



## *Romanticism on the Net*

### **Air**

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#### **Abstract**

This essay takes those exhibits in *RÊVE (Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition)* that are connected to “air” as points of departure for a survey of the renewed interest in air in Romantic-period cultural texts from across Europe. Scholarly interest in Romantic air has burgeoned of late but has often tended to prioritise metaphorical senses of the term or cognate terms such as *atmosphere*. This essay, conversely, focuses on more literal engagements with what Percy Shelley, in *Prometheus Unbound*, calls the “all-sustaining air.” Beyond this primary focus on the literal, however, the essay is also attentive to overlap between actual and metaphorical air in the specific context of the (Romantic) museum, with its complex evocation of what we might call “the air of the past,” an evocation which many of the Romantic-period texts considered here anticipate.

#### **Biographical Note**

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1. Lungfuls of what Goethe, in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften (Elective Affinities)*, calls “der freien frischen luft” (“the free fresh air”), are ubiquitous in European Romantic-period writing (312).<sup>1</sup> Saint-Preux, the protagonist of Rousseau’s novel *Julie*, following in Rousseau’s own footsteps through the Upper Valais, attributes “le retour de cette paix interieure que j’avois perdue” (“the return of that inner peace which I had lost”) to being in “les hautes montagnes où l’air est pur et subtil” (“the high mountains where the air is

### ***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

pure and subtle”) and adds: “on se sent plus de facilité dans la respiration” (“one feels one breathes more easily”; 1: 365). Rousseau himself, one of Romanticism’s most notorious and influential walkers, describes in the eighth walk of his *Rêveries* “le besoin . . . de respirer le grand air” (“the need . . . to breathe the open air”), contrasting it with “les vapeurs de l’amour-propre” (“the vapours of self-love”) which build up indoors (*Première partie* 2: 427). In her *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, Mary Wollstonecraft (certainly no fan of Rousseau) similarly describes how walking in “the open air is always my remedy when an aching-head proceeds from an oppressed heart,” and finding particular pleasure, amid “the wilds of Norway,” in the “romantic views I daily contemplate, animated by the purest air” (46, 116). Charlotte Smith, atop the (slightly less) “stupendous summit, rock sublime!” of Beachy Head, in Sussex, praises “Heaven’s pure air, / Fresh as it blows on this aërial height” (lines 1, 60–61). In his “Lines Written in Early Spring” (1798; in *Complete Poetical Work*, vol. 4), William Wordsworth expresses his “faith that every flower / Enjoys the air it breathes” (lines 11–12), while Edward Trelawny reports that Byron told him how breathing “the air of Greece” had made him “a poet” (1: 48). In his essay “Über naive und sentimentalische dichtung” (“On Naive and Sentimental Poetry”; 1795), Friedrich Schiller notes that “jeder feinere Mensch” (“every feeling person”) experiences “eine Art von Liebe und rührender Achtung” (“a kind of love and touching respect”) for nature “wenn er im Freien wandelt” (“when he walks in the open air”; 4: 579). Goethe’s *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* repeatedly emphasises not only the benefits, but also the unsettling energies, of fresh air for his two protagonists, Eduard and Charlotte, but also for Charlotte’s niece Ottilie, whom they invite to live with them – reminding us that not all Romantic-period air is salutary. “The air I

### ***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

breathe in a room empty of you,” John Keats wrote to Fanny Brawne in July 1820, “is unhealthy” (532). In his *Interesting Narrative*, Olaudah Equiano enumerates among the horrors of a slave ship being “near suffocation, from the want of fresh air, which we were often without for whole days together. This, and the stench of the necessary tubs, carried off many” (53–54). Metaphorical lungfuls are no less common: William Hazlitt, for instance, described the novels of Walter Scott as “bracing” “mountain air,” “brought . . . in ship-loads” to stimulate the “languid nerves” of those “who live at the southern extremity” of Britain (1: 131).<sup>2</sup> Nor was this interest in air by any means merely a textual phenomenon: *RÊVE* exhibits like [Sir Edwin Landseer’s \*Monarch of the Glen\*](#) (Lacôte) and [A View of Abbotsford from Across the Tweed](#) (Archer-Thompson), or Turner’s depiction of [Stonehenge](#) (Joiner), all speak to the new importance of air in Romantic-period painting.

