Beckett, Barthes and Breath

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Herbert Blau's essay, 'Barthes and Beckett: The Punctum, the Pensum, and the Dream of Love'[ii], presents a compelling image of the missing relation between Samuel Beckett and Roland Barthes. While it *argues* the operations of both Beckett and Barthes—through their 'pensa' or 'puncta'—turn around the desire for, and fear of, love, Blau's essay *illustrates* the difficulty of trying to bring the two into conversation. Aware of the challenge both pose to the imposition of a 'metalanguage', Blau folds the writers together through two distinct discussions: the application of Barthes's conceptual tools to Beckett, and the problems Beckett poses for these tools (106). Unable to talk to each other, Beckett and Barthes rely on Blau's fold to signal a relation that should have been but wasn't. In a symptom of this tension, Blau conjoins Beckett and Barthes only twice. First, he observes 'the exquisite points of (…) Barthes and Beckett' to be 'nodes of protoplasmic irritability, the malaise at the selvedge of nonexistence that refuses not to be', or a mutual 'refusal of the death instinct in the death instinct' (102). Second, he finds 'in Barthes and Beckett, there is something wanting in love, which we think of as a thing of silence, if it is not entirely spoken' (106). Love, then, and death, are brought together in 'the astonishing suggestion that we are more than half in love with death, since death is the aim of life' (102).

Blau's passing reference to John Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' (1819) implies a third term, breath. When Keats imagines his speaker as 'half in love with easeful Death', he closes the rhyme by calling on Death 'to take into the air my quiet breath'.[iii] In *A Lover's Discourse* Barthes reminds us that Keats's 'half in love with easeful death' is an exaggeration, provoking a fantasy or 'false conception' where death somehow happens 'beside me' rather than at life's terminus.[iv] This theme resembles Beckett's recurring trope of characters who

never finish dying. By taking 'into the air my quiet breath', a line favoured by early Beckett, we find a further instance of Blau's fold in breath, the implicit, material respondent to fantasies of death. Keats's speaker sighs for death, insofar as the sigh signals the desire to comingle with the absent one, articulating a relation that both longs for presence and finds relief in absence. 'To sigh for the bodily presence', writes Barthes, 'the two halves of the androgyne sigh for each other, as if each breath, being incomplete, sought to mingle with the other' (*LD,* 15). Or, like the narrator of Beckett's *How It Is*, who, 'before Pim', finds himself carried away when 'a deeper breath heaves him slowly up leaves him at last and sets him slowly down others would say a sigh'.[v] This essay asks how we might reimagine Blau's fold, by having Beckett and Barthes *sigh* for each other. Accordingly, two competing impulses drive my argument. I consider the aesthetic use that Beckett and Barthes each make of breath. At the same time, I establish breath as a basis for their comparison. The latter, however, demands a common understanding of breath that hazards the divergent genealogies of the former. Bearing this tension in mind is important because, for Beckett and Barthes, the use of breath is always specific to the local context where it appears. Breath articulates connections, but its significance remains notional, never developing into a consistent concept. No synthetic statement carries across the oeuvre. Even those works taken as definitive accounts of breath—for Beckett, the short, *Breath* (1969); for Barthes, the essay on Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Charles Panzéra, 'The Grain of the Voice' (1972–7)—prove less comprehensive than they appear.[vi] Nevertheless, a basic similarity emerges in the *use* Beckett and Barthes make of breath: both draw on breath as a mean point of comparison, against which other sounds might be measured and upon which other sounds might hang, to grant them a materiality. In this way, breath becomes what Roldophe Gasché calls an 'infrastructure,' a 'preontological and prelogical' complex that functions according to formal rules developed in the philosophical play of contradictions.[vii] For both Beckett and Barthes, this infrastructural

capacity makes breath simultaneously useful and banal, an essential part of the work but hardly a talking point. For readers of Beckett and Barthes, it functions as a useful hinge structure for thinking across their fundamental differences.

