

## Movements of Syncopnea

My reading of Buckley's breath and his rendition of Cohen's "Hallelujah" introduce the spectrum of the following study of breathing in modern literature. In the first chapter, the implications of artistic respiration observed in Buckley's exhalation are put to the test by visiting a number of critical settings in which breath has been thought and written about across the centuries. The characterizations of breathing as liminal, on the verge of semantics, primary, disrupting, relational, and non-self-identical repeatedly recur across the various contexts I investigate, thus constituting a historical-theoretical framework for my investigation of modern respiratory literature.

What I observed in Buckley's recording of "Hallelujah," that the audible breath is a marginal element tending to be unheard, pertains to breathing in general. Breath usually escapes perception and often remains unnoticed; breathed air is mostly invisible. In artistic renderings too, breath is seldom visible at first glance. That a book-length comparative study of breath in modern literature has not yet been done could be due to this fact. Another reason is certainly the hesitance and suspicion some historical accounts of breath, and the network of terms that go along with it, provoke, an issue to which I will return later in this chapter.

It has to be admitted from the outset: when one writes about breath in literature, one never writes about breath as such. Literature cannot record physiological respiration; whenever breathing enters a written literary work, it will be semanticized to occur as a word, image, metaphor, or metonymy. Consisting of arbitrary signs, literature necessarily fails to reproduce the sound or visual appearance of breath accurately. This, however,

is precisely the reason why literary renderings of breath are so intriguing. Words can only hint at the phenomenon of breathing: breath necessarily escapes them; they capture its tendency to withdraw from what is visible and heard. That we never see or hear breath as such in a literary text, but only encounter indications of it that point to something else located somewhere else, increases the awareness that breath has no fixed place or mode of occurrence. Every inhalation is always on the verge of becoming an exhalation; the oxygen in our lungs is on the verge of becoming carbon dioxide outside our body; the audible sigh recedes into silence; the curling white shapes in the cold air dissolve. Literary depictions of respiration and the word “breath” may invoke a fleeting image or sound, but if we shift our attention from what we imagine back to the page or screen we’re reading, we return to silent letters.

The letters of the word “breath” point, not only to a physiological process, but also to a rich and complicated etymological and cultural history. Precisely because breath challenges representation, it often marks moments when literature reflects the limits of language’s meaning-bearing, referential function. An investigation of breathing in literature is bound to have a double focus: on the matter in question and on the ways in which this matter has been thought about, written about, presented, and represented. My analyses will move along points of intersection: where breathing meets something other than itself (a linguistic sign, a printed letter, a sheet of paper, an electronic display, a recorded sound, etc.), where it enters language and interrupts it, and where it is transferred between different media and materialities of literature. In other words, the way breathing has been thought about, written about, and aesthetically rendered never fully coincides with the physical phenomenon—with what we do when we inhale and exhale. At the same time, a ruptured movement, an uneven symmetry, a non-self-coincidence, and the very notion of transference are indeed characteristic of the physiological breathing process. The inhaled air is split into various constituents in the body and chemically does not coincide with what is exhaled. Our life as human beings is reliant on the continual intake of an inorganic substance that becomes part of our body, only to depart from it again, now transformed. The fact that breathing is necessary in order to live also shows that what we consider organic life depends on our bodies’ alliance with inorganic substances: as breathing beings, we are never fully “ourselves.” As L. O. Aranye Fradenburg puts it, “Breathing is an experience of (embodied) extimacy: the ‘me’-ness of a strange element, the strangeness of what is in me” (181). With every breath we take, we find ourselves at

the limit of what is deemed our own (our body, etc.) and what is deemed other (the outside world, etc.). A respiring living organism is never self-contained, the “self” of a breathing being is scattered into fragments that do not make up a coherent identity. “Catching one’s breath” is catching up, for an instant, with that part of the “self” that always exceeds it. In ongoing excessive exhalations, the subject continually outbreathes itself.

The movement of breathing is a continuity of interruptions: intervals determine the alternation of inhalation and exhalation—inhaling and exhaling necessarily disrupt, or cut into, one another. A living being’s breathing rhythm is never completely regular; it is continually intermitted by inhalations induced by contingent impulses and factors. While the analogy between bodily breath and breathing in words will always be slightly askew, it is precisely this incongruence that turns out to provide the most fruitful point of comparison, especially if one is concerned with modern literature, in which crises of representation and the dilemmas of rendering them have been increasingly negotiated.

In my analysis of modern literary respiration, I try to avoid two associations with which breath is often invested: a notion of organicism and a kind of re-spiritualization, which is especially perceptible in New Age discourses. In aesthetic renderings, breathing, a physiological process, something living beings are supposed to do, meets inanimate materials and media—taken seriously, the focus on breath in literature alone forbids conceiving of it in purely organic terms. My preferred method is close reading: however, the biological metaphor of an “organic unity” in literary texts, which has been promoted especially by the New Critics (and, even more so, attributed to them retrospectively)<sup>1</sup> is rendered inoperative for the very same reasons. A reading such as the one I did of Buckley’s “Hallelujah” often shows that different elements of an aesthetic work do not relate to each other harmoniously and do not amount to a holistic “organism”;<sup>2</sup> put more generally, a close reading of breath tends to reveal that a work’s internal interrelations are fundamentally frictional. In investigating how breath is negotiated as a poetic figure and principle in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature, my focus will be on the arrhythmias of self-reflexivity: those moments, movements, or points where texts reflect on and display their own mediality, materiality, and linguistic constitution, as well as their production and reception.

