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Structures of breathing: East Asian contributions to a phenomenology of embodiment

Abstract

What is the role and structure of breathing within embodiment? The topic here is explored in a comparative, phenomenological approach. While the traditional mind-body divide and the Greek idea of an internal, disembodied psyche have been dominant in European thought, in the Chinese-Japanese cultural nexus air-like phenomena and breathing are acknowledged as essential aspects of human experiences. The aim of this paper is presenting a first sketch of such a phenomenology of breathing through premodern and modern non-Western (mostly Japanese) sources, ultimately showing how such an aesthetic attunement to the breathing body was a central element of Homeric sensibility as well.

Keywords

Breathing, Phenomenology, Japanese thought

1. *The body paradox*

Is that of having, or being a body a universal experience? On one hand, it would seem that the materiality of the body is a necessary, obvious element of our being. On the other, though this very experience keeps being only half-transparent to us, or outright paradoxical: we *are* subject-bodies and we possess objective, somatic bodies at the same time. To further complicate this “universal” experience, the relation with our own bodies and those surrounding us is clearly mediated by culturally specific sensibilities and contexts. The very disconnection between mind and body, to which we strongly associate the double tag of Platonism and Christianity, is one of the keystones of Western thought, an overarching trait of European philosophy and later, science. This hierarchical division between mind

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and body is one of the great figures of Western dualism, possibly the first and deepest one. It is important however to notice how this cleft, which at first would seem simply a loss, has been both a resource and a hidden spur for European thought, which modeled itself also around the tension arising from this cut. On a first level, it has done so looking for forms of universality that can be abstracted by the always relative and located experience of *Leib*; on a second level, denouncing such cleft has been the driving force of another rich stream of discourses (might they be Nietzsche's idea of the Dionysian, the intellectual vindications of feminist philosophies, the phenomenological explorations of embodiment).

Acknowledging the existence of such a historical problem at the core of Western philosophy might also suggest another question. If the cleft between mind and body is actually a Western specialty (and thus this drive towards disembodied universality is in a certain sense a regional idiosyncrasy), we have to accept that such a division itself is a relative phenomenon. It might not be erased, but it can be recognized as a form of cultural filter. This last operation is not exactly easy, given the host of physical, educational, lexical and even grammatical conditioning – not to mention the scientific and philosophical one – that makes us think of the somatic as an objective element, and introject the psychic as an internal and immaterial function.

2. *A quest for Eastern embodiment: Yuasa reads Watsuji*

Given all such difficulties, it is only logical to think that a dialogue with other traditions of thought might be therapeutic for a philosophy of embodiment. Here I would like to approach this problem focusing on Sino-Japanese sources. By using the term therapy, I do not suggest a conversion to a superior Asian form of bodily awareness, which exists, when it exists at all, only within individual biographies and as a result of a certain effort (and towards which practitioners of Zen, *yoga* or *aikidō* earnestly work both in Asia and in the West). Such a therapy should rather address what in our ideas of the body is hidden behind obviousness. A dialogue with cultural alterity is not only needed to discover the full, problematic philosophical value of non-European thought, but also to understand our own cultural heritage.

An intercultural reflection about the body also affords us to avoid two great obstacles that such cross-cultural work often encounters:

the stance of those affirming the uniqueness of Western philosophy, and that of those who proposes Asian thought as a parallel universe of pure difference. Given how the very first guarantee of intersubjectivity in our *Lebenswelt* is indeed the body, the possibility of mutual affection afforded by it, a phenomenology of embodiment has to acknowledge and work with both difference and commonality at the same time.

The question of embodiment is one of the major themes in the work of the Japanese philosopher Yuasa Yasuo (1925-2005), who in his volume *Shintai* (published in 1977, and translated in English in 1987 as *The body*) addresses the Asian practice of “cultivated bodies”, and proposes a two-layered model of consciousness. According to Yuasa, who perhaps falls himself into too dualist a model, along a first clear and self-present level of consciousness privileged in the West, we can find a dark, bodily, procedural form of consciousness that has been more fully acknowledged by Asian thought.

