

# 'HAVING BEEN THERE' THE MATERIALITY OF CLOUDS

Gemma Brace

*Nimbus – cloud*

*Nubes – a cloud*

*Nubis – of a cloud*

*Nubi – to or for a cloud*

*Nube – by/with or from a cloud<sup>1</sup>*



*I see them as temporary sculptures of almost nothing –  
the edge of materiality ...*

*It looks like you can dive into them or grab them,  
but they just fall apart.<sup>2</sup>*

Imagine if you could hold a cloud, reaching upwards to delicately cradle its fraying edges between two hands. But then the sky would be empty: it was a perfect day not a cloud in the sky.

But what is the sky without clouds? Without clouds there is no sense of space or time to the vastness above us. If nothing has 'been there'<sup>3</sup> then how do we relate our past to our present. The exhibition 'Air' considers how we 'visualise the invisible', albeit referring more generally to air as an element; ever present, ever there. Clouds, or more specifically clouds in art, provide a perfect example from which to explore the idea of visibility. Their very intangibility and immateriality in life causes their materiality in art to become rich with meaning. Materiality itself is intricately linked to the notion that something 'has been there' – on a phenomenological level it demands that we acknowledge that something 'is there' – that it suggests that maybe we should ask not just how do we visualise the invisible, but how do we materialise the immaterial.

Clouds have 'been there' throughout art history, drifting, billowing and towering above us; dry, vaporous smudges in chalk, barely-there gestures in watercolour, impossibly contained delineations in engraving, and more recently captured and frozen in

time by photography, then sped-up and hyper-realised in film. Yet, their presence is complicated. They have been conflated with celestial beings, providing the perfect resting place for angels and gods. They have been part of a mythical 'other-world', untethered, empty and weightless; part of the above with no relation to below.

However, as art and science have converged, so too has land and sky, bringing the clouds back down to earth and imbuing them with a new sense of weight, both physically and metaphorically. There are specific moments throughout history that provide examples of this transition, such as Aristotelian philosophy in the sixth and seventh centuries, but perhaps the most fitting example of this is the Renaissance, which saw a movement from a flat compositional representation of the world favoured by the Ancients, to a spatial awareness of depth and perspective that we associate with the Moderns.<sup>4</sup>

This new three-dimensionality remains relatively unchallenged, yet still somewhat divorced from realism as artists chose poetic license over perspective. The sky became indicative of mood and atmosphere, populated by heavy black clouds of melancholia or bathed in sunshine which cast a luminescent glow on the world below. Their presence often dictated the fall of light and shade, described in terms of *chiaroscuro*,<sup>5</sup> a key component of landscape art. Yet at this point they are still a supporting character amidst a cast of other meteorological players including rain, wind and rainbows. Drifting along in this manner it is not until the eighteenth century that they move centre stage.

It is in the work of John Constable (1776–1837) that clouds become the focus and the sky becomes a subject matter in its own right.<sup>6</sup> In fact not only is the sky the subject, but compositionally it becomes separated from

the earth. The two cloud studies by Constable in 'Air' provide a visual example of this. In *Cloud Study Horizon of Trees, 27 September 1821* (fig. 14) the landscape is still present in the foreground, maintaining a traditional relationship between land and sky. Yet in *Cloud Study Hampstead, Tree at Right, 11 September 1821* (page 65) a lone tree is the only trace of habitation, and even then it is merely the furthestmost branches we can see.<sup>7</sup> Constable's clouds have broken free.

Both works were painted during a summer of intense production, during which the artist set-off each day across Hampstead Heath to capture the changing skies over London. Introducing the phrase 'I have done a good deal of skying'<sup>8</sup> one can imagine that those skies, freed entirely from their traditional relationship to the ground, have been envisaged by Constable whilst lying backwards on the Heath, eyes intently looking upwards, blinkered to the landscape that surrounds him. Yet it is strange that in going from an earlier position whereby clouds lacked substance because of their separation from reality (related to the celestial rather than the physical world) that we have come full circle. Once again clouds have been released from their earthly tethers, but importantly, in the work of Constable, they originate in life rather than the imagination, giving them a new sense of materiality.