2. Scholarly interest in Romantic air began in earnest in 1957 with the publication of M. H. Abrams’ essay “The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor.” According to Abrams, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Byron did something new with “air in motion . . . breeze or breath, wind or respiration,” making it “the vehicle for” what Abrams calls “a complex subjective event”: “the return to a sense of community after isolation, the renewal of life and emotional vigour after apathy and spiritual torpor, and an outburst of creative inspiration following a period of sterility” (“Correspondent Breeze” 113–14). For Abrams, then, air was central to what Romantic-period poetry (or at least what Abrams elsewhere calls “the Greater Romantic lyric”) *does*, to what makes Romantic-period poetry *Romantic* (see Abrams, “Structure”). Among the works which Abrams considers, he sees Percy Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” (1820) as an “astonishing” exception: “most of

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

these poems,” Abrams writes, “begin with a literal wind which transforms itself into the metaphorical wind of inspiration. Shelley reverses the sequence,” moving from the metaphorical to the actual west wind (“Correspondent Breeze” 120). And the tendency to move from literal to metaphorical air is indeed visible in a much wider range of Romantic-period cultural texts than Abrams surveys. Consider, for instance, the entry for *air* in the first volume of William Nicholson’s [\*British Encyclopedia\*](#), a comprehensive and influential early-nineteenth-century work of reference known to many Romantic-period writers, including Percy Shelley.<sup>3</sup> *Air*, the *Encyclopedia* succinctly explains, “is a thin elastic fluid, surrounding the globe of the earth. It is compounded by two gases, viz. oxygen and azote [nitrogen], together with a variety of other substances, suspended or dissolved therein.” For more detail on “the mechanical and chemical effects of this extensive fluid mass,” the reader is then directed to the *Encyclopedia*’s entries for *atmosphere* and *chemistry*. Turning to the former, a shift in idiom is immediately apparent, from the more prosaic, Enlightenment tone of the entry on *air* to something altogether more “Romantic,” which draws both on a biblical language of wonder and on a more secular aesthetics of the sublime, anticipating Alexander von Humboldt’s later evocation, in his *Kosmos* of an all-encompassing *Luftmeer* (sea of air; 1: 321, 332). The *Encyclopedia* offers us the following definition:

[*Atmosphere*] is that invisible elastic fluid which surrounds the earth to an unknown height, and encloses it on all sides. This fluid is essential to the existence of all animal and vegetable life, and even to the constitution of all kinds of matter whatever, without which they would not be what they are: for by it we literally may be said to live, move,

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

and have our being: by insinuating itself into all the pores of bodies, it becomes the great spring of almost all the mutations to which the chemist and the philosopher are witnesses in the changes of bodies. Without atmosphere no animal could exist; vegetation would cease, and there would be no rain nor refreshing dews to moisten the face of the ground; and though the sun and stars might be seen as bright specks, yet there would be little enjoyment of light, could we ourselves exist without it. Nature indeed, and the constitutions and principles of matter, would be totally changed if this fluid were wanting.<sup>4</sup>

This apostrophe is only the opening of a substantial, multi-page entry. But it makes clear the proto-disciplinary nature of the Romantic-period episteme through the absence of any rigid distinction between what we would now call scientific and other modes of knowing and describing the world: wonder and taxonomy (like that of the entry for *air*) combine in a passage which is at once lyrical and informative, at once, we might say, “airy” in both tone and content.

3. Responding to such disciplinary crossings, more recent scholarly interest in Romantic air, which gained fresh vigour from the new historicist turn in Romantic-period studies during the 1990s, has followed a similar trajectory from the literal to the metaphorical, and in particular, from “air” to “atmosphere.” Especially significant in this respect was Thomas Ford’s monograph *Wordsworth and the Poetics of Air*, which examines “the blurred line between literal and metaphoric atmospheres” in Romantic-period cultural texts (1).<sup>5</sup> “Romantic reformulations of imaginative literature” such as those described by Abrams,