However, before exposing his thesis Yuasa begins by retracing the theme of embodiment in the work of two of the greatest Japanese philosophers of the 20th century, Watsuji Tetsurō (1889-1960) and Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945). Yuasa knows especially Watsuji’s philosophy in a direct way, having been his student at the University of Tokyo. Yuasa attempts to read Watsuji’s notion of human as inter-existence of individual and collectivity (*ningen*) and that of cultural-natural environment (*fūdo*) as a moment of this human existence describing them as important contributions to a Japanese philosophy of the body. The stress on embodied spatiality (contrasted to the Western privilege accorded to consciousness and time) makes Watsuji a precious author in addressing this deep layer of bodily consciousness, expressed in the climatic existence and in the net of relations of concrete human beings. However, Yuasa first has to face a problem: Watsuji does not ever specifically treat of “body”.

Watsuji never dealt explicitly with the body and the philosophical issues relevant to it, but we can see glimpses of his views in many of his writings. In his early work, *Ancient Japanese culture*, he analyzed Japan’s oldest songs, emphasizing that the ancient Japanese people did not distinguish between subjectivity and objectivity. “For them, what is known through the senses must be immediately the mind”. There is no distinction between the mind and the flesh, so there is no clear consciousness of the distinction between the self and the modes of external being in one’s bodily sensations. (Yuasa 1987: 46)

It might seem absurd to dedicate the first chapter of a book about the body to an author that “never dealt explicitly” (Yuasa 1987: 46) with it. The second section of Yuasa book has thus to turn towards an examination of premodern Buddhist sources, and concrete psycho-physical practices. A Western reader might then conclude that very little theory is given for this Asian body, or even that such an analysis is ultimately doomed to fall in the specific or into a mute call to practice.

I think that this problem has to be addressed by further inquiring into what is meant as body in these texts. Even if we accept the phenomenological distinction of *Leib* and *Körper*², talking about embodiment our attention is still going to the somatic, the physical, the singular. But the Japanese reflection about embodiment never privileged these aspects. This does not mean, however, that the body is not present in these works.

Let us consider again the case of Watsuji. Both in his work on the climatic existence of human being (*Fūdo*, published in 1935) and his monumental analysis of ethical inter-existence (*Rinrigaku*, published in 1937-49), the body is the subject, a singular and plural subjectivity existing as (rather than “within”) concrete climatic and historical forms. Such a body is something going well beyond the skin of individual bodies or a muscular structure: the climatic space described by Watsuji, and read by Yuasa as an exterior dimension disclosed by the body (integrated, but secondary), has to be understood more radically. To Watsuji, the literal “wind and earth” (風土, *fūdo*) of human milieu are also “flesh” and “human body” (Watsuji 1935: 52). As observed by Sakabe Megumi: “What Watsuji affirmed is that the spatiality of ‘body’ and ‘climate’ is not extensional, but intensional (as for the omnipresence of ‘flesh’ in Merleau-Ponty); in other words, within it the internal is at the same time the external, and the external is at the same time internal” (Sakabe 2000: 105).

The consubstantiality of body (but more-than-somatic) and space (intensional, not extensional), means that such a living, animated space possesses a subjective dimension no less original than those that we can recognize in our limbs. The alleged lack of a reflection on the body in Watsuji and other Japanese philosophers is ultimately a

² In other words between a living body, experienced as the condition of a first-person and intersubjective experience, and an object-body such as the one studied within physical sciences.

misunderstanding based on the modern and Western vision that excludes *a priori* the possibility of a subjectivity and a corporeity outside the somatic, and that observes subjectivity itself as a delocalized, disincarnated process.

3. Subject: the “body-principle”

This continuity of subject and body in Japanese thought can be better understood also following a very concrete linguistic datum, which is unfortunately lost in Western translations. Shortly said: starting from the late 1920s, Watsuji, Nishida, and most Japanese philosophers, incorporated linguistically the word “body” (体) in a newly invented translation of the word “subject” (主体). The term 主体 (*shutai*), becoming current in the philosophical language of this period, is the combination of the characters 主 (“principal”, “master”) and 体 (“body”). But translation, both to and from Japanese, is in this case an already fully philosophical problem.

