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Change of Air: Introduction

Rhys Kaminski-Jones and Erin Lafford

It is now more than sixty years since the first publication of M. H. Abrams' essay 'The Correspondent Breeze' (1957), and air is a more pressing subject than ever in Romantic studies.¹ As Thomas Ford argues in *Wordsworth and the Poetics of Air: Atmospheric Romanticism in a Time of Climate Change* (2018)—a work that many of the contributors to this special issue turn to in their own essays—the Romantic period ushered in a 'new vocabulary of atmosphere' that encompassed the meteorological, the physiological, the emotional, the aesthetic, and the historical.² Ford resuscitates Abrams' sense of the 'thoroughly ventilated' nature of British Romantic poetry—where winds, breezes, spirits, and other airy forms facilitate a 'complex subjective event' that unites 'inner experience and outer analogue' (Abrams, 113, 126)—and breathes new life into it, finding in 'atmosphere' a 'new term that held together the discursive weather of Romanticism as a material practice of historicist self-description' (Ford, 22–3). Along with Ford, others have taken up air and atmosphere variously as key figures of textual mediation in the eighteenth century (Jayne Lewis), as an emergent topography or 'atopia' bound up with the impulses of British imperialism (Siobhan Carroll), as the materialisation of a shared poetic and scientific culture (Tim Fulford), or even as a medium to think through Romanticism's 'nonanthropocentric accounts of a speculative realist world' (Michele Speitz).³ It is evident, then, that there is a vibrant aerial turn at work in the study of eighteenth-century and Romantic culture, and that by returning to the writings of this period we can better understand air as a pressing site of historical, environmental, medical, philosophical, affective, and imaginative enquiry. Abrams' influential account of the correspondent breeze has now evolved from a model of lyric inspiration to encompass a diverse circulation of aerial genres, forms, and approaches.

It was in the spirit of this aerial turn that the editors of this special issue organized the symposium ‘Change of Air: Atmosphere, Health, and Locality in the Romantic Era, 1760–1840’ at the University of Oxford in September 2018.⁴ The essays gathered in this issue are based on some of the proceedings of that symposium. Provoked by ubiquitous, but diffuse, calls for a ‘change of air’ as a form of therapeutic treatment and environmental awareness in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we asked how the notion of a ‘change of air’ might also be productively employed as a way to revisit and recast older critical ideas of ‘Romantic’ inspiration.⁵ In particular, we wanted to expand and nuance persistent (and broad) metaphors of Romantic breezes and winds by paying further attention to air and atmosphere as an important medium of local, regional, and national difference. Seeking to pluralize and materialize entrenched ideas of a supposedly Romantic lyric airiness (and the locations from which it ostensibly springs), speakers covered topics as various as sea airs, mountain airs, unhealthy, urban, and experimental airs, as well as air as an influence on national identity, and the significance of air in picturesque travel writing. Abrams’ Romantic atmosphere is by definition ‘air-in-motion, whether it occurs as breeze or breath, wind or respiration’ (Abrams, 113): but travelling in search of a ‘change of air’ suggests instead air on location, tied in some way to the place it envelops. The creative tension between these contrasting ideas—both equally foundational to atmospheric Romanticism—fuels many of the essays that follow.

What has ultimately emerged from our symposium, however, is not limited to this contrast between aerial location and motion: it has initiated instead a series of wide-ranging and dynamic conversations, not only about air as an element central to medical and scientific enquiry, but also about the wider emotional, ecological, and political affordances of atmosphere, and how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers are so closely attuned to them. All of the essays collected here attest to the period’s fascination with atmosphere as multifarious—at once a material, meteorological phenomenon manifested in air, weather, and

seasonal shifts, and a more nebulous register of mood, aesthetic experience, or the circulation of ideas. These essays, like their aerial subjects, are constantly drifting across borders between matter and metaphor. We hope, therefore, that what is offered in this issue is a more diverse index of the aerial imagination in Romantic-period writing, one where coal-smoke and pollution mingle with mountainous mists, where the ‘airs’ of polite fashionable society collide with the consumption of ostensibly healthier climates, where exposure and sympathy are interconnected, where smell is a faction of intellect and air becomes a condition of liberty, and where atmosphere is at once a defining characteristic of Romanticism and the term and medium best suited to thinking about its end.

