

Romantic Cloud Time

Howard, Goethe, Shelley

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In 1802 the chemist and meteorologist Luke Howard gave a paper to the Askesian Society in London on the forms of clouds. In the paper, published in the *Philosophical Magazine* the following year as 'On the Modifications of Clouds', Howard coined the Latin cloud names that are still in use today: cumulus, cirrus, stratus, nimbus, and their various combinations. His innovation was in showing how clouds were not, as had long been assumed, random in their shapes and movements, "the sport of winds... ever varying, and therefore not to be defined", but followed recognisable patterns and proceeded through a series of identifiable forms.¹

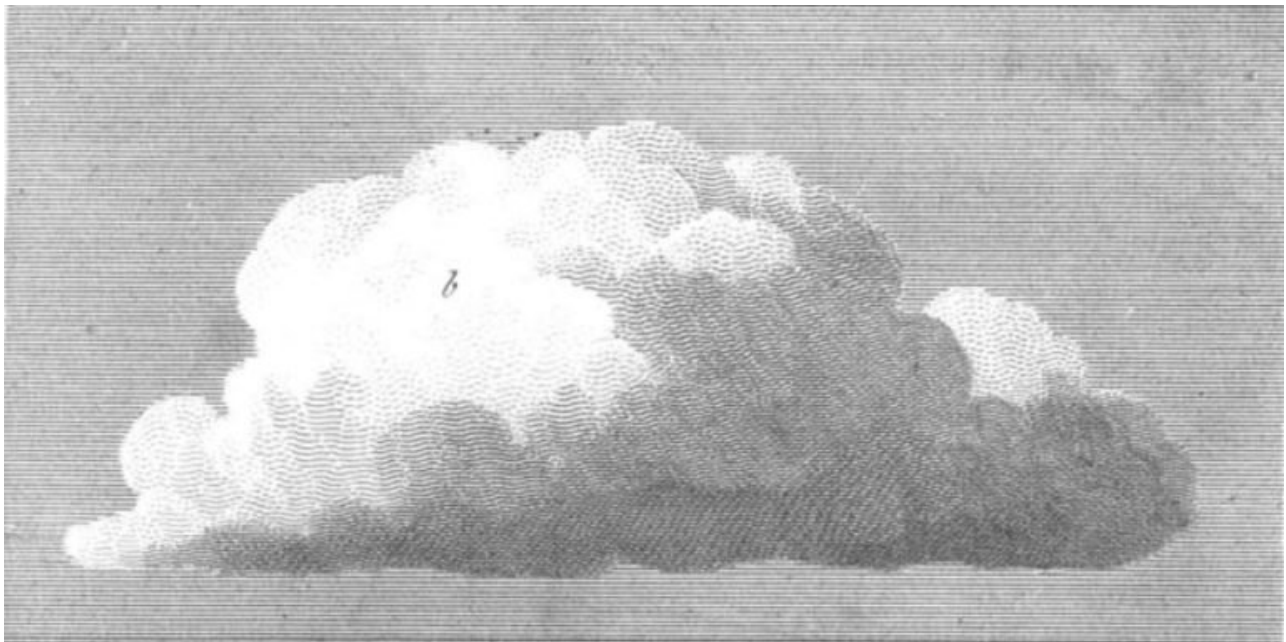


Fig. 1: Luke Howard, illustration of a cumulus cloud, LXIV. On the Modifications of Clouds, *Philosophical Magazine* XVI, vol. 16, no. 64 (1803)

Howard's taxonomy, based not on rigid, static categories but on modification, applying a principle of constant flux and shifting identity to the natural world, held wide appeal not just for scientists but for poets, painters, and other weather-watchers. His theory of clouds shaped the way nineteenth-century Romantic thinkers understood the environment.

Howard's essay quickly had influence in Britain and, through the intervention of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Germany. Goethe was introduced to Howard's essay in 1815 by his employer-patron, the Grand Duke Carl August of Saxe-Weimar, and wrote rapturously of the joy he took in learning of Howard's cloud names and the way they gave form to the formless.

