet lightning" recalls Brontë's earlier claim that Thackeray's wit is mere "lambent sheet-lightning" in comparison with his prophetic insight. The theme of M. Paul's stormy moods works similarly in *Villette*, as they prove mere flashes of intensity in contrast to Lucy's powerful capacity for omniscience.

The relationship between prophecy, aerial stimulation, and female embodiment that unfolds over the course of *Villette* arguably owes a great deal to the connection between omniscience and

controlling authorship. More than that, this relationship evinces a weather wisdom that—as Anderson explains—associated nervous response to changes in the air with animal instinct (177).

Weather wisdom was the focus of a notable meteorological display on view at the Great Exhibition of 1851, which Brontë visited five times while she was composing *Villette*.⁶⁹ The “Atmospheric, Electro-magnetic Telegraph, conducted by Animal Instinct” or the “Tempest Prognosticator,” for short, was one of the many exhibits she may have seen during her tours of the Crystal Palace. Designed by George Merryweather, a doctor by trade and the honorary curator of the Whitby Literary and Philosophical Society Museum, the Tempest Prognosticator used one of the simplest life forms—the leech—to register “the electrical state of the atmosphere, which precedes thunder” (44). The essay Merryweather wrote to accompany the unveiling of his invention at the Great Exhibition appeals to noted nineteenth-century neurologist Sir Charles Bell’s assertion that “we doubt whether the body would ever be exercised under the influence of reason alone, and if it were not first directed by sensibilities which are innate or instinctive” (23).

Merryweather’s device thus attempts to harness the instinctive powers of the nervous system by placing twelve leeches in individual pint bottles partly filled with water. At the top of each bottle, was a narrow metal tube that Merryweather claims the leech “would enter, and make every effort to do if a storm were preparing” (45). At the top of each these tubes stood a narrow piece of whalebone connected by a gilt chain to individual bell-hammers. When the leech entered the tube, it dislodged the whalebone lever, triggering a central alarm bell that predicted an approaching storm. The bodily sensitivity of the leeches and the auditory signal of the alarm established a network of

⁶⁹ Brontë writes to her friend Margaret Woller that the wonders of the Great Exhibition “appeal too exclusively to the eye and rarely touch the heart or the head” (*Letters 2*: 666). Glen, however, has persuasively demonstrated the significant influence Brontë’s visit to the Crystal Palace had on *Villette* (203-50).

sensory communication that prompted Merryweather to liken his device to the electric telegraph machine. “The apparatus being now ready for action, I beheld an Atmospheric, Electro-magnetic Telegraph,” he explains, “which would communicate to me, at all times, processes that were taking place in the higher regions of the atmosphere” (46). Like Lucy’s predictive responses to atmospheric electricity in *Villette*, Merryweather’s device relies on the assumption that electrically-charged atmospheric conditions stimulate the nervous system. “It is not thunder which acts upon the leech,” he writes, “but the electrical state of the atmosphere, which precedes thunder” (44).

Brontë’s probable familiarity with Merryweather’s exhibit and the theories of atmospheric electricity that informed his invention is all the more likely given that her guide to the exhibition was well-known scientist David Brewster.⁷⁰ A prolific author of articles on popular science for journals such as the *Quarterly Review* and *Fraser’s Magazine*, Brewster composed two lengthy essays on meteorological studies for the *Edinburgh Review*. Both his 1839 article, “Statistics and Philosophy of Storms,” and his 1844 piece, “Harris on Thunderstorms,” pay considerable attention to what he refers to as the “electrical and magnetical phenomena” of the atmosphere: a concept that also informed Merryweather’s “Electro-magnetic telegraph” (“Statistics and Philosophy” 406). As Brewster writes in his 1839 article, it is “mortifying to the pride of science, and a reproach to every civilized Government, that we know so little of meteorology—of the laws and perturbations of that aerial fluid which exists within and around us” (406). Yet Brewster’s specific focus, like Merryweather’s, is on the need for more efficient forms of weather prediction, and for a greater understanding of how “aerial domains” operate “in a state of tumult and excitement” (406).

⁷⁰ As Glen and, more recently, Katharine Inglis have pointed out, Brontë gained a wealth of knowledge about developments in contemporary visual science from Brewster, whose work on meteorology has not been discussed in relation to *Villette*.

Although we have no direct evidence that Brontë read Brewster's essays or discussed Merryweather's invention with him during their repeated visits to the Great Exhibition, *Villette's* electrical atmospheres and tumultuous storms draw our attention to many of the same scientific debates that we find in both Brewster's and Merryweather's works. Notably, Brewster's description of turbulent atmospheres in "The Statistics and Philosophy of Storms" uses the same language to describe global meteorology as Lucy does when she hears the piteous accent of the wind outside Miss Marchmont's house. We recall Lucy's statement:

I fancied, too, I had noticed—but was not philosopher enough to know whether there was any connection between the circumstances—that we often at the same time hear of disturbed volcanic action in distant parts of the world . . . 'Our globe,' I had said to myself, 'seems at such periods torn and disordered; the feeble amongst us wither in her distempered breath, rushing hot from steaming volcanoes. (37)

By comparison Brewster writes:

Though there appear to be no circumstances connected with the distribution of terrestrial heat, magnetism, or electricity, which would lead us to consider these localities as the probable birthplace of storms, yet we may expect to form some rational hypothesis on the subject when our knowledge of the interior condition of the earth shall be more advanced; and when we shall have studied with better materials the connexion which seems to exist between the convulsions of our atmosphere, and the phenomena of earthquakes and volcanic action. (427)

Merryweather's explanatory essay on the Tempest Prognosticator proposes a similar theory on weather prediction and volcanic action. In a letter to his colleague, he writes: "I beg to call to your remembrance a conversation we had . . . when I observed to you that I apprehended from the number of storms we had had this year, that we should hear of earthquakes, and volcanoes in action,

in distant regions. I copy the following from the *Illustrated London News* of February 25, 1850, p.131: —‘A letter from Naples, of the 9th, gives an account of an eruption of Mount Vesuvius which has just occurred’” (7).

Brontë’s undoubted awareness of the 1850 eruption of Mount Vesuvius—a topic of great public interest during the period she composed *Villette*—likely accounts for her protagonist’s seemingly unexpected focus on “disturbed volcanic action in distant parts of the world.” More than mere historical coincidence, though, Lucy’s predictive capacity suggests the author’s familiarity with meteorological theory and theories of the nervous system as a barometer of meteorological change. As Merryweather’s apparently eccentric “telegraph” indicates, this interweaving of meteorological and neurological study was often seen as a potentially revolutionary way to foster an omniscient awareness of global weather patterns. In this regard, Lucy’s sensitive nervous system relates to Victorian debates about universal knowledge and weather prediction constitutive of narrative authority rather than nervous disorder.

In the most famous scene of atmospheric event in Brontë’s final novel, this empowering focus on the nervous system comes into concluding and clarifying focus. Chapter forty-two, entitled “Finis,” begins with Lucy’s short and declarative claims: “Man cannot prophesy. Love is no oracle.” Yet the final pages of the novel, in which she describes the ominous signs of the weather, are nothing if not prophetic. Here she describes the climate that coincides with M. Paul’s long-awaited return from three years in Guadalupe:

M. Emanuel’s return is fixed. It is Autumn; he is to be with me ere the mists of November come . . . The sun passes the equinox; the days shorten, the leaves grow sere; but—he is coming.

Frosts appear at night; November has sent his fogs in advance; the wind takes its autumn moan; but—he is coming.

The skies hang full and dark—a wrack sails from the west; the clouds cast themselves into strange forms—arches and broad radiations; there rise resplendent mornings—glorious, royal, purple as monarch in his state; the heavens are one flame; so wild are they, they rival battle at its thickest—so bloody, they shame Victory in her pride. I know some signs of the sky; I have noted them ever since childhood. God watch that sail! Oh! guard it!

The wind shifts to the west. Peace, peace, Banshee—“keening” at every window! It will rise—it will swell—it shrieks out long: wander as I may through the house this night, I cannot lull the blast. The advancing hours make it strong: by midnight, all sleepless watchers hear and fear a wild south-west storm. That storm roared frenzied, for seven days. It did not cease till the Atlantic was strewn with wrecks: it did not lull till the deeps had gorged their full of sustenance. Not till the destroying angel of tempest had achieved his perfect work, would he fold the wings whose waft was thunder—the tremor of whose plumes was storm.

. . . Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life. (495-96)

Although “love is no oracle,” according to Lucy, her bodily perception of the weather is. “I know some signs of the sky; I have noted them ever since childhood,” she asserts. “God watch that sail! Oh! guard it!” This semi-ambiguous ending, which purports to leave “sunny imaginations hope,” does not mask the authority with which Brontë’s narrator predicts the future (“It will rise—it will swell . . .”). Rather than understanding these dramatic signs of the weather and Lucy’s sensitivity to

them as external manifestations of her distressed psychological state, this poignant scene bears out the narrator's already established prophetic ability.

Far from displaying a hysterical outburst or withholding closure, Lucy prophesies her lover's death. In a final act of restraint and control, she also demands that the reader rely on his or her own intuition to understand her story's final outcome.⁷¹ Put another way, Brontë calls on the power of predictive insight as the final key to the novel *Villette*. This emphasis on individual intuition rather than teleological knowledge testifies to Lucy's narrative power. The vagaries of an atmosphere that sometimes withholds the "Creative Impulse" afford her a particularly controlled ending to her story—one that reaches into the realm of the extra-diegetic by demanding something of the reader, just as her comments on authorship and atmosphere encourage us to rethink Brontë's own authorial process. It is important, then, that the seemingly unhappy ending of *Villette* rejects the desire for closure associated with the definitively happy ending of the traditional marriage plot and focuses instead on the longing the "Creative Impulse" is always stirring. Like the "wild craving cry" that Lucy can never satisfy, the "wild south-west storm" that concludes Brontë's final novel demands that the reader is "roughly roused and obliged to live."

⁷¹ See, for comparison, Vrettos's opposing claim: "Brontë leaves us in the midst of this emotional and meteorological outburst, thereby extending her portrayal of neurosis beyond the boundaries of the text and refusing either narrative or interpretive closure" (78).

Chapter Three

Molecular Narration and the Condensation of Character in *The Return of the Native* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878) famously begins at twilight on "[a] Saturday afternoon in November" (8). Much like the misty November scenes that inaugurate Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (and poignantly conclude *Villette*), the opening pages of Hardy's sixth published novel locate event and narration in the dark, damp vistas of an early English winter. "[P]recisely at [the] transitional point of its nightly roll into darkness the great and particular glory of the Egdon waste began," the narrator of *The Return of the Native* explains (8). Likewise in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), Hardy's protagonist embarks on her ill-fated journey to Chaseborough on a "fine September evening, just before sunset": an hour when the cooling of the sun makes the air visible and "the atmosphere itself forms a prospect, without aid from more solid objects" (71). After the novel's subsequent rape scene, Tess returns to Alec d'Urberville's home at Trantridge transformed as much by his violent actions as by the atmospheric conditions in "The Chase" that make her "beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow" (82) nearly indistinguishable from the "webs of vapour which . . . formed veils between the trees" (81).

Written more than fourteen years apart and often celebrated as Hardy's first achievement as a mature novelist, on the one hand, and as his most influential late-career fiction, on the other hand, *The Return of the Native* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* respectively emphasize the materiality of air. As I argue in the following pages, the dense material atmospheres in these novels often stand in for the knowledge, desires, and sensations that their human characters (and ostensibly omniscient narrators) abdicate or withhold. Yet, as part of the group of nine works that Hardy identified as "Novels of Character and Environment" in the Introduction to the Macmillan Wessex Edition of 1912, both

have become touchstones for critical analyses of the place the human individual occupies within the natural world.⁷² As John Plotz has recently argued: “To most of his readers, Hardy has appeared . . . so besotted with the facticity of the natural world that his characters become little more than cogs in the vast Wessex machine” (122). In his correction of this critical commonplace, however, Plotz claims that “[e]nvironment is complementary to (rather than determinative of) character in Hardy, a fact that underlies Hardy’s abiding interest in how differently individuals make sense of the world they share” (123). “[A]gainst those who foreground Hardy’s obsession with environment,” Plotz ultimately maintains, the author’s “obsession with how different individuals orient themselves in the world is crucial” (123).

In each of the scenes mentioned above, however, the temporal transition between day and night and the seasonal progression from fall to winter create atmospheric conditions that turn our attention away from the subjective relationship of characters to their natural environment. In *The Return* for instance, the narrator focuses on the obscurity of the night air that defines “the great and particular glory of the Egdon waste” and mediates its “nightly roll into darkness” (8). At this crucial moment within the novel’s inception, the narrator focuses on the lack of distinction between the heath and its atmosphere, adding that Egdon “could best be felt when it could not clearly be seen” (8). Along with the absence of human characters that critics have often discussed in this famous opening scene, the obscurity of the narrator’s vision or comprehension is fundamental to what the heath is and how it informs the events that Hardy’s storyteller will subsequently unfold. A similar movement of attention away from the human body occurs when the narrator of *Tess* asserts that the

⁷² Hardy identified nine Novels of Character and Environment in the Wessex Edition of 1912. They represent most of his major works and include *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891), *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *Jude the Obscure* (1895), *The Return of the Native* (1878), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *The Woodlanders* (1887), *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), *Life’s Little Ironies* (stories) (1894), *Wessex Tales* (stories) (1888).

atmosphere forms more of a noteworthy “prospect” than “solid objects” (71) and later reveals that Tess’s body is “nearly indistinguishable” from the webs of vapor around her (81).

Against Plotz’s assertion that the characteristic feature of Hardy’s fiction is his “interest in the particularity of what any individual notices about the world” and that “Hardy notices noticing, in all its diverse forms,” these famous episodes from *The Return* and *Tess* mutually diffuse the individual “acts of attention” that Plotz deems central to the relationships the novelist’s characters have with the natural environment (123). Tellingly, the emphasis in each of these pivotal moments is neither on the ways in which the individual makes sense of his or her environment, nor on the ways in which the environment defines the individual. Instead, both episodes focus on the enigmatic materiality of an atmosphere that obfuscates character- and narrator-based cognition and renders the human body absent, permeable, or diffuse.

Just as human bodies in the novels I discuss here assimilate themselves into the atmospheric environment, so too does the materiality of the atmosphere absorb characters into itself, replacing the human individual and its attendant psychology with diffuse and permeable natural phenomena. This emphasis on the instability of aerial matter—over and above the discrete and enduring physicality of the human individual—urges us to question the critical consensus that embodiment stands at the center of Hardy’s work. Elaine Scarry, for example, emphatically states: “[Hardy’s] subject is not the passage of persons through the world, but the passage of embodied persons through the world, and he is, on this subject, without peer in the three centuries of the English novel” (50). In his recent and influential analysis on embodiment in Victorian fiction, William A. Cohen complicates this assertion by focusing on the figure of the face, but he nevertheless remains faithful to Scarry’s earlier emphasis on Hardy’s attention to corporeality. As Cohen maintains: “Hardy focuses his material account of perception and interiority in his portrayal of the human face, a process he undertakes most rigorously in *The Return of the Native*” (88). Cohen suggests that although

the face is constantly changing, it is nevertheless a physical surface that records and emits characters' embodied subjectivity; he accordingly maintains that Hardy's account of the "waste tablet" of Clym Yeobright's face in *The Return of the Native*, "Suppl[ies] a morphological account of otherwise invisible internal changes" (92). Hardy "presents thought as a physical process, which draws on bodily resources," Cohen ultimately argues (92).

Importantly, both Cohen and Scarry assert that Hardy's novels express subjectivity through the legible surface of the body. Scarry eloquently describes, for instance, the "visible record of the exchange between the human creature and the world" registered by the reciprocal imprints that sentient human characters leave on the surface of the material world, and that the surface of the non-sentient material world leaves on them (51). She takes her primary example from *The Woodlanders* (1887) in which the white paint on a freshly painted gate marks the female characters who pass through it, just as the passing of these characters marks the gate (49). For both critics, then, the human characters in Hardy's fiction are recognizable in terms of a physical surface and material solidity. For both Cohen and Scarry, the objective world these characters help to define remains similarly palpable. Once, however, we consider the vaporous air that stands in for the body in the rape scene in *Tess*, or the "black fraternization" that integrates "the obscurity in the air" and the "obscurity in the land" in the opening scene of *The Return*, we see that materiality and characterization in Hardy's work is often visually opaque and obliquely felt. This form of characterization consequently has more to do with atmospherics than the legibility of solid surfaces (8).