The word “subject”, which after Descartes is often used almost as a synonym of *ego*, maintains however in the various European languages an etymological relation with the original Aristotelian *hypokeimenon* and the Latin loan word *substantia*, namely “something lying underneath”. At the very same time, it can be used in an almost wholly different sense, as opposite of objective. It is in other terms a historically composite word, which we use with ease in very different linguistic games just out of habit. To list the major ones:

- a) *subjectum*, *hypokeimenon*: that about which is possible to predicate something;
- b) consequently, grammatical subject and agent;
- c) the theme, argument of a discourse;
- d) self-conscious *ego*;
- e) “subjective”, the opposite of “objective”;
- f) also in the first sense of “underneath”, somebody on which is used some power (i.e. within politics).

Like for many other Western notions, there was no easy way to find a simple Japanese equivalent. A first translation attempt was that of Nishi Amane (1829-1897), a father figure of Japanese philosophy, in his 1870 *Encyclopedia* (百学連環 *Hyakugakurenkan*). Given the impossibility of a direct equivalent to all the above meanings, Nishi started considering the difference between subject (此観 *shikan*) and

object (彼観 *hikan*) as a matter of vision (as for the meaning of the character 観 *kan*; see Kobayashi 2010: 43). The characters 此 and 彼 are simple spatial markers meaning “here” and “there”: however, in Buddhist contexts they were also employed to contrast the instability of ego and *samsara* (此岸 *shigan*) and the transcendental vision of *nirvana* (彼岸 *higan*, literally “the other side”). In his attempt to create an equivalent for the Western subject, Nishi evidently felt that most characteristic of it was the act of seeing, as in the meanings e) and partly d), but not the others, grammatical subject included. In the context of grammar, in fact, the ideograph that became used to translate the words “subject” or “theme” was 主 and originally had the meaning of “master” (Kobayashi 2010: 48), thus suggesting how predicates could be considered as “servants” of this principal element. The sense of “underneath” of the original Greek was therefore turned over. Amane alternated between the two translations without finding a final solution, and it was Inoue Tetsujirō (1855-1944), with the publication of his *Philosophical dictionary* (哲学字彙 *Tetsugaku Ji'i*), in 1881, that offered the hybrid 主観 (*shukan*) as translation of the English “subject” (Kobayashi 2010: 54).

It was Nishida, beginning with the second period of his production (the late 1920s, in particular in his analysis of Marx), that in order to stress the active quality and the immediacy of subjectivity substituted to the character standing for “vision” (観) that of “body” (体): hereby the word 主体 (*shutai*). Watsuji, who in 1925 started teaching Ethics at the University of Kyoto following an invitation of Nishida himself, immediately adopted this term in his writings.

In synthesis, the word *shutai* is subject and body, a body considered as autonomous, being its own “master” (主), whose functions and relation with the world go well beyond the detached approach of vision. This subject can be literally translated as “principle of embodiment”, and is thus also considered as guarantee of some invisible spontaneity that escapes conscious control. In more concrete terms, what constitutes the authentic and primary experience of this body-subject is not the (relative) availability of our striated muscles – with which we can stand up or move our arms while conceiving these movements as the orders of an internal ego, to which the body is subject in the servile sense of a mechanical cause. What really characterizes our existence as bodily subjects or as subjective bodies are the moments in which this autonomy gives itself as a more than egoic “mastery”: the complex coordination of sport, dance or

calligraphic gestures, the functioning of autonomous systems, sexual excitation, and respiration. *Shutai* is, literally, a principle making itself body.

4. *The body master*

In order to understand an East Asian perspective on the body it is thus first necessary to understand its tight tie with subjectivity; such subjectivity is in turn never given outside the relationship with a mastery that runs through the body but cannot be reduced to any somatic element.

While *shutai* is ultimately a concept arising through a confrontation with Western paradigms, I would like to further present this model of embodied subjectivity with a comparison with one of the founding texts of the Sino-Japanese canon, which already addressed this autonomous mastery of the body. In the second chapter of the IV century b.C. Chinese classic *Zhuangzi*, the paradox of this master-body is observed with the philosophical taste for the aporetic that characterized early Daoism.

