

The Breath of the World

It is at the heart of all our experiences. It is not a substance: it does not enclose in itself the nature of things. Nor is it a late echo, added once the experience is accomplished. It is a rhythmic movement, regular and tireless, a wave without noise that goes to the limits of the horizon and comes back to us, to brush against our bodies and to explode into our lungs.

Without it, nothing would be possible in our life. Everything that happens to us has to mix with it, to take place within its space. Breath is the first activity of all living beings, the only one that can claim to meld itself with being. It is the only work that does not tire us, the only movement that has no end other than itself. Our life begins with a (first) breath and will end with a (last) breath. To live is to breathe and embrace in one's breath all the matter of the world.

It is not only the most elementary movement of any human body, it is also the first and the simplest of the acts of living beings—its paradigm, its transcendental form. Breath is, quite simply, the first name of being in

the world. Intellection is breath: the idea, the concept, and what we, ever since scholasticism, call an intentional species are all portions of the world in the spirit, before the word, design, or action may restore to the cosmos these intensities. Sight is breath: it is to welcome light, the colors of the world, it is to have the force of letting oneself be pierced by its beauty, of choosing a portion and a portion only, of creating a form, of initiating a life starting from what we have extracted from the continuum of the world.

Everything in the realm of the living is the articulation of breath: from perception to digestion, from thought to pleasure, from speech to locomotion. Everything is a repetition, intensification, and variation of what takes place in breath. This is why the most different kinds of knowledge—from medicine to theology, from cosmology to philosophy—have used it as the noun that characterizes life in its most different forms, in the most diverse languages (*spiritus*, *pneuma*, *Geist*). To recognize its status, people have made of it a substance separate from others through form, matter, and being—mind [*esprit*]. But the first, most paradoxical attribute of breath is its very lack of substance, its insubstantiality: it is not an object detached from others, but the vibration through which everything opens up to life and mixes with the rest of the objects, the oscillation that, for an instant, animates the matter of the world.

It is a vibration that touches, simultaneously, the living being and the world that surrounds it. In breath, for the duration of an instant, the animal and the cosmos are reunited; and they seal a different unity from the one marked by being or form. It is, however, with and in the same motion that living being and world consecrate

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their separation. What we call life is only this gesture, through which a portion of matter distinguishes itself from the world with the same force that it uses to merge with it. To blow is to make the world, to fuse with it and to redesign our form, in a perpetual exercise. To breathe is to know the world, to penetrate and be penetrated by it and its mind [*esprit*]¹—to traverse it and to become for an instant, with this same impetus, the place in which the world becomes an individual experience. This operation is never final: the world, like the living being, is only the return of breath and of its possibility. Mind [*Esprit*].

Breath does not limit itself to the activity of the living: it defines the consistency of the world, too, and especially that. The space it traces coincides with the world milestones that one experiences. We reach out as far as our breath does. On the other hand, a world without breath would be nothing but a confused mass of objects in the process of decomposition. If it is thanks to breath that we are in the world, it is in and through breath that we have understood and fashioned the world. It is of breath that we have to enquire about the nature of the world: it is in breath that the world reveals itself, it is in breath that the world exists for us.

The innumerable beings that populate the cosmos, the most different and incomparable things, the most faraway moments and spaces, the most incompatible realities draw their unity from the infinite forms of breath. They melt into a world. As a superior unity of everything that is different—a supreme and unsurpassable unity of what is and what is not—it does not exist other than in and through breath.

The metaphysical space of breath is, above all, contradiction: breathing precedes every distinction between

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soul [*âme*] and body, between mind [*esprit*] and object, between ideality and reality. It is not enough to proclaim the facticity of sense and its primacy over existence. Sense and existence always live as breath and in breath: they are its specific vibrations. The world is breath and all that exists in it exists in this form. The existence of the world is not a fact of the logical order: it is a pneumatological matter. Only breath can touch and feel the world, giving it existence. One can only breathe the world.

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The ancients are not the only ones to have made breath into [sc. a principle of] the transcendental unity of the world and into the proof that, in this capacity, it is a living reality. In an unpublished fragment, Newton wrote: "Thus this Earth resembles a great animal or rather an inanimate vegetable, draws in aethereall breath for its daily refreshment & vitall ferment & transpires again with gross exhalation."¹

But one has to wait for the more recent debate around the Gaia hypothesis to recognize that atmosphere constitutes the living unity of the world, the proof that the planet is determined by life. One of its first formulations, in an article that Lovelock and Margulis published in 1974 in the journal *Icarus*, asserts that the existence itself of atmosphere is proof of a "homeostasis on a planetary scale"² and of the fact that "life has modulated the flow of energy and mass at the planetary surface."³ Atmosphere is the vital breath that animates the Earth in its totality.

