

## I CAN'T BREATHE

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

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



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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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



## Poetry as Excess

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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