Mary-Ann Constantine’s opening essay on ‘Consumed landscapes: coal, air and circulation in the writings of Catherine Hutton’ situates Hutton’s novels—predominately *The Welsh Mountaineer* (1817) but also *The Miser Married* (1813) and *Oakwood Hall* (1819)—in relation to the prevailing context of health tourism and ‘change of air’, re-reading this trope by focussing on a particular substance and subject: coal. Working within a framework of materialist Romantic ecocriticism and Anna Tsing’s definition of the ‘assemblage’, Constantine demonstrates that coal ‘which both changes and is changed by air, also travels’: in so doing, she offers a way of re-reading some of the received dichotomies of travel literature (‘country and city, outdoors and indoors, liberty and confinement, natural and unnatural’), reflecting the enmeshed lives of humans and matter within the extractive industries of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Wales. Showing Hutton as highly sensitive to human interactions with air and coal, Constantine makes illuminating connections between the author’s Gothic imagination and her intertwined immersion in British tourism, industry and infrastructure. Constantine’s sharp re-assessment of Romantic travel literature’s ‘pure’ and ‘noxious’ aerial tropes as they relate to the geographical and social context of the coal trade

exemplifies this issue's intention to pluralize the forms of air circulating in the Romantic imagination.

Rhys Kaminski-Jones, in his essay 'Floating in the Breath of the People: Ossianic Mist, Cultural Health, and the Creation of Celtic Atmosphere, 1760–1815' is similarly alert to the importance of attending to regionality in order to appreciate more fully the diverse cultural and medical currencies of air in this period. Taking up Samuel Johnson's characterization of Scottish Gaelic culture as 'an essentially airborne phenomenon', Kaminski-Jones revisits the under-theorised tropes of 'mistiness' that surround Romantic constructions of Celticity in order to argue that Celtic atmosphere is 'a topic too widespread and significant for Romanticists to push to the side-lines'. Instead, his essay uncovers the neglected medicalized atmospheric discourses perceptible in Romantic-era Celticist texts that demonstrate their 'intertextual relationship with a hugely influential body of atmospheric thought'. Paying particular attention to James Macpherson's Ossianic 'mists' in the illuminating context of his exposure to neo-Hippocratic ideas about the relationship between environment and human health, Kaminski-Jones shows the complex layers of medicalized thinking, poetic allusion, and oral tradition that make up a 'complex model of Celtic aerography' in Macpherson's works, and their legacy in the Welsh cultural revival of the 1790s. Paying close heed to the profoundly intertwined relationship between environment and culture in constructions of 'vaporous' Celticity, he argues finally that the 'misty language of Celtic revivalism' was deployed to express authors' 'hopes and fears about the marginalized yet increasingly sought-out cultures to which they belonged'.

We move from the mountainous mists of Celtic Romanticism to the seascapes of Bognor Regis in Harriet Guest's essay on 'The Salubrious Air of Bognor'. Guest offers a detailed case-study of the Sussex seaside resort as a distinctive node in the emergent culture of late eighteenth-century seaside tourism, and the curative prescription of 'salubrious' sea air. A

fascinating history of a resort ‘built on air’, Guest’s careful tracing of the designs and ambitions of Sir Richard Hotham—who founded and developed the resort, and controlled it until his death in 1799—uncovers an idiosyncratic meeting of social, emotional, and environmental ‘airs’. Designed to attract the ‘attention and patronage of fashionable nobility and even royalty’, the Bognor resort was not simply favoured for its health-giving sea airs—it was also, due to its physical and social architecture, about the ‘distances between people; the reserve maintained by visitors’, and thus fostered an atmosphere of ‘social exclusion’ as much as one of shared recuperation. Considering the Bognor resort via its development history and its literary representations reveals the centrality of air as both a metaphor for and medium of vexed social interactions, whereby the ‘implicit acknowledgement that seaside resorts are defined by their mixed sociability’ means that the ‘pretensions of the resort are self-defeating’. Air is here not a shared element that overcomes separation, but one that exposes attempts to manage access to it along the boundaries of class and social status.