Attending to the atmospheric scenes that span almost two decades of Hardy's career allows us to move away from the enduring critical emphases on embodiment in his fiction and recognize instead how the molecular—the minute particles of invisible matter that comprise the physical world—replace the coherence of consistently embodied subjects. Rather than the stable registers of

subjectivity, emotion, and perception we traditionally associate with characters and narrators in realist fiction, both *The Return* and *Tess* examine volatile aspects of the material world. This molecular narration often focuses on the inability of both Hardy's characters and storytellers to accurately perceive the environment that surrounds them. But at certain crucial moments in these novels, the imperceptible molecular movements of the physical world manifest themselves in climatic events. These signifying forms of weather—from dew to mist and cloud to fog—represent a “condensation of character,” which I define as the coherence of molecular elements of those entities that we traditionally recognize as “Egdon Heath” or “Tess Durbeyfield.” Rather than evoking authoritative epistemologies or stably embodied subjects, “molecular narration” and “character condensation” evince a material unity with the rest of the physical world. There emerges in Hardy's fiction, as in Victorian science, I accordingly claim, an awareness that many of the material elements that comprise the human (such as molecules of oxygen, hydrogen, and carbon) also comprise atmosphere. What we gain from this understanding is that surfaces—legible boundaries of body or landscape—are less constitutive of character in Hardy's novels than the ephemeral atmospheres that periodically, and significantly, replace them.

Hardy's condensation of character and molecular narration anticipates narrative tropes we traditionally associate with the rise of modernism and its movement away from nineteenth-century realism. For example, narratologist Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan discusses critical theories that assume the “death of character” as a result of the British modernist novel. She traces Modernism's ostensible repudiation of psychological depth and human individuality through assertions such as Virginia Woolf's in *The Common Reader* (1925) that the aim of fiction is to “record the atoms as they fall upon the mind” (qtd. in Rimmon-Kenan 30). But there is a problem in the rhetorical question that Rimmon-Kenan poses: “even if we grant the ‘death’ of character in contemporary literature, can we also retrospectively ‘kill’ him in nineteenth-century fiction?” This inquiry assumes a false

dichotomy between fully corporeal personas in the nineteenth-century novel, on the one hand, and the molecular flows and shifting materialities characteristic of modern and contemporary literature, on the other hand (31).

If we briefly examine Rimmon-Kenan's account of character alongside D.H. Lawrence's 1914 letter to Edward Garnett—in which he articulates the “allotropic states” that she attributes to characterization in twentieth- and twenty-first century fiction—we see how molecular narration and character condensation in *The Return* and *Tess* prefigure Lawrence's interest in allotropy: a phenomenon that the OED defines as “the occurrence of a chemical element in two or more forms differing in structure and physical properties” but remaining “unchanged in substance” (“allotropy”; “allotropic,” def. 1a). Lawrence, whose enthusiasm for Hardy's fiction is well known, writes to Garnett: “that which is physic—non-human, in humanity, is more interesting to me than the old-fashioned human element—which causes one to conceive a character in a certain moral scheme and make him consistent” (182). In his response to the futurist writing of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and its influence on *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* (1920) (Whitworth 29), Lawrence continues:

[W]hat is interesting in the laugh of the woman is the same as the binding of the molecules of steel or their action in heat: it is the inhuman will, call it physiology, or like Marinetti—the physiology of matter [*sic*], that fascinates me. I don't care so much about what the woman *feels*—in the ordinary usage of the word. That presumes an *ego* to feel with. I only care about what the woman *is*—what she *is*—inhumanly, physiologically, materially. . . . You mustn't look in my novel for the old stable ego of the character. There is another ego, according to whose action the individual is unrecognizable, and passes through, as it were, allotropic states which it needs a deeper sense than any we've been used to exercise to discover are states of

the same single radically-unchanged element. (Like as diamond and coal are the same pure single element of carbon. . . .) (*Letters 2*: 183)

Lawrence's pronounced interest in the physiology of the female body and its relevance to literary subjectivity speaks to Hardy's more subtle, yet nonetheless profound, representation of women as central to the volatile representations of personhood in *The Return of the Native* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

Accordingly, this chapter traces the emergence of molecular narration and character condensation in Hardy's early and late fiction to the scientific advancements of the 1870s—a decade that saw the publication of *The Return of the Native* as well as the rise of molecular physics and attendant researches into energy formation, transference, and loss. My examination of writing on these topics by scientific thinkers such as physiological psychologist Henry Maudsley and philosopher Herbert Spencer considers their arguments against the suitability of women for rigorous pursuits by appealing to the limits of their so-called vital force. By placing Hardy's fiction alongside the writings of Spencer and Maudsley, both of whom he read, I argue that his novels reclaim molecular science and its ties to femininity, as an innovative method of incorporeal characterization.⁷³

Unlike recent studies of astronomy and acoustics that focus on how distant planets or ethereal sound waves become apparent through embodied perception in Hardy's fiction, I examine the ways

⁷³. As Lennart A. Björk notes, Spencer was one of Hardy's "more influential authors" and Hardy had read Volume I of Spencer's *First Principles* (1862) and *Principles of Biology* (1864) by 1867 (*Notebooks 1*: 335). Likewise, Hardy records passages from Maudsley's *Natural Causes and Supernatural Seemings* (1886) soon after its publication (*Notebooks 1*: 195).

in which atmospheric inform the author's fascination with the imperceptible.⁷⁴ I contend that the materially rich air in *The Return of the Native* and *Tess* mediate crucially between the invisible motions of the molecular world and the sometimes visible instability that phenomena such as condensation and evaporation make apparent to the human eye. Thus, the "hollow stretch of whitish cloud shutting out the sky" in the opening of *The Return of the Native* (7) emphasizes the same material volatility that the narrator of *Tess* identifies in the "low-lit mistiness" of a fateful September evening (71). This relationship between the instability of material atmospheric and the invisibility of molecular movement also forms a counterpart to the work of scholars such as Anne DeWitt, Allen MacDuffie, and Adelene Buckland who have focused on the influence of molecular science in Hardy's work through the lens of thermodynamics.⁷⁵ Each of these scholars has paid special attention to the "second law" pertaining to entropy which, as scholars including Gillian Beer have influentially argued, became a topic of public concern in the mid-to-late 1800s when the Victorians began to associate cosmic heat loss with the gradual cooling of the sun and future extinction of human life.⁷⁶ Immediately relevant to the second law of thermodynamics is physicist Maxwell's

⁷⁴ On astronomy and human perception, see Anna Henchman *The Starry Sky within* (2014) and Pamela Gossin *Thomas Hardy's Novel Universe* (2007). For an example of recent work on sound in Hardy, see Cohen 94-98 and David James.

⁷⁵ DeWitt finds scientific materialism antithetical to representations of the human in Hardy's *Two on a Tower* (1882). MacDuffie considers energy transfers between the organic and inorganic world in *Tess* ("Victorian Thermodynamics" 208-09). See also Buckland 246. The most comprehensive study of thermodynamics in Victorian literature to date is Barri J. Gold's *Thermopoetics* (2010). Gold discusses Maxwell's work but not Hardy's (241-44).

⁷⁶ For a contemporary account of cosmic energy loss see William Thomson (Lord Kelvin) "The Secular Cooling of the Earth" (1863) (77). For a comprehensive reading of solar decay and the second law of

famous challenge to the law of entropy. The theory that came to be known as “Maxwell’s Demon” postulates (contra the second law) that the heat of fast-moving, invisible molecules could be transferred from a cooler body to a warmer one if a non-human being (a demon) capable of seeing and identifying the speed of these molecules were able to regulate their movement. Maxwell accordingly disproves the second law which, as he succinctly explains in *The Theory of Heat* (1871), holds it “impossible . . . to transform any part of the heat of a body into mechanical work, except by allowing heat to pass from that body into another at a lower temperature” (153).

Though I focus on Maxwell’s study of molecules at some length in this chapter, my focus is not on the second law but rather on the imperceptible nature of molecular movement central to Maxwell’s famous theorem as well Hardy’s fiction. As I demonstrate below, the invisible motility that informs thermodynamics has a direct bearing on the ways in which the Victorians perceived the air around them. Even the most quotidian aspects of meteorology, such as the process of dew formation or the manner in which fog dissipates consequently bespeak a larger fascination with the material contents of the air and the modes of evaporation and condensation that help to define their appearance. I contend that heat loss, though entirely relevant to the second law of thermodynamics, appears most significantly in Hardy’s novels in the form of weather. Once we examine the significance of the mist and dew that often proves so central to his novels, we are therefore able to comprehend the ways in which nineteenth century discourse about cooling and heating bodies goes hand-in-hand with debates about vitality and the constitution of matter.

My discussion of *Tess* in the fifth section of this chapter focuses on the ways in which meteorological forms of condensation and evaporation suggest the cosmic scale of creation

thermodynamics in Victorian literature and culture see Beer’s “‘The Death of the Sun’ Victorian Solar Physics and Solar Myth” in *Open Fields* (1996). The most recent foray into this critical arena is MacDuffie’s study, *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination* (forthcoming).

postulated in “nebular hypothesis,” as it was first termed by William Whewell in the 1830s, but formulated by Immanuel Kant in the mid eighteenth century and later developed by Pierre-Simon Laplace in the late 1700s. As I elaborate, influential scientists and philosophers of the nineteenth century from French positivist Auguste Comte to Irish physicist John Tyndall—upheld the controversial view that a nebula, or cloud of gas, condensed to form celestial, and ultimately human, bodies. Scientists such as Tyndall, I further explain, conceived of these bodies as physically continuous with the molecules present in the nebula: “visible living things . . . are not formed of matter different from that of the earth around them,” he argues (*Address* xv). “They are, on the contrary, bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh” (xv). Accordingly, the nebular hypothesis not only informed the question of divine creation that scientific materialists grappled with throughout the latter half of the century, but also directly speaks to the concept of characterization that Hardy established in his novels of the same era. Faced with the authorial challenge of producing subjectivity out of thin air, I contend, Hardy draws upon the same modes of creation theorized by the physiologists and physicists he studied.⁷⁷

Critics have often discussed the opening chapter of *The Return of the Native* as a creation narrative, on the one hand, and an exemplary study of the close relationship between character and environment, on the other hand. However, the molecular narration in the atmospheric first pages of the novel allows us to appreciate more fully the ways in which Hardy calls upon contemporary science to redefine the origin and expression of human subjectivity. My exploration of two of the most celebrated passages in the novel’s opening chapter—although they do not focus expressly on femininity—introduces us to the intricate manner in which Hardy establishes a connection between physics and physiology. Once we establish this connection, it becomes possible to understand why

⁷⁷. Pamela Gossin’s pioneering work on astronomy, cosmology, and gender in Hardy’s fiction suggests that Hardy was familiar with nebular theory; she traces its influence in *Far from the Madding Crowd* (141-43).

Hardy represents molecular condensation and female characterization as closely related expressions of vital force.

1. Molecular Narration and the Atmospheric Aggregates of Egdon Heath

Few Victorian novels are so concerned with the process of beginning—with the self-reflexive sketching of a narrative world—than *The Return of the Native*. Neither are many Victorian narrators as perplexingly uncertain of the boundaries between setting and characterization than Hardy's is in these well-known opening pages. Consider the first two paragraphs of the novel:

A Saturday afternoon in November was approaching the time of twilight, and the vast tract of unenclosed wild known as Egdon Heath embrowned itself moment by moment. Overhead the hollow stretch of whitish cloud shutting out the sky was as a tent which had the whole heath for its floor.

The heaven being spread with this pallid screen and the earth with the darkest vegetation, their meeting-line at the horizon was clearly marked. In such contrast the heath wore the appearance of an installment of night which had taken up its place before its astronomical hour was come: darkness had to a great extent arrived hereon, while day stood distinct in the sky. Looking upwards, a furze-cutter would have been inclined to continue work; looking down, he would have decided to finish his faggot and go home. The distant rims of the world and of the firmament seemed to be a division in time no less than a division in matter. The face of the heath by its mere complexion added half an hour to evening; it could in like manner retard the dawn, sadden noon, anticipate the frowning of storms scarcely generated, and intensify the opacity of a moonless midnight to a cause of shaking and dread. (8-9)

What is perhaps most apparent in this passage is that Hardy's narrator initially appears to represent the setting of the novel through a metaphor of the human body, making the waste of Egdon Heath

into an expressive human face. The title of the chapter, “A Face on Which Time Makes but Little Impression,” emphasizes the embodied characteristics of this wild expanse, which has “a lonely face,” possesses both “complexion” and “countenance,” and—as we learn later in the chapter—dons “an antique brown dress” of briar and furze (10). The beginning of the subsequent chapter extends this metaphor, describing the ancient Roman road that traverses the Heath as a “parting-line on a head of black hair” (12).

Accordingly, critics from the nineteenth century through the present have regarded the supposed embodiment of the natural environment in this scene as a form of characterization: a way of making the heath one of the novel’s “*dramatis personae*,” as a contemporary reviewer put it in the *London Observer*.⁷⁸ Subsequent discussions of the heath tend to conflate, more or less directly, its corporeal features with characterization. For example, D. H. Lawrence sees Egdon Heath as a more significant embodiment than the characters that inhabit it: “The Heath persists. Its body is strong and fecund. . . . Here is the sombre, latent power that will go on producing, no matter what happens to the product. Here is the deep, black source from whence all these little contents of lives are drawn” (*Criticism* 172). For J. B. Bullen, *The Return of the Native* “links man and his setting” rather than subordinating the human characters in the novel to the body of the heath, as Lawrence suggests (96). Bullen argues: “it is through the narrator’s visual rendition of human physiognomy” that Hardy’s novel makes the landscape like a body and the body like a landscape (96). In contradistinction to both Lawrence and Bullen, J. Hillis Miller suggests that the heath neither overshadows nor complements the human characters but is instead “no more than an unfolding of one basic catachresis for topographical features, ‘face,’ as when one says ‘face of the mountain’” (28). Miller goes on to identify human physiognomy in this scene as an empty signifier or “face” that “does not substitute for some more normal literal term” (28). He claims: “The ‘tragical possibilities’

⁷⁸. Quoted in Bullen 97.

expressed by the lonely face of the heath are made realities in the novel as they are embodied in the various characters' lives. The characters rise up from here and there over the heath as the personification of its personification" (27).

But the opening scene of Hardy's novel poses a unique interpretive challenge that none of the aforementioned arguments addresses: How do we conceive of narrative elements that are not apparent or stable? Egdon appears to be a setting, but it also reaches beyond its presumed spatial confines: it is "vast" and "unenclosed." At the same time, it appears to absorb some traits of the human: the narrator describes Egdon's "face," as we have already noted, and ambiguously reports that it "wore the appearance of an installment of night[,] " which suggests a certain measure of anthropomorphism. Nevertheless, the heath demonstrates a temporal and meteorological agency that exceeds that of realistic characterization. Egdon, we recall, can "retard the dawn, sadden noon, and anticipate the frowning of storms." This is a remarkably more agential—and emotive—role than the one adopted by the only human in this scene, the hypothetical and disoriented "furze cutter" who "looking upwards" and "looking down" cannot tell where day ends and night begins (who cannot, in other words, distinguish the earth from its pervasive atmosphere).

Modern critics often overlook this integration of the heath with the night sky. Yet, this synthesis is immediately apparent to a contemporary reviewer in the *Westminster Review* (1883). Couching the Hardy's sensitivity to atmosphere as the province of the accomplished rural novelist, the anonymous reviewer claims that *The Return of the Native* "is rich with all the complex possibilities of an organic life; he has discerned its varying moods of day and gloaming and night. . . . All the harmonies that air makes with earth Mr. Hardy has learnt to discriminate and to love" (350). Despite the reviewer's somewhat insipid praise, he cannily observes that the relationship between the earth and the air produce emotion in Hardy's novel irrespective of its representation of human characters. We see this more clearly in a subsequent portion of the chapter:

The most thorough-going ascetic could feel that he had a natural right to wander on Egdon. . . . Only in summer days of the highest feather did [the Heath's] mood touch the level of gaiety. Intensity was more usually reached by way of the solemn than by way of the brilliant, and such a sort of intensity was often arrived at during winter darkness, tempests, and mists. Then Egdon was aroused to reciprocity; for the storm was its lover, and the wind its friend. (10)

There is a surfeit of emotion in this description and its reliance on the seasons, but the narrator's use of the subjunctive mood, passive voice, and qualifying adjectives complicate any clear association between emotion and embodied individuation. Like the hypothetical furze cutter of the previous lines, the "thorough-going ascetic" is a type rather than a subject: a possible agent who "could feel" but, then again, very well may not. The narrator postulates rather than describes his existence. Similarly, the use of the passive verb "was reached" is not only qualified by the adverbial phrase "more usually," but takes as its deferred agent the ambiguous subject "intensity." "Such a sort of intensity" is not only vaguely modified, then, but also originates in an obscure source: the adjectival noun "solemn" which is ultimately a manifestation of the weather ("winter darkness, tempests, and mists"). Hardy's prose simultaneously disembodies and defers emotion: it makes its origins as perplexing and uncertain as the temporal and geographical features of the heath itself. The narrator personifies both the weather and Egdon when he conclusively asserts: "the storm was its lover, and the wind its friend" (10). It remains, however, difficult to comprehend any reciprocity between character and environment (or human and landscape) amid the unstable signifiers and postponed agency that pervade the scene. Ultimately, these lines leave us in a state of uncertainty about the actual substance of Egdon Heath and its relationship to the human. This obscurity does far more than establish a mood or set a narrative tone: it alerts us to the problems of perception and cognition that ensue in the rest of the novel. More than a representation of Egdon Heath itself, the

scene examines the potentials and limitations of diegetic representation, asking what kind of story might be told if we attend to the invisible, impalpable, and unstable underpinnings of the material world and its shifting relationship to the atmosphere that surrounds it.

