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## ATMOSPHERE

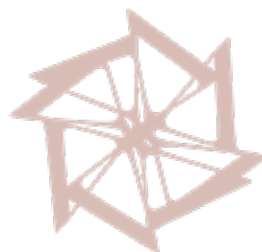
Unmourning Atmosphere:

Mary Webb's Alternate to Elegy

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Henri-Edmond Cross (Henri-Edmond Delacroix), *Landscape with Stars*, ca. 1905 – 1908, Watercolor on white wove paper, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain.

Golden stars amidst a bleak landscape of blues and greens; Henri-Edmond Cross's *Landscape with Stars* seems to meditate upon the uncertain, yet mystical, elements of the world around us. So, too, does Shropshire novelist Mary Webb wax the precarious characteristics of our atmosphere and nature. In "Unmourning Atmosphere: Mary Webb's Alternative to Elegy," Jayne Lewis uses Webb's novels to explore a drastically reduced conception of our natural environment. Atmosphere is not the heavily conceptualized envelope of gases with which we have become familiar. Rather, like stars, atmosphere provides an intimate and expressive presence of individual bodies that persists through a mutually transformative exchange. Emphasizing Mary Webb's writing on discrete bodies and the local atmospheres they create, Lewis urges us to remediate our own vexed, possessive relationship to the atmosphere at large.

- The Editors

# UNMOURNING ATMOSPHERE: MARY WEBB'S ALTERNATIVE TO ELEGY

Jayne Elizabeth Lewis

*For the imagination sees the highway of mortal existence where it ends abruptly, penumbrous, flecked with shade from the heart-shaped leaves of the Tree of Life: and the shadow is the sign that we have come at last within the pale of the tree's mysterious whisperings.*

- Mary Webb, *The Spring of Joy: A Little Book of Healing* (1917)

*In order for a climate to exist, all the elements within a given space must be at once mixed and identifiable—united not through substance, form, or contiguity, but through the same 'atmosphere.'*

- Emanuele Coccia, *"Leaf Theory: The Atmosphere of the World"* (2018)

Because climate change is climate loss, speaking about "the" atmosphere today seems to compel the elegiac mode. Numbers — CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations, methane potentials, time horizons — are the metrics, if not the very meter, of the mourning. Yet because complete loss is still imminent, atmospheric elegy feels fated to participate in what Timothy Morton deems a dark ecology; one must somehow mourn not just what was but what is about to be. In the context of climate change, Morton supposes, complete mourning for our natural environment is impossible precisely "because we are so deeply attached to it." This possessive bond suspends the natural environment's lamented future between two logically contradictory conditions where "there is nothing left for elegy at all" and yet "there is no end to the work of mourning."

Melancholia was the name that Freud gave to the stymied, circular mourning of things that are not quite things but that we stubbornly treat as if they were. (He called them ideals.) Is there any alternative to it? The Shropshire writer Mary Webb (1881-1927) proposed one; her two most significant works on this front even appeared in 1917, the same dark, modernity-defining year of war in which Freud published "Mourning and Melancholia." Its shadow status in relation to the modernist literary canon — and modernist theories of atmosphere — notwithstanding, Webb's writing experiments with a conception of "atmosphere" that is uniquely specific, generative, and diverse. Indeed, the radically graphic forms of that writing transfigure dark ecology into bright shadow, an ever-present aura birthed perpetually from conspiracy between the linguistic medium and the bodies that speak through it.

Webb is occasionally likened to one of the exemplars of Morton's dark ecology, the environmental fatalist Thomas Hardy. But a more important, if implicit, interlocutor was yet another contemporary: Walter Benjamin. Often mediated in his own writing through the figure of the shadow, Benjamin's reflections on aura have shaped recent critical theories of atmosphere as an aesthetic category, even as idiosyncratic literary latticework like Webb's has languished beneath that theory's notice. Arising from the printed page rather than from the photographic medium that Benjamin held in fascinated and melancholy contempt, Webb's auratic atmospheres achieve an ironic immediacy. This quality in turn gives rise to affective and aesthetic possibilities undreamed of in our enlightened natural philosophies — possibilities unshadowed by pathos and freed of the will to materialize, to conceptualize, and ultimately to possess.

