

"...but the clouds..."

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Being a Valediction Permitting Mourning, in Three Stages of Decline

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Abstract

"Cloud" is the most appalling metaphor we have to describe the global network of integrated data: a portent of dread always on the way to disappearance. Let me tell you why.

Keywords

Dislimning, cloud computing, entropy, technicity, telepresence, mourning

for Niall

Stage 1: Dissolution

Sugar cubes are accretions of sucrose, formed into solid and static lumps of tiny crystalline carbohydrates that hold their shape until placed in liquid. And yet, it is liquid that enables sugar crystals to be formed into solid objects in the first place when they are subjected to heat. In this way, they are like clouds. Ethereal, particulate, and dissolvable, they are forever on their way to becoming nothing. The sugar cube is a *pharmakon* of sorts, an integer of opposites that in its either/or-ness can never be reconciled.

Like William Gibson's epochal notion of cyberspace, the sugar cube's imminent nothingness is like the "nonspace of the mind," intangible, dissolute, like "city lights, receding." [1] And like presence at a distance in telecommunications, or writing, it transforms and changes the conditions of the environment in which it is immersed. The dissolving sugar cube also resembles even less tangible, invisible states of cultural matter, like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's concept of the "noosphere," a stage in the evolution of human life when the earth gets a new 'skin.' In his *Phenomenon of Man*(1955), de Chardin describes the noosphere as "organised matter in its dispersed state," human vibrations "resounding by the million" around the physical earth. [2] Writing on human evolution during the 1920s and 1930s, he intuitively anticipated in the concept of the noosphere something like the Internet; something that could garner "a whole layer of human consciousness exerting simultaneous pressure upon the future and the collected and hoarded produce of a million years of thought." [3] But even more tellingly, he anticipated the problems of nomenclature under a cloud, the difficulty of giving a material name to the immaterial. "Have we ever tried to form an idea," he asks, of the magnitude of human thought outered from the senses into a thinking layer that circumscribes the world like the atmosphere? [4] De Chardin never uses the word "information," yet that is the moniker that has been given to the technological age he was imagining.

And like the tussle between communication and entropy in cybernetics, information, figured as sugar dissolving, is a slippery commodity, open to misinterpretation and always in danger of failing to reach its destination. In order to make the point, an aside is unavoidable. We need to make a deviation—to stray from the path—or, with apologies to Heidegger and his notion of philosophy itself, to pursue an unanticipated way. The notion of information as energy at odds with entropy is nowhere more revealing and appropriately delicious than in the misprision of the coiner of cybernetics' name, Norbert Wiener, pronounced variably as *Weener*, *Winer*, *Veener*, or *Viner*, which evidences the increasing noise and ambiguity in the system of its utterance. This difference is one that can only be seen and not heard, since the rupture between orthography and phonetics is unpredictable and unavoidable, and impacts the world with its presence, as well as in the means by which it presents. And the particulate currency of information—the difference that makes a difference, as Gregory Bateson would always have it; as *Weener*, *Winer*, *Veener*, or *Viner* theorized—has a tendency to leak in transit, like the parlor game of Chinese whispers or Isaac Newton's inexplicable ballistic apple plummeting at the speed of light onto Gary Oldman's head in Tom Stoppard's film *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Or, even more distantly, in the bombast of Socratic know-it-all's gate-crashing the scene of an argument with the folly of certitude, aiming to correct misinformation; cocksure fathers returning from the dead to protect their textual siblings from hermeneutic ambiguity. In all such instances of apparent control, entropy is and will always be the norm and order the aberration.

