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BREATHING AS EVENT IN POETRY*

Abstract: The paper explores the interrelations and tensions between breathing, voice, and language, along with their effects on poetry's performative aspects and reception. It emphasizes the twofold connection between breathing and language: On the one hand, breathing displays various physiological substructures of language, and, on the other hand, it is always a linguistic phenomenon formed by language. It outlines the contexts of anthropological and philosophical theories about breathing, and from there approaches some key concepts of poetic theory. The paper discusses the theoretical framework of the lyric and applies it to a poem by Ágnes Nemes Nagy, it focuses on the poetic principles of breath and breathing in modern poetry and lyric theory as effects of poetical events. The main question hereby is as follows: How can linguistic and bodily (im)materiality become a genuine textual event in literature (in poetry) and which kind of framework does it presuppose to achieve the characteristics of event also regarding repeatability? Since breathing owns a spiritual or kairotic meaning (cf. "*Atemwende*" in Paul Celan), it can be allegorized also as an event between history and a dimension beyond historical time — perhaps as an allegory of the literary event as well?

Keywords: *language, poetry, biopoetics, breathing, (counter)signature*

Breathing belongs to the "voice as complex synesthesia", but not simply in the way that "eye movement or mimicking"[1] do — as phenotypes. It preempts such phenomena and is not merely an accompaniment, but rather — alongside its utterly distinct vital physiological function — it is a physiological generator, even a medium of the vocal apparatus, the voice and articulation. Of course, it is precisely the ungraspability and

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1 Petra Gehring, *Über die Körperkraft von Sprache. Studien zum Sprechakt* (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus, 2019), 149.

fleetingness, the intrinsic immateriality, but also the perceptibility of breathing that all call up a range of poetological, cultural and religious associations — from poetic inspiration to the holy spirit (where it is often the case that the language of breathing most often implies non-human, or superhuman actors). These associations point toward — or, enact — performativity, and in this way it seems that breathing is crucially linked to performativity. The "bodily power of language"[2] would be, literally, the power of breath (and the mediality of breathing itself can be seen as the foundation of a 'ur-model' of performativity, for instance, the motif of inhalation — either of life or/as a vital force — in various cultures). As such, the relational tension should be understood as being between the 'fluid', circulating immateriality of breath and its objectification (however construed) or, at least, its phenomenalization. This tension may represent a distinct characteristic of breathing's specific and unique liminality.

We also need to be aware of the medial transmission, i.e., recording of breath by means of various relevant cultural and messaging technologies, and discourse networks — from the telephone and sound recordings all the way to Zoom meetings. The iconic experience of breathing into the telephone[3] and the effects of the audibility of breathing in voice recordings manifest an analogue recording of breath by revealing or amplifying it as a sound, as a somatic background of articulation of speech (of information), or of voice in a media-theoretical sense.[4] This medial accentuation — or even historical-anthropological differentiation — played a central role in its ability to be a source of immense fascination and continues to contribute to

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2 Cf. ibid. This book doesn't consider the topic of breathing properly.

3 "Even today, there is nothing quite so unnerving as a caller who repeatedly calls and hangs up or who never identifies himself (it is usually a he) and simply breathes into the phone. Such violations of etiquette call forth the primal uncanniness of the medium." John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air. A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago / London: Chicago UP, 1999), 198. The 'Unheimlichkeit', uncanniness of breathing in call or in being called: As is well known, Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* conceptualizes the voice of conscience as silence [*"Conscience discourses solely and constantly in the mode of keeping silent."* "The call discourses in the uncanny mode of *keeping silent*." Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 318, 322]. This silence — which interrupts the "listening away" (Dasein "*fails to hear [überhört]* its own Self in listening to the they-self" (ibid. 315–316) — is rooted in the "uncanniness" as "the basic kind of Being-in-the-world" (ibid. 322), respectively the silence evokes this uncanniness. We could almost say, the calling silence of the conscience as an appeal was in its phenomenality something like a breathing — without speaking.

4 About the physiologies and corporeal dimensions of the (recorded) voice on examples of poetic tape recordings see the following instructive papers: Monika Schmitz-Emans, "Schreiben nach Selbst-Diktat — Stimmen aus der Fremde. Über das Tonband als Medium und Modell poetischer Arbeit," in *Das Diktat. Phono-graphische Verfahren der Aufschreibung*, ed. Natalie Binczek and Cornelia Epping-Jäger (Paderborn: Brill Deutschland, 2015), 95–120; Zoltán Kulcsár-Szabó, "Selbstpräsenz auf Tonband (András Ferenc Kovács: Öninterjú)," *Acta Philologica* 57 (2021): 97–109.

this (whether in the context of chemical weapons or the medicalization of breathing, most recently during the Corona pandemic). Breathing as white noise of speech (or, of the body, that is, the surroundings, or even, environment?) — behind, beneath, or even before speech — this experience certainly contributed to the history of a fascination around breathing in the modern era — perhaps it even helped to establish it. With this, it also prompted motivations for breath's storage potential, in this sense the objectification of breathing, as well as its transformation into writing — information or specific phenotypes (also as equally compensatory acts). And all this, against a background of an automatization of breath with respect to the breathing subject, even a turn against the subject itself; an uncanniness of breath in a linguistic-anthropological scope that Nietzsche already foresaw.

