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15 January 2019

Version of attached file:

Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Nieuwenhuis, M. (2015) 'On one breath all depend.', *Journal of narrative politics.*, 1 (2). pp. 167-179.

Further information on publisher's website:

<https://jnp.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/default/issue/view/2>

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On one breath all depend*

Marijn Nieuwenhuis**

Abstract: The element of the air has recently started to be welcomed back as a field of knowledge in the social sciences and humanities.¹ The attention to the air has mainly, but not exclusively, been the result of the increasingly tangible effects of particle pollution. Toxic pollutants have made breathing more difficult. It is however not only the atmosphere itself which is congested. This writing is a personal manifesto in which I wish to show how pollution has affected both my physiological as well as my psychological well-being. I sense that the element of the air has in the process of its polluting been robbed from its historical potency to inspire freedom and imagination. The vital and personal relationship to the air has for a very long time been left ignored as a potential domain for an alternative politics. The air seems instead to have historically been subordinated to a more terrestrially-focused understanding of politics. This article conveys a personal desire to rethink our relationship to and knowledge of the air. I wish to give the air a renewed voice without confining it to language. I propose to do this by arguing for a poetic awareness and turn in the way we breathe. Through the use of text I attempt to transcribe the cadence of my breathing.

*How blue the sky was, and how great was hope!
Hope has fled, conquered, to the black sky...²*

I.

In this paper I am interested in the reasons why we talk, dream and speculate so little about the air, despite its anteriority and its intimacy to our being. I try to reconnect to the air after having realized that I largely have lived my life in silent denial of it. This ongoing and unnerving realization came to me in China where I was for the first time confronted with the smothering feeling that comes from a lack of air. Pollution entered the pores of my skin. I felt alienated from the air, emotionally comatose and spiritless. Pollution, I discovered, is not

* The title of this paper derives from the teachings of Ephrem the Syrian, a fourth century Syriac theologian. Cited in Margaret Smith, 1995, *Studies in Early Mysticism in the Near and Middle East* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications), p. 86.

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¹ See for instance Peter Adey, 2014, *Air: Nature and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books).

² Paul Verlaine in Roland Barthes, 2002. *A Lover's Discourse* (London: Vintage Classics), p. 91

only that which is chemical and material but also that which is invisible and psychological.

Some things have improved upon my return from China, others have not. I feel as if the air continues to be taken away from me and breathing is often as hard as I felt it was in China. I feel as if I need to rediscover the rhythm of my breath. Recent protests in the US and elsewhere demanding a right to breathe seem to suggest that many suffer from a lack of air. Eric Garner's now famous last words, "I can't breathe", have become more than a symbolic expression for millions worldwide.³ This essay centers on the religious, political and poetic (as far as these things can be separated from each other) relationship between the air and the breathing body. It is written in a language that attempts to follow the rhythm of my breath. I call it no more than an attempt because I am still learning to understand what it means to breathe. I concentrate and focus to align the measure of my writing to the cadence of my breathing. I am conscious that this means that I might need to rediscover both, and I understand that this will take time and patience.

I said that I am trying to 'reconnect' to the air. I said this because I believe that I have once before stood in direct connection with it. My first act in this world was the active calling for the air. That first connection with it provided me with the chance to be part of this world. I remember that I was born but was soon thereafter compelled to forget this fact. The forgetting of my birth, the memory of being born, runs parallel to the forgetting of my relationship to the air. Since my birth it has, however silently, continued to nourish me. It is only through this selfless act and the air's dedication to our relationship that I can remain part of this world. On one breath all that I am depends. This essay explores the question why, I think, I have for so long granted so little attention to the air. I end the text with the call for the importance of a remembering of the air.

II.

The French philosopher Luce Irigaray, whose work has helped me to breathe more consciously, laments that European metaphysics has historically focused too little on the air for the question of human being.⁴ The air lies beyond the reach of language, but also of the consciousness of being. To be comes only after my breath. I breathe before I can ascertain that I am. I breathe, and only after that can I be. Descartes wrongly and reductively subordinated breath to thought, with all the repercussions that ensued for the way we think about the question and metaphysics of being.⁵ The breath is anterior to knowledge of it; knowledge can only translate it as breath. "Without breath there would be neither speech nor speaking, but before speech and in speech, at the beginning of speech, there is breath."⁶

We cannot live without air. The excess of air means that it is so much simply 'there', that we take it for granted and normally do not even think about the fact that without it humanity could not be. The air is both the invisible and that which makes visible. It nurtures life, in secret. In Don DeLillo's satirical play *Valparaiso* the TV presenter Delfina Treadwell tells her TV audience: "We live in the air as well as the skin. And there is something in these grids of information that strikes the common heart as magic."⁷ The magic of air is a well-kept

³ Marijn Nieuwenhuis, "A Right to Breathe". *Critical Legal Thinking*, 19 January 2015, last accessed on 1 February 2015. Accessible at: <http://criticallegalthinking.com/2015/01/19/right-breathe/>

⁴ Luce Irigaray, 1999. *The forgetting of air* (London: Athlone Press).