Any new concept or fashion needs its apologists. The scribblers of eighteenth-century England lured the literate elite into an appreciation of satire, metaphor, and wit. Similarly, the new currency of 'vapor' associated with "the cloud" captures a polemical and rhetorical shift in the IT industry with as much bombast and blather as Augustan pamphleteers writing of beauty, snuff, or the plague in the pages of *The Spectator* or *The Tatler*. The raffish figure of the journalistic hack casts a long shadow from Augustan England. Just think of

Google's CEO, Eric Schmidt, proselytizing a seismic new wave in the world of information, rhapsodizing the new location of data services and architecture "in a 'cloud' somewhere." [5] Rewrite that as "in a 'cloud' or something" and you hit the right slacker note that captures the vagueness of the metaphor and its vaporous technical and lexical connotations, as if Jeff Spicoli from *Fast Times at Ridgmont High* had discovered that you can actually turn the pages in a book. It's, like, totally awesome! With such vagueness *and* certitude in mind, it is clear that the semantic demigods of 'the cloud' do indeed want it both ways. Compaq Computer marketing executive George Favaloro is credited with coining the term in 1996 when the internet was being invoked as mystically ambient, invisible, and all around us. [6] But it was also grounded, physical, stored *somewhere* on a server, usually in the corporate headquarters of a big name in Silicon Valley or in the basement of some startup ISP in any-town, USA. As slick and bewildering as it sounded, it was slyly projecting into metaphor what was in fact just another form of transit of information from one location to another: telecommunications by any other name. So, with Augustan poetasters once again in mind, think of the rhetoricians of 'the cloud' as fast-talking used-car salesmen in plaid suits peddling bad faith, much like the shifty character Ray in *Seinfeld* who tries to sell Kramer a battered and secondhand automatic wheel chair: "This is our best model, the Cougar 9000. It's the Rolls-Royce of wheelchairs. This is like...you're almost *glad* to be handicapped."

The grounded fixity of the infrastructure of the internet, distinct from these otherworldly metaphors of a celestial city, from theistic motifs of the pearly gates of cyberspace or an evolutionary noosphere, was writ large for me as a postgraduate student of English literature at La Trobe University in Melbourne in the mid-1980s. Something referred to as "the Internet" was being talked about in office corridors in hushed tones, like some vernacular Alpha and Omega had materialized in the suburbs. "It," in deliberately heightened scare marks, was located in a sealed glass room in the Borchardt Library and only accessible to academics and librarians at designated booking times that coincided with global time zones. Dial-up, of course. When I asked our arts librarian what "it" did, she informed me in reverential tones that it enabled researchers to access information overseas using the phone lines, as if it was delivering the reliquary of an ancient Tuscan saint from Florence to Bundoora. The forecast from then on was for fine weather, no clouds, and a new name for old ways of doing things like—and this is right out there—taking books off shelves, elsewhere. So, *Hic lectionem finit*, or something.

Yet in borrowing the molecular and stratocumulus notion of 'the cloud' from mathematics, astronomy, and meteorology, the metaphor suggested dispersal and displacement, an agglomeration of points within a mass more gaseous than solid; immaterial, foggy, and moving like flotsam, gossamer, or fairy floss. I certainly have no recollection of hearing the term in the late '90s, and it was really only a couple of years ago when I heard Stuart Moulthrop use it during a talk in Melbourne that I realized there was yet another "next big thing" on the hyper-horizon of networked computing. As Moulthrop started navigating his Prezi demonstration, he announced that the text, images, and movies he was showing us weren't *here*, on his machine, in this theatre, but were being "pulled from the cloud." The oracular way in which he described the process of information being invoked or summoned had transformed him into a North American Papa Legba, intoning some weird techno-voodoo from Melbourne and calling upon the Haitian Loa to do their worst in the name of

snazzy design and information at your fingertips. I can't remember what Stuart was actually showing, for all I could hear in my jaded interior monologue was *Mad Men* ad-speak rhapsodizing this thing called "the cloud," information about which had coincidentally been filtering into the mailboxes, as if out of nowhere, on my various mobile and terrestrial devices. I admire Stuart and his work, particularly his 1996 incunabulum of hypertext fiction, *The Color of Television*. That bewildering network of crossed destinies was like the night sky tuned to the dead channel it surfs: complex, opaque, and open to endless possibilities.