## ***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

Ford argues, “reflected a pivotal change in the meaning of the term ‘atmosphere’ that made possible the later development through which it took on its doubled modern and still current sense, at once metaphoric and literal,” while at the same time providing “a language for conceiving what literature and science shared” (4, 5). We find across a range of Romantic-period writing the proliferation of new phrases like “the atmosphere of human thought” or “the atmosphere of sensation.”<sup>6</sup> “Atmosphere,” Ford argues, “presented a new semantic figure that could designate the period’s emergent sense of historical specificity, the spirit of its age” (2). Most recently, Erin Lafford and Rhys Kaminski-Jones return, in their special themed issue of the journal *Romanticism*, entitled *Change of Air*, to what they call “the vibrant aerial turn at work in the study of eighteenth-century and Romantic culture,” confirming the status of “air as a pressing site of historical, environmental, medical, philosophical, affective, and imaginative enquiry” in both the literature of the period and current critical responses to it (118).

4. As the examples with which I opened this essay make clear, however, an interest in what William Wordsworth, in “Tintern Abbey” (1798), calls “the living air” (line 9) around us – that is to say in actual rather than metaphorical air – also constitutes a significant component of European Romantic-period cultural texts. That interest, and how it is reflected in a range of the objects exhibited in *RÊVE*, is my subject here.

### **“Something in the Air”**

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

5. A reader consulting the entry for *air* in Nicholson’s *Encyclopedia* would notice that while the entry itself is (as we have seen) very short, there are a number of related entries, the majority of which are connected with emergent or developing technologies. We find, for example, an *air-gun* (military-grade versions of which were produced in Austria in the late eighteenth century); *air-pipes* (“a contrivance invented by Mr. Sutton, a brewer of London, for clearing the holds of ships, and other close places, of their foul air”); and an *air-trunk* (“a simple contrivance by Dr. Hales, for preventing the stagnation of putrid effluvia, and purifying the air in jails, and close rooms”). In other words, alongside the many conceptual and metaphorical applications of air in the Romantic period, we find an increasing number of literal, practical applications, including revolutionary inventions like the Montgolfier hot air balloons and the improved diving bells designed by Charles Spalding and John Smeaton in the 1770s and 1780s, opening up the skies and the seas respectively. Indeed, arguably the most familiar eighteenth-century engagement with air, Joseph Wright of Derby’s painting [\*An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump\*](#) (1768), shows the use of technology to illustrate for educational purposes the life-sustaining power of air.
  
6. *RÊVE*, too, has its fair share of technological “contrivances” based on new or established understandings of the properties of air: [Erasmus Darwin’s Artificial Bird](#) (Rhodes), for instance, or [Beethoven’s Ear Trumpets](#) (Samuels), which remind us of the etymological links to the “Musical Airs” that William Jones (as Ford observes) denied were “too volatile to be analysed” (Jones 41, qtd. in Ford 28). I want to focus on [The Eudiometer at Tintern](#) (Fulford). Eudiometers – instruments for measuring the chemical properties of gases – were developed by Joseph Priestley and Alexandra Volta in the 1770s. The one which Humphry

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

Davy brought to Tintern Abbey in 1800 had been designed by himself as part of his wider research at the nearby Pneumatic Institute of Bristol, founded by Thomas Beddoes in 1799, into (as Tim Fulford puts it) “the formative and curative influence of gases on the body, brain and mind.”<sup>7</sup> The air of Tintern had recently been celebrated by William Wordsworth, a friend of Beddoes and Davy, in his eponymous poem of 1798, and before that by William Gilpin in his *Observations on the River Wye* (1782), which Wordsworth knew. Bringing a eudiometer to Tintern, Davy was, as Fulford explains, attempting to determine “the extent to which the inspiration conferred by respiring the air of the Wye Valley had material causes” and thereby to “demonstrate” the literal, “chemical and physiological validity” of Wordsworth’s metaphors.