⁵ Derrida is one among some that have engaged with discussions on the relationship between the act of breathing and the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*. See, for instance, Jacques Derrida, 2008, *The animal that therefore I am* (New York, New York : Fordham University Press), chapter 2.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, 2005, *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan* (New York (NY): Fordam University Press), p. 110.

⁷ Don DeLillo, 2011, *Valparaiso* (London, Oxford and Basingstoke: Pan Macmillan), p. 106.

secret, and it is neither my intention nor is it in my powers to give it away.

There lies a level of difficulty in thinking how it is that something often considered to be nothing makes possible everything. The air is “too quick for reason, consciousness, and for any means man can master”⁸. Why do we think we are ‘earthlings’ [*Erdlinge*] rather than beings of the air [*Luftwesen*]? When it comes to human needs, we understand the importance of drinking and eating but rarely think about breathing. A right to air is not necessarily the same as a right to life. The air is anterior to life and language, but it is also there when either is no more. It creates the possibility for both.

The natural American poet Theodore Roethke wrote, while searching for an escape from himself, that “[s]ometimes it's well to leave things in the air. Let me remember me: not my despair”. Surrendering to the air is spiritually, religiously and poetically associated with ascendance and a form of autonomy from the interests, weight and will of the earth. The earth pulls down on the apple which itself wants to move upwards. Newton's third law affects also our thinking. The Jungian psychoanalyst James Hillman writes about Joseph Priestley's (co-)discovery of oxygen which only was made possible, he argues, because of the contemporaneous “obsession with density, weight, number, and measure”. It helped Priestley “to materialize the air” and “differentiate it into a complexity of its constituents”.⁹ The movement of our thought “is toward the bottom”... [T]he justification for the “bottom-line” reduction is in the rhetoric of earth – common sense, solid facts, hard reality.”¹⁰ No more dreaming as if there is no ceiling to the sky. The earthly and cumbersome characteristics of solidity and physicality are also the implicit or explicit domain of metaphysical thinking. Indeed, “metaphysics, in its incessant search for grounds on which to construct its theories, is based on the solidity and density of the earth”.¹¹ Politics has historically likewise always been a very earthly practice. The first Athenian, the autochthonous Erichthonius, is nurtured by Gaia, the 'Earth Mother of All'. How different, however, is the mother of air. Light, warm and unconditional. Perhaps we need a different registry of knowing and relating to the air. One that is gentle and as caring as the air itself.

I believe that there is an urgent political task set for us to rediscover the air. I also believe that it is possible to retrieve it as a subject worthy of investigation and imagination. This *belief* came to me when I noticed myself that the air is much more than the mere background on which earthly objects become visible. The air for me resides in the experience of the *elemental*, or what Merleau-Ponty called “subdued being”, the formless, “non-thetic” “being before [human] being”.¹² I believe (in) the air to be the medium of possibility to imagine expressions of being differently. In this paper I try to find a way to talk about the aesthetics and politics of the air without attempting to either reveal its secret or to arrest the reader's intimate relationship to it. Few things are as personal as the air we breathe. I intend no harm to damage what is yours. This is very much a story of my air or, perhaps more accurately, the air that is inside of me, but that is also part of you.

III.

I had never pondered on the existence of the air, until I started my PhD fieldwork in China. My dissertation focused on the historical process of the territorialisation of the state in China,

⁸ Luce Irigaray, 1999, p. 164.

⁹ James Hillman, 2010, *Alchemical Psychology* (Dallas (TX): Spring Publications), p. 305.

¹⁰ James Hillman, 2010, p. 305.

¹¹ Tina Chanter, 1995, *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Re-writing of the Philosophers* (London: Routledge), p. 164.

¹² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 1968, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston (IL): Northwestern University Press), p.267.

and had thus an earthly intention rather than an airy imagination. Territory remains largely seen as a political relationship with the earth. However, whilst living in China, I became aware of the importance of the air as a medium of nourishment and nurture. Such awareness did not occur overnight. I spent a good two years in China and worked for a number of months as an ecological urban planning consultant. It did not take much time before I realized that the thick smog of airborne pollution hindered my respiratory breathing and affected both my psychological and biological well-being. The stifling air was so heavy that it felt oppressive and suffocating first on and later under my skin. I read research that demonstrated that the psychological and neurological effects of air pollutants has become of increasing importance, as the consequences of increased pollution levels are more visible and hence, discussable. Links between particle pollution and neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism and neuropsychiatric diseases such as schizophrenia have already been established.¹³

The situation in China is particularly grave, I felt. Studies initiated and conducted by Chinese scholars showed that aerial pollution is annually responsible for 350,000 to 500,000 premature deaths in China.¹⁴ Blue skies are indeed a rarity in coastal China where I spent most of my time during my two-year stay. The heavens are instead filled with toxins that render visible life's dependency on the altruistic nature of the air. I felt that the cloak of 'bad air' handicapped my breathing and soon came to sense that the lack of 'fresh air' affected my mood. I suffered from migraines, felt feeble, spiritless and uninspired. Air pollution in China has led to the loss of more than 2.5 billion life years of life expectancy.¹⁵ The relationship between pollution and well-being has been picked up by artists such as the painter Cai Guo-Qiang, who observed that "Chinese people now have access to most things except clean air."¹⁶ The observation applies, of course, also to peoples living in other parts of the world.