## I

What modern people call “the atmosphere” became ours through language. As Leo Spitzer observes in one of the many footnotes that ring his influential genealogy of ambiance, “atmosphere” was for the Greeks the “name... invented for the ring or orb of vapor... supposed to be exhaled from the body of a planet and to be part of it, which air itself was not considered to be.” Over time, but specifically with air’s isolation as an object of scientific analysis in the seventeenth-century, “the” atmosphere lost this auratic quality, and its name “was extended to the portion of surrounding air occupied by this, or supposed to be, in any way, within the ‘sphere of the activity’ of the planet, and finally, with the progress of science, to the supposed limited aeriform environment of the earth or any other planetary or stellar body.” We come, almost, full circle: “this ‘surrounding air’ reminds us of *aer ambiens*.”<sup>2</sup> But precisely because our gaseous, quantifiable envelope of surrounding air is a reminder, it also marks our distance from *aer ambiens* — the impossibility of sensing it with the immediacy imagined to have been available to the Greeks. We’re left with dead property.

This sense of loss as an epiphenomenon of enlightenment subtly conditions modern critical theory of atmosphere, where Spitzer (writing in the middle of the technological nightmare of the second world war) remains a key figure. Ironically, it may be because of its prescribed, quasi-scientific detachment from its topic that prose criticism hosts so many poignant reflections “on” atmosphere: one thinks not just of Spitzer but of such undisputed (and oft-cited) *evocateurs* as Hermann Schmitz, Gernot Böhme, Emanuele Coccia. Schmitz’s lyrical 2012 essay on “Atmospheric Spaces,” for example, appreciates atmosphere not as a location within which orientation is possible but as the experience of space “without area.” Because atmospheric spaces are “spanned by ... movement,” they afford volume without dimension.<sup>3</sup> Part of what it is to be atmosphere is to be “without”; put another way, this withoutness is precisely what puts “us” *within* atmosphere, transforming the loss of something (in this case, spatial coordinates) into the ongoing experience of “occupation.” Indeed, for Schmitz, “such area-less spaces are not merely shadow-like side-effects and symptoms of the locational space that is familiar to us, but are rather its indispensable preconditions.”<sup>4</sup> Schmitz’s “atmospheric spaces” are compensatory, but they also replicate the loss for which they compensate. Their preconditional privilege becomes apparent only when their (implicitly derivative) shadow-likeness is devalued.

As confirmed in his essay’s robust if diasporic afterlife in the footnotes of others, Schmitz’s dialectic of not-quite loss and tenuously renewed lease consolidates and seemingly solidifies an international critical community, one that is able to take on a shared sense of “atmosphere” even though its members are so widely distributed in physical space that they may never have breathed the same air. At once gathered and diffuse, this community tends to be phenomenological rather than ontological or epistemological in its philosophical orientation. Often inspired by Benjamin’s impressionistic materialism, it embraces (perhaps is embraced by) the supple genre of critical reverie, fragments of which float from site to site of atmospheric reflection, their temporary coalescences and containments a postmodern compensation for the sense of loss that attends the modern demand for separation and objectivity.

The actual groundlessness of that sense of loss was, of course, a proposition floated in Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), an influential work of postmodern critical theory that begins, interestingly enough, with Latour’s (or his narrator’s) nose buried in the daily newspaper. On its fourth page, he encounters the growing hole in the ozone layer, but by his own page seven he is reassuring himself that, like the ancients, “we too think that the sky is falling. We too associate the tiny gesture of wielding an aerosol spray with taboos pertaining to the heavens. We too have to take laws, power, and morality into account in order to understand what our scientists are telling us about the chemistry of the upper atmosphere.”<sup>5</sup> Almost thirty years on, the “anxieties of ecologists”<sup>6</sup> have been trumped by the anxieties of epidemiologists, the sweeping “we” exposed as a presumption of privilege, and the daily newspaper with its tangible, sequentially numbered pages all but supplanted by the digital cloud. So Latour’s consolations — “our” inevitable mixture with the objects of our

thought means that “we,” having “never been modern,” can’t yet have lost the past — can seem like misdirections. It’s in its atmospherics that *We Have Never Been Modern* turns out to be, well, modern. Something has indeed been lost. It’s sad.

The critical community of modern atmospheric elegists seems to include few women. The unmitigated grief and prophetic furor of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, or Elizabeth Kolbert’s more recent *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*, may be more our style. But here too is a version of elegy, cheated by the impending disappearance of the object it would apostrophize. So perhaps for a true alternative we should try looking nowhere at all. That might be not to theory, to criticism, or to the lyric science writing that dominates literary journalism today, but instead to the more specific and yet less referential — the more speculative and yet less rarefied — art of fiction as practiced in the modern past.