The metaphor of 'the cloud' does indeed want it both ways. It wants to be ethereal and material at the same time. As illustrations of it demonstrate, it plays on the idea of vapor as other-*thereness*, but expresses its grounded-ness in the solidity of location (not on my computer, but others elsewhere). This sophistry, which is neatly gestured toward in the theme of the conference "Cloud and Molecular Aesthetics," marvels at a new distributed and immaterial model of data storage that exceeds the 'network' metaphor that defined the age of the early internet. And here was I, all those years ago, thinking that the decentered, antinuclear attack model of the internet was particulate—cloud-like—just like the first images of ARPANET. ARPANET project manager Larry Roberts sketched a famous map in the late 1960s that depicted the routes information followed as it flowed between nodes in what would become the internet. [7] As the vagaries of time would have it, his prediction of what cyberspace might look like resembles a cloud that is more meteorologically accurate than the hokey 'cloud' cartoons of today.

Stage 2: Dislimning

One of the great wise guys in Shakespeare's pantheon of *dramatis personae* is Hamlet, the lugubrious heir apparent to the Danish throne and famous for his funk, but not the *good* funk, as Larry David or Mark Amerika might say. With the court spy Polonius, he plays that time-honored anthropomorphic optical game of seeing shapes in a cloud:

Polonius: My lord, the Queen would speak with you, and presently.

Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?

Polonius: By th' mass, and it's like a camel indeed.

Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel.

Polonius: It is backed like a weasel.

Hamlet: Or like a whale?

Polonius: Very like a whale.

Hamlet: Then I will come to my mother by and by. [8]

The aim of Hamlet's conceit is to betray Polonius as a sycophant, a yes-man whose obsequiousness lurks hidden within his outward agreeability (not dissimilar to the arras he hides behind in order to eavesdrop on Hamlet's conversation with his mother, or indeed the sophistry of the computer network as vaporous and grounded). Such optical duplicity in *Hamlet* suits a world of court intrigue, politics, and power-mongering, with its

connotations of reading signs, surveillance, and rhetoric that anticipate the more macabre world of Shakespeare's Jacobean successors, such as Cyril Tourneur and John Webster, as well as the genre of revenge tragedy they perfected in his shadow. But it is in *Antony and Cleopatra*, one of Shakespeare's Jacobean tragedies, that the metaphor of clouds as bad faith, or "black vesper's pageants," is articulated. [9] The protean quality of atmospheric vapor is, for Mark Antony, a metaphor of his fall from power, alienation from Rome, and his own melancholy realization of his dissolving sense of self. Far from being a ludic game of diversion for court wastrels, gazing upon shapeshifting clouds is a kind of metaphysical soothsaying that gives Antony the bad news of indistinctness, disintegration, and loss. Images of dissolution and saturation work throughout the play as leitmotifs of dramatic change, from Antony's early hard-man stance as power-hungry traitor to the empire ("Let Rome in Tiber melt") to his mourning for the failure of his ambition ("The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct / As water is in water"). [10] Shapeshifting here is not the puzzle-play of *Hamlet*, but a confrontation with failure, with a lack of faith in metaphors of disembodiment, such as clouds, "that mock our eyes with air." Clouds are emblematic of the breakdown of Antony's sense of self on the way to disintegration ("here I am Antony, / Yet cannot hold this visible shape"). [11] Like clouds, he is vaporous, promiscuous, and wanton, an adulterous traitor whose sense of self is vanishing. Impotent at the end of the play, he is unable to even fall on his own sword.

And, like many of Shakespeare's protagonists, he is a philosopher of sorts, an incipient metaphysician of the passage of time as a commingling of states of mind, recognizing something for what it is in the moment of its passing. Gilles Deleuze, writing about Henri Bergson on this very point, describes a "rhythm of duration," whereby something is what it is in time. [12] It is Bergson's dissolving lump of sugar that concentrates a metaphysical duration of time, wherein the essence or substance of a thing is seen for what it is. So, like a cloud or water dissolving within water—dislimning, becoming indistinct—the essence of a thing (or its *quidditas*, after Thomas Aquinas) is seen within this moment of changing states. As clouds are meteorologically and philosophically defined in terms of their molecular crystallization and evaporation of moisture, such dynamic changes of state aren't especially appropriate or reliable for defining spaces of secure storage. As Deleuze presciently notes regarding Bergson's lump of sugar, it is in spite of its arbitrary form, or "carving out as a lump" as a thing with form, that it "opens out to the universe as a whole." [13] In other words, it dislimns, like water in water.