Guest’s sensitivity to the social and emotional dynamics of air and atmosphere is echoed in Erin Lafford’s essay on ‘William Gilpin’s Atmospheric Sympathy’, which considers how moments of aerial exposure in Gilpin’s travelogues also provoke, in their negotiations of distance and proximity, sympathetic responses. Returning to familiar criticisms of Gilpin’s picturesque as socially and emotionally myopic and careless, Lafford argues for atmosphere as an environmental and affective medium that complicates attempts at aesthetic detachment in his writings. More than simply a storehouse of visual effects, such as the ubiquitous smoke, haze, and mist that are praised for their pleasing ‘obscurity’ throughout Gilpin’s travelogues, atmosphere is revealed as an embodied phenomenon not without its share of anxieties. Gilpin’s sensitivity to the influence of atmospheric conditions (like malarial ‘fogs’ and damp) on health are read back into his vocabulary of picturesque aerial arrangement, so that the pleasures and importance of ‘distance’ take on newly freighted significance. A discussion of Gilpin’s now

infamous encounter with the female beggar in the ruins of Tintern Abbey in particular reveals how there is an ‘anxiety of atmospheric contagion’ at work in this passage that ‘complicates the idea that the picturesque tourist can remain untouched, in its manifold meanings, by the locales they visit and the people who inhabit them’. Insisting that Gilpin’s frequent descriptions of the effects of environment on the body and mind are read alongside the visual pleasure taken in aerial tints and effects means, Lafford argues, that the ‘careless “airs” of the picturesque tourist’ find a counter in the embodied entanglements of atmosphere.

Rowan Boyson’s essay on ‘Mary Wollstonecraft and the Right to Air’ is concerned similarly with air as a medium of ethical importance, one idealized as an element and condition of ‘liberty’ that also bears the burden of unequal access to its freedoms. Boyson’s study of the medical but also ecological and philosophical currencies of air in Wollstonecraft’s novels *Mary: A Fiction* and *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman*, in *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, and in her political writings uncovers, as she argues, a ‘forgotten history of air rights’ in Wollstonecraft’s oeuvre. Paying particular attention to how Wollstonecraft’s literary and political remarks on air are informed by medical discourses, racialized climatology, slavery cases, and the pneumatic chemistry of the 1790s, Boyson directs much-needed attention to how the ‘cultural association between air chemistry and radicalism in the 1780s has been studied by historians of science, but less attention has been paid to the longer semantic links between political freedom and air’. Wollstonecraft is revealed as a writer who ‘closely weaves together slavery, liberty, women, and air’, and a sustained consideration of her ‘olfactory sensitivity’ in the Scandinavian *Letters* and *Maria* highlights the importance of smell as one of the most ‘culturally diverse’ and ‘free forms of desire and sensuality’ (especially for female subjects), offering a captivating alternative sensory perspective on the Romantic aerial imagination.

Finally, Thomas Ford’s closing essay, ‘Atmospheric Late Romanticism: Babbage, Marx, Ruskin’, takes up atmosphere as a term for pinpointing ‘Romanticism’s closing’.

Responding to ongoing critical and historical difficulties with describing and defining the end of Romanticism, Ford argues that the three things that mark ‘strong breaks between the present and Romanticism’ are ‘computers, communism, and climate change’. Looking ‘in each case to someone thinking the possibility of these concepts into being at the end of the 1830s’, Ford pays particular attention to the ‘atmospherics of their thinking, showing how they used [. . .] atmospheric Romanticism to inspire radically different currents of thought’. Charles Babbage’s *The Ninth Bridgewater Treatise: A Fragment* (1838), in its attempts to ‘vindicate the theological value of mechanical computation’, is shown to expand the possibilities of atmosphere as a medium that, counter to Romantic conceptions of ‘transience, change and erasure’, offers instead ‘inscriptive permanence’ carrying important moral implications. The ‘youthful atmospheric Romanticism’ of Karl Marx’s early poetry is revisited in order to draw out the innovation of his later material turn, which—if not a complete rejection of the Romantic attachment to atmosphere—is nevertheless a ‘dialectical overcoming of this still-Romantic set of oppositions between atmosphere and ground, [. . .] universality and restriction, what should be and what is’. Finally, John Ruskin’s essay ‘Remarks on the Present State of Meteorological Science’ (1839) is seen to break with the ‘Romantic’ model of scientific enquiry as a pursuit of the lone individual, envisioning meteorology—what would ‘eventually become climate change science’—as an inherently collective form of knowledge production. As Ford shows, however, these various breaks with atmospheric Romanticism nevertheless remain indebted to it: the modernity they usher in, and which we continue to claim as our own, still breathes some of the same Romantic air.

