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## THE CIRCUMAMBIENT AIR: OR, SEVERAL ATTITUDES ABOUT BREATHING\*

*Davide Stimilli*

to breathe is a fulfilling of desire  
Wallace Stevens

The following pages draw a very rough sketch of the ways in which the perception of the medium of life, the air, has changed throughout the history of Western culture and has accordingly affected our conception of the environment as such. They are also meant to outline a Poetical History of the Air, as it were—a necessary part, to my mind, of the *General History of the Air* that Sir Robert Boyle, the founder of modern chemistry, left unaccomplished at the end of his life.

Boyle's own definition of the air, which I excerpt from this work, masterfully summons the commonly shared, though certainly not commonsensical, view of the volatile element up to his time:

By the Air I commonly understand that thin, fluid, diaphanous, compressible and dilatable Body in which we breath, and wherein we move, which envelops the Earth on all sides to a great height above the highest Mountains; but yet is so different from the *Æther* [or *Vacuum*] in the intermundane or interplanetary Spaces, that it refracts the Rays of the Moon and other remoter Luminaries.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The *General History of the Air*, Designed and Begun by the Honorable Robert Boyle Esq. London, Printed for Awynsham and John Churchill 1692. Fol. 1.

Boyle's definition has the merit to make clear that the *Æther*, or vacuum—which amounts to the same, for him, as the use of the parenthesis implies— is nothing else than disembodied air, marking the limits of the air in the ancients' cosmos, as confined to the sublunar world, to the atmosphere proper. Indeed, the Greek word *ἀήρ*, which has passed to English through the transliteration into Latin, always signifies in Homer, as in the Presocratics philosophers, mist.<sup>2</sup> At an early stage of its linguistic development, the Greek air is, by antonomasia, a misty air. We may see in this usage already the roots of that ambivalence in our attitude towards the air which Hamlet has most passionately expressed, as he voices so many of the anxieties which are still with us:

This most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire—why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.<sup>3</sup>

The air we breathe makes up the sphere of life in the ancients' view of the cosmos, what the Greeks called *ὁ περιέχων ἀήρ*—“the circumambient air” of my title, which I borrow from a seventeenth-century English poet, Sir John Suckling,<sup>4</sup> being a faithful translation of the Greek expression.<sup>5</sup> “The circumambient air” of the Greeks, I would like to suggest, is a synecdoche for “the circumambient world”<sup>6</sup> Wordsworth refers to in *The Prelude*. We can nowadays avoid such a periphrasis by using the term ‘environment,’ which was however not yet available to Wordsworth,<sup>7</sup> having been first introduced into the

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<sup>2</sup> Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque, ad vocem ἀήρ*: “le mot signifie toujours chez Homère le brouillard et notamment la vapeur qui s'élève du sol et reste en suspension dans la partie la plus basse de l'atmosphère.” Cf. also H.A. Paraskevaides, *The Use of Synonyms in Homeric Formulaic Diction* (Amsterdam: Hakkert 1984) 102-103.

<sup>3</sup> In his first encounter with Rosenkranz and Guildenstern, *Hamlet* II. ii.

<sup>4</sup> “The circumambient air doth make us all,/To be but one bare individual.” Sir John Suckling, cited in Thomas Blount, *Glossographia: or a Dictionary. Interpreting all such Hard Words Whether Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, French, Teutonic, Belgick, British or Saxon, as are now used in our refined English Tongue* (London 1656), ad vocem ‘circumambient.’ I have not been able to locate the lines in any of Suckling's published works.

<sup>5</sup> Leo Spitzer does not mention the English translation in his otherwise exhaustive essay “Milieu and Ambiance,” *Essays in Historical Semantics* (New York: Vanni 1948) 179-303. On the arisal of the modern view of the environment out of the ancient, see also André Chastel, “L'Aria: Théorie du Milieu à la Renaissance” (1973), in *Fables Formes. Figures*, 2 vols. (Paris: Flammarion 1978) 1: 393-405.