Joy, anger, grief, delight, worry, regret, fickleness, inflexibility, modesty, willfulness, candor, insolence – music from empty holes, mushrooms springing up in dampness [樂出虛，蒸成菌], day and night replacing each other before us, and yet no one knows where they sprout from. [...] But I do not know what makes them the way they are. It would seem as though they have some True Master, and yet I find no trace of him. He can act – that is certain. Yet I cannot see his form. He has identity but no form [可行已信，而不見其形，有情而無形]. The hundred joints, the nine openings, the six organs, all come together and exist here. But which part should I feel closest to? [百骸、九竅、六藏，賅而存焉，吾誰與為親] I should delight in all parts, you say? But there must be one I ought to favor more. If not, are they all of them mere servants? But if they are all servants, then how can they keep order among themselves? Or do they take turns being lord and servant? It would seem as though there must be some True Lord among them [其有真君存焉]. But whether I succeed in discovering his identity [情] or not, it neither adds to nor detracts from his truth. (Zhuangzi 2013: 8-9)

The *Zhuangzi* is well known for its resistance to univocal interpretations: however, in this paradox-inclined reflection on embodiment what is first attacked is the idea of a singular, whole body. There is no singular envelope for the multitude of bodily islands and the constant

variety of our emotive symphony: “without them we would not exist, without us they would have nothing to take hold of” (Zhuangzi 2013: 8). We are forced to think of this constant flux as “a music from the void”, or a sort of fungal matter, that clumps in a mysterious fashion out of atmospheric dampness. Such flux is however not mere chaos: between the “hundred bones and nine holes” (百骸九竅) of this porous, heterogeneous mass there is something mysterious, formless but possessing a certain identity and character: actually, the most literal translation for the character 情 (*qíng*) is not “identity” but rather “sensibility”. This indistinct reality is the true master within ourselves, the non-subjective condition of subjectivity. The XVII century Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) refers to the same passage of *Zhuangzi* in one of his poetic diaries, and identifies this bodily presence with an instinct for poetry.

Among these hundred bones and nine holes there is something. For now let's call it “gauze in the wind” [*Furabō*]. Surely we can say it's thin, torn easily by a breeze. It grew fond of mad poetry long ago and eventually this became its life work. At times, it has wearied of the venture and thought of quitting; at times it has pressed forward, boasting of victories. Battling thus back and forth, it has never been at rest. For a while it yearned for worldly success, but poetry thwarted that; for a while it thought of enlightening its foolishness, but poetry broke that off. Finally, without talent or skill, it simply follows along this one line. (Bashō 2005: 29)

Bashō's body is a *Gestalt*, made out of holes and junctures no less than bone and organs. Even further, it is in its “empty” availability that it becomes a passageway towards natural creativity and artistic expression. This insubstantiality is a source of discomfort, true, but also an opening that lets things arise of a non-thing such as wind: emotive modulation is a music that arises from the relation with empty and hollow, like a wind instrument. The *Furabō* (風羅坊 literally: “wind-gauze-clump”), Bashō's poetic alter ego, is like Goethe's daemon, something always manifesting within contradictions, lacking a proper name (Bashō names is just “for now”), and controlling one's life in an essentially negative way, as physical restlessness. Bashō, through the poetic symbol of something oscillating between materiality and immateriality (a gauze being torn by the wind), describes with great precision the particular open quality of this body-subject.

5. *The open body: the logic of breathing*

The insistence on the open, air-like and even negative elements within the body also opened in a more cosmic tone the aforementioned chapter from *Zhuangzi*. Here we find the acoustic and contemporarily respiratory image of the piping of heaven: “Ziqi of South Wall sat leaning on his armrest, staring up at the sky and breathing – vacant and far away, as though he’d lost his companion”. (Zhuangzi 2013: 7)

The breathing rhythm of the single reflects within the body the movement of wind through the world, manifesting itself as a relation between visible and invisible.

The Great Clod belches out breath, and its name is wind. So long as it doesn’t come forth, nothing happens. But when it does, then ten thousand hollows begin crying wildly. Can’t you hear them, long drawn out? [...] Blowing on the ten thousand things in a different way, so that each can be itself – all take what they want for themselves, but who does the sounding? (Zhuangzi 2013: 7-8)

There are several possible interpretations (and translations) for this passage. Some cast it in a cosmological sense, some read it as an ironic passage about the ultimate unity of different human philosophies. What I would like to stress here is however how much in *Zhuangzi*, in Bashō’s diaries, in countless other East Asian artistic and bodily practices, what we find with great coherence is the stress on a more-than-somatic movement that brings the body always already outside of itself: breathing.

