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## **Reading writing breathing**

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## **New Writing**

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### Abstract

This article addresses how breath is intra-active with reading and writing. The two meditation methods I used for concentrating on and writing the breath-experience were ‘attention on the breath’ as taught within a Korean Seon (Zen) tradition, and writing this experience as ‘meditative enquiry’ [Stephens, T. 2021. ‘A Meditative Enquiry into Presence: Unmaking the Autoethnographic Self.’ *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice* 14 (2): 161–178]. Two ‘texts’ gradually converge into an intertwined experience of reading both academic and literary writing, blurring distinctions between them. Various theories are drawn from that un-do dualistic frameworks of epistemology assumed in reading academic texts. This raises questions for the embodied cognitive humanities, post-qualitative methodologies, and in autoethnographic and phenomenological writing as well as for creative writers. The article draws from cultural, philosophical, and literary studies, recent breath studies, and from the field of embodiment, to contextualise the ‘creative academic writing’ excerpts; leading to an unavoidable conclusion: this type of ‘new writing’ is not new but, rather, contiguous with practices of embodiment. Yet, how can a written fabrication of breathing be read, and does stylistic innovation present insurmountable problems for the academic validation of creative academic writing?

**Keywords:** creative academic writing, nonself meditation, breath studies, Covid-19, reading, Korean Zen, post-qualitative.

## Reading writing breathing

*Language is an element of the subject, the most subjective element, of which the most subjective in turn, is the rhythm (Meschonnic).*

*We are on the edge of disaster without being able to situate it in the future: it is rather always already past...that which has put a stop to every arrival. To think the disaster...is to have no longer any future in which to think it (Blanchot).*

### Introduction: positivist breathing and its diminishing

A recent article in this journal, ‘The breathing story, fiction as a tool for living’ by Jacob White (2023), made a thoughtful case for ‘attention’ over ‘intention’ particularly in the search for fictional inspiration or material, not only for writing, but for living. Also, how the mode of autofiction allows fiction writing itself to be an ‘understanding experience’ that is ‘connected to the body’ (2023, 18). He aptly quotes Annie Ernaux, whose life writing ‘thrive[s] in this space: “It is the absence of meaning in what one lives, at the moment one lives it, which multiplies the possibilities of writing”’ (2020, 156 in White 2023, 4). Yet, the utility of fiction itself may be just one dimension of efficacy. The flat representational style of normative explicative academic writing, in introductory texts like this for example, is generally considered to be efficacious at reducing either absence or ambiguity of meaning. And yet, when lines are drawn along the spectrum from analytic philosophy’s clarity using representational languages to continental forms of literary philosophy, does efficacy in writing appear primarily to militate against subtle embodied experience? Literary devices, styles, rhythms, the advent of metaphor with its affective sensory connotations, multivalence, and polysemy problematise empirical non-fiction. And as has been shown us by expert practitioners of reading such as Genette who produced two outstanding volumes on the craft, one on reading texts as Palimpsests ([1982] 1997), the other

including the role of marked silence through Paratexts ([1987] 1997), when such features are generally guarded against, or employed strategically in academic texts, we thereby create the ‘problem’ of creative text in academic writing that arguably underpins much contemporary debate on what constitutes creative, yet academic, writing. To innovate with any established academic paratexts, if not to exacerbate the hierarchical divide between creative and academic writing, fiction and non-fiction, creates various affects. For example, the mixed-form of ‘Introduction and/or Conclusion’ (Stephens 2021) neither introduces nor concludes, and may be read as a very unacademic and inadequate replacement for a proper ‘Introduction’ at the beginning, separated from its ending ‘Conclusion’ by an academic article in the middle. Paratext is well described by Skare (2020) as what enables a text to be offered to its reading public. She cites Genette in saying it is also ‘a threshold...a ‘vestibule’ ... an ‘undefined zone’ between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary’ (1997, 2 in Skare 2020 np). This insight usefully complicates matters.

To continue with a focus on student writing, often caught in this positivist struggle for demonstrable learning, or knowledge, contribution, and so on, Ings’ recent study on ‘poetic register in exegetical writing’ amongst PhD researchers (2021) addresses this tension that: ‘in creative practice, inquiries, researchers and their data are intrinsically linked, because one generates the other. An artistic practitioner cannot be separated from what they create because they permeate it, often in very visceral ways’ (136). It is in this sense that Art Writing, especially when aligned with global crises (Haylock and Patty 2021), is emblematic of embodied cognition, allowing authors to variously write of direct and lived experiences in complex, or entangled, social fields. Ings concludes that: ‘Paltridge et al. argue that options for presenting doctoral writing “do not necessarily have to fit with a pre-conceived template” (2012, 342)’ and that:

Hamilton and Jaaniste note that in creative practice exegeses – ‘Often poetic evocations [...] are testament to the depth and breadth of the evocation of the work, how it draws attention to the contingencies of the body/self, and how it provides

diverse insights into the subjective qualities of awareness and perception (ways of seeing, being in and knowing-of the world)'(2009, 12 in 2021, 136)

Ings makes a strong argument, via interesting examples, for 'diverse ontologies' (2021, 137) but does this not diminish the fact that experiential 'objects of study' such as our breath, or sensory-affective material in academic writing, present readers and examiners alike with ineluctable ontological and epistemological challenges?

*Breath. One, prior to any number that is 'one', inspiration and exhalation. The breath is both, surely, but is it one inspiration and one expiration, a beginning and end, like a country sliced in half? Symmetrical purposes, ideologies, and faces irreconcilably different only at the moment of division, otherwise, inextricable. A sea and connected river. Two kinds of water? Two experiences of one substance. Leaving home, arriving home: same building. The body ([whilst] breath [ing]) is a cyclic experience of a place, no beginning nor end, if one. If two, they begin a storyline, one drama after the next. Nothing alike on the way not changed on the way back.<sup>1</sup>*

Breathing, when simply related to the air we intake and exhale, might already be understood through a number of assumed dualities: in/out, concrete-material/subtle immaterial, self/other. At the outset, we note then that: 'Breathing requires complex interactions of the central and peripheral nervous systems with the respiratory system. It involves cortical (volitional) as well as subcortical (automatic) output' (Urfy and Suarez 2014, 241). We can also establish that:

The diaphragm is the motor muscle of breath, which can be automatic, forced, or controlled. The diaphragm is assigned to multiple functions, both indirectly and directly, which go beyond breathing. It also promotes expectoration, vomiting, defecation, urination, swallowing, and phonation. The diaphragm influences the body metabolic balance and stimulates the venous and lymphatic return, thereby creating the correct relationship between the stomach and the esophagus to prevent

gastroesophageal reflux. It is essential for correct posture and locomotion, as well as for the movement of the upper limbs. The diaphragmatic muscle influences the emotional and psychological spheres. Inspiratory apnea is able to raise the somatic pain threshold, decreasing the [...] perception [of pain]. The functions of the diaphragm do not stop locally in its anatomy but affect the whole body system. It can be called systemic breath. (Bordoni et al. 2018)

The objective register of this quotation from the scientific literature; its quality of transparency and economy of expression based on empirical study, subtly, or not, reinforce the tacit everyday sense that we each may think we intimately know our own breath, yet, when couched in academic terms, the breath quickly exceeds our knowledge and, often, our understanding. Breath is obscure. Study of the breath therefore seems of great emergent interest in such a way that the paradigm of embodied experience may re-surface diminished knowledge. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated breath's cultural importance in redefining social space, especially how we default to a commodified notion of air as a right and privilege, of clean, disease-free or air-conditioned quality. The breath concept reduced to oxygenation. The clinical *Journal of Breath Research* (2007–2023), the work of the European Respiratory Society's (practice-focussed education for respiratory professionals) *Breathe Journal* (2004–2022), the Canadian Respiratory Research Network (CRRN), and the BMJ Open Respiratory Research Archive, for example, together reveal only a handful of results for searches on 'meditation', 'prana', 'pranayama', 'yoga', and 'yogic', some of which focus on 'slow breathing' and 'Buteyko' (developed by the Ukrainian doctor Konstantin Buteyko in the 1950s). It is medical science then that largely occupies Breath Studies, thereby neutralising the breath as a possible cultural transformational object, poetic, musical, spiritual, and separating out a place it may have held for millennia in various cultural traditions.

*As we are enquiring into the 'what is it', the 'what is this' of a breath – albeit with an unconventional method, of writing, enquiry – we are cornered into the qualitative. Forgetting*

*about counting, number, or measure, to return to something like an experience of a breath breathing itself, a body-breath, taking place at one and the same time as we notice it. At least until we find out what one is. Some suggest we count each breath, not for the purpose of associating each with a quality, or of measuring, instead just to indicate when we have lost sight of the breath altogether. Counting, handholding, touching each breath as it goes. A momentary lapse with a balloon string; and that mind disappears off into the distance. But such systems do not answer our fundamental question...What is a breath? How is a breath beside language? What is this, that breathes? What is it, that asks what is this?<sup>2</sup>*

There has been a recent reclamation of breath as an ontological presupposition of any phenomenology of the lived body or being-in-the-world. Petri Berndtson's route towards his PhD on a phenomenology of the primacy of breathing (2018) is interesting because we find situated a number of collaborators on a timeline in which breath studies becomes more widely established.

The 'Respiratory Philosophy' approach (Berndtson 2010; Berndtson and Škof 2018) is actively re-reading a philosophy inclusive of non-western contemplative studies through phenomenology, not least due to Škof's study of Indian religion and culture. This is typified in a recent conference in Helsinki, on Respiratory Philosophy and Sound Art (June 2022), and in recent events where pranic inquiry is presented by Purushottama Bilimoria, a scholar of Hindu and Indian thought in global and 'postcolonial' (this term is disputed) contexts.<sup>3</sup> Suffice to say that an approach has evolved over recent years supported by parallel initiatives such as the Life of Breath: breathing in cultural, clinical and lived experience, Wellcome Trust Award, led by Havi Carel and Jane Macnaughton, and the so-called cognitive (or medical) humanities, which has provided a richer integrative context for this emergent topic.<sup>4</sup> Embodiment Studies, within which Breath Studies would be included, has co-evolved with these critical medical and philosophical approaches, and thereby constitutes a fascinating mix of subject and post-subject, that is ontological and pre-ontological, ethics and epistemologies. Berndtson's Phenomenological

Ontology of Breathing (2018) appears continuous with these precedents, and opens us to the spiritual-political dimensions of breath and the respiratory world. However, what is clear from his thesis in 2018 which does reference his practices in meditation and breathwork is that its strength lies in a theoretical rethinking of a phenomenology of breathing. The chapter that follows in Berndtson and Škof (2018) 'The Possibility of a New Respiratory Ontology' tends to potentially delimit breathing in Zen as the Sōtō practice of zazen or 'just sitting' as it is sometimes called: 'zazen is abdominal breathing' (32). He then elaborates on a common western trope that describes an ultimate reality of emptiness in Buddhism in general and through over-use of 'is' as a grammatical construct equates *sūnyatā* (Sanskrit, emptiness) and 'space', and 'air', and 'nothing' through a type of inverted materialist logic. In European thought this can be traced back to, amongst others, Hegel: 'Nothingness, which the Buddhists have made the beginning principle for everything, and the final goal, and the ultimate end of everything, is this same abstraction' (Hegel 1827 in Droit 2003, 59). A validation of the task to reanimate and materialise breath's role — in epistemology — is at stake.