The loss of contact with the air begs the question how we should 'value' the fact that we now have "access to most things". The relationship to the 'Great Open' of the air seems historically to have been 'exchanged' for a connectedness to the materiality of the earth. The world is more than the material things which occupy it and over which we exercise our knowledge. Humans dwell equally as much in invisible air. The influential Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh writes about our duality as beings of both the earth and the air.

*When we take a step on the green earth, we are aware that we are made of air, sunshine, minerals, and water, that we are a child of earth and sky, linked to all other beings, both animate and inanimate.*¹⁷

The balance between the sky and the earth seems lost in the birthplace of the Tao of Zen. The country's post-1978 industrialization project, which serves the narrow territorial interest of the state, has come at the cost of rampant aerial pollution. In the process, the air has been

¹³ Sermin Genc, Zeynep Zadeoglulari, Stefan H. Fuss and Kursad Genc (2012) "Review Article: The Adverse Effects of Air Pollution on the Nervous System," *Journal of Toxicology*: 1-23.

¹⁴ Zhu Chena, Wang Jin-Nan, Ma Guo-Xia, and Zhang Yan-Shen. 2013. "China tackles the health effects of air pollution," *The Lancet* 385 (9909): 1959–1960.

¹⁵ Edward Wong, 2013, "Pollution Leads to Drop in Life Span in Northern China, Research Finds". The New York Times, 8 July 2013, last accessed on 3 November 2014. Accessible at: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/09/world/asia/pollution-leads-to-drop-in-life-span-in-northern-china-study-finds.html?_r=0

¹⁶ Cai Guo-Qiang in Jennifer Duggan, 2014, "China's environmental woes inspire art". *The Guardian*, 15 August 2014, last accessed on 1 November 2014. Accessible at: <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/chinas-choice/2014/aug/15/chinas-environmental-problems-cai-guo-qiang>

¹⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh, 1996, *Cultivating the Mind of Love* (Berkeley (CA): Parallax Press), p. 52.

annexed by the gravitational forces of an earthly politics. Perhaps the silent process of the ‘forgetting of the air’ should be seen as part of a historical process of becoming modern. Maybe I need to clarify here that I see modernity as a process of believing in the myth of self-reliance, a false dualism between society and nature and a fetish for insulation.

One could argue, as the German thinker Peter Sloterdijk has, that humanity has ever since its transition from nomadic to sedentary existence lived in a progressive trend toward ever more sophisticated technological forms of insulation. The history of mankind seems marked by continuous attempts to exclude itself from the environment by means of insulation. Indeed, “[h]uman evolution can only be understood if we also bear in mind the mystery of insulation... [*Insulierungsgheimnis*] that so defines the emergence of humans”¹⁸ The interior conditioning of the air separated us from the air outside in more than just one way. Peter Sloterdijk’s work on bubbles and spheres, as much influenced by the ‘earthly’ Heidegger as the ‘airy’ Indian philosopher Osho (previously known as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh), demonstrates how the development of the severing of our ties with the air starts from simple sedentary dwellings to the construction of cities, states, shopping malls and eventually globes.¹⁹

Insulation, I feel, has as its objective to singularize and reduce our worlds to what is inside. It is a logic driven by specialization, efficiency, focus, force and discipline. This history of insulation and isolation, which has overtaken our understanding of what it means to be with and part of nature, seems to have led to an ever-growing detachment from the open air and all the radical imaginations and ways of being it can offer. Comte de Lautréamont asks: “Where are ‘things’? In amorous space, or in a mundane space?”²⁰ Can love be anywhere else than in the indeterminate outside that is air?

My housemate, a construction worker, told me last week that insulation isolates. “It leaves the weather, noise, wind and all other things outside.” Insulation isolates, it keeps all that is outside, outside and all that is inside, inside. What remains is the bubble that I consider my home. Insulation teaches us to look down, to think in the concrete, to love with constraint and we learn to be content inside bubbles. To ask for nothing outside of it, not questioning it, but forgetting that we are not born as individual singularities. Happy is the in-dividual, the non-dividable, the singular which is efficient and thinks he needs no outside. “What remains [however] of the dream of human autonomy once the subject has experienced itself as a penetrable hollow body?”²¹ I am trying to find new ways to feel how we can be together again, and the air has become my preferred medium of communication. I inhale the same air you exhale.

Key to this transition from being together with the air to becoming creatures of the earth is a historical change in the way the air was conceived, perceived and lived. Modern knowledge of the air enabled its materialization into constituents and its eventual separation from space altogether. Robert Boyle’s air pump, the instrument which allowed for a space without air, is illustrative of the secularization and the denaturalization of the air. Air transformed into something through which humanity could now exercise control over life and death.