Breathing is an interface phenomenon: that is, a situation in which heterogeneous elements are at the same time divided and connected. It relates to things we are more easily inclined to consider as body (lungs, bronchi, trachea, nose, mouth), but also something else, “air”, that would seem excluded from such a count. The air is something that can be today described in strictly chemical terms, and seems thus unworthy of philosophical attention. Respiration is not one of the most common themes of embodiment, especially until one keeps the scientific perspective of a purely somatic body, made of more and less favored parts (a perspective already mocked by Zhuangzi), ready to control each other. Within such a perspective, it is clear how in comparison with the mystery of the brain, lungs are little more than a pump. But if this is the case, why did the Indian, Chinese

and Japanese world insist so much on breathing, to the point of making it a central aspect of our being-in-the-world?

A first element that we can gather from Zhuangzi and Bashō is the relation between breathing and our being empty, hollow. In other words, breathing is a constant reminder of our particular insubstantiality: not a complete inexistence, but rather emptiness in the Buddhist sense of the term (Skr. *sunyata*, Jap. 空 *kū*). What is affirmed by this view on emptiness is the relative, co-dependent quality of reality, our lack of a compact and self-sustained self continuously projected on ourselves as our own ego, and constantly mapped on our image of a solid, fully somatic body. Peter Sloterdijk, albeit in a very different perspective, notes in his *Critic of cynical reason* how crucial the illusion of such a closed body is to Western man, and how disruptive a simple hole can be to such a somatic unity: “The arse crosses all borders playfully, unlike the head, to which borders and possession mean a lot” (Sloterdijk 2001: 148). The uncouth laughter of toilet and sexual humor³ always arises with the sudden, violent crossing of this boundary between external and internal, proper and improper: that is, self and other. The head is flung back on the body exactly because such body has holes.

A second essential aspect of breathing is its rhythmic nature, its naturally organizing itself in the two poles of expiration and inspiration, tension and relaxations. Opposite and related, none of them is at any moment thinkable as an independent reality. The often-quoted non-dualism of Asian cultures is first and foremost this attention for plexuses and rhythmical relations, not a simple monism. A modern philosophical definition of such relations is the famous notion of absolutely contracting self-identity (絶対矛盾の同一 *zettai mujunteki dōitsu*) defined by Nishida. Nishida however tried to translate in philosophical terms the particular disjunctive connection 即 (*soku*), found in Buddhist texts. *Soku* expresses the contradictory unity between still different things (so that A is always already B, B is always already A). It is a cultural taste that can be recognized in even older elements, such as the *yin-yang* thought in archaic China, or the linguistic process that brought both Chinese and Japanese to express abstract notions with the combination of two opposite terms: for instance “antithetical compounds like 長短 *chō-tan*, literally ‘long-

³ And the word “humor” itself, we might have to reflect about it, refers to a liquid secretion potentially crossing bodily boundaries.

short', which stands for the idea expressed in English by the word 'length' but is more logical, since it expresses a synthesis by specifying both elements and emphasizing neither" (Samson 1928: 32).

This "non-dual duality" can be retraced in breathing first as the paradox of vacuity (the connection and disconnection of body and environment), secondly as the respiratory rhythm (tension-distension), thirdly within the oscillation between voluntary and involuntary, emotive and cognitive, that characterizes breathing as a process. Breathing is the only⁴ bodily process that is inscribed in a physical, unconscious memory and at the same time part of our psychical and personal lives. We can try to hold back (temporarily) our bowel movements and hunger, albeit with a certain uneasiness, but we cannot possibly modulate them. Heartbeat, in a moment of distress or fear, can even be felt as something extraneous to ourselves (up to the descent into madness in Poe's *Revealing heart*). Only breathing is an integrated interface of physical and psychic. We cannot attain a total control over it, and yet it can be educated, become an almost artistic gesture, both skilled and spontaneous. It is on the other hand also true that most of our emotions seem to inhabit the chest, and exist also as breathing: two major examples are those extremes of human behavior such as crying and laughing, concerning which would be hard to assess a priority between uncontrolled breathing and psychic turmoil (see Plessner 1970).