Embodiment Studies, deeply informed by its phenomenological roots whether Husserl's rethinking of the human sciences through philosophy at the turn of the twentieth century (Beyer 2022) or Merleau-Ponty's focus on the body-experience (Berndtson 2010), has paid relatively little attention to breathing outside of certain parameters. We need to signpost here that reading studies from a cognitive literary perspective has now marked 10 years since Kukkonen's work, that argued for the reader as learner, after Wolfgang Iser's 'implied reader' and, more importantly, highlighted a 'second generation' approach to recognising cognition itself as embodied (2014). The special issue of *Style Journal*, in which her editorial and article feature, encouraged this new integration of the 4-E theory of embodied cognition; that cognition is enactive, embedded, embodied and extended, a model derived from cognitive neuroscience, into the study of literature. The first generation meeting between science and embodiment was facilitated in significant ways by Buddhist meditative practice, particularly from the Tibetan diasporic culture and the Dalai Lama's work in befriending the West. Shilling's review of embodiment in the



social sciences (2016) makes brief reference to 'somatic improvement involving yoga, meditation and a host of bodily practices and disciplines associated with elements of Oriental spirituality' (2016, 9). An embodied Subject presents science and western human science, which broaches a deeper engagement with embodied experience, addressing one of Husserl's primary aims, significant challenges. Spano highlights the specific use of the example of the breath in Husserl as focussed on the difference between voluntary and non-voluntary movement for instance. In experiences of kinaesthesia the breath acts as a primary instance of non-volitional action that can become willed action:

Another example often used by Husserl is breathing; I usually breathe involuntarily, yet I am always able to breathe at will by stopping, starting again and accelerating or decelerating by [sic] breath. (Spano 2022, 126–127)

Husserl's interest in the will and volition is as interesting as his reflection on the place quiet breathing has, out of the numerous citations found in his work. Is there an interest we might take in the possible threat that any amplification of subtle experience may present?<sup>5</sup>

Hier ist das leise Atmen bewertet als Mittel, ein Übel zu vermeiden; das laute Atmen hätte zur Folge oder zur vermutlichen Folge ein Unheil; die Verwandlung in leises Atmen ist nun in Übertragung positiv gewertet. (Husserl 2020, 422)

## **Unsettled breathing, undoing binary readings (of the breath)**

### **Post-qualitative deregulation**

One of the central features of contemporary post-qualitative writing is, clearly, the de-centring of the Subject. A recent contextualisation insightfully describes 'the complexity of the post-qualitative movement' as defined by a threefold shift including: 'the linguistic turn, the crisis of representation and the possibilities of writing as a research method' with 'the affective turn' alongside 'post-humanism, new materialisms and new empiricisms'

(Correa et al. 2020, 65). In other words, the instability of the Subject might result indirectly from three conditions. I would describe these three ‘threats’ as infinitude in post-representational forms, excess in sensory-affective embodiment, and lastly proliferation in systemic appropriation. They each contribute a form of de-regulation, or unregulation; the antipathetic value to regimes of quality regulation and accountability systems, in formal experiential contexts, like education for instance, where what is required of bodies is, largely, a form of compliance. The first initiates over-production in writing whereby without an authorial limit each text is infinitely inter-textual. The second impacts on scale, in that time or events telescope into a proliferation of sensory-affect and intensification. This saturates thinking and thus invites the risk that libidinous force overwhelms any regulatory mechanism on the will, individual or collective, to act in a convergent manner. Thirdly, that anonymity or non self-disclosure, a rebellion against an institutionalised demand for transparency in the mechanism of regulatory power, and newly unregulated ‘wild’ materialities or contested empirical realities, go hand-in-hand with an increase of surveillance and accountability. The mass expropriation of literary culture by AI, is but one recent, vivid example. The initial challenges that Chatbots present educational regulation, and judgement, see for instance Okonkwo and Ade-Ibijola (2021) is relevant so far as this technology might equate to ‘nonself’ authorship. This provides additional urgency to the ethical concerns of regulation.

Some evidence for this regulatory argument might be found via Callinicos in his critique of postmodernism. Here he defines three aporias that are problematic for poststructuralism that echo these thoughts: firstly, rationality, accusing Derrida of anti-realism in ‘endlessly self-generating textuality’ (1989, 77). Secondly, resistance, that a type of pluralistic Deleuzian mode of desiring mitigates against political action. Thirdly, the Subject, that Foucault’s early redefinition of the subject constituted as: ‘the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces’ (Foucault 1980, 73–74 in Callinicos 1989, 87) destabilises the Subject’s autonomy and freedom entirely. We note also that for Foucault Power/Knowledge are inextricable. Callinicos’ argument for these three aporias, an aporia being an unsolvable contradiction in a text or theory,

those of the 'rational', political 'resistance', and 'subject's autonomy', is interestingly aligned with the three waves of theoretical shift that inform the current post-qualitative position (Correa et al. 2020). We can read all three points, for both post-qualitative and poststructuralist accounts, as centrifugal forces that empty the Self-concept of its inner consistency and test its boundaries, whilst, at the same time, centripetal socio-economic forces increasingly consolidate an individualistic and commodified Self, for extrinsic purposes.

### **Self/Nonself**

This leaves us with a more specific immediate problem. On the one hand, a combination of the phenomenological impulse informing embodied cognition, driven largely by the cognitive sciences and neurosciences, alongside the diverse permissiveness that allowed first-person experience, including autoethnographies, to diversify methodologies, sees increasingly diverse post-qualitative research into individualised, uniquely situated subject-embodied experience. A literal self-justified research. Whereas, on the other hand, an impersonal and socially-oriented materialist impulse that situates practices and practitioners in contexts, groups, and geo-political nexuses, de-personalises, and to an extent disembodies, the post-qualitative Subject for the sake of socio-political critique and analysis of wider systemic complexities of material power-relations.

The meditative text (in italics) seems to question the status of the singularity of any 'object' in and as research; and alternates between these extreme modes of, traditionally, subjectivism and objectivism, subject-presence or subject-absence, on-off, off-on.

*Which is to say that meditative enquiries – the writing and reading of experience – slow down and consciously inhibit interpretation, as a strategy, to clarify automaticity in thinking, through text, think of experience by reading experience, as text(ures), text(ural) experience, closely, simultaneously in the writing and reading – as all writers do – (or do they?) as readers may (or may not?)...distinguishing thoughts from words by touch only, fact from*

*factuality with a writer's sixth sense, from the morass of what we might call the as-words-form sensory mulch, that via pause and affect create something anew.*

My own contribution here is meditative enquiry (Stephens 2021), where an object, like 'presence' or 'the breath' is studied through meditative attention, questioned, and simultaneously written.

A type of mindful writing, although the outcome of this process is not necessarily clarity, more one of slowing down cognitive processing through syntactical means. Mindful writing cannot be a tool, or a technique. When Ritzer coined the term McDonaldization around the turn of the twenty-first century to critique the technical rational paradigm, it was applied to many things. McMindfulness is the inevitable counter to the mass promotion of meditation, a concept promoted by Ron Purser, as ballast to arguments that counter the overwhelming clinical evidence now proving its efficacy. Hyland charts this (2017) and cites Zizek to do so: 'although "Western Buddhism" presents itself as the remedy against the stressful tension of capitalist dynamics ... it actually functions as its perfect ideological supplement' (Zizek 2001 in Hyland 2017, 344). Contemporary western Buddhist-influenced practice and theory must address this dilemma. Published academics who meditate and indeed teach are few and far between although there is a paucity of research on this.<sup>6</sup> One outstanding example is found in Bhikku Analayo, whose PhD research ([2003] 2006) and subsequent studies of the Satipatthāna-sutta (2013; 2018) now confirm his position as an international authority on the comparative Buddhist teachings on mindfulness from the three canonical sources in Sanskrit, Pali, and the Chinese Āgamas. He also lives the life of a simple monk, teaching and practising at the Insight Meditation Society, in Barre, Massachusetts. For Analayo, transparency in writing is akin to empirical science in all three contexts, of meditation, academic research, and teaching, and his use of text as direct communication tends towards clarity of expression as equivalent to a clarity of the mind in the tradition of Buddhist didacticism.<sup>7</sup> This may be necessary and thus ethical, a decision of simple appropriateness in teaching, translation and exegesis.

Practice demands variability. We might inquire, for instance, into the subtle differences between attention, focus, concentration, and absorption when practising single-pointed meditation, or may focus on the subtle difference between embodying *karunā* (compassion) and boundless compassion when practising the *brahmavihārās*, as for instance explained by Analayo.<sup>8</sup> Some sensory-affective states as delineated in Buddhist teaching on meditation reach types of specificity and forms of precision, in practice, that can only be known or accomplished through embodied, extralinguistic silence. It is rather the arriving into, straying from, adjusting to, or of, such states, which may re-engage the cognitive activity of using language, after a period of mental quietude. Yet, when we write of such things there is a level of cognitive dissonance between any such modes of profound or immersive experience, as is common to writers (indeed [m]any experiences of creative absorption) and meditators, which has an holistic and all-encompassing present-focus, and a mode of experience that is necessarily subject to an exclusively linear and time-bound teleological logic, in producing the written sentence, in narrative, and then decoding it, through reading. However, there is an 'epistemic distance' (Hick 1990, 92) to adapt John Hick's notion, between the non-representational in experience and devising the means of representation to convey that experience. It is only assumed there may be nothing qualitatively different between academic or literary writing, as such, and writing meditatively ....