Part of this change, which is also linked to scientific developments, can be understood through Constable's process of painting the sky. Unlike his larger, academic landscapes, these smaller sky studies were painted *en plein air*. At the mercy of the elements, Constable had to paint quickly to capture the constantly changing clouds above him. Nearly all these studies – produced in volume over the summers of 1821 and 22 and then at regular intervals throughout his lifetime – have written descriptions on the reverse detailing the exact atmospheric conditions on the day. They are anchored in a particular moment in time and therefore also attend



FIG. 13

**John Constable • *Cloud Study***

1822 • oil on paper laid on panel

YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART, PAUL MELLON COLLECTION

to the particularities of place, or rather sky. Constable's usual method of selecting elements of different landscapes and then reassembling them could not be used if he was to remain true to painting what he saw from life.<sup>9</sup>

Despite this allegiance to naturalism, Constable's skies have still been discussed in light of a pre-Modern narrative; 'making a proleptic leap towards abstraction and beyond.'<sup>10</sup> Yet Constable is not alone in his Modernism. As a child, the artist J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851) was also fond of lying amongst the tall grasses on Hampstead Heath, filling his sketchbooks with skies, pre-empting Constable's gaze skyward. These sketchbooks formed 'memory banks'<sup>11</sup> which in later years devolved into splashes and layers of watercolour forming the basis of simple colour compositions. Although Turner's skies came to embrace an 'apocalyptic' sense of drama, embroiled in a whirling dervish with the land and sea, both artists still retained a relationship to the land on which they stood, or rather in the case of skying, lay.

It is this temporality that imbues Constable's clouds (and Turner's to a lesser extent) with added significance; without clouds there is no time in the sky. Clouds within Constable's work have been transcribed with various meanings 'Their subject is change itself, or weather as a figure of change', a notion aligned with both enlightenment theory and scientifically recorded changes in weather and climate.<sup>12</sup> There is also the suggestion that they exist in order to provide movement, a notion that can be related back to the idea of 'having been there'. In order to 'have been' one must have already at some point 'been there'. Therefore, in terms of materialising the immaterial, the temporality inherent in clouds is key. So why at this point in time were artists turning to the sky? Why do Constable's clouds start to solidify whereas others have floated away on the imagination?



FIG. 14

**John Constable** RA • *Cloud Study Horizon of Trees, 27 September 1821*

1821 • oil on paper laid on board • 25.8 x 30.5 cm

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FIG. 15

**J.M.W. Turner** RA • *Study of Clouds*

after c.1830 • gouache and watercolour on paper • 19.2 x 27.5 cm

COURTESY OF TATE; ACCEPTED BY THE NATION AS PART OF THE TURNER BEQUEST 1856. © TATE, LONDON, 2017

Various scholars, beginning with the German art historian Kurt Badt (1890–1973), have argued that Constable’s ‘skying’ came as a direct result of technological and terminological changes in recording the weather, relying on Constable’s assertion that ‘we cannot see the sky truly until we understand how it functions.’<sup>13</sup> This idea was then revitalised by meteorologist-come-art historian John Thornes whose monograph on Constable published in 1999 makes a convincing argument. However, whether Constable was affected by scientific, and more precisely meteorological, developments is in a way beside the point. Instead what is interesting is what these changes were and how they helped to materialise the immaterial (clouds).



*It was the very mutability of clouds, their very lack of fixity, which offered the particular challenge to their clarification.*<sup>14</sup>

For centuries philosophers and scientists have sought to define the dramatic iterations of water and heat in the skies above them. Richard Hamblyn offers a useful background to such attempts, starting with Robert Harke Curator of Experiments at the Royal Institute, who in the sixteenth century suggested that a new and specific language was required with which to discuss the weather and atmospheric conditions. Harke’s call was heard but not immediately answered until Prince Elietorkart Theodorb devised a complex system of symbols, which although put to use failed to catch on in any great way. The quest was taken up by French scientist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck whose five initial cloud categories lacked enough specificity for use. It was not therefore until pharmacist and amateur meteorologist Luke Howard (1772–1864) was invited to give a lecture at the Akesian Society in 1802 that clouds found their language. Subsequently deemed ‘Namer of clouds’,

Howard’s talk grew into *The Essay on the Modification of Clouds*, a 15,000 word text which was published in the *Philosophical Magazine* the following year.

