Thomas Schestag

Stinking breaths—stinkende Stimmen

Ich der stinkende Atem des Volks. I take a deep breath, trying to translate. Me the people's stinking breath. Who, or what, is this? And what does *Atem* mean to say here? Or has its meaning been condensed, repressed, fermented into its quintessential olfactory quality? And if so—but how (and why) exactly: *so*—, what, then, would be the meaning of the people's *stinking* breath? How to smell; how to accept and to take in; how to read and understand; how to translate (into) its particular perfume? How—*me*? But how can I, though the sentence leaves *to be* out—; how, me—the stinking breath of many—; how are they all compressed in order to escape or to evaporate, *into* me, nothing but their breath? They are breathing nothing but *me*: den stinkenden Atem des Volks. Do I incorporate, condense, personify their *stinking* breath? Ich—das stinkende, *gärende* Volk? Ich—das *Gären* des Volks—; me—the people's fermentation? Ich, das Volk auf der Schwelle zum Aufruhr? Ich—die Schwelle—der stinkende Atem (des Volks)? Do I embody—but I don't dispose of any body, *corpse* or corporation—unrest among the people? The people on the brink of insurrection, riot, *stásis*? Me—its striking, *stinking* breath? But, then, again, who: *me* (neither *one* nor *many*)? And when, and where, and why? What for?

The scene is in a letter written on August 28th 1775 in Straßburg by Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz. Its addressee is Johann Gottfried Herder. Weeks earlier Lenz had sent a manuscript of his comedy *The Soldiers—Die Soldaten. Eine Komödie*—to Herder, waiting for comments, and for advice where and when to publish. "Ich der stinkende Atem des Volks". Three lines further down in the letter Lenz alludes to Shakespeare's *Tragedy of Coriolanus* parts of which he had started to translate into German in late 1774. Die Arbeit an der Übersetzung hielt Lenz das ganze Jahr 1775, so to speak, *in Atem*: translating excerpts from *Coriolanus* kept Lenz *in suspense* for the most part of 1775. In his letter to Lenz, to which Lenz here responds, and which has been lost, Herder must have refered to a particular scene in Shakespeare's tragedy which Lenz, as he writes, had translated yesterday: "Daß Du im Coriolan eben die Szene aufnimmst, die ich gestern der Königin übersetzt, über die ich seit drei Tagen brüte". That you are refering to precisely this scene in *Coriolanus* which I translated yesterday—: *der Königin*. This is (and is) not: *for the queen*. Lenz is allowing himself here an antonomastic joke with the family name *König*, refering to *Luise König*, the woman in whose house Lenz lived during his Straßburg years. Just yesterday he has been translating this particular scene (not for the queen but) for his landlady. A scene over which I have been brooding now for three days. And he has not yet come to any conclusion. The translation is still pending. Die Szene hält den Übersetzer immer noch in Atem. The scene continues to keep the translator in suspense. Lenz continues: "Es ist als ob Coriolan bei jedem Wort das er widers Volk sagte, auf mich schimpfte—und doch kann ich ihn ganz fühlen und all seinen Grundsätzen entgegen handeln". It is as if Coriolanus with every word he directs against the people were railing at *me* (me—the people; me—the people's stinking breath). And yet, I can feel him entirely; as if saying: I can agree entirely with his feelings (against the people); I can feel him feeling, and I can feel *with* what he feels. […] *und all seinen Grundsätzen entgegen handeln*: and I can act *in accordance* with all his principles, or: I can act *against* all his principles. The word *entgegen* (in its adverbial function) expressing (according to *Deutsches Wörterbuch*) "annäherung oder widerstand", accordance or resistance. Translation on the brink (of rioting against itself): I can feel with Coriolan's feelings against the people, and yet [still] act against all his feelings against the people. Against—against. Gegen— gegen. Or: and act in accordance with his principles that is act against myself as far as it is as if every word he directs against the people were directed against me. What, then, under these peculiar circumstances, could be my *principles* of translating? Was, angesichts der skizzierten *Gegen*gegenwendigkeit in dem zitierten Satz—meine *Grundsätze*, Coriolan zu *übersetzen*? Kann *Über*setzung überhaupt von *Grund*sätzen ausgehn? Grundsätzen *entgegen* gehn? What could be, more precisely, the principles of translating this very *scene*? Or would they have to be suspended? Ist dies, nicht nur für Übersetzer, eine *atemberaubende* Szene? A *breathtaking* scene? But which scene, exactly? What follows in the letter will help identifying it (although *identity* is not the word). Lenz continues by writing two words in English, followed (at least, so it seems) by their translation: "*Worthy voices*—das Wort des Herrn—das höchste Ziel alles meines Strebens—ach *worthy voices* […]". *Worthy voices*—the Lord's word—all my efforts' highest aim—alas *worthy voices* … As if *worthy voices* marked the writer's highest aim (the abyss of heavens one might call it), and an abyss of deepest—fathomless—worthlessness, at once. Grund(satz)*losig*keit.