Are these worlds, a world apart? Some writing, like some reading, as Ings (2021) has already suggested, especially in the arts and literature, can be meditative; deeply reflexive and, highly visceral. Whilst this might interest theorists of embodied cognition it is clearly of great fascination to writers since late modernism. Literary theory and criticism turns to breath studies to address why the breath has not generally been considered in literature. If the professionalised writer, or editor, operationalise tacit distinctions between writing that is simply: good/bad, clear/confused, transparent/opaque, 'publically acceptable' and so on, it is also within the frame of paratext that breathing has been silenced. Inherent in French post-structuralism, drawing from semiotic psychoanalysis,

was the question: Is there one writing, or many? Not simply as a problem of genre, but as one of the political subject-in-crisis. So, what does this mean, and how can we tell academic and literary texts apart? Notice the breeze present as the slight fluctuations in temperature and humidity on the skin, of what is the same air that reddens our blood, quicker than a word takes to spell, or to speak, as this nonself asks of itself: ‘what is this?’ whilst writing the inbreath, and outbreath.

*A shine glanced hand. Appearing bright as a word, nestling into familiar and unfamiliar lines. And yet the bog in a mouth, a furred odorous sensorium with its billions of agitated forms, not so much pre-lingual as sub-lingual, desiring its own loss through overproduction, its own immersion, this living gaseous mulch cleanses the palate of a page, before a word is freshly inlaid, such as; ‘river-breath’ creates the possibility of surprise. Open to the sea, looking back, looking forward, of mixed temperature and salinity, a word barely formed.*

In one very clear sense, it is the advent of nonself that had preceded, and postdates, the destabilisation of the ‘Subject’ at the core of some versions of modernist and postmodernist literature, although this is a much broader debate to be continued elsewhere.<sup>9</sup>

### **Evocation to enaction**

Let us consider a proposition that a literary text, by leading with metaphor and the rhetorical, using what van Manen calls ‘vocative’ methods (noncognitive, ineffable, and pathic), essentially engages in a form of intensification, here, the sense-data-experience in the text: ‘In the reflective process of writing, the researcher not only engages in analysis but also aims to express the noncognitive’ (2016, 240). We can invoke the literary as a latent or implicit aspect of all academic language from a phenomenological perspective because;

phenomenological writing is a rational process in the sense it tries to systematically explore the meaning structures of a phenomenon or event. On the other hand, it is also nonrational in the sense that it tries to [...] stir up the prereflective substrates of experience as we live them. (2016, 240)

van Manen also concludes, in a sentence I will adapt: ‘The experiential [meditative – T.S.] writing of the text should aim to create a sense of resonance in the reader’ (2016, 240). We might recall then that ‘evocative autoethnography’ for Ellis (1997) and Ellis and Bochner (2016), two of the key theorists in the field, forming one of its key concepts, says of evocation that: ‘calling what we were doing evocative autoethnography, we considered our work both transgressive and critical [...] make your readers feel stuff; activate their subjectivity; compel them to respond viscerally’ (2016, 60).

Is this borne out by other research in the field of reading? The binaries of fiction/nonfiction, akin to creative vs. academic writing, in formal terms, indicates only that it is ‘evocation’ that clearly plays a rhetorical role in all text, and that stands in relation to efficacy in various disciplines: as a shift in style and world view. In the most basic terms, early twentieth century literary criticism from Russian formalists such as Roman Jakobson, to I.A. Richards at Cambridge and John Ransom at Kenyon College in the USA, alongside the ‘linguistic turn’ informing analytic philosophy, championed the role of logic, linguistics and analytic context informing rigorous reading methods. Also from the early twentieth century, literary theorists, such as Rosenblatt, came to employ the distinctions made between ‘such generally-accepted contrasts as “expository/poetic” or “literary/non-literary”’ (1988, 2), evolved from her notion of reading as exploration and event when advocating for the ethical import of the individual ‘reader experience’ in reading, discussed in her book *Literature as Exploration* (1938). Her widely employed distinction between ‘efferent’ (reading for information) and ‘aesthetic reading’ (1938, 2005) in the evolution to a perspective that empowered readers as more than passive recipients of text, rather, in establishing a ‘transactional theory’ of the reader–text encounter, was a position taken up by a wave of theorists negotiating structuralist-constructivist positions, most notably Wolfgang Iser’s *The Implied Reader* (1972) and *The Act of Reading* (1976), and ‘The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach’ in *Reader-Response Criticism from Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (1980) alongside Umberto Eco’s *The Role of the Reader* ([1979] 1984).

These ideas were all very influential in my own undergraduate studies in English Literature in the 1980s in a UK Higher Education context. I am less certain of the influence Rosenblatt's legacy has had in the USA. Iser emphasised the 'convergence' of text and reader (1972, 275) as both an artistic and aesthetic activity in which the reader is to an extent frustrated by the literary text, in a way that exegetical texts, in contrast, confirm expectations. Iser initiated reading as 'aesthetic recreation': 'We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectations, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject; this is the dynamic process of recreation' (Iser 1972, 288). Hence reading became akin to writerly processes, in a mode of highly interactive meaning making. These works are generally regarded as a move away from the overly technical-rational approaches of the New Criticism, emphasising imagination and intersubjective confirmation of individual reading, although Eco tends more towards the formalist camp in my opinion. This dynamic process reminds us of just how influential Rosenblatt was, e.g. in one of her educational works, a Technical Report for the Illinois Center for The Study of Reading (1988), when she explains why her adoption of Dewey's term 'transaction' (Rosenblatt 1988) to replace 'interaction' was fundamental to delineating the epistemological difference at stake:

In *Knowing and the Known*, John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley pointed out that the term 'interaction' had become too closely tied to Cartesian or Newtonian philosophical dualism, the paradigm that treats human beings and nature as separate entities. The newer paradigm, reflecting especially Einsteinian and subatomic developments in physics, emphasizes their reciprocal relationship. The scientist, 'the observer,' to use Niels Bohr's phrasing, is seen as 'part of his observation' (1959, 210). Instead of separate, already-defined entities acting on one another (an 'interaction'), Dewey and Bentley (1949, 69) suggested that the term 'transaction' be used to designate relationships in which each element conditions and is conditioned by the other in a mutually-constituted situation. This requires a break with



entrenched habits of thinking. The old stimulus-response, subject-object, individual-social dualisms give way to recognition that such relationships take place in a context that also enters into the event. (1988, 2)

Rosenblatt's insight therefore predates Barad's notion of reciprocal 'intra-action' (2007) by many decades and thereby allows us to appreciate the depth of her contribution in paving the way for a field of embodied cognitive literary theory. The subtle energetic dimension of a reading-writing-breathing concept, does not now appear as novel, given her historically grounded view. We also note the depth of her commitment to (a textual) pluralism: 'Terms such as the reader, the student, the literary work [...] are somewhat misleading, though convenient, fictions. There is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work; there are in reality only the potential millions of individual readers of the potential millions of individual literary works'. (1938, 32)

This shift of a view of 'world' effectively underpins all of the work in new materialist embodied cognition and now more popular 4E approaches, where cognition is embodied, embedded, enacted, or extended (Carney 2020; Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991), and is the hinge on which an epistemological door, between self and world, will either open, like a breath, or remain closed. The very notion of the post-qualitative, in research and writing, depends on this philosophical shift. We might note how the philosopher Andy Clark's extended mind theory in the 1990s (Clark and Chalmers 1998) was built on a notion of phenomenology of space, found in later Heidegger. Indeed, the problem of the body as extension, clear in Descartes, was one that had to be dismissed in favour of his (mathematical) idealism, where the mind is simply unconnected with quantified space of any dimension.

Recent interest via studies of literature in the cognitive humanities aims to situate this world view experience via the body, for instance in Troscianko's reading of Kafka's *The Trial* (2014) as enactive cognition. The extension of the 'matter' of the text in the actions of reading implicates the extension of mind in acting in the world, whereby sharp distinctions between imagination and fiction falter. Clearly, western philosophy's

‘problem’ with the body-world and its relation to both logic and truth statements is at the root of many of these re-evaluative motivations, still working their way through and across various academic disciplines. Inwood put this insightfully in his review of a book aligning Heidegger and Wittgenstein. Their rejection of idealism as described by Edward Minar, is summed up by Inwood as follows:

Idealism, and realism, presupposes that there is something – I, we, mind, etc. – independent of and unaffected by the world, on which the world may, or may not, depend. But this is not so: the self, we and all the concepts in terms of which idealism and realism might be expressed are indelibly world-saturated.’ (Inwood 2016, 867–869)

It is in this sense of ‘world-saturated’ we might read a meditation on the breath as embodied cognition of a post-qualitative nonself, and in spite of its imaginative or speculative nature nevertheless, accept its empirical orientation to gauge a reading of that world.

*If however we might be like a musk turtle gliding underwater to rest next to a stone shell patterned lines overlaid with mosaic watery light, breathing through a tongue; not coming up to air for months at a time. Is this breath breathing? Is this word, alive? Not the phenomenological bracketing, or epoché, of some experience from the next, because where is next? Next is nowhere to be seen. Phenomenological human science induces us with an underwater spell in a dive for a pearl, that an intake of breath, after an outbreath, might arrive, when, like a turtle, waiting for days upon nights upon weeks upon months for something to stir, may yet not be distracted, whilst it attentively waits, sustained only by its one metabolic trick: slowness, dark green. A one sweet every-breath. Not mesmerised, nor hypnotised, but rather, awake, fully at rest.*

### **Non non-western (philosophy)**

We may go further and state that what have been neglected, and less acknowledged, outside of an archaeological anthropology, are the non-western practices of embodied

cognition as a form of practice-expertise and accomplishment. Knowledge of one's breath is an indigenous matter, continuous with millennia of educational heredity. When considering the vast realm of human knowledge in the oral cultures and non-linguistic domain, this constitutes most of the 'success' of the human species in its transition from animal to human. Writing is nothing but new writing, as is most western knowledge new knowledge.

Respiratory philosophy and qualitative, or post-qualitative, breath studies may provide continuity with the work of Francesco Varela whose practice of Tibetan Buddhism in the 1970s and work as a neuroscientist and philosopher led to the setting up of the Mind and Life Institute in 1987 to continue this dialogue between Science and Buddhism, from which embodied cognition theories developed.<sup>10</sup> We are reminded that the problem of self-writing evolved post the Subject (Cadava, Connor, and Nancy 1991). Their excellent book *Who Comes After The Subject?* elaborates numerous ways that French post-structuralists crossed the boundaries of western rationalism, such that non-western culture enabled institutional critique for these self-consciously anti-colonial thinkers. Other valuable studies focus on the fraught 'post-colonial' Self from a continental philosophy tradition. (Gannon 2006; Persram 2011). Yet still, accounts of, and from, meditation as the primary form of embodied practice in Buddhism - and in which tradition a notion of nonself is germane - are only gradually emergent. Accounts from yoga practices, from the Indian cultures out of which early Buddhism arose are likewise less well integrated into French continental philosophy, although Irigaray's attempt, whilst now very challenging in terms of its gender-identity positions, was a legitimate attempt to step outside of her western heritage and philosophical training; we will touch on this again later.

