

## PREFACE: BREATHE IN. BREATHE OUT.

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Like millions of others, I am under lockdown in response to the spread of the coronavirus. From my apartment in New York City I look down a deserted Broadway. The avenue is one straight line for ambulances speeding by, but there is little more. Yet the edges of this central artery within Manhattan look slightly out of focus, a trembling of contours I associate with the heat of fever. It is as though global warming's continued muffled cry has eventually downloaded into humans in the form of a virus affecting our breathing and our average temperature. If something will become apparent in the years to come, it is that air is not just an empty dimension within which humans exist but the substance through which existence itself is possible.

In such times it is not lost on me that the organizing concept of this book is *pneuma*, the Greek term for air, breath, or spirit. Written under the signature of gratitude to my 86-year-old mother, she will just miss its release. As I write these lines she is in hospital infected with COVID-19. COVID exposed a tumor. A doctor informs me over the phone that the situation is irreversible. For all the powers of digital media to offset our physical confinement, I am told that no communication technologies are available in her ward, the same one where she worked for nearly forty years. I wake up to the fact that she never owned a mobile phone, and I ask an old friend from my hometown to bring one to her. This technological interface seems to be the only way to share airspace with my mother, as though the digital has become the great air reservoir of the world. Despite agreeing to bring the device to her bed, the hospital staff tell me that she is disoriented and isn't making any sense. "And who isn't disoriented?" I ask in frustration. But I realize there is no point in arguing. I am smashed by the complexity of it all, my daughterly love finding solace only in the memory of a woman who loved silence and lived it soundly, especially in the later years of her life.

Breathe in. Breathe out. A fine balance keeps us alive. And yet for most of our lives we are hardly aware of its mechanism. Air partakes in eliding the conditions of the very reality it enables. Yet the air we breathe today is becom-

ing closer to our thinking, no longer the mere (read: vital) background substance through which thoughts are possible but instead the very element that aligns our lungs to our brains. One good example of this is how performative paradoxes dominate our thinking, as though one side of a pressure seeks to draw balance from a pressure on the other. I sustain my condemnation of corporate capitalism through books I buy online from Amazon. I teach my students not to doubt the benefits of methodological doubting. I tell my son to think with his own head. Because of the virus, I'm in confinement in the name of a common good that exposes my economic privilege. Conscious of it or not, we have grown sick of hearing about performative paradoxes. And yet our sickness itself is symptomatic of the fact that, ubiquitous and insistent, the performative paradox has gradually lodged itself in our chests. It hosts itself in the structure of our breathing. For what is breathing—the alternation between opposites—if not a performative paradox, civil war in our lungs.

The rule in religion, politics, media, or the market is no longer simply to discipline or regulate the rhythms that animate public institutions and populations but to infuse them with what William Butler Yeats once called the “antithetical multiform influx,” that is, an undecidable veering that draws us to its middle. The image is that of the swing of a pendulum whose oscillation from tick to tock does not tell time, less so where things are going, but constitutes itself as time by means of the very motion.

Bearing this in mind will help make sense of contemporary authoritarian populism in Brazil and other parts of the world. When Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump talk about the threat of coronavirus, their words are not pronouncements that take place in the present tense. Inasmuch as the present is disjointed, the virus is always already both a dire danger and an overblown nuisance. To say that Bolsonaro and Trump are deniers of the virus is to fail to see how entangled their denial is in the already tomorrow when they will be saying the extreme opposite. To accuse these rulers of being paragons of contradiction is to miss the point entirely. That would be to impart them with grounds they actively disavow. A contradiction would assume a subject without caesura, a form of singularity that aspires to be self-identical. But sovereigns like Trump and Bolsonaro are deeply fractured; indeed they wield their sovereignty by upholding the rift like a war trench from which to launch their semiotic terrorism, even to the point of auto-annihilation.

In an odd twist of brutalist aesthetics, the cracks in the system are exposed, and not in purview of transparency but so as to allow for the total and organic identification between a subject and his praxis. As long as we fail to

see the strategic coupling of opposites at the heart of contemporary governance, we won't be able to grasp how the Right operates its extremism. The epistemic leap I see necessarily involves something like a reconceiving of the political through the problem of substance. In this sense, the operations of breathing that COVID-19 is making apparent, like some powerful reagent, may also lend themselves to better grasping how power works today.

—New York City, April 17, 2020