To provide a conceptual framework for poetic breathing, I will introduce a term defined by a non-self-coincidence that connects mutually interruptive meanings: *syncopnea*. “Syncopnea” does performatively what it says semantically, connecting and cutting short breath (*pnœ*) and the Greek

word *syncope*, a word conjoining two contradictory elements: *coptein*, to cut off, beat, or scratch, and *syn-*, a preposition designating unity (Liddell and Scott 1940). The uses of the word “syncope” in English all designate an interruption of something continual: in medicine, fainting or a failure of the heart’s action; in music, the interruption of a regular rhythm; and in phonology, the loss of a sound within a word.<sup>3</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy summarizes these semantic implications as follows: “A rest, a suspension, a fluttering, a stronger beat over a silence. And a loss of consciousness” (*Expectation* 113). When he first introduces the term in *The Discourse of the Syncope*, Nancy writes: “The syncope simultaneously attaches and detaches. . . . Of course, these two operations do not add up to anything, but neither do they cancel each other out. There remains the syncope itself, the same syncopated, that is to say, cut to pieces . . . and somehow rejoined through amputation” (10). In short, Nancy’s motto is “syncope versus synthesis, or, more specifically, syncope at the heart of synthesis, smack in the middle” (*Expectation* 113). Nancy here alludes to the proximity of syncope and the heart in medical discourses.<sup>4</sup> The anatomical interdependence of cardiac and respiratory cycles ties the syncope to breath. Moreover, the rhythm of breathing as outlined here can as such be considered syncopal, and the pause, a constitutive element of the breathing process, always involves the risk of turning into apnea, a bodily shutdown akin to medical syncope. Nancy links breath, heart, and syncope when he addresses the constitution of the subject:

The beat of this difference/différance does not arise in a given Subject: it exposes him to possibility, chance, and risk. It is born in the archaic pulsation around which—breathing, heart, listening, inside/outside—crystalizes, originally, the enigma of “some one.”

Rhythm engages time with a relation to self by exposing it, in its milieu, to the suspense of the beat, to the caesura or syncope that binds and unbinds measure during this time. (55)

The breathing subject comes and continues to be in rhythms of syncopnea, “acts of inhaling and exhaling, which . . . are . . . always in dissonance with itself” (Salminen 114), and which continually endanger its status as a subject as such. Catherine Clément designates syncope as the moment when “the subject blacks out” (*Syncope* 69), when the autonomous, conscious being is overtaken by a bodily rupture: a suspended breath, for example, or “a cough, that banal everyday suffocation; banal, yes, but it is spasmodic, and as such provokes a little suspension of being. Paroxysmal, like a fit, it brings on coughing that doctors call syncopal, during which one gets

ringing of the ears, vertigo, and loss of consciousness” (7). For Nancy, the syncopnea also marks a relation “between language and the world: . . . the space where the concept is not possible, where reference leaps, . . . where, naming fails. . . . The space where something is silent” (*Expectation* 113). Extending Clément’s claim that “breathing *is* the art of rupture” (*Syncopnea* 13), my book focuses on how literature captures the rupture of breathing.

As a methodological consequence, I trace the tensions within syncopnea rather than attempting to establish a systematic conceptualization of the poetic implications of breath. This would be bound to fail, as breath has resisted clear-cut categorizations throughout its etymological and conceptual history. Three major implicit points of reference for such an investigation of syncopal literary breath have already been addressed: (1) the etymological history of breath and the network of terms associated with it; (2) how breath and the terms related to it have been thought about in the Western tradition; and (3) the physical, material, and kinetic features of breathing as a physiological process. Concerning the second point, my selection of the specific historical conceptions of breath discussed in this book requires a short explanation. In literature of the twentieth and twenty-first century, one can observe an emphasis on the physical qualities of breath and a stronger focus on the lungs as bodily organs and air as an inhaled and exhaled material substance. Therefore, I will primarily consider corporeal understandings of breath. The heightened focus on the physical domain in negotiations of breathing in modern literature and art is not entirely new; it rather points back to pre-Socratic and Stoic philosophy (e.g., in the notion of *pneuma* as a primary substance). In the conceptual history of breath, the Stoics highlighted its material implications before it became, with time, more spiritualized and immaterialized.

This can be illustrated with the etymological history of breath-related terms.<sup>5</sup> In the earliest uses of *pneuma*, in the fifth century BC, the meanings “wind” and “breath” predominated, while the word only rarely designates “spirit” (see Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 443). In Stoic philosophy, *pneuma* was the term used to refer to the corporeal world-soul (see Hahm 4). In Christian notions, especially, of *pneuma* as divine breath, over time the spiritual dimension of the word starts to prevail and to be strictly separated from the physiological act of breathing. In the Latin translation of the Old Testament, *pneuma* generally turns into *spiritus*, which still encompasses approximately the same array of meanings, while, however, increasingly stressing the incorporeal dimension of the term (Lutze 52). In the translations into Germanic languages, where no word with the same range of meanings as *pneuma* and *spiritus* exists, this tendency is reinforced: when *spiritus* is

translated as “ghost,” for example, it refers to a divine entity or the human’s portion of eternity, an immaterial being, rather than to the mortal breathing body (60). In the New Testament, this emphasis is upheld. This development of respiratory terms probably accounts for the fact that physical breath has been sublimated rather than abjected, even though it involves waste expelled from the body. The etymology of the English word “breath” counteracts such a spiritualization, as it is derived from an Old English word that has utterly physical, palpable implications: *bræþ* or *brēþ* means “odour, smell, exhalation as of anything cooking or burning” (*Oxford English Dictionary* online). Even though, as Steven Connor argues, the airy atmosphere, “however relentlessly spiritualised it was, could never entirely free itself from the materiality of vapour or breath” (“Beckett’s Atmospheres” n.p.), the spiritual overtones dominated the cultural history of breath for centuries.