## II

Some time ago now, I was in the midst of mourning someone. She had died young, of one of those melanomas (squamous, odious, insidious); it is hard not to trace to some hole in the ozone layer. In the midst of mourning this friend, I began reading a writer I knew she’d loved, a spinner of fictions whose position at a point of numerous transitions — historical, linguistic, geographic, generic, even bodily — advances her candidacy as an elegist of atmosphere.

Reading Mary Webb isn’t much like reading anybody else; the Virago Press cover of Webb’s best-known novel, *Precious Bane* (1924), quotes the Independent’s baffled verdict that “there is nothing quite like it in English literature.” Indeed there is not. It isn’t even really like itself. Along with the rest of Webb’s fiction — most notably 1917’s *Gone to Earth* — *Precious Bane* has been classified, never with complete conviction, as “rural romance,” as nature writing, as regional literature, as redacted folklore, as secular mysticism, as feminist and even ecofeminist allegory. You could also fix Webb’s work in the lens of disability studies: *Precious Bane*’s protagonist, Prue Sarn, comes off as a witch thanks to her prenatally imprinted harelip, and Webb herself suffered from a disfiguring autoimmune disorder. She died at 46, though not before publishing several popular novels during and just after the First World War. (The so-called “scarlet war,” whose mustard gas lent material form to the first modernist modern atmospheres, is registered aslant in *Gone to Earth* in the menacing figure of its protagonist’s seducer, Jack Reddin.) Webb was not ignored in her time: *Precious Bane* won the Prix Femina Vie Heureuse prize in 1926, netted respectful reviews in high places, and even milked a fan letter out of then-prime minister, Stanley Baldwin. After Webb’s death, whole books were devoted to tracing her Shropshire “haunts.”<sup>7</sup>

Webb looks very much like a writer of place. Her fiction’s invariable setting, the English/Welsh border county of Shropshire, was her birthplace. This “delicate home/of color and light” remained such a home off and on for much of her life. She’s buried there, as happens to be my friend. Yet in Webb’s fiction, Shropshire is never directly named. It’s therefore peripherally recognizable, available only insofar as it is obliquely suggested by fiction that tended to get written from afar, while Webb was living, unhappily but ambitiously, in a flat in Bayswater. Though the preface to *Precious Bane* expresses Webb’s sense of “good fortune in having been brought up in [Shropshire’s] magical atmosphere,” it also suggests that most of the book’s linguistic contacts with that place are derived from “the authors of *Shropshire Folk Lore*,” presumably Charlotte Sophia Burne’s *Shropshire Folklore: A Leaf of Gleanings* (1883).<sup>8</sup> Otherwise, Webb only summons Shropshire as (and through) voice. Dialogue approximates its spoken rhythms and turns of speech; a torqued, unpredictable diegetic syntax both echoes and reshapes — conspicuously remediates — that same unheard dialogue. (“‘*The Maister be come.*’ The words made such a murmur, and were so piercing-sweet, that I wrote them in my book.”<sup>9</sup>)

“Shropshire” itself was felt to be vanishing in Webb’s own day. Vanishing as a linguistically specific region demarcated by a compressed, elliptical dialect that was neither archaic nor new-made, neither familiar nor alien to the ear of convention (“*Maister*,” “*fritten*,” “*summat*”). Vanishing too as a geocultural area that had been slow to industrialize (and self-commodify) relative to other counties in the British archipelago. Recent criticism mainly gauges Webb’s interventions in the politics of

landscape, setting her rural worlds against the establishment of the National Trust or the metastasis of factory farming in the first half of the twentieth-century, finding “opposition between sustainable traditional ways and a destructive modern way of seeing the land.”<sup>10</sup> These are productive ways of thinking about Webb’s relationship to loss, but the aim of this kind of criticism is to cut its own losses — to produce the sort of political and economic critique that can console critics of culture for their near total lack of actual cultural authority. Theme is a commodity in the economy of literary analysis, form a currency in the economy of lamentation.

As an aesthetic category, atmosphere is distinct from form and theme, even as, in its indistinctness, it seems to arise from their interaction. Emanuele Coccia: “the relation between container and contained is endlessly reversible.”<sup>11</sup> But while for the well-accompanied postmodern theorist this dynamic rescues atmosphere into a kind of detached, free-floating phenomenology, for the modern fiction writer it portends isolation and a confrontation with the limits of the linguistic medium. Indeed, while Webb’s “atmospheric spaces” are highly evocative in their “intangible sentimental quality,” they are also often conspicuously artificial. Airtight. Not for the claustrophobic.<sup>12</sup> Glen Cavaliero, the *eminence grise* of Webb studies (such as they are), judges *Precious Bane* frustratingly “remote from ordinary concerns,” projecting “no real sense of an England existing outside [Webb’s] fictional Shropshire.”<sup>13</sup> Webb’s own contemporaries found that “her narrative is strange, fantastic, symbolical,” Webb herself “a rustic” who “neither cares nor is able to dissociate the seen from the unseen.”<sup>14</sup>

