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SAMUEL BECKETT TODAY / AUJOURD'HUI 30 (2018) 179–195

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## Breath Crystals

*A Vestigial Poetics of Breath in Beckett, Celan, and Arikha*

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### Abstract

This essay draws out some largely unremarked aesthetic convergences between Samuel Beckett and two Romanian-Jewish, German-language contemporaries of his: the poet Paul Celan and the painter Avigdor Arikha.

### Résumé

Cet essai met en relief quelques points de confluence esthétique peu remarqués entre Samuel Beckett et deux de ses contemporains juif-roumains d'expression allemande, le poète Paul Celan et le peintre Avigdor Arikha.

### Keywords

breath – aesthetics – trace – vestige – souffle – esthétique – trace – vestige

Adorno's remarks on Beckett's "negative *καίρως*" might properly be extended to Celan's work:

At ground zero, however, where Beckett's plays unfold like forces in infinitesimal physics, a second world of images springs forth, both sad and rich, the concentrate of historical experiences that otherwise, in their immediacy, fail to articulate the essential: the evisceration of subject and reality. This shabby, damaged world of images is the negative imprint of the administered world.

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This essay explores one such convergence around that “negative *καίρως*”, the peculiar and idiosyncratic invocation of breath in both their works as a marker of the marginal presence of human being and as a reduction of the working of art to its minimal element—what Celan in his lecture “Meridian” calls “an *Atemwende*, a turning of breath” (1983, 52/ 1986, 58). At the same time, I extend that convergence to embrace also Beckett’s friend, the artist Avigdor Arikha, whose life forms so many uncanny tangents with Celan’s.

The general aesthetic affinities between Beckett and Celan need only brief elaboration: before the war, Beckett articulated a conception of a “literature of the unword” [*Literatur des Unworts*] (1984, 54; 173) whose ambitions anticipated Celan’s call for poetic efforts which “exposed in an unsuspected, terrifying way, carry their existence into language, racked by reality and in search of it” (1986, 35). For Beckett, the goal of boring “one hole after another” in language, “until what lurks behind it—be it something or nothing—begins to seep through” (1984, 172), was still a project. For Celan, the brutal historical realities that Beckett could only begin to apprehend in 1937 had already imposed an objective fate on language: “it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech” (1986, 34). Boring through language was no longer an aesthetic project, but an objective historical situation that the poet confronted. Likewise, Beckett’s refusal of symbols or Celan’s of metaphor correspond to the desire in each writer to strip away the accretions of banalized or instrumental language use. This project proceeds through the explosively paratactic assemblages and etiolated grammatical structures of Beckett’s late prose and Celan’s intense condensation of German through nonce compounds and tortured syntactical effects. Witness the poem that gives my title, from Celan’s 1960 volume *Atemwende*, “Breathturn”:

*Weggebeizt vom  
Strahlenwind deiner Sprache  
das bunte Gerede des An-  
erlebten—das hundert-  
züngige Mein-  
gedicht, das Genicht.*

Eroded [or bitten away] by  
the beamwind of your speech  
the gaudy chatter of the pseudo-  
experienced—the hundred-  
tongued perjury-  
poem, the noem.

2014, 18–19

As John Felstiner among others has remarked, the term “weggebeizt” refers not only to the geological process of erosion, as Pierre Joris translates it, but also to the bite of acid as it burns the exposed grooves in an etching plate, a process Celan would have been intimate with through the work of his wife, the artist and engraver Gisèle L’Estrange (218–219).<sup>1</sup> The process of etching furnishes an apt metaphor for the biting or eating away of superfluous material in order to expose the essential texture of the work. The poem’s corrosive speech burns off the *bunte Gerede* of false or “perjured” writing, figured here in an allegorical image of the many-tongued [*hundertzüngige*] beast of Error, the false witness that, the poem’s final stanza will suggest, denies the fundamental role of poetry, that of bearing witness.

