Regular Article

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Unclearing the Air: The Pneumatological Dalliances of Jacques Derrida

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Abstract: In the 1980s, Luce Irigaray accused Western philosophy of "forgetting" about the role that the materiality of air and the act of breathing played in pre-Socratic metaphysics. This essay explores how Jacques Derrida maintained a complicated but insightful relationship to the air throughout his career through the mediating influence of *pneuma*, a word with long and complicated connections to the air. I highlight two relevant sites of engagement. The first was found in *Of Grammatology* (1968), where he connected the breathy logocentrism of "natural writing" to a concept of pneumatology (a "science of spirit" with some interesting connections to Leibniz) that served as grammatology's Janus face. The second stemmed from *Of Spirit* (1991), in which Derrida emphasized the combustible, fiery face of *pneuma* to lambast Heidegger's use of translation to mediate away the historical presence of the word *pneuma* for ideological purposes. This body of work, *en toto*, presents a subtle and oblique critique of Irigaray's position. For Derrida, the air cannot function as the medium for an alternative metaphysics of presence because, historically, its space has already been infused with a pneumatic specter that cannot be ignored.

Keywords: pneuma, breath, metaphysics, Jacques Derrida, Gottfried Leibniz, Martin Heidegger

René Descartes was living in northern Holland during the spring of 1638 when he wrote a letter responding to a series of objections he had received regarding his *Discourse on Method*, which had been first published the previous year. Among the most potent criticisms levied in the original correspondence (thought to be penned by a Piedmontese soldier and polymath named Alphonse Pollot) was toward Descartes's now famous reduction to *je pans, donc je suis* ("I think, therefore I am") as his first metaphysical principle. Wouldn't the act of, say, *respiration*, Pollot wondered, manifest as a necessary prior intervention to any invocation of thought, since without breath the body housing the mind would cease to exist? Descartes's response to this query was addressed not to Pollot directly, but their mutual friend Henricus Reneri. In it, Descartes undertook a resolute defense of his argument toward the preeminence of thought that would become a cornerstone of his later expansion in the *Mediations*.

> When someone says "I breathe therefore I am" (*je respire*, *donc je suis*) and purports to demonstrate his existence from the fact that breathing could not exist without it, he demonstrates nothing at all, for he would first have had to prove that it is true that he breathes, and this is impossible without also having proved that he exists. But if he intends to demonstrate his existence from the feeling or opinion he has of breathing … his conclusion is sound. For then the thought of breathing occurs in the mind before the thought of his existing, and he cannot doubt that he has it while he has it. To say in this sense, "I breathe therefore I am' is nothing else than 'I think therefore I am."[1]

1 Quoted in Williams, "The Certainty of the *Cogito*," 99.

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Anyone familiar with the Cartesian methodological division of mind and body should be unsurprised by the tenor of this passage. Breathing was precisely the kind of mechanistic "animal response" Descartes lumped in with activities such as swallowing and yawning.[2] To even consider the possibility that breath could be a first principle would have been problematic to his entire schema. Instead, Descartes turned the proposition on its head, holding that conceptualizing the idea that breathing was the existential root of the self first required thought about the act of breathing itself. Any divide between thinking and breathing – *cogito* and *respiro* – merge into, as argued by Bernard Williams, something along the lines of *I think about breathing, therefore I am*.[3]

Almost three hundred and thirty years later, this brief Cartesian treatment of breathing inspired another French-speaking intellectual to think about the nature of breath, albeit in a very different fashion. Jacques Derrida referenced and quoted from Descartes's letter in his essay "Violence and Metaphysics," published in his 1967 collection *Writing and Difference* (*L'écriture et la différence*). Within his broader analysis of the ontological and linguistic implications to the question of Being brought forth by Husserl and Heidegger, Derrida utilized the breathless exegesis of Descartes to frame the problem of representing Being as a concept through the mechanism of metaphor. The aim of this critique was Ernest Renan and Friedrich Nietzsche, who had argued in separate works that the meaning of Being rested within its etymological relationship to the word *respiration*. Heidegger, Derrida noted, would have resisted such a conclusion on the basis that the use of a word to establish the meaning of Being misses the very essence that the word Being entails. Derrida extended this criticism to the way in which language shapes the empiricist impulse to tracing the history of things. That respiration as a word signifies respiration as an act does not necessarily mean that the word itself captures what that act *is*. It is this turn upon empiricism that brings him to Descartes's tableaux between breath and thought. Derrida argues that because the Cartesian dictum of "I breathe" always first entails the thought about that act of breath,

> that the *meaning* of respiration is always but a dependent and particular determination of my thought and my existence, and a fortiori of thought and of Being in general. Supposing that the word 'Being' is derived from a word meaning 'respiration' (or any other determined thing), no etymology or philology – as such, and as determined sciences – will be able to account for the thought for which 'respiration' (or any other determined thing) becomes a determination of Being among other things. Here, for example, no philology will be able to account for the gesture of Descartes's thought. One must travel other roads – or another reading of Nietzsche – in order to trace the genealogy of the unheard-of meaning of Being.[4]

While Derrida does not expound upon what these "other roads" may entail, the etymological critique he engages through Descartes does draw attention to the differing paths that branch out from any consideration of the ontology of breath. For Derrida was never one to let a semantic difference of linguistic differánce slide unnoticed, least of all here. This is because any concept of breath cannot just encompass the physiological act of breathing implied by words like *souffle* (drawn from the French and Latin verbs that mean "to blow"). It must also account for the abstracted breath of divination attached to the Latin word *spiritus*, or the Hebrew word *ruah*, or the Greek word *pneuma*. To find language that intersects with such a divergent string of concepts appears a Sisyphean exercise, which seems precisely the point Derrida is trying to make with his discussion of Being. Or, as philosopher Lenart Škof pointedly concludes in an insightful analysis about Derrida's relationship to breath, "*I breathe, therefore I am:* this statement was for Derrida an insufficient condition for our epistemological and ethical experience."[5]

Is there more to this notion of breath that escapes notice, though? Even though he never devoted an entire study to the concept, an interest in its ambivalence of historical meaning dotted Derrida's various writings for decades. Early essays about the role of breath in Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty in "La parole souffle" (also in *Writing and Difference*) tackled the pernicious presence of respiration with the same

2 Hatfield, "*L'homme* in Psychology and Neuroscience," 275.
3 Williams, *Descartes*, 77–8.
4 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 139.
5 Škof, *Breath of Proximity*, 145.