This refusal of dissociation arises from circumstances under which the impersonal unseen inexorably orders — even as it mediates — what persons see, whether they are characters who represent embedded and embodied centers of perception “in” Webb’s novels or living readers positioned more or less outside it. It is a strange effect, well-rendered in a contemporary review that characterized *Precious Bane* as “a conceit in the old sense of the word,” akin to “a sampler stitched through long summer evenings in the bay window of a remote farmhouse.”<sup>15</sup> If such analogies oddly reproduce the fusion of perspective and perceived object that we find in Webb’s fiction, they capture a quality that is dissonant — indeed dissentient — from both Webb’s seeming naturalism and her aspirational abstraction. Bending toward the moral and political as often as toward the mystical and interior, this dissonance is only intensified by Webb’s biting wit, though Hardy is most often named a significant influence, she was a more ardent admirer of Jane Austen’s “trenchant wit” and “ladylike Falstaffianism,” enabled as these were by the “circumscribed outlook of her time.”<sup>16</sup>

If Webb imagined that she could meet “our immortal Jane” only “in a problematical Heaven,” her own sentences are mannered, even constrained by their own artifice. “She borrowed shapes and was afraid to put anything inside them,” wrote Ernest Baker in 1936, detecting “a lack in her books of a certain liveliness and assuring feel of reality.”<sup>17</sup> This awkwardness redoubles in light of what has begun to be retrieved and sensitively analyzed as Webb’s mystical “ecopoetics.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, it is felt most strongly in her almost improbably evocative natural atmospheres. “Sunshine, mist, storm sweeping over or enveloping the hills color the human drama and even guide its course,” reported a TLS review of her first novel, *The Golden Arrow*. G.K. Chesterton found in the fiction of “the Shropshire lass” “a light not shining on things but through them” such that “solid things become transparent, a diffused light.”<sup>19</sup> Webb’s only biographer received her “naturalistic allegory” as a non-mimetic, non-reflective treatment of the sensible world, identifying it with the mysticism that Webb cultivated less through exposure to nature than through her reading of figures from Julian of Norwich to Sir Thomas Browne.<sup>20</sup> This genealogy turns individual paragraphs into intricate codes of signatures transmitted through an energy of light that surrounds not just discrete natural objects — flowers, foxes, trees — but people and even pictures as well. Highly individuated, such atmospheres are mimetic in the way that protective coloration is mimetic; they merge the bodies that they surround with a determining environment that also transmits information about them. Such an environment will perforce be most immediately experienced by Webb’s reader as linguistic, as fictitious, and even as lexical. And it’s definitely disorienting, not least because it looks so orienting.

It is difficult to describe Webb’s atmospheric techniques. This is in part because they develop in and through her



Henri-Edmond Cross (Henri-Edmond Delacroix), *Landscape*, n.d. Watercolor over graphite, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain.

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techniques of characterization. The best examples come from *Gone to Earth*, wherein (or whereabouts) an intimately omniscient third-person narrative voice organizes itself around and through the responsive, embodied intelligence of Hazel Woodus, a countrified gypsy's daughter and parson's wife who in a typical passage "turned home. At that moment a note of music strayed... and ran down the silence like a spray of water. The air was lost in distance."<sup>21</sup> Though she seems like a pilot through a web of sensations and atmospheric effects, Hazel here is actually peripheral to the movement of this music; its loss "in distance" makes distance the only possible actor or presence here. Likewise, Hazel Woodus's very name seems to point to something tangible (hazel wood) but the "us" at the end of it shades a seeming noun into the secondary qualities that make things available to sensation.