Even from such a rough sketch of a phenomenology of breathing we can therefore acquire several insights, such as:

- a) the Asian acknowledgement of polar unities, which is in turn the condition to recognize four more figures of "absolutely contradictory unity" in our breath:
- b) external-internal (the human "hollowness");
- c) tension-distension (breathing as a rhythm);
- d) physic-psychic (the somatic-emotive character of respiration);
- e) voluntary-involuntary (the artistry and spontaneity of breathing)

If we observe the Sino-Japanese cultural nexus, we can recognize these very elements expressed in the notion of 氣 (Jap. *ki*, Chin. *qi*), "air" or "breathing". Or rather, I would further argue that it is only from a phenomenological observation of these breathing paradoxes that we can actually understand the philosophical relevance of the

⁴ According to physiology, the only other exception is the anal muscle, which would further explain the panicked laughter described by Sloterdijk.

concept of *ki*, without reducing it to an essentially alien or mystical notion.

6. *Ki as a phenomenon: Kuki and Watsuji*

A first challenge to this inquiry is the very real difficulty of translating the word *ki*. In its various compound terms, it can refer to “weather” and “climate”, “atmosphere”, “air”, “breathing”, “attention”, “care” (as in *Sorge*), “taste”, “sympathy” and “antipathy”, “mood”, “health”, “illness”, “folly” and so on. With the risk, especially from a Western perspective, of meaning eventually everything, and thus nothing. Japanese philosophers that have most recently discussed *ki* seem to be still hampered by this difficulty: Ogawa Tadashi discussed *ki* brilliantly, but within a framework that relies heavily on Hermann Schmitz’s phenomenology of atmospheres (Ogawa 2000), without exploring too much the cultural implications of such an attempt; Yamaguchi Ichiro (Yamaguchi 1997) in his book approached the theme from a multiplicity of perspectives (an account of modern authors reflecting on this theme, a historical reconstruction, linguistic data, forms of practice in arts and martial arts, Chinese medicine), but these different chapters are not connected by a strong underlying theory. Hisayama (Hisayama 2014), again in a neophenomenological perspective, tries to avoid such confusion by distinguishing three spheres of *ki* – physical, atmospheric and interpersonal, panic – but the metaphor itself of the sphere seems partially counterintuitive, in dealing with an object characterized by hollowness and flow.

In short, a philosophy (or a phenomenology) of *ki* seems at first still something to wait for, just like a Western pneumatology is for the greatest part still to be thought of. But just as we have seen with the body, the absence of an explicit exposition does not mean that this notion is not philosophically active in the work of modern Japanese thinkers: it is for instance possible to recognize two brilliant approaches to this phenomenology of the insubstantial in the work of two major authors like Watsuji himself and Kuki Shūzō (1888-1941).

The most known work by Kuki, *The structure of iki* (Kuki 1930) is a philosophical exploration of a uniquely Japanese aesthetic ideal: *iki* is a form of worldly transcendence that arose among the libertines living through the “floating world” of pleasure quarters. For these connoisseurs, both men and women, erotic charm was an interplay

