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The Clouds and the Poor: Ruskin, Mayhew, and Ecology

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In 1871 a shadow came across the page of that “cloud-worshipper,” John Ruskin (6:75). After praising meteorology, in his youth, as a “science of the pure air, and of the bright heaven” (1:208), and extolling “cloud beauty” throughout Modern Painters (7:133–99), Ruskin confronted in the “black heavens” of industrial pollution a threat to his familiar models for moral, aesthetic, and political instruction (27:204). In Fors Clavigera (1871–1884), The Art of England (1883), and The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century (1884), he launched a sustained attack on a society destroying its atmospheric and moral bearings in the service of political economy.

Critics retorted that Ruskin’s complaints about pollution obscuring the “pure traceries of the vault of morning” (33:388) were the views of an irrelevant aesthete whose writing excluded, in the title of one acerbic review, “the clouds and the poor” (Wise). Taking up the implicit challenge of this conjunction, I consider how we might discover an ecological consciousness in the Victorian period that juxtaposes atmospheric phenomena and urban environments. What can we learn by linking Ruskin’s ecological studies of work and political economy to the traditions of urban sociology in the nineteenth century? What might studies of poverty and casual labor draw from a moral and meteorological register that sees industrial modernity as a darkening, denaturing, and immiserating force? What do clouds have to do with the poor?

To explore these connections I argue that we need the work of one writer whose massive exercise in social ethnography complements Ruskin’s ecological invective. Henry Mayhew’s London Labour and the London Poor (1850–2/1861–62) offered a compendious account of casual laborers, vagrants, and the indigent. Mayhew might be placed in a tradition of nineteenth-century sociological writing that tackled urban sanitation and environmental blight, including texts like Friedrich Engels’s The Condition of the Working Classes in England (1845), Edwin Chadwick’s reports for the Poor Law Commission in 1842–43, and Florence Nightingale’s Notes on Hospitals (1863). Mayhew and Ruskin never engaged one another’s writing directly, but in pursuing their projects—Mayhew to describe, Ruskin to exhort—both attend to how atmospheric phenomena affect the lives of those in the modern metropolis and frame social perception within a wider matrix of concerns. Both address, with different foci and mutually informing stances, the representational challenges of depicting ambient phenomena. They do so by means of figurative devices that emphasize in/visibility and mediation in space, rhythm and duration in time. Ruskin interrupts his writing to complain about how dark skies occlude his view of paintings, leaves, and minerals, thereby exposing the scene of writing to ponder what conditions facilitate or hinder work. Mayhew suffuses the scenes, occupations, and actors that come under his notice with reflections on their social microclimates, the qualities of their workspaces. Ruskin is attentive to the importance of undisturbed seasons for what he thinks of as noble work, to the point of analogically displacing labor into nature, in figures like the “embroidered sky” (14:76). Mayhew concretely invokes the seasonal routines and banalities of casual laborers’ lives.

In multigeneric documents that reproduce others’ voices and solicit correspondents for collaborative exchange, Ruskin and Mayhew both develop mixed aesthetic and political accounts that aim to mobilize publics and forge communities. That such efforts remained marginal in their time and failed to have durable political efficacy does not lessen their continuing discursive power. Juxtaposing...
Fors Clavigera and London Labour, here I argue that Ruskin and Mayhew together disclose a Victorian ecological discourse attuned to the divergent spaces, varying rhythms, and dispersed networks that compose the urban environment. In the first section I focus on space and scale, showing how Ruskin’s politico-moral atmospherics (his insistent use of figures and scriptural schemata of light and darkness to explain Britain’s corrupt political economy) usefully complements Mayhew’s sociological chiaroscuro (his description of bright or gloomy spaces that frame his interview subjects while gesturing to scales beyond them). A comparative approach emphasizes how both Ruskin and Mayhew are teaching us what it means to see, in perceptual and political senses, even if this is only to discern the modes, media, and conditions of sight, its spatial limits and occlusions, its scalar variations. I take Ruskin’s rant about how “WE NEVER SEE ANYTHING CLEARLY” (6:75) as a guide to perceptual preoccupations he shares with Mayhew. In the second section I turn to time, considering Ruskin’s construction of pure seasons and pristine environments alongside Mayhew’s routinized depiction of the weather’s temporality. Mayhew’s observations puncture the lofty symbolism of Ruskin’s moral figuration of the weather; yet the latter’s sense of climatic symbolism also throws into relief the banal weather notation that Mayhew leaves inertly in the background. Using J. M. W. Turner’s The Watercress Gatherers as a touchstone, I bring space and time together in the final section to show how Ruskin and Mayhew mutually construct, and offer fuller representations of, Victorian ecological networks.

This essay thus addresses the discourse of two somewhat marginal figures to fund broader reflections on an emerging Victorian ecocriticism attentive to the urban-industrial nexus and to questions of scale and duration. How often, in reading novels of Victorian London, do we pass through idle chitchat about the weather, or skim moments of atmospheric framing in order to get on with the plot? What opportunities for understanding social form and relation can we find in such moments? What strategies of reading might bring out these elements of ambience, periodicity, and interconnection, and how would they risk making too much of the background and banal?