By taking breath as a point of tension between, and a tenor within, each oeuvre, I reformulate the metaphysics of the Greek Stoic, Posidonius, into an aesthetic conceit. For Posidonius, Phillip Horky writes, 'the soul is defined as a "hot breath" and is matter, and it is soul that is said to "hold together" bodies, "just as glue controls both itself and what is outside"'.[viii] As Horky demonstrates, in the 'hot breath' of pneuma, 'a fascinating, if challenging, pair of Stoic notions come into play: breath as the "tension" among corporeal objects, or as the "tenor" within them' (277). Breath certainly outlines 'tensions' between Beckett and Barthes, but can it provide a 'tenor' for their work's internal coherence? Efforts to establish breath as a tenor in Beckett and Barthes trace consistencies through their works. And yet, the co-presence of these consistencies contradicts any definitive statement on what breath means. Rather than depend upon this internal (in)coherence, then, breath serves as a figure for a common pursuit for structural principles.

Beckett and breath

When breath appears in Beckett's notes, it tends to be explained in psychoanalytic or metaphysical terms. From Otto Rank's *The Trauma of Birth* (1925), Beckett observes that 'all neurotic disturbances in breathing (e.g. asthma), repeating feelings of suffocation, refer directly to physical reproductions of the birth trauma', while also noting the more metaphysical claim that 'Esse [To Be] means to breathe!'.[ix] From the Presocratics Anaximenes and Democritus, he takes the principle that objects (and atoms) are held together by breath. But breath plays out many more variations in his creative work, as has been recognized by many critics.[x]

Adam Winstanley, for instance, reads *L'Innommable*'s interest in respiration alongside Ernest Jones, where an individual's concern with internal hygiene 'manifests itself through "an intense aversion for already breathed air" and "a passionate interest in the subject of breath control"' (184). To develop this thematic interest in expelled breath on a syntactic level, Beckett uses epanorthosis, or the immediate correction, clarification or contradiction of terms by those that follow it. Winstanley contrasts the epanorthotic rhythm in *L'Innommable*, which uses breath in a themato-technical sense, to the more straightforward extrojection of breath advanced in the later dramaticule, *Breath* (1969). The whole life cycle of *Breath* corresponds to the raising and lowering of lights over a stage of rubbish to a single cycle of inhalation and exhalation. Rather than the endless squirmings of *L'Innommable*, *Breath* appears to offer the act of breathing as a symmetrical unity, encapsulating an entire life in mirrored-processes of inhalation and exhalation.

Breath, too, presents a mangle of meanings, whose contradictions are particularly clear when we compare the English and French manuscripts. The latter, Stefanie Heine notes, is more physiologically correct than the final piece: the breaths in and out are meant to be 'well differentiated' (206). What finally appears as the play's symmetrical extrojection begins with a biophysical focus, becoming, as might be expected from Beckett, more symbolic and abstracted in successive iterations. If this genetic history gestures to complications in *Breath*'s denotations, watching it with Claire Lozier, as a multimedia *vanitas*, opens further challenges.[xi] The *vanitas*, an artwork that reminds us of the fleeting nature of life, is derived from Ecclesiastes 1:2, which Beckett mutilates to good effect in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*: 'The dead fart, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities, and the quick whistle'.[xii] What appears as *vanitas* in the Vulgate is given as *hebel* in the original Hebrew, which is sometimes translated as vapour or breath. So, *Breath* aims to capture an ephemerality that perhaps acts as a false flag to Beckett's other breaths. After all, when the breath is held for

the ‘ten seconds, fifteen’ in *How It Is*, it might as easily anticipate the symmetries of *Breath*, written eight or nine years later, as recall the epanorthoses of *L’Innommable,* of eight or nine years before. In either case, it distinguishes between the symmetrical, ‘poetic’ breath, and a staggered, asymmetrical ‘physiological’ breath. These diverse treatments show that breath, in its physiological sense, can be linked to psychological processes of excorporation or to metaphysical conceits of the excorporeal or the vaporous.

For David Lloyd, whose interest in breath tends towards a psychological response to metaphysics, breath evokes a sense of ‘dread’ because, as ‘a vestige of being’, it reminds the subject of their intimacy with death (189–91). Developing a combinatorial reading of Beckett, Avigdor Arikha and Paul Celan, Lloyd finds in Beckett instances of Celan’s breath turn:s ‘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.’ (189) Rather than extrojection, whereby ‘draff’ might be violently expelled, breath in Lloyd’s Beckett performs a quieter, and more abstracted, function as a marker of pause, remainder and excess. If Lloyd suggests that breath is not to be ‘a notably recurrent motif in Beckett’s works’ (189), it might be more accurate to say that inherent contradictions in Beckett’s uses of breath frustrate efforts to make this motif coherent or comprehensive.

