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Breathing

Chaos and Poetry

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I CAN'T BREATHE

I suffer from asthma, so perhaps I was affected by a sense of asthmatic solidarity when I saw the video of Eric Garner's assassination. Garner was killed on July 17, 2014 in Staten Island, New York City, when a New York City Police Department officer put him in a chokehold for about fifteen to nineteen seconds while arresting him. The words "I can't breathe"—which Garner panted eight times, less and less audibly, before expiring—have been chanted by thousands of demonstrators all over the country in the months since.

In many ways, these words express the general sentiment of our times: physical and psychological breathlessness everywhere, in the megacities choked by pollution, in the precarious social condition of the majority of exploited workers, in the pervading fear of violence, war, and aggression. Trump is the perfect emperor for this baroque

empire of unchained vulgarity, glamorous hypocrisy, and silent, widespread suffering.

Respiration is a subject that will help me discuss our contemporary chaos and search for an escape from the corpse of capitalism. I'll start by reading Friedrich Hölderlin.

Hölderlin belongs to the tradition of German Romanticism, but his pathway diverges from idealism because he opposes an ironic interrogation of Reality to the assertive style of Hegelian dialectic rationalism. Hegel chose the path of bigotry, the modern bigotry of History conceived as the becoming real of Truth.

Hölderlin was not such a bigot, and he did not follow this pathway that leads to historical delusion. In "Mnemosyne," he writes, "A sign we are, without interpretation / Without pain we are and have nearly / Lost our language in foreign lands."¹

Hegel, who was a colleague of Hölderlin's during their college years in Tübingen, finds the unity of man in the concept, and in the historical "becoming true" of the concept. Hölderlin does not fall into the trapdoor of Hegel's *Aufhebung* (sublation). He does not buy idealism's faith in the historical realization of *Geist* (spirit). His ground for understanding reality is not *Geschichte* (History), but *Begeisterung* (inspiration). Hölderlin intuits that the intimate texture of being is breathing: poetical rhythm.

I intend to emphasize here the ontological meaning of “rhythm”: foundationally, “rhythm” refers not only to vocal emissions or to the sound of acoustic matter, but also to the vibration of the world. Rhythm is the inmost vibration of the cosmos. And poetry is an attempt to tune into this cosmic vibration, this temporal vibration that is coming and coming and coming.

Mystical Buddhist philosophy distinguishes between the Indian words *shabda* and *mantra*. *Shabda* is a word for ordinary speech sounds, used to denote objects and concepts in the normal exchange of operational signifieds. A *mantra*, on the other hand, is a vocal sound that triggers the creation of mental images and sensible meanings. While *shabda* acts on the level of the operational chains of functional daily communication, *mantra* acts on the rhythm of the body and its relation with the semio-sphere—which is the source of the human world. *Ātman*, in this philosophy, is the singular breathing of each sensitive and conscious organism; *prana* is the cosmic vibration that we perceive as rhythm.

In “Notes on Antigone,” Hölderlin opposes a poetical logic to the conceptual logic of the then-emerging idealism. Against Hegel’s panlogism, Hölderlin advocates a sort of panpoeticism. We should not dismiss this stance as merely Romantic patheticism, for there is a deep philosophical core to

Hölderlin's suggestion. Hölderlin means that poetry is the semiotic flow that emanates the perceptual and narrative forms that shape the common sphere of experience. Reality, in other words, is the sphere of human interaction and communication secreted by language and refined by poetry. Poetry builds and instills the strata of mythopoiesis: it is the inspiration of the social imagination and of political discourse. In Hölderlin's words, "poets establish what remains."² Respiration and semiosis: this is the conceptual couple that I want to consider in order to understand something of our contemporary chaos.

Chaos and rhythm are the main threads of this book, which roams about the apocalypse of our time: in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the mindscape and the social scene are flooded by flows of unhappiness and violence. In his poetry, Hölderlin foresees the forthcoming chaos of modernity and the coming breathlessness. It's a problem of measure, he says. There is no earthly measure, so our sense of measure (rhythm) is only a projection of our breathing: poetry. This is why man lives poetically, although he "deserves" differently. Hölderlin: "May a man look up / From the utter hardship of his life / And say: Let me also be / Like these [gods]? Yes. As long as kindness lasts, / Pure, within his heart, he may gladly measure himself / Against the divine."³

Poetry as Excess

What is poetry? Why do human beings deal poetically with words, sounds, and visual signs? Why do we slip away from the level of conventional semiosis? Why do we loosen signs from their established framework of exchange?