Materializing ecological space: black heavens, bright markets

Throughout Fors Clavigera, Ruskin breaks the frame of his letters to reveal his writing environment. “I sit down to write by the dismallest light that ever yet I wrote by,” he complains, “namely, the light of this midsummer morning, in mid-England (Matlock, Derbyshire), in the year 1871” (27:132). In Venice, “I can’t write this morning, because of the accursed whistling of the dirty steam-engine of the omnibus for Lido” (27:328). In Birmingham he stalls by “listening to the plash of the rain; and watching the workmen on the new Gothic school, which is fast blocking out the once pretty country view from my window” (29:170). These are instances of what Timothy Morton calls “ecomimesis,” a representational trick central to nature writing whereby the seamless connection of writer and world is proclaimed by means of an “ambient poetics” used to achieve the effect (3–4, 29–78). For Morton ambience participates, however consciously, in “generat[ing] a fantasy of nature as the surrounding atmosphere,” but fractures in the finish of such ideological visions can be revealed by close attention. Finding internal ruptures in the “very processes that try to convey the illusion of immediacy and naturalness” might activate a “liberating potential” wherein we evaluate ambient art for its ecological possibilities (77, 142). I contend that we can locate such an emancipatory potential in Ruskin’s ambient reflections, particularly in his atmospheric figuration of spaces darkened by capitalism’s waste products, even if the force of his critique of political economy is repeatedly undermined by abstraction and aesthetic nostalgia.

Always tonally diverse, Ruskin’s ambience veers in the late writing toward gloom and disgust. The reason is both pollution and poverty, materialized in the “storm-cloud” that he first sees in 1871: “the sky is covered with grey cloud;—not rain-cloud, but a dry black veil, which no ray of sunshine can pierce; partly diffused in mist, feeble mist, enough to make distant objects unintelligible, yet without any substance, or wreathing, or colour of its own” (27:132). This obstacle to perception “looks partly as if it were made of poisonous smoke; very possibly it may be: there are at least two hundred furnace...
chimneys in a square of two miles on every side of me. But mere smoke would not blow to and fro in that wild way. It looks more to me as if it were made of dead men’s souls” (27:133). Far from conveying a sense of satisfied immersion in an environment, Ruskin’s ambient moments frustrate his aesthetic projects and bring their moral commitments to the fore. “I simply cannot paint, nor read, nor look at minerals, nor do anything else that I like,” he moans, “and the very light of the morning sky, when there is any—which is seldom, nowadays, near London—has become hateful to me, because of the misery that I know of, and see signs of, where I know it not, which no imagination can interpret too bitterly” (27:13). Whether darkened by smog or pollution, the sky has a double function formally enacted here: it interposes literal and emotional darkness between Ruskin and his aesthetic pleasures; and it mediates his reflections on poverty, as an index and reminder of a social darkness outside.

Thus a pattern emerges that organizes Ruskin’s project of exposing the moral elisions of liberal political economy, especially its myopic view of “wealth” as profit and frivolous consumption. Each act of aesthetic apprehension can jolt the reader into confronting the corrupt space of the economy, either by facing the facts of poverty and desperation in industrial Britain, or by reflecting on how “living in coal-holes and ash-heaps” could seem the “proudest existence” (27:156) of an economic regime. Morton argues that ambience can appear in nature writing as a “symptom of automation” and “capitalist alienation” (87). With varying degrees of self-critique, Ruskin’s attention to the “storm-cloud” operates as such a symptom, often finding expression in moral and scriptural registers. What he once termed the “ordinance of clouds” (6:112) has been disenchanted: “Smoke above for sky, mud beneath for water; and the pleasant consciousness of spending one’s weary life in the pure service of the devil!” (27:290). He claims that capitalism has produced an atmospheric blight that gives us a clue about its corrupt moral and spiritual underpinnings. In a memorable vision, he declares that it has reversed the divine order for light with a “counter-order”—“Let there be darkness” (28:462)—that yields a “poisonous black wind … of an entirely corrosive, deadly, and horrible quality” (28:463–4), a sky that is a “dome of ashes, differing only by their enduring frown and slow pestilence from the passing darkness and showering death of Pompeii” (28:464).