Derridean rigor as the 1997 lectures that became the basis for the posthumously published *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2006), a work that brought the confluence of Descartes and breath full circle. Philosopher Michael Naas has even theorized that Derrida may have sought broader transcendental meanings through thinking about his own breathing toward the end of life.[6] All the while inhaling the ontology of breath, he managed to secure himself a place outside of French philosopher Luce Irigaray's broader accusation that Western male philosophers were guilty of a "forgetting of the air" that formed the basis for their entire metaphysical apparatus. Her intended target of critique was Heidegger, specifically for his lionization of the earth and his championing of pre-Socratic figures like Heraclitus and Parmenides to create a metaphysical lineage justifying such an emphasis. She goes on to wonder what a metaphysics of being based on the mechanism of breath – *I breathe, therefore I am* – might resemble. Yet there is a profound and underappreciated difference in the fact that Irigaray chastised them for forgetting *air* and not *breath*. Collapsing them together, after all, falls into a similar etymological trap that Derrida himself drew between *respiration* and *Being*. The issue of breath in philosophy has never been solely about the physicality of breathing, so much as *what* is being breathed. Breath, therefore, ties into the entire pre-Kantian emphasis on the substance of *logos*, that which cannot be ascertained but affects everything that the subject can ascertain or think about. Derrida's recognition of this history behind breath will become clearer in the following pages.

That said, where exactly is the air that supplements this notion of breath in Derrida? The fact that he most often parsed the epistemological spectrum of breath through the lens of the word *pneuma*, I contend, is a telling sign of where to look. Indeed, few words carry such a diverse, complicated, and contentious history in Western thought. As both substance and episteme, *pneuma* weaves through the interplay between metaphysics and material played in a diverse range of thoughts from Hippocratic and Aristotelian physiology, Stoic and Neoplatonic cosmology, medieval theology, early modern science, and modern philosophy of language (among others). It was the spectral building block that Giorgio Agamben once referred to as "perhaps the most imposing intellectual cathedral in medieval thought."[7] Most of all, *pneuma* was the stuff that filled the air prior to development of atmospheric measurement in the sciences, holding an ever tenuous place until the deathblow was struck in the laboratory of Albert Michelson and Edward Morley in 1887.[8] Air and *pneuma*, in short, were intertwined for centuries in ways that philosophy and the arts are still grappling with, even if the physical sciences have moved to other quarters.

These pernicious folds encapsulating air with *pneuma* weave throughout Derrida's approach to questions of ontology, and in addressing them they allowed him to advance some formidable critiques toward the imposition of ideology into the post-Enlightenment discourse on breath. One of the most potent consequences from the scientific evacuation of *pneuma* has been to open up the concept of air (and by proxy, breath) to the possibility of non-pneumatic ontological significance. When thought of as empty of substance, divine or otherwise, air can become a medium for a variety of new ways in thinking about the grounding of *logos*, as Irigaray does in her feminine remapping of the air. Or, this evacuation at least makes the pneuma-less air easier to bypass in favor of other elemental groundings for the *logos*, which was the path taken by Heidegger. Derrida was skeptical of both the veracity and motivation behind these types of ontological moves. The swirling of an airy epistemology broached through pneumatic discourse that I outline in the coming pages becomes the means through which Derrida challenges the marriage of ontology to ideology within the trope of elementalism. (Though Heidegger becomes his main target in this regard, how this challenge unfolds creates an unspoken questioning of Irigaray as well.) What becomes clear is that an air bereft of the historical weight of *pneuma* was as anathema to Derrida as a breath bereft of thought was to Descartes. Yet this stance does not mean that Derrida considered the presence of *pneuma* in a positive light. On the contrary, those familiar with works like *Of Grammatology* know that Derrida was deeply critical of the grasp pneumatology held on Western philosophy. Nevertheless, *pneuma* was not something that

6 Naas, *Miracle and Machine*, 110–1.

7 Agamben, *Stanzas*, 90.

8 For a detailed and illuminating discussion of the Michelson–Morley experiments that effectively closed the door on pneumatic and aethereal science in modern thought, see Swenson, *The Ethereal Aether*.

could be merely wished away from the history of thought any more than it could be buried within the history of science. It was, for him, a foe that had to be questioned but could not be cheated.

I think that Derrida's trepidation was well worth the risk. In allowing for a rich epistemological engagement with *pneuma*, he portends a broader critique of how the politics of a pneuma-less breath have developed in recent years, especially the rationalism and pragmatism pervading recent discourses of the environmental humanities.[9] These ways of thinking distance themselves from the questions of an air-laden metaphysics out of seeming necessity. By saddling the ideological moves made by Heidegger and Irigaray with the weight of an *onto-theological* forgetting, Derrida exposes the holes in this approach and crafts a narrative in which a pneumatic metaphysics can maintain a continued relevance. To forget *pneuma*, he seems to say, is to try and create an air without history. And, as I imagine, his rejoinder to the prior statement might be, a *logos* that blows with the breeze is logocentric all the same.

1 Derrida and Pneumatology

Derrida's most direct early engagement with *pneuma* appears in what is probably his most famous tome, *Of Grammatology* (*De la grammatologie*, 1968). It was here in which he famously connected the breathy logocentrism of "natural writing" to a concept of pneumatology – a "science of spirit" – that served as grammatology's Janus face. The overarching argument he makes about the festering influence of logocentric language throughout *Of Grammatology* is well known and need not be recounted with any appreciable depth in this piece. Even so, the emergence of *pneuma* as a factor in Derridean philosophy starts with the broader connections he identified between *logos* and *phone*. If the desire to anchor a concept of metaphysical truth to vocal proximity haunted every step of Western philosophy from the pre-Socratics through Heidegger – a staple of Derrida's thought – *pneuma* was the vehicle through which these desires became manifest. The theological sway it held was powerful enough to split writing into two competing tracts, which Derrida lays out succinctly in one particularly notable passage in the first chapter of *Grammatology*.

> Writing in the common sense is the dead letter, it is the carrier of death. It exhausts life. On the other hand, on the other face of the same proposition, writing in the metaphoric sense, natural, divine, and living writing, is venerated; it is equal in dignity to the origin in value, to the voice of conscience as divine law, to the heart, to sentiment, and so forth… *Natural writing is immediately united to the voice and to breath. Its nature is not grammatological but pneumatological* [emphasis mine]. It is hieratic, very close to the interior holy voice… to the voice one hears upon retreating into oneself: full and truthful presence of the divine voice to our inner sense.[10]

Redemption of the nonphonetic letter from its theological prison lies at the heart of the grammatological project, actuated through a thorough vivisection of Rousseau's *Essay On The Origin of Languages* later in the text. Pneumatology functions as the barrier over which a viable grammatology must overcome. Having mortared together voice and utterance with breath and spirit into an indomitable theological wall, *pneuma* allowed for a cooptation of writing from expression of mere *technê* into a manifestation of deific, phonic presence in graphic form. Rousseau thought that God wrote upon his heart as he in turn wrote upon the page. Derrida sought nothing less than to cut off the pneumatic breath fueling that sense natural of writing, thereby suffocating the logocentric impulse at the source. Grammatology, then, is his attempt to create a vacuum that evens the historical field, bringing about the closure of this Greco-Christian epoch of logocentrism that *pneuma* helped to perpetuate even into the strictures of Enlightenment naturalism and rationality.[11]

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9 This is an interesting point beyond the purview of the essay I have written, but for an interesting series of discussion about how a speculative metaphysics might coexist within the social science-centric discourses of the environmental humanities, see McWhorter and Stenstad eds., *Heidegger and the Earth*.

