Introduction

ZOLTÁN KULCSÁR-SZABÓ / CSONGOR LŐRINCZ / GÁBOR MEZEI / GÁBOR TAMÁS MOLNÁR / ATTILA SIMON

For more than three decades now, as literary studies has sought to redefine its theoretical and methodological assumptions, and to recalibrate its focus within the umbrella of cultural studies, it has been confronted with a myriad of challenges from other, sometimes not even neighboring, disciplines (e. g., those beyond the traditional domains of the humanities). This very heterogeneous, theoretical, and methodological orientation has become particularly striking in the development of what many have called "new materialism." The inadequacy of former insights about the existence and historical-cultural variation of the media of literature – often conceived of as immaterial or incorporeal (such as language itself or aesthetic experience) – is increasingly explained by a lack of interest in the material factors of literary communication and aesthetic processes, or even by the superficiality of knowledge available. The range of materialities that can be considered in the study of literary phenomena, as shown by the variety of theoretical proposals to bring them to the fore, has proved to be quite broad. From the material factors of cultural-social processes to the history and presence of media and technologies, as well as the physical and biological conditions of communication, vast areas of topics have come to the surface, offering numerous impulses for approaching literature in cultural studies.

One of the most notable developments in post-millennial literary studies is the spectacular interest – both theoretical and historical – in the biological context and factors of human and non-human life. The broader background to this can be identified in more general trends. On the one hand, there are the efforts to grasp the so-called *posthuman condition*, efforts which have become dominant, above all in philosophy, and which seek to explain a change in the concept of human beings as brought about by a decisive transformation in our relationship to technology. A wide variety of theoretical approaches provides different frameworks for interpreting the anthropological, sociological, etc., consequences of this change. Equally important are new interdisciplinary ventures to explore the social science and humanities contexts of the climate crisis (and thus, among others, to explore the possibility of revising common assumptions about the duality of culture and nature), which have for some time been embraced by the category of so-called *environmental humanities*. Also, more traditionally designed research programs have emerged in novel shapes that touch upon several points mentioned above, but which are nevertheless different in focus and methodol-

ogy, and, in some respects, are linked to more classical approaches in literary and social history. Without abandoning the tradition of text-centered, interpretative study of literary phenomena, these approaches initiate the exploration of the intersections where the biological materiality of bodily existence comes into closest contact with literary or cultural communication. There is little surprise in the fact that literary history offers an inexhaustible repository of cultural forms that shape and convey to man, through language and concepts, the various extreme experiences of human, animal, and vegetable life, that is, the extreme experiences of being (in the) body, from sexuality and sport, to pain and disease. For some time now, there has been a lively interest in so-called *zoopoetics* (e. g., Driscoll/Hoffmann [eds.]) and *biopoetics* (e. g., Kulcsár-Szabó et al. [eds.]). These approaches, be they focused rather on a more narrowly defined biological existence – such as the relationship between animal and human forms of existence in the case of the former, or on a broader conceptual framework of "life" in the latter – try to explore not only how literature bears witness to its not insignificant role in shaping the concept and understanding of life, but also how the contexts of bodily existence, which sometimes cannot be modelled in language, influence and even shape the creation and reception of literature. The genuinely interdisciplinary formation called *medical humanities*, in which literary studies usually play a proactive role (for promising prospects of such programs, see Emmrich), also contributes to the exploring of such questions.

The aim of this collection on breath and breathing in literature is to present a quite recent focus on research in literary and cultural studies, unfolding within the framework outlined above. The studies examine not only how breathing, understood as a complex, manifold site of intersections between life and language, is thematized, but also how it becomes a textual factor in literary writing. The topicality of the subject, given the broader cultural, social, and political context, is obvious: the climate crisis and the pandemic in recent years, or even a sentence that occupied the political public for months in 2020 ("I can't breathe"), have confronted us with the fact that breathing has become a visible medium in cultural and textual terms. Not to mention the spectacular prominence of political aspects, which are explicitly addressed, or, in certain cases highlighted, as the very focus of investigation in several of the studies in this volume. Although fraught with ambivalence, Giorgio Agamben's famous distinction between *zoe* and *bios* might serve as a model for the relationship between breathing and language, with the latter entering the biopolitical frameworks of the approach to the concepts of human life. Relevant publications show that the first summaries (monographs, collective volumes, theses) of these issues of literary pneumatology appeared around the turn of the 2010 s/2020 s (cf. Rose, Heine, Lettenewitsch/Waack [eds.] etc.).