This may in part account for the fact that breath tended to be considered suspicious or was even ignored for a time in twentieth-century literary criticism, with its increasing focus on the body and materiality. Over the last few years, however, breathing has been rediscovered in the humanities.<sup>6</sup> My book contributes a comparative study of breathing in modern literature to this recent research, focusing on how the corporeal dimensions of breath receive articulation and how the respective works display their own mediality while attending to respiratory matters. In the works I analyze, spiritual and transcendental-historical notions of breath have often been rethought in terms of movements that no longer involve metaphysical overtones: *transmission*, *traversing*, *transgressing*. As I am interested in the specifically poetic implications of breath, I reconsider classical models of inspiration and the role of breathing in ancient rhetoric. To establish a theoretical and historically informed background for the close readings of specific articulations of breath in modern literature, I will trace movements of syncopnea along the following lines: liminality; generative, formative, and constitutive implications of breath; disrupted temporalities and transactuality; and precarious interdependence.

### Breath and Liminality

It is hardly surprising that in Gilles Deleuze’s *Essays Critical and Clinical*, a collection of texts dedicated to moments when literary language “tends toward an ‘asyntactic,’ ‘agrammatical’ limit, or . . . communicates with its own outside,” breath repeatedly marks such a limit: “breath-words, the asyntactical limit toward which all language tends” (5).<sup>7</sup> Breath is liminal on

various levels: it moves between visibility and invisibility, sound and silence, readability and obscurity.<sup>8</sup> Physiologically, it operates across the borders of the body, and etymologically, the meanings of oscillating terms such as *pneuma*, *psyche*, *anima*, and *spiritus* float between binary oppositions: inside and outside, material and immaterial. Holding together the various meanings with which breath has been associated, these terms have a unifying effect (*syn-*). At the same time, the etymological threads are continually cut (*coptein*). The radical difference of the meanings renders a smooth coherence among them impossible; they will always be apart, despite being contained under the same umbrella term, which interrupts the latter's self-identity: what, for example, is *pneuma*, if it is supposed to be breath *and* wind *and* spirit? Breath-related terms enact what Nancy calls "the impossibility 'itself' of the same." Following Nancy, we can argue that the "sameness" of a word like *pneuma* "*undecides itself*: it undoes itself as it constitutes itself" (*The Discourse of the Syncope* 10) through its different meanings. Over the centuries, "breath" was associated with the whole spectrum of signifieds that the terms *pneuma*, *spiritus*, and *anima* encompass. The word as we know and use it today is a multitude constituted by semantic displacement and shifted identifications.

In "La parole soufflée," Jacques Derrida negotiates the cultural and etymological implications of breath. They do not, as one might expect, serve as an example of phonocentrism and the Western metaphysics of presence. On the contrary, for Derrida, the "oversignification which overburdens the word 'souffle'" (224) demonstrates that we never own the signifiers we use when we speak. Because words always precede us and are invested with their own historicity, the idea of having our own speech turns out to be an illusion. As Derrida argues, the excess of meanings historically linked with "breath" reveal the fact that language keeps slipping from our grasp and keeps dispossessing us, forcing its own history into our mouths whenever we speak. The complexity of the etymologies of breath-related terms and their complicated relations to the ways in which breath has been conceptualized in antiquity and Christian theology cannot be unwound here; the discussion of one example, however, shall show how correlations between anatomy, philosophy, and etymology are themselves caught in a movement of syncopea.

### Anaximenes: Breath, Air, Soul, Wind

*Pneuma*: "wind," "breath," "breathed air," "spirit": seeing these meanings simultaneously and side by side when we open any Greek dictionary evokes the impression that *pneuma* unifies them. However, a closer look at a crucial

passage in pre-Socratic philosophy shows how brittle an analogy between the various meanings of *pneuma* turns out to be. The sentence to be focused on is the first recorded equation of wind, breath, air, and spirit, or soul, in Greek; probably the first microcosm-macrocosm analogy; and possibly one of the first recorded uses of the word *pneuma* as such.<sup>9</sup> Anaximenes, a prominent member of the Milesian School (sixth century BC) supposedly claimed: “Just as our soul [ψυχή], . . . which is air [ἄήρ], holds us together, so wind/breath [πνεῦμα] and air [ἄήρ] surround the whole cosmos” (quoted in Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 158–59). The sentence is attributed to Anaximenes by the doxographer Aetius (first or second century BC), who adds the comment, “Air and wind/breath are used synonymously” (quoted in Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 159). Aetius’s work is recorded by an unknown writer referred to as Pseudo-Plutarch (first or second century AD). The complicated transmission of the “quotation” makes it impossible to be reliably attributed to the one author Anaximenes. As with all existing fragments of early Greek philosophy, the contemporary material records were lost and multiple mouths and hands have been at work in the process of transmitting them; that the original fragments were subject to reinterpretation and adaption in this process is unquestionable. Classicists agree that the quote has not been taken over directly from Anaximenes because it contains words he could not possibly have used.<sup>10</sup> The passage’s material history alone has some respiratory characteristics: it resonates with the dispossession Derrida associates with breath in “La parole soufflée” as well as the transmission and transformation processes of physiological breathing.