10 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 17.

11 Naas, "Pneumatology, *Pneuma*, *Souffle*, Breath," 29–30.

Derrida's choice to make pneumatology the onto-theological cousin of grammatology may appear a clever juxtaposition of semantic symmetry, as much a stylistic choice as explicative terminology. Yet the word pneumatology carries its own complicated history, which becomes relevant to any analysis of its use in *Of Grammatology* even if Derrida does not reference or explain this history as such. Pneumatology is a word that has long encompassed the study of spirit. While its contemporary manifestations have been purely theological in scope, prior to the late eighteenth century this type of study was also considered a science bent ascertaining the substantial properties of *pneuma* and its effects on the material world. This science of *pneuma* was split into three categories. The first two encompassed the substantial properties of God and lesser beings of noncorporeal divinity (i.e. angels) and were thus purely based on speculative metaphysics. The third dealt with the pneumatic roots of *psyche*, and thus encompassed the study of the human mind that would eventually become the empirical field of psychology.[12] Only this third branch moved into the empirical and observational rigor wrought by Enlightenment science, given that *pneuma* proved to be a substance that could not be measured with any precision.

Not everyone was comfortable casting the old triumvirate of pneumatological thought aside so easily. A good example can be found in Hegel, who, as philosopher Alan Olson notes, gave more credence to theological and religious meanings than many of his German Idealist contemporaries. Hegel was particularly concerned with the potential of the new psychology to eviscerate the longstanding relationship between mind and soul in favor of a vulgar embodiment that lacked the scope necessary for real scientific inquiry.[13] This line of thought manifests most clearly in some brief missives on pneumatology that Hegel wrote in his *Enzyclopadie*, and most tangibly explored by Olson in his book *Hegel and the Spirit*. Olson argues that, for Hegel, the development of a *psychologia* based only on instrumental observation and eschewing metaphysical questions entirely turned as far from pneumatological roots as one could get. While Hegel does acknowledge that the speculative methodologies of medieval and early modern pneumatology left much to be desired as science, these issues did not stem from the focus on an unobservable divine substance. Rather, the problem was in the desire to conceptualize that substance as static and unchanging. Such a status rendered *pneuma* impervious to the mechanics of the dialectic, and therefore obtuse to Hegelian usage. Method, not scope, plagued the science of *pneuma* as it transitioned into the modern age since it excluded the "sense of wonder" that constituted a mediating element in the realm of inquiry since Aristotle.[14] Yet this move also, as Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen suggests, reflected Hegel's desire to make speculative reason a necessary component of religious discourse moving forward into the nineteenth century.[15] Hegelian pneumatology, thus, tried to thread a rather small needle between raw empiricism and speculative metaphysics with a surprising degree of nuance.

Derrida was no doubt well aware of this methodological thrust inherent in the history of pneumatology when writing *Of Grammatology*. He even acknowledged its tripartite history as spirited science while tying it to the instrument of natural writing of which he was so critical.[16] That acknowledgement of the history of pneumatology as also *scientific* (in the sense of Hegel) instead of purely *theological* was more than a gesture

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12 The word *psychologia* emerged as an offshoot of pneumatology in a book written by Renaissance humanist Marko Marulić, and later spread through the works of German theological writers like Philipp Melanchton, Rudolf Goeckel, and Johann Heinrich Alstead. As opposed to the modern pedagogy and practice of psychology, treatments of *psychologia* still understood the mind as an extension of a noncorporeal pneumatic substance. Only with the emergence of empirical psychology in eighteenth-century England did *psychologia* begin to be distanced from its subservience to pneumatological thought. McVeigh, *A Psychohistory of Metaphors*, 72.

13 Olson, *Hegel and the Spirit*, 15. In fact, Olson continues to argue that the entire concept of Hegelian Absolute *Geist* is suffused with a "pneumatological pulsar" grounded in Martin Luther's specific unfolding of spirit in his *Small Catechism*, which according to Olson is a far cry from his more doctrinal writings on the content of Spirit. Thus, Olson posits that "the major impetus for German Idealism, for all of its variegated complexity, cannot be properly understood apart from this simple background [in Luther], and that Hegel's philosophy of Spirit may be viewed therefore as a theoretical completion of the pneumatology deeply embedded in the religious and philosophical *Lebenwelt* of Germany," Ibid., 5.

14 Ibid., 149–50.

15 Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology*.

16 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 9.

toward epistemological clarity. It also served to nuance any potentially harsh dialectical reading of his grammatological argument. Derrida no doubt realized the temptation to read the construction of grammatology as a final suffocation of the aerated history behind *pneuma*. On the contrary, the air had long receded from the pneumatic ideal without his help. Christian pneumatology had already become anaerobic, having burned off any oxygen within its makeup during the height of Neoplatonism, even before Luther and later theologians made their discursive mark. All Derrida did was point out the connection of this process with Plato's desire to condemn writing as the anathema to living speech.

He made this relationship, carried through hushed undertones in *Of Grammatology*, more explicit in the contemporaneous essay "Plato's Pharmacy," through his detailed unpacking of the *Phaedrus* dialogue. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates regarded the books mentioned by the title character as a "drug" (*pharmakon*) tempting him to recede from the company of people. The lesson was to show how writing purveyed knowledge by the most facile means without embodying its spirit. Derrida, though, vivisected this dialogue through yet another example of the vagaries of translation. The word *pharmakon*, he claimed, could refer to "remedy" as readily as "drug." Using this ambivalence of meaning, he goes on to argue that the animated speech valorized by Plato is subject to the same mechanics of repetition (through language and memory) as the suspect writing. Thus, only the instrumental supplement of writing could guarantee the presence of *logos* in its role as perpetuator of truth. Writing thus becomes a breathless arbiter of meaning, turning the living breath into an object of repetition. Derrida, in essence, suggests that writing and *logos* need each other, a codependency that ensures the survival (and thriving) of each in turn. He states as such with great clarity in the following passage from the heart of "Plato's Pharmacy."

> If the *pharmakon* is "ambivalent," it is because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that link them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (soul/body, good/evil, inside/outside, memory/forgetfulness, speech/writing, etc.). It is on the basis of this play or movement that the opposites or differences are stopped by Plato. The *pharmakon* is the movement, the locus, the play: (the production of) difference. It is the différance of difference.[17]

Naas categorizes this "différance of difference" (in his own clever recourse to medicinal metaphor) with the word *autoimmune*: "a source that has need always of another source, of the other, in order to expropriate itself but also to express itself in the first place."[18] In order for the word to breathe, Naas holds, it must borrow from the abstract breathlessness of the machine. And it's within this autoimmune set that the history of pneumatic breath, a history that goes unsaid in Derrida, carries deeper contextual meanings to both repetition and autoimmunity worth expanding upon. *Pneuma* was not just the substantial face of metaphysics and cosmology for much of Western pre-modern philosophy. It was also an important aspect of medical methodology as it developed through late Antiquity, saturated all the while in faculties and structures of repetition, natural and otherwise. Aristotle conceived of a relationship between connate *pneuma* and heat that worked through the body, connecting mind to invigorating seed and body to soul.[19] Galenic medicine cast *pneuma* as the substance maintaining bodily temperament, affecting everything from circulatory to reproductive processes. From the Neoplatonists through the medieval scholastics, *pneuma* was thought of as a kind of heated respirator cycling divine breath between God and man – a breathless breath – keeping the corruptible flesh of the body working in good temperamental order. It was a substance almost air-like in its omnipresence and effervescence, suturing mind and body, physiology and eschatology together before Descartes took its breath away in a definitive stroke of meditation.