Howard categorised clouds into three main types; ‘Cirrus (a curl of hair), Cumulus (a heap) and Strata (a layer).’<sup>15</sup> These were then modified to include Cirro-cumulus and Cirro-stratus, and then Cirrulo-stratus and Cumulo-cirro-stratus. Based on the notion that each category of cloud had the ability to transform into another, he essentially ‘granted clouds mobility rather than demanding they stand still.’<sup>16</sup> These terms were further developed by Thomas Forster (Howard’s student) in *Research into Atmospheric Phenomena*, 1813, and then re-visited by Howard again in *The Climate of London*, 1818–20 (with an expanded version released in 1833). It was in September 1821 that Constable began the first of his series of sky studies, declaring ‘I am the man of clouds’, however, this materialisation of a language for clouds that coincided in both art and science suggest that Hamblyn is right in stating that ‘new ways of seeing became increasingly bound up with the formulation of new words.’<sup>17</sup>

It is also interesting to note that both Howard, in his allegiance to science, and Constable, with his dedication to recording the time and minutia of weather conditions, both retained a sense of the poetic. Constable declared that clouds ‘were the chief organ of sentiment’<sup>18</sup> and Howard managed to create a terminology that held at its heart the mutability of clouds, retaining their ‘ancient and sensual appeal’.<sup>19</sup>

It is worth noting that various challenges were made over subsequent years to Howard’s classifications, with frequent appeals for new additions. It was not until Swedish cloud scientist Hugo Hildebrand Hildebrandsson (1838–1925) and Ralph Abercromby (1842–97) compiled a comprehensive list of ten terms based on Howard’s original categories that the argument



FIG. 16

**Luke Howard • Cirrocumulus cloud study**  
c.1803–11 • brown, buff and grey wash

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abated. These terms, still in use today, were presented at the first International Cloud Conference, 1896, and were committed to paper in the first *International Cloud Atlas* published the same year.<sup>20</sup>



*Cloud is a body without surface but not without substance. Although it has no surface, Cloud is visible.*<sup>21</sup>

Looking back – and looking up – it seems strange to imagine that there was ever a time when the numerous apparitions above had no official designation. Artistic and scientific developments in the eighteenth century have meant that not only are clouds now visible in language but that it is this very language that has helped to give them substance. Whilst that substance may not provide a surface, there is still a sense of something we can hold on to; a materiality and tangibility that only language can provide. Around this all other descriptive words associated with clouds are able to float freely, firmly occupying the poetic realm:

*drifting*      *wisp*      *scudding*      *haze*  
                  *puff*      *pall*      *vaporous*  
                  *billow*      *smudge*      *towering*

‘Word clouds’ (and clouds of words) accumulate<sup>22</sup> on the horizon, building in volume and nebulosity. The words above take on a cloud-like physicality as they slip-and-slide between one another. The physical movement of clouds can also be further likened to language as Peter Porter suggests in his poem *Essay on Clouds*:

*The sun enjoys short sentences  
 but clouds prefer  
 a shifting Jamesian syntax.*<sup>23</sup>

The ability for clouds to transform, altering the sky instantaneously, can also perhaps be aligned with the

word's multitude of meanings beyond the meteorological as we are reminded that clouds can also envelop, obscure, cover, conceal, mask, smother and swarm. It is noteworthy that each of these words is related to invisibility, aiding clouds' stealth-like spontaneity to transform the sky in seconds, making them the shape-shifters of meteorology. This constant state of instability and flux is also key for theorist Hubert Damisch who has attempted a semiotic deconstruction of the word and suggests 'that cloud, in the ever changing variety of its forms, may be considered the basis, if not the model, of all metamorphoses.'<sup>24</sup>

Delving further into language, one word that stands out in Damisch's discussion of clouds, is dreaming; a word which shares cloud's insubstantiality and is also associated with looking upward. When we dream thoughts and images drift into one another, moving seamlessly between vignettes and one-act plays, half-memory, half-imagination. In a sense the differences between dreaming and memory (or rather remembering) is similar to that of the sky and clouds in art pre- and post-Constable. Dreaming implies imagination is the first and foremost element, whereas remembering has its roots in factual or material matter. So if a cloud is like a dream, is like a memory, how does this help us understand its materiality?