*In breath, a place. If it were theoretically possible, and it is, then the space that is this body, this chest cavity, this chamber (L. camera), this dark room (L. obscura) no less, is now an open black box, like an exploded diagram, of what may, at least theoretically, be our last breath; imploding, inhaling, awaiting its imagined, for the moment, metaphysical echo and return, to explosion, exhalation, we might hope; of an outbreath to follow...sensing the lung's*

*capacity, opening into and opening out of its bellowed self, to something like, scrutiny, akin to a concertinaed enquiry, a Proulxian narrative tracking the entirety of the life of an object, such as an accordion, breathing.<sup>11</sup> A purely impurely experiential genre, the sensory mode of which, what is qualitatively called 'reflection' (visible, audible, olfactory, etc.), is of less fascination – being distraction – than the phantasmagoria of this said 'box', the one that the previous sentence opened, with. To begin, somewhere, and follow a thread, however slight, sleight or slight, as to what it may be, or which melody is played.*

Philosophical tradition in German-speaking Europe did pre-empt the modern shift towards embodiment and against universalism. This aligns Ditley's project at describing 'lived experience' as historical phenomena (Makkreel 2021), its 'facticity', with many of the numerous interpretative Schools that arose in order to study the human after Husserl, such as Freudianism, Marxism, Existentialism, indeed Psychology itself, of which new science Husserl was critical. Each is marked by the unresolved tensions between the archetypal 'subject' and the historical and situated 'subject'. We find in German anti-idealism a significant shift towards the exigencies of embodiment. However, the European body as a transcendental object, determined by immutable laws and understood with logical principles or medical systems vis-à-vis a situated historical material phenomenon with an undisclosed and non-representational core, actually still hold in common the mind-metaphysics correlation, and provide continuation of a centuries-old backdrop to the experience of breath prior to any useful distinction between western/Eastern philosophy.

As Purushottama Bilimoria pointed out, through a session at the recent Respiratory Philosophy and Sound Arts conference in 2022 that suggests renewed interest in the breath, breath studies might already be but a footnote in the non-western field of Prāna study when considering: 'Brāhmanic-Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Āyurveda, Patañjali's astangayoga, Kundalinī and Hatha Yogas, and with qi in the classical Chinese medicinal system' (2022, 25). Some of these systems retain a philosophical bias towards metaphysics and transcendent insight, and it is this form of philosophy the early twentieth

century logical positivists - on a tidal wave of secularism - worked so hard to stamp out; however, non-western systems are often judged merely cognitively, i.e. without the dedicated methodologies of extensive and complex practices that accompany such beliefs in experiential terms. Knowledges of prānāyāma, or Qi, involving the conscious use of breath, or universal energy, might be more widely mis-taught and watered down in the West than ever before, as recent popular moves against the western appropriation of yoga teaching might attest. As Phillips describes, an interlocking literature of diverse schools in Sanskrit, over some twenty centuries, includes a genre of epistemology, pramāna-śāstra, with metaphysical and 'world-transcendence' positions that rely on 'idealist, dualist, monist, theist' arguments as justification; whilst also including 'the authority of testimony' and 'yogic perception and/or meditative experience as crucial for Religious knowledge' (2021, np). Pramāna (knowledge sources) include mainly 'perception, inference, and testimony' (Phillips, 2021). We note that Buddhist Madhyamaka philosophy emerges with Nāgārjuna (c150-c 250 CE) as taking skeptical, atheistic and/or critical positions, hence known as 'middle way' approaches, albeit extended to absolute essencelessness or emptiness of all positions, including its own. The contradiction that an eternal, transcendent 'Buddha-nature' (tathāgatagarbha) exists alongside nonself teachings is best discussed in a recent book by Jones (2021), in which he supports earlier views that: 'The early Buddhist model [...] preserves what Stephen Collins called "a kind of pragmatic agnosticism, in which the self is not so much denied as declared inconceivable" (1982: 10). What was taught in early discourses attributed to the Buddha could instead be characterized as a "soteriological strategy"' (Collins 1982, 78 in Jones 2021, 6). Nonself, as educative capacity.

*Paying attention to this mental speech that occurs whilst we breathe...we begin to prepare, dust off unpreparedness (to write) this one mindful breath, singularly, albeit with the multiple guides of previous breaths (each a whispered opinion) and with the realisation of finality, attempt to catch one occurrence: intact. Make fiction non-fiction. That is, it might also spontaneously occur to us that: 'Our life rests upon a single breath', and to experience*

*this (rest) at least once, might be a task worth undertaking.<sup>12</sup> At the same time as be overawed by the multitudinous possibilities of becoming fully present to, and knowledgeable of; one breath, in which the outside-in, inside-out, pull and/or push – depending on one’s perspective – is largely beyond anything we might call: will, choice, decision, or even, control; how air, (mainly nitrogen, a little oxygen and less carbon dioxide, neon, hydrogen) keeps us alive. Minute by minute. Except here; in the pale imitation of a story, seemingly authoritative, taking itself too seriously perhaps, for the lightness and indifference of this... soufflé; an enquiry into, which is now beginning, and might, we hope, not take place only once more; of life-giving importance, soon to be over; the telling of its life-story, biography. The lack of which is the quickest route to death, by unawareness or suffocation. Neglect. It is already anticipated there may be another enquiry, yet if some rare, or common or garden nested bird say, scares, or simply hops down and away before a composer, such as Messiaen, a bird listener’s full attention had even arrived, he’d anticipate another along in a moment, pencil in hand, ready to notate. Because the suspicion that whatever full attention might be is more elusive, than its absence or presence, and not at all dependent on our effort, but on the arrival of the thing. Living, as if waiting on a song. Convinced I will not die just yet. Repeatedly. To half-heartedly endeavour to focus on one, half-breath, perhaps, appears to be usual, yet to attempt full concentration, proceeding diligently, one word in front of the other, on a full breath, is clearly not impossible.*

### **Towards a sigh: the non-contradiction of academic and literary writing**

When Ings, mentioned earlier, borrows from Leavy’s discussion of poetics in a social science context to emphasise: ‘Patricia Leavy, in her discussion of poetic writing in research observed, “poetry is a form that itself brings attention to silence (or as a poet might say, to space) and also relies on emotional evocation as part of meaning making while simultaneously exposing the fluidity and multiplicity of meaning”’ (2015, 66 in 2021, 122), the positive relation between evocation, emotion, and polysemy is key to Leavy’s point.

Academic writing on the qualitative, on experience, now encompasses autoethnographic methodologies (Douglas and Carless 2013) and phenomenological methodologies

(Van Manen 2016) and these are now catalogued into numerous typologies.

‘Ellis and Bochner (2000) identify over forty different terms that have been used to describe autoethnographic approaches between the late 1970s and 2000’ (Douglas and Carless 2013, 92). van Manen (2016) describes 31 types of phenomenology of practice, associating each with a key author. My version of ‘meditative enquiry’ (Stephens 2021) might be added to each category. We dispense with the idea that one cannot write whilst meditating, by meditating whilst one writes. Ontological diversity may be less problematic than epistemological fixities in academic presentation, which returns us to the question of what disciplinary embodied knowledge is at stake for the practitioner, someone for whom research is iterative and derived from practice.

Both academic and creative modes of writing in this article are subject to one key indeterminacy which is related to the efficacy of writing itself, in alternative epistemological positions that place the writer/reader or researcher/subject in what Ricoeur calls ‘the dialogue between hermeneutics and the semiological and exegetical disciplines’ ([1981] 2016, 93), i.e. interpretative vs. descriptive modalities. Of course, we require both. In the early work of autoethnographers, when Ellis and Bochner discuss their first meeting in 1990, they articulate this choice between, as Denzin said to Ellis, ‘being caught between hard social science and interpretive humanistic inquiry’ (2016, 38) which was, and perhaps still is, very much in operation throughout academia, and academic publishing.<sup>13</sup> Ricoeur’s aim in ‘The hermeneutical function of distanciation’ is to escape a nominal antinomy ‘between alienating distanciation and participatory belonging’. A negative notion of distanciation he reads in Gadamer. For the first (alienating) he cites Gadamer as associating with the distance that ‘renders possible the objectification which reigns in the human sciences’ (2016, 93–106) and the second (belonging) the ‘primordial relation whereby we belong to and participate in the historical reality which we claim to construct as an object’ (93–106). Instead then, Ricoeur argues for a positive sense of distanciation, as a condition for ‘communication in and through distance [which] displays a fundamental characteristic of the very historicity of human experience’ (93–106). In such a manner continuity with the fabric of pre-historic, largely pre-literate cultures is possible, and thereby knowledges

that have been assumed long-past might be rendered living, and embodied. Yet, only in and through a distance – like space, of air, of breath – which must be respected.