As if sensing the prescience of Jacobean conceits of dislimning or phenomenological metaphors of dissolution for the corporate branding of a new age of the Internet, Reuven Cohen, cofounder of the "Cloud Camp" course for computer programmers, asserted many years later that the term 'cloud,' by "virtue of being a metaphor, [is] open to different interpretations." [14] Such acumen. This insight stopped my breath and almost my heart. What invention and erudition is displayed here, the sublime as making something out of nothing; a negative capability no doubt honed by years of disciplined immersion in the study of literary figuration such as Rosemond Tuve's *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*, or the poetry of John Keats. And so, "*mutatis, mutandis*," we conclude from Cohen's syllogistic formula that change is necessary and inevitable in corporate branding associated with the internet, and that we continually have to remake our metaphors for understanding it. When parsed, reiterated, conjugated, and even obliterated many times in

the disciplines of prosody, logic, and dialectical materialism, Cohen's impeccable and humbling syllogism, I have concluded, does not offer a reassuring motif for an architecture premised on the aporia of storage *and* distribution. But Cohen's coup d'état, one that salvages the metaphor's entanglement in hermeneutics for a corporate world that has no interest in the history of ideas, is this: "it's worth money."

As an aside, the cloud metaphor has, surprisingly, been visually represented in nonmonetary terms. In 2012, data statistician Simon Raper created a complex matrix of relations among key philosophers within Western thought, such as Plato, Husserl, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger, using metadata drawn from Wikipedia. [15] Technologist Adam Hogan's textual analysis of this graphic representation identifies a surprising and polemical narrative from Raper's data set that highlights what he describes as the problem with G.W.F. Hegel within the history of philosophy. Raper's map, it seems, inadvertently accorded far too much importance to Hegel's place in the noosphere of reflective, hard men. But in his ostensible motivation to transform the history of ideas into a social network, the graphics he generated represent the pantheon of great minds as a cloud, not, after Raphael, a School. Suffice it to say, clouds are not constituted of hot air, and cloud computing is listed as a specific area of interest for Raper on his blog. Hogan's astute critique of Raper's exercise in data mining and visualization unwittingly presents a potential critique of intellectual conception, influence, and reception in a 'neutral' who's who of Western thinking. I have not done the meta-analysis myself, but it would be far too much to hope that the playwright Aristophanes appears in this map, even peripherally. His satire from the 5th century BC, *The Clouds*, was a daring critique of the intellectual fashion of his day, particularly for its representation of Socrates as a sophist or traveling salesman peddling ideas, which later led to Aristophanes' trial and execution by, well, Socrates. In philosophy, then, as in the meteorology of clouds, what goes around comes around. *Hóper édei deîxai*, or, if that Greek axiom is too Greek for you, the "thing as has been shown."

Stage 3: Dispersal

At the dawn of cyberspace, as we know, the "sky was the color of television tuned to a dead channel." [16] When he coined that deadpan aphorism, it's not clear exactly where William Gibson was or what he was doing. I like to think he was sitting on a chair in Vancouver. But not just any chair; a specific one, a green brocade chair, on which he sat reading Jorge Luis Borges's *Labyrinths* for the first time, gazing at its upholstered leaves that resembled clouds. And perhaps he remembered, too, watching a live video feed from Plaça Catalunya in Buenos Aires, lost in the tele-present reverie of his own virtual presence in the very spot he had stood only days before while pursuing Borges's absent presence throughout that city. He remembers acutely the display of Borges's ephemera that he had seen there, arrayed under glass, treated as if to suggest the onset of Borges's glaucoma. Simulating the waning eyesight of a blind Argentine Tiresias to come, this visual conceit captured the precarious fate of data lost in 'the cloud,' as the American author of one other-zone strained to gaze upon the quizzical objects of another that were almost there, yet, indistinctly, not. Gibson struggled to make out the rhythm of Borges's hand sloping from left to right, as if tracing a pathway through circular ruins of time in which there was no beginning or end. [17]