Yet it is notable how often Ruskin’s claims are couched in abstractions. Generality undermines the force of his address. Instead of accusing specific individuals or policies, he makes modernity a proxy for experiments in war and disease: “You can vitiate the air by your manner of life, and death, to any extent. You might easily vitiate it so as to bring such a pestilence on the globe as would end all of you,” whether “with corpses, and animal and vegetable ruin in war: changing men, horses, and garden-stuff into noxious gas,” or “with foul chemical exhalations; and the horrible nests, which you call towns, … little more than laboratories for the distillation into heaven of venomous smoke and smells” (27:91). To blame is simply a generic corporation, the “United Grand Steam Percussion and Corrosion Company, Limited (Offices, London, Paris, and New York)” (28:462)

This flight from concretion, coupled with what Leslie Stephen disparaged as “reason[ing] too much from single cases” (695), separates Ruskin from sociological commentators on urban misery. He routinely turns to periodicals and letters for “a picture of domestic life, out of the streets of London in her commercial prosperity” where “dirt, misery, and disease alone flourish,” an admission that the Slade Professor at Oxford seldom confronts scenes where the “houses have no ventilation, the back yards are receptacles for all sorts of filth and rubbish,” and “the dead lie in the dogholes where they breathed their last” (Pall Mall Gazette, qtd. in 27:42). Over the course of many years, these lengthy citations of disease, cold, starvation, and death start to feel like a hollow performance of the duty to “clear myself from all sense of responsibility for the material distress around me, by explaining to you … what I know of its causes; by pointing out to you some of the methods by which it might be relieved” (27:13).

Moreover, Ruskin’s effort after perceptual purity can undercut his desire to keep misery in view. In a discussion comparing Thomas More’s Utopia to the tenets of his own projected arcadia, the Guild of St. George, Ruskin admits “we cannot relish seeing any pretty things unless other people see them also” (27:123). He describes his project as an “endeavor to give you fresh air, wholesome
employment, and high education” (27:146). Yet “high education” comes to sound like a pun, given the oft-stated aim of a program where children “will know what it is to see the sky,” “to breathe it,” and “to behave under it, as in the presence of a Father who is in heaven” (27:164). While rejecting the idea that the poor could “paint or star-gaze themselves into clothes and victuals” (27:19), Ruskin does seem to deflect the gaze from practical challenges to aesthetic appreciation. If this sometimes sounds a note of hope, a way to counteract “the entire system of modern life” with its “total carelessness of the beauty of the sky, or the cleanness of streams, or the life of animals and flowers” (28:614, 615), it can also denote repulsion and frustration, a sense that his project is salvage work, “mere raft-making amidst irrevocable wreck” (28:264).

It is significant that many of Ruskin’s calls to the sky occur in settings that had a previous aesthetic resonance. Discussing Kirkby Lonsdale and the valley of the Lune, once drawn by Turner (28:299; compare 6:26), he complains about the river’s decline: people “pitch their dust-heaps, and whatever of worse they have to get rid of, … and the whole blessed shore underneath … is one waste of filth, town-drainage, broken saucepans, tannin, and mill-refuse” (28:301). He is similarly frustrated along the Wharfe (28:301), and his calls for children to see the sky were prompted by letters to the Times about misbehaving mobs at Margate (27:161–4), the locale where Turner sketched Europe’s “loveliest skies” (27:164). If the goal is “that you may see the sky, with the stars of it again” (27:219), it is unclear whether this will be achieved by exiting the places where the sky is obscured and repeatedly seeking an unspoiled “elsewhere” (MacDuffie 159), or by changing the conditions that produce “smoke, which hides the sun and chokes the sky” (27:207).

Where Ruskin’s ambient reflections are sometimes lifted away from concrete interactions to aesthetic nostalgia, Mayhew’s scenes remain grounded in precise locations and perceptions. Contrast Ruskin’s abstractions of moral light and darkness with this scene of the London street markets lighting up on a Saturday evening:

There are hundreds of stalls, and every stall has its one or two lights; either it is illuminated by the intense white light of the new self-generating gas-lamp, or else it is brightened up by the red smoky flame of the old-fashioned grease lamp…. Some stalls are crimson with the fire shining through the holes beneath the baked chestnut stove; others have handsome octohedral lamps, while a few have a candle shining through a sieve: these, with the sparkling ground-glass globes of the tea-dealers’ shops, and the butchers’ gaslights streaming and fluttering in the wind, like flags of flame, pour forth such a flood of light, that at a distance the atmosphere immediately above the spot is as lurid as if the street were on fire. (LL 1:9)

The scene gives advance notice for the technique of London Labour and the London Poor. Mayhew’s crosscuts rapidly take in a range of trades and spaces; call attention to perceptual apertures and screens; deliver en passant an implicit narrative of technological progress (from candles to gas-lamps); and then lift away to a distance that frames the scene as both striking and ominous. Across hundreds of interior vignettes, however humble, he manages to delineate the space and plumb the air, presenting us with both perceptions and the medium wherein they float. A typical scene of poor housing is given through the smoke that the sun shaft of light cut through the fog raged in the corner-cupboard, not three yards from me (LL 1:48). Another lodging house is “so full of smoke that the sun’s rays, which shot slanting down through a broken tile in the roof, looked like a shaft of light cut through the fog” (LL 3:313). Ruskin views such smoky filters as blocking his objects. Mayhew uses them to accentuate the fragility of sight. Both are developing versions of what Morton describes as “medial” ambience, materializing the “atmosphere in which the message is transmitted” (37).