<sup>6</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1850) VIII.56.

<sup>7</sup> At least in 1805.

English language by Carlyle in 1827.<sup>8</sup> The closest approximation to 'environment' we have in ancient writing is the juxtaposition of *Airs, Waters, Places* in the title of a treatise which belongs to the Hippocratic corpus and is indeed devoted to what we would now qualify as environmental concerns.

In his 1869 *The Queen of the Air*, the work of his Carlyle most admired, John Ruskin takes Athena to be the representative of "the ambient air"<sup>9</sup> in Greek mythology and thus describes "the several agencies of this great goddess:"

- I. She is the air giving life and health to all animals;
- II. She is the air giving vegetative power to the earth;
- III. She is the air giving motion to the sea, and rendering navigation possible;
- IV. She is the air nourishing artificial light, torch or lamplight; as opposed to that of the sun on one hand, and of *consuming* fire on the other;
- V. She is the air conveying vibration of sound.<sup>10</sup>

Independently from the accuracy of Ruskin's account from the point of view of "scientific mythology,"<sup>11</sup> his distinction between a 'life-enhancing' (under which category I propose to collect Nos. 1, 2, 4) and a 'communication-enhancing' (Nos. 3 and 5) agency of the air is very insightful and may help us to better analyze the ancients' view. Let us start by examining the former, or 'life-enhancing' agency.

The standard poetic epithet for the air is "vital," up to Thomas Traherne's epigrammatic formulation of the economics of breath in his poem "The Circulation:" *No Man breaths out more vital Air, / Than he before suckt in,*<sup>12</sup> and to Gerard Manley Hopkins' comparison of

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<sup>8</sup> Spitzer, "Milieu and Ambiance," 232-233.

<sup>9</sup> "which included all cloud, and rain, and dew, and darkness, and peace, and wrath of heaven." *The Queen of the Air: Being a Study of the Greek Myths of Cloud and Storm* (1869) in Ruskin's *Works*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: Allen 1905) 19: 327.

<sup>10</sup> Ruskin, *Works*, 19: 328.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the impassioned defence of the legitimacy of his argument in a letter written May 18, 1871: The "Queen of the Air" was written to show, not what could be fancied, but was felt and meant, in the myth of Athena. Every British sailor knows that Neptune is the god of the sea. He does not know that Athena is the goddess of the air; I doubt if many of our school-boys know it - I doubt even if many of our school-masters know it, and I believe the evidence of it given in "The Queen of the Air" to be the first clear and connected appassionate proof of it which has yet been rendered by scientific mythology, properly so called." *Arrows of the Chace*, in *Works*, 34: 504.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Traherne, *Centuries Poems, and Thanksgivings*, ed. H.M. Margoliouth, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon 1958) 2: 152.

the “nursing element” to the “Blessed Virgin.”<sup>13</sup> In broader scientific terms, taking as a point of departure the Aristotelian *corpus*, and in particular a passage from the *De Generatione animalium* (767a31-34), one can see that Aristotle assumes the existence of a correspondence between “the bodily condition of a person” (ἡ διάτεσις τοῦ σώματος) and “the blend (κράσις) of the surrounding air,” the latter providing the first nourishment of a body.<sup>14</sup> Pursuing this line of thought even more radically, the medical writer known as Anonymus Londinensis imaginatively likens men to plants, “for as they are rooted in the earth, so we too are rooted in the air by our nostrils and by our whole body.”<sup>15</sup> The Hippocratic treatises *Airs, Waters, Places* and *Breaths* most forcefully draw the attention of the medical practitioner on the quality of the air, which is bent to affect the bodily constitution of human beings as they are constantly exposed to its influence. Yet the air has an even closer relationship to the soul than to the body, as the soul embodies the principle of animal movement within the body. A laconic Latin epigraph beautifully states the relationship of the soul to its element: “The earth has the body, the stone the name, and the air the soul” (*Terra tenet corpus, nomen lapis atque animam aer; Carm. epig. 1207, 1.*) According to the doxographical tradition, the Presocratic philosopher Anaximenes considered air the origin of the universe, which it had produced by way of rarefaction and condensation; but the first philosopher who explicitly identified the soul with the air was Dionysius of Apollonia; he was followed by the Stoics, who then made current the distinction between *aer* and *pneuma*, namely, external and internal air.<sup>16</sup>