In writing his "Invitation" for the 2007 reprint of the New Directions edition of *Labyrinths*,

Gibson candidly reveals how he intuited something of the weird pretzel-logic of cyberspace from Borges' literary 'fabulations,' such as reviewing books that don't exist or imagining such books into existence through the very force of invention. Books, Borges reminds us, need only be possible to exist. In Gibson's matrix, too, there's "no there, there." [18] The matrix is a conceptual meme that filters through Borges' visible unrealities into the evanescent possibility that, for a short time at least, the sky *could* be the color of television tuned to a dead channel. Or, more prosaically, what you are looking at on a screen is temporary, an invocational transcription of packets of ASCII code encrypted in the databases of a computer *somewhere*. The sublime delicacy in Borges's figuration of the virtual is the plausibility of impossible things, like dreaming a man into existence, living a year of quotidian time in the blink of an eye, or a book whose narrative paths fork in time as well as space. It was no trite conceit when Borges referred to his writings as "fictions" since he was writing code, on the way to imagining Gibson's avatars as console cowboys punching deck in the Sprawl, opening portals to worlds of ideas conjured out of the most austere assemblage of letters. Gibson paid dues to his Latin amanuensis many years later, when he described "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" as a fable of the vast construction of "utterly pure information" disguised as fiction infiltrating the fiber of quotidian experience. [19]

Borges' fiction "The Library of Babel," first published in Spanish in 1941, is indicative of his interest in encountering the infinite in the minutely small. This fable of ambiguity deliciously invites a compelling comparison with the rhetorical ambience of cloud computing. Its virtuosity is in fact its virtuality, as in so many of his fictions. It is the anticipation after Jacques Derrida and *l'avenir*, or that which is to come; the unexpected, unfamiliar, and unpredictable. [20] Initially, the library's portrait is a deliriously utopian oxymoron: a built environment that is infinite, made up of hexagonal chambers that contain all books, as well as all possible books that have not yet been written. Borges allusively captures this conceptual mind-fuck with a nod to the formidable Blaise Pascal and his model of the universe, conceived as a "fearful sphere": the "library is a sphere whose exact center is any one of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessible". [21] Subsequent translations of Pascal's dictum, taken hostage by cyberpunk console cowboys and West Coast data dandies alike, invariably borrow from him, unwittingly or otherwise, the idea of center and periphery as a model for thinking about the distribution of data in a network. In *Neuromancer* (1984), Case describes the matrix as "Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding." [22] Similarly, the 2007 *New York Times* feature on the new age of supercomputing announced that IBM had "vague" plans to use data "from afar." [23] Unbelievable.

Initially utopian, this idea of imagined endlessness within the visibly finite, like Borge's "aleph" or the computer-banks of Cisco servers, increasingly becomes a Dantean hell, as well as a proto-portrait of the databases associated with cloud computing. The most frequently used metaphor of data being in a "cloud somewhere" suggests a place that is, as yet, no place; dizzying, ambient, vertiginous. It is an abstraction, a metaphysical conceit, or, after Borges after Shakespeare, the thought experiment of imagining a universe in a nutshell, in which Hamlet conceives of himself as a king of infinite space, or Thomas Hobbes after him perceives his "infinite greatness of place." [24] The sampling of Pascal's "fearful sphere" in "The Library of Babel" suggests a history of the virtual that Frances Yates

documented in her sublime work of scholarship and wonder, *The Art of Memory* (1966), an alchemical text that exhaustively documents the *ars memoria* of ancient and Elizabethan cabbalistic thinkers who formulated systematic methods of storage and recall for universes of information within the mind.