Apart from the discussions about possible sources for the specific wording, the analogy established in the uncertain quote has caused extensive debates among classicists because it does not quite add up. A contemporary reader familiar with the etymological entanglement of the words “soul,” “air,” “breath,” and “wind” may easily interpret the analogy as follows: a life-giving principle, an airy soul, sustains human beings, just as an airy cosmic soul sustains the universe. Such a reading, however, runs the risk of projecting Stoic thought onto Anaximenes’s text.<sup>11</sup> Classicists continue to wonder about the basis of the comparison,<sup>12</sup> and as Jonathan Barnes notes, “The terms of the analogy are not identical” (55). The asymmetry of the analogy becomes more obvious in a visual depiction:

soul (ψυχή) is air (ἄήρ)	breath/wind (πνεῦμα) and air (ἄήρ)
holds us together	surround the whole cosmos



Aetius's comment that "air and wind/breath are used synonymously" already smooths over an unevenness in the comparison. Many interpreters (e.g., McKirahan 146; Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 162; Guthrie 128) stress that the first part of the comparison draws on the notion of a breath-soul that keeps humans alive and departs at death, which "was already an old popular belief" in Anaximenes's times (Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 162). Such an interpretation makes perfect sense; the movement of breath (identified with the soul) from the body's inside to the outside gives some plausibility to the arrangement of the comparison as a whole: inner breath is compared to an outer breath, and the self, "our soul," to the outer world. In this reading, breath operates as mediator between the clauses; however, it turns out to be a fairly fragile one.

Apart from the fact that we cannot even be sure whether *pneuma* was the word used by Anaximenes, and if so, whether it was used in the sense of wind, breath, or both, an explicit reference to breath is absent from the first clause. The analogy would be more symmetrical if *pneuma*, a term that can refer to "inner" and "outer" breath, both wind and breathed air, figured in both clauses.<sup>13</sup> That the explicit reference to breath occurs in relation to the cosmos and not in relation to the human is somewhat surprising to present-day readers,<sup>14</sup> but in the historical context, "wind" was probably the word's primary meaning.<sup>15</sup> In Anaximenes's formula, notions of inside and outside disperse: air, a substance of the outer world, is equated with the soul. Designated as a constitutive part of the human, it is not clear from Anaximenes's words whether this part is inside or outside the human body, or both; whether it holds us together from outside, from inside, or by mediating between inside and outside. In the sentence, *pneuma* figures as a word whose ambiguous meanings are not reconciled, but rather cut across each other: while some of its semantic implications are associated with a physiological process of the human body, another meaning locates it on the outside—the cosmos, which is also considered a living animal by many ancient thinkers.<sup>16</sup>

Kirk, Raven, and Schofield note that the "possible dual application" of *pneuma* as wind and breath "could have led Anaximenes to the parallelism of man and the world" in the first place (160). This speculation suggests that an indifference pertaining to the word *pneuma* inspired Anaximenes's analogy, the two sides of it representing a pictorial outgrowth of the two meanings "breath" and "wind" respectively—but then, *pneuma* is only present in the second clause. The *form* in which the first recorded equation of soul,

air, breath, and wind occurs is significant: it appears as a literary device, an analogy. What decisively formed the way breath has been thought and written about throughout the centuries, its identification with air, wind, and spirit, first figured in a literary use of language. While the multiple meanings of *pneuma* tend to be reconciled in the adoption of the word as a term for the all-permeating substance that holds the world together in Stoic philosophy and—in an adapted manner—in many present-day New Age accounts of breathing, the difference of the terms supposedly equated in the analogy is rendered especially perceptible by the parallel arrangement; highlighting the breaches and asymmetry of the supposed equation, it is the very form of the analogy that displays a movement of syncope.

### Inside and Outside

Anaximenes's formula complicates the relation between inside and outside: in the analogy between the human body and the cosmos via soul, air, and *pneuma*, these localizations become uncertain. As Jean-Christophe Bailly puts it in his essay "The Slightest Breath (On Living)," the "space of breath is the coming and going through which the outside and the inside communicate" (4). This claim is not only plausible from a physiological perspective; the interferences between inside and outside also pervade the cultural history of breath, as Anaximenes's analogy showed. Nancy demonstrates how the notion of the soul represents an intervention of binary understandings of the body's exteriorities and interiorities. The intersections he traces could, from another perspective, be considered essential characteristics of a breathing body: a body determined by a continual exchange with exteriority, that extends itself to the outside. In contrast to the predominant idea that the soul is something "other than the body," Nancy defines it as "the body outside itself" (*Corpus* 126). For him, the soul, especially Aristotle's understanding of it, is a way to think about the body's relation to its own exteriority. Interpreting Aristotle's claim that the soul is the "*first entelechy of a natural organized body*," Nancy sums up that the soul "is not some thing but the fact that there is a body, its *existence*" (128). "The soul is the presence of the body, its position, its 'stance,' its 'sistence' as being *out-side* (ex)" (128).