As we now look at its ‘communication-enhancing agency,’ the air was undoubtedly the universal medium of communication in the

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Hopkins’ “The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe,” 1. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, trans. A.L. Peck (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP 1963) 398-401.

<sup>15</sup> W.H.S. Jones, *The Medical Writings of Anonymus Londinensis* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1947) 37. An Aristotelian origin of the comparison has been suggested: cf. Jeanne Ducatillon, “Le traité des vents et la question hippocratique,” *Formes de pensée dans la collection hippocratique: Actes du IV colloque international hippocratique (Lausanne. 21-26 septembre 1981)* (Genève: Droz 1983) 266-267; but a Stoic origin seems indeed more likely (as suggested by Walter Spoerri in the ensuing discussion [276].)

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Erwin Rohde, *Psyche: Seelencult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen* (Freiburg i.B.: Mohr 1894) 548-550; Hans Diller, “Die philosophiegeschichtliche Stellung des Diogenes von Apollonia”, *Hermes* 76 (1941): 359-381; Volker Langholf, *Medical Theories in Hippocrates: Early Texts and the ‘Epidemics’* (Berlin: De Gruyter 1990) 244-245.

pre-Torricellian and pre-Boylean world, namely, before the discovery of the atmospheric void would introduce a solution of continuity in the *plenum* of nature.<sup>17</sup> As long as the belief that “there is nothing that is empty of air,” which the author of the treatise on *Breaths* firmly states,<sup>18</sup> remained unchallenged, the function of the air as the medium of communication was established beyond doubt. Yet the final refutation of the *horror vacui*, more than anything else, damaged the reputation of the magician and the astrologer, as the action at a distance, yet through a medium, was the assumption on which both the power of the magician to influence the course of nature and the power of the stars to influence the sublunar world were dependent. Tommaso Campanella, still writing before the caesura, can argue in his treatise *On the Sense of Things and on Magic* that “the air is like a common soul which helps all and through which all communicate” (*l'aria sta come anima commune che a tutti aiuta e per cui tutti comunicano*).<sup>19</sup> John Evelyn, while denouncing the pollution of the air of London in his essay *Fumifugium: or, the Inconvenience of the Aer, and Smoake of London Dissipated*, a text first published in 1661—which shows how the interest for questions we might now define of public health had become already acute by the second half of the seventeenth century in England—, concedes that one of his reasons for concern was precisely the unpredictability of “the celestial influences” under the new atmospheric conditions, as they are bent to be

so much retarded or assisted, and improved through this omnipresent, and, as it were, universal Medium: For, though the Aer in its simple substance cannot be vitiated; yet, in its prime qualities, it suffers these infinite mutations, both from superior and inferior causes, so as its accidental effects become almost innumerable.<sup>20</sup>

Yet neither discontinuity nor mutation could intervene to affect

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<sup>17</sup> Evangelista Torricelli is the student of Galilei who invented the barometer and discovered the so-called “Torricellian vacuum.” The discovery of the atmospheric void and pressure are thus far from contradicting each other, as Eugenio Montale suggests in his poem “Il vuoto,” an elegy mourning the loss of the void: “È sparito anche il vuoto/dove un tempo si poteva rifugiarsi./Ora sappiamo che anche l'aria/è una materia che grava su di noi./Una materia immateriale, il peggio/che potera toccarci.” *Tutte le poesie* (Milano: Mondadori 1977) 607.

