

## THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

## Reading for Atmosphere: A Pedagogical Approach

THOMAS SORENSEN

The rising threat of ecological collapse has granted atmosphere, the cohesive mood of a text or place, a newly prominent place in the humanities. The dominant approach examines lines of continuity between the atmospheres in the sky and the more ethereal atmospheres compounded in the printed page. Since the late eighteenth century, mist, clouds, and fog have circulated as tropes for the aesthetic atmospheres of English literature; and English literature has grown increasingly atmospheric as mist, clouds, and fog have taken on the symbolic weight of the Industrial Revolution and its smog-laden skies. Jesse Oak Taylor suggests that there might be “an actual relationship between the literal and literary senses of the term” that could help critics respond to the Anthropocene and the challenges it presents to traditional distinctions between nature and culture (7). Jayne Elizabeth Lewis shows that literary atmosphere developed hand in hand with the natural science of air through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> A distinct (but not separate) branch of ecocriticism, centered on the work of the German philosopher Gernot Böhme, promotes atmosphere as the basis of an environmentally responsible sensibility. For Böhme, atmosphere brings us into a nonexploitative relationship with our environments on the basis of a physical existence that people hold in common with the trees and grass (89–97, 103–08). Kate Rigby adapts Böhme’s philosophy into a contemplative eco-poetics, emphasizing the power of literature to activate atmosphere’s ethical affordances.

Literary studies has, then, a solid intellectual history of atmosphere. And we have a strong account of how atmosphere might cultivate ecologically sensitive habits of perception. But critics are still working to articulate even the most basic strategies for analyzing atmospheric effects. This is probably because atmosphere never received the formalist treatment that, at the inception of literary

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studies, adapted other basic literary terms to the methods of practical criticism—narrative, description, tone, meter, imagery, theme, and so on. Under the New Critics, atmosphere suffered neglect—on account of its nebulousness, yes, but also because it was so strongly associated with the Romanticism that the New Critics defined themselves against. William Empson famously places atmosphere beyond systematic access, a quaint fanaticism “particularly suited” to the nineteenth century (20; see 17–20). We still don’t know how atmosphere *works*—how authors write atmospherically, how they coax it into saliency.

The rich contextualization that atmosphere has recently received lacks a corresponding depth of close reading. I propose a set of practical terms, principles, and rules of thumb that critics may draw on in articulating atmospheric effects. To this end, I have chosen to structure my contribution as a sample lesson plan instead of a conventional essay: my aim rests primarily with sculpting public habits of reception, and this process takes place most naturally in the classroom. Atmosphere remains hard to teach. I have seen introductory English syllabi with units on plot, genre, meter, and character, but never on atmosphere. I hope, then, to make atmosphere accessible to students as well as critics. This lesson plan is based on a course I have taught myself. I have selected as my reading Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, but any atmospheric text would do. The lesson plan is designed for a small-to-midsize enrollment (fifty students or fewer), and could be as short as one and a half hours or as long as three, depending on how much time the instructor devotes to discussion and how many passages they analyze.

Before class starts, I ask every student to send me one passage from the reading that strikes them as being particularly atmospheric. I select two or three and sketch out provisional analyses for myself. These will be the passages that we discuss at the end of class. After a brief conversation just to get a sense of what ideas students already have about atmosphere, I start off with a simple exercise. I show students (using slideshow software) a picture of a lemon and I ask them if it is fast or slow. If students

ask for additional guidance, I tell them to just go with their guts. Anything more would interfere with the experiment. The whole point is to test whether seemingly arbitrary, subjective associations are in fact arbitrary or subjective. About two-thirds to three-quarters consistently say the lemon is fast. I then display two images, one of sandpaper and one of satin, and ask students which they would call “kiki,” which “bouba.” They overwhelmingly match sandpaper with “kiki,” satin with “bouba.” I inform the class that we have just replicated (or not), in our own provisional laboratory, two experiments from the cognitive sciences (Woods et al.; Etzi et al.). This exercise catches students off guard and grants an empirical solidity to a subject matter that constantly risks dissolving into vagueness.