If our entire tradition has spoken . . . about the soul, it's because . . . it has thought, not in the soul alone but in the *difference* between body and soul, the difference between body and soul, the difference that the body *is* in itself, for itself—this

difference in tension, in extension, in a certain tone of the outside. And what's been thought under the name of *soul* is nothing other than the experience of the body. (134)

That the soul has continually been tied to physical breath through the words *pneuma* and *spiritus* supports Nancy's notion of the "soul as an experience of the body," which, as he claims, has been present "on the textual surface of the whole tradition" (134). What physiological breath shares with a cosmic, divine breath-soul are the implications of such a soul for the body: as Nancy's reading of the soul shows, the concept of the body derived from taking into account the particularities of a breathing body and that of a body tied to a soul are strikingly alike. In a similar vein, Nancy equates body and spirit in the context of Christianity, designating spirit as "the organ of sense," "the subtilizing of all forms of bodies—of their extension, their material division, in the distilled and revealed essence of the *sense* of the body: the spirit *is* the body of sense, or sense in body" (77). Here, the coincidence of body and spirit is explicitly linked to breath. Nancy defines Christianity as "a religion of breath," "of exhaling," "of expiration and inspiration, a general pneumatology." "The Spirit passes from Father to Son"; "the spirit's body, gathered up, concentrated in its breath, offered in sacrifice to the father it returns to by expiring, the body of the last cry, of the final sigh where everything is consumed" (77).

While Nancy's discussions of the soul primarily focus on one direction of the body's relation to an outside that is its own extension, Christian pneumatology is described as a respiratory exchange between father and son. What about the being who receives the spirit/soul/breath? Like any respiring body, it is invaded by an exteriority that becomes an integral part. This radically unsettles any fixed positions of exteriority and interiority, just as the notion of a soul/spirit as the body outside itself does. The way Nancy theorizes the biological body complements his understanding of the soul/spirit. In "The Intruder," a text centering on the heart transplant he underwent, Nancy addresses a stranger occupying the body, "a disturbance, a trouble in the midst of intimacy" (161). The intruder who is foreign precisely because it is "inside" separates the I from itself, turning it into something unfamiliar (163): "An intruder is in me and I am becoming a stranger to myself" (167). In Nancy's text, both the new transplanted heart and "his" own heart, which stopped working properly, are perceived as foreign. In other words, he focuses on what becomes *noticeable* as an intruder because its integration in the body does not run smoothly. When the organism

does its most regular respiratory work, there are strangers whose invasion goes unnoticed: inhaled foreign particles enter the lungs breath by breath. "Our own breathing is . . . an Other that inhabits us," as Michel Chion puts it (334).

### Life and Death, Animate and Inanimate

Throughout the centuries, the soul has been conceptualized as that which animates the body. This leads to the next cluster of binary pairs that breath continually undermines: even though the association of breath with a life force tends to predominate, on closer consideration, it becomes evident that breath is continually situated on the limit of the animate and inanimate, organic and inorganic, life and death. Elizabeth A. Povinelli condenses these respiratory intersections in one sentence: "Life and Nonlife breathe in and breathe out" (44).

The respirational intertwining of animate and inanimate can be traced back to antiquity. The Pythagorean philosopher Philolaus of Croton located breathing between what is alive and what lacks life. According to Aristotle's pupil Meno, Aristotle argued that life is characterized by warmth, that "the productive [i.e., life-giving] factor has no share in the cold," and that "our bodies are composed of the hot; for they have no share in the cold." The role attributed to breathing is quite peculiar: "immediately after its birth the living thing draws in the breath outside, which is cold; and then, as if of necessity, it expels it again. This desire for the breath outside arises in order that, as the result of the inhalation of the breath, our bodies, which are by nature too warm, may be cooled by it" (quoted in Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 341). Before a reasonable function is ascribed to it, breath figures as something other than life and the body. Philolaus deems it necessary to explain the desire to breathe, as if it were a paradoxical thing to do. The appended explanation, that breath has the function of cooling the body, which is *too* warm, is then taken up in the famous account of respiration by Aristotle. It is important that Aristotle only mentions the life-maintaining function of breath while Philolaus first presents it as life's opposite by stressing that life and the living body *have no share* in the cold. His explanation for why breathing is necessary implies that the body has to incorporate a stranger, something other than life, to maintain it.

Only full identifications of the soul or *pneuma* as life-giving instances and breath, which are very rare in antiquity, would prompt a notion of purely vital breath.<sup>17</sup> Most classical narratives suggest that life depends on

enduring substances (the soul or *pneuma*) inhabiting the body and leaving it in the moment of death; rather than being identical with those substances, breathing is most often simply described as being, in some way or other, involved in acquiring or nourishing them. To give two examples from ancient Greek medicine: “Erasistratus believed the *pneuma* to be acquired through respiration . . . and Praxagoras believed the *pneuma* to be nourished by respiration and therefore partly acquired from the outer air” (Hahm 162). In Democritus’s view, breath prevents the soul atoms from escaping and dispersing (Aristotle, *On Respiration* 437–39). The Stoic philosopher Chrysippus argues that *pneuma*, which he identifies with the soul, enables both breathing and living.<sup>18</sup> In all these accounts, breath, while being related to the vital instance and involved in maintaining life, is neither vivid nor vivifying per se.