One may wonder, with ample justification, exactly where the air can be located in any of Derrida's early pneumatological dalliances. Reading *Of Grammatology* and "Plato's Pharmacy" gives the impression that Derrida merely continues the anaerobic mentality pervading the broader post-Stoic history of pneumatology. If anything, he appears to make breath even more breathless by welding the fates of *logos* and

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17 Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 130.

18 Naas, *Miracle and Machine*, 117.

19 Freudenthal, *Aristotle's Theory of Material Substance*.

writing together with such influence. Making this assumption, though, forgets the lesson of the *pharmakon*: that the ambivalence of language ties opposites together in a dialectical dance of meaning. A pneumatology cast as grammatology's other already carries air within its epistemological genes, even as that element became more unseen, unsmelled, untasted, and unsaid as that episteme unfolded over time. It represents, at heart, an opening gesture into more tangible engagements with the ethereality of air that will come later. Nevertheless, such a move toward the air must come from somewhere. My contention has been that the first move occurred at the *margins* of Derrida's early writing, not necessarily *within* it. The implication here suggests that looking for the word "air" means looking in the wrong place. The focus should not be so much on *what* Derrida said about the air in these early writings, but *who* he implicated in his history of pneumatological natural writing and *why* he cast that implication in the terms that he did. Something hinted at as a slight caveat in the evolution of logocentric thought in Western philosophy, much like air, was the slight caveat in the broader history of pneumatology.

And strange enough, an unexpected model for Derrida in planting the unexpected presence of the air in *pneuma* can be found within the work of the German polymath Gottfried Leibniz.

2 Leibniz and the Spirited Air

That the latter represented a relatively quiet influence on the former emphasizes the fundamental strangeness of their junction. Derrida never gave Leibniz's thought the same vigor of critique reserved for figures like Rousseau or Husserl, and by the 1980s he would go so far as to ask why Heidegger was so beholden to Leibniz for a concept of reason, anyway, when Spinoza could serve just as well.[20] We tend to think of Leibniz as within the vein of Deleuze than Derrida. Nevertheless, Leibniz dotted the Derridean oeuvre through oblique cameos characterized by a soft if tangible admiration. While some have argued that Leibniz carried a more direct impact on Derrida than often given, their most notable connection lay in a shared, effervescent desire to upend a particular dominance of metaphysical orthodoxies that had dominated Western philosophy since Plato.[21] Both valued a perceived mechanistic disposition of the immaterial lacking in the broader history of idealistic thought. Both were interested in the relationship between signification and language, particularly the connections that could be ascertained between symbols and knowledge (a relationship disdained in the Platonic corpus). And compared to others accused of perpetuating logocentrism in Western philosophy, Leibniz got off light. At least, in Derrida's view, he *tried* to find a way out of the diktat of logos even if his non-phonetic solution was less than successful when placed under an epistemological microscope.

There may have been another reason, though, that Derrida placed Leibniz as a small but notable exception ("even including Leibniz," he says) in his broader brotherhood of the logos stretching from the pre-Socratics to Heidegger. Perhaps that reason was solely to bracket the legacy of the *characteristica universalis*, the non-phonetic language of Leibnizian dreams that nonetheless depended on the very universality of the logos that Derrida marked as the pervasive empowerment of phonocentrism.[22] Or, the

20 Davies, "Why Leibniz?" 82.

21 Stocker, for example, has argued for specific influences like that of Leibniz's affective critique of Cartesian geometry, where the application of force upon objects as the principal motivator of spatial interactions was methodologically resonant with the force applied by work deconstruction on the object of the text. *Routledge Philosophical Guide to Derrida on Deconstruction*, 46–7.

22 Paul Davies unpacks this particular tract in his short essay about Derrida's use of Leibniz in *Of Grammatology*, ultimately arguing against such an interpretation. "If Leibniz looks to Egypt and China for hints as to how language might be made to work against the subjectivity and complex content-dependence of meaning, sound and translation," Davies writes, "the end is to have nothing in it of Egypt or China. It is to be the pure and perfect apprehension of truth, and although that apprehension is one more calculation, a further mechanical operation, and so is never able to claim for itself the qualitatively different status of a final end (a final truth), it imports each of its 'ends' and calculations the values and features of the idealized end of logocentrism, the perfect absence of tension, tense, desire and imagination," "Why Leibniz," 84.

motive may have been tactical, a way to shield Derrida from the ethnocentrism of oriental fascination by propping up Leibniz's own as pernicious cover.[23] A more intriguing explanation revolves around Derrida's identification of the pneumatological scaffolding hoisting the mechanistic determinism of Leibnizian monadology as something distinct and worthy of notice. He would not have been the first to do so. In fact, some contemporary interpreters of Leibniz's work have argued that fairly explicit and important links can be found between a historical pneumatology and the figure of the monad. William Clark, for one, holds that Leibniz created a junction between cosmology and pneumatology by giving individual monads the benefit of a rudimentary consciousness staked by a first principle of intelligent cause.[24] Christia Mercer goes even further, drawing parallels between the Stoic cosmology of a *pneuma* mixed with air and fire and Leibniz's theories regarding the constituent parts of substances.[25] Then there are Leibniz's own references to the realm of pneumatology that appear in Book III ("On Words") of his *New Essays on Human Understanding*, the posthumously published critique of the emergent empiricism of John Locke.[26] Toward the end of the section "On the Name of Substances," Leibniz describes the differences between natural substances that are perfect wholes and natural or man-made substances that are aggregates of unrelated parts. For him, only animate bodies coursing with *entelechy* could be homogenous and indivisible. Using that particular word is significant, since *entelechy* was a term derived from Aristotle with pneumatic connotation that carried more material grounding than its common translation as spirit or soul. That substantial wedge circulating between material and immaterial lying at the heart of pneumatic historiography led Leibniz to the following conclusion. Even though organic bodies could be thought of as fleshy machinery (a reference directed as much at Descartes as Locke) they are no less "imperishable" than the soul itself – an aspect Leibniz demonstrates through an entertaining allegory of trying to strip the costume off a harlequin, only to find endless layers of clothing underneath.[27] Clowning aside, a fixation on the mechanics of breath again reasserts itself. The cyclical repetition and inevitability of respiration dominates body and soul for Leibniz, intertwining both in the very thoughtful transcendence attributed as an essence of his monadology.