I then ask, What is the basis of these correspondences? Why do people for the most part agree that lemons are fast, sandpaper is “kiki?” I’ve so far been lucky enough to have at least one student capable of linking the correspondences together through bodies of subsidiary associations. Lemons are yellow; we associate yellow with happiness; when people are happy, they tend to talk and gesticulate faster than usual. Lemons are acidic; acid is sharp; sharp things often move quickly, like arrows and swords. The associations that might arise even from a single lemon are vast. There is no way we could compute them one by one. So our brains organize them into a feeling, an impression, which we take in all at once as a unified whole. No two things elicit the exact same impression. A lemon feels different from a prune, which feels different from “kiki,” which feels different from “bouba.” I quickly walk students through a few of the more famous theorizations of these impressions, including Jakob Böhme’s “signatures” (*signatura rerum*) and George Santayana’s “essences” (41). But the term I prefer to use, following Jan Zwicky, comes from medieval theology: *haecceity*, the “thisness” of a thing (166).

Haecceities, I explain, are a lot like flavors. There is no way to describe how a lemon tastes to someone who has never tasted a lemon—it’s just lemony. But we do have descriptors that many different flavors have in common: sweet, bitter, tangy, and so on. And these descriptors are useful,

especially in analyzing how, for instance, chefs generate certain gustatory effects. The same goes for haecceities. There is no way to describe the haecceity of a tree—it's just the feeling of tree-ness. But the English language does have descriptors that overlap among many different haecceities. Rain, the color blue, and nighttime are all sad and calming; sunny skies, the color yellow, and balloons are all happy. And these descriptors are useful in analyzing aesthetic effects. I show students a list of common descriptors: calm, serene, contemplative, bucolic, blithe, comforting, warm, happy, jovial, excited, ecstatic, agitated, grating, angry, rough, rugged, gritty, grungy, raunchy, foul, creepy, spooky, tense, anxious, bitter, sad, mournful, dreary, bleak, grim, solemn, grand, and mystical. I color-code my list, proceeding through the spectrum from a blue "calm" through a yellow "happy" to a red "angry" to a lighter shade of blue for "mystical." This emphasizes that different affective descriptors shade into one another just as colors do.

I show students a picture of a moon and have them describe its haecceity. I limit them to the descriptors on the list. Otherwise, it would be impossible to point out any consistencies and outliers among their individual impressions. Students usually choose descriptors such as calm, serene, contemplative, spooky, sad, mournful, solemn, and mystical. Descriptors like ecstatic or rugged remain, for the most part, ignored. This exercise goes to show that different people tend to attribute similar affective profiles to the same objects. Similar, but not the same: my impression of a lemon is probably somewhat different from yours. No two minds have all the same experiences, and so no two minds imbue any given object with the same associations. After all, there are people for whom lemons feel slow. But we can say that enough of a consistency exists for authors to elicit atmospheric effects with some degree of reliability.

The next slide displays a short poem by Wang Wei:

I sit secluded in bamboo.  
One pluck: the lute string long resounds.  
To this deep grove that no one knows,  
The bright moon comes and shines. (my trans.)<sup>2</sup>

We have four lines, each centered on a single image: bamboo; a lute string echoing; a deep, unknown grove; and a moon. I have one small group of students describe the haecceity of the bamboo, another the lute, and a third the grove (we've already done the moon together), recording descriptors privately to themselves. After thirty seconds or so, each group shares its list. Students will most likely assign all three images an overlapping body of descriptors: calm, serene, contemplative, solemn, and mystical. Wang Wei, then, observes a high level of resonance among haecceities. When haecceities resonate, they enhance one another. We aren't usually conscious of haecceities. But when all the haecceities in a given work are similar, they come into saliency. We notice them more easily, we feel them more intensely, than usual.

The next slide displays the same Wang Wei poem from before, but with a different last line: "A puppy runs in, tail wagging." I point out that this last line introduces a discordant affective profile. When haecceities contrast, the result is a dissonance that resolves into a comic or disturbing quality. We quickly analyze one of the student-selected passages together that contains a strong contrast among haecceities. When, for instance, Robinson describes a "deep woods" as being "dark and stiff and as full of their own odors as the parlor of an old house," the tenor and the vehicle carry dissonant affective profiles (*Housekeeping* 98). The "deep woods" are creepy, spooky, tense, and anxious; the parlor of an old house suggests warmth and comfort. Robinson could have selected a cellar or a basement. The "parlor" is deliberate. She wants us to compare the deep, dark woods to the coziest, most welcoming room in a house. And the effect is a disturbing quality that only enhances the creepiness and the spookiness of the deep, dark woods.<sup>3</sup>