between physical attraction, the dual tension kept through an exercise of will, and the detachment due to the realization of the ultimately empty quality of desire. Sexuality, as we mentioned above, is another of the contexts in which the body is revealed in its hollowness, in which the apparent autonomy of the *ego* is cracked by the always relative desire for the other-than-itself (interestingly, one of Plato's ideals was indeed the spherical, perfect body of two perfectly and definitively joined halves, who do not desire anymore imperfect contacts with plural bodies as we read in Plat. *Sym.* 190a). One of the words employed by Kuki to describe desire is the old Japanese word 色気 (*iroke*), literally "colored *ki*" (the character of color originally corresponds to the character of sexuality). The exercise of will that allows this desiring relationship to keep existing in its duality without tending to a superior or ultimate unity is also 意気地 (*ikiji*), "determination" or "courage" – another form of *ki*. The movement of desire, with its oscillation between closeness and detachment, is by itself akin to a sort of respiration. The very title of Kuki's work is suggesting this connection, playing with the ambiguity of the word いき (*iki*) through different possible ideograms for it, such as 粹 ("elegance"), 意気 ("determination") or even 息 ("breathing"). The analysis of Kuki has the merit of discussing, no matter how implicitly, the specific form of atmospherically embodied desire. Desire is an inter – and extra – personal embodiment, something that makes us exist outside of ourselves, and this embodied field of desire exists between people, places, objects and words, and is able to "fill the whole of existence", as in the Maine de Biran quote with which Kuki opens his work (Kuki 1930: 13). During his (admittedly fictionalized) 1954 conversation with a Japanese, Heidegger recalls his earlier encounter with Kuki during the 1920s, and while lacking any real understanding of Kuki's work, defines *iki* as "the breath of the stillness of luminous delight" (Heidegger 1959: 44). The reference to air and breathe could be a pure coincidence, but it could also effectively date back to a conversation with Kuki. *Iki* can be considered as a culturally charged atmosphere, a *ki* phenomenon that involves different bodies in the same breathing.

Another perspective on *ki* can be found in Watsuji's aforementioned analysis of climate (*Fūdo*, 1935). In the first theoretical chapter of his work Watsuji describes the exteriority of climatic emotions as their being, literally, in the air.

One morning we may find ourselves "in a revived mood" [literally: 爽やかな気

分 *sawayakana kibun*, “a fresh *ki*-part”). [...] What we have here is not a mental state but the freshness of the external atmosphere. But the object that is understood in terms of the temperature and the humidity of the air has not the slightest similarity with the freshness itself. This freshness is a way of being, it is not an “object” or the “quality of an object”. It is not that we have certain states imposed on us by the atmosphere; the fact that the atmosphere possesses a state of freshness is that we ourselves feel revived. We discover ourselves, that is, in the atmosphere. (Watsuji 1935: 14-5, tr. modified)

Describing such emotive tonality Watsuji is well aware that already in Heidegger the *Stimmung* is something that “[...] assails. It comes neither from ‘without’ nor from ‘within’ but rises from being-in-the-world itself as a mode of that being” (Heidegger 1927: 133). But the strange topology of mood is even more obvious in Japanese, since the word 気分 (*kibun*) is literally “a fraction of *ki*” or “an understanding of *ki*”, integrated within ourselves by our own attunement and hollowness. The distinction between internal and external is not erased, but none of the two poles is thinkable in absolute or independent terms (this is the major aim of Watsuji, as he decides to avoid the word “nature” and rather think about the human-natural nexus of *fūdo*). Just like human beings, air as a subjective, spatial medium already exists as this empty, that is relational, mode of being.

This first passage and the phenomenological analysis of “cold” (寒気 *samuke*, that is literally “cold *ki*”), open the work of Watsuji, and are those quoted most often. But Watsuji includes a reflection on the intersubjective and artistic values of *ki* later in the volume, as he begins probing into that irrational harmony characteristic of Japanese art: according to Watsuji, it has to be thought of as 気合 (*kiai*), as an attunement of *ki*. The accurately irregular forms of a Japanese garden, a painting with a strongly asymmetrical structure, where the empty white is meant to breathe through the black form, and the poetic model of chained comic poetry (俳諧の連歌 *haikai no renga*), in which more poets gather together and compose an impromptu series of verses arising from the contingent harmony of their encounter, are all examples of *kiai* as a breathing together. Reflecting on this last example, Watsuji asks:

How can such chance create artistic unity? Here again the answer lies in “meeting of feeling” (*kiai*), in this case a meeting of the heart. If there is no meeting between the tempers of a gathering of poets, no surpassing linked verse will come of the gathering. While preserving their own individuality, the

poets combine their feelings (*ki*) and reveal their individual experience in a symphonic concord of each other's hearts. This form of poetry was no doubt something never thought of in the West. (Watsuji 1935: 196)

Is Watsuji right? Is the acknowledgement of breathing as a crucial element of embodiment, with aesthetic, social, spiritual resonance, something that cannot be found at all in the West?