Hölderlin writes, "Full of merit, yet poetically / Man dwells on this earth."⁴ The poetical act is here opposed to the "deservingness," or merit, of man. What is merit? I think that merit is the quality of being worthy, of deserving praise or reward, the quality of measuring up to the (conventional) values of individuals in a given social scene.

Social beings are more or less full of merits. They deserve recognition as they exchange words and actions in a worthy way, and they receive mutual understanding as a sort of moral payment, a confirmation of their place in the theater of social exchange. Merits and moral payments and recognition are part of the conventional sphere. When humans exchange words in the social space, they presume that their words have established meanings and produce predictable effects. However, we are also able to utter words that break the established relation between signifier and signified, and open new possibilities of interpretation, new horizons of meaning.

In the last lines of the same poem, Hölderlin writes: "Is there measure on earth? There is /

None.”⁵ Measure is only a convention, an inter-subjective agreement which is the condition of merit (social recognizability). Poetry is the excess which breaks the limit and escapes measure. The ambiguousness of poetical words, indeed, may be defined as semantic overinclusiveness. Like the schizo, the poet does not respect the conventional limits of the relation between the signifier and signified, and reveals the infinitude of the process of meaning-making (signification). Exactness and compliance are the conditions of merit and exchange. Excessiveness is the condition of revelation, of emancipation from established meaning and of the disclosure of an unseen horizon of signification: the possible.

What we are accustomed to call “the world” is an effect of a process of semiotic organization of prelinguistic matter. Language organizes time, space, and matter in such a way that they become recognizable to human consciousness. This process of semiotic emanation does not reveal a natural given; rather, it unfolds as a perpetual reshuffling of material contents, a continuous reframing of our environment. Poetry can be defined as the act of experimenting with the world by reshuffling semiotic patterns.

Did I say: poetry can be defined? Well actually the act of definition that I have just performed is arbitrary and illicit, because the question “What is

poetry?” cannot be answered. I cannot say what poetry “is,” because, actually, poetry “is” nothing. I can only try to say what poetry *does*.

The act of composing signs (visual, linguistic, musical, and so on) may disclose a space of meaning that is neither preexistent in nature nor based on a social convention. The poetical act is the emanation of a semiotic flow that sheds a light of nonconventional meaning on the existing world. The poetical act is a semiotic excess hinting beyond the limit of conventional meaning, and simultaneously it is a revelation of a possible sphere of experience not yet experienced (that is to say, the experienceable). It acts on the limit between the conscious and the unconscious in such a way that this limit is displaced and parts of the unconscious landscape—of what Freud called the “inner foreign country”—are illuminated (or distorted) and resignified.⁶

That said, I have so far said nothing, or nearly nothing. Very little. Actually, poetry is *the* act of language that cannot be defined, as “to define” means to limit, and poetry is precisely the excess that goes beyond the limits of language, which is to say beyond the limits of the world itself. Only a phenomenology of poetical events can give us a map of poetical possibilities.

“Is there measure on earth? There is / None,” Hölderlin writes. He continues, “No created world

ever hindered / The course of thunder.”⁷ Let’s forget measure, let’s forget technical capability social competence and functional proficiency. These measurable entities have invaded the modern mindscape and accelerated the rhythm of the info-sphere up to the point of the current psycho-collapse and techno-fascism. Let’s try to think outside the sphere of measurability and of measure. Let’s find a way to rhythmically evolve with the cosmos. Let’s go out of this century of measure, let’s go out to breathe together.

Félix Guattari speaks of “chaosmosis”: the process of rebalancing the osmosis between the mind and chaos.⁸ Hölderlin speaks of poetry as linguistic vibration, oscillation, and quest, of a rhythm tuned to the chaosmotic evolution that simultaneously involves mind and world.

VOICE SOUND NOISE

Chaos as Spasm

Chaosmosis is the title of Félix Guattari's final book.¹ The concept of chaosmosis emerged from Guattari's previous work, particularly from his and Gilles Deleuze's concept of the refrain (*ritournelle*). The term "chaosmosis" alludes to the incumbency of chaos, and the prospect of chaos's osmotic evolution itself. The groundwork of chaosmosis is the ceaseless interplay between cosmic respiration and refrains of singularity.

The established order—social, political, economic, and sexual—aims to enforce a concatenation that stiffens and stifles the vibrational oscillation of singularities. This stiffening of vibrant bodies results in what Guattari calls "spasms."² Guattari did not have time to further elaborate his concept of the chaosmic spasm, as he died a few months

after the publication of *Chaosmosis*, but I think that this concept is crucial for an understanding of subjectivity under today's conditions of informational acceleration.