The mushroom cloud that heralded the atomic age in 1945 signified a dreadful mastery of power over matter, and the capacity of one to destroy the other. Julius Robert Oppenheimer's retrospective quote in 1960, borrowed from the *Bhagavad Gita*, infamously signified what that meant: "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." This was not an experience of exhilaration but of dread, of horror at the awesome nothingness of everything vanishing in a cloud of dust (in *The Waste Land* many years before, Thomas Stearns Eliot had prophetically offered to show us fear "in a handful of dust"). [25] The fear of disaster associated with the Y2K virus in 2000 was widely attributed to be yet another pestilence unleashed upon the world by the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse associated with millenarian thinking. The same wraiths, outstaying their welcome in the new century, would also seem to have been responsible for the 2012 algorithmic glitch that cost the Knight Capital Group in the United States \$440 million in thirty minutes. [26]

And like the fragile and pernicious fate of clouds in the atmosphere, the ever-present stress at the dissolution of the network is a cybernetic principle derived from the Second Law of Thermodynamics, that is, the struggle to control the loss of energy in a system, as well as a deconstructionist concept of the *post*, of the terminal condition of data's arrival at its destination by not arriving. And the infinite Jorge Luis Borges, another Time Lord, who witnessed the very house in which he saw the Aleph demolished, shattered as if he was present at the conflagration of the great library of Alexandria or the vanishing of the God particle itself in a proverbial puff of dust (coincidentally, another Time Lord who came after him, *Dr Who's* Tom Baker in the 1970s, did one of the earliest television ads for Prime Computers). And so too, if our forecasts are not in error, the cloud will also meet with its Armageddon. If we look closely with the rigor he demands of us, it will have been announced somewhere in his premonitory fictions.

In the early days of techno-culture associated with the emerging internet, *Mondo 2000* magazine was the *dernier cri* of choice for visionaries and hackers alike. One of the "what's hot" topics that regularly featured in its pages was the notion of vaporware: new ideas talked up so much that they seem to already exist, or simply must in the name of new technology. This included things such as "teledildonics," or sex at a distance, a supposed panacea to help stem the plague of sexually transmitted diseases, as well as a totally killer asset to be garnered for spicing up online gaming and virtual curb crawling around message boards or Internet Relay Chat. [27] Marcos Novak theorized "liquid architecture," the transformative and elastic environment of cyberspace and its flow between built and immaterial worlds. [28] At a time that felt like a Kuhn-ian paradigm shift, anything *seemed* possible in the new age of what Ted Nelson called "dream machines." [29]

But in reality, well before the 1990s, we were already indifferent to the cult of vapor, the apparent magic of phantoms manifesting on domestic screens in the form of television and video. Jonathon Cray's formidable inquiry into the history of "techniques of the observer" captures the development over time of the vanishing point that opens the world out and

then refocuses it specifically on the eyes of the viewer; in particular, the idea of material technology that creates the illusion of the immaterial, such as vanishing-point perspective. [30] The cathode ray tube of television monitors relies on a process of vaporization associated with phosphorescence in order to project images on a screen that have been broadcast from elsewhere. Such clunky, “old school” technology is now pretty much obsolete and difficult to find, unless you take the time to scour rubbish dumps or opportunity shops for it. The images a cathode ray tube projects are the product of the interplay of vapor and the material technology of a glass screen. Accordingly, if such a device had a conscience, it would be comfortable in its technicity, of which vapor literally is a constituent element, not a metaphor.

The writer Samuel Beckett is not usually regarded as a significant mixed media artist of the twentieth century. A novelist and dramaturge of the spoken word and the stage, he also experimented with mime, radio, film, and television. Had he not died in 1989 he would, no doubt, have experimented with HTML and may have been the first poet laureate of the Benny Hill School of bathos to discourse upon the World Wide Wait. As with other media with which he worked, Beckett was fascinated with the medium of technology itself, especially television. His 1976 play “...but the clouds...” is an exemplary text that captures his formalist interest in the televisual apparatus, its specific features of manifestation as if from nowhere, the appearance of an image removed from any physical or temporal location. More particularly, this fascination with the medium concentrated his sharp focus on the nature of spectatorship as a way of *seeing* within the context of an electronically mediated event. His typically spare technical directions for the play’s *mise en scène* are visually suggestive not only of seeing it as a televised event concentrated in one space, but are also emblematic of the projection of images from a cathode ray tube. [31]