7. *Not only East: the Greek breathing*

As long as we observe specific Asian art forms such as Japanese chained poetry, it is hard not to agree with Watsuji. However, if the cluster of *ki* phenomena effectively exist, like their remarkable heuristic value already suggests, we should encounter at least traces of such a breath-thinking in other cultures. Indeed, the extremely common expressions about air and atmosphere in European languages on one side, and the hidden relevance of aerial words in the European philosophical and religious vocabulary (*anima, psyche, pneuma*, spirit, ghost, *Geist* and so on) on the other, makes quite clear how this particular phenomenological relevance of air is at least unconsciously still very active in our bodies and thought corpus. If we can imagine a phenomenology of breathing, its hermeneutic aspect must necessarily be retraced also within European culture. It is no surprise, therefore, that its most direct expressions date back to a time before the interiorization and de-corporation of the psychic described by Hermann Schmitz in referral to V century Greek thought (Schmitz 2011: 247).

This preferential relation between breathing and embodiment seems in fact to be the most radical hypothesis advanced by the English philologist Richard Onians in his volume of 1951 *Origins of European thought*. According to Onians, in Homeric times "thinking is described as 'speaking' and is located sometimes in the heart but usually in the *phren* or *phrenes*" (Onians 1951: 13). The *phrenes* are involved in the whole of psychic life, not simple thinking but also emotions, desire, sympathy and antipathy, divine and demonic inspirations. *Phrenes* contain the *thumos*, "not mere air but something vaporous within, blending and interacting with the air without" (Onians 1951: 48). According to Onians, if we read Homer in depth we must accept that *phrenes* are nothing else than "lungs", a fact that leads him to formulate the basic statement of his book: to ancient

Greeks thoughts and emotions are something that is blown and breathed. These lungs are the interface of dreaming, of the temporary madness of inspiration or a stroke of genius: Penelope in the *Odyssey* says for instance: “First some god inspired [*enepneuse*] into my mind [*phrenes*] the idea of a mantle” (Hom. *Od.* 19.138). Alcohol has its effect on *phrenes*, and it is in the lungs that wisdom and wit are to be found: both Laertes and Telemachus are described as “a spirited man” (*pempnuomenos*, see Onians 1951: 59). Onians offers textual evidence that connects to this lung-centered model the word, which Homeric characters keep in their lungs, sensorial knowledge such as taste and smell, and even sight. The beauty of an image is in fact something atmospheric, that is able to affect us internally because it is “breathed in”, as evident in the Homeric hymn to Demetra, in which “the goddess changed her stature and form (*eidos*) and beauty was breathed around her (*peri t’amphi te kállos aeto*)” (Onians 1951: 73-4). This idea could even be the very basis of the term “aesthetic” itself, which would consist exactly in the perception of such invisible auras and atmospheres: “*Aisthomai*, ‘I perceive’ (with the resultant substantive *aisthesis* [...] our aesthetics, etc.) is the middle of the Homeric *aistho*, ‘I gasp, breathe in’” (Onians, 1951: 75).

In this consistent mass of Homeric quotes and etymologies, we can easily recognize the same semantic structure that seemed so exotic and untranslatable once expressed with Asian ideograms. This seems to confirm and broaden the scope of some of the hypotheses that have oriented this (clearly selective) inquiry into East Asian forms of embodiment.

a) The first is that, as we stated above, a bodily field can effectively be a privileged locus for the understanding with the other – within and across cultures.

b) The second is that premodern East Asian thinking approached the question of the body in terms that can be still philosophically active, and do not have to be reduced to ethnography or pure praxis to be meaningful.

c) The same concepts have moreover kept an active, if sometimes implicit, role in the 20th century Japanese thought. Such that due to its originally intercultural character, is another relevant gateway to our understanding of them.

d) Lastly, but not least importantly, this confrontation with another culture has the not little merit of forcing us to observe easily missed analogies and tendencies within our own European tradition.

From such conjoined endeavors is perhaps possible a shift of direction for the phenomenological reduction, so that the locus of our thought can be at least partially brought back from the inside to the outside, from the head alone to the pulmonary cavity of Homeric and Asian traditions. In sum, to make philosophy without forgetting to breathe.

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