Literature's interest in breathing is of course nothing new: as the most fundamental intersection of life in linguistic and life in biological terms, it has been present in ideas about the creation, transmission, and reception of literature since the beginnings of European culture. The close link between the concepts of soul and/or spirit and

breath – as attested, for example, by Hungarian etymology (*lélek – lélegzet*) – is of cardinal importance from antiquity to Christian (though not only Christian) culture (one need only refer to the categories of *pneuma*, *spiritus*, *psuche,* or *anima*). On the other hand, as can be seen from the enduring conceptual-historical virulence of the various ideas of inspiration, literature has never been without reflection on the physiological conditions of its creation. For example, major 20th-century authors such as Charles Olson, who developed the program of the "projective verse," or a number of German lyricists, Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Paul Celan, among others, who attempted to visualize the idea of poetry through metaphors of breath objectified (*Hauch*, *Atemkristall*, *Atembild*), or the contemporary poet Durs Grünbein, who promotes the concept of a "biological poetry" in his essays, have focused on the principle of breath in their attempts to grasp the essence of poeticity. "Das Gedicht bleibt … pneumatisch berührbar … hier, auf Atemwegen, bewegt sich das Gedicht," declared Celan in his speech *Der Meridian* (Celan 108).

Apart from the obvious allusion to Paul de Man, the title *Allegories of Breathing* refers, first of all, to the manifold figurative and conceptual relations that determine the connection between breath/breathing and soul/spirit from antiquity up to the present day. Breath has also been understood as a metonymy of life, and even as a cosmic principle. Literature as the art of language is a dedicated place for the appearance of this connection – or rather, duality. This primacy of literature not only comes from the prevalence of the concept of *inspiration (inspiratio, epipnoia)* that originated in antiquity, but also sheds light on the significance of a biomaterial component. The physiological process of breathing is a condition for speech as a process of emitting sounds, and, through that, for semiotic components that are transformed into the immaterial world of meaning in language. On the other hand, the component of breathing that is essential for sustaining life, namely, the inspiratory phase, obviously represents a barrier to speech. To be alive, one must also take (speech) breaks. The narrator of Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* lingers at length on this distinction:

> Still, it is easier to breathe in than out. As it is easier to absorb what life offers than to give out the results of such absorption. As it is easier to take a blow than to hit back. Nevertheless, wheezing and ratchety, I eventually exhale, I overcome. There is pride to be taken in this; I do not deny myself a pat on my aching back.
>
> At such times I become my breathing. Such force of self as I retain focuses upon the faulty operations of my chest: the coughing, the fishy gulps. I am what breathes. I am what began long ago with an exhaled cry, what will conclude when a glass held to my lips remains clear. It is not thinking makes us so, but air. Suspiro ergo sum. I sigh, therefore I am. The Latin as usual tells the truth: suspirare = sub, below, + spirare, verb, to breathe.
>
> Suspiro: I under-breathe.
>
> In the beginning and unto the end was and is the lung: divine afflatus, baby's first yowl, shaped air of speech, staccato gusts of laughter, exalted airs of song, happy lover's groan,

> unhappy lover's whisper, and beyond and beyond the airless, silent void. A sigh isn't just a sigh. We inhale the world and breathe out breathing. While we can. While we can. (Rushdie 53)

Therefore, from a psychophysiological point of view, breathing is at the same time a medium, a means of transfer, and an obstacle to speech, as can be seen, for example, in the various acoustic accidents of recorded speech where the otherwise volatile breathing process gains a permanent presence. Borrowing Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's conceptual dichotomy (Gumbrecht 79–89), breath can be called an agent of transgression between cultures of presence and cultures of meaning. But it represents not only the dimension of presence, but also that of absence in speech. Rilke famously called breathing, *Atmen*, an invisible poem, *unsichtbares Gedicht*. It is hardly a coincidence that breath in literature, as discussed in several studies of the present volume, is always associated with the notion of death and, thus, carries out the conceptual framing and reframing of the impossible experience of death, be it the other's or one's own.