*What is a visible thing?*

*What is it that makes the visible a thing?*

*And what is the visibility of the thing?*<sup>25</sup>

For this we can return to the notion of 'having been there': to remember is to recall a moment that has already been and gone. A memory is a material in its own right, an evidential trace where the temporal crosses with the spatial to make visible 'It relies entirely on the specificity of the trace, the materiality of the

vestige, the concreteness of the recording, the visibility of the image.'<sup>26</sup> The evocation of clouds by contemporary artists often lies somewhere between dreaming and remembering, with some artists leaving barely a trace whilst others cast theirs in stone, the very essence of the concrete.

Dutch artist Berndnaut Smilde's (fig. 17 and page 147) work is intimately bound to the idea of both visibility and materiality. His work falls somewhere between sculpture and photography requiring Smilde to physically create a work in-situ which within moments will cease to exist. The results are captured in a photograph providing a record of what 'has been'. Smilde is interested in the temporary aspect of what he creates, ascribing a sense of duality to it. His clouds can either be 'intepreted as a sign of loss or becoming'<sup>27</sup> encompassing their temporality. The beauty in Smilde's work is embedded in this very fragility. Suspended amidst ornate interiors<sup>28</sup> or disused industrial spaces, the clouds encompass a sense of impossibility, and therein lies their magic. Logic tells us the cloud cannot exist, but the photograph says otherwise.<sup>29</sup>

In material terms Smilde's clouds only exist in the form of a photograph, transportable, fluid and inherently visible. Therefore, as in a memory there too in a photograph, the moment has already passed. In artists Bruce and Norman Yonemoto's film *A History of Clouds* (1991), Robert A. Sobieszek, Curator of Photography at Los Angeles County Museum of Art discusses photography's problematic relationship with clouds, referring to a boom in cloud photography towards the end of the nineteenth century. The turn from photography as documentation to photography as art can be seen in the ever more evocative imagery that sprung up around this time; 'The cloud becomes a primary subject matter in and of itself. It becomes a symbol. It becomes a metaphor. It becomes a bit of poetry. In short the cloud in photography becomes mythopoetical.'<sup>30</sup> Interestingly





FIG. 17

**Berndnaut Smilde • *Nimbus Dumont***

2014 • digital C-type print • 75 x 110/125 x 184 cm

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND RONCHINI GALLERY. PHOTO: CASSANDER EEF TINCK SCHATTENKERK. © THE ARTIST

what these photographers were capturing is similar to what Constable was seeking in his sky-studies and Howard in his naming of clouds. Something material and visible, yet poetic, like a 'hair curl' or a 'heap' – a memory that is just a stepping stone away from dreaming.

In British artist Ian McKeever's on-going series *... and then the sky dreamt it was the sea* (2015–) it is the sky itself that is dreaming (page 138). The series evolved from a lifelong habit of photographing the sky, but it was not till the artist took the step of scaling-up these images to make large format prints, that a way to work with them materialised. McKeever explains the symbiotic relationship between sea and sky by recalling a memory of standing upon the shoreline, looking out to sea 'trapped between two membranes which were different yet the same, the one echoing back to the other'.<sup>31</sup> The series *... and then the sky...* adapts this refrain turning the photographs upside down to create an 'inverted sky', before adding gouache above or below to create a sense of an 'other'. Topsy-turvy clouds take on the power and swell of the sea, bulging and ebbing away across the sky, fleecy edges unravelling like spittle upon the crest of a wave. McKeever's images are reminiscent of cloud photography from the 1860s (referred to in the Yonemoto brothers' film), in which the use of fast exposures for capturing the sky, and slow exposures for the land, created images in which the two were often indecipherable. This symbiosis is also noted in Mi Fu's *History of Painting* in which Fu notes that the emptiness of clouds recalls landscapes and waterways causing us to talk of 'mountains of clouds and seas of clouds'.<sup>32</sup>