Eschewing the cosmological and the psychological, Steven Connor finds most consistency in Beckett’s material evocations of breath. Breath, for the most part, functions as an ‘audible silence’, but Connor does note one moment, in *Company*, where it becomes ‘audible, even tangible’: ‘Let the hearer be named H. Aspirate. Haitch. You Haitch are on your back in the dark.’ (63) ‘The ejaculations which pepper Beckett’s work’, Connor observes, ‘are full of more or less violent expirations of air: “phew”; “pah”; “hah”; “shhhh” and the remarkable, mysterious “aha” of *All Strange Away* and *Company*. This kind of belly-speech is much in

evidence in Beckett, in the many evocations of the fart' (61). Thus, Connor finds in breath a material support for bringing together even such stylistically divergent works as *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (*DW*) and *Company (C)*. Compare for instance, this passage about breath from *Dream* with one from *Company*:

> his rhonchi not to mention his inspirating (there's no call to labour this particular aspect of his malaise) crepitus mucous sonorous sibilant crackling whistling wheezing crowing and would you believe it stridulous, strangled with the waterbrash and a plumjuice sputum (*DW*, 85)
>
> Apart from the voice and the faint sound of his breath there is no sound. None at least that he can hear. This he can tell by the faint sound of his breath. (*C*, 428)

Company strips the *Dream* passage of its exuberant synonyms and indulgent self-recrimination to deliver a key insight: breath's unintelligible sounds provide a point of departure, a base comparator that determines what can be heard and thought.

The psychoanalytical, metaphysical, affective and materialist approaches to breath carry through Beckett's work. When brought together, however, their contradictions preclude an overarching system. Connor, more concerned with Beckett's material interest in air than breath *per se*, is alive to these inconsistencies, noting variously 'breath is a kind of skin'; 'breath is matter temporised, chronical stuff'; 'breathing is laboured in Beckett's work, and breathing is part of the labour of that work'. (55; 59; 60) Psychic armour, materialized time, and rhythmic labour present three ways in which Connor will parse Beckett's breaths. Breath, a term perhaps overwhelmed by its concatenation of significances, presents multiple lines into Beckett's work, but from no single point of origin.

Barthes and breath

Connor's materiality recalls Barthes's interest in the grain of the voice. But Barthes's voice is toothier and fleshier than Connor's 'violent expirations', and dismisses breath as a site of interest. If, for Beckett, breath forms the ground upon which other sounds are figured, too much breath, for Barthes, robs sound of its interest. Writing about Fischer-Dieskau in 'The Grain of the Voice', he disparages the German tenor's rendition of the *Lieder* for being all too breathy: 'everything in the (semantic and lyrical) structure is respected and yet nothing seduces, nothing sways us to *jouissance*' (183). While 'the breath is the *pneuma*, the soul swelling or breaking, and any exclusive art of breathing is likely to be a secretly mystical art', this mysticism is qualified as 'levelled down to the measure of the long-playing record' (183). 'The lung, a stupid organ (lights for cats!), swells but gets no erection' because 'it is in the throat, place where phonic metal hardens and is segmented, in the mask that *signifiance* explodes, bringing not the soul but *jouissance*' (183). Barthes favours Panzéra, whose art 'was in the letters, not in the bellows (you never heard him *breathe* but only divide up the phrase)', over Fischer-Dieskau, from whom he 'seems only to hear the lungs, never the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mucous membranes, the nose' (183). If breathy music allows for the full swell of the soul, it doesn't swell the loins, or at least not Barthes's, who likes a bit more bite in his expirations.