Worthy voices is a quotation. It refers back to the scene in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* over which Lenz has been brooding now for three days. The words relate to scene 3 in the second act. In his translation, Lenz doesn't remain true to how Shakespeare divides the second act into scenes. He already includes excerpts from scenes 1 and 2 of this act into what he calls *Dritte Szene*. The reason for why Lenz ignores Shakespeare's divisions is that he tends (or seems to be tempted) to condense a discussion that in Shakespeare only culminates in scene 3, but steadily builds up already over the course of the two preceding scenes, into one and the same. The third scene, according to Lenz' intervention into Shakespeare's composition or make-up of the second act marks the (excentric) center of the *tragedy*. It turns around *voices*. In other words around *breaths*.

After the sack of the rebellious Volscian city of Corioles, almost solely due to the courage and daring of one single Roman general, member of a patrician family, *Caius Martius*, he will receive, after the army's return to Rome, the *agnomen* Coriolanus, honoring his deeds— *Caius*

Martius Coriolanus—, and the senate wants to make him consul. But for this to happen, Coriolanus has to undergo a certain operation. He has to obey to the custom—*éthos* (in Plutarch's *Life of Gaios Markios*)—to stand on the *forum* and publicly beg for the people's *voices*. In the course of scene 1 of the second act, two tribunes of the people, Brutus and Sicinius, who want to undermine and defeat Coriolanus' election for consul (preparing for the plebeians revolt against the patricians, in other words for a civil war), come forward, and speak. It is these speeches which open what Lenz calls *Dritte Szene*. He translates Brutus' first statement but cuts off its very first sentence. It is this: "All tongues speak of him [of Coriolanus]" [II.1.203]. Lenz cuts off these tongues. The one sentence about *all tongues*. From what follows in the text it turns out that *all* tongues are the *people's* tongues. Ein Stelldichein aus Zungen, das alle Stände mischt. In Brutus' English: "[…] stalls, bulks, windows, / Are smother'd up, leads fill'd and ridges hors'd / With variable complexions, all agreeing / In earnestness to see him. Seld-shown flamens / Do press among the popular throngs, and puff / To win a vulgar station" [II.1.208–213]. And in Lenz: "[…] Ställe, Kramläden, Fenster,—alles wird zerdrückt von Menschen, auf den Galerien und den Giebeln der Häuser reiten sie bunt durcheinander und gucken nach ihm herunter". In Lenz *no* tongues speak. Or rather, *no*: in Lenz' translation not even *no* tongues speak for he cuts off any trace of reference to the people's speaking tongues in the English version. Lenz incisively—and this can no longer or not yet be called a *translator's* gesture— mutilates them *all*. He deprives the people of its tongues. Whereas in *Shakespeare* Brutus and Sicinius *speak to share* their opinions (about Coriolanus, and the people), in Lenz—translating *Coriolanus*—a strange strategy (one may call it *to shake and pierce*) in regard of the *people* prevails.