This issue was compiled in the spring and summer of 2020, a historical moment that has provided its own very particular atmosphere. Romantic-era medical texts, whose minute instructions on how to avoid unhealthful air might once have seemed quaint, read rather differently when an airborne pandemic has made such atmospheric regulation ubiquitous. We

have found ourselves, unexpectedly and disturbingly, living like Catherine Hutton's valetudinarian Bridget Dolgarrog, confined to our homes, hyper-anxious about atmospheric dangers, 'not able to face' the shared air of our cities and towns. These essays were not written with this historical moment in mind, but at times they suggest how elements of Romantic aerial culture might help us understand it, not least thanks to the attention they give to a phenomenon now reoccurring with vengeance—namely, the unequal distribution of atmospheric risk. From Gilpin's beggars forced to live amongst suffocating damp, to Hutton's mines plagued by perilous underground vapours, to the enslaved black people whose access to "free air" was a matter of racist debate, these essays make it clear that economic and racial exploitation have always conspired to expose certain members of society to atmospheric danger. It will have to be left to future work to examine these shared atmospheric currents more fully, though Bakary Diaby's essay in the Summer 2020 edition of *Romantic Circles: RC Unbound*—an issue entitled 'breath', in testament to George Floyd—represents an important early contribution to the process, making the case for a necessary (though as Diaby stresses, as yet uncertain) change of air in our discipline. Diaby contrasts 'air [. . .] pierced by shouting' and violent racism to the 'default business-as-usual quietism' of Romantic studies, warning that any scholarly reaction on our part to this atmospheric discrepancy 'will prove to be hollow without substantive steps taken to change the status quo'.⁶ We do not claim that our work represents this change, but in the current climate, echoing such sentiments seems the least we can do.

NOTES

¹ M. H. Abrams, 'The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor', *The Kenyon Review*, 19.1 (Winter 1957), 113–30.

² Thomas Ford, *Wordsworth and the Poetics of Air: Atmospheric Romanticism in a Time of Climate Change* (Cambridge, 2018), 2.

³ See Jayne Lewis, *Air's Appearance: Literary Atmosphere in British Fiction, 1660–1794* (Chicago, 2013); Siobhan Carroll, *An Empire of Air and Water: Uncolonizable Space in the British Imagination, 1750–1850* (Philadelphia, 2015); Tim Fulford, 'Science and Poetry in 1790s Somerset: The Self-Experiment Narrative, the Aeriform Effusion, and the Greater Romantic Lyric', *English Literary History*, 85.1 (2018), 85–117; Michele Speitz, 'Affect and Air: The Speculative Spirit of the Age', in *Romanticism and Speculative Realism*, ed. Chris Washington and Anne C. McCarthy (London, 2019), 37–55.

⁴ We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to speakers at the symposium who have not been able to contribute to this issue: William Tullett, Tim Fulford, Christine Kenyon-Jones, Jen Wallis, and Jane Darcy. We would also like to thank those organisations who offered generous support to the symposium, namely TORCH and RECSO in Oxford, The Oxford Environmental Humanities Research Network, BSLS (The British Society for Literature and Science), BSECS (The British Society for Eighteenth Century Studies), and BARS (The British Association for Romantic Studies).

⁵ See in particular Vladimir Jankovic, *Confronting the Climate: British Airs and the Making of Environmental Medicine* (Basingstoke, 2010); Jan Golinski, *British Weather and the Climate of Enlightenment* (Chicago, 2007).

⁶ Bakary Diaby, 'The Signs of the Times', *Romantic Circles: RC Unbound*, 20.1 (Summer 2020), http://romantic-circles.org/blog_rc/signs-times, accessed September 14 2020.