This molecular narration, which the opening scene of *The Return of the Native* dramatically establishes, suggests what twentieth-century German phenomenologist Gernot Böhme describes as the use of the term “atmosphere” in everyday speech to indicate “something that is in a certain sense indeterminate, diffuse but precisely not indeterminate in relation to its character” (114).

“Atmospheres,” Böhme states, “are indeterminate 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 where they are. They seem to fill the space with a certain tone of feeling like a haze” (114). In making these claims, Böhme calls for an atmospheric aesthetics that emphasizes “sensuousness and nature” rather than evaluative Kantian judgment (115). Since he is “concerned with the relation between environmental qualities and human states,” Böhme also remains invested in an aesthetic atmospheric that is neither subjective nor objective (114). His focus, as he puts it, is on a coordinating “and” or “in-between” that joins human subjectivity with the natural world.⁷⁹ Consequently, even though Böhme’s insights

⁷⁹ This definition of atmosphere shares much with Theresa Brennan’s study of the transmission of affect in which she asserts: “There is no secure distinction between ‘the individual’ and the ‘environment’” (6). Like Böhme, and unlike Hardy, Brennan defines atmosphere as something that is transmitted between individual bodies and between bodies and their shared atmosphere. Affect, she contends, can be transmitted by “pheromones—molecules that can be airborne and that communicate chemical information—[that] signal and produce reactions by unnoticeable odor” (9). Thus, “any inquiry into *how* one feels the others’ affects, or the ‘atmosphere,’ has to take account of physiology as well as the social, psychological factors that generated the atmosphere in the first place” (1).

emphasize an atmospheric mediation between human subjectivity and the material world, he maintains a homeostatic relationship between subject and object that Hardy's molecular narration defies.

What quickly becomes clear as we attend to the ambiguities and shifting significations of the inaugural atmosphere in Hardy's 1878 novel, is that the conjunctive or reciprocal exchange between subject and object, character and landscape, or atmosphere and earth cannot be fully explained by grammatical or conceptual additions or substitutions. Neither analogy, nor metaphor, nor—as J. Hillis Miller maintains—catachresis can account for the atmospheric and diegetic volatility that makes any one thing almost exactly like another. For instance, the “hollow stretch of whitish cloud shutting out the sky” transmutes what the narrator initially describes as an “unenclosed wild” into its opposite: a private semi-enclosed space of a “tent” with a “floor.” Here, the atmosphere is both transformative and ephemeral: the clouds alter the heath but remain temporary and permeable like an open-air tent. Thus, Miller's claim that the human characters in *The Return of the Native* constitute a personification of the heath, which is, in turn a personification of the narrator's consciousness, ignores the fact that each signifier in this chain of misaligned metaphors undergoes remarkable permutation. There can be no “face,” that is, because the entity “known as Egdon Heath” is not fully distinguishable from its atmosphere.

This disembodiment directly opposes the tenets of physiognomy that Victorian thinkers understood as binding the face to a knowable human essence or character. As Sally Shuttleworth reminds us, the nineteenth-century fascination with physiognomy emerged from the tenets laid out in Johann Kaspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* (1783), translated into English in the final decades of the eighteenth century (59). This “new theory of the self,” as Shuttleworth calls it, clearly located the essence of human character in the material qualities of the body, insisting that the physical and the spiritual were inextricably linked (60). By reading the human face as a legible surface,

physiognomy promised to unlock the interior moral and spiritual essence of the individual. But, as Lucy Hartley further elucidates, physiognomy was “doomed to fail as it offer[ed] false claims about human existence based on the idea that the character and behaviour of an individual . . . are explicable through facial expression” (3). Thus, what Hartley finds most significant about physiognomy, is its influence on “modern psychological thought” (3). What emerges in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century as a psychological account of human character and behaviour,” Hartley explains, “is both the long-term outcome of physiognomical teachings and the reason for their dissolution” (3). Rimmon-Kenan connects this legacy, “even in our century, when the scientific validity of Lavater’s theory has been completely discredited,” to the enduring “metonymic relation between external appearance and character-traits” in modern fiction (65).

In his influential reading of *The Return of the Native*, Cohen traces a materialist rather than spiritual or moral history of the human face associated with the physiognomic. Cohen’s engagement with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of “faciality”—which the French theorists articulate in two influential works, *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980)—underlies his argument that Hardy finds “a material basis for mental and emotional processes, implicitly opposing the spiritual tenets of physiognomy” (88). He claims that the “sensory apparatus of the face” makes the novel’s characters “open to the world through their senses” and therefore elides the boundary between subject and object (89). But his contention that the landscape “stands in a reciprocal relation to the human” upholds a distinction between place and person that the aerial conditions of Egdon Heath adamantly overturn (100). As the narrator of *The Return* claims: “The distant rims of the world and of the firmament seemed to be a division in time no less than a division in matter.” Still, the appearance of matter is quite another thing from its essence in this novel. As the confused

gaze of the hypothetical furze-cutter demonstrates, the world and the firmament are not just inverted but also comprised of the same elements.⁸⁰

Like Cohen, David Musselwhite conducts a Deleuzian analysis of sensation and embodiment in Hardy's work. Musselwhite marshals Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's discussion of the *body without organs* in *Anti-Oedipus* in order to argue: "The Heath is not merely one other, albeit superhuman, protagonist of the plot, nor is it simply an inert, picturesque and evocative background—but it is the very plane of consistency, the matrix, the affective field, within the boundaries of which the drama must be framed and then take its place" (25). Although the twentieth-century philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari and the "materialist psychoanalysis" of *Anti-Oedipus* remain secondary to my discussion of molecular narration in Hardy's fiction, it bears noting that some of the most innovative Hardy scholarship employs Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of molecular flows and molar composites.⁸¹ This connection—already evident in D. H. Lawrence's

⁸⁰ Both the generalized type of the furze-cutter and the spatial and temporal confusion on Egdon Heath oppose traditional definitions of character as a distinctive individual. As Ian Watt explains: "the 'principle of individuation'" that arises in philosophical discourse of the long eighteenth century, notably by John Locke and David Hume, leads to the individuation or disassociation from "type" constitutive of characters in the early novel (21). "[T]he characters of the novel can only be individualized," Watt argues, "if they are set in a background of particularized time and place" (21). The synthesis and instability of time and place in the novel's first chapter must therefore be seen as opposing key elements of literary character inherited from the eighteenth-century novel (and presumably upheld in Victorian fiction).

⁸¹ There is much in Deleuze's explanation of Hardy's fiction that speaks to the concerns of this chapter. As both Cohen (159) and Musselwhite (1) note, Deleuze embraces the "exemplary case of Thomas Hardy: his characters are not characters or subjects: they are collections of intensive sensations, each one is such a collection, a package, a bloc of varying sensations . . . a subjectless individuation. And these packages of vital sensations, these collections or combinations . . . these clusters of sensations, these individuals, file across the

prose—between developments in Victorian physics and subsequent concepts in twentieth-century literature and philosophy, suggests the degree to which Hardy’s fiction responds to contemporary developments in molecular science and evolving concepts of human vitality. It is to these discoveries and their influence on Hardy’s narrative form that we now turn.

2. The “Illimitable Inane” and Nineteenth-Century Molecular Physics

I have been arguing that the difficulty that Hardy’s narrators and characters mutually have separating what seems to be the face of a heath from the firmament above, or the body of a woman from the fog that engulfs her, renders narrative categories such as character and setting unstable. I have also suggested that this atmospheric volatility confuses the boundaries between individual objects and establishes a form of characterization that emerges from a synthesis of the animate and inanimate rather than reciprocity between the two. We have seen, for instance, how the heath—which possesses as much emotion, intention, or subjectivity as any of the human figures in Hardy’s novel—absorbs and perpetuates the agency of the atmosphere itself. Egdon is not darkened by an absence of light in the “firmament” above but rather folds night into itself: “embrown[ing] itself moment by moment” in a flourish of Miltonic rhetoric that elevates its obscurity to epic proportions.⁸² If we consider the ways in which molecular physics deals with the same imperceptible

landscape as though tracing a line of flight, or a line of deterritorialization of the earth itself (*Dialogues* 39-40). We can see how Deleuze’s evocation of a “collection, a package, a bloc” evinces an interest in the molecular and the molar. Unlike Deleuze, I read characters in Hardy’s fiction as a collection of material components rather than “intensive sensations.”

⁸² The first recorded use of the poetic verb “embrown” in the *OED* is from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: “The unpierc’t shade Imbround the noontide Bows.” Alexander Pope’s subsequent use of the verb in his translation of Homer’s *Odyssey* (1725) upholds its epic tradition, which, in the nineteenth century, takes on distinctly atmospheric connotations (“Embrown” def. 1a).

and shifting configurations of material substances as the opaque opening of *The Return of the Native*, we begin to see how the scientific discourses underlying Victorian perceptions of embodiment and air unfold in Hardy's fiction. The following passage from J Maxwell's 1873 address "Molecules," delivered to the British Association for the Advancement of Science (and reprinted later the same year in the popular journal *Nature*) precedes the publication of *The Return of the Native* by four years. Maxwell carefully draws together literary and scientific discourse by focusing on the visibility of dust in air. He relates the scientific demonstrations of the ancient Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius to those of his colleague John Tyndall and to Alfred Lord Tennyson's contemporary poem "Lucretius" (first published in *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1868), which describes the invisible movements of primordial molecules:

When Lucretius wishes to form a mental representation of the motion of atoms, he tells us to look at a sunbeam shining through a darkened room (the same instrument of research by which Dr[.] Tyndall makes visible to us the dust we breathe,) and to observe the motes which chase each other in all directions through it. This motion of the visible motes, he tells us, is but a result of the far more complicated motion of the invisible atoms which knock the motes about. In his dream of nature, as Tennyson tells us, he

saw the flaring atom-streams
And torrents of her myriad universe,
Running along the illimitable inane,
Fly on to clash together again, and make
Another and another frame of things
For ever. (96)

By calling attention to the epicurean atomism of Lucretius, Maxwell references a literary

heritage that extends from the early Roman poet's six-book didactic work *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*, circa mid-first century BCE) to Alfred Tennyson's poem.⁸³ Maxwell's pairing of these two poets—both of whom Hardy read and admired—focuses on their mutual interest in the eternity of matter and the indivisible basic units that came to be known as atoms. In his 17 January 1897 letter to Edward Clodd, Hardy praises “that glorious Double-man—poet & scientist—Lucretius. I see you refer to Munro's translation. I do not know it, but it seems an extraordinarily close one, to judge from the few passages quoted in your book, which I have tested” (*Selected Letters* 111). Thus, although Hugh Andrew Johnstone Munro's English-language version of *De Rerum Natura* (1864) brought the poem to wide Victorian readership, Hardy's familiarity with it evidently precedes the translation, suggesting his interest in Lucretius ran deeper than a passing interest in a prominent new edition.⁸⁴

Examining Hardy's familiarity with Lucretius's work alongside Maxwell's passage helps to elucidate the literary and scientific conditions that place this Victorian author's atmospheric environments within an established discourse of literature and science. Further, Maxwell's discussion of what we might call an “aerial materialism” in this passage places the shared ideologies of Lucretius and Tennyson alongside Maxwell's own molecular and atmospheric research, which he initiated in the 1850s with his studies of the velocity of gas molecules.⁸⁵ Maxwell's reference to Tyndall, who was already an esteemed Fellow of the Royal Society at the time, additionally emphasizes the popular perception that ambient material in air could provide insight into the

⁸³. On the date and content of *De Rerum Natura*, see David Sedley's entry on “Lucretius” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (in particular, section four: “Physics”).

⁸⁴. In addition to his interest in Lucretius, we know that Hardy had a deep personal and critical interest in Tennyson. See, for example, Millgate's *Biography* (70, 194).

⁸⁵. For details on Maxwell's early career, see Harman's entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

“flaring atoms streams” of Tennyson’s Lucretius. A celebrated public speaker, Tyndall is often credited with popularizing physics for a large audience, and frequently lectured to audiences of a thousand people or more (DeYong 39). As Maxwell’s commentary suggests, Tyndall’s iconic demonstration of dust floating in air fosters a connection between invisible molecular movement and the visible motility of aerial particulate. Tyndall’s research into radiant heat and its effect on the atmosphere—as well as the transmission of sound and light through air (including the acoustic effects of fog)—which span the length of his productive career, also share much with Maxwell’s own research on thermodynamics and molecular physics.

Of greatest importance for our discussion here, however, is the way in which Maxwell’s lecture assumes that the void or “illimitable inane” that gives rise to the natural world remains fundamentally inapprehensible to both the poet (Tennyson or Lucretius) and the scientist (Maxwell or Tyndall). Molecules “continue this day as they were created,” Maxwell explains (99). “No one has ever seen or handled a single molecule. Molecular science therefore is one of those branches of study which deal with things invisible and imperceptible by our senses” (86). Likewise for Hardy, who read *De Rerum Natura* in Latin and studied the minute details of the Dorset weather with a care unrivaled by most scientific observers, molecular narration evinces a clear connection between the imperceptible movement of matter and the perceptible but opaque atmosphere on a Saturday afternoon in November.⁸⁶ By emphasizing visible forms of aerial condensation such as clouds and storms, Hardy’s narrator is able to identify the perceptible (matter in air) as a way of conceiving of the imperceptible (the molecular).

When we examine Hardy’s own resistance to the metaphysical, his narrator’s reticence to articulate with certainty his knowledge of the natural world comes into sharp relief. In response to a reader of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* Hardy writes: “I hope you will not mind my owing to a mistrust of

⁸⁶. On Hardy’s meteorological observation see Mottram (41).

metaphysic. . . . it is a sort of bastard, begotten of science upon theology—or, in another form, a halfway house between Deism & Materialism. It ultimately comes to this—such & such things *may* be. But they will ever be improbable: & since infinitely other things may also be, with equal probability, why select any one bundle of suppositions in preference to another?” (*Collected Letters* 1: 261). Hardy’s “mistrust” of the branch of philosophy that, at its most basic level, deals with the nature of being, helps to elucidate why the narrator of *The Return* emphatically undermines any certainty in the novel’s initial account of origin, time, and space. Because the molecule came to be widely (though contentiously) perceived in the Victorian period as a basic and original element of matter, its existence raised questions about the relationship of materialism to spiritualism. There remains a fundamental distinction, then, between the easeful claims of even the most scientific minds that molecules are the product of a divine creator and more cautious claims of men like Hardy who suggest that “since infinitely other things may . . . be . . . why select any one bundle of suppositions in preference to another?”

Thus the refusal to assume absolute knowledge that Hardy evinces in his letter and in the opening pages of his seventh novel—though they uphold a fascination with the shifting parameters of the material world—in fail to easefully adhere to the deistic authority Maxwell upholds when he explains that molecules are “perfect in number and measure and weight, and from the ineffaceable characters impressed on them we may learn that . . . our noblest attributes as men, are ours because they are essential constituents of the image of Him Who in the beginning created, not only the heaven and the earth, but the materials of which heaven and earth consist” (99-100). To be sure, the opening scene of *The Return* grapples with the tension between deism and materialism that Maxwell’s emphatic solution implies, and that Hardy’s letter later addresses as irresolvable. But it would be only partially accurate to agree with Musselwhite that the opening of the novel is “massively critical and inaugural, recalling, as it does, the opening chapters of Genesis and the division of the waters from

the land and of the day from the night” (24). For, although physical matter in the novel’s opening takes on the ancient qualities of the molecular it refuses the teleological causation that both Musselwhite’s analysis of biblical analogy and Maxwell’s description of divine creation assume. This anti-deistic point of view emerges most clearly in the following passage:

[P]recisely at this transitional point of its nightly roll into darkness the great and particular glory of the Egdon waste began, and nobody could be said to understand the heath who had not been there at such a time. It could best be felt when it could not clearly be seen, its complete effect and explanation lying in this and the succeeding hours before the next dawn: then, and only then, did it tell its true tale. The spot was, indeed, a near relation of night, and when night showed itself an apparent tendency to gravitate together could be perceived in its shades and the scene. The sombre stretch of rounds and hollows seemed to rise and meet the evening gloom in pure sympathy, the heath exhaling darkness as rapidly as the heavens precipitated it. And so the obscurity in the air and the obscurity in the land closed together in a black fraternization towards which each advanced half-way.