7. Davy was certainly not alone at the time in thinking that the stimuli for affective responses to air could be measured empirically: the explorers and natural philosophers Horace Bénédict de Saussure and Alexander Von Humboldt, for example, used cyanometers – devices for measuring the blueness of the skies at high altitude – on [Mont Blanc](#) (arguably the largest exhibit in *RÊVE*; Bainbridge) and Chimborazo, respectively. In canto 4 of *Don Juan* (1821), Byron alludes playfully to Humboldt and his “airy instrument” (lines 889–95). But Davy’s idea about a specifically *poetic* kind of air looks back not only to the links between climate and cultural productivity postulated by the German art historian Johan Joachim Winckelmann (to whose ideas I return later) and the French philosopher Montesquieu, but also to the association in classical literature of intoxicating volcanic gases with prophetic *inspiration* (etymologically, “breathing in”). In the fourth chapter of the thirteenth book of *Corinne, ou l’Italie* (*Corinne, or Italy*), Germaine de Staël registers the



***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

prevalence of such associations in the landscapes around [Vesuvius](#) (Duffy), home to the Cumaen sibyl, which she describes as “la contrée de l’univers où les volcans, l’histoire et la poésie ont laissé le plus de traces” (“that part of the universe where volcanoes, history and poetry have left the most traces”; 2: 326; Duffy). In her apostrophe to those same landscapes, the novel’s titular *improvisatrice* expands on the idea, praising “les volcans enflammés qui donnent à l’air tant de charmes” (“the flaming volcanoes which give the air such charms”), a famous passage later depicted in François Gérard’s painting [Corinne au Cap Misène](#) (*Corinne at Cape Misenum*; 1819–21), where Corinne’s song is likened to the smoke rising from Vesuvius in the background (2: 329). In the second act of *Prometheus Unbound* (1820; in *Selected Poems*), the setting for which was also inspired by the landscapes around Vesuvius, Percy Bysshe Shelley similarly describes “the breathing earth” and the “oracular vapour” which is “hurled up”:

Which lonely men drink wandering in their youth,  
And call truth, virtue, love, genius, or joy,  
That maddening wine of life, whose dregs they drain  
To deep intoxication; and uplift,  
Like Maenads who cry loud, Evoe! Evoe!  
The voice which is contagion to the world. (2.2.52; 2.3.4–10)

Here, Shelley uses classical ideas about “oracular,” prophetic and poetic “intoxication” with volcanic “vapours” to describe a wider, contemporary interest in the transformative (one might well say *revolutionary*), but also potentially dangerous (“maddening”),

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

affective response to the natural world. Too much air can, as it were, go to your head – an idea which recalls not only the experiments with nitrous oxide performed by Beddoes and Davy at Bristol but also the accounts given by Saussure and Humboldt of how the thin air at very high altitudes impacted their abilities to conduct rational, scientific analyses.

8. From Percy Shelley’s “lonely men” to Mary Shelley’s *Last Man* (1826), a novel which also opens in the “oracular” Cumaean air around Naples, the mention of “contagion” reminds us of the fact (which I noted earlier in this essay) that not all Romantic-period air is salutary, in literal as well as in metaphorical senses. In her apocalyptic and thankfully not too prophetic story, Mary Shelley describes the gradual extinction of the human race by an airborne disease which respects no boundaries except for temperature: the disease is kept partly at bay only by very cold air, either in winter or at high altitudes. “Winter . . . purified the air,” we are told: “winter was hailed, a general and never-failing physician. . . . The effects of purifying cold were immediately felt; and the lists of mortality abroad were curtailed each week” (2: 121, 161). As we have seen, a number of the “contrivances” related to *air* in Nicholson’s *Encyclopedia* are concerned with maintaining the cleanliness of air in confined spaces, that is to say, with avoiding “contagion” not in the metaphorical sense used by Percy Shelley in *Prometheus Unbound* but in the literal sense of preventing illness and disease. Among the many exhibits in *RÊVE*, it is [Cowper’s Windowpane](#) (Stafford), in his home at Orchard Side, Olney, which best brings into view these anxieties about the potential relationship between air and disease. In Jane Austen’s *Emma*, gentle fun is poked at the heroine’s father, whose various health-related foibles include having purpose-made screens brought from London to shield him from the (half-imagined)