Celan’s career-long intimacy with visual artists, from the surrealist painter Edgar Jené in Vienna to his relationship with L’Estrange, parallels Beckett’s similarly close relationships to visual artists throughout his life. This biographical parallel underscores another, between Celan and Beckett’s close friend Arikha, whose life chimes almost chiasmatically with Celan’s. Born in Romania in 1929, nine years after Celan, Arikha likewise grew up in the German-speaking Jewish community of Czernowitz. During the war, he was deported along with his mother and sister to a Romanian labor camp. Evacuated by the Red Cross to Palestine, Arikha left Israel in 1950 and eventually settled in Paris, where he met Beckett in 1956 (Thomson, 1994). It would be tempting to dwell on these biographical correspondences and on this missed encounter between two Romanian, Jewish and German-speaking artists, but it is a different, more conceptual convergence that I want to explore here in tracking the motif of breath across the work of all three.

Celan’s poem *Weggebeizt* concludes:

*Tief  
in der Zeitenschrunde,  
beim  
Wabeneis  
wartet, ein Atemkristall,  
dein unumstössliches  
Zeugnis.*

1 Dischner notes that Celan had underlined the term *Weggebeizt* in his copy of Sigmund Günther’s *Physikalische Geographie*, where it describes the wind-erosion of desert pyramids (37). Carson emphasizes the word’s relation to etching (112–114). Thomson and Coppel (28–29) give a useful account of Avigdor Arikha’s etching technique that helps to explain Celan’s metaphor.

Deep  
 in the timecrevasse,  
 in the  
 honeycomb-ice  
 waits, a breathcrystal,  
 your unoverturnable  
 witness.

tr. modified

This image of the poem as a crystal of breath frozen in ice, a hard fragment containing an ephemeral breath that is also an “unoverturnable witness”, peculiarly condenses the concerns of Celan’s later poetry. It locates the poetic utterance deep in the narrow space of the “time-crevasse”, as if it awaits the moment in which that to which it bears witness might be received. The image condenses both the preservative effect of the glacier’s movement that picks up fragments of rock or gravel as well as beads of air and the crevasse-like grooves of the plate that retain the trace of the artist’s hand to become “witnesses”. Speaking out of what he calls, in his lecture “The Meridian”, the “acute accent” of the present (1986, 40–41), it draws the fragility of the breath into conjunction with the hard endurance of witness: that is, testimony to a present that is not a celebration of immediacy, but one saturated with the crystallized seepage of history, including the history of its own language.

As the same lecture has it, poetry is breath that issues from one’s “innermost narrowness” (1986, 52), “aware of the limits drawn by language as of the possibilities it opens” (1986, 49) If language is “shape, direction, breath” (1986, 45), then:

Poetry is perhaps this: an *Atemwende*, a turning of our breath. Who knows, perhaps poetry goes its way—the way of art—for the sake of just such a turn? ...

Perhaps, along with the I, estranged and freed *here, in this manner*, some other thing is also set free?

1986, 47

Elsewhere Celan appears fully attuned to the deep relation, both historical and etymological, between the idea of breath and that of spirit, “that immense semantics of breath, of respiration or inspiration imprinted in Greek or Latin”, as Jacques Derrida puts it (163). Like the biblical wind that “bloweth where it listeth”, breath is traditionally both the metaphor and the sign of the spirit, *Pneuma* or *Spiritus*, that which creates and animates life.<sup>2</sup> Similar connotations

<sup>2</sup> John (3.8).

that Celan would have been aware of cluster around the Hebrew concept of *Ruah* or *Ruach* which lies at the base of the biblical conceptions that inform Western notions of spirit.<sup>3</sup> But it is not insignificant that both “The Meridian” and the volume *Atemwende* from whose title it borrows insist on the noun *Atem*, from the verb *Atmen*, to breathe, rather than *Hauch*—breath, vapor, or mist—which lends itself more obviously to being the metaphor for spirit or life. Metaphorically *Hauch* signifies a touch, air or hint of something and, as Celan might have gathered from Walter Benjamin, is the equivalent of the Greek *aura*.<sup>4</sup> *Atem*, on the contrary, more strongly connotes the physical process and product of breathing, the air taken in and expelled by lungs, nose and mouth in the circuit of respiration. Whereas *Hauch* is that which evaporates, *Atem* is the insistent physiological presence of life and of the peculiar movement of estrangement, that “innering-outering” motion whereby that which is inhaled issues forth as a residue or relic in the expiration, bearing with it the exhausted traces of the self. One might also name it “utterance”, the outerling movement of speech: Büchner’s Lucile—in whose shape Celan meets poetry—“perceives language as shape, direction, breath (*nimmt Sprache als Gestalt und Richtung und Atem wahr*)” (1986, 45; 1983, 49). To Lucile, language appears in its physicality, in the breath that articulates it before it signifies, in its shape and orientation rather than in some notion of spirit that informs it. She apprehends both language and breath as *things* before she understands them as signs and, indeed, the only speech act of hers that Celan cites is, famously, her absurd and, in his ears, anarchic, “Es Lebe der König!”, an “act of freedom” with the materiality of “a step” that negates the tendency, the direction of the present as a “word against the grain” (1986, 40). Breath and step: throughout “The Meridian”, these are Celan’s terms for poetry, figures that set poetry “on its way” through a certain disequilibrium that is the condition of any encounter and that holds to the letter, not the spirit, of the utterance. The poem is the material trace of an exhalation, of the being who has expired and persisted in the turning of the breath, breath that is the movement of the self-estrangement to which it bears its *unumstössliches* witness.