. . . Every night its Titanic form seemed to await something; but it had waited thus, unmoved, during so many centuries, through the cries of so many things, that it could only be imagined to await on last crisis—the final overthrow. (8-9)

As in the first two paragraphs of the novel, in which we learn that “the heath wore the appearance of an installment of night . . . before its astronomical hour was come,” these lines lack temporal specificity: they describe an uncertain future that returns to an ancient past (8). Although “the obscurity in the air and the obscurity in the land close . . . together” harking back to the origins of a universe-in-formation, not unlike Tennyson’s “illimitable inane,” this darkness also anticipates the “last crisis—the final overthrow.” In similar vein, just as “flaring atom-streams / Fly on to clash

together again, and make /Another and another frame of things / For ever” in Tennyson’s representation of Lucretius’s philosophy, so too does the obscurity in the paragraphs above create new and equally obscure material variations: the “shades and the scene . . . gravitate together” while the “sombre stretch of rounds and hollows” of the heath and its ancient barrows “seemed to rise and meet the evening gloom.” As in the passage discussed earlier in this chapter, here too the conditional mood of the verbs (“could” and “seemed”) emphasizes the uncertainty of material appearances.

This episode summarily undoes the epistemological clarity and authoritative agency that would afford a god, or an omniscient narrator, control over the material world. The narrator’s critique of human perception and cognition—evident in his perplexing assertion that Egdon “could best be felt when it could not clearly be seen”—undermines his subsequent attempt to understand the heath. Rather than focusing on the surfaces or boundaries of the human frame and the heath’s resemblance to it, as critical consensus suggests, this scene conjoins terrestrial and celestial space. It also refuses the linear concepts of nature, history, and humanity that Gillian Beer identifies in this episode. In her view, “*The Return of the Native* opens not with people but a place. . . . This landscape is . . . undeveloped, and unchanged. . . . In natural-historical, and in anthropomorphic terms . . . it represents the unaltered conditions of the world” (36). But the destabilizing descriptions of time and place we have already discussed suggest a constant and immediate development that owes more to the molecular underpinnings of the scene than it does to a molar continuity in the features of the land or the appearance of the sky. In fact, the only definitive facts the narrator is able to establish are the ones that remain external to the story he tells. “Here at least were intelligible facts regarding landscape,” he remarks of the heath’s description in *The Domesday Book* (or ancient geographical survey that William the Conqueror ordered in 1086) (10). “Its condition is recorded therein as that of heathy, furzy, briary wilderness. . . . Then follows the length and breadth in leagues” (10). But even

these “intelligible facts” are based on an “ancient lineal measure” that is “uncertain” and does little to establish the individual identity of people, places, and things we traditionally expect from the opening pages of a Victorian novel (10).

Although Hardy’s narrator demonstrates the ability to report actions occurring when there is presumably no one present and to state the motivations, perceptions, or intentions of certain characters, these conventions do not assume the form of a traditional third-person omniscience. Linda Shires refers to this characteristic as “unknowing omniscience,” which maintains the “early aesthetic, rhetorical, and political impulse not to ‘know’” that she identifies in Hardy’s poetry (36). “From the beginning to the end of his writing career,” she elaborates, “Hardy shows an unusually keen interest in questions of epistemology . . . especially with reference to its limits and validity” (36). If we consider the qualities that major narratologists deem central to an omniscient or “unrestricted” viewpoint, we are able to better comprehend the limited nature of the narrator’s knowledge. For example, Seymour Chatman describes the difference between a “shifting limited” point of view and “continuous omniscience” as a difference in diegetic “purpose” (215-16). A shifting limited point of view allows the narrator to change “his mental entry from one character to another” but “expresses no purpose” (216). By contrast, “continuous omniscience” helps to unfold “the teleology of the plot” (216); “each new consciousness is dipped into for the express purpose of moving events through to the next stage” (218). Gerald Prince offers a similar sketch of an “unrestricted” or “unsituated” point of view when he attests that the all-knowing narrator “tells more than any and all the characters (could) know and tell at the time of the situation described” (51). Robert Scholes, James Phelan, and Robert Kellogg, although they express the limitations of the term “omniscience” for describing narrators in fiction, see its definition as “based on the presumed analogy between the novelist as creator and the Creator of the cosmos, an omniscient God. . . . Omniscience includes the related god-like attribute of omnipresence. God *knows* everything because He *is* everywhere—

simultaneously” (272).

What emerges from this set of discussions is the idea that omniscience proceeds from the narrative association between deistic authority and all-pervasive knowledge. It is this enduring assumption that has led Jonathan Culler to reject the term “omniscience” outright as a viable term for literary analysis: “The basis of ‘omniscience’ appears to be the frequently articulated analogy between God and the author,” Culler maintains. “The author creates the world of the novel as God created our world, and just as the world holds no secrets for God, so the novelist knows everything that is to be known about the world of the novel. This is all very well, but if, for instance, we do not believe in an omniscient and omnipotent God, then we cannot draw on what we know of God to illuminate properties of narrative. Even if we believe in God, there is precious little knowledge about him on which to rely” (23).

Culler’s analysis helps to elucidate the ways in which the atmospheric and deeply agnostic opening of *The Return* identifies a similar problem. The narrative voice of Hardy’s novel—despite its frequent propensity to gain access to subjective information in order to advance the plot or elaborate the intentions of individuals—emphatically fails to possess a stable vantage point or pervasive knowledge. Thus, the deliberate similarities between the opening of *The Return of the Native* and Genesis exact a critique of this principle far in advance of modern theories such as Culler’s or Audrey Jaffe’s which articulates the “fantasy” of total knowledge in the Victorian novel as one that “depends on . . . a series of oppositions which mark a difference between describer and objects of description” (6). Hardy’s molecular narration—which sees the past, present, and future, as well as people and places, as shifting iterations of the same physical material—refuses any such series of oppositions. The narrator’s interest in dense and dark atmospheres accordingly repudiates the authoritative knowledge we traditionally associate with God and omniscient narration. This refusal, in turn, brings Hardy’s self-affirmed agnosticism and narrative technique into close alliance.

Hardy's agnosticism is a well-known aspect of his thinking, but he made the most emphatic statement of his ambiguous belief after the publication of *Jude the Obscure* (1895), which had been savaged in the press for its immorality. In a diary entry following this critical uproar, he explains: "I can express more fully in verse ideas and emotions which run counter to the inert crystallized opinion. . . . To cry out in a passionate poem that (for instance) the Supreme Mover or Movers, the Prime Force or Forces, must be either limited in power, unknowing, or cruel—which is obvious enough . . . will cause them merely a shake of the head; but to put it in argumentative prose will make them sneer, or foam, and set all the literary contortionists jumping upon me, a harmless agnostic, as if I were a clamorous atheist" (qtd. in Millgate *Biography* 353).

This uncertainty regarding the purpose, aims, and outcomes of creation —"the Prime Force or Forces"—and their relation to religion bears a direct correspondence to theories of vitality prominent in Hardy's day. These are topics, as Phillip Mallett has noted, that Hardy discussed with his friend and literary advisor Leslie Stephen in 1875 after the author witnessed Stephen's renunciation of holy orders (161). "The deed was executed with due formality," Hardy recalls of the event, "Our conversation then turned upon theologies decayed and defunct, the origin of things, the constitution of matter, the unreality of time, and kindred subjects. He told me that he had 'wasted' much time on systems of religion and metaphysics, and that the new theory of vortex rings had 'a staggering fascination' for him" (*Life and Work* 109). As Lennart A. Björk reminds us in his introduction to *The Literary Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*, it was also under Stephen's advice that Hardy undertook a rigorous course of rest and reading shortly after this meeting and immediately prior to starting *The Return of the Native* (xix-xx). "The rest," Björk maintains, "afforded Hardy time to broaden his general education—about which he seems to have felt insecure for the greater part of his life—as well as to concentrate on and collect whatever specialized material he conceived of as useful or mandatory for his profession" (xxi).

Thus, although we have no direct evidence that Hardy and Stephen touched on either Herbert Spencer's or Henry Maudsley's accounts of universal origin during their conversation about "the constitution of matter," the focused course of reading Hardy pursued, in combination with the significant public attention to both Spencer's *First Principles* (1863) and Maudsley's influential essay on "The Theory of Vitality" (also 1863) throughout the 1870s, suggests that both men were familiar with these publications.⁸⁷ Moreover, we do know with certainty that Hardy engaged with the work of both thinkers. His sustained interest in Spencer can be traced to notes he took on *Principles of Biology* (1867) during his composition of *The Return of the Native* (*Notebooks* 1: 336).⁸⁸ Hardy also owned the fourth edition of *First Principles* (reprinted 1880), which he annotated (Millgate, "Library") and his notebooks include a discussion of Maudsley's *Body and Will* (1883) (*Notebooks* 1: 383).

Mallett discusses the relevance of Maudsley's thought to Hardy's discussion with Stephen and further links the medical psychologist's interest in thermodynamics to *Jude the Obscure* (162-163).⁸⁹ In Maudsley's work, Mallett discovers Hardy's responsiveness to the influence of heredity on human character, the inability of the individual will to overcome biological determinism, and the fatalistic connection between moral and physical degeneration and cosmic energy loss (the death of the sun).⁹⁰ I wish to reorient this line of inquiry by focusing on the ways in which Maudsley applies

⁸⁷. On the revival of popular interest in Spencer and the tenets of his *First Principles* in the 1870s, see Harris.

⁸⁸. On *Principles of Biology* and *Return of the Native* see Cohen (92-93; 95-96).

⁸⁹. Cohen addresses Maudsley in different vein, emphasizing the psychologist's emphasis on the physical principles of mind, though not in relation to Hardy's work (2-3).

⁹⁰. For an historical and biographical account of Maudsley's influence on Victorian psychiatry, see Showalter ("Female Malady" 112-20). Showalter emphasizes Maudsley's emphasis on "the inescapable destiny of hereditary influence," "psychological determinism," and "degeneration": themes immediately applicable—as Mallett suggests—to Jude Fawley's family history in *Jude the Obscure* (Showalter 118; Mallett 162).

the molecular research advanced by Maxwell in the 1850s to his discussion of the material origins of the universe.

This scientific framework applies to *The Return*, not only in the scenes discussed above, but also in the following scene from chapter two: “Humanity Appears upon the Scene, Hand in Hand with Trouble,” in which the narrator presents four individuals central to the plot of the novel but defers naming or particularizing them. The narrator first describes a “solitary figure” (16) that, after some delay, he identifies as Eustacia Vye. He also describes the “old man,” whom we later learn is Eustacia’s grandfather, Captain Vye (11). The storyteller sets before us “the woman,” whom the subsequent chapter reveals as Thomasin Yeobright, as well as “the traveller with the cart [who] was a reddleman”—Diggory Venn (12-13). Yet, in this second chapter, as in the first, the narrator elides the distinctive attributes of the people he describes, emphasizing the lack of particularity that distinguishes any one character from another. Moreover, as the following passage shows, this ambiguity emerges from the atmospheric indistinctness of the hour as well as the uncertainty of the narrator’s knowledge and perception:

[A]t this transitional hour . . . there was that in the condition of the heath itself which resembled protracted and halting dubiousness. . . . This was not the repose of actual stagnation, but the apparent repose of incredible slowness. . . . to exhibit the inertness of the desert, and at the same time to be exercising powers akin to those of the meadow, and even of the forest, awakened in those who thought of it the attentiveness usually engendered by understatement and reserve. (14-15)

It is crucial here that the narrator implies that human perception tends to respond to the motion or transformation of objects—for instance, the vital processes of the blooming meadow, or lush forest—by assuming they possess the stasis of an inert and lifeless desert. The narrator also emphasizes this incongruity between the deceptive truths of human perception and the material

reality of substances in the following passage:

The old man frequently stretched his eyes ahead . . . At length he discerned, a long distance in front of him, a moving spot, which appeared to be a vehicle. . . . It was the single atom of life that the scene contained . . . when he drew nearer he perceived it to be a spring van. . . . (12)

Both the lack of human distinctiveness and the gradual emergence of “life,” which the narrator compares to the imperceptible atom, emphasize the lack of differentiation between and the deceptive appearance of material forms. “Life” first emerges through the focalization of the old man’s partial long-distance perception. When the miniscule “atom of life” he observes becomes more readily apparent, we learn that it does not belong to a human character but instead to the “spring van” that the traveling reddleman guides along the “vast dark surface” of the heath (12). Later in the scene, the narrator describes the animate “form” of Captain Vye in similarly molecular, or atomic, terms: “The reddleman watched his form as it diminished to a speck on the road and became absorbed in the thickening films of night” (14). This transposition between the human and the non-human—Captain Vye and Diggory’s van—not only emphasizes the similarity between their materiality, but also mediates the partially perceptible movements that occur on the heath (twilight arrivals and departures) through their relationship to an atmosphere: “the thickening films of night.”

Maudsley calls upon the same principles of molecular motion and energy loss that underlie this scene in his “Theory of Vitality” (a revised version of which appeared within his 1871 publication *Body and Mind*). In his discussion, Maudsley emphasizes both the lack of differentiation between organic and inorganic matter and the emergence from and disappearance into dust that characterizes human life: “The etymological import of the words physics and physiology is notably the same and it may be that . . . in the difference of their application lies a hidden irony at the assumption on which the division is grounded” (vii-viii). The correspondence between Maudsley’s views of energy and

animation take clearer shape when we consider following passage:

When Nature was first examined objectively the differences in matter appeared manifold, and its modes of energy or activity—that is, its forces—appeared many also. On a more careful use of the senses, however . . . it became evident that one form of matter only disappeared to reappear in another form; that it never perished, but only changed. . . . Out of dust man is formed by an upward transformation of matter, and to dust he returns by a retrograde metamorphosis thereof.

Corresponding with the changes in the form of matter are changes in its modes of energy or its forces; to different combinations and arrangements of molecules correspond different modes of energy. (126)

As we see here, one of the guiding principles of Maudsley's methodology is to understand "mental science" as dependent on the principles of the body and its mechanics: principles that arise from the molecular origins of the human body. Consequently, Maudsley's conception of human subjectivity is founded on the same imperceptibility of "microscopic physics" that Maxwell elucidates. If we compare the transposition of Diggory's van—the "single atom of life" to the "speck" representing Captain Vye with Maudsley's view of organic and inorganic matter, we see further how the synthesis of human and non-human worlds in Hardy's fiction coincides with the connections Maudsley draws between molecular science, human physiology, and allotropic states:

The elements of organic matter are not different from those of inorganic. . . . What is special is the manner of composition of the elements: there is a concurrence of manifold substances, and they are combined or grouped together in a very complex way. . . . Life is not a contrast to non-living Nature, but a further development of it. . . . Knowledge cannot pass the life-boundary, because there are not at present any means of following the intimate changes which take place beyond it; there is a world

there into which the senses of man cannot yet enter. . . . physics and chemistry of a delicacy beyond the reach of the powers of the highest microscope, are needed.

(135-36)

Because, as Maudsley asserts, the capacity to investigate the molecular origins of pre-human matter are not within the realm of nineteenth-century science, the exact mutations of matter that link the organic with the inorganic are not available to the human senses: they are, like Captain Vye's form as it merges with the "thickening films of night," absorbed in an opaque realm inaccessible to human perception. Subsequently, the question of "[w]hether living matter was formed originally, or is now being formed, from non-living matter" is one that puts Maudsley's 1871 essay in dialogue with the shifting materialities of people, places, and things in *The Return of the Native* (vii).