Then again, like Beckett, Barthes's seemingly definitive statement on breath does not carry across the oeuvre. Consider the closing paragraph for *The Pleasure of the Text*, which, in recapitulating Barthes's praise for the granular quality of voices, draws on breath noises to demarcate a space between signifier and signified:

> It suffices that the cinema captures the sound of speech close up (this is, in fact, the generalized definition of the 'grain' of writing) and make us hear in their materiality, their sensuality, the breath, the gutturals, the fleshiness of the lips, a whole presence

> of the human muzzle (that the voice, that writing, be as fresh, supple, lubricated, delicately granular and vibrant as an animal's muzzle)…[xiii]

In 'The Grain', breath served as the grain's counter; here they share 'materiality' and 'sensuality'. Still, a material reading of breath does not exhaust Barthes's understanding of breath. Surveying instances of breathing in *The Rustle of Language* demonstrates that breath also functions as a point of comparison, a habit or a limit: 'To change doctrine, theory, philosophy (…) spectacular as this seems is in fact quite banal: one does such things the way one breathes; one invests, one lays aside, one reinvests', and 'The literary life is the sole element in which certain déclassés can breathe'.[xiv] 'The rustle of language' itself emerges when, in the screening of Antonioni's film on China, a group of schoolchildren simultaneously read aloud from different books: 'the meaning was doubly impenetrable to me, by my not knowing Chinese and by the blurring of these simultaneous readings (…). I was hearing the music, the breath, the tension, the application, in short something like a *goal*' (78–9).

Later, breath will be associated, as in Cicero and Quintilianus, with the natural limits the body imposes on rhetorical units. 'Anyone preparing to speak (in a teaching situation) must become conscious of the *staging* imposed by the use of speech, by the simple effect of a *natural* determination (which derives from its physical nature: that of articulatory breathing)' (310). Articulatory breathing demands a decision, when the speaker chooses to speak well or badly: 'Either the speaker chooses the role of Authority in all good faith, in which case it is sufficient to "speak well" (…). Or else the speaker is hampered by the Law (…) he corrects himself, adds on, stammers, enters into the infinitude of language' (310). Neither choice undermines the Law, as both are locked in the same signifying system. 'In order to subvert the Law (and not simply to get around it)', argues Barthes, 'he would have to dismantle all vocal delivery, the speed and rhythm of words, until he achieved an *altogether different*

intelligibility' (310). Dismantling vocal delivery through breath's rhetorical use explicitly invites a subversion of the law. Far from simply being 'levelled down to the measure of the long-playing record', breath in Barthes's thinking offers an instrument for conveying sense and subverting the law. But, like Beckett, the local force of Barthes's breath-thinking is somewhat diminished across the oeuvre.

Beckett, Barthes and breath

Insofar as it can be framed in a metalanguage, Beckett and Barthes both invoke breath in otherwise quite different attempts to hollow out a space behind, beneath or between signifier and signification and to connect with other bodies in this extra-linguistic space. The danger of this metalanguage, however, is that it can depend upon the assumption that we already know what breath is and what it does. Consider, for instance, exemplary criticism of Beckett's final novel, *Comment c'est/How It Is* (1961–64), where breath units are often invoked to describe the novel's aporias.[xv] Distinguishing between the small-scale caesurae of typographical spacing and 'larger-scale ruptures in the work's rhythm', Laura Hensch observes how 'the typographic spaces between fragments (…) give *How It Is* much-needed delimitation, contrast, and breathing room'.[xvi] Hensch does not explore the 'breathing room' analogy, perhaps because it often describes the text's fragmentation in Beckett criticism. For Graham Fraser, 'the text is written in "gasps"; the rhetorical periods marked off by the blocks of text on the page are bounded by the physical capacity for breath of the narrator's laboring body'.[xvii] In introducing *How It Is*, Edouard Magessa O'Reilly suggests: 'Rather than units of meaning, these fragments reconfigure the narrative as units of breath' (ix). More recently, Paul Sheehan notes how 'the unpunctuated bursts of text (…) are like prosodic "breaths", framing the narrator's gasps' (145). These respiratory analogies may inform associative leaps (Connor), comparative models (Winstanley or Lloyd), or descriptive asides (Fraser, O'Reilly

or Sheehan), but they all risk the banality of what Barthes calls 'adjectival criticism (or predicative interpretation)' (180). Not, I hasten to add, because the criticism is banal. Rather, when they invoke breath, their critical focus threatens to collapse into an adjectival quality, as, indeed, it must when associating breath with any predication.