Arikha has a strikingly correspondent formulation regarding the nature of painting: “Art is nothing. It is a breath, it passes through the breath and stays in the breath” (221). As he elsewhere remarked, “the paint in a Velazquez looked

3 See Derrida, 164–167, and also Dischner, 38.

4 See Benjamin’s use of the term *Hauchkreis*, “breathy halo”, in “Kleine Geschichte der Photographie” (1966, 237; english transl. 1999, 517).



FIGURE 1  
Avigdor Arikha, *Samuel Beckett with a Glass of Wine* (brush and sumi ink on Japan paper, 26 × 33.7 cm, 1969)  
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as if it had been ‘blown on in one breath’” (qtd. in Rose, 1985, 18). This effect of paint, or in the drawings, ink, being blown onto the canvas or paper, recurs in Arikha’s work and is beautifully captured by the critic Barbara Rose:

Because form in Arikha’s drawing is not mass but surface, these ephemeral mists, clots, bursts of ink, appear as fragile and delicately connected as a spiderweb. Matter is dematerialized into film, becoming a hazy atmosphere or an insubstantial mirage about to dissolve once more into air.

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Typical of this style are the pen and ink portraits of Beckett that Arikha produced shortly after he had abandoned his earlier commitment to abstract painting and committed himself for six or seven years solely to drawing and etching, seeking to learn again how to render the seen or observed directly from life.

The two images here illustrate finely not only his astonishing skills as a draughtsman and his uncanny capacity to render the visible, but also the formal dimension of the claim Arikha makes in the essay “Looking at Painting,” that:

In all that is, all that is no longer is evoked: testimony, echo, a mirror’s shadow, what a life was. It will end without a surveyor’s view of it. Only traces inadvertently left.

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In these drawings, the trace of the past is the trace of the hand, proceeding nervously, rapidly, that generated these “clots” and “mists” of ink out of which the drawing emerges. It is as if, for example, the spare strands of brushed ink that compose the writer’s hair in “Samuel Beckett with a Cigar” cannot forget that they are lifted out of the dark mass of ink that forms his jacket and the



FIGURE 2 Avigdor Arikha, *Samuel Beckett with a Cigar* (brush and sumi ink on gessoed paper, 35 × 27 cm, 1970)  
 © ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/DACS, LONDON, 2019. PHOTO GEORGES MEGUERDITCHIAN; CNAC/NMAM/DIST. RMN-GRAND PALAIS/ART RESOURCE, NEW YORK.



FIGURE 3

Avigdor Arikha, *Self-Portrait Shouting One Morning*  
(sugar aquatint on Mino paper, 46 × 38 cm, 1969)

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chair he occupies: their materiality as inky marks on paper constantly counterpoints the image they compose and which is the object of the artist's and our attention, the trace of a life to which it bears witness. The peculiar balance or oscillation Arikha everywhere achieves between the foregrounding of his formal and material means and the emergence from them of a figure, itself a trace of the past, is nowhere more evident than in another of his drawings, "Self-Portrait Shouting One Morning" (Fig. 3). Contemplating this work we are obliged to follow the circulation of the wisps of ink around the dark abyss of the silently shouting mouth through which Arikha seeks to capture an instant in the present and at the same time grasp its "testimony, echo, a mirror's shadow" of history, the baleful trace of Arikha's terror in the labor camps. The life or immediacy that infuses the inorganic material tracing of the drawing as such paradoxically counterpoints the image that appears to emit the memory-trace of life reduced to thingliness.