The biblical image of the “breath of life,” which most prominently occurs in Genesis 2.7 when God blows into “man’s” nostrils in order to animate what he formed out of soil, is one of the most influential sources for the tendency to identify breath with life. In the Hebrew original, the “breath of life” is “חַיִּים נְשָׁמַת” (*nishmat ḥayyim*) (*The Interlinear Hebrew-Aramaic Old Testament*, 1:4). Whereas the animating quality of the breath itself is unclear in that scene (it is only certain that it animates man), the “breath of life” is used as a metonymy for life in the English translation of later passages in the book of Genesis (e.g., Genesis 6.17, 7.15, 7.22). It must be added that the King James Bible takes over the formulation of Genesis 2.7, “breath of life” (7, 8), whereas in the Hebrew original, various different wordings are used: in Genesis 6.17 and 7.15, “חַיִּים רוּחַ” (*ru’ah ḥayyim*) (*The Interlinear Hebrew-Aramaic Old Testament*, 1:15, 17), and in Genesis 7.22, “רוּחַ חַיִּים נְשָׁמַת” (*nishmat ru’ah ḥayyim*) (*The Interlinear Hebrew-Aramaic Old Testament* 1:17). This may not make a great semantic difference, but the linguistic coherence in the English translation helped establish a dominant metonymy that shapes the English understanding of breath to this day. The breath of God in the Bible not only has the capacity to give life; it can also effect the exact opposite—in Job 4.9 God destroys life by the very physical gesture he gave life to man in Genesis: “By the blast [*nishmat*] of God they perish, and by the breath [*ru’ah*] of his nostrils are they consumed” (*The Bible*, 610; *The Interlinear Hebrew-Aramaic Old Testament* 2:1329).<sup>19</sup> While in Genesis the breath blown into man’s nostrils animates, in Job the breath blown from God’s nostrils takes men’s life. In the King James Bible, the proximity of the passages is less obvious because *nishmat* is translated as the “blast” of God. Along with the narrative of the creation of man in Genesis,

this account of God's respirational punishment of the wicked recalls the ancient Egyptian notions of a breath of life and a breath of death that can be imparted to men by divine agencies (Piperno 33). In the Old Testament, the consequences of God's breath depend on his intentions: if his plan is to give life, it animates; if he wants to punish, it kills; if he is enraged, the breath cleaves the surface of the earth (2 Samuel 22:16). In the context of the natural world, God's breath is said to cause frost and ice (Job 27.10). In Ecclesiastes, the word "הֶבֶל" (*hevel*) (*The Interlinear Hebrew-Aramaic Old Testament*, 3:1582), which in Hebrew means "vapor" or "breath," is highly prominent: it designates ephemerality and nothingness and links breath to the futility of life. In the King James Bible, this link is subdued because *hevel* is not translated as "breath," but rather as "vanity": "vanity of vanities; all is vanity" (75). In contrast to the "breath of life," the breath of death, destruction, or frost and breath as ephemerality did not become dominant images in the cultural imaginary and everyday speech. The privileged association of breath with life owes more to the reception and translations of the Bible than to the biblical text itself.

Biologically speaking, breathing is without doubt a vital principle: we could not live without it. However, the idea of breath as the primary animating principle is more textually than physiologically founded: it is deeply indebted to classical and biblical sources such as those discussed here. In *Histoire du souffle*, Daniel Piperno observes that many mystifications of breath as a vital or metaphysical principle in antiquity go hand in hand with the assumption that the cessation of breathing marks death (13): in other words, the soul as a material or immaterial essence of life leaves the body with the last breath. In modern medicine, respiration no longer represents the sole factor of determining life or death: today, the cessation of the functions of the brain are equally decisive for declaring a person dead.<sup>20</sup>

Breathing renders the borders between animate and inanimate porous. Physiologically speaking, respiration is mechanical: a passive, monotonous process the body executes without us usually being aware of it.<sup>21</sup> Chion stresses that "breathing is something about which we are mostly unconscious. It is something objective and nonintentional in us" (334). As a consequence, we have to give up our status as the subjects of breathing: *we* don't breathe; rather, something in our bodies does—*it* breathes. In this sense, respiration runs counter to a notion of mental aliveness defined by active and intentional acts.<sup>22</sup> In spite of its autonomous functioning, it is possible to direct one's breathing: "Breathing is . . . the sole bodily process that can switch between being reflexive and unconscious to being volun-

tary and conscious” (334), Gorbman claims, and L. O. Aranye Fradenburg describes it as “involuntary but manipulable” (181). However, the only thing we can influence to some degree is the rhythm of breathing, the length of inhalations and exhalations—we cannot choose not to breathe, and we have little control over most processes of external respiration and none over inner, that is, cellular, respiration.

In current medical accounts of cellular respiration, what is usually associated with a life force (animation, creation, growth and thriving, etc.) collides with its very opposite: consumption, decomposition, and waste. There is a “basic chemical similarity of respiration to combustion” (Slonim 6).<sup>23</sup> Cellular respiration involves metabolic reactions, processes of chemical transformation in which decomposition and recomposition constantly alternate: organic matter is broken down and cell components built up, energy is released and consumed. It operates syncopically: in the course of anabolism, or synthetic metabolism, molecules are assembled, and in catabolism, or degradative metabolism, organic molecules are broken down in order to produce energy (Slonim 10). It is important that cellular respiration is determined by catabolism: breaking down glucose into carbon dioxide and water, using oxygen, and thus producing the energy necessary for a body’s organic functioning. In this process, a waste that constitutes a significant part of our breathing is generated: carbon dioxide, which has to be expelled from the body by means of exhalation. In short, breathing sustains life by decomposing matter and turning it into waste.

The respirational maintenance of life implies a dependence of the body on the outside (see Salminen 113); as breathers, our bodies are unsealed. The exposure to the outside at the heart of the life-sustaining process poses a continual risk: every breath we take could infiltrate substances fatal for our body; even knowing that we are exposed to poisonous gases cannot prevent us from inhaling them—not being able to stop breathing may kill us. David Lloyd points out another crucial nexus of breath and mortality: “If every breath is the anticipation of expiration, if every anticipation is expressed in an intake, a holding of breath, is it not also the occasion of dread, of the anxiety that its movement in the rhythm of mortality itself inspires? Breath, we could say, is the intimacy of death within the subject” (188–89). Or, in Jean-Christophe Bailly’s words, breath is “the tangible and intimate form of living’s exteriority to itself, or its ex-timacy [*extimité*]” (5)—it is life outside itself, life touching on the inanimate, which is, in turn, constitutive of it.