Back in England, in 1820 the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley published 'The Cloud', a poem that assumes the first-person voice of a cloud as it cycles through the forms that Howard had described. Shelley's cloud returns to "the pores of the ocean and shores" and leaves the sky clear, but then is re-born and un-dead:

I silently laugh at my own cenotaph,
And out of the caverns of rain,
Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,
I arise, and unbuild it again.²

In emphasising the recurrent nature of cloud formation and reformation, commentators on Howard and the literature and art that he inspired often disregard the self-destructive nature of the Romantic cloud. The longer title of Howard's essay is usually forgotten: *On the Modifications of Clouds, and on the Principles of Their Production, Suspension, and Destruction*. Howard's clouds mount themselves up but then self-annihilate, dissolving in rain, evaporating in air, or transforming into something else.

But as in Shelley's poem, the sense of an ending is always qualified, if not fully negated, by the fact that the cloud either takes on a new form or gets reabsorbed into the water cycle, and eventually another cloud of the same type reappears. Is the individual cloud really destroyed, or does it make sense for Shelley to use the same first-person 'I' pronoun for new clouds that arise? The individual cloud cannot be truly mourned, because of its participation in a cycle of perpetual modification and its identity within a type – cumulus, stratus, etc. – that persists and transcends particular manifestations. As Shelley's cloud puts it, "I change, but I cannot die."³

As a result of this pattern, the Romantic cloud becomes a figure for imagining a hopeful yet elegiac future. In Romantic cloud writing, nature's cycles are contrasted with linear conceptions of time – human and social history, and the finite life of a person, or of a society. The perpetual modification of clouds, always dying but always reborn, in which there is no clear boundary between types and no single instant of destruction, buffets against humanity's moments of rupture and irreparable change. But the cycle continues and triumphs over linear histories; something individual, something specific, is vanished, but a cloud (the same one?) reappears, and with it a cloudy sense of cyclical time, repetition, and similitude.

In the twenty-first century, we know that natural and human history are intimately entwined, even indivisible, perhaps identical. Natural cycles have been forced onto a linear track of devastation. Local and global weather patterns have altered – the climate has changed and is changing – in many cases already irreversibly. Clouds are changing too. As a result of climate change, cirrus clouds are moving higher in the sky to cooler zones, where their net warming effect on the planet will be enhanced and contribute to temperature rise. Stratus and stratocumulus clouds, which have a cooling effect because they reflect solar radiation back into the sky, are decreasing, dissipated by the increased heat of the Earth and oceans. (Shelley’s cloud takes the stratus form when it describes how “Over a torrent sea, / Sunbeam-proof, I hang like a roof”.⁴) The Romantic cloud, which asserts nature’s fluctuating permanence, might no longer seem relevant. But the Romantic cloud as a tool for thinking still has a place. It finds creation in destruction, and in its resistance to death’s finality it “unbuild[s]” the linear trajectories of history.

Although Howard uses the term ‘destruction’ in the title of his essay, in his accounts of cloud-death destruction is reframed. He describes how clouds “decrease”, “disappear”, “subside”, “evaporate”, “pass off”, and are “lost in” rain. But he also describes these processes in more constructive terms, as gains rather than losses. He refers to “the resolution of clouds into rain”.⁵ When outlining the “dispersion” of the cumulus cloud he turns destruction into production, specifically “the speedy production of transparency” or “of hazy turbidness”.⁶ The cloudless or hazy sky is now not a space of absence or loss, but an effect, an accomplishment, which creates room for the next formation. Similarly, the “bare... blue dome of air” in Shelley’s poem is the cloud’s “cenotaph”, but also its womb, and will be unbuilt by the undead cloud that arises.⁷

Howard’s inclination to translate destruction into production finds a parallel in his religious optimism. In 1821 Goethe had written to his contact in London requesting details about Howard’s life; this request was forwarded to Howard himself. He initially thought the request was a hoax, but after confirming its legitimacy in 1822 he supplied Goethe with a short memoir of his life, including an account of his early interest in clouds as a schoolboy. Goethe was thrilled to receive Howard’s reply, and translated the memoir and published it under ‘Meteorology’ in his series of scientific writings, *Zur Naturwissenschaft überhaupt* (‘On Natural Science in General’). We don’t have the original draft of the memoir that Howard wrote, but we have a version that Howard himself produced around 1853, seemingly copied from the original but with some additions and revisions; and a translation back into English of Goethe’s version probably made by Luke’s son Robert, who knew German. At the end of the memoir Howard, a devout Quaker, offers a hopeful vision of the world’s future (here in Howard’s revised version):