The idea is quite old. Lamarck was, without a doubt, the first to define atmospheric and climatic space as

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the site of a dynamic interconnection between matter and life, between world and subjectivity. The treatise he dedicated to the science of this liminal space—a science he called *hydrogeology*—opens with this question: “What are the general effects of living organisms on the mineral substances which form the earth’s crust and external surface?”⁴ The possibility of conceiving, of the most superficial layer of matter in the terrestrial crust and of the ensemble of gaseous and liquid materials that hang over the planet as an immense fluid for the circulation of being arises from the discovery that “the various *compound mineral substances* occurring in the earth’s external crust in isolated accumulations, veins, and parallel beds, and so on, as plains, hills, valleys, and mountains are exclusively the product of the animals and plants that lived in these areas.”⁵ According to Lamarck, this unity is engendered by the state of aggregation; and the forms of any matter at surface level have the organic faculties of living beings as direct and indirect causes of the existence of that matter. As he had already written in his *Mémoires*,

all the compounds one observes on the globe are due, be it directly or indirectly, to the organic faculties of living beings endowed with life. In effect, these beings form all materials, having the faculty of composing their own substance, and, to compose it, a part between them (plants) having the faculty of forming first combinations that they assimilate to their substance.⁶

This is not simply a matter of influence on the chemical composition. The presence of living beings does not limit itself to determining the aggregation of matter; it also defines its status. The world exists only in those

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places where there are living beings—while the presence of life, for its part, transforms the very nature of space.

What we see here is a movement that operates contrary to the one described by Lamarck in his *Philosophie zoologique*: it is no longer the living being’s responsibility to adapt to environmental circumstances—the *circumfusa* of neo-Hippocratic medicine;⁷ rather the environment in its entirety has to become echo, halo, aureole for the mass of living beings—in other words, their atmosphere.

The opposite is also true. If we are atmospherically connected to what surrounds us, this is also because the atmosphere is what constantly engenders the living. This is the conclusion reached by one of the first analyses of the chemical relations between living beings and the environment: the *Essai de statique chimique* by Dumas and Boussingault, published in 1844. The authors start from the assertion that plants function “in every particular, inversely or in opposition to animals”: “If the animal kingdom constitutes an immense apparatus of combustion, the vegetable kingdom, in its turn, constitutes an immense apparatus of reduction.” Their perfect integration is not just the simple supernumerary effect of a preestablished harmony, nor is it just the result of divine government expressing itself in the natural economy, but the consequence of the fact that the life of plants and animals depends entirely on the atmosphere:

What the one gives to the atmosphere, that the other takes from it; so that, surveying these facts from the loftiest point of view, and in connection with the physics of the globe, it would be imperative on us to say that, in so far as their truly organic elements are concerned, plants and animals

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are the offspring of the air, that they are but condensed or consolidated air [...]. Vegetables and animals, therefore, come from the atmosphere, and return to it again; they are true dependents of the air. Vegetables, then, assume from the atmosphere the elements which animals exhale into it.⁸

We do not inhabit the Earth, we inhabit the air through the atmosphere. We are immersed in it exactly as the fish is immersed in the sea. And what we call breathing is nothing but the agriculture of atmosphere.

To try and join the two movements—the one that goes from living beings to the environment and the one that goes from the environment to living beings—means to think of the atmosphere as a system or a space for the circulation of life, matter, and energy. This is the radical approach of the Russian naturalist Vladimir Vernadsky. He recognized that “atmosphere is not an independent region of life”⁹ but is also an expression of life. In effect, green plants have created a new, transparent medium for life—atmosphere:¹⁰ “Life creates both the free oxygen in the Earth’s crust, and also the ozone that protects the biosphere from the harmful short-wavelength radiation of celestial bodies.”¹¹ At the other end, life constitutes itself starting from atmosphere: “Living matter builds bodies of organisms out of atmospheric gases such as oxygen, carbon dioxide, and water, together with compounds of nitrogen and sulfur, converting these gases into liquid and solid combustibles that collect the cosmic energy of the sun.”¹² Vernadsky calls the biosphere “the exterior crust of the Earth,” considering it not only as a material region but especially as “a place of transformation of the planet by external cosmic forces. These forces mold and transform

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the faces of the earth and, as a result, the history of the biosphere is sharply distinguished from that of the rest of the planet.”¹³

The principal source of this region is what Vernadsky calls living matter: the collection of organisms and living bodies that are responsible for the creation of new compounds¹⁴ and that “exert a powerful permanent and continuous disturbing effect on the chemical stability of the surface of our planet.” It is living matter that

creates the colors and forms of nature, the associations of animals and plants, and the creative labor of civilized humanity, and also becomes a part of the diverse chemical processes of the Earth’s crust. There is no substantial chemical equilibrium on the crust in which the influence of life is not evident and in which chemistry does not display life’s work. *Life is therefore not an external or accidental phenomenon of the Earth’s crust.* It is closely bound to the structure of the crust, forms part of its mechanism, and fulfills functions of prime importance to the existence of this mechanism. Without life, the crustal mechanism of the Earth would not exist.¹⁵

In this living mass, plants play a major role: “All living matter can be regarded as a single entity in the mechanism of the biosphere, but only one part of life, *green vegetation*, the carrier of chlorophyll, makes direct use of solar radiation. [...] The whole living world is connected to this green part of life by a direct and unbreakable link.”