As I’ve shown, breath itself is not devoid of life’s other from a present-day physiological and chemical perspective: the respiratory process involves

an assemblage of organic and inorganic matter. Breath is “vibrant matter” in Jane Bennett’s terms: “a turbulent immanent field in which various and variable materialities collide, congeal, morph, evolve and disintegrate” (xi). While Bennett ascribes vitality and activity to the assemblages involving inorganic matter so as to counteract a predominant conception of matter as dull and passive,<sup>24</sup> *Poetics of Breathing* insists on the dullness and passivity of breath, attending to how these characteristics intersect with what is, and has been, considered active or vital. Accordingly, the book approaches breath in terms of “inanimation,” as David Wills understands it, involving “*what is inanimate in animation*” and “the extent to which *the inanimate animates*” (x). Exploring “origin[s]” of life in various textual settings, Wills’s *Inanimation* focuses on “constituting instance[s]” when the “inorganic ‘suddenly’ becomes organic” (xii). Throughout Western cultural history, breath has been situated at precisely this threshold—the biblical creation narrative being a paradigmatic example. Against the widespread tendency to move breath from such a liminal position to the domain of life and the organic because it initiates the transition from inanimate to animated according to many cultural and medical narratives, *Poetics of Breathing* elaborates on “*what is inanimate in animation.*” The study of modern literary breath thus presents a counternarrative that challenges both the prioritization of life and the very binary oppositions between animate and inanimate and between organic and inorganic. This endeavor is particularly facilitated by literary breath’s enmeshment of respiration and language. Wills convincingly argues that lives are “inanimated by means of language . . . language itself generates and self-generates as a privileged form, perhaps *the* privileged form, of inanimate life” (xii). Starting from the premise that breath is *inanimated* by language in literary renderings, my readings focus on moments when, in turn, dead respirational letters emit living qualities, when “*the inanimate animates.*”

### Breath as a Generative, Formative, and Constitutive Principle

The associations across the Western tradition of breath with a life-giving impulse are tightly linked to ideas of breathing as an animating impulse that initiates, generates, and constitutes. In numerous cultural narratives, breath plays an essential role in the creation of the cosmos, living beings, or works of art; physiological accounts not only link respiration to life but also discuss



breathing as a necessary precondition for the articulation of spoken language, which is, in turn, reflected in linguistic philosophy and poetic negotiations of breath. Focusing on breath as an animating, generative force is liable to reduce it to pure life without taking into account its entanglement with the inorganic. In this respect, it is helpful to bear in mind Wills's argument that the inanimate precedes the animate: "before there is living . . . prior to knowing what living means—there is an encounter with the nonliving, with . . . the in- or non-animate" (xii). This consequently determines an "*inanimating* logic" of "life" as such (6). In the following section, in tracing some of the narratives and discourses that treat breath as anterior or primordial, I want to explore the ways in which a respiratory threshold between inanimate anteriority and life or animated creation ruptures vitalist trends, especially with regard to literature. In his study of Paul Celan's poetics, Wills paves the way for such an approach: "Specifically, I contend that the relation between poetic expression and breathing, the play of inhalation and exhalation thanks to which we live and are able to express ourselves, in fact relies on its own (inanimate) interruption: a turning of the breath out of the breath occurs to inanimate the life that breathing sustains, and such a turning can be identified as a poetic function" (113).

### Air and *Pneuma* as Primary Substances

The connotations of breath with giving or maintaining life are firmly established in our cultural memory. Less widely known is that in antiquity breath was often connected to the idea of a primary generative substance. Anaximenes, who, as we have seen, drew an analogy between soul, air, and a cosmic breath or wind, held that air was the originary substance from which everything else emerged. A number of classicists argue that this analogy might have been crucial for the choice of air as primary substance.<sup>25</sup> Keeping in mind the iridescence of the terms in the analogy from a present-day view allows us to rethink what has been deemed a monist worldview that reduces the multiplicity of all phenomena in the world to a single principle. Hippolytus recounts Anaximenes's theory of the animating primal material as follows:

Anaximenes . . . said that the principle is unlimited [APEIRON] air, out of which come to be things that are coming to be, things that have come to be and things that are coming to be, and gods and divine things. The rest come to be out of the products

of this. The form of air is as follows: when it is most even, it is invisible, but it is revealed by the cold and the hot and the wet, and movement. It is always moving, for all the things that undergo change would not change unless it was moving. For when it becomes condensed and finer, it appears different. For when it is dissolved into what is finer, it comes to be fire, and on the other hand air comes to be winds when it becomes condensed. Cloud results from air through felting; and water when this happens to a greater degree. When condensed still more it becomes earth and when it reaches the absolutely densest stage it becomes stones. (Hippolytus, *Refutation*, 1.7, 1–3; quoted in McKirahan 49)

Classicists have asked what it actually was that Anaximenes understood as air (e.g., Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 146). From today's perspective, the wording of Hippolytus's account makes such a question appear redundant: the "form of air" is described as essentially changeable; it almost seems as if air *was* not something, but rather constantly *became* something else: "it comes to be fire," "winds," "clouds," "water," and even "earth and stones." Even though such a reading might not be historically defensible, I pursue it a little further so as to explore its specifically *processual* understanding of breath. Let us, for a moment, consider Anaximenes's air in terms of a Heraclitian perpetual flow. Plato disdainfully summarizes Heraclitus's thought as follows: "There is nothing which in itself is only one thing . . . the things of which we naturally say that they 'are,' are in process of coming to be, as the result of movement and change and blending with one another. We are wrong when we say there 'are,' since nothing ever is, but everything is coming to be" (Plato, *Theaetetus* 152d–e, quoted in McKirahan 142–43). As the generating principle is fundamentally characterized by *becoming*, the notion of something constituted as a *being* is dismissed as such. Moreover, it becomes difficult to differentiate the generative principle from what it constitutes.<sup>26</sup> When air is claimed to be accountable for things' emergence and their continual transformation, it is presented as a principle that not only generates things but also keeps determining their mutability.