Crucially, Maudsley's investigation of the operations of the human nervous system, like Hardy's attempt to introduce character in the opening pages of the *Return*, appeals simultaneously to molecular science and atmospherics. In the following passage he relies, by way of scientific explanation, on the notion that air can begin to elucidate what our conception of biology alone cannot:

[T]he little world of the organic cell have been made known; the balance has demonstrated the indestructibility of matter . . . and, in the electric stream, there has been found a means of investigating nerve-action. . . . At present we know, from the investigations of Du-Bois Reymond on the electro-motor properties of nerves, that the activity by which the propagation of a stimulus is accomplished is closely connected with an altered arrangement of their material molecules—perhaps even essentially determined by them. Accordingly, the process of conduction in nerves may belong to the series of continuous molecular operations of ponderable bodies, in which, for example, the conduction of sound in the air . . . is to be reckoned. (124)

On this view, the actions of the body—created by the effect of the nerves on the muscles—are registered in terms of electric or Galvanic force. This “electric stream,” in turn, expresses molecular changes that Du-Bois Reymond, much like Luigi Galvani himself, believed to be intrinsic to the muscles of the body.⁹¹ But rather than conceive of the molecular movements of the body in purely biological terms, Maudsley tellingly relies upon a comparable movement of molecules in air and their production of sound.⁹² In this passage, Maudsley evokes the atmospheric in order to describe the minutia of material substance as a basis of energy transference within the human body. Notably, in his view, our “feeble senses” cannot register molecular movement except through a comparison to air (112). This opposition between atmosphere and what Maudsley refers to as a “universe of energies . . . [e]ncompassing us and transcending our ken” (112) corresponds to Herbert Spencer’s similar attempt in *First Principles* (1862) to leverage physics as a means of unlocking certain core theorems that he thought unified the material and immaterial operations of the cosmos.

Divided into two volumes, *First Principles* understands the social, political, organic, and inorganic systems of the world as belonging to the categories of “The Unknowable” (part one) and “The Knowable” (part two). “The Unknowable” treats the intersections of religion and science. It ultimately argues that the two must be fully separated from one each other in order to arrive at a set of philosophical principles proceeding from the “Ultimate Cause of things”: Spencer’s personal

⁹¹. For a detailed description of Du-Bois Reymond’s galvanic measurements of molecular force see “Laws of the Muscular Current” 443.

⁹². See also Tyndall’s *Sound* (1867) which argues: “Different nerves are appropriated to the transmission of different kinds of molecular motion . . . It is the motion imparted to . . . the *auditory nerve*, which, in the brain, is translated into sound” (32). Tyndall’s study also treats the transmission of sound through different material states of air (foggy, clear, and so forth) at great length.

concept of an impersonal originating force (88-89).⁹³ By comparison, “The Knowable” treats the largely scientific principles of “Space, Time, Matter, Motion, and Force” and their molecular underpinnings (136). Just as Maudsley understands the molecular principles of the natural world as informing human psychology and physiology, physics informs the basic principles of Spencer’s treatise, which assumes the core principles of “the indestructibility of matter,” “the continuity of motion,” and “the persistence of force.”⁹⁴

We have already seen how “the indestructibility of matter” pertains to developments in molecular science presented from the time of Lucretius onward. The “continuity of motion” deals with what Spencer describes as “motions visible and invisible of masses and molecules” which can neither “precede from nothing [nor] lapse into nothing” (155). He exemplifies this principle by appealing to the transference of motion through sound and air, much as Maudsley does: “the molar motion which disappears when a bell is struck by its clapper,” Spencer explains, “re-appears in the bell’s vibrations and in the waves of air they produce . . . [similarly] when a moving mass is stopped by coming against a mass that is immovable, the motion which does not show itself in sound shows itself in molecular motion” (156).

Spencer understands “the persistence of force” in terms of molecular motions associated with the action of heat (177) as well as the formation of the solar system. According to the nebular

⁹³. In *First Principles* Spencer argues: “Religion and Science have been undergoing a slow differentiation, and their conflicts have been due to the imperfect separation of their spheres and functions. . . . [A] permanent peace will be reached when Science becomes fully convinced that its explanations are proximate and relative, while Religion becomes fully convinced that the mystery it contemplates is ultimate and absolute. Religion and Science are therefore necessary correlatives” (88).

⁹⁴. For a summary of the three principles and their basis in contemporary physics, see Jonathan H. Turner 35-36.

hypothesis, to which Spencer adheres, diffuse matter condenses and generates “forces adequate to produce the motions now going on” (181). He later returns to the phenomena of heat and condensation in his definition of evolution which, as Jonathan H. Turner explains in his reappraisal of Spencer’s work, is not limited to a sociocultural notion of evolution, but rather to the more general principles of progression, stasis, and dissolution on a universal scale (38). In the following passage, Spencer discusses evolution primarily in terms of the meteorological processes of condensation and evaporation:

All things are growing or decaying, accumulating matter or wearing away, integrating or disintegrating. All things are varying in their temperatures, contracting or expanding, integrating or disintegrating. Both the quantity of matter contained in an aggregate, and the quantity of motion contained in it, increase or decrease; and increase or decrease of either is an advance towards greater diffusion or greater concentration . . . heat rays falling on a cold mass, augmenting the molecular motions throughout it, and causing it to occupy more space, are beginning a process which if carried far will disintegrate the mass into liquid, and if carried farther will disintegrate the liquid into gas . . . since there is no such thing as a constant temperature . . . every aggregate is at every moment progressing towards either greater concentration or greater diffusion. (251)

This discourse of condensation, evaporation, and evolving materiality helps us conceptualize the ways in which Spencer, like Maudsley, places the female body in the context of vitality or the origin and transformation of organic life. As we will see in the following section, the female characters in both *The Return of the Native* and *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* evince many of the same molecular properties that inform the philosophical and physiological work of these thinkers. By placing Hardy’s fiction in the context of contemporary physics, however, my aim is not to suggest that either Spencer’s or

Maudsley's engagements with molecular science emerge unaltered in his novels. Instead, I contend that the energy transference and heat loss they influentially consider in the context of a material atmospherics provide helpful context for understanding Hardy's experiments in fictional form. The novelist's method of registering material permutations through the atmospheric dissipation or condensation of energy refuses the delineated embodiment that so many critics find central to his work. We see this material instability most clearly in Hardy's female subjects: in the "twinning" of Eustacia Vye's breath with the wind, for instance, or the delicate beads of moisture that form on Tess Durbeyfield's eyelashes.

3. The Condensation of Female Character in *The Return of the Native*

As we have seen in the previous chapter on Charlotte Brontë's fiction, by the 1840s physicians such as Thomas Laycock and Thomas John Graham had already deemed atmospherics to be connected intimately to the periodicity that defined women as unstable subjects who were pathologically susceptible to climatic variation.⁹⁵ What later thinkers such as Maudsley and Spencer, and most important, Hardy himself, found mysterious about female embodiment coincides with a keen attention to the enigmatic molecular origins of vitality. We can better grasp this correspondence between molecular science and characterization in *The Return* when we turn to the narrator's initial description of Eustacia Vye. In this passage, we see the atmospheric components of her gendered subjectivity in detail:

There the form stood, motionless as the hill beneath. Above the plain rose the hill,
above the hill rose the barrow, and above the barrow rose the figure. Above the

⁹⁵ See, for instance, Mary Poovey's claim that periodicity "constructed the woman as essentially different from man" (*Uneven Developments* 37). See also the discussion of Victorian neurologist Thomas Laycock in the previous chapter. In *A Treatise on the Nervous Diseases of Women*, Laycock claims: "Nervous diseases are continually influenced by atmospheric changes" (148).

figure was nothing that could be mapped elsewhere than on a celestial globe.

. . . The scene was strangely homogeneous, in that the vale, the upland, the barrow, and the figure above it amounted only to unity. Looking at this or that member of the group was not observing a complete thing, but a fraction of a thing.

The form was so much like an organic part of the entire motionless structure that to see it move would have impressed the mind as a strange phenomenon. Immobility being the chief characteristic of that whole which the person formed portion of, the discontinuance of immobility in any quarter suggested confusion.

Yet that is what happened. The figure perceptibly gave up its fixity . . . it descended on the right side of the barrow, with the glide of a water-drop down a bud, and then vanished. The movement had been sufficient to show more clearly the characteristics of the figure, and that it was a woman's. (15-16)

The narrator does not identify Eustacia by name until nearly forty pages after this initial description of her standing atop Rainbarrow: the highest of the ancient barrows, or burial mounds, on Egdon Heath. By contrast, the first paragraph of the passage pays great attention to the spatial relationship between the atmosphere and this unnamed "figure," above which there remains "nothing that could be mapped elsewhere than on a celestial globe." Eustacia is therefore proximate to and affiliated with the atmosphere but, at the same time, her form synthesizes with the earthly elements in the scene. Like the "shades" and "the scene" that appear to "gravitate together" (8) in the novel's atmospheric first chapter, here "the vale, the upland, the barrow, and the figure above it amounted only to unity." The narrator keenly insists that in order to separate any one element from the group results in observing "not . . . a complete thing, but a fraction of a thing." The coherence of the elements we would traditionally define as character or landscape in this scene therefore unify the sky, the heath, and the figure above it, rather than finding reciprocity between body and land.

Noticeably, the motion of “Eustacia”—a single element within the greater emotional and physical significations of the scene—creates “confusion.” What we might call the condensation of her “figure” with “that whole which the person formed portion of,” accordingly comprises character in this scene. Significantly, once Eustacia separates from the mass of which she is part, the narrator’s comparison of her gendered motion to a water drop reveals an association between the atmospheric condensation that results from heat-loss and femininity. This association continues in the following lines:

There she stood still, around her stretching the vast night atmosphere

Her back was towards the wind, which blew from the northwest; but whether she had avoided that aspect because of the chilly gusts which played about her exceptional position, or because her interest lay in the southeast, did not at first appear . . .

It might reasonably have been supposed that she was listening to the wind, which rose somewhat as the night advanced, and laid hold of the attention. The wind, indeed, seemed made for the scene, as the scene seemed made for the hour. (49)

Here, the narrator renders Eustacia’s intellectual and emotional interiority secondary to the wind. In lieu of a particular interiority, the storyteller emphasizes Eustacia’s opacity: “that she was tall and straight in build, that she was lady-like in her movements, was all that could be learnt of her just now.” Eustacia’s femininity thus emerges through her affiliation with the “sky” (as the chapter title suggests) and the “wind,” which “it might reasonably have been supposed . . . she was listening to.” This synthesis between the character Eustacia and her environment thus reiterates the “confusion” that arises when we try to abstract her from the material mass. The “whole which the person formed portion of,” thus relies on a molecular continuity expressed through air, rather than an embodied particularity or legible subjectivity.

This connection between Eustacia and the atmosphere continues throughout the novel. For instance, she resides at “Mistover Knap,” and the narrator tellingly asserts: the “subtle beauties of the heath were lost to Eustacia; she only caught its vapours” (65). In anticipation of a second interview with Clym Yeobright, the returned native of the novel’s title (whom she will eventually marry to tragic end), Eustacia muses: “What an opportunity would have been afforded her of seeing the man whose influence was penetrating her like summer sun!” (109). The erotic sun, which warms and filters through Eustacia’s body, suggests the metaphorical permeability she experiences under conditions of sexual desire, as well as the fluctuations of condensation and evaporation that structure her character. Much like Jane Eyre’s Miss Temple, Eustacia also carries an atmosphere with her: one that exerts an emotional control over Clym: “as he walked further and further from the charmed atmosphere of this Olympian girl his face grew sad with a new sort of sadness” (171). So, too, do Eustacia’s own moods resemble changes in the climate: “Her beginning to dance had been like a change of atmosphere,” the narrator remarks when she meets her old lover Damon Wildeve at the village picnic at East Egdon. “[O]utside,” the narrator states, “she had been steeped in arctic frigidity by comparison with the tropical sensations here. . . Eustacia . . . was entirely in a cloud” (220). In accordance with this close association between sex, desire, and atmospherics, Hardy’s storyteller further defines Eustacia’s moods through an emphasis on her appearance and attire which “always had a sort of nebulosity about it, devoid of harsh edges anywhere; so that her face looked from its environment as from a cloud, with no noticeable lines of demarcation between flesh and clothes” (217). This affiliation between Eustacia and atmospherics as an expression of (dis)embodiment is doubly clear in her own expression of sexual desire. When she contemplates her conflicted desire for Damon Wildeve, for instance, she explains to him: “Damon, a strange warring takes place in my mind occasionally. I think when I become calm after your woundings, ‘Do I embrace a cloud of common fog after all?’” (59).

This pattern of atmospheric characterization has much in common with the medical and philosophical debates of the 1870s through the 1890s that raised questions about the energy reserves of the female body. One of the most prominent disputes about the physiological differences between women and their male counterparts in the decade surrounding *The Return* involved female education. Women had gained admission to the Cambridge lower examinations in 1863, to the same qualifications at the University of London in 1867, and at Oxford in 1870 (Burstyn 80). Although the University of London opened its doors to women wishing to pursue a full degree in 1878, arguments about the physical and psychic effect of these developments persisted throughout the final decades of the century. Crucially, these arguments centered on the same philosophies of energy and force that emerged within physical science. For instance, Maudsley understood the greater rate of women's energy as part of the periodic changes of the female body. In "Sex in Mind and Education" (1874), which was published in the liberal *Fortnightly Review*, he urges:

Let it be considered that the period of the real educational strain will commence about the time when, by the development of the sexual system, a great revolution takes place in the body and mind, and an extraordinary expenditure of vital energy is made, and will continue through those years after puberty when, by the establishment of periodical functions, a regularly recurring demand is made upon the resources of a constitution that is going through the final stages of its growth and development. The energy of a human body being a definite and not inexhaustible quantity, can it bear, without injury, an excessive mental drain as well as the natural physical drain which is so great at that time? (467).

The language of periodicity, or "periodical functions," which Maudsley adopts from earlier physicians such as Laycock, coincides with a scientific materialism that emphasizes the limits of vital

force.⁹⁶ As we have noted before, many of Maudsley's theories are indebted to Spencer. Not surprisingly, then, the following passage from Spencer's *The Study of Sociology* (1873), presages Maudsley's interest in the limited mental and physical reserves of women.⁹⁷ Building on his interest in Darwinian evolution, Spencer analyzes women's limited adaptation to environment and unsuitability for education. By appealing to the same periodic functions that Maudsley associates with "the sexual system," Spencer influentially emphasizes women's decreased capacity for intellectual labor and the corresponding paucity of vital energy they release into the air:

[T]hroughout their lives, but especially during the child-bearing age, women exhale smaller quantities of carbonic acid, relatively to their weights, than men do; showing that the evolution of energy is relatively less as well as absolutely less. This rather earlier cessation of individual evolution thus necessitated . . . has two results on the mind. The mental manifestations have somewhat less of general power or massiveness; and beyond this there is a perceptible falling short in those two faculties, intellectual and emotional, which are the latest products of human evolution. (341)

This passage tellingly conflates contemporary theories of evolution and energy loss with women's intellectual and emotional development. The quantities of "carbonic acid" that women exhale into the atmosphere is "relatively less" because their scarce energy reserves must be preserved within the body.

With Spencer's and Maudsley's emphasis on vital force and the limited energy reserves of the

⁹⁶ On Maudsley's development of Laycock's neurophysiology, see T. H. Turner. On "new theories of conservation of energy" as the basis for Maudsley's argument against women's participation in higher education, see Showalter ("Female Malady" 124-25).

⁹⁷ For more on vital energy and female periodicity in Spencer's arguments against female education (especially their economic implications), see Ann Mari May 633-34.

female body in mind, I wish to turn back to the figure of Eustacia standing atop the bluffs of Egdon Heath. Here, Eustacia's sighing becomes part of the "wild rhetoric of night" native to the sounds of the heath. This attempt to define her character both in relation to the sky and as a subject whose "brain had authorized what it could not regulate" establishes her affinity with and dissipation into air:

Suddenly, on the barrow, there mingled with all this wild rhetoric of night a sound which modulated so naturally into the rest that its beginning and ending were hardly to be distinguished. The bluffs, and the bushes, and the heather-bells had broken silence; at last, so did the woman; and her articulation was but as another phrase of the same discourse as theirs. Thrown out on the winds it became twined in with them, and with them it flew away.

What she uttered was a lengthened sighing, apparently at something in her mind which had led to her presence here. There was a spasmodic abandonment about it as if, in allowing herself to utter the sound, the woman's brain had authorized what it could not regulate. One point was evident in this; that she had been existing in a suppressed state, and not in one of languor, or stagnation. (50-51)

The sigh that escapes Eustacia in this scene does little to denote her unique or embodied characterization since it immediately modulates into the other sounds of the evening atmosphere and is "authorized" automatically by her brain, though not regulated by it. This instinctive neurological response suggests that Eustacia's character, expressed through wind and breath, is material rather than emotional. She is more in tune with the "bluffs, and the bushes, and the heather-bells" that have already "broken silence" than she is an entity apart: "Her articulation was but as another phrase of the same discourse as theirs."

Hardy's representation of "the woman" in this scene consequently establishes an opaque and

volatile form of characterization that resurfaces throughout the novel. Consider, in this connection, the narrator's famous description of Clym Yeobright:

The face was well shaped, even excellently. But the mind within was beginning to use it as a mere waste tablet whereon to trace its idiosyncrasies as they developed themselves. The beauty here visible would in no long time be ruthlessly over-run by its parasite, thought, which might just as well have fed upon a plainer exterior where there was nothing it could harm . . .