As with Derrida, none of these pneumatological streams weaving through Leibniz are direct in referencing its airy past. But in old age the German philosopher would turn his eye once more onto the pneumatic question, stashing recourse to the air within a semantic theological dispute. It came in the form of a 1716 letter published under the title *Discours sur la théologie naturelle des Chinois* ("Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese"), a missive composed by Leibniz in response to a book on Chinese theology and philosophy by French Oratorian priest and philosopher Nicolas Malebranche. The book in reference,

23 Derrida's engagement with Chinese language and writing in *Of Grammatology* has been subject to a great deal of debate since the publication of Han-Liang Chang's "Hallucinating the Other: Derridean Fantasies of Chinese Script" in 1988. Although this fascinating back-and-forth is beyond the scope of this essay, a brief overview of this critical discourse toward Derrida, along with some mild pushback toward Chang's perspective can be found in Milesi, "*Chinoiseries*."

24 Clark, "The Death of Metaphysics in Enlightened Prussia," 428–32.

25 Mercer, *Leibniz's Metaphysics*, 273–4. In his review of Andreas Blank's book *Leibniz: Metaphilosophy and Metaphysics*, Richard Arthur describes a clear and equally plausible alternative to Mercer's interpretation that Leibniz was channeling the spirit of Stoic cosmology through his own: "Mercer reads Leibniz in 1670–1 as re-interpreting the Stoics' pneuma as an immaterial vital power emanating from God, and as advocating a reduction of bodies to immaterial minds. Blank concedes that the Neoplatonic emanation scheme Leibniz sets out in *On Transubstantiation*, when taken together with his well-known claim in the *Theoria Motus Abstracti* that 'every body is a momentary mind,' may well give that impression. But Blank finds convincing evidence in texts (and especially in the correspondence with Oldenburg and de Carcavy) that Leibniz's ether is material, a spirit in Digby's sense of subtle *matter*. Leibniz's strategy should not be understood as an attempt to spiritualize matter, but rather 'to analyze concepts traditionally denoting properties of immaterial substances in mechanistic terms, and thus assign a common, rational content to a variety of ancient theories about the constitution of matter'." Arthur, "Andreas Blank, Leibniz."

26 Taking the form of a dialogue between two interlocutors voicing the respective position of Locke and Leibniz, the work went unpublished after the death of Locke in 1704. While Leibniz scholar and biographer Nicholas Jolley has called it a unique window into Leibniz's thoughts on metaphysics and epistemology, Jolley simultaneously notes that *New Essays* is "a deeply puzzling and frustrating work," *Leibniz*, 23.

27 Leibniz, "Of the Names of Substances," cclxxvi–cclxxvii.

structured as a dialogue between two philosophers from China and Europe, respectively, was less about Chinese thought *per se* than a quiet allegorical rebuke of Spinoza's natural theology that Malebranche found particularly wanting.[28] In kind, Leibniz's true target with the letter was not the deceased Malebranche (who died in 1715), but Malebranche's main source on China for his dialogue – Niccoló Longobardi, the seventeenth-century Jesuit successor to Matteo Ricci in China and stern critic of the integrated theology pioneered by Ricci during his time there. Longobardi's dispute with Ricci centered on the translation of Christian doctrines into the Chinese language and grounding these ideas in the philosophy of the dominant neo-Confucian system practiced by the literati of the Ming Dynasty. That Ricci's reasons for doing so were at least partially grounded in a missionary pragmatism was of little concern to Longobardi. He thought the practice encouraged a dangerous hermeneutic syncretism, encouraging the Chinese to equate metaphysical concepts through the logic of their own natural theology. Because Chinese philosophy, as Longobardi understood it, had no concept of a spirited substance that was not based in matter, then communicating the essence of God and Christian cosmology through those philosophical terms was impossible. The meaning would be, in the truest sense of the phrase, lost in translation.

Leibniz thought such conclusions were both unfairly essentialist toward the Chinese and a misrepresentation of the pneumatological roots weaving through Longobardi's own belief system. As an example, Leibniz focused on the way his Jesuit interlocutor interpreted the Confucian principle of *li*, a word that was often translated as "reason" by the Jesuits and thus became the cornerstone of finding some analogy to logos in Chinese thought. Since Longobardi's own source readings cast *li* as a principle of the air, his contention was that it could not be translated as the transcendent logos because of its pernicious elemental and material ties. Doing so, for him, perpetuated nothing less than an exercise in proto-Spinozism. Leibniz, by contrast, was far more charitable in his own interpretation. The difference, as Haun Saussy notes, is a matter of degree: while Longobardi was content to take the Chinese sources he read at face value, Leibniz offered the benefit of interpretive intricacy.[29] He does this in a most clever fashion, by airing out the hermeneutic complexity of the *li* concept (as Leibniz understood it) while simultaneously showing how Western thought on logos wasn't so anaerobic as Longobardi might have thought. "The [Chinese] Spirits are not merely air," Leibniz wrote, "but the *force of air*."

> And if Confucius has said to one of his disciples that the Spirits are only of air, he meant animated air and was accommodating himself to the intellectual capacity of this disciple, scarcely capable of conceiving spiritual substances. Thus for the Greeks and Latins, *Pneuma*, *Spiritus*, signifies air; that is a subtle and penetrating matter in which created immaterial substances are in effect clothed.[30]

Notice the careful but meticulous connections that Leibniz employs in this passage. It's reasonable to assume that the Confucian example is a mode of allegory because such allegorical structures involving the air are also endemic to Western theological discourse. Both *pneuma* and *li* signify air in their own contexts, an argument not at all unexpected from the pen of a fervent universalist like Leibniz. Had he left it there, as yet another turn of the *characterica universalis*, his point against Longobardi would have been reasonable if not quite profound. In the next sentence, though, he girds the relationship between *pneuma* and air with a material underpinning, beyond the realm of the merely linguistic. Material air, it seems, both *penetrates* and *clothes* the immaterial substance of *pneuma*. This interpretation may seem odd from the theological perspective thought which Longobardi was working. But it would have been entirely unsurprising when incorporating the epistemological weight of the early modern sciences that Leibniz knew quite well.

For all of this laudable rhetoric that gives air a small space to breathe, Leibniz is certainly not beyond reproach here. Without doubt he perpetuates his own essentialisms inherent in a desire to create universalizing bonds between disparate cosmological narratives. But that particular fault doesn't obscure the

28 Saussy, *The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic*, 37–8.

29 Ibid., 41.

30 Leibniz, "Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese," 87.

important work he performs in this passage. Specifically, making sure that the aerobic roots of *pneuma* do not vanish into thin air, translated away in the interest of theological convenience. The elemental aspect of *pneuma*, for Leibniz, was core to the idea of *spiritus* as developed throughout the bevy of medieval and early modern Christian thought. Denigrating that element for the sake of ideological concerns, qua Longobardi and Malebranche, amounted to an exercise of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Perhaps Leibniz was taking the presence of the air for granted in his pneumatic formulation (another issue close to Irigaray that will be dealt with later), but at least he gave fealty to the air as a foundational aspect in terms that simply can be mediated away.

