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Pierre Glaudes and Anouchka Vasak, eds., *Les nuages: du tournant des Lumières au crépuscule du romantisme (1760-1880)*. Paris: Hermann, 2017. 1 + 354 pp. 28€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-7056-9475-3.

Review by Caroline Ford, University of California, Los Angeles.

While clouds and cloud cover are implicated in current debates about global warming, following in the footsteps of Karl Popper and Michel Serres, the editors of this volume, Pierre Glaudes and Anouchka Vasak, seek to explore their importance for literature, philosophy, the history of art and the history of science in a much earlier period. The book emerged from a seminar that was hosted by the Fondation des Treilles, which was founded by Anne Gruner Schlumberger to encourage dialogue between the arts and sciences, and the volume's seventeen contributors were participants. It was in the period between the Enlightenment and late Romantic period that the classification and scientific study of clouds began, as evidenced in the 1802 publication of Luke Howard's essay "On the Modification of Clouds." The editors argue that clouds crystallized modern anxieties about the relationship between man and the universe. How clouds were considered reflected existential anguish among a diverse set of writers throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Madame de Staël, Victor Hugo, Goethe, Chateaubriand, and Mirabeau, among others.

The book is divided chronologically and thematically into three parts. The first part, "Nuages des Lumières," brings together a range of essays on the function of clouds in the writings of Luke Howard, Denis Diderot, and the *encyclopédistes*; on the beginnings of the new science of meteorology and on the role of clouds in the Festival of Federation during the French Revolution. The second part, "Le Mal du Ciel," explores the cloud as a symbol in the writings of Senancour, Goethe, Madame de Staël, Chateaubriand, Lamartine, and Victor Hugo. The third part, "Nuages fin de siècle," examines the place of clouds in the writings of Elisée Reclus and Joris Karl Huysmans as well as the representation of clouds in painting and in photography. The vast majority of the essays focus, then, on the literary representation of clouds, and most of these essays are weighted toward the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These contributions indicate, as André Weber puts it, the extent to which the cloud was an integral part of the metaphorical repertoire of Enlightenment philosophy, giving writers the possibility of visualizing in a clear sense how clarity and light emerges from obscurity and darkness. At the same time, the nascent science of meteorology eschewed the terrain of the symbolic in favor of the "real" and in favor of classification, as Luke Howard's writings demonstrate. This tension between the metaphorical and physical aspects of clouds continued to shape how writers and *savants* considered them in the nineteenth century.

In one of the most interesting essays in this volume, Dominique de Font-Réaulx explores the pictorial representation of clouds in landscape painting and photography in France, England, and the Low Countries, showing how the work of Luke Howard was received, understood, and later reflected in painting. John Constable, Eugène Boudin, Eugène Delacroix, and Gustave Le Gray are the subjects of her analysis, which complements the many literary essays in the volume in important ways. De Font-Réaulx emphasizes the role that photography played in shaping the rise of "serial" paintings of landscape, as painters, such as Claude Monet, attempted to capture the changing appearance of

landscapes or structures (such as the Rouen cathedral) during the course of a day.

*Les nuages* represents an ambitious attempt to draw together a disparate set of scholars in the fields of literature, history of art, and philosophy to reflect on a moment in which the consideration of the natural world underwent significant transformations, as Clarence Glacken argued in *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* some time ago.<sup>[1]</sup> Here, the cloud is used as a vector to chart that transformation and to assess how it might be understood as a symbol of modernity. The essays in this volume are full of tantalizing insights, and the authors succeed in offering up a number of hypotheses about how and why the cloud became of subject of inquiry, reflection, and classification at this particular moment in time. Like many edited volumes, however, *Les nuages* is less cohesive conceptually than it could be. The conclusion by the historical sociologist and philosopher Jean Baechler, for example, is less of a summation than a reflection on the concept of “les nuées” and their rational and irrational dimensions. Some readers might also wonder why the editors chose to limit their field of vision to France, albeit with some discussion of Britain, Holland, and Germany, and largely to literary sources. Did the representations and understandings of clouds in other parts of the world change in this period? A broader and more comparative focus might have enriched the volume’s claims and conclusions. It also seems somewhat curious that the editors do not consider the relationship between literary representations of clouds and the emergence of new environmentalist discourses during the course of the nineteenth century. Finally, it is surprising that none of the contributors discuss John Ruskin’s 1884 lecture, “The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century.” Nonetheless, the collection’s survey of changing perceptions of clouds, climate, and the natural world, which forms the thematic basis of Hermann Editeurs’ “Météos” collection, of which this volume is a part, will certainly interest environmental historians, literary scholars, art historians, and philosophers of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe.

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Jean Baechler, “Conclusion. Les nuées irrationnelles”

## NOTES

[1] Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

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