This is a danger that *How It Is* explicitly courts. From its opening line, 'how it was I quote before Pim with Pim after Pim how it is three parts I say it as I hear it' (1), the text frames an interaction between three apparently distinct narrative levels: the metanarrative commentary on the text's three parts, the narrator's so-called actual position (in the mud) and its so-called imagined moments of reprieve from the mud (a series of images, delusions or fantasies). Given the novel's metanarrative commentary, the locutions, '*cesse de haleter*/the panting stops', and their variants, appear to act as the discursive counterparts to the line breaks, and, undoubtedly, serve as inspiration for the breath metaphors used to describe them. And yet, distinguishing between what the phrase *tells* and what the breaks *show* raises a tension in, rather than a tenor that unites, the metanarrative of the novel with its form. After all, 'when the panting stops' sometimes appears at the end of a paragraph unit, sometimes in the middle and sometimes at the beginning. If we cannot establish the phrase as the discursive correlative of the paragraph break, neither can we dismiss this possibility entirely. The development of this ambiguity may account for the decision, at a relatively late stage in the manuscripts, to replace '*retiens mon souffle*' with '*cesse de haleter*'. To 'hold my breath', I must exert a will that dissolves in the phrase, 'the panting stops'. When exerted over the narrative itself, the will may indeed correlate paragraph breaks with held breaths. But it loses this power when this breath devolves into uncontrolled, and uncontrollable, panting, whose source is undetermined. Even as the novel includes clear markers of its metanarrative, breath complicates any attempt to distinguish this metanarrative from the other narrative levels.

The play on metanarrative in *How It Is* encourages us to imagine it as the novel that Barthes did not write, the *Novel-Fragment* he refers to at the outset of *The Preparation of the Novel* that manages to sit between 'notation' and 'novel', without travelling the full distances 'from the discontinuous to the flowing'.[xviii] Such novels 'hinge on the *dash*, on the site, on the flux, on the page upon which the caesura of the discontinuous is *marked*' (18). While *How It Is* is a text devoid of such punctuation—divisions are visualized only through spaces on the page—it replaces the 'rhetorical expostulation' of the sentence with the paragraph, between one and seven lines long. To read the longer paragraphs aloud, in a single breath, leaves one 'panting'. Quite apart from the phrasal cues, then, we should acknowledge that any sustained engagement with the novel encourages subtle breathing patterns to play out upon the text. To adapt Adam Piette's concept of the memory-rhyme, we might call this a memory-rhythm, whereby breathing units, comprising of repeated sequences of two to six words, counterpoint the visual fragments of *How It Is* with phrase-figures, like 'vast tracts of time'; 'before Pim', 'with Pim' and 'after Pim'; 'how it is' or 'was'; or, of course, 'when the panting stops'.

Barthes offers another approach in a book he did write, which explicitly aims to suspend metanarrative. *A Lover's Discourse* presents a thesaurus-type resource for measuring the lover's image-repertoire. To advance this notional repository, Barthes uses the alphabet to create 'an *absolutely insignificant* order', which will not tempt the reader to render it into a love story or a love history: to give it narrative sequence, to express it through a metalanguage. For Barthes, the figure permits him to replace 'description' of the lover's discourse with its 'simulation', 'a "dramatic" method which renounces examples and rests on the single action of a primary language (no metalanguage)' (3). All this avoids rendering the lover as 'a simple symptomal subject', whose amorous episodes are chained to the 'causality' of '*the love story*, subjugated to the great narrative Other, to that general opinion which disparages any excessive force and wants the subject himself to reduce the great imaginary

current, the orderless, endless stream which is passing through him, to a painful morbid crisis of which he must be cured' (7).