The dialogue between Brutus and Sicinius unfolds, and further down in the same scene you can hear Brutus saying this (about Coriolanus): "I heard him swear, / Were he to stand for consul, never would he / Appear i'th'market-place, nor on him put / The napless vesture of humility; / Nor showing (as the manner is) his wounds / To th'people, beg their stinking breaths" [II.1.229–233]. When saying *I heard him swear* Brutus seems to be saying something like this: "I swear, I heard him swear, and say:"[…]". Or: "I say, I swear, I heard him swear, and say". The relation between *I say—I swear—I hear* unfolding out of the turn of phrase *I heard him swear*, brings to the fore, by piercing all ears, that speech and hear-say, speech *as* hear-say takes place on shaky grounds. In other words, translation no less. This is how Lenz listens to what Brutus says when saying he heard Coriolanus swear: "Auch hört ich ihn schwören, wenn er der Gewohnheit gemäß ums Konsulat anhalten müßte, so werde er sich nimmer entschließen, das gewöhnliche Kandidatenkleid anzulegen oder seine Wunden dem Volk zu weisen und es so um seine stinkenden Stimmen zu bitten". I swear this is what you hear when looking at Lenz' translation of stinking breaths: stinkende Stimmen.

What's in a *breath*? What—in the *word* "breath"? And what in voices—*Stimmen*—, here? *Breath*—the word—, especially in Shakespeare, but not exclusively, may also mean— besides "the air inhaled into and exchaled from the lungs in the act of breathing"; and besides the *smelling* air exhaled from the lungs—: "Speech; a spoken or whispered word or words; a spoken sound; an utterance. Formerly also: judgment or will expressed in words" [*Oxford English Dictionary*]. As if saying, when saying "I give you my *voice*": I give you my *breath*. My voice for you, supporting the senate's purpose of having you elected as consul is not a mere *word*, although I may utter the word *Yes* when it comes to elect or select you—in public—for office; nor is my *voice*, and even less so, a mere *vote*—although *voice* may, like *Stimme* in German, also mean *vote* in English—. When saying "I give you my *breath*", I mean to say that I guarantee—I swear, or promise—with my *life*—as if, at precisely this moment, stepping outside of the realm of both *human* and *political* life, reduced to a mere *breathing* (if not *sighing*) *creature*—; to support your candidacy. No *word* is able to live up to this *breath* (the quintessence of *life*), especially not the word *breath*. Breath is all I have, breath is all I am.

This highest and most noble estimation of *breath*, as quintessence of the life I am ready to give (if not to sacrifice), is challenged by what Brutus had heard Coriolanus say: that he would not, would never beg the people's stinking breath. *Stinking* breath no longer refers to a breathing body as the most notable embodiment of *life*, but to that very same body on its way to rotten carcass, and decay. This is what Coriolanus has to say about the people's breath (further down, in act III) at the moment of being banished from the city of Rome: "You common cry of curs! whose breath I hate / As reek o'th'rotten fens, whose loves I prize / As the dead carcasses of unburied men / That do corrupt my air: I banish you!" [III.3.120–123]. And in Lenz' translation: "Ihr Haufen bellender Hunde, deren Atem ich hasse, wie den Dampf verfaulter Moräste, deren Liebe ich gerade so hoch schätze als die Äser unbegrabener Toten, die mir die Luft anstecken—ich verbanne euch". In other words: your breath smells *death*. The fact that you all are still breathing only indicates that you are already dead. Your city is a city of the dead. Your polis—*nekro*polis. But even—or especially—those corpses' smell still affects, it corrupts Coriolanus' air. The cry to banish them instead of being banished by them is a cry of despair about not being able to come to terms with *breath*.