*What kind of camera is completely shut tight as to be hermetic and thus, to all intents and purposes, useless? None. The lung grows like a complex branching out into the skies of absorption, the deepest concentration appears the most open to sky; because where is between and between what is between...a listening place, a non-sensical, non-conceptual gradualism, this soft concentration, profoundly delicate of things where inhalation begins, not as a picture, but the multiple of the tingling sites whereby air might enter the space of our being skin, suspended from interpretation of what this or that sensation might mean, as a rule, it is not wholly known in one gasp, one digestive swoop, as was the pictured moment, nor split in two like a before and after squall, but sensed, interiorly, where exactly the air-body respire...appears to diffuse, across interstices through the soles of our feet, scalp and fingertips, we breathe in and out of the body's sponge-foam; eyes breathe through tear ducts, skin's pores open and close their mouths, listening to air through their ear breathing antechambers, whispering secrets, meeting the flow of air through the nostrils and throat suffused with non-photographic light, oxygenation, air pressure, a reptilian skin pouch of deflate-inflate, moreso when like the non-visible spectrum, radiating across membranes and blood – at all times – imprinted, these miniscule microbreaths registering their both-sidedness, meeting across the littoral, shorelines of sense, where it becomes impossible to see or say who's first, or was first here, air or sound, empty, full, simultaneously, exchanging a mouthful of breath for a mouth full of air, conjoined, separated, bonded by our aerated heartbeats, entrained, in love with our atmosphere, circulating a gasp of joy through arteries; breath is breathed across subtle boundaries, continually in, continuing out, beyond the mechanism of breathing, as a blacksmith fires bellows unlocked in the chambers of air in an ear, breath is already breathing across the world-skin of alveoli, this verisimilar veridical place, a both-space, being-across and being-with, intimately without, forever casting itself within, through space dark membrane lined coral sponges of lungs, salty breaths, like anemones, within us that we are within. It is a we that are breathed by a watery air, humid and turbulent, as if under a sea,*



*lining a loose settling of ocean floor each minute crater a breathing space, we are within a fluctuating textured body of air, as material as water, thickening, of various densities, carrying spores, dust and skin, carrying its admixture of poison and cure. Prior to us nestling in any of these differentiated dips, indents within the interior of things, is habit and habitat. Engendering itself, an ouroboros object breath turns out to be, subtle, insensible breeze ribbon blowing through us once again. Dissolving as quickly across my spongy spectrum as bloods are reddening, as I walk, sit, stand, sleep, and so on, acting in consort with the former phantasmagorical I and the future phantasmagorical I, until constant, until background, white noise, which never rests, radiating, incessantly, mostly sited one cell deep, resonates with our bones' vibrato. We hear. Air becomes blood before word. In tenths of a second pulled into circulation before we can pause.*

## **To practice – is to end at the beginning**

### **A systemic fallacy**

Finally, this academic-creative new writing appears to touch on this notion of the systemic breath supported by a muscularity of a diaphragm-like rhythmic experience. Representational accounts of experience written after the event are subject to a lapse of time and the advent of 'extra-experiential' reflection that allows 'extra-experiential' thinking to play a role in the organisation of the writing as document. Different methods of writing, such as drafting and editing (see van Manen's account of the Dutch phenomenologist Johan van den Berg, who wrote on index cards, later collaged into longer texts (2016, 375)), also add layers of indeterminacy to the problematic notion of presence in lived experience (Stephens 2021), and the writing thereof. We therefore want to shift the debate away from the false notion of an authentic, time-stamped documentary writing to a situated historical and cultural engagement acknowledging the seen and unseen aspects of context as it is written, enacted as it is read.

*So let us assume that the echo, or hypothetical reversal of the proposed expansion of one*

*breath (half-breath?) into our lungs, has a response: contraction, which is so opaquely and habitually constructed, as being any movement, bodily contraction, autonomically ill-considered by most, almost, until the last or under threat of the last, breath; not one to miss, is nevertheless an expectation of something, real, finally; something by which what is taken (for granted) must be returned. The natural counterpart of expansion, inflation, entails a necessary gift, a base rhythm: birth for death, beginnings with endings, openings made with fastenings in mind, taking-as-giving. Deflation as contraction, like galaxies say, which is as unthought as our being-air and subtle material. The air is what we are. Also. To take away one's breath, is not yet to pass away, when positively charged, a wholebody spasm first rung by the air; like a tuning fork, instrument, or a bell free to sound. To make this one body-sound: a birth-cry; is a right. The horror of indignation at its limit can kill hope. Strangled rage at the same time as we slowly suffocate. Why? Because, breathlessly, we exempt ourselves from being breath. We run away from breath towards breathing.*

*Is exhalation letting go? If black holes suck to engorgement what and when might they exhale? Yes, we ring in the silence of storms, and can only imagine what it is not to breathe, like children repeatedly do.*

### **A fictional disappearance**

With the definition of breathing as practice, when it appears in the context of a meditation practice, rather than as an organic experience and rather than as anything other than instinctive, physiognomic, animal, or unconscious 'bios', is illuminated by a nuanced discussion of the use and misuse of Bourdieu's notion of habitus in the excellent entry that is Karl Maton's contribution on Habitus to 'Part II – Field Theory: Beyond Subjectivity and Objectivity' in *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts* (2008). Bourdieu's definition of habitus was as practice that disrupted the subject/object paradigm with a field theory, namely: '[(habitus)(capital)] + field = practice' (Bourdieu in Maton 2008, 51). Maton's explanation of Bourdieu's formula is helpful:

practices are the result of what he calls ‘an obscure and double relation’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992a, 126) or ‘an unconscious relationship’ (Bourdieu 1993a, 76) between a habitus and a field [...] practice results from relations between one’s dispositions (habitus) and one’s position in a field (capital), within the current state of play of that social arena (field).

He quotes Bourdieu and Wacquant directly to sum up the mutual informing by the field of habitus and by habitus of the meaning of the field: ‘On one side it is a relation of conditioning; the field structures habitus...On the other side, it is a relation of knowledge or cognitive construction. Habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 127 [original italics] in Maton 2008, 52). Germane to, and a problem within, the notion of practice is one of the development of mastery, and Bourdieu’s field theory thereby, potentially at least, hands to capital cumulative worth and value, and to the field the valuation and hierarchy of the habitus + capital association.

What then occurs, as the unintended and problematic outcome, is that the self-subject disappears entirely, subsumed into a set of relations in which it is embedded. That is, *Pratītyasamutpāda* (Sanskrit), translated as ‘dependent origination’ or ‘interdependent coarising’ to emphasise the point, the concept in Buddhism as one way to explain this state of a lack of inherent self-identity. This level of formalism in the system defined by Bourdieu is also reflected in Umberto Eco’s demotion of the reader to a possible imaginary figure, ghostlike, hypnotised, or a simple point of function, and here we read functionality as efficacy, in the textual system. Text, much like air, demands we read-breathe it.

Eco cites Kristeva in defining how a text relates to a reader: ‘Usually this conjuring up of the “ghost” of the sender is ordered to a symmetrical conjuring up of the “ghost” of the addressee’ (Kristeva 1970 in Eco 1979, 10). As a specific example, a story is analysed as an example of ‘fabula’ which through cues, expectations, and ellipses, if not direct instruction by the author, tells the reader ‘to write ghost chapters’ (212) that the story, by Alphonse

Allais, goes on to approve: ‘thus the text implicitly validates a “ghost chapter”, tentatively written by the reader’ (214). A complex analysis of the ways in which the text prompts this type of fabulation, on behalf of the reader, gives Eco the material to evidence his theory, and it is a profoundly structuralist one:

We shall see in the last essay of this book (Chapter 8) how a story by Alphonse Allais, *Un drame bien parisien*, can be read in two different ways, a naive way and a critical way. But both types of readers are inscribed within the textual strategy. The naive reader will be unable to enjoy the story (he will suffer a final uneasiness), but the critical reader will succeed only by enjoying the defeat of the former. In both cases – anyway – it will be only the text itself – such as it is made – that tells us which kind of reader it postulates. The exactness of the textual project makes for the freedom of its Model Reader. If there is a ‘jouissance du texte’ (Barthes 1973), it cannot be aroused and implemented except by a text producing all the paths of its ‘good’ reading (no matter how many, no matter how much determined in advance). (1979, 10)

Such a position is highly problematic; hidden texts within texts should remind us that underneath Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) may be a racist reference to a racist joke by Allais and that such imponderable stories are denied a complete relation to truthfulness, only after the death of the author. This reminds us that Umberto Eco is both novelist and theorist of reading.<sup>14</sup> The theorist as novelist becomes a necessary strategy for the emergence of post-structuralism, in which all text can be subject to a philo-literary analysis. The birth of the reader, that followed directly as a consequence of the death of the author, for Barthes at least - in contemporary terms - finds us at the precipice of the death of readership, after the birth of AI. The wholesale absorption by AI of innovations within creative writing, now made available to textual production of any genre, without authorship, reaches one apotheosis of post-structuralism; reading finds its role again in the margins, and boundary condition, when all text becomes paratext. Yet what this problematises of interest now, might simply be the arc of connections made in structuralism’s potential future conjured up by structural linguistics, AI, and our biases. In Eco’s terms the ‘Model’

or ‘ideal reader’ is inseparable from: ‘the “ideal” text as a system of nodes or joints, and to establish at which of them the cooperation of the Model Reader is expected and elicited’ (1979, 11). The logical outcome is in fact Eco’s next move which is to: ‘renounce the use of the term /author/ if not as a mere metaphor for <textual strategy>’ (11) and hence we realise that the Model Reader is also not a subject, in fact, both subject polarities of author/reader are dismissed, in favour of ‘a textually established set of felicity conditions (Austin 1962) to be met in order to have a macro speech act (such as a text is) fully actualized’ (1979, 11). This false disappearance of the Subject, whether author or reader, is the assumed position of the problematic challenge of AI to notions of both academic and literary readership. Yet, any cultural or mechanistic or technological system cannot reproduce itself in perpetuity, the imaginary writer would at least require imaginary readers, at certain points along their co-evolution. When the author role becomes empty; and readers also void, or text is merely reproducible for decoding, this state is not to be confused with a western reading of nihilism. No-one breathes: enabling a liberated breath.

*If humans are constituted as aerobic beings, advancing and retreating through a curriculum of veins, together with the matters of absorption, dissolution, transformation; blown across one cell thick, of gas to blood, and blood to tissue, in a swirl and eddy of a starry gale, or spatial beings; the space between space as that which informs every material form, yet which nevertheless vanishes into densities of thickly layered transparency, in this hyper-ventilated structure that provides all elements the space to breathe; both such traditionally immaterial elements, are pure fiction. We are off-hand epithets, played on a pentatonic scale of five senses, or sung as the world reflects us, as we name them: elements. Yet to fully experience one, might make fiction riveting. Is (the word) death, or dying, carried upon an inbreath as we expire? We are never born, die, or breathe without someone nearby, breathing their breath into ours, at whatever distance we may or may not prefer, and of course our distant co-breathing cousins were actually plants and proto-trees. Our breath planted millennia before gills ever drew air from bubbles between the watery slime of prokaryotes in the sea. Are we felled by the lack of one, more, breath, or is the final breath, of which we are aware, the unconscious release we seek, or do we peter out, halfway, so to*

*Speak, as if walking across a bridge – we faint – and on waking, have no idea as to which side we are facing and from whom we are being given to, or welcomed from, for a split second: clarity. Fully situated. At which point all ‘sidedness’ evaporates and we are left true, in our perpetual bridged and bridging place of mid-breath. We might need that final half-breath to gasp and guide our fall. And so we trust that gathering is not in vain. As a puppeteer of this musculoskeletal discombobulation make a performance of a breath across the woven fascia-knitted limbs; pointing, stage left, on a single string. Our breath is at least then, half-imagined, as it begins, and as we listen to an inrush of lifecreating- space, this imaginary full intake of a breath that is neither call, nor response, neither open nor closed; but always both; because who is to say that the first patter of breath – our bodies took – was not that disengorgement of the fluid-filled lungs retched up by infant instinct; that this puppet-body first took a bow, before being, so that exhaling is in fact where breath begins, contrary to our ‘natural’ assumption that to take is to become, and to become is to intake. That to begin we need to take. What if the reverse was more true? That the spiralling squeeze; being born, is expulsion from our first sponge-soaked wetbreath. Birth carried on an amniotic outbreath, half-complete. What is left unexpressed, like any story, is in fact, re-absorbed.*