Despite being turned upside down, McKeever's clouds are made of sturdy stuff, and are in a sense both more visible and material than Smilde's magical apparitions. As photographs, both works refer to an absence, but (although less akin to documentary in their presentation) McKeever's clouds belong to the natural world, having

drifted above the hills and rooftops, rather than being contained artificially within a building. Bristol-based artist Helen Jones also utilises the idea of absence in her ghost-clouds. Working in black pigment and pastel, she repeats a process of application and erasure to create ethereal, monochromatic skies reminiscent of black and white photography. Material is removed from the surface – transparent tracing paper – and the soft, smoky quality of the traces left behind mimics the delicate wispy remains of a cloud as it slowly disappears from view. The instability of the material is such that the demarcation between material and surface is lessened, allowing for a feeling of movement in what is essentially static. So much so that we imagine that one strong breath or gust of wind could physically loosen the charcoal's fragile grip upon the paper's edge. A similar frailty belongs to the work of Thomas Kerrich (1748–1828) whose cloud studies in chalk pre-date Constable's *plein air* oil sketches, or Tacita Dean's (b.1965) large-scale chalk drawings on Masonite board in which dusty remains collect within creases on the surface (fig. 18).

In the catalogue which accompanied 'Constable's Clouds: Painting and Cloud Studies' by John Constable' at the National Gallery of Scotland, Anne Lyles highlights the debate that endured throughout the eighteenth century regarding the best choice of material for creating quick studies outdoors. Drawing worthy attention to art critic John Ruskin (1819–1900) who lectured and wrote profusely on the subject of clouds in art,<sup>33</sup> his allegiance to pencil, is duly noted, favoured for its ability to capture light and shade. Yet, for clouds he made an exception, stating for best effect 'it can't be a sharp tool: the reason why cloud does not encourage drawing is not so much its shape, but rather its instability and evanescence'.<sup>34</sup> However, a popular material at the time for capturing this instability was watercolour, celebrated for its fluidity and speed and supporting the suggestion that 'clouds are to outline as colour is to drawing'.<sup>35</sup>



FIG. 18

**Tacita Dean • *HS40***

2015 • chalk on masonite boards • 244 x 488 cm (overall)

COURTESY THE ARTIST, FRITH STREET GALLERY, LONDON AND MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK/PARIS. © THE ARTIST

Frequently used by Turner (and Constable during certain periods), watercolour<sup>36</sup> does indeed mirror the spontaneity and mutability of clouds. The idea that clouds are in some way antithetical to outline is an interesting notion. Clouds are as much about what is inside as what is outside, as much about the colour as the drawing. French philosopher Gaston Bachelard is interested in an idea surmised by Pierre Jean-Jarre that 'For we are where we are not'<sup>37</sup> which introduces the idea of spatiality to thinking. He recognises that by separating the inside from the outside that we automatically introduce the idea of division, creating a barrier, drawing a line. But clouds actively contradict the idea of outline, delineation and permanence that we would traditionally use to define something with shape.<sup>38</sup>

So what is it about watercolour that allows for an outside and an inside without creating an outline? Firstly, its fluidity means that it exists in a state of flux for far longer than other more viscous materials such as oil paint. Its water-content means that unless sparingly applied it is constantly trying to escape, breaking free to create tiny rivulets across the surface. But perhaps more important is its translucency. Again, this depends on the method of application, but traditionally watercolour allows for a degree of visibility. Often its opacity is more concentrated at the central point of application leaving the edges looser and less defined, much like a cloud.

Artist Polly Gould's work is also concerned with this 'instability'. In the past her research has focused on the use of watercolour by doctor, botanist and amateur artist Edward Wilson (1872–1912) who documented the British Antarctic Expedition in 1910–13 alongside photographer Herbert Ponting. Watercolour was traditionally used for this type of topographical landscape documentation, however due to icy temperatures the water would freeze on the thin glass plates. Wilson had

to adopt a method of annotating his drawings in pencil so that he could then return to the relative warmth of the hut to recreate his landscapes in watercolour.

The work that has grown out of this for Gould is itself as delicate and ethereal as a cloud. Working with a glass-blower she creates hand-blown globes, which are half-transparent and half-coloured, split in two by an equatorial divide (fig. 19). The transparent half is then transformed into a mirrored surface using silver deposit and varnish. The globes are placed upon a sheet of sand-blown glass on to which she reassembles Wilson's original Antarctic landscapes to create new panoramas. Countering the fluidity of watercolour, the treated surface creates a textured plane upon which to catch and contain the watery colour. The mirrored globe above reflects the landscape below,<sup>39</sup> so that there are indeed 'mountains of clouds and seas of clouds' in the sky. The work *Observation Hill* (page 121) is made up of several of these otherworldly spheres which as a sculptural form are reminiscent of clouds dotted across the sky.