Taking a longer historical perspective, it is also important not to lose track of the fact that, beginning in antiquity — where reading was almost exclusively reading out loud[5] —, the immediacy of breathing held a very different form of physiological, perceptual, phenomenal and gestural status, and it had a much more prominent, explicit manifestation and existence when compared to the epochs of silent, internalized reading that followed much later.[6] Romanticism's various poetics of breath could also be understood here as compensations for this partial loss of the function of breathing,[7] which had been more evident in the earlier 'rule based poetics' (with its inherent memory of rhetoric). At the same time, following the emergence of diverse forms of messaging and storage technologies, breathing reappears in the form of a re-entry during the modern period (though, it is assuredly something quite different than the breathing from earlier epochs) — here, freed from the specific conceptions of subjectivity still bound to it around 1800. Ultimately, one can say that cultural technologies and the relevant dispositives of reading create, or mark, very different historical approaches to, and practices of dealing with, breathing. They temporally mark distinct 'uses of the body' — i.e., 'of' breathing, enact this and realize correlative forms of life.[8]

How can one best thematize the act of breathing in lyrical poetry? How can lyric acts — above all apostrophe, lyrical in-vocation — be understood/grasped as acts of breathing, or vice versa? Tropes of breathing have been granted quite a range of

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5 Still very informative and instructive Josef Balogh, *"Voces paginarum". Beiträge zur Geschichte des lauten Lesens und Schreibens* (Leipzig: Dietrich'sche Verlagsbuchhand-lung, 1927).

6 Cf. Eva Horn, "Luft als Element. Literatur, Klima und Thomas Manns Tod in Venedig," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 95 (2021): 353–375; Albrecht Koschorke, *Körperströme und Schriftverkehr. Mediologie des 18. Jahrhunderts* (München: Fink, 1999).

7 This is an analogue addition to Horn, "Luft als Element".

8 Cf. about these notions Giorgio Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2017), 1011–1279.

meanings and functions within lyrical communication: In Romanticism, we find contiguities or metonyms of breathing in a haptic or tactile sense — phantasms of a physiological process of embodiment of the intimate relationship between poem and reader, under the banner of poetic immortality.[9] At their core, these rhetorical strategies should be understood as compensations, or sublimations, of the problematic self-foundation of lyrical speech — of vocality, of vocal immediacy.

The Hungarian poet, Rilke-translator and literary scholar Ágnes Nemes Nagy (1922–1991) also addressed the poeticization of breathing in her work. A particularly poignant example in this vein is a poem with the title *Lélegzet (Breath)*, in which the bareness or exposed character of breathing is also the theme of the poem itself. The poem begins (thematically) with an almost prayer-like gesture: "Do not desert me, air, allow / your servant to breathe deeply now." The apostrophe evokes the air, prays for it (also for a form of inspiration, crucial for poetic invention), and the very same element is necessary for its voiced completion to even occur. Even with the referential, or, deictic directionality of address, the bespoke air is not simply an Other, it has already become the air of apostrophe itself. Still, the air evoked makes breathing possible to begin with — utterly indispensable for the voice and, thus, the apostrophe. The air inhaled, and the voice as such would be a gift of the air, whose name has just been uttered. Hence, breathing should itself become prayer, be voiced as prayer.[10] This also means that the poem as a whole becomes legible as such a gift, such a prayer. In this gift, the form of being of the lyrical I is quite literally exposed on the bodily level of breath.

In the poem, breathing becomes a genuine linguistic event: becoming a synonymous dimension of a dynamic of inhalation and exhalation, of letting-breathe through the poplar branches of the lyrical I — but, more as well: of an intersubjective, or more precisely, hybrid dynamic existing in the turn of breath between human being and plant, between the I and the poplar. One might even say that, in this revitalizing language game and web of signification, the text itself is breathing (in the sense of a dynamic re-translation of the substantive *levegő* [air] into *lebeg* [float]), that, in fact, here, we are dealing with a true example of writing breath.

The aforementioned permanence of the turn of breath is, however, not confirmed at each and every point by the pneuma-graphic text — and at one such point, it turns into

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[9] See for instance the following papers: Andrew Kay, "Conspiring with Keats: Toward a Poetics of Breathing," *European Romantic Review* 27, no. 5 (2016): 563–581; Francis O'Gorman, "Coleridge, Keats, and the Science of Breathing," *Essays in Criticism* 61, no. 4 (2011): 365–381.