His countenance was overlaid with legible meanings. Without being thought-worn he yet had certain marks derived from a perception of his surroundings, such as are not unfrequently found on men at the end of the four or five years of endeavour which follow the close of placid pupilage. He already showed that thought is a disease of flesh, and indirectly bore evidence that ideal physical beauty is incompatible with emotional development and a full recognition of the coil of things.

As for his look, it was a natural cheerfulness striving against depression from without, and not quite succeeding. The look suggested isolation, but it revealed something more. As is usual with bright natures, the deity that lies ignominiously chained within an ephemeral human carcass shone out of him like a ray. (119)

What is perhaps most striking about these lines is that their close attention to the details of Clym's face does little to distinguish him as a particular individual with a discrete subjectivity. His physical motility and unstable subjectivity link Hardy's characterization of him to the atmospheric accounts so prominent in the introduction of Egdon Heath and Eustacia Vye. We know, for instance, that Clym's thoughts wear away at his body, changing its outward appearance, just as the atmosphere continually shapes and re-shapes the character of Egdon Heath. But just as the narrator characterizes Eustacia as an opaque outline—"The Figure against the Sky"—the narrator also fails

to reveal Clym's thoughts or the subjective traits that define him beyond an adherence to type. The narrator's assertion that Clym had "certain marks . . . not unfrequently found on men at the end of the four or five years of endeavour which follow the close of placid pupilage" implies both a specific set of circumstances (pupilage of a certain duration) and a general response (not infrequently found). Likewise, the "waste tablet" of Clym's face, which the energy of his thoughts consumes, demonstrates the same physical enervation that Victorian physiologists attributed to female periodicity. Clym's emotional and physical volatility—his uncertain position between youth and maturity—emphasize a pivotal moment of biological growth: "to one of middle age" his face "was that of a young man, though a youth might hardly have seen any necessity for the term of immaturity" (119).

I contend that Hardy's portrayal of Clym appropriates debates about molecular science, energy loss, and atmospherics common to discussions of female periodicity in order to revise certain key aspects of fictional characterization based on sexual physiology. What we might term an overt materiality in his novels, in other words, should not be mistaken with an exclusive emphasis on the female—or male—body and its supposed distinction from the physical world. Instead, the attraction and repulsion of molecules implicit in his characterization operate according to the same physical laws as human emotion. As Maudsley allows us to appreciate: "Attraction plus repulsion of molecules constitutes our conception of matter; and, in observation of its modes of energy, attraction is recognized in gravitation, cohesion, magnetism, affinity, love, while repulsion is found in the centrifugal force, in heat, in electricity, in antipathy, and hate" (128). In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, we see the ways in which similar laws of attraction and repulsion inform an erotic and generative atmospherics that repeatedly supplant the embodied desire of the human subject.

4. Dew and Mist in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

Critics writing on femininity and embodiment in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* often return to the novel's so-called "garden scene" as a touchstone for the overabundant sensuality that Hardy's narrator attributes to Tess during her days at Talbothays Dairy. In his study of the political body in *Tess*, for instance, Jules Law asserts that "Phase the Third" of Hardy's novel "contains some of the most frequently cited evocations of Tess's body" (257). These are evocations that, according to Law, "ironize [the] progressive fetishization of Tess's body by linking it to Angel Clare's patently contradictory hypostatizations of her" (257). Law cites, in this connection, Penny Boumelha, who emphasizes Tess's "explicitly remarked continuity with the natural world." "The ideological elision of woman, sex, and nature remains a structuring element of the tragedy . . . to a point where it becomes disruptively visible," Boumelha contends (123). But despite the undoubtedly erotic implications of the garden scene that these critics identify, I wish to suggest that the atmosphere in this famous episode takes on an emotive and sensual materiality that removes desire from the body. In the following lines, Tess wanders through Talbothays garden at dusk. The scene, which takes place shortly after her arrival at the dairy, follows Angel's first expression of interest in her as "a fresh and virginal daughter of Nature" (136):

It was a typical summer evening in June, the atmosphere being in such delicate equilibrium and so transmissive that inanimate objects seemed endowed with two or three senses, if not five. There was no distinction between the near and the far, and an auditor felt close to everything within the horizon. The soundlessness impressed her as a positive entity rather than as the mere negation of noise. It was broken by the strumming of strings. . . .

The outskirts of the garden in which Tess found herself had been left uncultivated for some years, and was now damp and rank with juicy grass which sent up mists of

pollen at a touch, and with tall blooming weeds emitting offensive smells—weeds whose red and yellow and purple hues formed a polychrome as dazzling as that of cultivated flowers. She went stealthily as a cat through this profusion of growth, gathering cuckoo-spittle on her skirts, cracking snails that were underfoot, staining her hands with thistle-milk and slug-slime, and rubbing off upon her naked arms sticky blights which, though snow-white on the appletree-trunks, made madder stains on her skin; thus she drew quite near to Clare, still unobserved of him.

Tess was conscious of neither time nor space. The exaltation which she had described as being producible at will by gazing at a star came now without any determination of hers; she undulated upon the thin notes of the second-hand harp, and their harmonies passed like breezes through her, bringing tears into her eyes. The floating pollen seemed to be his notes made visible, and the dampness of the garden the weeping of the garden's sensibility. Though near nightfall, the rank-smelling weed-flowers glowed as if they would not close for intentness, and the waves of colour mixed with the waves of sound.

The light which still shone was derived mainly from a large hole in the western bank of cloud; it was like a piece of day left behind by accident, dusk having closed in elsewhere. (138-139)

This detailed scene undoubtedly represents terrestrial nature as generative and abundant. Not surprisingly, then, critics such as Rosemary Morgan identify it as “Tess’s most important erotic scene” (86). Morgan discusses the “‘-Milk’, ‘-spittle’, ‘-slime’, ‘sticky blights’ —the mucosa and emissions of biological sex—[that] ‘rub off’ upon Tess” and assimilate her surroundings “to her erotic consciousness” (87). But Morgan’s contention that Tess invests the terrestrial world with a fecundity that emerges from her affirmative and self-possessed desire for Angel assumes that the narrator’s

point of view aligns with Tess's perspective. This alignment, however, is far from constant, since it comes in and out of focus with the narrator's alternate observations of the physical world and elucidation of Tess's sensory impressions ("the soundlessness impressed her"). The narrator's factual description of a "typical" atmosphere and his typological invocation of "an auditor" (who is not Tess) suggest that we must account for his statement of diegetic facts as well as account of Tess's impressions. But Morgan—much like Law and Boumelha—overlook the ways in which the narrator's attention to the remarkably diffuse, permeable, and transmissive atmospherics in this episode contravene the tangibility of the landscape and Tess's seemingly embodied affiliation with it.

In the scene immediately preceding her walk through the garden, Tess proclaims: "I know that our souls can be made to go outside our bodies when we are alive. . . . A very easy way to feel 'em go . . . is to lie on the grass at night, and look straight up at some big bright star" (136).⁹⁸ This disembodiment reoccurs in the garden scene. The decisive link between the disembodiment that Tess describes at the breakfast table of dairyman Crick and her response to Angel's second-hand harp in the garden thus aligns her with an atmospherics that opposes earthy corporeality. Rather than associating Tess's sexual history with the innocence (and fertility) of the natural world, the narrator's assertion that "she undulated upon the thin notes of the second-hand harp, and their harmonies passed like breezes through her," stresses the ways in which atmospherics replace human sensation.

⁹⁸ Henchman argues: "Stargazing paradoxically uses the senses to glean something that is fundamentally not visible . . . stargazing begins with an act of looking but then move beyond what can be seen to an active imagining of elusive celestial bodies and vast tracts of space" (147-48). By contrast, I read this moment as a rejection of Tess's conscious mind and body. In my view, the scene bears more of a resemblance to the out-of-body experience associated with ancient concepts of astral projection than with perceptual practices of stargazing.

If we consider this passage in dialogue with Spencer's *First Principles* (1862), the historical context surrounding the connections that the novel makes between atmospheric, sensation, and the nervous actions of the body come into focus. Spencer poses the following questions: "What is the nature of the relation between nervous energies and mental states? [H]ow are we to conceive molecular changes in the brain as producing feelings, or feelings as producing molecular changes which end in motion?" (193). Citing a lecture on "Animal Automatism" by Thomas Henry Huxley—celebrated Fellow of the Royal Society and close associate of Tyndall—Spencer contests two of Huxley's assertions. First, that those "actions associate[ed] with purpose and intelligence may be performed automatically" and secondly, that "the consciousness which ordinarily accompanies them is . . . simply a 'concomitant' or a 'collateral product'" (193). Spencer maintains, contra Huxley, that consciousness is a "factor" that produces nervous action rather than a product of its motions. Nevertheless, Spencer admits that "the connexion between the two is inscrutable" and ultimately reaches only a "semblance of an explanation" (9-6). Since, in his view, we cannot conceive of consciousness existing in "an immaterial something . . . [t]he only supposition having consistence is that that in which consciousness inheres is the all-pervading ether." He unfolds his argument in this manner:

[The ether] can be affected by molecules of matter in motion and conversely can affect the motions of molecules; as witness the action of light on the retina. In pursuance of this supposition we may assume that the ether which pervades not only all space but all matter, is, under special conditions in certain parts of the nervous system, capable of being affected by the nervous changes in such [a] way as to result in feeling, and is reciprocally capable under these conditions of affecting the nervous changes . . .

Thus though the facts oblige us to say that physical and psychical actions are correlated . . . so as to suggest transformation, yet how the material affects the mental and how the mental affects the material, are mysteries which it is impossible to fathom. But they are not profounder mysteries than the transformations of physical forces into one another. They are not more completely beyond our comprehension than the natures of Mind and Matter. (196)

Spencer's definition of ether and its action of "light on the retina" harkens back to Thomas Young's light wave theory, developed in 1801, which focuses on the physical potentiality of "luminiferous ether"—simply defined as an "elastic solid that filled space and whose transverse undulations constituted light waves" (Siegel 239). As we have seen in chapter one, the ether proves central to Dickens's representations of the atmosphere in *Bleak House*, its unique vibrations producing light in the same way that vibrations in the air create sound (Cantor and Hodge 46-47). This historical conception of the ethereal transmission of sound is evident in the final lines of the garden scene, in which "waves of sound" become visible in the form of an aerial particulate: "The floating pollen seemed to be his notes made visible." In similar vein, the "waves of color" produced by the twilight glow of "rank-smelling weed-flowers" merge with the sound of Angel's harp in mid-air. This synthesis, in turn, reinforces the derivative sentience and that Hardy's narrator affords to the human characters whose volition proceeds from this "transmissive" ethereal medium.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ John Ruskin elaborates a similar view of "undulation" in his lecture on "The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century" (1884). Ruskin's discussion of clouds elaborates the movements of "atoms" and "particles" as comprising color and form. Of particular relevance here is Ruskin's discussion of vibration in opposition to undulation which he sharpens in opposition to Tyndall: "Do you suppose a water-wave is like a harp-string? Vibration is the movement of a body in a state of tension,—undulation, that of a body absolutely

By postulating that “under special conditions in certain parts of the nervous system” ether can produce feeling, Spencer provides insight into the ways in which atmosphere in this scene (as throughout much of Hardy’s fiction) mediates between the actions of the body and the emotions and sensations that it experiences. Tess’s physical volatility in the garden—her propensity to “undulate . . . upon the thin notes of the second-hand harp,” which “passed like breezes through her”—therefore establishes the similarity between the molecular motions of her nervous system and the ethereal medium that surrounds her. The narrator revisits this connection between nerves and the atmosphere when he maintains that Angel “had studied the curves of [Tess’s] lips so many times that he could reproduce them mentally with ease: and now . . . they sent . . . a breeze through his nerves, which well nigh produced a qualm; and actually produced, by some mysterious physiological process, a prosaic sneeze” (166). This description of a common sneeze as a physiological response to the exceptional sensory stimulus of Tess’s lips emphasizes the atmospheric agency that invests “inanimate objects” and amorous bodies with conscious sensation. Unlike the false “appearances of things . . . under the influence of emotion, or contemplative fancy” that John Ruskin’s definition of the pathetic fallacy deems “unconnected with any real power or character in the object,” Hardy—like Spencer—represents the ether as an iteration of molecular and, consequentially, psychic force (70). “The dampness of the garden” that expresses “the weeping of the garden’s sensibility” is therefore not an extension of Tess’s, Angel’s, or the narrator’s selfhood. Instead, the dampness condenses emotion and affect into a form of precipitated moisture.

These connections between atmosphere and molecules develop in the subsequent chapter of *Tess*. At the beginning of chapter twenty, the narrator establishes Angel’s perception of Tess through an emphasis on the ephemerality of living things and the combined molecular origins of organic and

lax. In vibration, not an atom of the body changes its place in relation to another,—in undulation, not an atom of the body remains in the same place with regard to another” (“Storm Cloud”).

inorganic matter. “Another year’s installment of flowers, leaves, nightingales, thrushes, finches, and such ephemeral creatures, took up their positions where only a year ago others had stood in their place, when these were nothing more than germs and inorganic particles,” the narrator announces (144). Later in the same paragraph, the “invisible jets and breathings” of the scents of flowers parallel the molecular convergence of Tess’s and Angel’s characters: “Tess and Clare unconsciously studied each other . . . All the while they were converging, under an irresistible law, as surely as two streams in one vale” (144). The erotic synthesis of these characters—like Tennyson’s “flaring atom streams”—emerge through a series of ephemeral materialities. Throughout the chapter, which describes the lovers’ developing romance, Tess’s body appears increasingly permeable: “Tess was the merest stray phenomenon to Angel Clare as yet—a rosy warming apparition,” the narrator remarks (144). Later, this physical permeability transmutes into an atmospheric apparition of desire: “Whilst all the landscape was in neutral shade, his companion’s face, which was the focus of his eyes, rising above the mist-stratum . . . looked ghostly, as if she were merely a soul at large” (145-46).

The narrator attributes to Angel—through free indirect discourse—the notion that in the ethereal mist Tess was “no longer the milkmaid, but a visionary essence of woman—a whole sex condensed into one typical form. He called her Artemis, Demeter, and other fanciful names, half-teasingly” (146). The novel’s representation of Angel’s attention to Tess as a “typical form” is not simply a critique of the foolish idolatry and possessive refashioning of his bride-to-be. More than that, Angel’s condensation of Tess’s character “into one typical form” reinforces the novel’s tendency to collapse the inanimate and animate, the aerial and the human (146). The narrator reiterates this condensation of character and its origins in a feminine atmospheric when he describes the moisture that clings to Tess’s body:

Minute diamonds of moisture from the mist hung, too, upon Tess’s eyelashes, and drops upon her hair, like seed pearls. When the day grew quite strong and

commonplace these dried off her; moreover Tess then lost her strange and ethereal beauty; her teeth, lips, and eyes scintillated in the sunbeams, and she was again the dazzlingly fair dairymaid only (146-47).

As this passage makes clear, atmospheric moisture transforms Tess's personhood. Angel's tendency to see her as "a whole sex condensed into one typical form" therefore coincides with the material condensation of dew and mist that cling to Tess's body and evaporate from it, marking Angel's perception of her unstable: alternately iconic and commonplace. The novel's representation of her as a molecular character upholds this variability by representing her through the volatile signifiers of condensation and evaporation rather than as a stable subject possessing a coherent physicality.

Hardy's focus on the body as a series of molecular processes that become apparent through their exchange with the air corresponds to widely-publicized developments nineteenth-century meteorology. Charles Tomlinson's *The Dew Drop and the Mist: An Account of the Phenomena and Properties of Atmospheric Vapour* (1863) builds on the earlier discoveries of Scottish physician and Fellow of the Royal Society, William Charles Wells, whose *Essay on Dew* (1814) correctly explained many of the principles responsible for dew-formation.¹⁰⁰ As Tomlinson explains, Wells contributed to the work of earlier natural philosophers by claiming that cold was not an effect of dew but rather its cause (136). As Tomlinson acknowledges, Wells discovered the "principles of *radiation* and *condensation*; by the first of which the surface of the earth after sunset, provided the sky be clear, cools down below the temperature of the air; and by the second, the vapor suspended in the air is reduced to the liquid state by contact with a body colder than itself" (132). Victorian theories of energy loss, vitality, and atmospheric moisture converge in Tomlinson's study. He tellingly remarks: "All bodies in nature are constantly engaged in radiating heat, the amount of which depends on their temperature and on other circumstances" (57). But the most "wonderful . . . source of heat" is "that which arises from

¹⁰⁰ For a biographical account of Wells and his works, see Moore.

vitality. In the warm-blooded animals, the temperature of the blood, the result chiefly of respiration, is constantly maintained at 98°” (36). Thus, “the formation of dew mainly depends on the cooling of the earth by radiation” but it also suggests the formation of dew on objects of a lower temperature than the surrounding air, such as the beading of moisture on the outside of a glass of cool liquid (141-42).