¹⁸ Peter Sloterdijk, 2009, “Talking to Myself about the Poetics of Space,” *Harvard Design Magazine*, 30: 1-8.

¹⁹ He argues: “Humans are pets that have domesticated themselves in the incubators of early cultures. All the generations before us were aware that you never camp outside in nature. The camps of man’s ancestors, dating back over a million years, already indicated that they were distancing themselves from their surroundings.” Peter Sloterdijk, 2009, p. 1. See also: Peter Sloterdijk, 2011, *Bubbles: microspherology* (Los Angeles (CA): Semiotext(e)), but also the other two volumes in his spheres trilogy.

²⁰ Cited in Roland Barthes, 2002, *A Lover's Discourse* (London: Vintage), p. 92.

²¹ Peter Sloterdijk, 2011, p. 94.

This is visually perhaps nowhere as well documented as in Joseph Wright's famous painting *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*. The painting depicts a scene in which a group of people are the onlookers of an unfolding tragedy. The air pump is shown to deprive a bird from oxygen while the natural philosopher, responsible for the asphyxiation, looks his audience in the eye as if to confront it with the Enlightenment's dispassionate attitude towards the animating air. The painter, who was himself asthmatic, asks his audience to identify the pump "both as an agent of enlightenment and a symptom of postlapsarian frailty."²² The picture foreshadows the consequences of human control over the air and warns about the subsequent imminent demise of the air's sanctity.



An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump (Joseph Wright of Derby, 1768)

Scientific knowledge of the aerial source of life meant that the air would soon change the way life was lived as well.²³ It is no coincidence that the painting was drawn at the burgeoning

²² Jayne E. Lewis, *Air's Appearance: Literary Atmosphere in British Fiction, 1660-1794* (Chicago (IL): University of Chicago Press), p. 41.

²³ The Flemish empiricist van Helmont, whose work influenced the later discoveries of Priestley and Lavoisier, introduced the word 'gas' into the Dutch dictionary, a term which he tellingly had borrowed from the Greek word *chaos*, the stuff which the ancients had associated with the origins of the universe. "Antoine Lavoisier thought gas derived from Dutch ghoast (spirit), while the German physician Johann Juncker defended Van

time and geographic heart of the Industrial Revolution. The burning of carbon allowed all that was solid to melt into air, and to profane the air that previously had been holy. “[M]an is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind”.²⁴

The human ‘engineering’ or ‘conditioning’ of air has had as much an effect on the practice of changing lives, as it had on ending them. Sloterdijk’s work on ‘airquakes’ [*Luftbeben*] shows that the First and Second World War exposed the terror that could be inflicted through the body of the air.²⁵ Knowledge of the air was however also used to change the temporal and spatial changing of life. Air conditioning would in the 20th century be used to create the “endless building”²⁶. Neither daily nor seasonal temporalities affect the body or mood of the modern being. The interior climate of the air is wholly anthropogenic. To paraphrase Le Corbusier, we live in incubatory ‘machines’ of our own making.²⁷ The notion of ‘home’ has silently become equated with the materiality of the roofed house. The roof shelters us from the daunting openness of the air but thereby also prevents us from looking up and from being once again one with the stars, the chaos from which we originally came from.

Rarely was I lucky enough to detect a star when I lived in China, but now, being ‘at home’, enjoying the cool British Midland midnight breeze, I equally notice how estranged I am to the life of the stars. My focus is instead on the physicality of the earth. I look down, rather than up. I feel as if something has gone missing in my alienation from the heavenly constellations above my head, something which perhaps has never been physically part of me, knowingly inside of me. I want to learn to look up. I sometimes wonder what the sky would look like if I could walk on my head.²⁸ Van Gogh, among others before and after him, associated the stars with divinity, infinity and immortality in his painting ‘Starry Night’ [*Sterrennacht*].²⁹ They are the inspired and inspirational reminders of human origins and ends. The air *inspires*.

IV.

The air refuses dichotomies of inside and outside. Upon observing and sensing that I move in the air and that the air moves inside and outside of me, I soon also realized that the idea of a distinctively Chinese air is thus also a fallacy. The air is not divisible on the basis of a

Helmont against those who thought his word ‘barbaric’, by claiming that it came from German *gascht*, or *gast*, ferment, froth or foam”. Steven Connor, 2010, *The Matter of Air: Science and Art of the Ethereal* (London: Reaktion Books), p. 123. The unlocking of the chemical makeup of air symbolised the start of humanity’s mastery over its energy, which van Helmont described as the *spiritus sylvestris* (‘spirit of a wild nature’) and we now know as carbon dioxide. See also: Walter Pagel, 1982, *Joan Baptista Van Helmont: Reformer of Science and Medicine* (Cambridge: The University of Cambridge), especially: pp. 60-70.

²⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 2008 [1848], *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Pluto Press), p. 38.

²⁵ Peter Sloterdijk, 2002, *Luftbeben: an den Quellen des Terrors* (Airquakes: At the Source of Terror). (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag KG).