Breathing, therefore, must clearly be a starting point for all examinations of literature and language in cultural studies, as it bears witness to the dependence of language on life in a biological context. The rhetoric of breathing means – and this is a second level of the intended meaning expressed in the volume's title – that while we talk about breath or breathing, we are in fact very often talking about something else (in the original sense of *allegoria*); and, vice versa, when we seem to be talking about something else, breath and breathing are frequently meant by what has been said. Such reversibility occurs between breathing and the following subjects: spirit, life, body, wind, air, atmosphere, and even the punctuation of written language.

The relations of oral performance and the verbal arts can be examined in a number of contexts. The rhetorical and poetical theories of classical antiquity (and in the powerful rhetorical tradition that unfolded from it) have remained influential up to this day regarding prominent questions on singing and the oral recitation of poetry, as well as the matter of silent reading and reading aloud. Homer's narrator refers to the limitations of his own organs of speech while rhetoricians often link the semantic rhythm of sentences and colons – or the problem of adequate tone or volume – to the rhythmic units of breathing. The same relation remains central for Charles Olson's poetic theory of the "projective verse," foundational for postmodernist poetry. Among many things, Olson declared: "I take it that PROJECTIVE VERSE teaches, is, this lesson, that that verse will only do in which a poet manages to register both the acquisitions of his ear and the pressure of his breath" (Olson 241). On the other hand, even within the framework of classical semiology, it has become evident that the acoustic operations of the human body (automatisms and culturally trained practices as well) open up, within language, a realm beyond semiology (Barthes).

Breathing and breath play a role in written literature as well. This is evidently the case when breathing appears as the subject matter of prose or poetry. But at the same

time, writing can influence breathing with just its peculiar signs (pneumatology and grammatology intermingle), most generally as the inscription of writing as arrangement. Punctuation marks the division of sentences, as well as the rhythmic segmentation of the units of sentences or lines (caesura, dash, or ellipsis). The sound effects produced while vocalizing otherwise mute letters (e. g., alliteration, stress, rhyme and other kinds of repetition) pertain to the materiality of prose and poetry, *as the written poetics of breathing*. Walter Benjamin talks about physiological stylistics, *physiologische Stilkunde* (Benjamin 323) in connection with Proust's asthma: *"Dieses Asthma ist in seine Kunst eingegangen, wenn nicht seine Kunst es geschaffen hat. Seine Syntax bildet rhythmisch auf Schritt und Tritt diese seine Erstickungsangst nach."* The (mainly syntactical) exploration of such stylistics would involve, first of all, the question of the readability of breathing in literature.

Breathing means the most elementary and continuous corporeal relation between living creatures and their environment: the accurate separation of the inside and the outside, of subject and object, in this way becomes impossible – that is, again, an important and relevant question concerning 20th-century and contemporary poetry. Air understood as an animating and mediatory substance together with its specific immaterial materiality can be explored through literary texts because of the atmospheric embeddedness of breathing in the world (see Horn). This embeddedness can manifest in various forms: as a metaphor for freedom, as a euphoric-ecstatic experience of inhaling fresh air, as the affective intensity of gasping passion or erotic desire, as well as in situations where breathing becomes impossible (breathlessness). These effects are readable in more than just a mimetic manner: we refer to the embeddedness produced by poetics when we refer, for example, to the "specific atmosphere" of prose while trying to substantiate this metaphor by means of the concepts provided by literary studies or stylistics. The medium of atmosphere (see on this Böhme) has also been an important topic of scientific, historic, and philosophic discourses about language from a narrower technological perspective as well – it is enough to refer to the speaking machines of Wolfgang von Kempelen and Christian Gottlieb Kratzenstein, together with the political and philosophical discussions these early forerunners of speech synthesis sparked. On the other hand, the atmospheric medium of breathing has been materialized through a wide variety of cultural, medical, meditative, and religious body practices – making visible the historical and cultural diversity around the techniques of breathing (see Škof/Berndtson [eds.]).