The repeated condensation of moisture on and around Tess’s body suggests a crucial link between these meteorological theories and the concerns about the limited energy reserves of the female body that we see in Maudsley and Spencer. Atmospheric volatility makes Tess “a whole sex condensed into one typical form” when dew and mist cling to her, but “the dazzlingly fair dairymaid only . . . when the day grew quite strong and commonplace” and the dew “dried off her” (146-47). These ethereal transformations suggest that the limited energy reserves of the female body and their relatively large output of energy in the form of breath, correspond to an increased oscillation between condensation and evaporation. “During a hot summer’s day the air contains a considerable quantity of vapour[.]” Tomlinson explains, “and as the heat prevents it from attaining the point of saturation, no condensation can take place; or, in other words, no dew can be formed; but as evening approaches, and the temperature of the earth’s surface declines by radiation, the air, not being able to hold the quantity of vapour which agreed with its higher temperature, attains the point of saturation, and then passes beyond it, whereby a portion of the vapor becomes deposited in the form of dew” (Tomlinson 19). Accordingly, Tess’s association with forms of mist and dew suggests the cooling of her body and the subsequent condensation of her character.

More than thirty years later, meteorologist and physicist John Aitkin continued to ponder these meteorological expansions and contractions in regard to human vitality. Aitkin rightly contested Wells’s hypothesis that evening dew was condensed solely from water vapor absorbed by the air during the daytime. His accurate counter-hypothesis stated that moisture radiated into the air

could form dew and that “dew, on bodies near the surface of the earth, is almost entirely formed from the vapour rising at the time from the ground” (10). Most important, however, is Aitkin’s interest in the vitality of plant life and its connection—through the formation of dew—to embodied energy. Aitkin’s distinction between internal moisture exuded from plants when they cool, and true dew (deposited from moisture in the atmosphere) touches upon the theme of vitality common to scientific and “poetic” interpretations of the dewdrop:

I feel that the dissecting hand of science has here done an injury to our poetic feelings. Every poet who has sung of the beauties of nature has added his tribute to the sparkling dew-drop. . . . We must, however, change our views regarding the source of the refreshing influence. We may no longer look upon it . . . as taken by the chill hand of night and given to refresh and invigorate exhausted nature; we must rather look upon it as suggesting that we are provided with an internal vitality more than sufficient to restore our exhausted powers, after the heat and toil of the day are past. (33)

When we place Victorian debates about female vitality alongside meteorological studies of moisture and vitality such as Tomlinson’s and Aitkin’s inquiries, the crucial link that atmosphere forms between literary atmospherics and atmospheric science becomes clearer. We have seen how physiological studies of women’s vitality create the conditions of possibility for representing characters as ephemeral aggregates of mist, dew, and haze. But the atmospheres within Hardy’s novels also represent a larger tendency to conceive of character not as embodied and singularly human, but rather as a material condensation: a convergence of elements whose origin within a unified and enduring molecular universe nineteenth-century science made widely known.

Because *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* tells the story of “A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented,” the moments most central to the plot of the novel are often those that bring Tess’s sexuality—as well as

her moral and physical “purity”—to the fore. In keeping with the discourses of female embodiment, energy loss, and periodicity dominant within Victorian science, Hardy’s narrator establishes Tess’s character through the condensation of atmospheric moisture. As the following section elaborates, this atmospheric materiality emerges most prominently at transitional moments in the novel: moments when atmospheric materiality and human sexuality prove intricately entwined.

5. Generative Character Climates and the “Infinite Azure of the Past”

In the scenes leading up to and following Alec d’Urberville’s sexual assault in fog-filled Cranborne Chase, Hardy’s narrator pays close attention to the conditions of the atmosphere. In each of the scenes I consider below—as in the aforementioned episode in the garden at Talbothays—the novel’s aerial climate absorbs the attention of the narrator and characters alike. As Tess journeys alone to the market town of Chaseborough on a fateful autumn evening, the parameters of her body become increasingly difficult to define. Initially, her form is secondary to the mist: “It was a fine September evening, just before sunset, when yellow lights struggle with blue shades in hair-like lines, and the atmosphere itself forms a prospect, without aid from more solid objects,” the narrator explains. “Through this low-lit mistiness Tess walked leisurely along” (70-71). When we arrive at the novel’s pivotal scene, however, Tess’s body is not secondary to but rather displaced by the atmosphere. In the midst of what Alec insists is a “growing fog . . . which so disguises everything” (80) that Tess could not possibly find her way home to Trantridge unaided, the body of Hardy’s protagonist gradually recedes among “the webs of vapour which by this time formed veils between the trees” (81). The narrator continues:

With the setting of the moon the pale light lessened and Tess became invisible as she fell into reverie upon the leaves where he had left her . . .

[P]artly on account of the fog, The Chase was wrapped in thick darkness. . .

“Tess!” said d’Urberville.

There was no answer. The obscurity was now so great that he could see absolutely nothing but a pale nebulosity at his feet, which represented the white muslin figure he had left upon the dead leaves. Everything else was blackness alike. (81-82)

This famous scene obviously elides Alec's violation of Tess, which—as the building tension in these lines demonstrates—coincides with an increasing atmospheric “obscurity.” The act that readers refer to alternately as “rape” or “seduction” occurs between the first and second “Phases” of the novel (significantly titled “The Maiden” and “Maiden No More”) and is therefore evident although not visibly apparent. Tess's dissipation into the atmosphere in this scene accordingly brings her physical transformation to the fore. The “pale nebulosity” lying at Alec's feet remains at a syntactic remove from her physical person since it “represents” not Tess herself, but her “white muslin figure.” This description, which makes the cloth covering Tess's body the focus of the narrator's attention, also emphasizes the character's latent vitality: “D'Urberville stooped; and heard a gentle regular breathing. He knelt, and bent lower, till her breath warmed his face” (82). The narrator's characterization of this “white muslin figure” upon the “dead leaves” retains a curious mixture of energy (breath) and inertia (sleep). Tess is noticeably inchoate in this moment, as her “pale nebulosity” implies. At this particular moment, the character “Tess” becomes a potential condensation of energies and sensations that the narrator has repeatedly associated with atmospherics in the earlier portions of the novel. Accordingly, the anguish of Tess's rape is most apparent through the implicit analogy to the hymeneal “webs of vapour” that “formed veils between the trees.” The narrator further develops this comparison between Tess's physicality and the aerial climate when he wonders “[w]hy it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive” (82).

Surprisingly, very few readings of this notorious scene discuss the significance of the fog beyond the physical “obscurity” that makes the opacity of the setting consistent with the omission of sexual violence. A notable exception to this lack of attention to the climates in Hardy’s novel is Kaja Silverman’s influential essay “History, Figuration, and Female Subjectivity in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*” (1984), which offers a visual and psychoanalytic reading of “figure” and “ground” in Hardy’s novel. Silverman refers at some length to what she terms “atmospheric congelation” in *Tess*: the ways in which “air mixes with other elements in such a way as to produce a curiously dense and textured medium” (16). She ultimately interprets Tess’s emergence as a foregrounded figure, on the one hand, and disappearance into “an undifferentiated background mass” (7), on the other hand, as evidence of the male narrator’s participation in the symbolic order: “Tess remains the privileged object of a male gaze” whose “body serves as the surface for . . . artistic and erotic inscription” (19), Silverman argues. Tess “is figured or dissolved according to the vicissitudes of authorial subjectivity and its ambivalent relation to representation” (27). “To the degree that the narrator’s desire for figural disintegration predominates,” Silverman concludes, “Alec’s ‘mastery’ of Tess will be perceived as a rape. However, insofar as priority is given to the narrator’s erotic gratification at the re-emergence of Tess as image, Alec’s action will assume the status of a seduction” (11).

In my very different reading of the scene in *The Chase*, I wish to emphasize how Silverman’s “atmospheric congelation” is fundamental to the novel’s representations of Tess not as a “figure” or embodied visual field, but rather as a “nebulous” persona: a material “phenomenon” that emerges as character through her molecular interaction with a transformative aerial climate (144). Tess’s sexuality—or what Silverman perceives as the narrator’s sexual representation of her—does not fall in and out of view based on the mediation of a dense atmospheric, but is rather an extension of those atmospherics. By understanding the ways in which the novel represents the condensation of moisture and matter in air as a generative process, we are able to see the ways in which Tess’s

reproductive sexuality binds her to the air and to the models of universal creation the novel upholds.

In order to understand this complex relationship between materialism and characterization in Hardy's fiction, it is first necessary to appreciate the ways in which Tess's "nebulosity" links her to other moments of sexual desire in the novel and, ultimately, to the "nebular hypothesis" that understood all human life to emerge from a single cosmic condensation of matter. I wish to turn first, then, to the Chaseborough dance in the novel's tenth chapter. It is here, in an "outhouse" behind the hay-trusser's, that Tess finds the Trantidge cottagers engaged in late-night revelry:

It was a windowless erection used for storage, and from the open door there floated into the obscurity a mist of yellow radiance, which at first Tess thought to be illuminated smoke. But on drawing nearer she perceived that it was a cloud of dust, lit by candles within the outhouse, whose beams upon the haze carried forward the outline of the doorway into the wide night of the garden.

When she came close and looked in she beheld indistinct forms racing up and down to the figure of the dance, the silence of their footfalls arising from their being overshoe in "scroff"—that is to say, the powdery residuum from the storage of peat and other products, the stirring of which by their turbulent feet created the nebulosity that involved the scene. Through this floating, fusty *débris* of peat and hay, mixed with the perspirations and warmth of the dancers, and forming together a sort of vegeto-human pollen, the muted fiddles feebly pushed their notes Of the rushing couples there could barely be discerned more than the high lights—the indistinctness shaping them to satyrs clasping nymphs—a multiplicity of Pans whirling a multiplicity of Syrinxes; Lotis attempting to elude Priapus, and always failing.

At intervals a couple would approach the doorway for air, and the haze no longer veiling their features, the demigods resolved themselves into the homely personalities of her own next-door neighbors. Could Trantridge in two or three short hours have metamorphosed itself thus madly! (71-72)

The combination of classical myth and picturesque rural life lends this scene an uneasy dissonance. Certainly, the allusions to the Greek Gods Pan and Priapus and their respective sexual pursuits of the nymphs Syrinx and Lotis, afford this atmospheric scene a certain loftiness. At the same time, however, the humor of the scene, which pairs the drunken revelry of the cottagers with a parodic sanctity, casts dispersion on figures such as the “young man with a wet face,” that urges Tess to stay, “his straw hat so far back upon his head that the brim encircled it like the nimbus of a saint” (72).

The incongruous humor and momentousness in this scene create a kind of cosmic farce: a drama of sexual desire, vitality, and universal origin that represents the swirling clouds of “scroff” as a gaseous haze of molecules similar in kind and substance to the whirling bodies of the dancers. The scene constructs a cosmos of the candle lights glowing like stars and the nebulous haze that condenses matter, sending it forth its “yellow radiance” into the “obscurity” in the pitch black garden outside.

Immanuel Kant’s early articulation of nebular theory in *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (1755) posits a similar account of cosmic origin: “I do not deny that the theory of Lucretius . . . have much similarity with mine. I set the first state of matter . . . in the universal dispersion of the basic stuff, or of atoms as they are called by them, of all celestial bodies” (85). For Kant, atoms move as if in a dance, they rotate and circle, adhering to the laws of repulsion and attraction:

If one . . . considers this basic stuff of world-matter floating around in such a condition in which it arranges itself through the [force of] attraction and through a mechanical result of the universal laws of resistance, then we see a space . . . in which

all conceivable particles perform in free rotations . . . the mutual attraction of these particles of the basic stuff . . . produce thereby new formations which are the seeds of planets that ought to arise. (117)

Kant's Universal Theory, which conceives of all matter as diffused in a particulate through space, helps us conceive of the ways in which the debris floating in the air at crucial moments in Hardy's novel possesses a similarly generative and atmospheric quality. We have seen, for instance, how the narrator associates "floating pollen" in the garden-scene with the notes from Angel's harp. The "vegeto-human pollen" in the dance scene plays a similar role. This molecular concoction—the synthesized detritus of sweat, peat, and hay—arises from the dissipating heat of dancing bodies and condenses as an organic particulate visible in air.

That the novel performs this process of creation and re-creation in the form of a dance, allows Hardy to draw human sexuality into a close (and characteristically droll) alliance with universal origin. The novel's purposeful reference to mythic sexual pursuits accordingly coincides with the motion of swirling bodies, sweat, and "scroff," which implicitly recall the "free rotations" of particles in Kant's theory of the heavens. This alliance between sexuality (associated with human reproduction) and motion, collision, and condensation (associated with cosmic vitality) comes into greater focus in the following lines:

The panting shapes spun onwards.

They did not vary their partners if their inclination were to stick to pervious ones. Changing partners simply meant that a satisfactory choice had not as yet been arrived at by one or other of the pair, and by this time every couple had been suitably matched. It was then that the ecstasy and the dream began, in which emotion was the matter of the universe, and matter but an adventitious intrusion likely to hinder you from spinning where you wanted to spin.

Suddenly there was a dull thump on the ground: a couple had fallen and lay in a mixed heap. The next couple, unable to check its progress, came toppling over the obstacle. An inner cloud of dust rose around the prostrate figures amid the general one of the room, in which a twitching entanglement of arms and legs was discernible.

(73)

The narrator associates the sexual preference of the dance partners with their perceptions of the material universe: emotion becomes matter and matter merely an impediment to motion. Moreover, the force of rotation, which leads to the comic heap of “twitching” arms and legs, connotes the generation of planets that, according to nebular theory, condense due to the force of their rotation. The dramatization of the forces of attraction and repulsion in this scene accords with descriptions of universal origins in Hardy’s day.

In his influential essay in the *Westminster Review*, Spencer argued for the reappraisal of nebular theory at a moment when it had fallen out of fashion. His essay was influential in bringing the theory back into favor in the latter half of the nineteenth century.¹⁰¹ He explains that the process of attraction or “mutual gravitation” brings atoms and molecules together. The cessation of this “atomic motion” coincides with a massive loss of heat and corresponding condensation of gaseous nebulae. For Spencer, this process is best understood in terms of atmospheric moisture: “When radiation has adequately lowered the temperature, these molecules will precipitate; and, having precipitated, they will not remain uniformly diffused, but will aggregate into flocculi; just as water, precipitated from air, collects into clouds” (*Essays* 119). Like Hardy’s spinning dancers, these molecular aggregates will eventually condense and collide: “Of clustered bodies in empty space,” Spencer explains, “each will move along a line which is the resultant of the tractive forces exercised

¹⁰¹ On Spencer’s contribution to the resurgence of interest in the nebular hypothesis in the 1870s, see Youmans (33).

by all the rest, modified from moment to moment by the acquired motion; and the aggregation of such clustered bodies, if it eventually results at all, can result only from collision, dissipation, and the formation of a resisting medium” (*Essays* 119).

Spencer’s essay helps us appreciate the ways in which Hardy imagines the entanglement of heat-generating bodies, like the “vegeto-human pollen” that surrounds them, as a condensation of individual elements (animate and inanimate) that create new synthetic forms. Spencer’s account also directs out attention to the ways in which the vital processes of motion and heat—constitutive of entire worlds within nebular theory—inform Hardy’s representation of human sexuality. The radiating heat of the “panting” bodies spinning their chosen partners in an “ecstasy” of emotion thus coincides with the eminently material and un-emotive condensations of aerial particulate their motion generates.

When we consider the dance scene alongside Tess’s rape in the fog-filled Chase we are able to further appreciate the ways in which vitality in Hardy’s novel is not so much an expression of embodied subjectivity, as it is an atmospheric iteration of the physical principles of the material world. The scene of Tess’s rape, tragic though it is, casts a knowing glance toward the physical principles that make her—like the “mist that forms veils between the trees”—one possible iteration of vital force in a cosmic drama of molecular transformation. From the scene in The Chase until the end of Hardy’s novel, the character Tess inevitably acts in response to the “coarse pattern” Alec traces upon her. Her pregnancy further represents “Tess” as a condensation of material forces over which neither she, nor the narrator, have control. The “pale nebulosity” that stands in for her unconscious body in The Chase therefore joins her to the nebula that as one Victorian treatise on solar, stellar, and planetary phenomena states, was “best adapted to produce our present solar-planetary system upon condensation” (Stanley 20). The diffuse state that Tess assumes in The Chase—like the gaseous state of “attenuated matter” nebular theory holds original to all material

bodies—makes her at once other-than-human and yet, by bringing her closer to a raw material state, more productive of potential feeling and emotion than many of the other people the novel represents.

