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The term ‘meteorology’ has been used in scientific literature for at least twenty-five centuries. While it still retains its original connection to “the things up there,” it is hardly surprising that its boundaries have undergone complex changes over such a long period. As defined in Aristotle, meteorology dealt not only with aerial phenomena but, in general, with the entirety of natural events occurring between the center of the Earth and the first celestial sphere (that of the Moon); meteorology thus described the ‘disorder’ and unpredictability of the lower parts of the universe, as opposed to the ‘perfection’ of the heavens. In the course of the seventeenth century, the rise of experimental physics, the relocation of comets to the astronomical domain, and the creation of the history of the Earth as an autonomous discipline led to a radical redefinition of the field, which historians of science have usually interpreted in terms of a complete break with its Aristotelian roots.

The tension between the programmatic ‘disorder’ of Aristotelian meteorology, and the modern effort to reduce its phenomena to a mechanical ‘order’ and predictability is the unifying theme of the collection *Ordre et désordre du Monde: Enquête sur les météores de la Renaissance à l’âge moderne*. Born out of a research project on the representation of catastrophes (as the editors quip, “every meteor, after all, is potentially a catastrophe,” p. IX), *Ordre et désordre du Monde* features 22 essays that explore the cultural history of meteorology from the early 1500s to the late nineteenth century. The wide-ranging approach to the subject, which includes natural philosophy, religion, politics, economy, literature, theatre and even landscape painting, is certainly one of the great strengths of the book. Even more importantly, the collection manages to unearth the continuities that have long been buried under the assumption of a definite break between ‘modern’ meteorology and the Aristotelian tradition. The editors reiterate that “with the dismissal of an Aristotelian framework, words remain the same but they refer to a different conceptual scaffolding” (p. 8); yet, the recovery of meteorology’s deep historical roots may be its single most significant contribution.

The first group of papers, “Filiations Renaissantes,” explores different uses and meanings of meteorology in the French, Italian and German Renaissance. In line with the overall approach of the book, only one of the articles addresses the Latin commentaries that were the typical product of the universities (as well as the favorite subject of modern historians of science and philosophy),
while the others deal mostly with the religious and political significance of uncommon meteorological phenomena. Burgundian chroniclers of the late 1400s thus wondered about the place that earthquakes or celestial prodigies should have in their works, and debated their divinatory value. One century later, the authors of French scientific poems employed Aristotelian meteorology against popular superstition, and as a metaphor to denounce the ‘disorder’ of the civil wars. In the “eschatological effervescence” of reformation and counter-reformation Europe, however, traditional meteorology was increasingly rejected or bent in order to make room for direct divine intervention in nature and for an apocalyptic reading of unusual ‘meteors,’ whose increased frequency only seemed to add to their abnormality. In a short vernacular pamphlet, Paracelsus abandoned Aristotelian natural philosophy in favor of an eschatological reading of the 1532 comet: “If Aristotle established correspondences between the frequency of comets, which are sub-lunar phenomena, and the weather affected by them [...] [the comet, for Paracelsus] becomes the sign of the end of the world's time [...]. Ultimately, [the comet] is a call for conversion and the symbol of an always possible divine mercy” (p. 98). Likewise, late sixteenth-century ‘prodigious histories’ exploited the conjectural nature of Aristotelian meteorology (which did not claim absolute certainty) to weaken its causal links and to insinuate direct divine intervention in the daily operations of nature.

The next section (“Perspectives Cartésiennes”) is devoted to Descartes’s meteorology, with special focus on the rainbow and on the analysis of Descartes’s mathematical vs Newton’s more experimental approach. Descartes’s work in the field is framed within his larger attempt to “replace the world of the scholastics surrounded by imaginary spaces, what he calls the fairy tale of the world, with a world made of matter and movement that will prove to be the real one” (p. 155). Still, the long-term perspective provided by this book suggests that Descartes actually shared with the Aristotelians the aim to provide a naturalistic explanation of the world. Because of its “epistemological cracks,” traditional meteorology proved unsuited to the task that could only be accomplished through the mathematization of the aerial phenomena and by bringing them into the ‘order’ of a predictable nature.

This endeavor met with only partial success. The third section (“Ambiguïtés Classiques”) documents the enduring pervasiveness of the blend of Aristotelian natural philosophy and Biblical literalism created in the late 1500s, whose survival was certainly favored by the eagerness to adopt tools and imageries of the new experimental science. Scientific poems continued to refer to Aristotelian and Biblical sources, like Saint-Martin’s *Système des cieux et des éléments*