<sup>18</sup> Hippocrates, *Breaths*, trans. W.H.S. Jones, in his edition of Hippocrates' works in the Loeb Classical Library, 7 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1923) 2: 231.

<sup>19</sup> Tommaso Campanella, *Del senso delle cose e della magia* (1st Latin ed.: 1620; Bari: Laterza 1925) 182.

<sup>20</sup> John Evelyn, *Fumifugium: or, the Inconvenience of the Aer, and Smoake of London Dissipated*, London 1772, 1st ed. 1661 (rpt.: Oxford: Oxford UP 1930) 14.

the agency of the air as “conveying vibration of sound,” as the medium of the human voice—we come thus to the last item in Ruskin’s list. Whenever one speaks, a vibration of the air reaches the listener’s ear, which, Albertus Magnus writes, “hears nothing but that which communicates with the trembling air” (*auris non audit nisi quae communicant cum aere tremente*).<sup>21</sup> Chaucer wonderfully adapts the physical theory of the diffusion of sound to his poetical vision of the spreading of Fame:

Soun is noght but air y-broken,  
And every speche that is spoken,  
Loud or privee, foul or fair,  
In his substance is but air.<sup>22</sup>

Yet, while seemingly neutral, the air, by being “the mansiou/Of every speche, of every soun,/Be it either foul or fair,”<sup>23</sup> is necessarily liable to produce opposite effects, as Fame can always turn into ignominious Infamy. Hence the three witches of *Macbeth* are properly redressing Chaucer’s alternative when they echo it in their enigmatic tautology: *Fair is foul, and foul is fair*. Once again, a Shakespearean character denounces the ambivalence of the air, which the ambiguity of the human word merely mirrors. Anthony Hecht, the contemporary American poet to whom I owe my subtitle,<sup>24</sup> also warns us against the double agency of language and its vehicle when he writes: “This atmosphere, which is our medicine,/By its own delicacy kills,”<sup>25</sup> lines in which we cannot fail to hear another echo of Macbeth’s tragedy. The castle of Macbeth has an air, according to King Duncan, which “nimble and sweetly recommends itself unto our gentle senses,” and Banquo confirms the remark by observing that “where the temple-haunting martlets most breed and haunt [...] the air is delicate.”<sup>26</sup> We know that this delicate air will turn soon into a deadly one. The action of language is thus assimilable to the action of the air by virtue of the ambivalence of their effects: like Achilles’ spear, they are the carriers of both wounding and healing. We are forever condemned to draw

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<sup>21</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Metaphys.* XI.2.3 (cit. in Guido Cavalcanti, *Rime*, ed. Domenico De Robertis [Torino: Einaudi 1986] 17.)

<sup>22</sup> *The Hous of Fame* II. 257-260, in *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Walter W. Skeat (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1926) 3: 23.

<sup>23</sup> *The Hous of Fame* II. 323-325, *Complete Works*, 3: 25.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. “Songs for the Air or Several Attitudes About Breathing,” in his *A Summoning of Stones* (New York: MacMillan 1954) 27.

<sup>25</sup> “Fugue for One Voice,” *A Summoning of Stones*, 8.

<sup>26</sup> *Macheth* I.vi.

our breath “in pain,” as Hamlet cannot but remind Horatio with his “dying voice.”<sup>27</sup>

Nonetheless, we have to catch our breath in order to tell the story. We will never know which was the “complete knowledge” the dying Kurtz was trying to convey with his final words, as “he cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision,” “a cry that was no more than a breath.”<sup>28</sup> Yet, like the narrator of Conrad’s story, we still have the power of changing a breath to a name.

Davide Stimilli  
Department of French and Italian  
Northwestern University

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<sup>27</sup> *Hamlet* V.ii.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, in *Complete Works*, 24 vols. (New York: Doubleday 1926) 16: 149.