The spasm provokes suffering and breathlessness in the nervous system and the consciousness of the social organism. But the spasm is “chaosmic,” in Guattari's terms, inasmuch as it invites the organism to remodulate its vibration and to create, *ex nihilo*, a harmonic order by way of resingularization. Music is the vibrational search for a possible conspiracy beyond the limits of the noise of the environment, and the recomposition of fragments of noise in a sound that embodies a conscious vibrational intention. In the spasm sound collapses into noise, a tangle of inaudible voices.

Thinking with Guattari's chaosmosis, we may reframe the concepts of history and of historical time. When we speak of “history,” when we view events from a historical perspective, we are imposing a certain modulation of our perception and projection of time. Historical perception is the effect of a mental organization of time within a teleological frame. Historical perception shapes time into an all-encompassing dimension that forces individuals and groups to share their temporalities according to a uniform meter and a teleological (or economic) frame. People enter the historical domain when they all hear more or less

the same music in their ears. Time is captured by a certain rhythmic refrain, so people march at the same pace. This shared pace of time's temporality, perception, and projection is called "history." Only thanks to the harmonization of different temporalities can history frame time's myriad events within a common projectual narrative structure.

Time and Spasm

For Henri Bergson, time is defined from the point of view of our consciousness of duration. Time is the objectivation of a biological organism's act of breathing, which is sensitive and conscious. Singular respiration is concatenated with others' breathing, and this corespiration we name "society." Society is the dimension in which singular durations are rearranged in a shared time-frame.

Consciousness is located in time, but time is located in consciousness, as it can only be perceived and projected by consciousness. "Time" means the duration of the stream of consciousness, the projection of that dimension in which consciousness flows. The stream of consciousness, however, is not homogeneous: on the contrary, it is perceived and projected according to different rhythms and singular refrains, and sometimes it is codified and arranged into a regular, rhythmic repetition.

In the industrial age, when a dominant rhythm was imposed over the spontaneous rhythms of social subjects, power could be described as a code aligning different temporalities, an all-encompassing rhythm framing and entangling the singularity of individuals' refrains. We could speak of Political sovereignty when the sound of law was silencing the noise emitted from the social environment. In our contemporary connective postindustrial society, the opposite is true: power is no longer constructed by silencing the crowd (for example, through censorship, broadcast media, or the solemnity of political discourse), but is based on the boundless intensification of noise. Today, social signification is no longer a system of the exchange and decoding of signifiers, but a saturation of the listening mind—a neural hyperstimulation. While political order used to be effected by a voice proclaiming law amid the silence of the crowd, contemporary postpolitical power is a statistical function that emerges from the noise of the crowd.

Referring to the swarm-like behavior of networked culture, Byung-Chul Han summarizes the transformation that has occurred in the relation between power and information: "Shitstorms occur for many reasons. They arise in a culture where respect is lacking and indiscretion prevails. The shitstorm represents an authentic phenomenon of digital communication . . . *Sovereign is he who*

commands the shitstorms of the Net."³ This is a good way to explain the ascent of the Emperor of Chaos to the highest political office in the world, the presidency of the United States of America. Modern power was based on the ability to forcibly impose one's own voice and to silence others: "Without the loudspeaker, we would never have conquered Germany," Hitler wrote in 1938 in the *Manual of German Radio*.⁴ Now, power emerges from the storm of inaudible voices. Power no longer consists in eavesdropping and censoring. On the contrary, it stimulates expression and draws rules of control from the statistical elaboration of data emerging from the noise of the world. Social sound is turned into white noise and white noise becomes social order.

In Deleuze and Guattari's parlance, the "refrain" is a concatenation of signs, particularly phonetic sounds and phonetic vibrations; the refrain is a semiotic concatenation (*agencement sémiotique*) that enables the organism to enter its singular cosmos into a wider concatenation. Time is the projection of a singularity (*durée*, in Bergson) and is simultaneously the frame of interindividual conjunction, the grid where uncountable refrains interweave.

Music is a peculiar mode of chaomosis: the osmotic process of transforming chaos into harmony. Music's process of signification is based on directly shaping the listener's body-mind: music is psychedelic (meaning, etymologically, "mind-manifesting").

Music deploys in time, yet the reverse is also true: making music is the act of projecting time, of interknitting perceptions in time. Rhythm is the mental elaboration of time, the common code that links time perception and time projection. The emanation of sound is part of the overall creation of a social cosmos: Steve Goodman speaks of “sonic warfare” in order to describe the invasion of society’s acoustic sphere by sonic hypermachines that besiege acoustic attention, imposing a rhythm in which singularity is cancelled.⁵

Code, Debt, and the Future

Code is “speaking” us. Code is a tool for the submission of the future to language, enabled by the inscription of algorithms into the flux of language. The future is now being written by the algorithmic chain inscribed in techno-linguistic automatisms.