Breath seems to mark a zone of indistinction between two (Greek) notions of *life*: sheer or mere life—*zoé*—, and life as *bíos* (building on *zoé*): a *form* of life, life *taking shape*—Gestalt—. Breath is neither bound to *zoé* nor to *bíos*, but both depend on *breath* (as *the* condition of their possibility). Breath seems to support, yet—in one and the same breath—to threaten both notions. Both ways of life. The indistinction between *breath* and *voice* and *vote* throughout *The tragedy of Coriolanus* situates breath at and as the origin of *political* life (as well as at—and *as*— the origin of its impossibility). According to a famous passage

near the beginning of Aristotle's *Politics*, man as *political* animal – *zóon politikon* – is defined as different from all other animals with which he may share voice—*phoné*—in that man only, and therefore it is called the particular property—*ídion*—of man, disposes of *lógos*: articulated voice or speech (in words), and is therefore called zóōn lógon échōn. *Lógos* here takes the shape of the *idiotic* property of man as *political* animal. On a scale of acoustic phenomena between *psóphos*—sheer noise or sound, unbound to breath (like thunder or wind)—, *phoné*—voice—, and *lógos*—articulated speech—, breath—*pneûma*—is involved in the utterance of voice—*phoné*—and speech—*lógos* or *diálektos*—. In short (as a passage in Aristotle's *History of animals* has it): without lungs, no voice, without tongues, no speech. [535a–535b]

[At this point, I want to indicate, in brackets, without discussing it, this: a resonance between Greek *psóphos*—noise or sound—and another Greek noun: *psêphos*. This latter is, in Plutarch's *Life of Gaios Markios*, on which, in its English translation by Thomas North, Shakespeare relied when writing *Coriolanus*, the word most often used for voice as vote: *psêphos* names a small round worn stone, or pebble—*calculus* in Latin—, but also those small stones in use (mostly in Attica) when it came to voting: they were collected in open urns, to later be counted. The breath as voice, the voice as vote, the vote as *Stimmstein*—calculus—: this process evacuates (step by step) breath or breathing out of the *political* custom of voting. On the brink, as mentioned in Plutarch's *Life of Gaios Markios*, of corruption: of buying and selling votes, or voices. It had not yet become a political practice, Plutarch writes, at Coriolanus' times, but corruption was, as you have heard, already in the air. This is from Thomas North's English translation: "It was but of late time, and long after this [Coriolanus begging for breaths or voices on the market-place], that […] the *voyces*—in Plutarch's Greek *psêphois*—of the electours were bought for money. But after corruption had once gotten waye into the election of offices, it hath run from man to man […]".]

How is it possible to evacuate, if not to banish, *breath* from the *political* sphere in general, from speech—*lógos* or *diálektike*—in particular? An answer to that question is found in a passage from Aristotle's treatise *Perì psychês—De anima—*. After having mentioned the porous distinction between *psóphos*—noise, sheer sound—and *phoné* by saying that voice is an animated being's noise—*phonè d'esti zóon psóphos*—(which folds *voice* back into a variation of *noise*: a liminal experience risking the life of life—as *breathing*—)—; Aristotle sees breath (as breathing in or inhalation) prepared by nature for two tasks—*dúo érga*—: breath generates (and necessarily so) an animated being's inner heat, but is also used for the voice—*phoné*—to take place. Not every sound or noise emanated by a living creature—*zóon*—is voice (the tongue is able to produce sound, as people are, when coughing or laughing). For voice is a particular sound able to indicate (or mean something): *phoné* is *psóphos semantikòs*. "In uttering voice (and now I quote from an English translation [by W.S. Hett]) the agent uses the respired air to strike the air in the windpipe against the windpipe itself". The agent here (I interrupt quoting Aristotle) are *human* beings as *political* animals using voice—*phoné*—in view of the semiotic and semantic quality it produces, in other words in view of *lógos*, or *diálektike*. "Proof of this lies in the fact", Aristotle continues (and now please hold your breath, and listen), "that it is impossible to speak either when inhaling or exhaling, but only when holding the breath—*allà katéchonta*—; for it is only in holding the breath—*ho katéchon*—that one can make this movement". [421a] Only by holding back, only by suppressing or oppressing breath are we able to speak. It is only by banishing breath from the *political* sphere—the quintessence of which is *public speech*—that the *polis*, political *life* takes shape. And *human* beings as *political* animals alike. *Hold your breath*: this seems to be the *political* imperative par excellence. But the fulfillment of such a command remains doubtful. In other words the establishment of the political sphere itself remains on hold (delayed, postponed), by breath as *katéchon* of speech. As if you heard someone say (or whisper): speech—the *katéchon* of breath: breath—the *katéchon* of speech. The return of the repressed, in this case *breath*, back before its banishment from the polis, is indicated by what Brutus had heard Coriolanus say: he would not beg the people's stinking breaths. Translated by Lenz as stinkende Stimmen.