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

draughts in his house. Mary Wollstonecraft, conversely, criticised in her *Letters Written During a Short Residence* what she considered the unhealthy practice in Swedish inns of “always keeping their windows shut,” in summer and winter, as if they “were afraid of the air” (46). As Fiona Stafford observes in her discussion of “the large sash windows” at Cowper’s Orchard Side, though, they “were designed to allow maximum light into the rooms, but this also meant letting in plenty of cold air.” In “The Winter’s Evening,” book 4 of *The Task* (1785) – a poem composed at Orchard Side and which, as Stafford points out, owes its origins at least in part to a window “nailed up to keep out the cold” – Cowper praises “a breath of unadulterate air, / The glimpse of a green pasture, how they cheer / The citizen, and brace his languid frame!” and recommends “to treat” the “lungs with air” (lines 751–52, 771, 773). However, the opening of “The Winter’s Evening” also makes an appeal to “stir the fire, and close the shutters fast, / Let fall the curtains” (lines 36–37). Stafford remarks that these lines register “more . . . than a straightforward desire to exclude draughts,” reading them rather as symptomatic of a poet whom *The Task* “presents [as] inclined to ‘peep at’ the world ‘through the loop-holes of retreat’ rather than pursue and active, public life, and generally preferring to read about war, politics and foreign lands from the safety of his home” (Stafford, quoting *The Task* 4.88–89). But for all this undoubted metaphorical significance, the lines do also register a literal and widespread contemporary concern, reminding us, again, that not all Romantic-period air is figurative.

9. High above Romanticism’s draughty rooms, in what Percy Shelley calls “the blue Dome of Air” (perhaps recalling Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s unbuilt “dome in air”), we find another *RÊVE* exhibit with close connections to air: [A Cloud](#) (Brant)– doubtless, today,

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

one of the most familiar emblems of Romanticism, given the popularity of William Wordsworth's "The Daffodils" (1807; *Complete Poetical Works*, vol. 2:), with its speaker wandering "lonely as a cloud, / That floats on high o'er vales and hills" (lines 1–2), and Casper David Friedrich's *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (*Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*; 1818).<sup>8</sup> The ever-changing "daughter of Earth and Water," as Percy Shelley explains in his playful but scientifically informed poem "The Cloud," clouds were also closely associated in Romantic-period cultural texts, across a range of genres, modes and disciplines, with what Shelley calls "the Powers of Air": winds, lightning, and precipitation (*Selected Poems*; lines 73, 68–69). As Clare Brant observes, clouds often function as a figure in Romantic-period literature for a given author's understanding of the wider natural system of which clouds are a part. "Clouds," as Brant puts it, "manifested metaphysics," as in William Wordsworth's 1808 poem "To The Clouds," where they are presented as "A type of [Nature's] capacious self and all / Her restless progeny" (*Complete Poetical Works*, vol. 2; lines 53–54). But such figurative uses were, as Brant points out, predicated to a significant extent upon substantial contemporary advances in scientific understanding of clouds: "romantic skies were made possible," Brant affirms, "by a synergy of ideas, which began with the naming of clouds in a scientific typology."<sup>9</sup>

10. In 1802, the French biologist and evolutionary theorist Jean-Bapiste Lamarck published an essay proposing a system for the classification of clouds. But it was Lamarck's contemporary, Luke Howard, who inaugurated the system of classification still in use today by applying Linnaean method to the problem, thereby managing not only to define the various (seemingly undefinable) but distinct "modifications" of clouds but also to account

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

for the continual transformation from one modification to another. Howard's 1803 *Essay on the Modification of Clouds*, which expanded on papers published the previous year, had substantial contemporary impact, influencing, for example, Shelley's and Wordsworth's cloud poems and also earning the praise of Goethe in his poem "Howards Ehrengedächtnis" ("In honour of Howard"; 1821):

Er aber, Howard, gibt mit reinem Sinn  
Uns neuer Lehre herrlichsten Gewinn.  
Was sich nicht halten, nicht erreichen läßt,  
Er faßt es an, er hält zuerst es fest;  
Bestimmt das Unbestimmte, schränkt es ein,  
Benennt es treffend! – Sei die Ehre dein! –  
Wie Streife steigt, sich ballt, zerflattert, fällt,  
Erinnre dankbar deiner sich die Welt. (*Goethes Werke* 1: 350)

Not merely a system of classification and taxonomy, however, Howard's *Essay* also sought to understand individual clouds or cloud groups in relation to much larger-scale weather systems. "Clouds," he affirms: "are subject to certain distinct modifications, produced by the general causes which affect all the variations of the atmosphere; they are commonly as good visible indicators of the operation of these causes, as is the countenance of the state of a person's mind or body" (1).