²⁶ “Air-conditioning has launched the endless building. If architecture separates buildings, air-conditioning unites them.” Rem Koolhaas, 2014 [2002], “Junk Space” (pp. 22-26) in Jen Jack Gieseking, William Mangold with Cindi Katz, Seta Low, Susan Saeger (eds.) *The People, Place, and Space Reader* (New York (NY): Routledge), p. 22

²⁷ “A house is a machine for living in. Baths, sun, hot water, cold water, controlled temperature, food conservation, hygiene, beauty through proportion.” Le Corbusier, 2008 [1924], *Toward an Architecture* (Los Angeles (CA): Getty Research Institute), p. 151.

²⁸ This relates to Paul Celan’s discussion of Georg Buchner’s *Lenz*; a figure who desired to walk on his head. Celan writes that “a man who walks on his head... sees the sky below, as an abyss.” Paul Celan, 2003, “The Meridian” (pp. 37-55) in *Collected Prose* (New York (NY): Routledge), p. 46

²⁹ See for instance Hope B. Werness, 1985, “Whitman and Van Gogh: Starry Nights and Other Similarities” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 2 (Spring), pp. 35-41.

territorial logic. The air's wholesome and ever-continuing body constitutes a politics that is radically democratic and equal. Your words are yours, but your air is mine and what is mine is yours. We exchange the medium that makes us. The air is not a politics of 'mine and thine'. It precedes historical appropriations and is exterior to political classification. The air moves silently and ebulliently through the tainting and tainted fingers and covetous hands of bounded powers. It enjoys a radical and anterior "sense of offensive and triumphant freedom like a bolt of lightning, an eagle, an arrow, or an imperious, sovereign glance."³⁰ The interminable air belongs to everybody and to no one. Just as Nietzsche's will, the air is a spirit which goes as much *over* [*über*] as *through* man. "The earth over water, fire over earth, air over fire - such is the utterly *vertical* hierarchy of Nietzschean poetics."³¹ If air is elevation, freedom from the earth, then breath is its calling. Every breath tests humanity's historical faithfulness to the earth and is a stark reminder that we live somewhere in-between the freedom of the air and the safety and security of the earth as home.

The radical freedom embedded in the air runs counter to modernity, a narrative instead marked by attempts to regulate, rationalise, secularise and ultimately pull down all possibilities of elevation and ascendance. Modernity is as much earthbound as it is earth-binding. Ingold writes that the "equation of materiality with the solid substance of the earth has its roots in a tendency, deeply sedimented in the canons of western thought, to imagine that the world is presented to human life as a surface to be occupied"³². The process of gravitational anchoring reached its apex in the separation of astrology from astronomy. The former now labelled superstitious nonsense, the latter raised to the level of knowledge. The measure of truth was no longer found in the universe but made here on earth. From all the ancient arts (e.g. alchemy, astrology etc.) perhaps only poetry survived as a means to communicate with the air.

Perhaps the poet's love for air is also a reason why the writings of one the most *unearthly* poets of the last century, Fernando Pessoa, felt so inspired by the life of things non-terrestrial³³.

I don't know if the stars rule the world
Or if tarot or playing cards
Can reveal anything.
I don't know if the rolling of dice
Can lead to any conclusion.
But I also don't know
If anything is attained
By living the way most people do.³⁴

Poetry is often said to articulate a 'rhythm of breath', while breathing is believed to constitute the source of rhythm. Poetry "has the same concrete value as the air we breathe. A line of poetry is a pneumatic reality. It must bow to aerial imagination. It is the creation of the joy of

³⁰ Gaston Bachelard, 2000, *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement* (Dallas (TX): Dallas Institute Publications), p. 136

³¹ Gaston Bachelard, 2000, p. 150, original emphasis.

³² Tim Ingold, 2005, "The Eye of the Storm: Visual Perception and the Weather". *Visual Studies* 20 (2): 97-104, 103.

³³ Fernando Pessoa and Richard Zenith, ed., 2001, *The selected prose of Fernando Pessoa* (New York: Grove Press).

³⁴ Fernando Pessoa and Richard Zenith, ed., 2006, *A Little Larger Than the Entire Universe: Selected Poems* (London: Penguin books), p. xxix

breathing...³⁵. The air I breathe is lighter than the feather it caresses. It defies earth's gravity as much as poetry defies the rigidity of language. Poetry belongs perhaps among the last channels to communicate with the lightness of the air. It communicates in a similar language. "All previous natural languages, including theoretical discourse, were developed for a world of weight and solid substances. They are thus incapable of expressing the experiences of a world of lightness and relations..."³⁶

The heavy is interpreted as the essence of knowledge over the lightness that is thought to be mere appearance. This is perhaps why we see now little Reason to look up. And if we do, we look at the sky out of concern for more earthly matters. I watched the weather forecast earlier today to know what I will need to wear for tomorrow. Rain serves agriculture, the sun tourism; the weather is an economic relation. The focus on the earth has led to a forgetting that the weather is also imagination and inspiration. Perceiving the weather "is a mode of being... With their feet on the ground and their hands in the air, human beings appear to be constitutionally split between the material and the mental."³⁷

V.