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The atmosphere is not something that is added to the world: it is the world as reality of mixture within which

everything breathes. If the natural sciences have trouble conceiving of immersion and mixture as the authentic nature of the cosmos, the human sciences stubbornly keep trying to understand this nature, for instance the climate, on the one hand as a *purely natural fact*, and *thus excluded from their domain*, and on the other hand as a purely human reality or as an exclusively aesthetic fact, which thus no longer relates to anything that comes from the nonhuman world. Thus, starting from the famous Hippocratic treatise *De aere, aquis et locis*,¹⁶ a vast tradition began to develop that runs from Aristotle to Montesquieu¹⁷ and from Verruvius to Herder¹⁸ and was to nourish the political geography of Ratzel as much as the metaphysical geography of Watsuji Tetsurô.¹⁹ Throughout the extraordinary diversity of approaches, doctrines, and historical contexts, this tradition concentrates on two ideas. First of all, it is important to recognize, as Abbé Jean-Baptiste Dubos would write, that “the human machine is not much less dependent on the qualities of the air, on the changes to which these qualities are liable, and, in short, on all the variations which may obstruct or favor what we call the operations of nature, than the very fruits themselves.”²⁰ Climate is here synonymous with the nonhuman. The human sphere—culture, history, the life of the mind—is not autonomous, it has a foundation in what is not human; the apparently nonspiritual elements—air, water, light, winds—do not engender mind but can influence the human being, his or her behaviors, attitudes, and ideas. Climates engender and set up the majority of humans in their physical aspect and, even more, in their social mores. As Edme Guyot wrote, “the nature of the earth, the quality of its fruits,

and the difference between climates have contributed to the variety of colors and to the diversity of figures and temperaments among all humans.”²¹ The nonhuman is the cause of the multiplicity of life forms—not only in space but also in time and history.

In radicalizing the Herderian approach, which makes of history, as Kant would say, a kind of “climatology of intellectual and sensory powers of man,”²² Simmel’s sociology made of the concept of atmosphere an absolute medium of social perception: “the atmosphere of someone is the most intimate perception of him.”²³ The idea of atmosphere as the originary dynamism of all sociability would have great success. For example, Peter Sloterdijk conceived of atmosphere at once as an original product of human coexistence and as the paradigm of all cultural life qua cultural life. “The symbolic air-conditioning of the shared space is the primal product of every society. Indeed humans create their own climate; not according to free choice, however, but under pre-existing, given and handed-down conditions.”²⁴ This shared environment is what Sloterdijk calls “sphere,” the geometrical figure of absolute interiority.

Spheres are by definition also morpho-immunological constructs. Only in immune structures that form interiors can humans continue their generational processes and advance their individuations. Humans have never lived in a direct relationship with “nature,” and their cultures have certainly never set foot in the realm of what we call the bare facts; their existence has always been exclusively in the breathed, divided, torn-open and restored space.²⁵

Humans thus “flourish only in the greenhouse of their autogenous atmosphere.” To live in society means to

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participate in the construction of these atmospheres; at the other end, the atmosphere is always a cultural fact. What is more, it embodies the impossibility of a state of nature: for Sloterdijk, climatization means the impossibility of getting access to the natural world. But plants demonstrate, on the contrary, that climatization—air-designing—is the living being's simplest act of existence, its most elementary nature.

Cultural reductionism is proper to a long tradition that makes of atmosphere "the fundamental concept of a new aesthetics." The atmosphere would be "the shared reality of the perceiver and the perceived. It is the reality of the perceived as the sphere of its presence and the reality of the perceiver insofar as he or she, in sensing the atmosphere, is bodily present in a particular way."²⁶ This interpretation, which goes back to Léon Daudet, makes of atmosphere "knowledge of the skin, which is as tangential as knowledge of the mind [*esprit*]" is and uses epithelial cells in the same way in which knowledge of the mind uses the roots of words."²⁷ This faculty of synthetic knowledge

envelops space and time; it emanates at once from the universe and from us; and it is in us—consciousnesses, persons, populations—as an inclusion of the universal, as that something that connects after having specified, which is neither quantitative nor qualitative but participates in both at the same time and has, in life, a life of its own, dissimulated yet capable of being exposed, analogous to that of radium or the waves at the cryptoid heart of inanimate nature.²⁸

This emanation, "at once moral and organic—under its moral aspect tied to the whole of being; under its organic

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aspect tied to epithelial and endothelial tissues"²⁹—is based on a cosmic accord. "The entire cutaneous surface makes us participants in a universal equilibrium, us, the adapted of outer and inner (*adaequatio rei et sensus* ['the conformity between thing and sense'])."³⁰

This psychological and gnoseological reduction of atmosphere seems to forget that atmosphere is fundamentally an *ontological* fact that concerns the status and mode of being of things, and not the manner in which they are perceived. If every act of knowledge is, by itself, a fact of atmosphere because it is an act of mixing between subject and object, the extension of the atmosphere's domain goes well beyond any act of knowledge.