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

11. In his *Rêveries*, Rousseau had spoken of introspective self-analysis as conducting “sur moi-même . . . les opérations que font les physiciens sur l’air . . . J’appliquerai le barometre à mon âme” (“on myself . . . the procedures which the scientists do on the air . . . I will apply the barometer to my soul”; *Première partie* 2: 240). But Howard’s achievement, then, was to introduce *system* to the study and to the conceptualisation of an aerial phenomenon which had long served, in literary texts at least, as the emblem *par excellence* of mutability and uncertainty, of *nebulosity*: “bestimmt das Unbestimmte,” as Goethe put it. In so doing, Howard’s *Essay* also provided a kind of scientific legitimacy for politicised interpretations of meteorological processes such as those offered by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in “France: An Ode” (1798), where the speaker sees the motions of the clouds as an emblem of a natural liberty unimpeached by the vagaries of human political history: “Ye Clouds! that far above me float and pause, / Whose pathless march no mortal may control! / . . . Yield homage only to eternal laws!” (lines 1–4). Moreover, Howard’s systematisation of clouds also participated in the wider understanding during the Romantic period of air not merely as a highly localised phenomenon – the kind of thinking behind, for example, Davy’s experiments with the eudiometer at Tintern – but as something which needed to be understood in global, and in what we would now call “ecological,” terms. The primary theorist of this understanding was the German explorer and natural philosopher Alexander von Humboldt, whose *Naturgemälde (Image of Nature)*, published in his *Ideen zu einer Geographie der Pflanzen (Ideas for a Geography of Plants)*, first made visible the idea of climate zones stretching around the globe across national boundaries, in contrast, for example, to the links between national environments and national characters which had been postulated by earlier eighteenth-century thinkers like Montesquieu and Winckelmann.

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

Howard's and Humboldt's is a *global* nature which can be marshalled behind the idea of *global* rights, an empirical understanding of air which can underwrite a metaphorical idea of political *climate*.

12. One of Britain's best-known and most-influential Romantic-period painters, John Constable, made many close studies of clouds – “sky-ing,” as he called it – influenced by Howard's ideas, which he first encountered, as Brant observes, through Thomas Forster's *Researches About Atmospheric Phaenomena* (2nd ed., 1815). Constable, like Turner, wanted to add meteorological realism to his history paintings but was also attentive to the affective potential of clouds, to their ability to create mood.<sup>10</sup> As Brant makes clear, however, it was not only those looking up at the clouds but also those looking down on them from above who were instrumental in this shifting perception of air. As noted, in *RÊVE*, it is [Erasmus Darwin's Artificial Bird](#) (Rhodes) which speaks most closely to the single most important Romantic-period technological advancement in respect of air (and indeed perhaps in general): the invention of flight. In the first chapter of the third volume of *The Last Man*, Mary Shelley praises “science that directed the silken balloon through the pathless air” and the novel envisages a near future in which hot air balloons have revolutionised global travel (3: 16; see also 1: 141–42, 203; 2: 143–44). That, of course, was far from reality in 1826, but accounts of manned flight, such as Thomas Baldwin's monumental [Airopaidia](#) (1786), certainly brought clouds closer to hand, providing lavish illustrations and no less lavish descriptions of “those Scenes of majestic grandeur which the unnumbered Volumes of encircling Clouds, in most fantastic Forms and various Hues, beyond Conception glowing and transparent, portray to a Spectator placed as in a Center

### ***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

of the Blue Serene above them” (Baldwin 2–3). Flight, in other words, made clouds the archetype of a new, aerial sublime. But neither were clouds, like “the powers of Air” which they often symbolise in Romantic-period writing, always salutary. As Tess Somervell reminds us in her discussion of [the volcanic fissure of Lakagígar in Iceland](#), the circulation through the upper air of volcanic ash from the eruptions of Laki (1783–84) and Tambora (1815) gave the Romantic period environmental disaster, disease, and famine – as well as celebrated literary works by Lord Byron and Mary Shelley. More broadly speaking, the burgeoning industrialisation of Europe’s cities, and agricultural practices, explain why, as Jonathan Bate observes, “this was the period when the word ‘pollution’ took on its modern sense” (137). In “London” (1789), for instance, William Blake refers (metaphorically, but also literally) to the churches “blackning” from the smoke of the city’s chimneys (line 10).

