



Gaston Bachelard (1943)

## air and dreams

### I.

Clouds are numbered among the most oneiric of "poetic things." They are the objects of daytime oneiric experience. They call forth easy, ephemeral reveries. In an instant we are "in the clouds," and then we come back down to earth, gently teased by positivists. No dreamer attributes to clouds the solemn significance of other sky "signs". In short, the reverie of clouds has a particular psychological characteristic: it is a reverie without responsibility.

The first thing that we notice about this reverie is that it is, as has so often been said, an easy play of form. Clouds provide imaginary matter for a lazy modeller. We dream them as a light cotton batting that rearranges itself. Reverie—as children often practice it—controls a changing phenomenon

15.

by giving it a command that has already been carried out or is being carried out. "Great elephant! Stretch out your trunk," says the child to the cloud that is growing longer. And the cloud obeys.

To account for the importance of the cloud in religious themes in India, Bergaigne writes quite correctly: "The cloud that envelops these waters is not only billowing and dripping, but even moving, and seems quite ready to play animal games." If the night's zoomorphism is stable in the constellations, the day's zoomorphism is undergoing constant change in the clouds. The dreamer always has a cloud to transform. The clouds help us to dream of transformation.

The authoritarian nature of reverie cannot be overemphasised; it is given as the most effortless of creative powers. This reverie works by way of the eyes. Meditated in the right way, it can shed light on the close relationship between will and imagination. Faced with this world of changing forms in which the will to see goes beyond passive vision and projects the most simplified of beings, the dreamer is master and prophet. He is the prophet of the moment. He tells, in



a prophetic voice, what is currently going on before his very eyes. Should there be, in some corner of the sky, matter that will not conform, other clouds have already prepared the preliminary outlines that the imagination will eventually complete. Our imaginary desire is attached to an imaginary form filled with imaginary matter. All the elements, certainly, are good for healing reverie. The whole world can be brought to life by the command of a hypnotic gaze. But with clouds the task is grandiose and easy at the same time. In this globular mass, everything rolls on just as you please. Mountains glide, avalanches fall and then regain their composure; monsters swell up and devour each other; the whole universe is governed by the will and by the imagination of the dreamer. (...)

#### IV.

Goethe has written a passage in which he gives a detailed analysis of the imagination of clouds. After lengthy reflections on the word of

16.

Howard, the English meteorologist, the poet seems to be drawn to another view of nature through poetic inspiration. Stratus, Cumulus, Cirrus, and Nimbus provide us with four direct images that are experienced in a manifest ascensional psychology.

Stratus. When from the water's most peaceful mirror a mist arises and unfolds as a single lament, the moon, linked with the watering phenomenon, seems like a phantom that creates other phantoms: then, o nature, we are all entranced and delighted children, we admit. Then it rises next to the mountain, piling up layer upon layer, it casts a shadow at a distance over all of the middle region, as ready to fall in the form of rain as it is to rise as a vapour.

Cumulus. And if the imposing mass is called into the upper regions of the atmosphere, the cloud stops in a magnificent sphere. In its determined form it proclaims its power to act, and what you fear and even what you experience is a threat above; below it is trembling.

Cirrus. But a noble impulse makes it rise even higher. An easy, divine constraint delivers it. A mass of clouds is broken up into flakes, like bounding sheep, a light combed multitude. Thus, what comes gently to life down here, up above finally flows with no sound into the lap and the hand of the Father.

Nimbus. And what is amassed up above, drawn by the earth's force, is hurled down in the fury of thunderstorms, spread out and dispersed in legions. The active and passive destiny of the earth! But lift up your gaze with the image: the word descends, for it describes. The spirit wants to rise to where it lives forever.

Gift. And when we have made this distinction, we out to attribute the gifts of life to the thing that has been separated out and rejoice in a continuous life.

There fore, if the painter or the poet, familiar with Howard's analysis, contemplates the atmosphere in the morning and evening hours, he allows its nature to subsist; but aerial worlds give him sweeter, more varied tones that can be grasped, felt, and expressed.

17.

The reader may be disturbed by the mixture of abstract ideas and images that are found in this passage. But looking at it more closely, he will be struck by the pluralism of the cloud's imaginary substance. By pursuing this pluralism even further, he can truly relate to the life of clouds. In this way, reverie can establish a further distinction between rolling cumulus and rumbling cumulus, namely a distinction between game and threat. In the Nimbus, caught between rising and falling, many different reveries are also in preparation. In any case, in reading Goethe, we should recognise that contemplating a cloud's form is not enough for a complete analysis of cloud reverie. Cloud reverie is a more profound participation; it attributes to thee cloud a material that is either gentle or menacing, a potential for action, or for self-effacement and peace. (...) Mythology is a primitive meteorology.