3 Derrida takes on Heideggerian *Geist*

I cannot say for certain whether Derrida knew about Leibniz's *Discours* at the time of his first pneumatological foray during the late 1960s. He does not mention or cite the letter in any of his admittedly narrow engagements with his Baroque predecessor. But even if their mutual interest in the discourse surrounding *pneuma* was mere coincidence, there still lies a fortuitous and uncanny resonance between the ways in which they both utilized it. For the linguistic ambivalence toward the relationship between *pneuma* and air that Leibniz displayed toward Longobardi finds a surprising mirror in concerns Derrida articulated toward Heidegger over the same topic. And it is within his broad critique of Heidegger, honed over several stages of political thought during the 1970s and 1980s, that Derrida sharpened his ideas about *pneuma*, breath, and air into a polemical scalpel. In his earlier writing on the efficacy of breath, Derrida turned on both Thoth (in *Pharmakon*) and Antonin Artaud (in *La parole souffle*), denying them the kind of transcendent breathing they tried to absorb through their respective practices. (Yes, Plato was the actual source of Thoth's denial, but Derrida structures the text in a way that strings the poor Egyptian demigod along before finally having the rug pulled from beneath his feet.) Yet neither Thoth nor Artaud offered anything more tangible than epistemological stakes for Derrida to work against. As with Leibniz, Derrida needed his own Longobardi to provide an ideological stake into his discussion. Heidegger proved a more than adequate foil in this regard, just as he had served for Irigaray when she mapped the forgetting of the air, at a time when Derrida was starting to dig into issues of *pneuma* with more veracity. Most important, it was a chance to expand upon a subtle critique that he made in reference to *Being and Time*, a work left unfinished because Heidegger had, ostensibly, *run out of breath*.[31]

This critical turn toward Heidegger's pneumatic entanglements manifests most visibly in *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, a transcription of a lecture by Derrida in which he dissects Heideggerian ideas about metaphysics, and more specifically the thorn-laden triangle between metaphysics, translation, and ideology. At base, *Of Spirit* constitutes a very different challenge toward the logocentric regime of

31 Derrida, *Of Spirit*, 153–4. This is not to say that Heidegger was *completely* breathless throughout, however. An intriguing reference to *pneuma* itself, for instance, lies within a key passage in his 1936 lectures published in *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*. The context emerges when Heidegger expounds upon Schelling's contention that *longing* constitutes the grounding of God. How is it possible, Heidegger asks, to ground the essence of a complete being within something synonymous with incompleteness and becoming, not to mention seemingly anthropocentric? The answer lies in the explication of God being able to represent only that which emerges from self-reflection since God only has access to the being of itself. This becomes the source of the aforementioned longing, and its expression through the envelope of the word must encompass both a sense of unity *and* a sense of differentiation. Heidegger hinges this thesis upon the following passage by Schelling quoted at length in his analysis: "The *word* of [God's] longing and the eternal Spirit, moved by love, which it itself is, utter the Word so that the understanding together with longing becomes creative and omnipotent Will and informs nature, at first unruly, as its own element or instrument." Because spirit is itself "moved" through the threshold of the word into the relative chaos of nature, spirit cannot be the ultimate grounding of what is. As such a unifying becoming, Heidegger argues, "Spirit is *pneuma*. This wafting is only the breath of what most primordially and truly unifies: *love*." It is thus, for Schelling, the mechanism through which the unity at the heart of God's being finds unity with that which is different, from the outside. Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise*, 124–9.

pneumatology undertaken by Derrida than that in his initial grammatological overture. Whereas *Of Grammatology* was concerned with the quiet nature of breathy *pneuma* as it emerged through oblique gestures in figures like Rousseau, in *Of Spirit* Derrida takes on the combustible, fiery face of that substance most renown in its Stoic iterations. To wit, reference to fire appears from the very start. "I shall speak of ghost [*revenant*], of flame and of ashes," he opens in somewhat vague terms, followed by a more specific "and of what for Heidegger, *avoiding* means."[32] (Classic Derrida: giving everything and nothing away in an opening gesture – shades of "Socrates, he who does not write," the quote from Nietzsche on the first page of *OG*.) Unpacking this statement begins with Derrida identifying an intriguing and potentially troubling series of disjunctions in Heidegger's thought involving the word *Geist* (spirit), that shadow-casting bulwark of Hegelian metaphysics. He tackles three important stages of Heidegger's engagement with the word over the course of twenty-five years of writing – a difficult and nuanced body of work of which I can only provide the barest outline.[33] But even this trace gives a sense of what Derrida was trying to tease out of the margins of Heideggerian thought, and why it represented an important development in his own thought regarding pneumatology as a whole. The first Heidegger, in the quintessential *Being and Time*, was adamant that *Geist* should not be used as an ontological basis, cautioning the reader to avoid its cosmic Hegelian manifestations and hedging toward the questioning malleability of *Dasein* in its stead. When the word appears at all, it's bracketed by quotation marks as a means to rein in its pneumatic girding. The second Heidegger, entranced by the societal role of the German university and discourses on animality and metaphysics during the 1930s, came around on *Geist* to cast the German language as heir to Greek intellectual veracity. The quotation marks were dropped, and the essence of *geistig* (spiritual) became the apparatus upon which the questioning necessary for the enactment of the world through which a sense of Being was mounted. However, Derrida shows how this turn, regardless of Heidegger's intentions, was inescapable from both the Greco-Christian pneumatic tradition he sought to avoid in *Being and Time* and the potent blood and soil ideology employed with such devastating violence over the next decade by the Third Reich. Thus, the third Heidegger (in the 1950s) sought to avoid the weight of *Geist* once more, this time by reframing its historical meaning through the poet Georg Trakl and his particular avoidance of the word *geistig* (spiritual) in favor of *gestlich* (spiriting). In this final gambit, Heidegger contended that a Trakl-inspired *Geist* subverted the pneumatological (and thus theological) connotation of *geistig*. Neither *pneuma* nor *spiritus*, this new reading of *Geist* is not laden with their airy connotations but marks the reinvigoration of a much older *flamme* that could bypass the entire epoch of Greco-Christian *pneuma*. A move intended, in some sense, to use language to mediate away the recurrent problem brought forth by *Geist*, cleansing with fire the stain of a pneumatic *Geist* from both himself and German art and philosophy as a whole.