Fraser, in adapting Barthes's *Discourse* to read *How It Is*, presents one of the more impressive efforts to find Barthes's figures in Beckett's text. He suggests the narrator's inscriptions in *How It Is* form part of a sadistic calligraphy, noting of the Roman Capitals, that 'just as the wounding calligraphy closed the gap between the narrator as subject and Pim as object in part two, in part three typography incorporates into the narrator the roles of both tormentor and victim in his effort to speak in "a voice of my own"' (73). For this reading, Fraser draws on, *inter alia*, *The Pleasure of the Text*, *A Lover's Discourse* and *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*, to approach a Barthesian Beckett, via Sade and the painful art of inscription. Ultimately, though, Beckett raises the stakes, consummating an erotic relationship between writing, desire and laceration that Barthes only flirts with. (69)

Fraser explicitly links Barthes's 'lacerations' and Beckett's language 'holes' to breath: 'such gaps in language—pauses for breath—are, moreover, embodied silences, the textual/typographical manifestation of the absence of speech, framed by speech and the breath' (69). But, while this shows how Barthesian figures might perform in *How It Is*, it does not really consider what the reciprocal unit might be for Beckett. If Julian Murphet is correct in calling the trajectory of Beckett's novels a 'mortification of the novel structure', the figure, as thought by Barthes, cannot operate as a site in *How It Is*.[xix] Whenever the Barthesian figure emerges, the novel digests it, and, far from incorporating it into an image-repertoire, discards it. Beckett's sadistic calligrapher works as a Barthesian figure but reading it as such does not create the grounds for a comparison, since they are not equable units. Since the figure for Barthes is a basic unit, a proper comparison demands the same atomistic unit in Beckett: the sentence fragment. In their preoccupation with what the figure or sentence fragment does, Beckett and Barthes most resemble each other.

While the criticism that incorporates the two works observes their common concern with love and fragmentation, this obscures a mutual commitment to develop a new method that might address these concerns while resisting metalanguage. Given the shifting nature of breath's *meaning* for Beckett or Barthes, I have tried to focus on what it *does*, which is to offer itself as a *figure*. In *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes calls the figure 'a fragment of discourse'. Rather than a matter of rhetoric, the figure should be understood in the 'livelier' sense of 'the body's gesture caught in action and not contemplated in repose': 'Figures take shape insofar as we can recognize, in passing discourse, something that has been read, heard, felt' (4). The figure also 'takes its departure from a turn of phrase'. So, phrase units or sentences provide the means to identify a figure. Importantly, sentences within 'the signifying economy of the amorous subject' are less important for what they 'say' than for what they 'articulate', since they remain a 'syntactical aria' or 'mode of construction', a means to articulate the affect, rather than the sense, of the amorous subject (6). The figure is constituted by a phrase or series of phrases, whose very repetition makes it a figure. The figure of waiting is constituted by the mutilated sentences we repeat to ourselves as we wait, for instance, while the figure of the I-love-you invokes the meaningless repetition of both this phrase and its partner, So-do-I, after first utterance. Reading breath as a figure dissolves these contradictions, since it can only ever be 'caught in action' or its local context. Thought in these terms, attempts to elevate it into a prevailing theory across either oeuvre seem not only bound to failure, but misguided.

Instead, we might think of breath as fundamental to a common effort to articulate, rather than describe, a discourse of relation. 'When the panting stops' describes something, but it also punctuates the text, and mainly through its repetitions, rather than its explicit evocation of breath. A parallel case might be found in Barthes, who, in different permutations, will link the banality of changing one's mind to the naturalness of breath in *The Rustle of Language, A*

Lover's Discourse and *The Preparation of the Novel*: 'to change ideas is banal: it's as natural as breathing' (*Preparation*, 5). Again, it is not the description that catches my attention, but the repeated articulation of the related pairs, banal-natural and changing-breathing. This is not, then, some larger metaphysical conceit about breathing as a fundamental figure for describing change; rather, this is a local use that signals one of breath's many, and contradictory, possible significances.

I have used the tension between Beckett and Barthes to compare their use of breath's tenor. Rather than a concept that unifies, breath itself produces a point of tension, a holding together of competing notions to understand better the relations it articulates. This tension in breath, and between Beckett and Barthes, is neatly illustrated if we return to tenor as understood in its musical sense. In 'The Grain of the Voice', Barthes opposes the German tenor, Fischer-Dieskau, the most celebrated singer of German *Lieder* in the twentieth century, to Panzéra, twice Barthes's singing teacher and a noted theorist of singing. The essay sets up Fischer-Dieskau as a foil to Panzéra, argues Jonathan Dunsby, in part to justify Barthes's personal feelings: he felt himself 'the only person left who had always "loved" that voice [which] he calls a "naked" voice'.[xx] Panzéra represented an older generation of 'Western art music', when it 'was a physical practice rather than (…) mostly an ambient intrusion' (129). Breath, or, rather, its absence, becomes an expression of love; rather than an antipathy to Fischer-Dieskau, the essay presents a desire, a sighing, for the beloved, Panzéra, to take his place.