During my time in China I realised how much the air affects me. The darkening of the Chinese air took my *temperament* away. It would be a mistake to consider this as 'only' an environmental or a Chinese-specific issue. The air is much more than that. "Air gives what is indispensable to live, to grow, to speak - to each one, man or woman, and to a relation between two not dominated by the one or by the other... Air is what is left common between subjects living in different worlds."³⁸ If air is all that and yet still more, then maybe there is a reason to confront the problem of its polluting more widely, not in the strictest environmental sense, but politically, historically and even emotionally.

Perhaps it is pollution to which Adorno really alluded in those last famous lines on the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz.³⁹ Was it the killing of air in the gas chambers that made any poetry after the fact barbaric? The violence of pollution becomes total when it is transferred through the fatal act of breathing in the absence of free air. The condition for life itself and thought about it are in the chambers of ~~death~~ gas denied and replaced by a culture of insulation and isolation. The gas chamber is the example of the terror that stems from perfectly designed insulation. It signifies the complete denial of the outside. What are the possibilities for poetry if the air is contaminated, transformed and inversely used as the means to exert violence against all possibilities of an outside?

*In the open-air prison which the world is becoming, it is no longer so important to know what depends on what, such is the extent to which everything is one. All phenomena rigidify, become insignias of the absolute rule of that which is.*⁴⁰

Adorno challenges the possibility of an outside - there where the air resides and where breathing takes place- after Auschwitz. He argues that the material and cultural production of life does not allow and even actively prevents a reconnecting with the freedom of the air. What space is there left for poetry (or any art) to negate politics if the air on which all depend

³⁵ Bachelard, 2000, 242.

³⁶ Sloterdijk in Connor, 2010, p. 11, 12.

³⁷ Tim Ingold, 2005, "The Eye of the Storm: Visual Perception and the Weather", 103, 104.

³⁸ Luce Irigaray, 2002, *Way of Love* (London and New York (NY): Continuum), p. 67.

³⁹ "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." Theodor Adorno, 1983 [1967], *Prisms* (Cambridge (MA): MIT Press), p. 34

⁴⁰ Adorno, 1997, *Prisms* (Cambridge (MA): MIT Press), p. 33.

is itself transformed from the medium of freedom into a weapon of death? “Between what the archaeologist Bjørnar Olsen calls 'the hard physicality of the world' and the realms of abstract thought in which 'all that is solid melts into air', no conceptual space remains for the circulations of the actual air we breathe and on which life depends.”⁴¹

I believe that there exists an opportunity, or at least a responsibility, to continue resisting and hope that there *is* such an outside, to think about the possibilities for a politics of the air free from the gravitational political forces that pull us down. I am in search of a non-language, but nonetheless one that mediates, through which I can communicate with you without having to fall back on overdetermined abstractions that hurt us both. Damaging words which politically enforce limits to our common world, categorise it into neat containers of power, words that constantly want to ‘make sense’ of me and you, concretising and insulating us, preventing me from being both with myself and with you. You, the reader, the lover, my fellow breather, the inhaler of a common air, I am searching for a language closer to the respiratory rhythm of our breathing. A language that allows us to both speak and listen to the shared air that mediates and animates both our hearts. No more language, insulation, or loneliness, come play with me outside of language. In my quest for a companion to converse in an anti-language, one which would make communication between us again possible, I discovered the figure of Paul Celan.

Celan is the poet but also the Jew after Auschwitz. Neither should, however, have been possible after the air was killed. Celan, whose very poetry I soon will argue is animated by a desire to breathe, seems to directly respond to Adorno’s radical negative dialectic in his ‘Conversation in the Mountains’ (*Gespräch im Gebirg*, 1959). The imaginary encounter between the two thinkers is written in a German-Yiddish dialectic, a secret sort of mouse-like ‘Yiddle’ (*Mauscheln*), that Germans could only partially have understood. The choice to speak in a hidden non-language, known to both Jews, turns language against language. The prosaically written parable is illustrative of Celan’s attempt to find a way to communicate without having to fall back on language. I call the prose illustrative precisely for the reason that it symbolises Celan’s attempt to recover what was imprisoned and killed in Auschwitz. It is an attempt to salvage the act of writing poetry, to find an outside, or indeed, to breathe again after the killing of air in Auschwitz.

VI.

Just as the poet does not think nor search for words, the words find and think him, we do not breathe air, instead it breathes us.⁴² The breath hints at the idea that the air is not in me, but somewhere between me and you. The air is outside and we are its porous interconnecting “walking air filters.”⁴³ Salminen writes “a singular individual is connected to common humanity (and also to non-human forces) by her breath”.⁴⁴ I share with you something that comes before I can become me and you become you. The air should be given something more than a voice of words. Let it be the secret melody through which we play the common

⁴¹ Tim Ingold (2009) “The Wedge and the Knot: Hammering and Stitching the Face of Nature“ in S. Bergmann, P.M. Scott, M. Jansdotter Samuelsson and H. Bedford-Strohm (eds.) *Nature, Space and the Sacred: Transdisciplinary Perspectives* (Farnham: Ashgate), p. 156.