### **A non-fictional appearance**

Breath, like reading and writing or academic ritual, is habitual. Our misunderstanding of the iterative might be corrected if, as Lisa Blackman, a significant theorist of embodiment in recent decades, points out, habit itself may be misread if we neglect its contentious history when torn between the forces of a materialist behaviourist psychology, which came to claim ‘habit’ as such (Leys 1983, 7 in Blackman 2013, 189). This was against a historic sociological preference for a Durkheimian as opposed to Tardean interpretation of habit as ‘social imposition or coercion’ (Durkheim) rather than ‘hypnotic suggestibility’ (Tarde) (189). In Durkheim’s ascendance sociology lent to habit the weight of a ‘bio-physical concept primarily located within the nervous system’ (Blackman 2013, 190). Blackman’s work is extremely valuable in re-tracing and re-emphasising the forgotten history of habit, also with one aim of diminishing the force of unnecessary dualities. She cites Gail Weiss (2008) who sees such patterns as continuous throughout nineteenth and

twentieth-century disciplinary discourse, ‘instinct versus learned behaviour, animal versus the human, nature versus culture and mechanism versus vitalism’ (Blackman 2013, 187), to twenty-first-century research, ‘particularly within the neurosciences, where debates about habit often refer to either conscious versus unconscious thought or action’ (187). This is a positive association with Ricoeur’s aim to dispense with false antinomy.

Any system for reproducing knowledge through an educational or publishing regime requires then that it critiques its own accepted habits. Those unconscious cultural norms of uncritical production. The problem of the systemic in social systems is outlined in what Blackman closely argues in her analysis of systems of habit, following Tarde, as she notes, ‘Durkheim and Tarde were both interested in imitation and contagious forms of communication which seemed to by-pass reason’ (2013, 189); it is not simply that habit is a form of ‘non-intentionality’ but can be associated with the early instabilities ‘enacted between philosophy, science, sociology and psychology at the turn of the twentieth century’ (192). The significance here, as we approach the breath, or a knowledge derived from the breath, from which we may elaborate in respiratory philosophy, is the necessity to break with phenomenological continuity and find neo-disciplinary concepts ...Tarde suggested ‘hypnotic suggestibility’ as key to understanding habit and this was because: ‘there was also a strong connection between psychic research and neo-vitalism, exemplified by the writings of Henri Bergson, William James and Gabriel Tarde’ (Blackman 2013, 192). In terms of social theory, for Tarde (1903):

The notion of habit was not a psychological disposition, but the means through which innovation might transmit through a kind of imitative rapidity; what he termed ‘invention through following’ (Toews 2003, 85) [and] Transported to a more contemporary horizon, Tarde is credited with the development of ‘an affect-based collective phenomenon’ or a ‘socio-psychic account of contagion’. (Toews 2003, 92 in Blackman 2013, 195)

*Let us (the non-fictional audience amongst whom this now [text] is situated) venture back across these imagined sentences, because finally there is no distinction between words, or thoughts, that can hold anything like, water, and see what this breathing does, instead. This first body-breath, what essential features its shell possesses, imaginatively replaying its genesis ([whilst] end [ing]), from a non-representational kernel of memory, vividly in the rasping, gasping and grasping against emptiness perhaps, empty theatre with no one present to say it took place perhaps, the audience distracted by interminable repetition, perhaps, a breath without witness, breaking out into the space around itself; finds its place, for taking in the Outside; by the necessary expulsion of what was secreted; inside, from one homeostatic imaginary to the next; or one incline into decline, from one twisting circulation arises another bisecting squall, vomited across a slight numerical difference, a pressure zone; infants expel a rich mother slime into a whirlpool of breath, from the fluid filled lungs, with the force of a float held under the sea, always telling, how full the outbreath breath can be.*

Indeed, it may become a necessity to work from an assumption that ‘respiratory philosophy’ is carried out in the spirit of a transversal study (Voegelin 2023, Voegelin and Wright 2022), of listening between and across disciplines. This article enacts a counter-generative and playful writeful embodiment, a critical counter-production of a literary-theoretical text, where the academic voice maintains no discrete knowledge; to keep, or lose. If a flautist might say, transversal sounding, to read-write-breathe, is continuous with the naturally occurring sounds and songs of windblown reeds, pre-cuniform, hence of an etymology including Pan and the Indo-European Pushan (Sanskrit, Pūsan) a pastoral nature deity, conjoining the entity of a human-animal-nature, with fertility, to a generative ‘textual-material’ production. ‘Transversal study’ is described by Voegelin as radical listening-study, part ‘interloper and troubling force’ freed from disciplinary autonomy that names for her a future for sound studies : ‘a study and a methodology that traverses disciplinary lines to get to know the world from its diffuse contingencies, unstable relationalities and potent interdependencies’ (Voegelin 2023, 96). For meditators this is well known as an insight into both the philosophical theory and practical experience



of praṭītyasamutpāda (Sanskrit interdependent co-arising). Transversality, perhaps, because any creative close reading, of the breath, using any means or method, is productive of new synergistic knowledges that are necessarily neo-disciplinary.

*We might give up this Subject, the Self or Subjective, by keeping body-in-mind embodied, identify with the non-Self of this sleight matter of what is 'prior' to an in-breath and the capturing thereof. Indifferent to making self-perpetuating meaning because the autobiographical cannot string anything together without a thread, interpret any array of precise affective meaning from a lung's contours and lack of nerve tissue. No sensation in the chest is the lung not yet speaking, the aches are all intercostal muscles and a rib cage possessed, its first port of call: to perpetuate itself as; the person, who, breathes. No-one seriously breathes. The flows and forms embodiment creates make an I superfluous, even, obstructive. This so-called breathing-I, reed-body I, impulsive in its self-recreation, multiple times mirrored, reveals that the habits we repeatedly press upon breath are unconscionable. Animal breath, at the threshold of the burrow, waits for its precise moment, and not a moment before, or second after, enduring regardless of any self-determined actor forcing their will, as if a breath knows its right to be freely in time, only when ready, on its own hermetic terms. Is a true breath not breathed, in this sense, but released from breathing?*

*We know, as a noeme – breath speaks – we are inhabiting the interior space of another's 'body', as also pocketfuls of aerated being within a hovering atmosphere coating a dropletlike planet, part of the moist slime surrounded granule, and on each upright frame – each thing tends to be round – rests not a column of air, so much as a packet, a sworl, at any one time, on each bed, strata formed from a mantle tissue, a shell layered from within to without, with each walk a gust, adorned with air like a flowing robe, each rest a hum, hemmed-in, by a capsule, and whatever the outer body may also contain, within its vast expanses, shared breathing; each miniature world breathes; as galaxies rotate between accumulating and attenuating the matter of stars, this is certain, that we always intuit another grain of finer texture, and breath brings its own density to bear on us, air vibrates, shines and radiates vitality, a levity, a weight, a certain temperature cocoon incomparable,*

*the next as unique as the last, chaotically balancing and balanced between themselves – equilibrium, of sorts, imaginary, most likely – of the wholly intact, we are always within the skin of a droplet say, varying gaseous chemistries, the I is a bubble floating downstream, appearing with a flash powder of lightning, that which illumines and exhausts itself during its entire lifetime, bursts and reforms its field, likewise. These combinatorial air bubbles deposit us here, or there, drift to the middle, flock and flow, and remainder. Or so we hope to imagine: the transcendental balance of the unobtainable picture, perfection and unmixed or unmuddied truth; that there is nothing as fluid in the matter of the body as a grain of truth. An electron somewhere partners an atom. Because no cell is perfectly free of its outside, breaths do not separate themselves from the air, nor divide from within as if to be perfectly captured. The boundary of water's skin, surface tension, is a counting-house-making-boundary, nothing more, thin, that an I counts as number, 1, repeatedly, ad infinitum, as we re-think and perpetuate this one breath, 1, I. I; 1; 1...I, (I.... 1) 1..... I; 1 and so on, secreting a shell out of electrical singular pulses. Bubbles actually bubbling. If air, like water, stagnates; breath can decline yet it is never not breath.*

## **Conclusion: textural breathing**

In Western scientific study, and Eastern practices alike, the extreme oversimplification of the notion of 'breath control', 'attention control', and so on, as a focus for a knowledge of experience, might also demonstrate the intractable problems of individualisation and Self reinforcement across cultural difference; the extension of breath as life-sustaining preempts its value as manipulatable. See, for instance, the case of Muzik, Reilly, and Diwadkar's (2018) study of Wim Hof's use of breathing techniques and meditation to endure extreme cold in a sports and survival context, which justifies the neurological affects of practices then recontextualised as effective for their new contexts. An example of the circularity of research confirmation via method and cultural assumption, of which this article might also be accused.