Elsewhere Mayhew’s environment assails other senses. Rag-and-bottle shops repel with their “positively sickening” smell: “Here in a small apartment may be a pile of rags, a sack-full of bones, the many varieties of great and ‘kitchen-stuff,’ corrupting an atmosphere which, even without such accompaniments, would be too close. The windows are often crowded with bottles, which exclude the light; while the floor and shelves are thick with grease and dirt” (LL 2:108). The olfactory and tactile take over in descriptions of hazardous workspaces, as when Mayhew interviews street-
sellers of needles and tailors’ trimmings who have gone blind on account of gas-lamps, with their noxious heat and light. One informant strikingly recalls the experience as one of becoming-fuel: “my eyes used to feel like two bits of burning coals in my head” (LL 1:343).

In these strange and vivid figurations of atmospheres both ambient and oppressive, Mayhew’s project gathers together what could be considered a sociology of microclimates. The representational strategy that attends to thousands of particularized settings and environs—to scalar disparities and obscuring media—reveals what Ruskin’s impatient and often-abstract reflections cannot. Ruskin disdained photography as a process for “mak[ing] the sun draw brown landscapes” that are nothing against nature’s “all imaginable colors” (27:86), but Mayhew figuratively deploys the potential of visual technologies (alongside the daguerreotype-engravings that populate his text) to underline achievements of detail and scale. He visits a street-photography studio, for example, “where the light was so insufficient, that even the blanket hung up at the end of it looked black from the deep shadows cast by the walls” (LL 3:205). It is no surprise that this gloomy setting yields portraits that are “nearly black” (LL 3:205). Customers are tricked into believing their likenesses have been taken, and sometimes leave with an image not their own. A tool of mimetic transcription thus reveals the blocking medium that makes a view of London’s East End impossible from other than close range. Mayhew’s investigation of visual incapacity transforms Ruskin’s characterization of photographic opacity into an ironic truth about social description and misperception.

Discussing the showman who conducts exhibitions of objects under a microscope, Mayhew develops a similar analogy focusing on the hyperlocal but recurring to the global. The showman first exhibits one human hair as a conduit between our bodies and the environment: “that which we breathe, the atmosphere, pass[es] down these tubes” (LL 3:85). Next he shows a section of an oak tree, which likewise has “millions of perforations, or pores, through which the moisture of the earth rises, in order to aid its growth.” Finally, we see “a drop of water, that may be suspended on a needle’s point, teeming with millions of living objects. This one drop of water contains more inhabitants than the globe on which I stand…. They are all moving with perfect ease in this one drop, like the mighty monsters of the vast deep” (LL 3:86). Passing freely among spheres, from the tiny product of manufacture in one London locale to the “globe” and the “deep,” Mayhew infuses his workaday document with a scalar logic that can connect any ephemeral trade to its larger economic circuit. As in his Morning Chronicle accounts of maritime labor (Unknown 299–302), these figures show how any individual, including the reader, can be linked to wider entanglements of economic activity and moral answerability.

Yet Mayhew’s precision and concreteness can also lead away from interconnected imaginaries to visions of stasis. Bringing the third volume of London Labour to an unexpectedly hortatory conclusion, Mayhew describes “The Asylum for the Houseless Poor of London” (LL 3:428), which takes in a transnational motley, the “poverty-stricken from every quarter of the globe.” When it opens Mayhew sees “ranged along the herb… a kind of ragged regiment, drawn up four deep, and stretching far up and down the narrow lane, until the crowd is like a hedge to the roadway” (LL 3:428). In a remarkable access of distress he recognizes that these people are “the vast heap of social refuse—the mere human street-sweepings—the great living mixen—that is destined, as soon as the spring returns, to be strewn far and near over the land, and serve as manure to the future crime-crops of the country” (LL 3:429).

A gradual reification in this depiction brings the human into the realm of what might be studied by photography or microscopes. Persons become a “hedge,” “sweepings,” “manure.” These pathos-laden metamorphoses date back to Mayhew’s salvo in the Morning Chronicle that gave rise to the series that would become London Labour, “A Visit to the Cholera Districts of Bermondsey” (1849). In “narrow close courts, where the sun never shone,” he saw people’s “blanched cheeks… white as vegetables grown in the dark,” their skin “parchment” or “tawed leather.” In polluted water “the limbs of the vagrant boys bathing… seemed, by pure force of contrast, white as Parian marble” (4). This gesture of disclosing the material substrate of the working poor—their substantial identity with the refuse amidst which they live—looks ahead to Mayhew’s final volume, which opens
on an extended reflection about why animals need “work” (movement, effort) to live whereas plants do not (LL 4:2–3). The animal “seeks its own living” in the “carbonaceous matter” it expends in the process; plants simply “breathe” to “acquire food and strength” (LL 4:2). Though emerging from sustained reflections on poverty, Mayhew’s reduction to physiological basics has an uncanny echo in Ruskin, who proclaims that “your power of purifying the air, by dealing properly and swiftly with all substances in corruption; by absolutely forbidding noxious manufactures; and... by planting in all soils the trees which cleanse and invigorate earth and atmosphere,—is literally infinite. You might make every breath of air you draw, food” (27:91–2).