⁴² I am paraphrasing Rimbaud’s closing lines of *Ô saisons, Ô châteaux*: “What do my words mean? Meaning flees, takes wing! [Que comprendre à ma parole? Il fait qu’elle fuie et vole!]” Cited in Arthur Rimbaud, 2003, *Rimbaud Complete, Volume I: Poetry and Prose*. Translated and edited by Wyatt Mason (New York (NY): The Modern Library), p. 132.

⁴³ Peter Adey, 2014.

⁴⁴ Antti Salminen, 2014, "On Breathroutes: Paul Celan’s Poetics of Breathing". *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* (12 (1), 107-126, p. 111.

rhythm of our hearts. What I want to close with is an argument for a ‘breath turn’. In what follows, I will argue for the need to learn to breathe differently, unspokenly and secretly with the heart.

The relationship between air and animation might anthropologically be one of the most common themes in poetry and religions across the world. The idea of a ‘living air’ plays a central role in Taoism (*Qi*), Hinduism (*Prāṇa*), Christianity (*Spirit*), Judaism (*Ruach*) but, of course, also in Shintō animism (*Iki*). The divine air is in many such accounts as much the spiritual as the biological ‘food of life’. It is simply out there and gives life. The air *inspires* and *in-spirits*.

The breath of life is a theme which also recurrently appears in the work of the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam for whom the absence of breath symbolises a “lack of happiness, lack of freedom and lack (or impossibility) of poetic creation.”⁴⁵ Suffering from ill-health and political persecution the “very rhythm [of his poetry] is organised to express shortness of breath”.⁴⁶

We notice a similar animate relationship between breathing and ‘poiesis’ in Paul Celan’s notion of ‘Breathturn’ [*Atemwende*]⁴⁷. Celan was strongly influenced by Mandelstam and responsible for making much of his poetry accessible in the German language. The two poets share also a common fascination for and intimate relationship to the air. Celan imagines poetry however altogether to be quite literally a breath from another world. For him, the halting of one’s breathing suspends the bodily circulation of air as much as poetry ruptures language. Poetry turns against language as the turning of breath turns against the body’s dependency on air. “This turn” is for Celan, Salminen writes, “a brief moment of strange freedom... the moment of radical individuation.”⁴⁸ But the turn is equally the moment the breather becomes aware that she is connected with other breathers through one shared medium, air.

A turn of breath suspends and ruptures the unconscious routine of breathing similarly to poetry’s breaking with the meaning and taken-for-granted abstraction of language. A space of potentiality arises from the awareness of our common breathing. Celan writes that: “[p]oetry is perhaps this: An *Atemwende*, a turning of our breath.”⁴⁹ A turn of breath is a disruptive moment, an *augenblick*, of authenticity and clarity – between the inhaling and exhaling of air – in which language is momentarily forced to halt. The flow and flux of words stop as the breath pauses. Celan uses *Atemwende* as a ‘counter-word’ [*Gegenwort*], a “word that cuts the thread, the word that no longer bows to history’s loiterers and parade-horses. It is an act of freedom. It is a step [*Schritt*].”⁵⁰ It is step precisely “because it occurs where language, contrary to all expectations, gives way.”⁵¹ It is also a step because it intervenes in the dominant narrative and opens-up the possibility of, or indeed, the inspiration for a different form of communication.

⁴⁵ Taranovsky cited in Peter Zeeman, 1988, *The later poetry of Osip Mandelstam: text and context* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi), p. 49.

⁴⁶ Sidney Monas, 1973, “Notes by Sidney Monas” (pp. 317-338) in Osip Mandel’shtam (ed.) *Complete Poetry of Osip Emilevich Mandelstam* (New York (NY): State University of New York Press), p. 346

⁴⁷ Paul Celan, 1968, *Atemwende* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag).

⁴⁸ Antti Salminen, 2014, “On Breathroutes”, p. 109, 111.

⁴⁹ Paul Celan, 2003, “The Meridian”, p. 47

⁵⁰ I translated the German version. The original reads “das Wort das den Draht zerreisst, das Wort, das sich nicht mehr vor den ‘Eckstehern und Paradegäulen der Geschichte’ bückt, es ist ein Akt der Freiheit. Es ist ein Schritt.” Paul Celan, 1986, “Der Meridian” in *Gesammelte Werke in fünf Bänden, Band 3* (Frankfurt am Main.: Suhrkamp 1986), p. 189.

⁵¹ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 1999, *Poetry as Experience* (Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press), p. 49.