Beckett’s meticulous practice of inhabiting the medium in which he worked, as a kind of techno-method actor becoming the technology, meant that he was always reviewing and rehearsing the history of perception and techniques of the viewer and of viewing. In “...but the clouds...,” he unwittingly conceives of a global network of information that can never be seen, but only imagined. The ostensible theme of “...but the clouds...” is the desire to grasp in memory the image of a deceased loved one who is beyond sight. But it is also a *how to* manual for thinking about ‘the cloud’ and molecular computing as metaphors of the material illusion of immateriality.

There is no official video or television production of “...but the clouds...” either approved by Samuel Beckett in his lifetime or by his estate since his death. The two available iterations of it represent unauthorized sequences by performance students in the Design, Application, and Direction class at Middlesex University in 2008, and a much earlier production of the entire play for Italian television in 1976, the same year the text was published by Faber. *The latter version*, “...Ma le nuvole...,” is a curious production—conspicuously so, in the context of the aesthetics of clouds. [32] It figuratively suggests the accepted metaphor of data stored in cloud computing being similar to discrete droplets of crystalized moisture forming a particulate mass in the atmosphere. The term *nuvole* is also an apt, if droll, metaphor in terms of this connotation since, as data, it is already “cloudy” for non-Italian speakers; obscure, elusive, and unreadable. In translation, the English word ‘cloud’ is encrypted, concealed, there-but-not-there, inaccessible. The congruence of these

metaphors presumes, or at least suggests, valences of irretrievable loss, mourning for a loved one, and the televisual dying of the light. "...Ma le nuvole..." resembles other Beckett plays in its repetitive circularity and tiresome rounds of activity and behavior, and like Borges' character Ireneo Funes, it is ultimately pointless in its dream of the persistence of memory.

"...Ma le nuvole..." can be read as a prescient, unwitting allegory for trying to understand the metaphor of the cloud, how it works, the premises of presence and absence it assumes, as well as a rumination on the anxiety of the evaporation of substance into air, presence into memory, and memory into distance. Mourning the loss of love, of memory, and of self is figuratively represented in the pixilation of the image of the character M's body into vaporous matter. Working extensively in television and video, Beckett was acutely attuned to the fragility of our confidence in screens, what is represented on them, and from where. In Beckett, the phosphorescent process of the cathode ray tube captures the faith in phantoms that make distant things appear as images on our screens. It is worth noting that the process of energizing phosphor to enable the projection of televisual images is a chemical reaction not dissimilar to the process of cloud seeding, the process of using silver iodide or carbon dioxide to stimulate rain.

M's figure, "crouching" in his little sanctum "in the dark" with his back to the camera's gaze, begs the image of a long-lost love, W, to appear to him. [33] Each time he entreats this act of becoming, things dissolve, literally so; the image of M, preparing once more to set out on the road in search of her, momentarily appears before the scene, too, dissolves once again into M crouching or retiring to bed. "Dissolve" is the most repeated and persistent direction in the text of "...but the clouds..." and it gestures to the temporary and fragile nature of presence as reality or memory. Begging for her appearance as a vision or a trace of memory, M waits for W to appear to him on the road, for her image to appear in his memory, for it to materialize on our television screens, to download to our terminals. When the woman's image does arrive, superimposed on the screen in the Italian production, we see her lips move and simultaneously hear the old man's voice repeating the words her mouth silently speaks.