Prescriptions, prophecies, and injunctions are ways of inscribing the future in language, and, more pointedly, of actually producing the future by means of language. Like prescriptions, prophecies, and injunctions, code has the power to prescribe the future, by formatting linguistic relations and the pragmatic development of algorithmic signs. Financial code, for instance, triggers a series of linguistic automatisms which perform social activity, consumption patterns, and lifestyles.

“Money makes things happen. It is the source of action in the world and perhaps the only power we invest in,” writes Robert J. Sordello in *Money and the Soul of the World*.⁶ Money and language have something in common: they are nothing and yet affect everything. They are nothing but symbols, conventions, *flatus vocis*, yet they have the power to persuade human beings to act, to work, and to transform physical things. Language, like money, is nothing. Yet like money, language can do anything. Language and money are shaping our future in many ways. They are prophetic.

Prophecy is a form of prediction that acts on the development of the future by way of persuasion and emotion. Thanks to the social effects of psychological reactions to language, prophecy can be self-fulfilling. The financial economy, for instance, is marked by self-fulfilling prophecies. When ratings agencies downgrade the value of an enterprise or the value of a nation's economy, they make a prediction about the future performance of that enterprise or economy. But this prediction so heavily influences actors in the economic game that the downgrading results in an actual loss of reliability and an actual loss of economic value—thus fulfilling the prophecy. How can we escape the effects of prophecy? How can we escape the effects of code? These are two different problems, of course, but they share something in common.

Poetry as Semiotic Insolvency

In his preface to *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein writes, “in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought).”⁷ Later, he posits:

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.

Logic pervades the world: the limits of the world are also its limits.

So we cannot say in logic, ‘The world has this in it, and this, but not that.’

[. . .]

We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot *say* either.

[. . .]

The subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world.⁸

The potency and extension of language depend on the consistency of the subject: on its vision, on its situation. And the extension of my world depends on the potency of my language. The process of going beyond the limits of the world is what Guattari calls “chaosmosis.” He speaks of chaosmosis “rekindling processes of semiotisation”: i.e., redefining the semiotic grid.⁹ The semiotic grid is

a tangle that limits the possibilities of experience, and therefore limits the experienceable world itself.

“Chaosmosis” means breathing with chaos—“osmosis” implies breathing together—but in this osmosis with chaos a new harmony emerges, a new sympathy, a new syntony. This “emergence” is an effect of autopoietic morphogenesis: a new form emerges and takes shape when logical-linguistic conditions make it possible to see it and to name it. Only an act of language escaping the technical automatisms of financial capitalism will enable the emergence of a new life form. Only the reactivation of the body of the general intellect—the organic, existential, historical finitude that harbors the potency of the general intellect—will enable the imagination of new infinities.

Language has infinite potency, but the exercise of language happens in finite conditions of history and existence. Thanks to the establishment of a limit, the world comes to exist as a world of language. Grammar, logic, and ethics are all based on the imposition of a limit. Code is a limited exercise of language and, simultaneously, it is the imposition of a performing and productive limit. Limits can be productive, but outside of the space of limitation, infinite possibilities of language persist immeasurably.

Code implies syntactic exactness of linguistic signs: connection. Compatibility and consistency

and syntactic exactness are the conditions of code's operational functionality. Code is language in debt. Only by exacting the necessary syntactic consistency can language perform its connective purpose. The leftover excess is the *remise en question* of language's infinity, the breakdown of consistency, the reopening of the horizon of possibility. Excess plays the game of conjunction (the game of bodies looking to make meaning out of *any* syntax), not the preformatted game of connection.

Poetry reopens the indefinite, through the ironic act of exceeding the established meaning of words. In every sphere of human activity, grammar establishes limits in order to define a space of communication. In the age of capitalism, the economy has taken the place of the universal grammar traversing the different levels of human activity: language, too, is defined and limited by its economic exchangeability. However, while social communication is a limited process, language is boundless: its potentiality is not limited by the limits of the signified. Poetry is the excess of language, the signifier disentangled from the limits of the signified. Irony, the ethical form of the excessive power of language, is the infinite game that words play to create and to skip and to shuffle meanings. Poetry and irony are tools for semiotic insolvency, for the disentanglement of language from the limits of symbolic debt.