This third turn – the turnabout from the turnabout – is where the slippery language of pneumaticism concerns Derrida most. In attempting to save Trakl (and himself) from the hegemonic aura of the *pneuma/spiritus* axis, Heidegger roots *Geist* as a proto-Teutonic predecessor of both words. Hence *pneuma* and *spiritus* were beholden to a fiery, primordial *Geist* that served as a metaphysical essence. In a move that betrays certain Heraclitian affections, fire fuels air, not the other way around. Derrida acknowledges the clever pan-European "linguistic-historical triad" that Heidegger tries to construct as an escape hatch, while highlighting a serious flaw in such reasoning. The fact that another precedent substance rooted in fire that Heidegger ignores (marked by the Hebrew word *ruah*) comes from Jewish theological traditions casts a darker politic upon his desire to seal *Geist* within a German linguistic ethos. Derrida, realizing the shadow this absence casts upon one whom he greatly respects, imagines what Heidegger would say in his own defense to a group of fictional theologians on this point: that, as a German thinker it only makes sense for him to conceptualize a concept of spirit within the confines of the German language. Yet even this caveat is doomed to failure, as Derrida subsequently expounds in a remarkable passage.

32 Derrida, Of Spirit, 1.

33 A detailed and useful analysis of this text and its implications can be found in Krell, "Spiriting Heidegger."

> I would not dispute the very strong "logic" of this response if the [*Geist/pneuma/spiritus*] historical triangle could legitimately be closed. In fact, it seems that it is closed only by an act of brutal foreclosure. "Foreclosure" figures as word common in various codes (law, psychoanalysis) to say too rapidly and too firmly something of this *avoiding* which we are cautiously trying to think through here. Such a "foreclosure," then, seems certainly significant in itself, in its content, but what interests me here is simply its value as a symptom, as it were, and to maintain a question of principle: what justifies the closure of this triangle 'historically'? Does it not remain open from its origin and by its very structure onto what Greek and then Latin *had* to translate by *pneuma* and *spiritus*, that is, the Hebrew *ruah*?[34]

Derrida hammers the incongruity of this foreclosure home by drawing together the linguistic pairings undergirding the relationship between *spirit* and *soul* (*Geist*/*Seele*; *pneuma*/*psyche*; *ruah*/*nephech*), but his point is already made. Respectful defense aside, he recognizes the disquieting implications undergirding Heidegger's dismissal of the tradition of *ruah*, a dismissal advanced while trying to reshape an inconvenient history behind *pneuma* into something that could save *Geist* from its own issues. *En toto*, Derrida paints of convincing picture of failure on the part of Heidegger regarding this entire project: pneumatological gravity appears too strong even for one as clever as Heidegger to escape its grasp.

Here, in the midst of dousing the very fire Heidegger tries to rekindle through Trakl, Derrida slyly plants his caveat toward the air with a similar nonchalance as Leibniz. Tucks it away in a footnote, no less. This aerobic turn pivots on his discussion of the linguistic relationship between spirit and soul that functioned so effectively as the *coup de grace* to the late Heideggerian turnabout on *Geist*. Noting that even Aristotle did not make any sound division between *pneuma* and fire, Derrida mentions the role that naturally occurring solar heat (and the gas Aristotle associated with those emanations) plays in the Greek thinker's conceptualization of *pneuma*. He quotes a passage from philosopher Helene Ioannidi regarding the Aristotelian "psychic principle," a perspective that amalgamated the vital mechanisms of the carnal body and that of the intellect – the *psyche* – that existed independent of that body under the shared principle of heat. Then, at the end of the footnote, Derrida casually drops part of another footnote pulled from Ioannidi's own text that states the following: "Under this term *pneuma*, according to a note of P. Louis's, Aristotle naturally understands vapor, gas, air, fluid."[35] As if to remind us that *oh, and pneuma signifies air too*: a caustic rejoinder framed in terms of an almost afterthought. When regarding the impact of this one footnote, one realizes that Derrida's very use of the word *pneuma* becomes a telling sign of an unsaid proximity to the air within Heidegger's pyrotechnic intrigues. In its use, the ambivalence of the *pharmakon* again rears its head. Just as the breath-laden word needs the mechanics and repetition of writing in order to truly transcend, the spirit-laden flame needs the mechanics and repetition of the air in order to take its place as an object of metaphysical thought.

All of this may seem rather pedantic, finding the air buried under the sediment of ancillary text. But finding air behind the scenes of all this metaphysical grappling around fire is precisely the point. The very nature of how air has been perceived – in philosophy, particularly – revolves around its inertness, the lack of any tangible signs of presence, much less work. Air, as George Bataille said about its cousin breath, is also an object that is not an object.[36] Yet work it performs: as the always unsaid part that fuels fire, as the residue of the negative dialectic that entangles the flame. One is tempted to hear the voice of Irigaray here, casting air as the "forgotten *material mediation* of the *logos*" beyond the scope of sensibility or intelligibility.[37] For Derrida, this makes the air too much of a *tabula rasa*, a blank canvas upon which everything can be inscribed while lacking presence itself. Taking that step would almost certainly necessitate the placement of breathing as the locus of being, which he knew would fall back into breathing's metaphor trap noticed by way of Descartes. More to the point, it also represents an attempt to circumvent the veracity of the pneumatic epoch, albeit in a different way than Heidegger attempted. Derrida's careful attention to *pneuma* displayed a tacit acknowledgment that whatever the physical quality of air, it's always full of

34 Derrida, *Of Spirit*, 100.
35 Ibid., 137.
36 Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 23.
37 Irigaray, *The Forgetting of the Air in Martin Heidegger*, 11.

something ontologically significant. What one breathes can never be fully disengaged from the transcendence attached to the concept of breath, any more than Artaud could create a *souffle* (breath) bereft of the *soufflé* (spirit) he despised. *Pneuma* represents the resistance to such reductions as surely as it resists being distilled to some basic elemental composition. And in this state, it holds together a reflection of the ambivalence that air embodies in philosophical terms. Hence the provocative twinning of grammatology and pneumatology, where each one needs the presence of the other to stake out its own epistemological claim (not unlike the relation between writing and *logos*). Derrida never claims to offer an escape from the dominance of the *logos* that pneumatology embodies in Western thought. Rather, he implies that the best one can hope for is recognition: how *pneuma* is entombed and what this says about the values and biases of its capturer. This holds whether the subject is Artaud, Rousseau, Heidegger, even including Irigaray, all subjected to the performative, theatrical move within the deconstructive impulse.