The transformative movement of Anaximenes's air according to its description by Hippolytus can not only be related to the unstable terms in Anaximenes's analogy of soul, air, and cosmic breath/wind, but, by extension, also to the complex semantic network of breath-related terms. *Pneuma*, *anima*, *psyché*, and similar terms are words that constantly change

their aggregate states, resisting a consistent state of being. Anaximenes's air is a primary substance that becomes all the other substances it generates. Far from the monist position usually attributed to Anaximenes, this would imply that everything is involved in an ongoing process of becoming different from itself. Stoic *pneuma*, a primary generative substance comparable to Anaximenes's air, is given the function of "holding things together and giving them unity" (Hahm 142). "According to Chrysippus the cosmos is permeated and given life by *pneuma*, the same substance that permeates a living thing and makes it alive. Just as this *pneuma* makes a man a living, organic whole, so the cosmic *pneuma* makes the cosmos a living, organic whole, with each single part grown together" (163). The idea of a harmonic unity created by an *identical* substance permeating both the cosmos and human bodies is unsettled when one considers how heterogeneously this substance is described in what itself is a highly heterogeneous corpus of transmitted pre-Socratic and Stoic texts.<sup>27</sup> With a view to the different material components attributed to *pneuma* (air, fire, breath, sperm, etc.) and its various subdivisions, syncopnia gives shape to the picture that emerges: that which grants unity and cohesion to the various phenomena of the world is itself a multiplicity cut into innumerable parts.<sup>28</sup>

### Imaginations of a Primordial Wholeness of Breathing

Later philosophical negotiations of breath that draw on pre-Socratic and Stoic ideas about breath-related primary substances tend to make the material qualities and the suggested unity these substances generate appear more coherent than the ancient texts suggest. The reflections on breath of Luce Irigaray and David Michael Kleinberg-Levin reveal the risk that such tendencies could revert to what Derrida called a phonocentric "dream of a life without difference" ("La parole soufflée" 226).<sup>29</sup> In *The Age of Breath*, Irigaray heavily relies on classical, especially pre-Socratic, sources. She claims that cosmic breathing, or wind—what she terms the "feminine divine"—bridges the human and the cosmic world and "never separates itself from nature, but transforms it, transubstantiates it without ruining it" (7). Women's task is to reinstall a lost unity, "to reunite incessantly earth with heaven through the breath, this vehicle of the soul" (8). Vague echoes of ancient originary substances such as *pneuma* or Anaximenes's air are evoked in the speculation that cosmic air and breath may (re)constitute a lost unity. To some degree Irigaray leaves it indeterminate whether what she has in mind is a unity of identical parts, a multiplicity constituted by different parts, or a wholeness

in which parts fluidly merge into one substance that may change its form and consistency. Mentioning that cosmic breath *transubstantiates* without being *separated* from what it was, that is, nature, is somewhat contradictory: even though a transubstantiated substance may remain in one piece, it is, by definition, different from it was before and separated from it in terms of consistence (or other qualities).

Despite this, Irigaray holds on to a notion of wholeness and unity that suggests self-identity. In *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, she identifies air with the forgotten “condition of possibility,” the “groundless ground” of what *is*, of beings (5). In contrast to thinkers like Derrida or Nancy, who embrace the idea of an existence outside oneself based on a split from an “original unity” that was an illusion in the first place, Irigaray considers existence as a relation governed by mastery adopted by those who disregard the generative wholeness granted by a forgotten primary air described as “unmixed, undivided” (61). With regard to cultural history, such an undivided air represents a smoothed-over reconsideration of *pneuma*—concerning physiology, it would be unbreathable for human beings, as a continual intake of unmixed oxygen is fatal. Irigaray’s motto, “I breathe, therefore, I am,” which she claims is “forgotten in Being’s *ek-sistence*” (163), rests on an imaginary and thoroughly textual air that itself consists of mixed constituents: Irigaray’s wide range of philosophical sources, from pre-Socratic thinkers to Heidegger, including various “Eastern” approaches, as she calls them.

Similarly informed by Heideggerian terminology and pre-Socratic notions of a type of breathing that connects humans “with the ecology of a larger whole” (75), Kleinberg-Levin sketches two possibilities inherent in breathing in his book *Before the Voice of Reason: Echoes of Responsibility in Merleau-Ponty’s Ecology and Levinas’s Ethics*: (1) “Our condition as ‘fallen,’ our ‘pathology’ as finite, as mortal, as ‘thrown’ into the contingency of a groundless existence, even affects, and is manifest in, the very nature of our breathing” (78). (2) In opposition to this rather negatively charged possibility, Kleinberg-Levin proposes

the possibility of a deeper, more primordial experience with being, an ecstatic potentiality for breathing . . . the possibility that we could enjoy a more life-enrichening experience with breathing—especially in relation to the realm of nature. . . . For breathing is the gift of our original integration into the wholeness and openness of being, of nature. Could we somehow return,