Gould's gentle coaxing of an essentially unstable material is interesting to consider alongside the work of Bristol artist Jemma Grundon (fig. 20), who in contrast traps her clouds within layers of resin. Similar to how Smilde and McKeever freeze time and capture their clouds in the photographic realm, Grundon highlights the fragility of her subject by 'attempting to solidify something transient and without mass'.<sup>40</sup> Her solitary clouds are painted in oil paint, a material more obedient to outline than watercolour but still allowing for movement. Layers are then built up with the addition of resin, encasing the cloud and imbuing it with a permanence that in reality it would resist. Interestingly resin also has another quality pertinent to this discussion. Its durability is partnered with transparency. The cloud is trapped yet visible. Where as a photograph creates a trace of 'having been there'



FIG. 19

**Polly Gould • *Mount Erebus and Northern Islets***

2013 • silvered hand-blown glass • d.15 cm  
and watercolour on etched glass • 40 x 40 cm

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DANIELLE ARNAUD, LONDON

Grundon's clouds are always 'there', little vestiges of impermanence, flattened, trapped and visible for eternity.

In sculptor Peter Randall-Page's work this sense of containment becomes three dimensional. *Solid Air III* is part of a larger series of works based on the principles of the five platonic forms in which all edges and interior angles are equal. Using mottled Rosso Luana marble, quarried from Carrara, Italy, these forms are stacked together creating a tension between the inner and outer membrane that recalls Bachelard's theory of opposition. In terms of language Randall-Page's 'clouds' bear more in common with the word's adjectival use than as a noun. They envelop, obscure, cover, conceal, mask and smother.

It is not just the shape of *Solid Air III* that embodies a cloud-like quality but the surface too 'The patterning in the marble is like solidified clouds'<sup>41</sup> swirling masses, creating a sense of movement both within and beneath the surface, supporting the notion that 'whilst stone is ostensibly fixed and unchanging, the forms themselves are concerned with growth and metamorphosis'.<sup>42</sup> Yet, in simple material terms, *Solid Air III* is immovable and impenetrable. Unlike the translucent clouds in Liz Butler's *Fragile Earth* series which allow us to look through them (much like Peter Lanyon's birds-eye view inspired by gliding) or Jones' charcoal smudges inscribed with erasure, Randall-Page's 'cloud' memorialises the temporary, as if a spell has been cast turning vaporous puffs of air into stone.



*... the clouds are torn apart and reunited, continually changing their forms, and their effects change every moment according to the different light they receive, either directly, or by reflections by reflections of reflections.*<sup>43</sup>



FIG. 20

**Jemma Grundon** • from series *Mono no Aware*  
2017 • oil and resin on board • 20 x 20 cm

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

What makes the invisible visible or the immaterial material? *Solid Air III* is certainly visible and in terms of its materiality creates a perfect metaphor for the notion that materials can inform and disrupt, expanding meaning with connections of their own. Its solidity, allows it to neither billow nor drift yet we recognise within it the form of a cloud. As with Constable's cloud studies there is no land or sea to relate the above to below in Randall-Page's work. In fact for all its physical weight it is in essence weightless, lighter than air, free to float away.

The clouds in the Yonemoto brothers' film are also given the freedom of movement, both physically on screen and metaphorically throughout art history as the various segments cover a wealth of artists across the centuries. The work opens with a slow tracking shot of the sky, panning across a perfect blue backdrop littered with fleecy tendrils. An anonymous voice reminds us of clouds' equivocality and sense of mystery, adding that 'in double and triple aspects, in their surmises of effects, images within images, forms which will come in to being'<sup>44</sup> that it is the state of mind of the spectator that completes the transformation.

Just as Leonardo (1452–1519) saw images in stains upon the wall and Alexander Cozens (1717–86) fashioned landscapes from a blot of ink, this suggests that clouds have a materiality all of their very own. Therefore, it is not simply a case of making their materiality visible, but of making visible within them something else, either by remembering, or by dreaming, or, 'by reflections by reflections of reflections'.<sup>45</sup>