Reflections on space and scale that might promote an ecological ethics or intimate a reconfigured social form end, in both Ruskin and Mayhew, with a vision of substantial or cyclical fixity. Ruskin implies that humans might well contemplate roots not riots, breathing our food instead of breathing in order to find food. Mayhew’s neutral tone belies the terrible harvest of “crime-crops.” These figures underline the static results of moral luck even as they challenge hypocritical readers to change, as Mayhew does after his tour of the asylum:

if you in your arrogance, ignoring all the accidents that have helped to build up your worldly prosperity, assert that you have been the ‘architect of your own fortune,’ who, let us ask, gave you the genius or the energy for the work?... Then get down from your moral stilts, and confess it honestly to yourself, that you are what you are by that inscrutable grace which decreed your birthplace to be a mansion or a cottage rather than a ‘padding-ken,’ or which granted you brains and strength, instead of sending you into the world, like many of these, a cripple or an idiot. (LL 3:429)

Recapitulating an earlier discussion of those who are “bred to the streets,” these comments confirm rather than undermine the sense that “there is a moral acclimatisation as well as a physical one, and the heart may become inured to a particular atmosphere in the same manner as the body” (LL 1:320). Despite their different representational strategies for ecological space—blurring social, organic, and atmospheric registers—Ruskin and Mayhew both return to the foregone conclusions of moral climatology.

Unsettling ecological time: seasonal labor, weather routine

The imagination of spatial regions, and of scales within and beyond them, ends with representations of material and social stasis that fail to provoke ethical action beyond, say, sympathy or recognition. On another level, however, Ruskin and Mayhew use ecological figures to envision changed moral circumstances. There is an insistent rhythmic character to their writing that complements the emphasis on space, and it is to these temporal patterns and transformations that I now turn. *Fors Clavigera* was intended to be issued in monthly letters, and their dating yields reflections on the time of year and the symbolism of the month: April, for instance, is seen as “the month of Opening” (27:60). Alongside these self-conscious gestures of temporal contemplation, Ruskin often has recourse to the ambient technique I began by discussing, which need not only be attuned to a present surround. Ruskin puts ambient reflections to work, that is, as paradoxically non-present reminders of past seasonality and future promise: “It is a bright morning, the first entirely clear one I have seen for months; such, indeed, as one used to see, before England was civilized into a blacksmith’s shop, often enough in the sweet spring-time; and as, perhaps, our children’s children may see often enough again, when their coals are burnt out, and they begin to understand that coals are not the source of all power Divine and human” (27:527).

In addition to the moral-atmospheric darkening caused by the storm-cloud, a continual theme for Ruskin is the seasonal collapse represented by industrial modernity. The “black-plague wind which has now darkened the spring for five years, veiling all the hills with sullen cloud” (28:317), is linked to production that need not rely on seasonal rhythms of agricultural work even as it consumes the means to survive weather fluctuations in cold climates. Hoping that demand for “Iron lace” would slow, Ruskin asks “how are we to think of Ornamental Iron-work, made with deadly sweat
of men, and steady waste, all summer through, of the coals that Earth gave us for winter fuel?” (27:34). His invective attaches to both sides of the commercial equation, producers and consumers, but he is perhaps most drawn to those who run capitalism’s antiseasonal machine: “What have you, workers in England, to do with April, or May, or June either; your mill-wheels go no faster in sunshine, do they? and you can’t get more smoke up the chimneys because more sap goes up the trunks” (28:79). In a startling moment that recalls Mayhew, Ruskin finds himself confronted with a literalization of his work’s odd title in two women beating out iron nails (or clavigere) “with ancient Vulcanian skill” (29:174). Their incessant labor, from “seven to seven,—by the furnace side,—the winds of summer fanning the blast of it” (29:174), he takes as indicative of modernity’s assault on rhythm.

Ruskin’s solutions for the Guild therefore entail seasonal correction. In keeping with his attacks on steam technology as a source of moral decline rather than a guarantor of future change (27:196, 245, 298–300), he allows that “[a]ll machinery needful in ordinary life to supplement human or animal labour may be moved by wind or water: while steam, or any modes of heat-power, may only be employed justifiably under extreme or special conditions of need” (28:655). Everything will be produced “in due season” (28:689) and according to “moral sunshine” (27:60). This vision is often thwarted by a depressing undertow. He inverts the epigraph to one letter, from the Song of Solomon (2:11–13), to give a vision of permanent seasonal deformation: “I fear that for you the wild winter’s rain may never pass,—the flowers may never appear on the earth;—that for you no bird may ever sing:—for you no perfect Love arise, and fulfil your life in peace” (27:79).