Breathing through a mask, and speech as contaminated by breathing through a mask, either in Darth Vader style, or, in the worst case, through a breathing machine, was an uncomfortable experience and a threatening possibility in the years of pandemia for all of us. Such masks are also a reminder that breathing and speech are never entirely natural, that they are always already realized in the intersection of culture and nature: it is precisely at such an intersection that the rhetorical tradition bases the fundamental tropes of (poetic) speech in general, such as *persona* or *prosopopoeia*. This is

why poetry can provide the means to, as expressed by Wallace Stevens in *This Solitude of Cataracts*, " [. . .] know how it would feel, released from destruction, / To be a bronze man breathing under archaic lapis". On the other hand, this directs our attention again towards the natural, mostly unrecognized or unconscious physiological automatism of breathing together with its conditional character, as understood in the field of literary medical humanities. Air pollution – as the result of industrial societies and their operations, or even the presence of *climate* that involves the condition, quality, and compounds of air, and the processes running in it and determining our life conditions – has also been a topic of ecocriticism for a longer period of time. Thus, though the focus of this volume is on readings of literary texts, it is easy to see how the topic can be extended as a matter of course to media and cultural studies, theater, music and performance studies, etc.,: breath and breathing play an unquestionable role in these fields as well.

The first and most extensive part of the volume (*Poetic Pneumatologies*) focuses on the poetic principles of breath and breathing in modern poetry and lyric theory. Csongor Lőrincz outlines the contexts of anthropological and philosophical theories about breathing, and from there approaches some key concepts of lyric theory. He puts these to the test in his illuminating analysis of the poems of Rilke and Ágnes Nemes Nagy. Csaba Szabó also discusses Rilke's poetry, inquiring into its alleged "auratic" character. Through an analysis of Rilke's sonnets, he explores the relationship between the concepts of breath and aura. Rilke's sonnets are also at the heart of Hajnalka Halász's study, including the above quoted characterization of breath as an "invisible poem." Here the poetic principle of breath in relation to linguistic performativity becomes the object of analysis. Charles de Roche's and Stefanie Heine's co-authored paper explores the crucial role of breath in the poetic discourse of modern poetry. In this context, Charles Olson's seminal writings are confronted with Jean Paulhan's critical essay *Clef de la poésie*, on the basis that both authors situate breath at the limit of referential and figural speech. Enikő Bollobás's contribution also discusses Olson's poetics of breath, highlighting two connections: on the one hand, his understanding of breath as a physiological-medical phenomenon, and, on the other hand, the poetic praxis, the significance of the prosodic function of breath in Olson's writings. Gábor Mezei turns to the poetry of Nemes Nagy, asking how organicism appears in the language of the Hungarian poet. In Nemes Nagy's poetry, the self-reflexivity of speaking about breathing plays an important role, and it is precisely this aspect that reveals the boundaries of pneumatology and "grammatology." Péter Fodor's and Andrea Urbán's co-authored paper examines a contemporary phenomenon of popular culture from the aspect of breath poetics. They explore how breath and breathing, as prominent motifs, are thematized in Taylor Swift's lyrics.

The second part (*Breathing Life, Breathing Death*) contains studies that examine breathing from the point of view of the extreme-limit experiences of human life: the relationship between breath and liveliness, and between breath and death. Zoltán Kulcsár-Szabó explores scenarios of the alienation and disappropriation of breath,

looking at the consequences of the deprivation of one's own breath, or the exteriorization of breath in the texts of Martin Heidegger, Edgar Allan Poe, Péter Nádas, Durs Grünbein and Dezső Kosztolányi. Peter Szendy provides a close reading of Poe's short story *Loss of Breath*, also discussed in Kulcsár-Szabó's article, focusing on the antagonism between different "breathing regimes." The contribution of Danijela Lugarić analyses Ivan Bunin's short story *Light Breathing*, focusing primarily on the performative aspect of the text. In Bunin's text, the author argues that writing can also be viewed as a specific way of shaping the unattainable act of breathing. Susanne Strätling explores the paradox of the immaterial materiality of breathing in the "pneumapoetics" of avant-garde and post-avant-garde literature (Andrei Bely, Carlfriedrich Claus, Gil J. Wolman, Chris Burden): here, the act of breathing plays a definite role in the search for ephemeral forms of (art)work and perception. Gábor Tamás Molnár analyses W. G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz*, focusing on Sebald's use of the image of "the death of the moth," in which the fire of the Oriental allegory is replaced by air. The article highlights two passages of the novel in which beings, a human and a moth, take their last breaths.