[10] About the relationship between breathing and prayer see the suggestive explanation in David Michael Kleinberg-Levin, "Logos and Psyche: A Hermeneutics of Breathing," in *Atmospheres of Breathing*, ed. Lenart Škof and Petri Berndtson (New York: SUNY Press, 2018), 13, referring to Kierkegaard.

an irritation where breathing becomes a central matter of importance. The enjambment of "szüntelen / új, szennyezetlen" in the Hungarian original ("continually return my new / unsullied life") separates them, but the syntax links the elements of 'continually' and 'new', which actually remain in a somewhat contrarian relationship to one another. When read aloud, one has to briefly pause after *szüntelen*, but not only due to the line break; also to make sure that the two words do not blend into one another too intensely (even more so due to the comma after *új*) thus creating a sonic cacophony. At that point, there is even a small stop, a pause of breath possible, of course, right after the word *szüntelen* (literally: 'without pause')! As such, the above-mentioned permanence and the quality of the 'new' are not able to be immediately reconciled with one another, which could refer back to the gesture of praying: This sought or imagined permanence arises from the apostrophe and from a gift, that cannot be presupposed or made permanent. Permanence and event cannot amalgamate with one another just like that. This stop, this brief holds up of intonation, even of breathing, and induces an anacoluthic effect (the breath: an anacoluthon of voice).

Now, "breathing is what allows for a passage from vegetative life to spiritual life",[11] and exactly that is what takes place in Nemes Nagy's poem — initially in the simulation of prayer and then, more so, in the hybrid turn of breath enacting the religiously tinged transition of a spiritual purification or healing experience — which, ultimately results in the last verse, the kairotic "infinities of breathing spaces".[12] The conditions for this are as follows: In the gift of air, the breath of the lyrical I becomes something other than its own, and only in this way can the promise of a 'new unsullied life' manifest itself. This is, then, performatively brought about through prayer, i.e., through the synonymous evocation of the semantic-etymological closeness of the verb and substantive in the original Hungarian, from *lobog*, *lebeg* and *levegő*. According to the poem, only this (linguistic) dynamization of the relationship between *air* and *floating* has the capacity to purify breath *(lélegzet)*.

Breathing is to be restored as a form of purification (the inhaled and exhaled air), which — as mentioned — possesses both spiritual and healing meanings. This can

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11 Ibid., 22.

12 As is generally known, the concept *"Atemwende"* in Paul Celan features a kairotic meaning as well: „Hence, to borrow a Greek term, the moment of *Atemwende* is profoundly a 'kairotic' event: *kairos (καιρός)* is a supreme and right moment which runs counter to chronological time, *chronos (χρόνος)*. *Atemwende* is a decisive point that carries irreversible and singular, non-causal and in Celan's case pre-semantic and nonthematic qualities, for instance the vocal weight and tonal timbre of his highly elliptical language. In other words: breath is a mortal signature of the living body that cannot be 'said in other words', because it precedes vocal wording." Antti Salminen, "Breathroutes: Paul Celan's Poetics of Breathing," *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 12, no. 1 (2014): 111–112. About the correlation between breathing and prayer see ibid., 118 ("breathing becomes a method of the unspeakable bodily prayer").

also be understood to correspond to a restoration of the subject-oriented language, of the reservedness of its operative functions — for instance, its verbal aspect. In the second strophe, the activities stemming from the lyrical I recede, up to the point where the poem — 'floating' in the 'infinities of breathing spaces' — results in a single act of naming, devoid of predicate, in the final verse. Of course, the whole poem enunciates, under the banner of a gift ("allow / your servant to breathe deeply now"), of a being allowed to breathe, being allowed to speak – just as the 'face' of the lyrical I can only (dis)appear in the 'wobbly leaves'. In the second strophe, however, this is developed further though the choreography of a reciprocal breathing-in through quasi-independent intervals between both forms of breath, which only still breathe themselves (in the mode of 'floating').

As an act of using one's body, the breathing practice of poetry via apostrophe represents a genuine life form, insofar as this speech situation — and, with this, its potentially double, immediate and latent orientation or achievement — is *the* form of lyrical life and cannot be separated from this.