After we have defined haecceities and considered how haecceities interact (resonance, contrast), we talk about how these interactions generate atmosphere. Whenever the reader attends to something, they experience its haecceity. But when the attention turns to something else, the haecceity doesn't go away. It lingers, like an odor in the air, and tinges what comes next. For how long, though? I ask my students. For a sentence? For a paragraph? For a

page? I suggest that haecceities remain present to us, if only as a haze in the background of awareness, for as long as we read. And as more and more objects occupy and then desert the light of our attention, their haecceities blend into one another. Just as, in a spice cupboard, cinnamon mixes with turmeric and nutmeg into a unified odor, so all these different haecceities form a unified feeling that haunts the background or periphery of reception. This background, peripheral feeling is atmosphere. Atmosphere is the sum total of all the haecceities that have occupied and departed the attention.

In the Wang Wei poem, for instance, the reader first encounters the bamboo and experiences its haecceity. Then the attention turns to line two with the echoing lute string. But the bamboo hasn't gone away. It's still with the reader—in the form of a background atmosphere that conditions the way we take the lute string in. The lute feels different because it comes right after the bamboo. Then, in line three, bamboo and lute merge in an atmosphere of calm serenity through which we receive the deep grove. In line four, the deep grove merges with the bamboo and lute as the atmosphere in which we receive the bright moon. When the half-conscious atmosphere in the background and the fully conscious haecceity in the foreground have a similar affective profile, a subtle but arresting harmony transpires. A domain of experience that follows us only stealthily through daily life emerges into rare and brilliant saliency.

We have so far discussed only one kind of haecceity: imagery. But there are other kinds too: diction, syntax, meter, rhythm, cadence, character, setting—any characteristic of literary form, really. The instructor can give students a list that they want to focus on, or they can ask the class to generate a list of its own. It might be helpful to consider a few examples from the reading—Sylvie for character, Fingerbone for setting, and so forth. The class will then be ready to jump in and analyze some of the passages they have selected. The following has, in my experience, worked quite well:

Sometimes in the spring the old lake will return. One will open a cellar door to wading boots floating

tallowy soles up and planks and buckets bumping at the threshold, the stairway gone from sight after the second step. The earth will brim, the soil will become mud and then silty water, and the grass will stand in chill water to its tips. Our house was at the edge of town on a little hill, so we rarely had more than a black pool in our cellar, with a few skeletal insects skidding around on it. A narrow pond would form in the orchard, water clear as air covering grass and black leaves and fallen branches, all around it black leaves and drenched grass and fallen branches, and on it, slight as an image in an eye, sky, clouds, trees, our hovering faces and our cold hands.  
(Robinson, *Housekeeping* 5)

I start off by asking students to describe the atmosphere of the passage as a whole using descriptors from the list. We quickly assemble a consensus on the board. Then I ask how Robinson generates this atmosphere—a difficult question, so I give students five to ten minutes to think it through, either on their own or in groups. Then we open up discussion.

One problem I sometimes run into is that students will mistake any contrast whatsoever for a contrast between haecceities. When this happens, it is necessary to stress that two images can look completely different while having similar haecceities. Rain is gray-blue, cold, and wet; paper is white, warm, and dry; but falling rain and papers ruffling in a draught both suggest a comparable sense of serenity and sadness. Students also tend to focus too much on imagery, and so I often find that I have to prompt them to speak about the other formal devices as well. If I want students to discuss cadence, for example, I might isolate the phrase “a few skeletal insects skidding around on it.” Students then have little trouble noticing for themselves the preponderance of *sk* sounds. The instructor might ask, What is the haecceity of the *sk* sound? Would you say this haecceity resonates or contrasts with the atmosphere as a whole? My own view is that *sk* sounds are excited, agitated, grating, and rough, and this contrasts sharply with the overall serenity and bleakness in a disturbing effect that introduces a subtle undercurrent of anxiety that Robinson carefully maintains throughout the novel.

For narrative voice, I might isolate the opening sentence: “Sometimes in the spring the old lake will return.” The first half, “sometimes in the spring,” sounds friendly and conversational, generating a blithe, comforting, and warm affective profile, while the second half, “the old lake will return,” sounds foreboding and oracular, suggesting solemnity and grandeur. Robinson could have chosen an entirely blithe and warm phrasing: “Sometimes, in the spring, the old lake might come back.” She also could have chosen an entirely grand and solemn phrasing: “There are times, in spring, when the old lake will return.” But the contrast serves a purpose. Robinson is constantly setting up positive, lively haecceities and undermining them with negative, somber ones. The atmosphere comprises a disturbing sense of a serenity rotting from within, of a persistent though subtle background anxiety.