Indeed, the peculiar contradiction between the moment depicted and the attentively focused gaze to which this extraordinarily accomplished image testifies underscores the painful split between the past in which the self is lost and the traces of that past which one thus captures indirectly. Arikha's drawing demands exactly the state of concentration that Celan ascribes—in strikingly painterly terms—to the poem:

The attention which the poem pays to all it encounters, its more acute sense of detail, outline, structure, colour, but also of the 'tremors and hints'—all this is not, I think, achieved by an eye competing (or concurring) with ever more precise instruments, but, rather, by a kind of concentration mindful of all our dates.

1986, 50

Arikha's work likewise communicates nothing; it presents the thing as it appears in its strangeness in a moment of sustained concentration and in doing so seeks to elicit the attention of the other for the sake of seeing rather than meaning or instructing.

For both Arikha and Celan, the state of attention that governs the work of poem or drawing is directed towards the encounter with the other: rather than communicate the "pseudo-experience" embodied in information, it pursues the state of suspension in which the other—*dieses 'ganz Anderen'*—is encountered. Such a state of suspension before (self-)estrangement is what Benjamin, citing Malebranche, defined as attentiveness, "the natural prayer of the soul."<sup>5</sup> It is an *Atempause*, a "pause for breath" that is also a pause *in* the breath, a moment where the motion of breathing is itself suspended (1986, 48/ 1983, 54). The *Atempause*—the catch in the breath that is the interval that divides inspiration from expiration—is also where the breath turns: the *Atemwende* in which "along with the I, estranged and freed *here, in this manner*, something else (*noch ein Anderes*) is set free" (1986, 47/ 1983, 52).

According to Celan, poetry is "set free under the sign of a radical individuation" (1986, 49) that allows it to become "art-less, art-free" (*auf diese kunst-lose, kunst-freie Weise*) (1986, 47/ 1983, 52). Similarly, Arikha finds in drawing from life the means to emancipate art from the academic mannerism that comes from drawing from models, ideals, or memory. Drawing from life establishes a peculiar dialectic, "supposing supreme mastery and the dismissal of mastery at the same time" (109). It necessarily involves what one might call a very Beckettian process of "unlearning" learnt skills in order to bypass the hindrances of acquired models, failing ever better, to paraphrase *Worstward Ho*. Arikha's version of "failing better" was "Improving craft: by getting better one gets worse. The better you paint, the worse you get" (qtd. in Channin 1985, 49). The quality that distinguishes the life-drawing from the painting produced from memory, photograph, or even from a drawing done from observation Arikha calls energy or *breath*, "the trace of life, that breath their source contains" (130–131).

Arikha's notion of breath is in part borrowed from Chinese writings on art, where it represents the "vital force" or *ch'i*, and is for him the crucial quality that differentiates an artwork both from academic idealism and from the "image", which "has to be read ... somewhat like information, given and received, of an event which one did not actually experience oneself" (220). The art of breath is grounded, accordingly, in a fundamentally "anti-accumulative" aesthetic: "the

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5 Celan is referring to Walter Benjamin's essay, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death" (1969).

accumulation of any previously acquired knowledge of a face or a figure has to be left behind the threshold of the present sitter" (132).<sup>6</sup> As a result, "Drawing from observation is an endless recommencement." The uniqueness and "subjective imprint" that imbues the work thus produced is "not unlike the power of the wind rearranging sand into patterns": it is, in other words, the trace left where the breath of life in the object is given back through the circuit of the artist's attention, in its *Atemwende* (133–134).

Breath here is not simply the organic pulse of the breathing body. It is as much a faltering, or mis-step, in the breath, Celan's "terrifying silence" that "takes his—and our—breath and words away" (2014, 47). The breath that materializes in such a work of Arikha's, in its ink and its brushstrokes, is at once a trace and an anticipation, the anticipation of what will "come to" in the work that emerges, with its burden of sedimented memory and its intuition of the estranged afterlife that its "deep marks", as Beckett put it in his brief commentary on Arikha's work, will trace:

Back and forth the gaze beating against unseeable and unmakeable. Truce for a space and the marks of what it is to be and to be in face of. Those deep marks to show.