Beckett's directions in the script of the play are typical of television directions, but are also suggestive of the transfer of bit rates. They mark pauses in the habitual wait for an image to appear, for data to download, to catch up with the pace of his thought. As Martin Esslin has observed of the play, in this respect, it is not an internal monologue of a typically bereft Beckett character, but the "voice of someone who is demonstrating a situation and providing a *mode d'emploi* for viewing a visual experience." [34] As with other texts in Beckett's entropic world (such as *Not I* [1973], *Footfalls* [1976], or *Ghost Trio* [1977]), the script of "...but the clouds..." has become "little more than a mere technical notation of camera positions (diagrams) and indications of timing." [35] The specificity of Beckett's precise understanding and choreographing of time is rigorous and unforgiving of even the most minute error. There are sixty directions in all. This is number 42:

Dissolve to S empty. 2 seconds. M1 in hat and greatcoat emerges from west shadow, advances five steps and stands facing east shadow. 2 seconds. He advances five steps to disappear in east shadow. 2 seconds. He emerges in robe and skullcap from east shadow, advances five steps and stands facing west shadow. 2 seconds. He turns right and advances five steps to disappear in north shadow. 2 seconds. [36]

The text of the play resembles strings of code, instructions punctuated by detail that suggest a possible performance in space and time. Beckett is both playwright and interface designer.

As the mischievous imps of reflexive irony would have it, "...but the clouds..." is still very much anticipated as "a play for television" in the Anglophile world, in which it has only been imagined through a glass darkly, in Italian, seen on computer screens outside that country. Beckett presumes the gaze of an ideal viewer who is familiar with the borrowing of the words "but the clouds" from another poet. But he can't presume an audience familiar with them and their sense of melancholy and loss, and especially the words that precede them, which are not uttered. These unspoken, melancholy words are like clouds in the sky, vaporous images of absence and loss.

Conclusion: *In tenebris*

The clouds will indeed be gone in the mourning. I don't need a visual aid to underline the ambivalence of this term, which can only be seen and not heard. The more we are guided by such evanescent metaphors for imagining where data is, the less secure we are likely to feel about it ever arriving when we invoke it. We are in darkness, bereft of information, no closer to knowing where we are in relation to its architectures, to memory and the apparent virtuality of geography in the 'post-age.' To appropriate the words of another Irishman, themselves appropriated by a previous one, the poet William Butler Yeats's melancholy lines at the end of "The Tower" (1926) are a meditation on evanescence, a sermon on the slow, incremental, and creeping nature of loss. They speak of gathering darkness and in doing so evoke a time to come, a time of entropy, system failure, viral infection, and data death:

The death of friends, or death
Of every brilliant eye
That made a catch in the breath—
Seem but the clouds of the sky
When the horizon fades;
Or a bird's sleepy cry
Among the deepening shades. [37]

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The best A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning study guide on the planet. The fastest way to understand the poem's meaning, themes, form, rhyme scheme, meter, and poetic devices. A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning Summary & Analysis. by John Donne. Upgrade to A+. A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning Summary & Analysis. by John Donne. Summary. Themes. Popularity of A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning: Written by John Donne, a famous metaphysical poet, this poem is a well-known love poem in English literature. It was first published in 1675 in the fourth edition of Life of Donne. The poem appreciates the beauty of spiritual love. Donne has painted a vivid picture of his eternal bond that keeps him attached with his beloved even when they are apart. A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning As a Representation of Spiritual Love: The poet, very artistically, draws a picture of this theme. He paints this picture through intense emotions and pure feelings. He says that he is going to part with his beloved, but they should not mourn this short gap. The Cloud. The Snow Man. Some Keep the Sabbath Going to Church. Write an essay of 300 words: Attempt a critical appreciation of John Donne's A Valediction Forbidding Mourning. What are your views on the metaphysical elements in the poem? A Valediction: Forbidding mourning is a metaphysical poem written by John Donne who is the founder of metaphysical poetry in English. The term "metaphysical" implies preoccupation with philosophy. The metaphysical poetry is distinguished by its startling images, conceits and comparisons. Metaphysical poets see acute resemblances in things which were clearly unlike. For example in A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning Donn free safety a defensive back positioned well behind the line of scrimmage, who is responsible for covering midfield for running plays or passes but who is "free" to assist other defenders in covering receivers. front line the players aligned along the line of scrimmage. fullback an offensive back who plays behind the quarterback and blocks or carries the ball on hand- offs. A powerful but relatively slow-moving running back. fumble to drop the ball. gang tackle to tackle the ballcarrier with more than one tackler. goal line the line marking the beginning of the end zone, over which the ball mu