Whereas Ruskin sees the seasons as conduits to philosophical reflection, and “pure” weather as furnishing figures for social arrangements, Mayhew’s informants view the weather as a condition of revenue. He often finds that “nature” is elsewhere, merely an extractable resource. “I never saw the sea,” confesses a costermonger, “but it’s salt-water, I know. I can’t say whereabouts it lays. I believe it’s in the hands of the Billingsgate salesmen—all of it?” (LL 1:22). Fruit and vegetables seem to appear on the market as inscrutably as manufactured articles, and all are evenly subject to seasons and weather patterns (LL 1:81). One of Mayhew’s profound contributions to the study of work is his detailed articulation of “casual labour” and its reliance on “Brisk and Slack Seasons” (LL 2:297). He systematically analyzes how work fluctuates in both time and space on account of the “weather,” “seasons,” “fashion,” “commerce,” and “accidents” (LL 2:297–300), a list that significantly flattens natural forces and artificial wants. An informant tells him that three days of rain “will bring the greater part of 30,000 street-people to the brink of starvation” (LL 1:57). Those affected might include “paviours, pipe-layers, bricklayers, painters of the exteriors of houses, slaters, fishermen, watermen (plying with their boats for hire), the crews of the river steamers, a large body of agricultural labourers (such as hedgers, ditches, mowers, reapers, ploughmen, thatchers, and gardeners), costermongers and all classes of street-sellers (to a great degree), street-performers, and showmen” (LL 2:298). Earlier I suggested that Mayhew’s settings comprised a patchwork of microclimates across London. These iterated moments of weather notation, both banal and consequential, likewise disclose interconnected environments and effects that are occluded by merely individual viewpoints.

The weather contours human physiology as well as trade: Mayhew’s subjects suffer from a range of ailments. One of his most tragic subjects, the “Negro Crossing-Sweeper” (LL 2:490) who lost both legs in awful circumstances at sea, has a precise weather experience: “the colder the better, he says, as it ‘numbs his stumps like,’” whereas “in warm weather … he cannot walk more than a mile a day” (LL 2:490). In the broader category of “Disaster Beggars”—“shipwrecked mariners, blown-up miners, burnt-out tradesmen, and lucifer droppers” (LL 4:427)—we see the casualties of dangerous environments in the city and beyond. Even the most ordinary trades can speak their climatic fears. A ham-sandwich seller even wishes himself a part of the weather: “I do dread the winter so. I’ve stood up to the ankles in snow till after midnight, and till I’ve wished I was snow myself, and could melt like it and have an end” (LL 1:178). Mayhew’s weather banal is a necessary result of studying the habits of those who work and wander outdoors, whose shelter is prone to the elements. But its tendency to slip away from routine to offer reflections on persistent physical distress, and even to blur human and
nonhuman states, embeds a critique of other writing that hardly feels the weather, or treats it only as a source of moral symbols.

Weather’s periodicity and duration pose obstacles to environmental representation that stretch this analysis well beyond the climate of the Victorian era, underlining how ecological thinking is by definition untimely and disjunctive. What Rob Nixon has called the “slow violence” (1–44) of environmental and physiological damage can only be seen or inferred with terrible belatedness, because in the moment such phenomena thwart depiction: their “hushed havoc and injurious invisibility” remain “spectacle deficient” (6, 47). As heirs to anthropogenic climate shifts, we have an unavoidably presentist filter on the Victorian era’s environmental disturbances, what Ruskin called “slow pestilence” (28:464) and Mayhew “slow poison” (“Visit” 4). Earlier I suggested that the imagination of ecological space and scale stalled into visions of material and social stasis. Here an ecological optic discloses, through the convergence of seasonal beauty and weather banality, recurrent cycles and unsettling effects that echo in the present, even if we still misapprehend them as formal surplus or textual background.

These disclosures add “temporality” to the “notion of atmosphere,” as ecological thinking must (Morton 166). They have a startling, dynamic materiality, revealed clearly in Ruskin and Mayhew’s shared obsession with the paper on which they pen and then print their indictments of industrial society. Perhaps uncomfortable about his curious, paper-intensive mode of distributing *Fors Clavigera* through subscription (Stoddart 10–18), Ruskin admits (citing a Report of the Rivers Pollution Commission) that “it is painful for me, as an author, to reflect that, ‘of all polluting liquids belonging to this category (liquid refuse from manufactories), the discharges from paper works are the most difficult to deal with’” (27:607). As Leah Price has richly catalogued (219–228, 246–9), Mayhew is less interested in paper’s by-products than in its potential for circulation and reuse, to the extent of “anticipating its own disposal” (239). Paper returns temporality to the stasis of social position and material being. It operates according to a dynamic whereby recycled wool can be used for both clothing and compost: a beggar’s rags “may be a component of … the library table-cover of a prime-minister”—or a wealthy art-critic—and may also feed the ground “so that we again have the remains of the old garment in our beer or our bread” (LL 2:31, 32). Is it unimaginable that Victorian readers may at some point have consumed, otherwise than by reading, the pages of Ruskin and Mayhew? Ecological time brings full circle the emphasis on the substrates of life and labor that both voluminous texts seek to embody, and carries their particulate matter indirectly into the bodies of the present.