1984, 152

Breathing anticipates in the double sense of *vorgreifen* or precognition and in that of dread, what Beckett once nicely termed "fear—followed by no genitive" (2009, 73). Dread is the sense of unease that pre-exists or "anticipates" any causative object, the intransitive awareness of alterity in and before the subject, bearing witness to the finitude, spatial and temporal, of the human.

The rhythm of breathing is the uncanny occasion of dread: it oscillates between the animate and the inanimate, in-spiration and ex-piration, marking the ambiguous borderline between spirit and body in a physical motion that signifies animation, the possession of spirit, and animality, the corporeality of the mere mortal creature. Breathing does not demarcate the difference between the animal and human endowed with soul or spirit, *pneuma* or *anima*, but embodies the indeterminate threshold between them, the zone of indistinction between human and animal, spirit and mere body, mere life. Is the very motion of breathing, inhalation-expiration, not always a reminder of the mortality with which the absence of breath threatens the spiritual creature? If every breath is the anticipation of expiration, if every anticipation is expressed

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6 On the anti-accumulative ethic of aesthetics, see Sarita Echavez See.

in an intake, a holding of breath, is it not also the occasion of dread, of the anxiety that its movement in the rhythm of mortality itself inspires? Breath, we could say, is the intimacy of death within the subject.

Unlike the eye that gazes, the voice that dictates and commands, or the limbs that fail and atrophy, breath is not a notably recurrent motif in Beckett's works and certainly not the focus of many critical readings in the way in which physical disability gave rise to the "Cartesian Centaur" or the insistent voice of the novels to dense linguistic meditations.<sup>7</sup> The place of breath seems liminal in Beckett's writings, despite the conclusion of one of his earliest stories, "Dante and the Lobster" with an ironic—and dread-full—invocation of Keats's "take into the air my quiet breath" and despite, above all, the notoriety of what must be by reputation at least his most famous dramatic work after *Waiting for Godot*, that is, *Breath* (2006, 3: 399–401). In this much-parodied scenario, two sounds punctuate the silence of the faintly-lit and waste-strewn stage. The first is the vaginal cry, the instant of birth, the second an amplified recording of breathing. A ten-second inspiration is accompanied by increasing light, followed by five-second silence—an *Atempause*—and then a ten-second expiration accompanied by light decreasing to a minimum level. Paired with the vagitus, the expiration can hardly help being read as what the word also signifies, the passage into death: breathing thus signifies here not the transcendent presence and movement of the spirit, but the insistent moment of inanimation in the animate. The exhausted traces of the breath are the invisible counterpart of the waste materials that litter the stage even as they continue to bear witness to the vestiges of the life of which they are the relicts.

Breath is thus both a liminal motif in Beckett's oeuvre and an index of liminality itself, of the ever-uncertain boundary between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness, animation and inanimate matter, speech and the mere murmur or rasp of an exhalation. In Beckett's late prose, breath remains an occasional and mostly unremarkable trace of life. In *Company* or *Ill Seen Ill Said*, steps or paces are painstakingly counted and calculated, but the innumerable breaths of the mortal creature are left untold. In the latter text, however, it is breath that outlasts the gradual erasure of light and gaze, pace and sound; it is the last trace as the traces of life are dispelled:

Farewell to farewell. Then in that perfect dark foreknell darling sound pip  
for end begun. First last moment. Grant only enough remain to devour

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7 Hugh Kenner's essay, "The Cartesian Centaur" (1961) inaugurated the thematics of the body-mind schism in Beckett studies; Olga Bernal (1969) remains the outstanding study of the dynamics of Beckett's fictions from a linguistic perspective.

all. Moment by glutton moment. Sky earth the whole kit and boodle. Not another crumb of carrion left. Lick chops and basta. No. One moment more. One last. Grace to breathe that void. Know happiness.