Science will go on – – there are plenty of labourers – the useful arts will advance and be perfected (the hurtful, I think, have nearly passed their acme) [...] Wars will cease, with other degrading and superstitious practices – society will assume a new aspect – general harmony and mutual good offices between nations and individuals, will replace the present too general selfishness and discord: all this, it may be not without intervening periods of opposition by the wicked and persecution of the good.⁸

This teleological vision of human history advancing towards Christian resolution appears to contrast with Howard's sense of natural time, which is cyclical. Yet he qualifies his own narrative of improvement with the acknowledgement of "intervening periods of opposition". A hazy ("it may be"), cyclical conception of history "arise[s]" and "unbuild[s]" the confident linear trajectory. Cloudiness would rise again in the textual life of the memoir, too. Howard's son Robert, in his translation from Goethe's translation, emphasised the connection with clouds in his phrasing: "Society will acquire a new form".⁹

Goethe had already written extensively about Howard before he received and translated the memoir. In 1820 he had published in *Zur Naturwissenschaft überhaupt* a short essay on Howard's cloud types and some accompanying poetic lyrics on the four basic types: stratus, cumulus, cirrus, and nimbus. In 1821 he republished the lyrics with added introductory lines celebrating Howard, under the title 'Howards Ehrengedächtnis'. 'Howards Ehrengedächtnis' was translated into English, by George Soane and Sir John Bowring in 1821, as 'In Honour of Howard'. Thomas H. Ford has pointed out that 'Ehrengedächtnis' also means a monument to the dead and includes the German word for memory. Howard was still alive in 1821 and would live another forty-three years, but as Ford observes, "Goethe honours Howard by remembering him, and in remembering him he imagines him to be dead."¹⁰ (Ford therefore titles his own translation of Goethe's poem 'Howard: An Inscription' to emphasise its epitaphic quality.)

In the poem, Howard's memory outlasts the clouds which die or disappear several times:

Der treuste Wolkenbote selbst zerstiebt,
Eh' er die Fern erreicht, wohin man liebt.

Er aber, Howard, gibt mit reinem Sinn
Uns neuer Lehre herrlichsten Gewinn:

...

Wie Streife steigt, sich ballt, zerflattert, fällt,
Erinnre dankbar Deiner sich die Welt.¹¹

E'en the cloud messenger in air expires,
Ere reach'd the distance fancy yet desires.

But Howard gives us with his clearer mind
The gain of lessons new to all mankind

...

As clouds ascend, are folded, scatter, fall,
Let the world think of thee who taught it all.¹²

As the clouds continually form, unform, and reform, there is something reassuring in Howard's own (albeit entirely fictional) permanent death, as well as his lasting legacy. Yet his seeming triumph over the clouds' mutability is overset by the recurrence of these and/or other clouds in the four lyrics that followed (yet preceded in composition) the introductory verses on Howard. The ending of 'Nimbus', the fourth cloud lyric, combines the dissolution of the storm-cloud in rain and mist with a dismal prophecy of humankind, but both are shadowed by a glimpse of hope:

In Donnerwettern wütend sich ergehn,
Heerscharen gleich entrollen und verwehn! –
Der Erde thätig-leidendes Geschick! –
Doch mit dem Bilde hebet euren Blick:
Die Rede geht herab, denn sie beschreibt,
Der Geist will aufwärts, wo er ewig bleibt.¹³

Threatening in the mad thunder-cloud, as when
Fierce legions clash, and vanish from the plain;
Sad destiny of the troubled world! but see,
The mist is now dispersing gloriously:
And language fails us in its vain endeavour –
The spirit mounts above, and lives for ever.¹⁴

The spirit that lives forever is the human spirit, implicitly including Howard's, but it is also the cloud's. Neither are truly dead. Howard's memory outlasts the individual clouds that are destroyed in the introductory verses about him, but then they reappear in the lyrics and "unbuild" his "cenotaph" (to use Shelley's terms) as well as their own. The rain- and storm-cloud nimbus, as Howard's essay made clear, does not really disappear, but regathers into an even greater "quantity of cloud"; "on the cessation of rain, the lower broken clouds which remain rise into cumuli...".¹⁵ Howard's cloud nomenclature may not live forever, if "language fails us", but the clouds and cloud forms remain, named or unnamed.