**Networks of ecology**

The spaces and temporalities of the urban environment, I have been arguing, admit of descriptions that both overlap and diverge, in the process disclosing an ecological imaginary with marked moral components and tensions. The emphasis on material stasis that came of thinking through scale in Ruskin and Mayhew shifts, when addressing rhythm and repetition, to an emphasis on material and moral entanglement at longer range. I pause here to assess the mutually informing advantages and flaws of these bodies of writing, which speak to constitutive tensions of ecological thought, before bringing space and time together in an ecological network.

In 1883 Ruskin declared that “all the recent agitation of the public mind, concerning the dwellings of the poor, is merely the sudden and febrile … recognition of the things which I have been these twenty years trying to get recognized” (29:469). But texts like G. R. Sims’s *How the Poor Live* (1883) and Andrew Mearns’s *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883), to which he alludes, merely typify a later phase in representing or “rediscover[ing]” poverty (Thompson 62). These depictions culminated a process begun in Mayhew—the attempt to placate social and sanitary fears flamed by cholera and Chartism—that finally reframed poverty in moralizing, sentimental, or picturesque terms (Thompson 43–5, Andrews 290–2). These accounts, like Ruskin’s, lack the granular detail, compelling voice, and quantitative verve of Mayhew. Ruskin’s ability to vivify abstractions over
time has its advantages, however, not least in his “eco-systemic awareness” (MacDuffie 167), directly apprehending changes that Mayhew was too immersed to see. “One third, at least, in the depth of all the ice of the Alps has been lost in the last twenty years,” Ruskin writes: “the change of climate thus indicated is without any parallel in authentic history. In its bearings on the water supply and atmospheric conditions of central Europe, it is the most important phenomenon, by far, of all that offer themselves to the study of living men of science” (27:635–6; compare 28:443). Ruskin may only have been apprehending the nineteenth-century close of a colder period of climate variability (the “Little Ice Age”), but the observed connection between British industrial activity and shrinking Alpine glaciers is presciently alarming for its sense of rapid, distributed, anthropogenic shifts (Albritton and Jonsson 38–42).

Mayhew’s method could be faulted, conversely, for wildly modulating between scalar extremes: the local detail of individual cases, occupations, and abodes; and the general overview of populations. Mayhew has often been seen as contradictory, pursuing “anti-statistical” methods of generalization (Thompson 58), “non-taxonomical” schemes of categorization (Prizel 434), and “non-typological” representations of subjects and classes (Clayton 28). His corollary advantage, however, is the ability to see physiological effects of changes in urban microclimates. In the course of a long section that focuses not on the poor but on their streets—as a prelude to cataloguing cleaners, orderlies, and sweeps—he expatiates about the quantity of dust and effluvia they contain, and how much of this detritus we inhale daily (LL 2:181–205).

Superimposing these uneven inquiries brings together their different scales and temporalities in something like what Jacques Rancière calls a “sensus communis,” an “aesthetic community” structured by both a “combination of sense data: forms, words, spaces, rhythms” (57) and the conflict between different “regimes of sense” (58). For Rancière these levels—“the assemblage of data and the intertwining of contradictory relations” (58)—aim at renovating a community as both an aesthetic and political object, even if it remains a “community structured by disconnection” (59). The following case study enacts this disjunctive overlap in a vision of ecological community that could be described, according to Rancière’s memorable phrase, as “being together apart” (59).

One of Mayhew’s most vivid studies involves girls who sell watercress. An informant assures him that “it would make your heart ache if you was to go to Farringdon-market early, this cold weather, and see the poor little things there without shoes and stockings, and their feet quite blue with the cold” (LL 1:149). Like other street-sellers, the watercress girl knows nature only as a market force—“In summer there’s lots, and ‘most as cheap as dirt’; “When the snow is on the ground, there’s no creases” (LL 1:151)—and is hard pressed to imagine where her goods come from. “I then talked to her about the parks,” writes Mayhew, “and whether she ever went to them. ‘The parks!’ she replied in wonder, ‘where are they?’” “All her knowledge seemed to begin and end with watercresses, and what they fetched” (LL 1:151).

This pathetic figure sponsored a number of representations in the Victorian period, such as Thomas Miller’s poem “The Water-Cress Seller” (1850) and William Travers’s drama The Watercress Girl (1865). Yet the ecological interest of the type does not stop at the urban borders of her knowledge. Her wares obviously grow somewhere, and in Turner’s drawing of The Watercress Gatherers (Figure 1) we have a representation that discloses the network along which such connections run. In Modern Painters Ruskin groups this drawing with English scenes in Turner’s Liber Studiorum “of a kind peculiarly simple, and of every-day occurrence” (3:236). Three decades later he still sees such images as evincing a “new temper” in Turner, where the “resolute portraiture of whatever is commonplace and matter-of-fact in life” brings “discord … among the grander designs of pastoral and mountain scenery” (13:434). He connects The Watercress Gatherers and others to Turner’s realization “that all is not right with the world,” and speculates about the “conditions of his London life” in forging this sensibility (13:433). These reflections suggest a link between Turner’s scenes of rural or peri-urban life and his youthful experience in the London that Mayhew came to describe.