2006, 3: 470

“Grace to breathe that void” is a painfully ambiguous phrase. Does it imply that breathing is a gift only on the condition that what is breathed is void, empty of life or sustenance, air or spirit? Is “that void” appositional, so that the phrase would imply that this unexpectedly granted penultimate moment of breath, the *Atempause*, is itself a void space, a moment of merely breathing in which suspension is emptiness? What is the force of grace, with its equally powerful connotations of divine and social gifts, redemption, elegance and “graciousness”? Does the final happiness—if not negated by the audible pun on know and no—follow on this moment where breath is devoid of any relation to spirit or ongoing life and signifies nothing more than self-attentive apperception, the awareness of one’s intake or exhalation of breath as simply that? Breath, then, would be the final or minimal instance of self-consciousness encountered only in the moment in which, as Celan puts it, one has become an “estranged I”, aware of nothing but the groundless fact of gratuitous being, “the sky below, an abyss” (1986, 46).

This is what Beckett renders in the contemporaneous brief prose piece, “Ceiling” dedicated to Arikha in 1981 (Channing, 1985, 12).<sup>8</sup> “Ceiling” tracks with painstaking slowness the moment of waking or “coming to” perception and apperception, consciousness and self-consciousness. As in comparable late texts like *Ill Seen Ill Said* or *Worstward Ho*, the “midget grammar” of “Ceiling” sustains a play on the antithetical meanings of the preposition *to*: at once opening—coming to consciousness or sight—and closing, as in “the door is to”, or, as here, “the eyes continue to”. The ambiguity embeds the sense that to “come to” to one phenomenon is to close off to another; that consciousness, and the self-consciousness it entails, is a state of estrangement:

On coming to, the first sight is of white. Some time after coming to the first sight is of dull white. For some time after coming to the eyes continue to.

8 “Ceiling” was published in Channing et al, *Arikha*, p. 12. It was also published in Thomson and Coppel, eds, *Avigdor Arikha From Life*, p. 7. The text is collected in Samuel Beckett, *Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho and Stirrings Still* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009). A detailed genetic account of the manuscript of this text is available at the University of Texas at Austin’s Harry Ransom Center: <http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/web/beckett/career/finalworks/manuscripts.html>.

When in the end they open they are met by this dull white. Consciousness eyes to of having come to.

It is one of those “periods of transition” which, we will recall from the essay on Proust, “represent the perilous zones in the life of the individual, dangerous, precarious, painful, mysterious and fertile, when for a moment the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being” (2006, 4: 19), a moment such as that in which Proust’s narrator “is tortured by a high ceiling, being used to a low ceiling” (2006, 4: 516–517). Beckett’s speaker shares this deep sense of painful disorientation:

No knowledge of where gone from. Nor of how. Nor of whom. None of whence come to. Partly to. Nor of how. Nor of whom. None of anything. Save dimly of having come to. Partly to. With dread of being again.

qtd. in CHANNIN, 1985, 12

The trace that remains of the past is the anticipation of the “again”, that is, dread. This, perhaps, is the underlying continuum in the conception of the breath that links Beckett, Arikha and Celan on a common terrain of aesthetic understanding, its conception as at once the sedimented trace of the past in the present and the dread of what “comes to” in bearing witness: it is the rhythm not of the physiological body, but of the being suspended between the “deep marks” of the past and a commitment to the acute accent of the present that refuses redemption by the grand narratives of historical optimism.<sup>9</sup> Once again, the concluding phrases of Beckett’s brief text invoke the liminal status of the breath: “Dull with breath. Endless breath. Endless ending breath. Dread darling sight.” Breath is precisely the trace of what expires and yet goes on again, endlessly ending and recommencing even at the very threshold of life itself: a “perilous zone” or “period of transition” in which “the consecutive adaptations” of the subject to the world in which it is estranged find their minimal form.

Breath is, in other terms, the vestige of being. As a vestige, it ties together Beckett’s traces of breath with the paces that mark the snow of *Ill Seen Ill Said* or *Company* and the conception of poetry in Celan’s *Meridian* as at once breath and step: all are *vestigial*, footprints, traces of the human, “inadvertently left”, as Arikha puts it. Breath as metaphor for art stands against a long tradition of aesthetic thought that identifies art with *form*. In that tradition, form assumes as