The dance at Chaseborough and the subsequent scene in *The Chase* accordingly recall the debates between spiritualism and materialism that were so central to developments within molecular science. Alec's sexual pursuit of Tess in the mist-covered Chase echoes the sexual pursuit of the Trantridge "fancy-men"—Pans and Priapuses alike—"whirling" Syrix and Lotis within a "luminous pillar of cloud" (72). Unlike the nymphs of classical mythology whom the Gods transform in order to save them from a fate such as Tess's, the "guardian angel" of Hardy's protagonist is inauspiciously absent—"sleeping and not to be awaked" (82). The non-involvement of divine "Providence" in Tess's rape consequently foreshadows the famous cynicism of the novel's final lines in which her death (penance for the murder of Alec D'Urberville) urges the narrator to proclaim: "'Justice' was done, and the President of the Immortals . . . had ended his sport with Tess" (420).

Notably, the most controversial and publicized debate regarding spiritualism and materialism, and the relation of these topics to nebular theory, was John Tyndall's "Belfast Address" delivered to the British Association for the Advancement of Science in August 1874.¹⁰² Tyndall's speech, delivered at the annual meeting of the most eminent men in Victorian science, argues for the validity of scientific reason as a means of questioning universal origin and human vitality. Reports of the speech were disseminated widely, not only within the scientific community, but also through the public circulation of newspapers and periodicals (DeYoung 112). As Tyndall frankly proclaims in his preface to the printed version of the address: "It is assuredly the advance of knowledge that has

¹⁰² Mallet suggests the relevance of Tyndall's thought to Hardy's conversation with Stephen about "the constitution of matter," which occurred approximately six months after the scientist's address at Belfast. (162-63).

given a materialistic colour to the philosophy of this age. Materialism is therefore not a thing to be mourned over, but to be honestly considered” (xxv). For Tyndall, as for Maudsley and Spencer, “materialism” does not connote an anti-spiritualist or non-deistic system of belief so much as it implies, first and foremost, an incontrovertible link between consciousness and physiology. For these thinkers, matter and mind are inextricably joined through the molecular movements of the body inherent within the nervous system: “Of late years the study of the nervous system and of its relation to thought and feeling have profoundly occupied enquiring minds,” Tyndall proclaims (xxv). “Is mind degraded by this recognition of its dependence? Assuredly not. Matter, on the contrary, is raised to the level it ought to occupy, and from which timid ignorance would remove it” (xxv).

But for Tyndall, as for many of the thinkers discussed in this chapter, the ability to conceive of the molecular movement responsible for human consciousness remains outside the realm of common sense. Just as Maudsley appeals to the conduction of sound in air as a way of explaining the “process of conduction in nerves” in his essay on vitality (124), Tyndall attempts to circumvent the conceptual difficulty of conceiving of the molecular movements responsible for thought and feeling by appealing to an atmospheric analogy: “Given the nature of a disturbance in water, air, or ether, and from the physical properties of the medium we can infer how its particles will be affected . . . But when we endeavour to pass by a similar process from the physics of the brain to the phenomena of consciousness, we meet a problem which transcends any conceivable expansion of the powers we now possess” (xxix). Tyndall adheres to this phenomenon of consciousness, but admits that without the assistance of logical inference he has “no power of imagining states of consciousness interposed between the molecules of the brain” (xxix-xxx). This discussion of the relation between thought and molecular physics leads Tyndall to suggest that in “the philosophy of the future . . . it may be, that the qualities of Mind will be studied through the organism as we now study the character of Force through the affections of ordinary matter” (xxviii). It is this assertion

that leads him to the significance of nebular theory, which, as he explains, holds that “our sun and planets were once diffused through space as an impalpable haze, out of which, by condensation, came the solar system. What caused the haze to condense?” Tyndall urges, “Loss of heat. What rounded the sun and planets? That which rounds a tear—molecular force” (xv).

The similarity between the force that rounds a drop of moisture and that which nebular theory holds responsible for the rounding of celestial bodies, emphasizes the degree to which cosmic processes of condensation and evaporation were eminently present to the Victorians—particularly in the years following the Belfast Address—in the quotidian forms of moisture that collect on a cheek, an eyelash, or within a grassy field. Within Hardy’s fiction, the unity of matter that contemporaries such as Spencer, Maxwell, Maudsley, and Tyndall believed to bridge the divide between human and non-human matter transforms the definition of character, rendering it not a discrete or particular entity so much as a volatile and often permeable amalgamation of material forces. As molecular science demonstrates, to imagine such a character is not to deny the incontrovertible unity of mind and matter, but rather to conceive of human consciousness as one of many possible iterations of molecular force interspersed with the material movements of the larger physical world. This continuity between molecule and mind—particle and person—suggests an integration of animate and inanimate forms prevalent throughout Hardy’s fiction. “[V]isible living things,” Tyndall claims, are “not formed of matter different from that of the earth around them. They are, on the contrary, bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh” (xv). “The nebulae and the solar system, life included, stand to each other in a relation resembling that of the germ to the finished organism . . .” (xv).

We find a comparable mode of integrative evolution in Hardy’s novels, which represent the human body not as reciprocal to nature, but rather engulfed in an aerial medium that assimilates their thought, feeling, and physicality to the rest of the molecular world. Tess’s transformation into a nebulous mass, and her simultaneous loss of consciousness during the novel’s climactic scene bears

this point out, but we can also track the novel's attention to this integrative form of characterization in the trajectory from the dance at Chaseborough, to the evening journey Tess undertakes with the cottagers travelling back to Trantridge, to the crucial scene in 'The Chase. Let us pause for a moment on the narrator's description of "the flock" of workers whom accompany Tess on the first leg of her inauspicious evening journey:

They followed the road with a sensation that they were soaring along in a supporting medium, possessed of original and profound thoughts; themselves and surrounding nature forming an organism of which all the parts harmoniously and joyously interpenetrated each other. They were as sublime as the moon and stars above them; and the moon and stars were as ardent as they. (74)

The sublimity of a harmonious synthesis in this scene, although an effect of the drunken elation of the revelers, adamantly co-mingles the molecular structure of the human body with its natural surroundings. Despite the comic effect and obvious irony of the scene, here—as in the dance scene—Hardy's narrator emphasizes the continuity between common experience and cosmic physics. The "organism" that Hardy's narrator describes, and that the elated cottagers experience in their drunken state, is a harmonious amalgamation: an "interpenetration" of minute forms of matter. The body is therefore not bound by a surface or circumscribed by the skin, but "joyously" synthesized with the surrounding elements within the "supporting medium" of ethereal space. Such integration suggests the placidity of Hardy's molecular narration, which does not disembodiment in order to diminish. Instead, the narrator's concept of a humanity intermingled with elements of the natural world suggests a materialism indebted to the concepts of nineteenth-century molecular science that joined earth with sky and body with air. As this scene helps us to appreciate, vital force is not a singular or distinctive product of gender, sex, or social station, but rather an evolving and unrestricted constellation of being: one that often invests the human characters of *Tess* or *The Return*

of the Native with emotion without limiting their subjectivity to a circumscribed “human carcass” (119). Likewise, the “fumes of [the workfolks] breathing” in this passage demonstrate the ways in which their embodiment is but “a component of the night’s mist” (77). This energy expelled by the human body therefore remains part of the “transmissive atmospherics” that also afford inanimate objects “two or three senses, if not five” (138).

The atmospheric thought and emotion that occasionally crystallize (not always harmoniously) in the form of a character trace the movements of the nervous system in the ponderable stirrings of air. By leveraging nineteenth-century concepts of women’s volatile physicality and limited energy reserves against the molecular unity conceived by contemporary physics, Hardy places the fictive female body in close proximity to theories of universal origin. This expression of vital force emphasizes the degree to which characters are always involved in a process of becoming and unbecoming that air mediates. Tess’s dissipation into a “pale nebulosity” therefore demonstrates a movement backward in time not unlike that undergone by Egdon Heath in the opening of *The Return*. Just as the “obscurity of night” transforms Egdon Heath into something ancient as well as regenerative, so too does the great “obscurity” that allows Alec to see “nothing but a pale nebulosity at his feet” suggest the conditions of a universe in formation: a universe that like character itself, condenses from the material elements floating through ether.

It is not that Hardy either privileges or diminishes femininity by rendering it dissoluble. Instead, his fiction contemplates an essential connection between the expression of sex and the forms of atmosphere that condense into characters. What this connection teaches us is that the emotion, sensation, and cognition traditionally restricted to studies of the embodied human form within Victorian fiction are often characterized through the meteorological condensation of energy and matter. The conclusion we draw from this atmospheric characterization is that femininity, with its enduring connections to air, is unequivocally central to nineteenth-century literary form. In

recognizing women as central to cultural concepts of air, we also begin to perceive the ways in which air has always been fundamental to literary expressions of subjectivity, for is within the molecular world, the shared atmospherics of art and science, that Hardy, like Tyndall, finds the most poignant expression of the human mind. The world, as Tyndall proclaims, “embraces not only a Newton, but a Shakespeare . . . not only a Darwin, but a Carlyle . . . And if, unsatisfied with them all, the human mind . . . will still turn to the Mystery from which it has emerged . . . then, casting aside all the restrictions of Materialism, I would affirm this to be a field for the noblest exercise of what, in contrast with the knowing faculties, may be called the creative faculties of man” (65).

For Tyndall and Hardy alike, the creative facility—unlike the “knowing faculties”—bespeak an incontrovertible similarity to the essence of air. But here Victorian science recognizes the limits of its power: “I touch upon a theme too great for me to handle,” Tyndall concludes in 1874, “but which will assuredly be handled by the loftiest minds when you and I, like streaks of morning cloud, shall have melted into the infinite azure of the past” (65). Conversely, the greatness of Hardy’s novel rests, in part, on its ability to represent a continuous present, and in that present, a fluid materiality that transcends the self. We often look to the character of “Liza-Lu” a “spiritualized image of Tess, slighter than she, but with the same beautiful eyes” as a compensatory investment in resolved ending of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, one that awkwardly affords Angel a spiritual union with Tess through the body of her younger sister. But I suggest we find the traces of “Tess” not only in the thematic conventions of the closed ending Hardy upholds in these final pages, but also, more important, in the uneasy movement of the black flag that “a few minutes after the hour had struck” outside the prison in Wintonchester “extended itself upon the breeze” (419). The stoic black flag, an appropriately material reminder of Tess’s life, continues to wave silently, registering not so much the rich subjectivity or continually embodied sentience of the character “Tess Durbeyfield,” so much as the continuity between this physical marker of a life shortly lived and the gently stirring breeze that

continues to animate this token of Tess's vitality even after Angel and Liza-Lu join hands, cease to watch it, and walk on.

Coda

Atmospheric characterization emerges in distinctly different ways in the bodies of work by Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, and Thomas Hardy that I address in this dissertation. We have seen, for instance, how Dickens's Esther Summerson experiences atmosphere as an externally effacing substance: an ethereal vapor that mediates between her occasionally expansive diegetic awareness and periodic semi-conscious states. Once we compare this anesthetic atmosphere to the surges of storm and wind that arise at key moments in Brontë's fiction, we discover a very different mode of fictive female embodiment: one that does not disrupt the coherence between consciousness and self but rather shows the two to be productively entwined. Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe—as their atmospheric family names suggest—are not so much disembodied by the air as they are extensions of its diffuse materiality and capacious reach. Although Brontë's protagonists evince many of the same oscillations of female psychology and physiology characteristic of Esther's first-person narration, they elucidate and reinforce the ways in which this oscillation is not something narrative can always control—or indeed—wants to control.

Whereas the occasional omniscience that emerges from Esther's response to the ether often destabilizes her narrative, Brontë's protagonists claim an atmospheric consciousness that allows them to author the self. Thus, Esther's "indefinable impression of myself as being something different from what I then was" suggests the disorienting split between being someone and being no one that Brontë's novels understand instead as a deeply embodied, and distinctly atmospheric, sense of self (380): "I only wished that I had wings and could ascend the gale, spread and repose my pinions on its strength, career in its course, sweep where it swept," Lucy Snowe avers (136). By the time we reach Hardy's late-century fiction, this relationship between atmosphere and femininity takes on an entirely new dimension. If the atmosphere in *Bleak House* is a largely external medium that encroaches upon the subject and the storms and winds in Brontë's fiction establish parity

between the sensing subject and the narrating self, the obscure climates in Hardy's narratives refuse both of these somatic and spatial relationships. The molecular aggregates of dew, mist, and fog in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *The Return of the Native* suggest that character is itself an atmospheric term: one that cannot be contained by the narrative structures critics so often interpret as seeking to identify, embody, or contain it. Hence, the most dramatic moment of atmospheric obscurity in *Tess* occurs not just in the gradual absorption of Tess's "nebulous form" into the fog of Cranborne Chase but also off the page, in the darkness and silence of the un-narrated break between the novel's two most climactic chapters (81-82). Hardy's protagonists are often interspersed with the other molecules that fill the air. They assume a solidity that is ephemeral, gathering in a set of atmospheric aggregations that might be either a human body (Tess) or a body of land (Egdon Heath), but that is, in either case, repeatedly transformed by the air.

What emerge most prominently in the canonical work of the three authors I consider here are the possibilities and problems of thinking about characters as forms of solid air. The difficulties in conceiving atmosphere as mode of characterization are often temporal as well as conceptual. The air does not always "disembody"—as it does for instance when it strikes Lady Dedlock's metaphorical corpse in chapter 29 of *Bleak House*, scattering it to the wind—but also, and more importantly, precedes character (362). Atmosphere is often there first so to speak, and it is out of this climatic field that characters often emerge or to which they ultimately return. As I have shown, at pivotal moments in many of the most often-studied novels of the Victorian period, climate emphasizes the volatility of women's bodies. But it is through this diffusion—this everywhere-ness of female characterization—that we begin to understand how central the relationship between climate and biological sex is to nineteenth-century narrative representations of the human.

There is a great deal more to be said about the ways in which atmospherics rewrite our histories of character in the Victorian novel. How do we speak about a feminist history of

subjectivity that is not grounded in the body? What sorts of questions emerge when sex is not primarily about difference but rather about diffusion? We might easily expand this set of questions to other works by the major novelists in this study. In Dickens's fiction, for instance, there are many instances in which characters appear to emerge from and disappear into an atmospheric field. The nefarious Daniel Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1841) dies a death not unlike Krook's in *Bleak House*: he is absorbed into the defiled fog that surrounds him. Quilp's unsuccessful attempt to escape his adversaries stresses the obscurity of atmosphere and the literal extinction of character: "the dense mist which obscured [his pursuers] from his view . . . appeared to thicken every moment" (508). His demise occurs at a time during which "the dead of the darkest night would have been as noon-day, in comparison with the thick cloud which then rested upon the earth, and shrouded everything from view" (510). Though a very different character than Esther Summerson, the darkness in noon-day that links Quilp's death with the later protagonist's attempt to narrate from the foggy interior of the law offices of Kenge and Carboy's, demonstrates the degree to which atmospheric conditions are constitutive of character creation—and disappearance—in Dickens's work.

In Brontë's second published novel *Shirley* (1849), the aerial exceptionalism that inspires self-authorship in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* is similarly part of a feminist atmospherics. In contradistinction to the male traditions of Romantic convention, especially the motif of the Aeolian harp, Caroline Helstone stresses the nervous sensibility of the female body as it responds to changes in the air: "Is it for nothing the wind sounds almost articulately some-times?" she wonders aloud (398). "Why, it suggested to me words one night: it poured a strain which I could have written down . . . What are all those influences that are about us in the atmosphere, that keep playing over our nerves like fingers on stringed instruments . . .?" (398). In Hardy's work, we can trace the psychological opacity of a character like Jude in *Jude the Obscure* (1895) to the atmospheric obscurity that allows the narrator of his 1891 novel to assert simply that "Tess became invisible" (81). The modes of social, intellectual,

and sexual obscurity that define Jude Fawley and Sue Bridehead in Hardy's final novel can persuasively be read as an extension of the diffuse and opaque atmospheres in his earlier fiction.

“Solid Air” suggests ways in which we can build on a literary atmosphere to reimagine how nineteenth-century novelists represent human subjectivity. As we progress through the era of Victorian fiction, we come to realize that the aleatory modes of characterization that modern narratologists associate with the work of modernist writers, authors of the French *nouveau-roman*, and the so-called death of character does not portray a lack of fictive humanity so much as it looks back to a densely signifying nineteenth-century atmosphere. As the novels of Dickens, Brontë, and Hardy help us to appreciate, there can be no breath without air, and—we might add—no character without climate.

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