True to form, Hazel doesn't appear in the opening paragraph of *Gone to Earth*. But then so little does:

Small feckless clouds were hurried across the vast untroubled sky — shepherdless, futile, imponderable — and were torn to fragments on the fangs of the mountains, so ending their ephemeral adventures with nothing of their fugitive existence left but a few tears.<sup>22</sup>

This lucid, almost ruthlessly specific sentence tenders virtually no object of direct perception, apart, maybe, from the little clouds. But clouds are not quite things, hence their steady employment in literature as figures for the atmosphere they also help create. Nor does this sentence, so full of activity, actually hold any active agent: the clouds, if they exist in the first place, "were hurried," but not by anything except perhaps their quality of being hurried. They "were torn," yes, but "on," not by, the "fangs of the mountains" — and which mountains we are never told. Yet despite its vagueness, this remains not only a visual scene but a highly determined, even contrived one. Its elements are perceptibly directed by the invisible medium that conveys them. (Invisibility itself is the attribute the narration will later assign to a "Power... so immanent that it pressed upon the brain."<sup>23</sup>)

*Gone to Earth's* opening lines proleptically echo its closing scene, where brutal hunters and their hounds run Hazel to earth with her pet fox. This fatalism isn't like Hardy's: it's a matter of (saved) appearance. Hence the "ending of [the] ephemeral adventures" of the clouds as if they were appearance, future as if it were past. These fictional effects are realized, and multiplied, in the paragraph's last word. "Tears" connotes both the weeping of an invisible percipient and tatters. Or perhaps readings: the second connotation (tatters) tears again between those two possibilities, extending the word "tears" as an unhearable echo. That echo becomes visible in, through, and against convention: the formal curvature of the printed sentence.

The clouds that begin this sentence end (with) it. Yet they return some pages later as "hill-wanderers" that "were as fiercely pure, as apparently imperishable, as a great ideal. With lingering majesty they marched across the sky, first over the parsonage, then over [Hazel's lover] Reddin, laying upon each in turn a hyacinth shadow."<sup>24</sup> Strikingly, the clouds themselves are never seen. They've been absorbed into Webb's highly artificial image of "hill-wanderer" and into their own adjectival affinity with an "ideal." As for the "hyacinth shadow," at once singular and plural, it too evades direct perception unless as a specific urgency. As such, however, the shadow(s) transform(s) the too-substantive "Reddin" from a character and proper name into a temporal and tonal effect of color (reddening). Eventually "redding" bends into a pun on "reading," which activity proceeds, now in a perceptible passing tense, under the custody of the hyacinth shadow.

As for Reddin and Hazel as characters, they are soon to "kn[o]w a sense of the pressure of night." Within a few pages it will have

appeared to them to stoop nearer, blind, impassive, but intensely aware of them under their dark canopy of leaves. Some Being, it seemed, was listening there, and not only listening, but imposing in an effortless but inevitable way its veiled purpose. Hazel and Reddin — he no less than she — appeared to be deprived of identity, like hypnotic mediums. His hardness and strength took on a pitiful dolt-like air before this prescient power.<sup>25</sup>



Here atmosphere's peripheral, transient, elusive quality mixes with its supreme power as a perceiving and perceptible medium, one distant enough to satirize the "dolt-like air" that Reddin's qualities of "hardness and strength took on," passively, as cloth takes on dye. It is not clear to what or whom Hazel and Reddin "appeared to be deprived of identity," contained within a single "hypnotic medium." But whatever "prescient power" is registered here, it seems to move both Hazel and Reddin out of transience into presence. "Before" modulates from a temporal term implying an "after" to a spatial one meaning "in front of." Loss never quite happens.

We might think of atmosphere as expansive, infinitely reverberant, but Webb's atmospheres, as exemplified here, are writ as vanishingly small as alphabetic characters, realized from there in specific and minute lexical effects. Such effects are experimental enactments of Webb's formal critical remarks on "atmosphere, that whimsical artist," who in a playful 1917 essay "transforms the already brilliant world by clothing things in tints other than their own. ... The haze that clings in the hearts of autumn trees ... lends the trees more loveliness than their own." Amplified in the repetition of "than their own," as it aligns "other" with "more," Webb's slightly forced rendering of "atmosphere" avows what "things" "own" (even if that is only certain "tints") by virtue of their existence through a medium that explicitly makes those things other and more than their own. Webb continues, or possibly reverses: "Near sunset, soft films gather imperceptibly, stealing over everything, so that all colours, while keeping their individuality, are mixed with gold medium. The clearest atmosphere throws a veil over actual things."<sup>26</sup> If the veil turns back to mystical allegory, atmospheric "films" register contemporary changes in the technology of the photograph. Recent chemical innovation had coaxed plates that had spent the nineteenth-century sheathed in a nitrocellulose camphor compound into shedding their skins. The resulting celluloid strips had begun capturing temporal movement through as yet silent film.