9 On Arikha and Beckett’s refusal of history as an aesthetic organizing concept, see Lloyd, 2016, 187–190.

its informing origin a self-determining expressive subject, exemplary and representative of the human as subject of freedom, master of the object that brings form to the mere matter of the senses.<sup>10</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy has compellingly articulated the counter-concept of art as vestige in contrast to the dichotomy of form and sense that has structured the aesthetic, in Hegelian terms, as the “sensible presentation of the Idea”. The vestige, as he points out, is neither the image nor even the form of the step that leaves its trace, but merely “the remains of a step, a *pas*” (1996, 98).<sup>11</sup> The invocation of the French *pas* not only calls to mind, as Nancy notes, Blanchot and Derrida’s famous essays on this word, but also casts the vestige as a moment of near-negation, “the name of the *almost nothing* that is the vestige” (94). This is not a dialectical negation, leading to the subsumption of the thing into the destiny of form or spirit, but the negation that is “the tracing, the step, of its disappearance” (96). The trace is not the image of the subject, but the mark of its passing. As such, it bears witness: “the vestige bears witness to a step, a walk, a dance, or a leap, to a succession, an élan, a repercussion, a coming-and-going, a *transire*” (97).

The vestige is, then, not the expression or the image of the subject, but the trace of its passing, or the effacement of the subject in and by its trace. Opposed to the idea of the Image, the trace is equally counter to Hegel’s notion of the aesthetic as the domain in which man duplicates and produces himself in the artwork, of that “mode of self-production in external things which is present in the work of art” (1975, 1: 31). In a related essay on the prehistoric cave paintings of Lascaux, “Painting in the Grotto”, Nancy offers an alternative etiology of the artwork which situates it not as a means to self-reproduction but as a mode of giving presence to estrangement:

There is in fact no reason to lend these forms and figures any other sense than the sense without signification of the exposition whereby presence makes itself a stranger, holding the world and the subject up before themselves as before an absent sense: not a lost sense, nor one that is distanced or deferred, but a sense given in the absence as in the most simple estranged simplicity of presence—being without being or without essence that founds it, causes it, justifies it, or sanctifies it. Being simply existing.

1996, 72

10 On the role of philosophical aesthetics in constituting the human as subject of freedom, see my *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (forthcoming, 2018).

11 As he points out, the word vestige derives from the Latin *vestigium* “which designates first of all the sole of a shoe or the sole of a foot, a trace, a footprint” (95).

It is to such “simple being” in its strangeness and absence of sense that Beckett’s waking subject comes [to] in “Ceiling”: the work traces and is the trace of such a coming to where the strangeness of “being simply existing” is attended with the dread at what Nancy calls “the subject looming up from its death, the suspended sense, the obscure obviousness” (69). And to a degree unusual even in Beckett’s late texts, the absence of sense and the presence of strangeness find absolutely no image: only consciousness bearing witness to its self-consciousness in face of the “dull white” that it opens to.

As the most vestigial of vestiges, breath appears at the very limit of the subject’s vanishing: in Arikha, Beckett and Celan, breath is no longer the vehicle of communication or the vessel of language. It is evacuated of the forms of speech and of intention, reduced to the cycle of inhalation and expiration or, in Celan’s case, to the crystalline remainder that bears witness to the having been. Breath for these artists is something paradoxically “anorganic”, to borrow an expression that Adorno uses of Beckett and Celan (219). Just as the breath-crystal contains nothing more than the chemical constituents of an exhausted exhalation, yet in its inorganic endurance holds the trace of a human passing “deep in the time-crevasse”, so this poetics of breath gestures towards an aesthetic adequate both to the “new thing that has happened” that Beckett limned in an early review, the breakdown of the subject-object relation (1984, 70), and to the subsequent catastrophe that the Holocaust foreshadowed: the utter reification of human and non-human beings in our time. Adorno writes of Celan’s “hermetic” poems:

They imitate a language beneath the helpless language of human beings, indeed beneath all organic language: It is that of the dead speaking of stones and stars. ... The language of the lifeless becomes the last possible comfort for a death that is deprived of all meaning.

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In the sealed cells of Beckett’s late texts, a comparable “language of the lifeless” struggles “to end yet again” in a last expiration, “slowly dispelled a little very little like the last wisps of day when the curtain closes” (2006, 3: 59). It remains to be seen whether out of the “innermost narrowness” of these vestigial texts something other, something both wholly other and as yet unprecedented, waits to be set free.

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