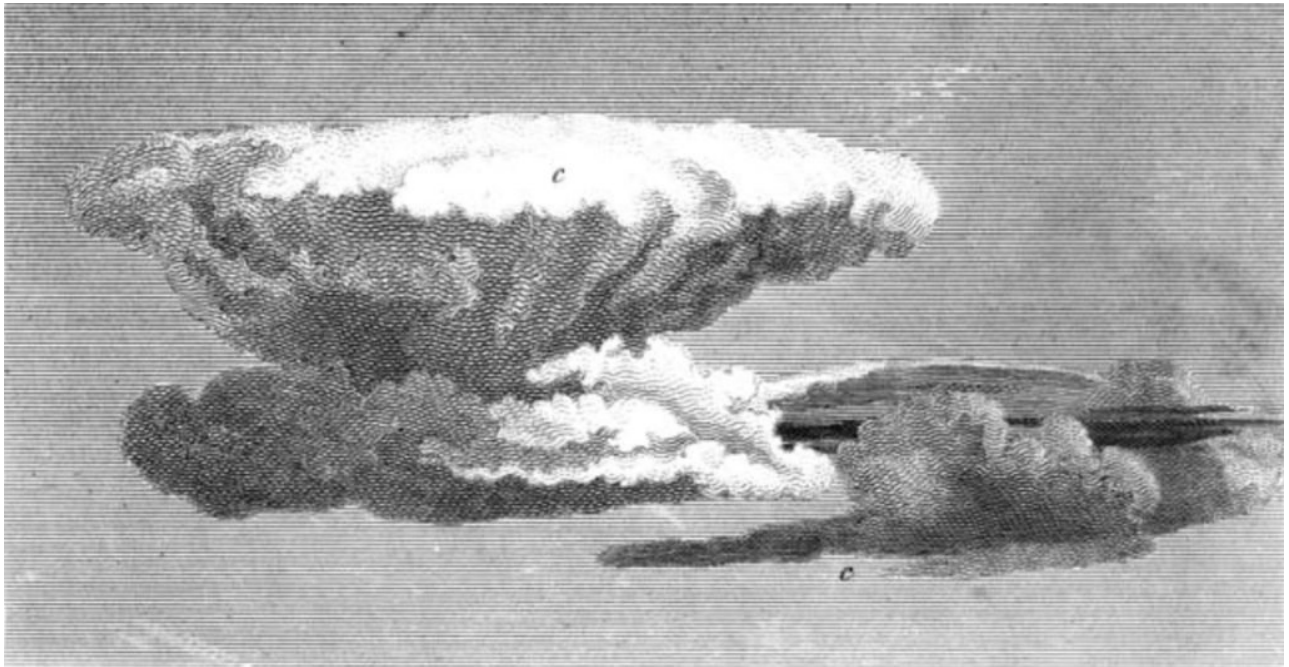


Fig. 2: Luke Howard, illustration of a nimbus cloud, LXIV. On the Modifications of Clouds, *Philosophical Magazine* XVI, vol. 16, no. 64 (1803)

Goethe's envisioned 'destiny' for the world is bleak and warring, compared to Howard's vision of future Christian harmony; but both are then absorbed into misty uncertainty, a cloud that disperses, reforms, and rises. The Romantic cloud is a way into thinking through the experience of different time scales – the ever-changing-yet-recurrent and, simultaneously, the irretrievably changed – and as such may be an illuminating tool for us to think with today, as it was for Howard, Goethe, and Shelley as they contemplated the future. How do we process grievous loss when, in the experience of many, life seems strangely, perversely, to go on? How do we mourn something that is both gone and still there, albeit in a different form? How do we turn destruction into production, dissipation into resolution? Straightforward narratives of the world's inevitable 'destiny', whether optimistic or pessimistic, falter in the face of the cloud.

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