The history of photography would soon be bound to critical theory of atmosphere via Webb's contemporary Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's ironically long-lasting 1935 reflections on the "decay" of aura famously trace it to the rise of mechanical reproduction, which is exemplified in the still photograph, though its "most powerful agent is the film." Benjamin's aura makes Webb's atmospheres seem prescient. But unlike Webb, Benjamin renders "aura" as figure of mourning: its decay is arrested and redeemed only in the evocative inscription of its loss — a loss that, in turn, yields the consolations of analytic insight into the material and economic foundations of modern life and art. Hence Benjamin supposes that "the concept of aura... with reference to historical objects may usefully be illustrated with reference to the aura of natural ones." He famously proceeds:

We defined the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, whole resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch. This image makes it easy to comprehend the social bases of the contemporary decay of the aura.<sup>27</sup>

The aura works here as an intratextual teaching aid even as it has subsequently solidified Benjamin's aura into valuable currency in critical writing "on" atmosphere. Such writing seeks an escape from critical objectivity into an experience of tangible presence and expressive community. For instance, echoing Benjamin's suggestion that "to perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return," Gernot Böhme supposes that atmosphere necessarily includes the "affective impact of the observed."<sup>28</sup> Thomas Ford is right — and brilliant — to perceive that in subsequent "atmosphere criticism" Benjamin's historicized aura actually functions ahistorically, since it's through its specification as aura that "atmosphere" becomes translatable, "'breathable here and now' no matter where and when it might be."<sup>29</sup>

This, needless to say, has not been the fate of Webb's auratic atmospheres, which in any case arise from the "type" of mechanical technology of visualization that Benjamin would have blamed for their decay. For Webb, the relevant technology

would be the character-based one of writing, ultimately manifesting in “type” itself.<sup>30</sup> Her female characters often explicitly acquire writing, and they are idiosyncratic, synesthetic readers. As for Webb’s own writing and its reader, the particulates that make up printed lines flow in the manner of “films,” as here: “A star shone through the trees, but it was not a friendly star. It was more like a stare than a tear.”<sup>31</sup> As “star” literally modulates into “stare” and away from “tear,” distance presents — is characterized — as intimacy.

In turn, at the level of characterization, “aura” at once surrounds living bodies and removes them. Hazel senses not her upright husband Edward’s body but rather his “presence, in the aura of which no harm could come.”<sup>32</sup> Such specifications, like the shading of “star” toward “stare,” identify individual characters with the medium that communicates them to Webb’s reader. Hence Webb’s attention to their specific, personal “atmosphere[s].” Hazel’s Bible-thumping mother-in-law is endowed with “that most adamantine thing — an unsympathetic atmosphere”<sup>33</sup>; the predatory Jack Reddin likewise “took his own atmosphere with him.”<sup>34</sup> Hazel herself, who moves “regardless of direction,”<sup>35</sup> does so through a different atmosphere, one that aligns her with Webb’s own medium: “Light seemed to be her natural sphere,”<sup>36</sup> and Edward knows “the charmed circle of her presence”<sup>37</sup>; “pictures [of her] c[o]me dimly yet radiantly before him”<sup>38</sup> and she herself recognizes that “I be like a picture”<sup>39</sup>: “How like a sacred picture she looked,”<sup>40</sup> Edward thinks, and “the blue sky received his certainty.”<sup>41</sup> Just so, “the light poured on [her] as it does from a burning-glass held over a leaf. It burned steadily on her, and then was moved, as if by an invisible hand.”<sup>42</sup>

As techniques of characterization, such human atmospheres seem to transpose the haloes of the medieval saints into an equally naturalistic and aesthetic key. It’s a naïvely conspicuous effect when set alongside Benjamin’s subtleties, but this does not make it less effective. Indeed, the differences speak to literary fiction’s potential as a participating elucidator — a realizer — of atmosphere. As Benjamin would be, Webb was interested in shadows as atmospheric figures. *Gone to Earth*’s “hyacinth shadow” makes explicit and active the “as if” implicit in Benjamin’s melancholy “as when” rendering of aura via the shadow of a distant branch. Proleptically *contra* Benjamin, Webb’s 1917 essay “The Beauty of Shadow” proposes that, far from being the phenomenon of distance, “shadow is one of the easiest to perceive of all nature’s beauties. As one may see the charm of a profile for the first time when looking at a silhouette, so one becomes aware of the perfection of a natural outline more quickly by seeing it drawn in one colour. ... Without shadow things would seem unreal, unbreathing as figures in a dream... With it come reality and rounded loveliness. It is only the bare winter tree, the barren heart, that are shadowless.”<sup>43</sup> Webb’s transition from sensation and perception to morality and affect simulates the shadow’s transition between the impression of unreality and the impression of reality. These are all matters of “becom[ing] aware” of specific bodies within a single medium that is shared by the seer and the seen. This awareness is immediately manifested in the shadow that communicates it.