Stefanie Heine's *Poetics of Breathing* (2021) takes a richly intertextual approach to literary criticism and provides arguably the most nuanced contribution to this encounter between literary theory and breath studies, as mentioned earlier. Readers of this journal will be interested in her specific focus on the 'authentic voice' in Kerourac and Ginsberg; the 'generative caesurae' in Musil and Woolf; the 'impossible expiration' in Beckett and Plath and the 'breath at point zero' of trauma, in Celan and Müller. In terms of the emerging domain of the breath in literature she notes the valuable place of Rose's literature review in connecting literary studies with writing in the medical, cognitive humanities (Rose 2019, 1-16). She does not discuss Berndtson's dissertation arguing for the primary phenomenological ontology of breath (2018), which is now the inaugural volume in a new series by Routledge 'Critical Perspectives on Breath and Breathing' (Berndtson 2023), nor Škof and Berndtson's edited collection *Atmospheres of Breathing* (2018). Yet she does footnote shared interests as part of a loose affiliation of current researchers on 'breath in the humanities' (2021, 331). When a philosophical, phenomenologically oriented approach, touching on politics, draws on the poetic; and a literary humanities approach based on poetics touches on the philosophical - a necessity emerges that can legitimately, in Heine's words, avoid, 'a notion of organicism and a kind of re-spiritualization' (2021, 3), and yet take up the challenge Rose outlined, that this new work might be 'deliberately drawing attention to aspects beyond representation and mimesis' (Rose 2019, 10). Therefore, Heine's broad thematic is of the breath as syncopnea, 'a continuity of interruptions' (2021, 3) because 'whenever breathing enters a written literary work, it will be semanticized to occur as a word, image, metaphor, or metonymy.' (2021, 1). An assumption throughout this article has been that a secular form of Buddhist meditation, allows fully attentive meditative practices, like academic writing, to articulate experience beyond a representational paradigm, invoking non-self as the mediating space wherein embodied nondualistic experience is made possible. As such, poetic or literary non-fiction provides a faint bridge of air connecting academic and creative writing. Heine's chapter on Woolf and Musil via a concept of rhythm, draws on Nibbrig to introduce the role of rhythm in text, with which I would wholeheartedly agree, and that might constitute for us something like the literary as the intertwining of

'reading-writing-breathing' for academic text:

Christiaan Hart Nibbrig claims that the text makes rhythm perceivable (107). He emphasizes that rhythm is not something given that can then be represented. Rather, it is considered a movement of language that produces and defines its own temporal quality. The rhythmical movement of language keeps being in process, nascent, so to speak. For Hart Nibbrig, rhythm is a movement of self-disruption, which he calls the 'breathing of texts' (96). (Heine 2021, 120)

Heine, like Berndtson (2018, 2023) and in Škof and Berndtson (2018) locates the diagnosis of a 'forgetting of breathing' from Irigaray (2002, 77) related back, especially to *The Forgetting of Air* in Martin Heidegger (1999), and then adds Cixous, on 'respirational écriture féminine' (2021, 310), to establish the embodied in the text. There is a continuity of association, and a difference, between Irigaray's 'cultivation of breath before and beyond any representation and discourse (2002, 16) and Cixous' embracing of language through metaphors of 'flow', 'overflow', and 'song' to move beyond psychic confinement (2001, 378). We might note here that Irigaray in *Between East and West* ([1997] 2002) received a very cool reception for her work that focused on breath, and drew on her personal experiences of a Yoga practice to think philosophically across this cultural divide, well ahead of its time, making of breath studies a return to a much earlier interest in the elemental exemplified by Irigaray's re-thinking of key (western male) philosophers and their elementary biases, notably Marine Lover of Fredrich Nietzsche (1991) and *Elemental Passions* (1992). These are works that still inform posthuman feminist phenomenology in contemporary theory (Neimanis 2017) and influence the writerly focus of the present text. Irigaray and Cixous's work establishes a practice-research method of embodied cognition, also exemplified in the 'literary' text in this chapter, moving us towards an association of the literary as a question of the degree of embodiment, and depth of investment, in the sensory-affective paradigm, as writer or reader, through the slow consciousness within such heritage as yoga or meditation wisdom traditions. In such practices, the elemental body is not a personal matter. The 'impersonal breathing' in Beckett, as cited

by Heine (178), is put in dialogue with Blanchot's reading of Beckett, and his own critical writing, in which 'there is not the slightest breath' (179) leading Heine to an insight that, rather differently, 'In Beckett's work, breathing, speaking, and writing are closely related, if not at times parallelized to the degree that they appear to be interchangeable' (178-9). I argue, implicitly, otherwise, that in Beckett and Blanchot's work - as in any form of critical (academic) writing in which a living necessity collapses representational paradigms - it is 'reading writing breathing' that become more than interchangeable, they are interdependent and co-arising. Any arbitrary distinctions between creative and academic writing fail to protect text from partaking in a living sense we have, perhaps, of death in abeyance, of literary contingency. This requires further discussion, as to how Blanchot might conceive of nonself.

Again, relevant here, we might note that Hélène Cixous's interest in the a-theological is also one of non-western a-theologies, such as Buddhism, and her alignment with Derrida's - often assumed - negative theology and interest in apophatic thought (Coward and Foshay 1992). This threads its way through their mutual interests in aporia, in writing, for which the breath may be considered a signifier. For example, Cixous in her chapter in *Feminism, Sexuality and the Return of Religion* (2011), entitled 'Promised Belief', states that: 'I myself believe in Literature.' And, in the written-up roundtable discussion from a conference 'Postmodernism, Culture and Religion' held in 2007 at Syracuse University, from which that publication originated, that: 'I feel very close to the reflections of Buddhism, if it is a religion, but it is more like a philosophy, more dialectical, more open to contradictions' (Cixous 2007, 179 in Alcoff and Caputo 2011, 10 cited in Stephens 2023). Hence this is 'promised' belief, not one fully realized. Content with a way out of the largely twentieth century epistemological problem that true belief requires justification in order to be considered knowledge, she allows contradiction to be that condition. Another contemporary, Julia Kristeva, also writes about belief (2009) as the precondition for the Subject to speak, at all, and on which 'knowing' depends as 'the eternal turnstile of parlêtre [speakbeing]' (2009, 12). For her the secular socio-political realm is also inheritor of a Christian legacy: 'For

modern humanism and the methodologies it forges, this will involve accessing psychosomatic experience in what makes of it a singular life, an ongoing rebirth, an unpredictable creativity' (2009, 9). This allows the prolongation of questioning in access to the sacred. The problem where the 'nihilistic certitude of some encounters the fundamentalist exaltation of others' (7) is relieved only where both access questioning alongside belief, which she cites as 'Credo - from the Sanskrit kredhdh/sraddhā' as both giving one's vital force with a belief in its return, hence belief [croyance] and credit [créance]. But it is, akin to Cixous, in literature that she believes, specifically because ' literature and writing work out a risky kind of knowledge, singular and sharable, concerning the desire for sense rooted in the sexual body. In doing so, literature-writing- shake up the metaphysical duo reason versus faith' (2009, 41).

A fault line in the academic text, its demise, its inefficacy, but also its promise, to literature, translates to the contingent nature of the Subject in meditation, as a feature of annattā (Sanskrit, nonself), of the meditator who meditates without concern for oneself, or, one's future, next, breath. Heine, in translating Nibbrig on rhythm, says: 'texts breathe in the way they interrupt themselves and thus move on' (2005, 107; Heine 2021, 120). A meditator, unlike the academic text, is always unconcerned for the efficacy of the present, rather it is in the abandonment of the failure to be present, that the text, and the breath, presents itself, anew. So, the meditator also focuses absolutely and precisely on every breath, and then moves on, as a form of close reading, which is to say, with intimations of writing.

*Unborn to ourselves, lived yet not lived, breathing but not breathed, to have breath but not air, to have air and not breathe. A derelict breath, ruined, jagged and pinched, creased, gathered, or gripped is the one fought for whilst being deprived, by others of air, or by self-strangulation, the asthmatic's inability to breath out, that we do not fully inhale, nor fully trust to exhale, or, so it seems...when one is not loved, where one is loved, only that breath is open. We need to rethink rhythm, in a heartbeat, not as a quantity of time nor as a relation between times, but as texture within time, present (Stephens 2010).*

Atsuhide Ito (2021) thinks through such problems across multiple disciplines and practices and usefully summarises in ‘Aerocide: Asphyxial Politics’ the politics of the right to air, breathing, and ‘a breath’ citing the fatalities of diverse cases including George Floyd, Pham Thi Tra My, and Ella Kissi Debrah, who were each killed as a result of police brutality, human trafficking, and road traffic pollution, respectively. Notwithstanding the global attention given to a contestation and crisis, of breath, via the Covid-19 pandemic, we see breath and its quality as much as air and its quality as increasingly synonymous. Such heart-rending violence on an individual and a global scale opens us to the cultural contexts in which we breathe, or are denied breath, and he cites Sloterdijk (2009) as one of the key theorists who has brought this to our attention:

Sloterdijk describes it as ‘Atmoterrorismus’ (atmospheric terrorism) to articulate the attack on the atmosphere in which enemies inhabit, instead of attaching [sic] the particular individuals’ bodies. Atmospheric terrorism haunts the insulated modern cities and returns in the scene of the Sarin gas attack in Tokyo underground train carriages on 20th March 1995. Similarly the Covid-19 virus spreads in well-insulated interiors of buildings and mobile transport carriages such as buses and trains. The translator Eduardo Mendieta translates Sloterdijk’s usage of the word *Luftbeben* as airquake. In another occasion Sloterdijk translates *Luftbeben* from German to air tremble... The two translations suggest a movement that happens to the air. In short, the air is changeable, conditional and conditioned; it is accessible, inaccessible or poisonous. Accessibility to air is political and hierarchical, and this is asphyxial politics. (Ito 2021, 2–3)

This *luftbeben*, or air tremble, is to have air reverberate, like a church organ sounds a church, like a bell is both voice and body, and becomes thereby a worthwhile focus of study. Reading and writing is fully acknowledged as a working practice against the grain of habit when the object under scrutiny is, like a breath, uncertain and contingent. This is another way of saying that the phenomenon of the ‘iterative’ embodied experience

– because what is breath if not emblematic of the iterative itself – is paradigmatic of a form of inter-connected knowing; ultimately this is the essential relation that connects ‘Reading writing breathing’ without punctuation. The educative is preemptively beneficial as it is of one’s right to be embodied. A breath is natural and an action but not a natural action. To breathe, inspire and expire, is a form of epistemology, to know, intimately.