You have heard me say (earlier) that Lenz, in his letter to Herder on August 28th 1775, when writing *Ich der stinkende Atem des Volks*, apparently decided to translate *stinking breaths* (the word *breath* reduced to its singular), detached from any reference to *voice* or *vote*, as *Atem*. Why? What seems to hold back Lenz—another moment of *katéchein*—, brooding over this particular scene now for three days, is the hesitation between *Atem* and *Stimme* (on the brink of *speech*) when it comes to translate *stinking breaths*. Before the background of the passage from Aristotle's treatise *On the Soul* (on breath held back in order to be able to speak) the fragmented sentence *Ich der stinkende Atem des Volks* (itself evacuated from Lenz' translation of Shakespeare's *Coriolan*) seems to mean to say this: Me—the people's stinking breath: that which is held back, if not oppressed, every time public—*political*—speech takes place, including the syntactic fragment *Ich der stinkende Atem des Volks*. What remains excluded from this fragmented sentence is, what has been included into its inmost core*: the people's stinking breath*. It marks—but not as far as it is *said* or *spoken*—its *inocclusive* shape.

It seems that Lenz has become more and more aware, in other writings from about the same time period, 1775–76, of a pause—or caesura—between *stinking* and *breath* in the people's *stinking breath*. I want, but not in order to conclude—*conclusion* is not part of what is going on here—to draw your attention to two short passages from a fragmentary treatise, written in close connection to Lenz' piece of theater *Die Soldaten. Eine Komödie*. It is an essay on (among other things) military reform. Its title: *Über die Soldatenehen* [On Married Soldiers]. This is the first

passage: "[…] Stroh in Kot getreten—das wahre Bild unsers heutigen Volks—[…]": straw trampled into excrements—the true image of our people today. *Breath* is not part of the image. But what happens when straw and faeces meet, is fermentation: *Gärung*. And this is the other passage. It refers to the oppression of both citizen and peasant—*den Bürger, den Landmann, der bis aufs Blut ausgedrückt ist*—in times of absolutism. That is, *today*. Lenz writes: "Ich deklamiere nicht, ich protokolliere nur das was ich überall hörte und sah, als ich mich unter diese Leute mischte. Wehe dem neuen Projektemacher der diese Erniedrigten noch tiefer erniedrigt, diese Zertretenen noch mehr zertritt, aller Fluch ihrer unterdrückten Seufzer (leider können die meisten nicht mehr seufzen) über ihn": This is no declamation, it is the protocol of what I heard and saw everywhere, when I mingled with these people (that is: *with the people*) (as if I myself indistinct from straw trampled into excrement). Woe to the new project maker driving those who have already been humiliated into even deeper humiliation, who continues to trample on those who have been trampled down, all the curse of their oppressed sighings (unfortunately most of them are no longer able to even sigh) upon him. As if *breathing* for most of those who have been trampled down (for most of the people) were no longer possible.

I will not comment on this last *protocol*. In what Lenz is describing here, in the people's true image—*Stroh in Kot getreten*—, and in the fragment from the letter to Herder—*Ich der stinkende Atem des Volks*—, you will recognize, later, the shape of something unheard of. It is the threshold of what I will not describe nor discuss, but only name (and then stop talking): *idiotic politics*.

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