Within this oscillation between material and immaterial, between breath and *logos*, signified through *pneuma*, I want to advance the possibility of understanding Derrida's stance on air not in terms of object, but in terms of method. *Air as method*, you might say. This contention, admittedly, seems strange on its face and most certainly comes late in the game of the argument I have been making. Think of it, then, as a small but useful caveat to keep in mind. The word *method*, as often utilized, implies a sense of structure, movement, and the dialectical refutation of difference. Or, if we decide to go the route of someone like Wittgenstein, that contemporary uses of the word *method* require some basis in the intent of a subject doing. All seem to be traits lacking in most conceptualizations of the passive, silent, unseen air. Yet the word *method* also exhibits that same stealthy, doubled transience Derrida found evident in the *pharmakon* and elsewhere. For within the etymological heart of method is the Greek word *hodos*, which can simultaneously mean "journey" or "path," the seeds of both becoming and being. Method, then, is not just a structural feature of the analytical process. It inhabits a space of both process and medium, implanted with the means that enact its own negation. And as one might expect, Derrida's own ideas about method were permeated by a maddening refrain upon this negating facet. He famously referred to deconstruction (held in the popular imagination as his most tangible foray into the concept of method) with the telling non-definition of *pas deméthode*, which could mean either "not of method" or "step of method" depending on the translation.[38] Derrida also carved out a careful hedging with regard to any potential grammatological science, lest anyone employ its tenets with an undesired doctrinal intent. "On what conditions is a grammatology possible?" he muses at one point in *OG*. "Its fundamental condition is certainly the undoing [*sollicitation*] of logocentrism. But this condition of possibility turns into a condition of impossibility. In fact it risks destroying the concept of science as well."[39] A provocative notion, this destruction of a science, but one with an important virtue encased within the polemic. There has been a tendency to view method as the mortar cementing the wall of positivist thought together, a mere tool defined by the innocuousness of its use. Derrida merely reminds us that method has history, manifesting with more tangible weight upon the world than what a mere facile idealism would allow. While method may seem passive like the air to most, for him method is *loaded* like the air. Less invisible than a light smoke beyond the visual cusp, inducing a reaction when inhaled even as it moves and wafts with an ethereal grace.

This sense of wafting fullness lying in the very creases between air and method is precisely what slips beneath notice. Such is the legacy of a pneumatological history of which Derrida was so eerily cognizant but also helpless to do anything but diagnose. The pneumatic trick is that its effect can only be reverse engineered, a post-causal inquiry that resembles being struck with a pebble and finding nothing of its source when turning around. Material nonexistence becomes its greatest recourse to power upon the world. This acknowledgment of *pneuma*'s continuing power *in absentia* prompted Derrida to reject Heidegger's attempt at a metaphysical flanking, even as Derrida was clearly sympathetic to Heidegger's plight.[40]

38 Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*, 123–4.
39 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 74.
40 Mowitt, *Sounds*, 82.

How interesting, then, that Derrida's position can also provide an intriguing rejoinder against Irigaray – who so carefully crafted her own method out of the air, promising a more equitable and lively metaphysics out of Heideggerian ashes. As Joanna Faulkner points out, the forgetting of the air that Irigarary casts as the beginning of Western metaphysics was simultaneously understood as a discarding of the feminine. Irigaray argued that even though Heidegger was critical of the Platonic tradition and their legacy of misrepresenting being, his recourse to the earth and the concept of dwelling retained the masculine tinge upon space that also stemmed from this metaphysical legacy. If only Heidegger had embraced the "conception of place as interval, passage, or fluid-medium," – even *airy* – she concluded, then he could have abrogated the problem of sexual difference in his philosophy.[41] For Irigaray, this breathy femininity was not just missing in Heidegger but lost to an entire Christian metaphysics that valorizes the word over the breath. In the essay "The Age of Breath," for example, she casts the title concept as marker of a fully immanentized and feminized sense of divinity, where God becomes an interiorized cohesion of self through spirit rather than an exteriorized patriarchal presence dominated by the ego.[42] Where the word of God divides through the presence of annunciation, the breath of God *coheres* – within ourselves and by extension to each other – through a carnalized divinity born out of the intimacy of silence.[43]

Yet if Irigaray, in her own way, joins in the Derridean crusade against the dominance of *logos*, he'd likely find issue with her doubling down upon breath as her angle of attack. For this is precisely the kind of thinking that falls into Derrida's *tabula rasa* atmosphere trap that often accompanies the amalgamation of breathing with being. In loading the forgotten air with the weight of a femininity's ontological potential, Irigaray enacts her own form of forgetting – a *pneumatic* forgetting. Even the air of Antiquity was already quite full of the very substance that girded the physiology of masculinity from Aristotle through the Romans and all the way into the writings of Aquinas. Perhaps the air was not so much forgotten by metaphysicians as already thought to be occupied. This, in and of itself, does not preclude an attempt to remap the air and breathing as the space of an ethical inclusivity, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty's grounding of philosophy as the "inspiration and expiration of Being" suggests.[44] But inscribing this upon the air seems like writing copious text upon paper, and when exposed to heat one finds their treatise obscured by an invisible ink that emerges from the depths. The perpetual return that Derrida enacts toward pneumatology is nothing less than a nod to the invisible ink upon the *logos*. A lesson that air offers no material avenue of escape from metaphysics, nor can it be an absence bottled and allegorized into a presence. With his pensive acknowledgment of the pervasiveness of *pneuma*, Derrida transforms the air into a space of perpetual haunting.

These are the ghosts that appear throughout his work if you know where to look for them. Take, for instance, the passage in "The Deaths of Roland Barthes" when Derrida speaks about the *punctum* (impact) of the photographic portrait in terms of the "air" of its subject. We take "air" in this context as a term of disposition. Yet the "air" Derrida speaks of "becomes more and more dense, more and more haunted and peopled with ghosts," as it ascends to the level of the metonymic.[45] Layered within, beyond immediate grasp, are the ghosts of the subject; the ghost of his environment; the ghost of her history. When gazing upon the photograph, we cannot help but breathe these specters into the confines of our selves. They are not confined merely to photography but populate every form of representation and artistry that we

41 Faulkner, "Amnesia at the Beginning of Time," 136–7.

42 Irigaray, "Age of Breath," 146–9.

43 For more on Irigaray's unique version of Christian femininity and its relation to divine breath, see De Vries, "Sharing Air," 142–55.

44 Petri Berndtson artfully analyzes the implications of this phrase appearing in Merleau-Ponty's *Eye and Mind*, connecting it to Gaston Bachelard's contention that the interchange of listening to nature manifesting within lies within "aerial" poetry (and by extension, philosophy) that moves with the natural aspirations of the cosmos. Merleau-Ponty's "reversibility" between seeing and being-seen, hearing and being-heard, moves with the rhythms between inspiration and expiration, a sense of "I breathe the world" and "the world breathes me." Berndston, "The Inspiration and Expiration of Being," 281–91. Merleau-Ponty provides an intriguing counterpoint to Derrida since, in contrast to Irigaray, his aerated philosophy sidesteps the *tabula rasa* problem since it engages with the metaphorical potential of breathing apart from the ontological status of the air itself.

45 Derrida, "The Deaths of Roland Barthes," 297.

encounter. Should Derrida be held as a figure that remembered the air, then, it's only in the sense of the ghost. In the same slight caveat – *even including Derrida* – which Derrida first gave to Leibniz in the history of logocentrism. As one who understood the impossibility of disentangling even the physicality of breathing from the blanket of logocentric thought, where the air becomes just another way of articulating the invisible and pervasive pitfalls of epistemology. Or, to put this in more poetic terms, just as Leibniz knew there was no separating the air from *pneuma*, Derrida knew there was no separating *pneuma* from the air.

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