A bit like Peter Pan’s shadow, Benjamin’s aura detached itself from three rich discursive contexts, two of which Webb allowed to color and shape her fiction, while the third is outlying modern fiction like Webb’s. One such context was that of contemporary spiritualism, diffused through the publications of such female-dominated organizations as the Oxford Psychological Society. (Their investigations were occasionally conducted through visual art, as in the case of the abstract, presciently modern spirit paintings of the Victorian medium and automatic writer Georgianna Houghton.) British women’s writing on mysticism also pursued the idea of aura as at once the expression of an individual and the property of the medium that conveys it. Notable here: Evelyn Underhill, who began her literary career as a novelist before turning to popular explications of mysticism. Webb owned a great many of her great many books.

Second, the aura was an object of scientific and medical knowledge that united a far-flung community of British and American physicians and chemists during and after the first world war. Drawing on recent photographic innovations, they developed technologies for detecting and measuring what their pioneer, Walter Kilner, called “an exceedingly faint haze [that] can be seen extending outwards a very long distance” from the human body. This haze “gives the impression that we are aware of its presence but are not quite able to distinguish it.”

Kilner entitled his 1911 study *The Human Atmosphere* so as to set “the subject apart from all occultism.” In declaring his eponymous “human atmosphere” to be “the prototype of the halo or nimbus constantly depicted around the saints,” Kilner both premodernized the secular, electromagnetic aura and conferred a kind of aura on his own aura photographs as “made visible” — read: objective, even “real” — on and through his patented Kilnascreen.<sup>44</sup> “I always associate a halo with part of the uniform of a saint,” wrote Kilner’s disciple Oscar Bagnall, “something unreal and ‘pictured strange in musty unread book.’ The haze with which I intend to deal is no saintly decoration, but shines forth alike both from the just and the unjust.”<sup>45</sup> From a historicist and materialist perspective, we might say that, as screens, dyes, lenses, and electrical currents replaced that strangely pictured “saintly decoration,” the aura was democratized, or that its transit from unreality to material reality made it the property of watercolor manufacturers, laboratory technicians, photographers. But it also reveals itself as the property of the medium that transmits it. It is “symbolically,” Ursula Roberts would note, that the “radiations” revealed through the Kilnascreen “can be defined as the field of electricity which every individual manufactures from the materials at its disposal.”<sup>46</sup>

Webb’s fiction shows individuals engaged in this process as they move through the fictive medium that literally symbolize them. It’s via sentences that synthesize — might even be said to synesthetize — Bagnall’s disparaged “unreal” into a condition of presence that Hazel Woodus passes through “narrow ways, lit on either side by the breath-taking freshness of new hawthorn leaves.” Primroses “eyed [her], as Madonnas might.” Eventually she finds herself inside “a shop where sacred pictures were displayed. ... There was one of an untidy woman sitting in a garden of lilies — evidently forced — talking to an anemic-looking man with ... a phosphorescent head. Hazel did not know about phosphorus or haloes, but she remembered how she had gone into the kitchen one night in the dark and screamed at the sight of a sheep’s head on the table, shining with a strange greenish light. This picture reminded her of it.” Hazel doesn’t “like this shop.” That’s because “perhaps she had seen in her dim and childish way the everlasting tyranny of the material over the abstract.”<sup>47</sup>

Here the material and the abstract, phosphorous and halo, perception and percipient blend within the same discriminating yet indiscriminate scrim. Hazel herself is lit by “a green flame of passionless devotion to loveliness as seen in inanimate things.”<sup>48</sup> But “glow-worms” also “shone incandescently in the long grass, each with her round, wonderful greenish lamp at its brightest.” Themselves neither animate nor inanimate — suspended between the insect genus *lampyridae* and lamps themselves — the glow-worms are then said to register the “very remote personality... that lit those lamps.”<sup>49</sup> The same impersonal personality illuminates Hazel, who looks away from the glow-worms only to see what “she thought... was an angel just beginning to appear,” a “phantom” that “shone as the glow-worms did” and “had a strange effect, standing there bathed in its own light... shining with the phosphorescence of corruption.”<sup>50</sup> The phantom might turn out to “be” a tree but women, worms, angels, pictures, trees, and phantoms all serve, reveal, and are conveyed through the film, the haze, the veil of the same medium.

What response does this sense of atmosphere elicit? Not elegy, exactly. The subtitle of Webb’s “little book of healing” essays on color, light, and shadow promises wholeness when we embrace those unsustainable qualities of atmosphere. The moving lines of her fictions realize them not as a lingering past but as a present future.