A breathturn is therefore a "counter-rhythmic rupture [*gegenrhythmische Unterbrechung*⁵²] that affirms the freedom of an extreme moment in the neighbourhood of silence and the breakdown of language, insanity, or death."⁵³ Di Cesare describes this physiological inversion, "the spasm or syncope of language"⁵⁴, as a "subversion, a revolt, and a revolution. *Atemwende* should be translated as 'revolution of the breath'".⁵⁵ It disrupts and breaks with the dominant modes of knowledge, precedes them and resists any subsequent attempts to be brought back into the fold. Celan's breathing inspired Derrida who synonymises the contra-movement of the *Atemwende* with the quality of poetry which similarly ruptures existing structures of language.⁵⁶ It opens-up language to the possibility of a radical experience of freedom.

Writing poetry means breathing differently, precisely because poetry like breathing does not follow "a prepared speech or text which expresses orders, laws or imperative truths."⁵⁷ Poetry, love and respiration cannot be learned through the acquisition of knowledge, as knowing is not feeling, but must, as Derrida notes, be 'learned by heart' [*apprendre par coeur*].⁵⁸ Learning by heart is characterised by the desire to completely and absolutely interiorise what is outside.⁵⁹ It is a desire to teach but also invent the heart.⁶⁰ This implies a process of total surrendering at the risk of losing oneself to the experience of poetry, love and breathing. It takes a lot of 'courage' (etymologically from the French name for the heart, *coeur*) to turn your breath, to write poetry and fall in love.

The phrase 'to learn by heart' translates in German as *auswendiglernen* (literally: 'learning (the) outside'). It makes explicit the relationship between the interior and the exterior. To bring what is outside to the inside of the heart, a process of interiorization and transformation towards becoming other. The otherworldly medium that is shared before I become me and you become you enjoys, in other words, both an *elemental* and *mediatory* quality. We share the air, before we are subjectively separate, we breathe together, or to paraphrase Heidegger's famous 1950 'language speaks' dictum *we do not breathe air, air breathes us*.

⁵² The concept of *gegenrhythmische Unterbrechung* originates from a passage in Friedrich Hölderlin's "Remarks on 'Oedipus'" (1988 [1803]: 101-102) and inspired Celan's own notion of *Atemwende*. The importance of the phrase has since its coining been discussed by a wide range of thinkers, including Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Giorgio Agamben, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno among others. The (translated) passage reads:

For indeed, the tragic *transport* is actually empty and the least restrained.

Thereby, in the rhythmic sequence of the representations wherein transport presents itself, there becomes necessary *what in poetic meter is called cesura*, the pure word [*reine Wort*], the counter-rhythmic rupture [*gegenrhythmische Unterbrechung*]; namely, in order to meet the onrushing change of representations at its highest point in such a manner that very soon there does not appear the change of representation but the representation itself." Friedrich Holderlin, 1988 [1803], *Friedrich Hölderlin: Essays and Letters on Theory* (Albany (NY): State University of New York Press), p. 101-102):

⁵³ Timothy Clark, 1997, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-romantic Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 259, 260.

⁵⁴ Nancy in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 1999, 49.

⁵⁵ Donatella Ester Di Cesare, 2012, *Utopia of Understanding: Between Babel and Auschwitz* (Albany (NY): State University of New York Press), p. 189.

⁵⁶ See the collection of texts in Derrida, 2005. I also follow Timothy Clark's discussion in his analysis on the two thinkers, see: Clark, 1997, chapter 11.

⁵⁷ Luce Irigaray, 1996, *I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History* (New York (NY): Routledge), p. 123.

⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida in Timothy Clark, 1997, p. 262.

⁵⁹ "In the desire of this absolute inseparation, the absolute nonabsolute, you breathe the origin of the poetic" Ibid.

⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida in Timothy Clark, 1997, p. 277.

I wish to use this elemental and bodily interrelationship between the heart, love, breath and poetry to give air a voice without instilling it with language or equipping it with knowledge. Perhaps this is my attempt to rediscover the air as a secret; as an unknowable, asubjective and unknowing medium of wonder that will always remain too indeterminate, too fast for knowledge to capture. Maybe we can turn our breath together, surrender a little to the air? Irigaray argues for such a common turn towards “awareness and... cultivation of the breath before and beyond any representation and discourse. The accomplishment of humanity, its perfect realization, requires the cultivation of one's own breath as divine presence, in ourselves and between us.”⁶¹

I am arguing for an ontology of the air that allows us to be-together-outside. The illimitable and a-territorial qualities of the air bring us together without forcing us to stay together. The air is always a being-with and a being-in. Such a subjectivity of air finds its spit and image in love which, as we know, equally defies and challenges the borders of language and materiality. “Perhaps loving each other requires that we look at the invisible, to abandon the sight of it to the breath of the heart, of the soul, that we preserve in its carnality, without staring upon it fixedly as a target.”⁶² To love, to breathe, then is to perhaps to revoke gravity.

⁶¹ Luce Irigaray, 2004, “The Age of the Breath” (pp. 165-170) in Luce Irigaray (ed.): *Key Writings* (New York (NY): Continuum), p. 169.

⁶² Luce Irigaray, 2001, *To be Two* (New York (NY): Routledge), p. 42.