#### **“Historical Airs”**

13. From the understanding of air as a global phenomenon, I want to return, in closing, to more local airs – and specifically, by way of representative example, to Byron’s aforementioned account of how breathing “the air of Greece” had made him a poet. That remark (which might well be apocryphal) certainly recalls Winckelmann’s theories, in his *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums (History of Ancient Art)*, about the supposedly causal relationship between the geophysical environment of Greece and the emergence of classical Greek culture. Discussing what he considers to be the influence of climatic conditions on human cultural productivity, Winckelmann proposes that “der Einfluß des Himmels muß den Samen beleben, aus welchem die Kunst soll getrieben werden, und zu diesem Samen war



***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

Griechenland der auserwählte Boden” (“The influence of heaven must quicken the seed from which art is to be sown, and for that seed Greece was the chosen soil”) because the Greek climate was a “Mittelpunkte” (“midpoint”) “zwischen Winter und Sommer” (“between winter and summer”) which gave rise to beautiful forms for artists to imitate: “die Künstler sahen die Schönheit täglich vor Augen” (“artists saw the beauty before their eyes every day”; 1: 128–29).

14. For Byron, however, Greece was not just a geophysical but *also* a cultural environment. “The air of Greece,” in other words, was not only (still) temperate but also permeated with cultural history, as Byron makes clear in the opening stanza of “The Isles of Greece,” from canto 3 of *Don Juan* (1821):

The isles of Greece, the isles of Greece!  
Where burning Sappho loved and sung,  
Where grew the arts of war and peace, –  
Where Delos rose, and Phoebus sprung!  
Eternal summer gilds them yet,  
But all, except their sun, is set. (lines 689–94)

These lines contrast continuity and decline, the felt continuity of the physical environment with the no-less felt decline of the cultural environment. For Byron, as a tourist, Greece is an example of what Joseph Addison, discussing Italy, calls “classic ground”: a landscape almost entirely overwritten with cultural associations.<sup>11</sup> “Where’er we tread,” as Byron had

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

put it in his earlier account of Greece, in the second canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812), “’tis haunted, holy ground” (line 828). Hence, the “air” that ostensibly made Byron a poet – “th’ Ionian blast,” which inspires the “voyager” to “hail” the “bright clime” of past glories – is not just the breathable air of present-day Greece but also, and moreover, the lingering air of the past, understood both literally and metaphorically (lines 857–58). Greece, to put it differently, has become a kind of museum where one can breathe in the present the air of the past.

15. In his monumental study *German Romanticism and its Institutions*, Theodore Ziolkowski argues that the “museum as we know it is in a very precise sense a Romantic institution” (320). “Dedicated to the arts and open to the public,” as Ziolkowski puts it, the “conception” behind the museum “reflected the thinking of the revolutionary age,” in which the increasing veneration of the arts as the secular counterpart (if not substitute) for religion in national consciousness transformed “the temple” into “the museum, the locus for the sacred encounter of the community with the Spirit in its earthly manifestations as painting and sculpture” (313, 329).<sup>12</sup> As Ziolkowski observes, however, the rise of the museum during the Romantic period not only reflects the fact that “Romanticism brought forth not merely a new glorification of art” but also that it “produced a new interest in the figure of the artist” (338). And while a virtual museum, at least within the parameters of the technology available in 2022, forbids breathing the air which individual objects or relics exude, *RÊVE* is still replete with exhibits whose entire and sometimes only significance stems precisely from their close association with their owners, from the idea that these object shared the same air as their owners and, to a perhaps dwindling extent, exude not