If there is time, it might bring about a sense of closure to consider how atmosphere and theme match up. I ask, What are some of the major themes in this text? I then make a list, choose the most interesting one, and ask, Why would the author use this atmosphere to go along with this theme? In the case of *Housekeeping*, why might Robinson use a serene anxiety or anxious serenity to express the relationship between the human species and our more-than-human environments?

Robinson grew up in Idaho. She loves her home state and wants to pass this love on to her readers. In fact, part of the reason she started writing in the first place was to help her New England friends “understand how rich and powerful a presence a place can be which, to their eyes, is forbidding and marginal” (“Wilderness” 246). The stakes were high. Forbidding and marginal landscapes are where the modern industrial state conceals its dirtiest business. Idaho, home to the Idaho Nuclear Engineering Laboratory, caps that region of the West most emblematic of America’s nuclear history: “Idaho, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico. These names are all notorious among those who know anything at all about nuclear weapons” (246).

Robinson, then, promotes her love for Idaho because she wants to save wilderness regions from the worst offenses of modern industry: “The best

defense, the best sort of on-the-ground defense for any landscape is to have people love it” (“Radiant Astonishment” 116–17). At first, this sounds like a familiar argument of first-wave ecocriticism that has fallen into disfavor: if we cultivate personal attachments to local landscapes, then we will protect them as extensions of ourselves.<sup>4</sup> But Robinson is arguing for something different: a Christian self-abnegation that beholds the land in its uncompromising alterity. “All love is in great part affliction,” a wounding of the self that orients it toward the reception of grace: “My bond with my native landscape was an unnameable yearning, to be at home in it, to be chastened and acceptable, to be present in it as if I were not present at all” (“Wilderness” 246). Robinson echoes here Simone Weil’s famous aphorism, “to see a landscape as it is when I am not there. . . . When I am in any place, I disturb the silence of heaven and earth by my breathing and the beating of my heart” (Weil 42). Love, in these terms, inspires us to make ourselves as small and inconspicuous as possible so that something else can exist.

It is atmosphere, in *Housekeeping*, that stimulates this self-abnegating sort of love, and it is through love that we grow more receptive to atmosphere. The Fingerbone landscape is constantly startling Robinson’s characters into heightened states of awareness. “What have I seen, what have I seen,” Ruth’s grandmother muses, coming back inside from her garden: “The earth and the sky and the garden, not as they always are. And she saw her daughters’ faces not as they always were, or as other people’s were, and she was quiet and aloof and watchful, not to startle the strangeness away” (19). She achieves Robinson’s ideal of being in place—a contraction of the self out of reverence for atmosphere and its thrilling strangeness. There is anxiety here, because we expose ourselves to the threat of the unknown. Yet there is serenity as well, because the stubborn obsessions and magnified trivialities that preserve us in mundane complacency dissolve into thin air. The atmosphere of *Housekeeping* is the atmosphere of Idaho, yes. But it is also the atmosphere of love, in Robinson’s conception: a wounding of the ego that braces us to confront the alterity

of the natural world and prepares us to receive God's grace. Robinson hopes to disturb her readers, through atmosphere, into a self-abnegating love for our natural environments. But we have to meet her halfway. We have to welcome her disturbances, and this involves learning how to read atmospherically, attuning our sensibilities to atmosphere and its chastening influence. Then we can come back to *Housekeeping* as a means of edifying ourselves, arduously yet felicitously, in radical ecological commitments and environmentally responsible ways of life.

## NOTES

1. Also see Abramson; Stanley 118–47; and Zhang 61–86.
2. The original reads as follows:

獨坐幽篁里  
彈琴復長嘯  
深林人不知  
明月來相照。

3. Of course, not all students will have spent much time in parlors. Many won't even know what a parlor is. This points to a persistent challenge in reading for atmosphere: haecceities are historically determined, and as history progresses, haecceities change. How, then, can authors reliably evoke atmospheres from readers to come? How can we access the atmospheres of the past? These questions will require deeper consideration from future critics.

4. See Nixon's critique of bioregionalism (236–45) and Heise's critique of place-based eco-poetics (3–16).

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