The chapters of the third part (*Force, Performance, and Politics of Breathing*) focus on the performativity of breathing, with particular attention to its political (and biopolitical) function and framing from antiquity to the modern era. Attila Simon's contribution explores Homer's "biopoetics" through a close analysis of a battle scene from the *Iliad*. Tracing the semantic network of the verb *pneio* in the text, it points out various transferences between nature and culture, life and death, human and non-human, physical and spiritual, as well as literal and figurative linguistic levels. Ábel Tamás's paper discusses Pompey's death and decapitation in the eighth book of Lucan's historical epic *Bellum Civile*. Here, the last breath of Pompey, and the holding of his breath reflect the political circumstances of the Roman Republic's final hours. The starting point for Thomas Schestag's essay is Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz's dilemma in translating a passage in Shakespeare's *Tragedy of Coriolanus*, in which the rendering of the word *breath* is at stake. The second part of the essay attempts to interpret an enigmatic Hölderlin fragment that reveals the complex nature of the biopolitical entity of the breathing body. Róbert Smid's paper offers an analysis of E. M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India*, analyzing the question of how different modes of perceiving otherness and strangeness are related to breathing in both its metaphorical and physiological sense. Finally, Georg Witte's contribution seeks to reveal the political dimensions of breath as an interface between language and life. Commenting on theories on the psychophysiology of rhythm and examples of modern and contemporary poetry (Andrei Bely, Osip Mandelstam, as well as American rap poetry), he concludes that breath can also be a medium of resistance to biopolitical and discursive violence.

The contributions of this volume are based on talks given at the "Allegories of Breathing" conference held at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Budapest, Hungary, on September 14–15, 2023. The conference was organized by ELTE's Department of Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies and the Association for General Studies

of Literature. ELTE's Scientific Council and the Faculty of Humanities generously supported the conference. This volume does not include all the lectures given at the meeting, while there is an additional paper included that was not delivered at the conference. The editors' special thanks go to the authors of the individual articles. We are grateful for the generous support of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, which made the publication of this volume possible. We would also like to express our gratitude to Thomas Emmrich who included our volume in the *Medical Philologies / Medizinische Philologien* series published by Franz Steiner Verlag. The editors owe many thanks to Christina Kunze (German texts) and Jared Butler (English texts), who carefully prepared the manuscript for publication.

List of Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. "The Grain of Voices." *Image, Music, Text.* Fontana, 1977, pp. 179–189.

Benjamin, Walter. "Zum Bilde Prousts." *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Herman Schweppenhäuser, vol. II/1. Suhrkamp, 1977, pp. 310–324.

Böhme, Gernot. *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*. Routledge, 2017.

Celan, Paul. *Der Meridian: Endfassung, Vorstufen, Materialien*, edited by Bernhard Böschenstein and Heino Schmull, Suhrkamp, 1999.

Driscoll, Kári and Eva Hoffmann, editors. *What is Zoopoetics? Texts, Bodies, Entanglement*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Emmrich, Thomas. "Medical Philologies / Medizinische Philologien." *Interdisziplinäre Epidemiologien. Zur Diskursproduktion von Seuchen*, edited by Th. E. Steiner 2024, pp. V–XL.

Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich. *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*. Stanford University Press, 2004.

Heine, Stefanie. *Poetics of Breathing. Modern Literature's Syncope.* SUNY Press, 2021.

Horn, Eva. "Air as Medium." *Grey Room*, no. 73, Fall 2018, pp. 6-25.

Kulcsár-Szabó, Zoltán et al., editors, *Life After Literature. Perspectives on Biopoetics in Literature and Theory*. Springer, 2020.

Lettenewitsch, Natalie and Linda Waack, editors. *Ein- und Ausströmungen: Zur Medialität der Atmung*. Transcript, 2022.

Olson, Charles. "Projective Verse." *Collected Prose*, edited by Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander. California University Press, 1997, pp. 239–49.

Rose, Arthur. "Introduction: Reading Breath in Literature." *Reading Breath in Literature,* edited by Rose et al., Springer, 2019, pp. 1-16.

Rushdie, Salman. *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Random House, 1995.

Škof, Lenart, and Petri Berndtson, editors. *Atmospheres of Breathing*. SUNY Press, 2019.