It is important here not to forget that all of this also applies to the act of *reading* the poem as well, insofar as the line 'between our mutual pair of faces' also refers to a space between the text(subject) and the reader — which represents the 'infinities of breathing spaces' as the poem itself. The above-mentioned breathing practice (life form), understood as using the physical body, also implies the body of the reading individual, and in this way, the poem can be read as a kind of institution of such a practice: whereby the poem itself almost teaches the reader how to breathe as a kind of counter-signature, an affirmation, a saying yes.[13] Thus, the prayer-like gesture of the entire poem shifts into a more comprehensive light: It is a call out for this counter-signature, and simultaneously a virtual lesson or training in this form of counter-signature (through which the emphasis on *új — new* becomes more understandable).[14]

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[13] "If we trusted the current distinction between competence and performance, we could say that the work's performance produces or institutes, forms or invents, a new competence for the reader or the addressee who thereby becomes a countersignatory. It teaches him or her, *if (s)he is willing*, to countersign. What is interesting here is thus the invention of the addressee capable of countersigning and saying 'yes' in a committed and lucid way. But this 'yes' is also an inaugural performance, and we recover the structure of iterability which will prevent us, at this point, from distinguishing rigorously between performance and competence, as between producer and receiver." Jacques Derrida, "This Strange Institution Called Literature," in *Acts of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 74–75.

[14] Interestingly also Charles Olson emphasized in his poetological theory about breathing, that in the 'projective text' not so much the breath of the poet, but that of the reader will be inscribed — quite as his signature: "If the inscription of the breath tempts us to imagine a move towards the line as signature, the particular physiological mark of the author, it can only be so as a signature which paradoxically erases personality in those who receive it while abstracting the signature's author

In this way, the poem generates itself or performs and presents itself — as poetic invention — in this interweaving web of 'performance' and 'competence'. Counter-signature as saying yes: Breath becomes — or appears to have become — the original, inaudible *Yes* in a spoken *Yes*,[15] doubled through assent, which always implies a second *Yes*.[16] In this complex web, the counter-signature can be pushed to excess though the event, its ostensible 'performative mastery' struck through:[17] This is the element, which, by the breath of the text itself, by its being allowed to breathe, was achieved or simulated precisely through this very breath (itself).

Ágnes Nemes Nagy: *Lélegzet*

Ne hagyj el engem, levegő,
engedj nagyot lélegzenem,
angyalruhák lobogjanak
mellkasomban ezüstösen,
akár a röntgenképeken.

'into' them…" Brendan C. Gillott, "Charles Olson's 'Projective Verse' and the Inscription of Breath," *Humanities* 7, no. 4 (2018): 10.

15 "It is therefore a kind of inaudible term, inaudible even as a determined yes is pronounced, in one language or another, within a given sentence counting as an affirmation. Language without language, it belongs without belonging to that totality which it simultaneously institutes and opens. It exceeds and incises language, to which it remains nonetheless immanent: like language's first dweller, the first to step out of its home. It brings to being and lets be everything which can be said. But its intrinsic double nature is already discernable, or more precisely, it is already confirmed. It is and is not of language, it both merges and does not merge with its utterance in a natural language. For if it is 'before' language, it marks the essential exigency, the promise, the engagement to come to language, in a given language. Such an event is required by the very force of the yes. Insofar — says Rosenzweig — as it approves or confirms every possible language, the 'sic' or the 'amen' which it institutes doubles with an acquiescence the arche originary yes which *gives the first breath to every utterance*." (emphasis by — Cs.L.) Jacques Derrida, "A Number of Yes," *Qui Parle* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1988): 126. Following Derrida, in the context of Heidegger's notion of '*Zusage*' this "yes in short, a sort of pre-engagement presupposed by every language and by every type of speech *(Sprache)*" is related to the "dimension" of *"Gelassenheit"* (see ibid., 127).

16 About its consequences: "Since the second yes resides in the first, the repetition augments and divides, distributing in advance the arche-originary yes." Ibid., 131.

17 "In this sense, the event, the other's unexpected coming, never signs or countersigns. Thus the word countersignature can assume another meaning, neither that of authenticating confirmation, the performative 'yes yes' to a signature, mine or another's; nor merely (or more) the dialectical opposition to the signature; but the very event that designates, countersigns in another sense the countersignature itself, that 'suicides' the signature, so to speak, carries it away, undoes it, exceeds it, effaces it, derides it. It is suicide itself." Jacques Derrida, "Countersignature," *Paragraph* 27, no. 2 (2004): 39.

Egy ezüstnyárfát adj nekem,
arcom a rezgő lombba nyújtva
hadd fújjam rá lélegzetem,
s ő fújja vissza szüntelen
új, szennyezetlen életem,
míg kettőnk arca közt lebeg
a lélegzetnyi végtelen.

Ágnes Nemes Nagy: *Breath* (translated by George Szirtes)

Do not desert me, air, allow
your servant to breathe deeply now,
let your angelic, silver-dressed
shadows flicker within my chest
like shapes in X-ray images.

Grant me a silver poplar, let
my yearning face be closely set
against it and allow me to
breathe into it and let its breath
continually return my new
unsullied life to me, and float
between our mutual pair of faces
infinities of breathing spaces.

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