## NOTES

1. Timothy Morton, "The Dark Ecology of Elegy," *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, ed. Susan Weisman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 252-4
2. Leo Spitzer, "Milieu and Ambiance: An Essay in Historical Semantics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 3 (1942), 188.
3. Hermann Schmitz, "Atmospheric Spaces/Espaces atmosphériques" (2012), trans. Margret Vince. *Ambiances* 2016 [online <https://doi.org/10.4000/ambiances7.11>], 2-3.
4. *Ibid.*, 3.
5. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Harvard: Harvard UP, 1993), 7.
6. *Ibid.*, 11.
7. See W. Byford-Jones, *The Shropshire Haunts of Mary Webb* (Shrewsbury: Wilding and Son, 1948), atmospherically billed on its cover as "charming in matter as in appearance" but seldom able to track down a local who actually remembered or had ever heard of Webb.
8. Mary Webb, "Foreword," *Precious Bane* (London, Virago, 2014), 6.
9. *Ibid.*, 112.
10. Simon White and Owen Davies, "Tradition and Rural Modernity in Mary Webb's Shropshire: *Precious Bane* in Context." *The Space Between Literature and Culture, 1914-1945* 15 (2019), 12. See also Danielle E. Price, "Controlling Nature; Mary Webb and the National Trust." *Clio: A Journal of Literature, History, and the Philosophy of History* 43 (2014), 225-52.
11. Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants; A Metaphysics of Mixture*, trans. Dylan J. Montanari (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018), 29.
12. Erika Duncan, "Rediscovering Mary Webb." *Book Forum* 4 (178), 27.
13. Glen Cavaliero, *The Rural Tradition in The English Novel, 1900-1935* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 138.
14. Gerald Gould, *New Statesman* (29 September 1917), cit. Coles, 178-9.
15. John Franklin, *New Statesman* (30 August 1924), cit. Coles 271.
16. Mary Webb, "Our Immortal Jane." Unpublished MS. Mary Webb Digital Archive. RM009: 10.
17. Ernest Baker, *The History of the English Novel* (London: H., F., and G. Withley, 1936), 221.
18. Rosalind Davie offers a sensitive, linguistically nuanced reading of Webb's "pantheism and nature spiritualism" in "The Other Side of Silence; The Life and Work of Mary Webb." PhD. Dissertation, University of Gloucestershire, 2018.
19. G.K. Chesterton, Introduction to *The Golden Arrow* (Jonathan Cape, 1928), 8.
20. Gladys Mary Coles, *The Flower of Light: A Biography of Mary Webb* (London: Duckworth, 1928), 116.
21. Webb, *Gone to Earth* (Cirencester, UK: Echo, 2004 [1917]), 103.
22. *Ibid.*, 3.
23. *Ibid.*, 60.
24. *Ibid.*, 83.
25. *Ibid.*, 113.
26. Mary Webb, *The Spring of Joy: A Little Book of Healing* (London and Toronto: JM Dent, 1917), 107.
27. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Mariner 2019), 188.
28. Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, ed. Jean Paul Thibault (New York: Routledge, 2017), 23.
29. Thomas Ford, "Aura in the Anthropocene." *symplokē* 21 (2013), 69.

30. For a palpable sense of Webb's interiority to her own writing as it has adapted itself to a new media atmosphere, one could do worse than visit the holograph manuscripts preserved in Stanford's Mary Webb digital archive: <http://marywebb.stanford.edu/contacts/index.html>.
31. Webb, *Gone to Earth*, 114.
32. *Ibid.*, 152.
33. *Ibid.*, 50.
34. *Ibid.*, 95.
35. *Ibid.*, 95.
36. *Ibid.*, 68.
37. *Ibid.*, 72.
38. *Ibid.*, 74.
39. *Ibid.*, 77.
40. *Ibid.*, 79.
41. *Ibid.*, 81.
42. *Ibid.*, 98.
43. Webb, *The Spring of Joy*, 97.
44. Walter John Kilner, *The Human Atmosphere, or, The Aura Made Visible by the Aid of Chemical Screens* (New York, Rebman), 82.
45. Oscar Bagnall, *The Origin and Properties of the Human Aura* (York Beach, Main: Samuel Weiser, 1937), 6.
46. Ursula Roberts, *The Mystery of the Human Aura* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1989 [1950]). Original Emphasis.
47. Webb, *Gone to Earth*, 56.
48. *Ibid.*, 104.
49. *Ibid.*, 105.
50. *Ibid.*, 106.

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