Beckett knew Fischer-Dieskau as the singer of Schubert's *Winterreise*. Beckett's letters suggest that he had, at least by March 1956, heard Fisher-Dieskau sing *Winterreise* in concert at the Salle Gaveau. Later in 1956, Beckett mentions receiving a gramophone, and intending to buy a copy of Fischer-Dieskau's *Winterreise*. The tension may simply be that Beckett 'loved' Fischer-Dieskau and Barthes did not. But there is a further fold to the story, that can

return us to the ways that breath articulates the relations that love seeks to name, reactivating our passing ships.

In Barthes's seminar on *Le Discours amoureux*, given from 1974 to 1976, the section, '*Inscription, celui du graffiti amoureux*' (Inscription, that of amorous graffiti), takes as its inspiration the Lied from *Winterreise*, '*Auf dem Flusse*' (On the River), where the speaker carves the name of the beloved into the river's ice with a sharpened rock.[xxi] This parallels the inscriptions of the narrator of *How It Is*, who inscribes his messages upon the beloved directly, rather than by proxy through the name. Excluded from the book version, 'Inscription' raises the figure of graffiti, whereby the name of the love object, or the mention of the amorous relation, is inscribed in the metro, on trees or at inaccessible elevated places. Unlike *How It Is*, Barthes does not give the body of the lover itself as an example, even if the link to *Winterreise* cannot but implicate Schubert and Fischer-Dieskau. And yet, as Paul Lawley has observed, *How It Is* does seem to invoke Fischer-Dieskau.[xxii] When Pim sings 'a little tune suddenly he sings a little tune suddenly like all that was not then is', the narrator prevaricates: 'I can't make out the words the mud muffles or perhaps a foreign tongue perhaps he's singing a lied in the original perhaps a foreigner' (47). Pim may not stand in for Fischer-Dieskau, but the narrator certainly controls Pim's singing like a record player, even if application of the needle stops, rather than starts, the music: 'He sings his song the song ascends in the present it's off again in the present. I withdraw my nails he continues the same air it seems to me I am rather musical (…) that's not all he stops nails in armpit he resumes cheers done it armpit song and this music as sure as if I pressed a button I can indulge in it any time henceforward' (55). This certainly makes sense of the later reference to 'recordings on ebonite or suchlike a whole life generations on ebonite' (93), which, in the composition process, appeared as '*disque sur bande*' (disk on tape). But it also resonates with Beckett's experiences of Fischer-Dieskau, first live and in person, then via the gramophone. If the real

'grain of the voice' that Barthes sought to discern was a living element of Panzéra, then, we might say, the superficial antipathy between Beckett and Barthes, as a matter of personal preference, might give way to a more basic common appreciation for the living voice that, for Barthes, was disturbed by technological advances and, for Beckett, enabled. We might well name such an appreciation 'love', but only by following a relation articulated in breath, a relation that finds the two listening, in isolation, to an absent third.

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[i] I thank Kate Kent, Marco Bernini, Stefanie Heine for kind comments on draft versions, and to the editors for further improvements. The errors remain my own.

[ii] Herbert Blau, *Sails of the Herring Fleet: Essays on Beckett* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

[iii] John Keats, *The Complete Poems*, edited by Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1982), 281.

[iv] Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, translated by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2018 [1978]), 12.

[v] Samuel Beckett, *How It Is* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 46.

[vi] Samuel Beckett, 'Breath' in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 369–71; Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice' in *Image-Music-Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 179–90.

[vii] Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 148.

[viii] Phillip Sidney Horky, 'Cosmic Spiritualism among the Pythagoreans, Stoics, Jews and Early Christians' in *Cosmos in the Ancient World*, edited by Phillip Sidney Horky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 270–94 (276).

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