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

only that shared air but also the air of the very *person* themselves. Exhibits of this kind include Beethoven’s aforementioned ear trumpets, [a pair of spectacles and a revolver that belonged to Camilo Castelo Branco](#), and [Mrs Unwin’s Spectacles](#) and [Teresa Guiccioli’s Travelling Chest](#) (Silva; Sutherland; Saglia). In an actual museum, one could imagine opening this chest (if regulations allowed) and breathing not only remnants of the air breathed *by* Teresa, Byron’s last attachment, but also breathing an air *of* Teresa herself – breathing what Diego Saglia, in his essay “Bodies” in this volume, calls, following Mario Praz, “the ‘thick perfume’ of the past” (Saglia, quoting Praz 68; Saglia’s translation). Most telling, in this respect, are objects which once formed part of those [Romantic Bodies](#) described by Saglia in his curated collection in *RÊVE*, such as [A Lock of Goethe’s Hair](#) (Hearn and Reynolds): bodies which are (as Saglia puts it) “still physically present, yet also – and inevitably so – dematerialized, evanescent, and distant.” In close proximity to an actual lock of Goethe’s hair, one might, with some justification, imagine inhaling an actual air of Goethe. And this trick still works in a virtual museum, albeit to a lesser extent – because the museum, as an institution, is perhaps the place where *literal* and *metaphorical*, *actual* and *idealised*, *present* and *past* airs mingle most productively. Part of what Ziolkowski calls “the museal impulse” is, of course, “to preserve things . . . from the depredations of time” (375). But etymologically speaking, *museum* signifies not just a space for preserving cultural relics but also, as Ziolkowski notes, “a temple for the veneration of the muses” (312). “O! there are spirits of the air,” Percy Shelley wrote, in his eponymous poem, which Mary says “was addressed in idea to Coleridge”: “such lovely ministers to meet / Oft has thou turned from men thy lonely feet” (*Selected Poems*, lines 1, 5–6).<sup>13</sup> Perhaps it is some modification of these same “ministers” of the past, these same

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

“spirits of the air,” these secular muses, whom we invoke and hope to encounter in our Romantic museums and our museums of Romanticism: the atmosphere of the past, but also, to a distinct but dwindling sense, the actual air of the past.

***Romanticism on the Net #80–81 (Spring–Fall 2023)***

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in this essay are my own.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of Scott’s own engagement with fresh and polluted air in his novels and in nonfiction writing in 1820s Edinburgh, see Oliver 171–76.

<sup>3</sup> Percy Shelley ordered Nicholson's *Encyclopedia* in December 1812 (see *Letters* 1: 343).

<sup>4</sup> Percy Shelley's various references to the "all-sustaining air" in *Prometheus Unbound* (1820; *Selected Poems*) may well owe something to this passage from Nicholson (e.g., 1.754; 2.5.42).

<sup>5</sup> Other important studies include Lewis; Carroll; and Speitz.

<sup>6</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 1.676; William Wordsworth, "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802; *Major Works* 606).

<sup>7</sup> A malevolent-looking Davy stands holding a pair of bellows in James Gilray's satirical representation of such studies: *A Lecture on Pneumatics* (1802).

<sup>8</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, "The Cloud" (1820), line 80; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Khubla Khan" (1816), line 46.

<sup>9</sup> For an extended consideration of clouds as "the object of keen meteorological observation during the Romantic period [which] paradoxically serve to abolish the representational realm altogether," see Jacobus 10–35.

<sup>10</sup> Valuable studies of Constable's "skying" including D'arcy Wood; Evans; and Thornes.

<sup>11</sup> See Addison, lines 12–14: "And still I seem to tread on classic ground; / For here the Muse so oft her harp has strung / That not a mountain rears its head unsung."

<sup>12</sup> Although Ziolkowski notes that the Louvre, which opened in 1793, was "the first museum accessible to the public as a matter of policy," he contends that our contemporary sense of what a museum is and should do "emerged under special circumstances in Germany during the early decades of the nineteenth century," citing Karl Friedrich Schinkel's proposal for the Altes Museum in Berlin as the foundational instance (313, 320).

<sup>13</sup> For Mary's claim, see P. Shelley, *Selected Poems* 703n.