*That, as Lyotard has written about writing and thought about thinking: ‘Thoughts are not the fruits of the earth. They are not registered by areas, except out of human commodity. Thoughts are clouds. The periphery of thoughts is as immeasurable as the fractal lines of Benoit Mandelbrot. Thoughts are pushed and pulled at variable speeds. They are deep, although core and skin are of the same grain. Thoughts never stop changing their location one with the other ...in analysing either their so-called structure or genealogy or even post-structure, it is actually too late or too soon. One cloud casts its shadow on another, the shape of clouds varies with the angle from which they are approached’ (1988, 5). These are ideas not of thinking-logic, but to go further, of embodied longing for failing realities, so as to conspire to capture some imaginary set-piece, empty-of-objects, for all-time, to make of thinking-writing breath; of clustering micro-droplets around some nuclei of floating vapour-dust until one drop, fully gorged, electromagnetically attracts, static skin to skin, might coalesce, and would fall from this breath to the ground, unthinking, unthinkable, until then, a non-representational image filled with reflected light, a hundred thousand moons in the sunrise of refracted light, at one and the same time, each, simply one of an incalculable number of micro-beings, photo-bodies, each a camera body-photo, flushing full colour spectra, in unison, of one and the same time, apparently scattered, water droplets, flash into sun’s light, trembling, on leaves, hanging from trees, on the morning grass, buddhadew, every eye-blind flotsam and jetsam, as if these miniature stars hung there suspended in sidereal time, where the lightest of the sky-breath born only out of a body of still air, necklaced on spider’s webs, littered across greenery, cctv lenses; amber, turquoise, ruby-red, each a condensation of breath in filigree first-light, each droplet alive, vibrant, – everything passes – running together indistinguishable moments, past and present, distorted, distended*



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*miniature perspectives in which the world is reflected, uncontainable microcosms distend like temple domes, serving multiple Gods, devoted to sacrifice, mourning, because air, like breath, always necessitated, always in one transitory temperature, stream or collision, of flow of chaos, defined by its conditions, by the lungs and leaves that warm it, breath constantly bursting out of itself, in countless thermal rivulets, sucked back into heaven's mouth; the outbreath began in this hovering air, swathed in dawn, condensed out of night's emptiness.<sup>15</sup>*

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The footnote is therefore a type of paratext according to Genette. As a meta-text it seems to exempt itself from the text; as publishing convention. A neo-discipline of citation practice would begin with the principle that were it not for meta-text we would realise that all text is already meta-text. Meta-text is employed to enact a documented meditation practice that, for the purpose of study, started on 27 January 2017 and ended on 2 October 2022 and resulted in a number of unforeseen writings, of which the body of this article (in italics) is one example. This also qualifies the article as COVID-19 pandemic or post-pandemic theory, and literature. Meditations on (one's) breath is a cultural aspect of this period, for myself as a writer, academic and long-term meditation practitioner. Hence, this is a form of performative autoethnography drawing on my positionality, a testimony of a pandemic experience for a person already studying their meditative breath in the context of a 'global respiratory crisis'. An opposite take is cited later, that of Voegelin's 'could not write' experience (2023, 1), which describes in a type of COVID-19 experience derived chapter 'Breath 4 Postnormal' (81) a section 'Exhalation: The practice of theory' (92), with a depth of theoretical engagement. Yet, if this, my, 'text in italics' is experiential cultural fiction, it also echoes the third person narrative of Ernaux (2022) whose impersonal autobiography is grounded in material facticity as 'autosociobiographie' (Baisnée 2018 81) and Ito's critique of a political embodied violence in 'Aerocide' (2021). Earlier versions of the 'text in italics', in full, and entitled 'A fictional breath whilst breathing', alongside the story of its circuitous route to publishing, will be made available on the author's Academia.edu page as an AOM (authors original manuscript). This speaks to the indeterminacy of creative nonfiction, and its ambiguous status in both creative and academic writing. Fictive-theory/fiction-practice nevertheless finds value in articulating a pandemic experience, is unique, and warrants further research.

<sup>2</sup> In the Korean Seon (Zen) tradition as taught by Martine Batchelor, from her teacher Master Kusan Sunim (1909-1983) abbot of Songgwang Sa, a method of koan meditation is practiced. A koan is a traditional story in which the last line, or hwadu, becomes a focus for meditation and means of inquiry. 'What is this', or 'What is it', derives from an encounter between Nanyue Huairang (677-744) and the Sixth Patriarch Huineng (638-713), a central figure in Chinese Ch'an, later Japanese Zen. Sunim says: 'In Zen meditation, the key factor is to maintain a constant sense of questioning' (Sunim 2009, 61). In this sense, as Martine often explains in meditation retreat instructions, the most important part of the hwadu, is actually the question mark itself. In one sense my 'meditative enquiry' into the breath is simply, distraction, in another, it is a means of gaining insight through inquiry. In the last instance, it is a meditative form of close reading, with a wide open awareness.

<sup>3</sup> The International Transdisciplinary Symposium, Airy Encounters, Respiratory Philosophy and Sound Arts, took place in Helsinki, 6–8 June 2022. Programme available at: [https://www.zrskp.si/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Zbornik-povzetkov\\_AIRY-ENCOUNTERS\\_spletna.pdf](https://www.zrskp.si/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Zbornik-povzetkov_AIRY-ENCOUNTERS_spletna.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> See resources on their Life of Breath website, hosted by Durham University at: <https://lifeofbreath.webspace.durham.ac.uk/>. Jane Macnaughton (2020) describes her research in the context of the Life of Breath project, an extraordinarily timely project given the urgent focus that the COVID-19 pandemic provoked. The Special Issue of *Body & Society* on 'Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Breath, Body and World' within which her article features, allowed a focus on topics as diverse as: air pollution science, feminist ecology, grief and song in theatre

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and smoking rituals (Oxley and Russell 2020). The Cognitive Humanities Bibliography, compiled by Emily Troscianko, valuably collects together recent research in this field, with an admittedly literary bias useful for readers of *New Writing*. Available at: <https://cognitiveclassics.blogs.sas.ac.uk/cognitive-humanities-bibliography/>. We might also note a brief editorial summary by McLaughlin of the integration of embodiment studies in a special edition of the *Connection Science Journal* (2017) for the analytic and synthetic sciences. Here she adds a case study illustration of the natural affinity between embodiment and Acting Studies, whilst directing this question to science and humanities researchers: 'How might we utilise or implement a unifying conception of embodiment across, within, and beyond our disciplinary practices?' (2017, 41), also advocating for 'transdisciplinarity' as one inevitable implication of embodiment theory (40).

<sup>5</sup> Nicola Spano lists citations on the breath found in *Studien zur Struktur des Bewusstseins* (Husserl 2020). (These are cited as Hua XLIII.3, 79; 96; 113; 305; 410; 412; 420; 422; 508–509.) Google Translate renders one of the more interesting quotations as: 'Here silent breathing is valued as a means of avoiding an evil; noisy breathing would result in harm; the transformation into quiet breathing is now counted positively in transference.'

<sup>6</sup> However, I was invited to attend a wonderful day-long teaching day on 'Wittgenstein, emptiness, the circle, drawing, Zen and ancient maps and positionality', organised by Jayoon Choi (Lecturer MA Illustration, Camberwell and MA Graphic Communication Design, CSM, University of the Arts London) and co-delivered by the Korean philosopher Dr Sool Park. Dr Park is a lecturer in philosophy and Korean literature at the Freie Universität Berlin and The Ruhr University Bochum, Germany. He specialises in the global history of philosophy, East Asian philosophy, and translation theory, investigating the intellectual interaction and intertwinement between different cultures and languages.

<sup>7</sup> These categories may even be ascribed to the historical Gautama, who spent most of his life teaching. The quality of this teaching in terms of style is most often described as practical, in that he avoided speculative or metaphysical questions. The suttas are also replete with agrarian metaphors, images and examples from everyday life, Vedic oral culture and some atomistic and elemental features, each of which might constitute other forms of clarity.

<sup>8</sup> An example of Bhikku Analayo's teachings on the brahmavihārās can be found here online: <https://www.buddhistinquiry.org/resources/offerings-analayo-old/compassion-audio/>. We note that these are from a tradition of oral transmission, and likely to be derived from ancient Indian practices adopted by Gotama from his own teachers and historical context.

<sup>9</sup> I elaborate on this complex issue in the *Handbook of Research on the Relationship between Autobiographical Memory and Photography* in a chapter called 'Photographic Non-Self' (Stephens 2023). There is a wider debate, to which I am making further contribution, as to the subterranean influence of Buddhist nonself on French culture, evident in both artistic and literary modernisms; celebrated, disavowed and readily appropriated in turn.

<sup>10</sup> Anecdotally, whilst dwelling on nonself, we notice formulations of nonself in many guises as a broad cultural interest, from Oliver Sacks' neurological case studies of identity lapses to Abi Morgan, the Welsh screenwriter who writes movingly on her husband's brain condition that rendered her completely 'unknown' to him, to Annie Ernaux's *The Years* (2008), that won her

the Nobel Prize (2022), which is likened to a ‘collective’ rather than individual ‘autobiography’, to the nonself that is Chatbot GPT-3 (Generative Pretrained Transformer), which has recently exceeded (some) expectations of AI writing production (December 2022).

<sup>11</sup> Annie E. Proulx, *Accordion Crimes* (1996). This is a novel whose central extended motif is the accordion itself which the narrative traces across its owner’s situations, times, and places. At one point, the accordion becomes a receptacle for a small fortune of folded notes of cash, secreted on the inside folds of the bellows, unbeknownst to its subsequent owners. This acts, simultaneously, as an extended literary and rhetorical device – at certain points shared only between author and reader (excluding the narrator and characters) for motivation of the plot. Without this knowledge belonging to the fictional subjects, this creates subtle literary affects, not least the bracketing of the fiction, as a storytelling secret, or contract, between the author and the reader, and a fictional knowledge in the reader’s mind that affects their interpretation of subsequent scenes.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Our life rests upon a single breath.’ This is a verbatim quotation often shared by my teacher Martine Batchelor from her Korean Zen teacher, Master Kusan, as one of the phrases used to encourage meditation practice, specifically that offers an evaluation of the importance of full attention to every breath for the meditator during practice, as well as the fragility and impermanence of life and hence urgency to practice.

<sup>13</sup> It is now more interesting that earlier versions of the italicised text had been rejected by both academic qualitative research and phenomenology journals and fiction publishers. Hence, this experiment in a dual-stylistic academic text is a creative variation of this piece.

<sup>14</sup> A contemporary example of these debates occurs in Justine Triet’s film *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023). As co-writer of the screenplay, and director, she continues her interest in the complexities of legal and ethical licence through a central character, a successful novelist of ‘autofiction’, accused of murdering her husband. The trial becomes emblematic of the co-existence of true and untrue, real-imagined, rational and irrational narratives, which only get ‘resolved’ in the case when the author’s blind son, both re-enacts a memory, which proves to be false, and re-tells a memory, which may be true.

<sup>15</sup> After writing and editing I have now read the most recent, if not only, other text on contextualising the breath within early Buddhist and Indian culture, that is Tamara Ditrich’s *Mindfulness of Breathing in Early Buddhism* (2018) which gives a detailed historical and textual account. In creative, as opposed to academic, writing, some influential texts, on the same topic as one’s own are best read after the event, in a process of non-cognitive clarification and confirmation. Ditrich’s is this text. She wonderfully summarises the role of breath as it appears as *prāna* in the earliest recorded Indian text, the *Rgveda* (RV), within pre-creation, and where ‘the dynamic structural model of the cosmos in its multiple interrelations to the human body indicate a perception of embodied individual that is not viewed as an independent entity but rather as a relational, interlinked, dynamic structure or process (AitA, 2.1–2.4).’ (Ditrich 2018, 100). Also, contextualises breath in later Upanishad text and commentaries, ‘including Buddhism, especially in its formula of dependent origination (Pali *paticca-samuppāda*), which reinterprets and redefines this model in the light of its doctrine of nonself and nonsatisfactoriness of existence.’ (100)