To link Mayhew’s watercress girl and Turner’s watercress gatherers is also to bring Ruskin’s account of an ethical or “Turnerian Picturesque” (6:14–20) into an urban setting. Building on

accounts that deploy Ruskin’s concept in discussing the “aesthetics of poverty” in mid-Victorian London (Andrews 286–90) and Mayhew’s ennobling, individualizing portraits (Clayton 43–51), I suggest that the drawing and its etching-mezzotint version (Figure 2) exemplify Ruskin’s more critical picturesque. This image describes a circuit, at once economic and ecological, that entangles gatherers and sellers, distant resource extraction and close-quarters consumption. Unlike representations of both gathering and selling that solicit sympathy, Turner’s image presents a visual syntax of interruption and mediation. It includes one individual working in a “brisk” mode and a group chatting in a “slack” moment. It holds our view to the gathering scene at hand but includes a carriage that rides off, umbrella raised, to the scene of sale in London. Thus we move along a chain yoking Ruskin’s aesthetic distraction to Mayhew’s social description:

Consider … what I am doing at this very instant—half-past seven, morning, 25th February, 1873. It is a bitter black frost, the ground deep in snow, and more falling. I am writing comfortably in a perfectly warm room; some of my servants were up in the cold at half-past five to get it ready for me; others, a few days ago, were digging my coals near Durham, at the risk of their lives; an old woman brought me my watercresses through the snow for breakfast yesterday. (27:514)

Any representation is subject to ambient disruption, its present commitments distended to showcase wider and more durable responsibilities. William Hazlitt once suggested that Turner’s images were “too much abstractions of aerial perspective, and representations not so properly of the objects of nature as of the medium through which they are seen” (78n). Moral perception in Ruskin and Mayhew gazes through media that can be variously captured in terms of the spatial metaphors of light and dark and the temporal dynamics of seasonality and routine. In Turner that mediation is stretched along a network that reveals how ecological representation is constitutively non-identical, always here and elsewhere, fixated on one scale while zooming out to another, idling in one temporality while probing others, haranguing a historical moment while reaching out to a future that includes and challenges—us.

What are the broader implications of mapping the sensus communis that links writers like Ruskin and Mayhew? Drawing inspiration from materials in postcolonial and nonhuman-oriented ecology, I suggest their utility for a Victorian ecocriticism that might differ from its Romantic forebears, focusing on urban and industrial environments; differentials of energy production, consumption, and waste; and scales of evolutionary, geologic, and cosmic time consonant with the cataclysm that modern human populations have set slowly in motion.5 Morton’s brief for an “ecology without nature” avoids presuming the categories of ecological analysis, while developing ways to establish, and critique, how writers think about their surroundings. Nixon’s account of “slow violence” similarly keeps in view the long shadow of environmental degradation in which the industrial acceleration of the Victorian era remains crucial, and argues that keeping in view (representation, distraction) is precisely at issue in ecological thinking (8–14).

My emphasis on the ensemble of scales and temporalities, ambience and delay, connection and disjunction, maintains that Victorian texts yield ecological readings in unexpected (even liminal) moments, at the confluence of built and atmospheric, urban and natural environments. In holding steady such entanglements of human and nonhuman, my work also hopes that plumbing the scales and epochs that determine thinking (or struggling to think) at the level of species, climate, and planet will not exclude an attention to ecological dissensus, economic inequality, and what has been described by geographers and environmental historians as capitalism’s imbrication “in the web of life” (Moore). Following the model of the nineteenth-century scientist Luke Howard, who inaugurated the study of urban climate in The Climate of London (1815) and also furnished the explanation of cloud classifications we use today in On the Modifications of Clouds (1803), we should juxtapose the aesthetics of Victorian writing about “natural” forms alongside studies of urban environments. Tracing the jagged lines of ecological networks that make an epithet like “the clouds and the poor” provocative could offer a fuller representation of the systems that writers like Ruskin and Mayhew were trying, piecemeal, to describe and to change.
Notes

1. See Williams for an account of how Ruskin’s cloud studies blend political and aesthetic figuration, and promote an “environmental stance” that “turns on how the liberty of persons relates to large-scale systems and collectivities” (171).
2. Mayhew’s project was “essentially collaborative” (Prizel 434), relying on informants and Richard Beard’s photographic assistance, and maintaining a public correspondence on its 1850–52 wrappers (Thompson 54–6).
3. For analysis and statistics relating to this phenomenon see Jones (33–51, 376–8).
4. Andrew Halliday, not Mayhew, wrote this section of volume 4.

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