

2018

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Recommended Citation

Steven Swarbrick. "In Anthropocene Air: Deleuze's Encounter with Shakespeare." *Early Modern Culture* 13 (2018): 103-114.

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5-28-2018

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Recommended Citation

Steven Swarbrick (2018) "In the Anthropocene Air: Deleuze's Encounter with Shakespeare," *Early Modern Culture*: Vol. 13 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/emc/vol13/iss1/8>

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In Anthropocene Air: Deleuze's Encounter with Shakespeare

STEVEN SWARBRICK

These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air.
—*The Tempest* (4.1.148-50)

What endures (in Anthropocene air)? Although this paper will focus on the question of endurance, it is not the endurance of the encounter between Gilles Deleuze and William Shakespeare that I have in mind, for which we have only a few scattered references across Deleuze's large body of work, but endurance itself. What endures *after* the actors have all vanished ("into thin air," in Prospero's phrasing)? For Deleuze, this question leads directly to "Hamlet's great formula, "The time is out of joint," which we may take as emblematic of Deleuze's whole project. According to Deleuze,

As long as time remains on its hinges, it is subordinate to movement; it is the measure of movement, interval or number. This was the view of ancient philosophy. But time out of joint signifies the reversal of the movement-time relationship. It is now movement which is subordinate to time.¹

"The time is out of joint" means for Deleuze that time is no longer determinable by the "I" or "I think." Time is not related to "our" time, the time of movements, actions, intervals, and numbers. Time being unhinged means that time is no longer finite but infinite: "a straight line," the empty form of time, time *without* content. "Everything which moves and changes is in time, but time itself does not change, does not move, any more than it is eternal. It is the form of everything that changes and moves."² Hamlet's time that is out joint is perforce "inexorable" because it has freed itself of every *possible*, that is, every habit of thought, movement, and action.

In his late essay on Samuel Beckett, "The Exhausted," Deleuze writes: "the realization of the possible always proceeds through exclusion, because it presupposes preferences and goals that vary, always replacing the preceding ones."³ The most famous example of the realization of the possible is Hamlet's

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“To be, or not to be,” which orders preferences and goals around the disjunction “or,” all the while masking a profounder truth: the overlap of “to be” and “not to be” (what Deleuze calls “inclusive disjunction”) in the figure of the Ghost (3.1.55).⁴ “In the end, it is these variations, these substitutions, all these exclusive disjunctions (daytime/nighttime, going out/staying in...) that are tiring,” Deleuze writes.⁵ But “Exhaustion is something entirely different: one combines the set of variables of a situation, on the condition that one renounce any order of preference. . . . One no longer realizes, even though one accomplishes something. Shoes, one stays in; slippers, one goes out. . . . One was tired of something, but one is exhausted by nothing.”⁶ The “possible,” for Deleuze, names the order of time that Hamlet would have us unhinge. It is the *order* of order, insofar as it—the possible—structures time (and space) through sequence and exclusion. The object that I perceive and intend is possible only because there is an excluded background or margin that remains impossible without a change in my perspective. The possible world—the world of actions and objects—depends on this blind spot or this margin—what Lacan call the “stain” of subjectivization, which always threatens to overtake the world of the possible, the only world “we” know and inhabit, since it is the world of habit as such. “We are habits,” Deleuze writes, “nothing but habits—the habit of saying ‘I.’ Perhaps, there is no more striking answer to the problem of the Self.”⁷

By contrast, the exhausted world is a world *without* possibility. “There is no longer any possible,” Deleuze remarks, “a relentless Spinozism.”⁸ This is the world of the straight line (Deleuze is thinking of Spinoza’s geometry of “lines, planes, and bodies”), the empty form of time in which all possibility has been emptied and replaced by the necessary, the incessant, the inexorable. For my purposes, it is noteworthy that Deleuze elsewhere writes of the exhausted that it is a perverse world without “oxygen”:

The world of the pervert is a world without Others, and thus a world without the possible. The Other is that which renders possible. The perverse world is a world in which the category of the necessary has completely replaced that of the possible. This is a strange Spinozism from which the “oxygen” is lacking, to the benefit of a more elementary energy and a more rarefied air (Sky-Necessity).⁹

The capital-O “Other” in Deleuze’s passage is a direct borrowing of Lacan’s “big Other” qua symbolic order. For Lacan, “big Other” names not the individual other but “the overarching ‘objective’ spirit of trans-individual socio-linguistic structures” and thus “configures the conditions of possibility for singular subjectivity” over and against a Real qua a-subjective materiality.¹⁰ In other words, “Other-structure” names for Deleuze “that which renders possible” our habits of perception. “We must understand,” writes Deleuze, “that the Other is not one structure among others in the field of perception. . . . *It is the structure which conditions the entire field* and its functioning. . . . It is not the ego but the Other as structure that renders perception possible.”¹¹

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What, then, is the “world without Others”? According to Deleuze, this is the world imagined by Spinoza, Sade, and Shakespeare, a world “from which ‘oxygen’ is lacking” because all possibility, all action, including the action of the breath, has been exhausted. Given Deleuze’s own history of respiratory illness (he suffered from suffocating respiratory attacks for most of his adult life), it is not altogether surprising that the “world without Others” would be figured as a lack of breath. Absent others, and so absent the “I” who is the realization of the “Other-structure,” what endures, according to Deleuze, are the elements. “The Other appears as that which organizes Elements into Earth, and earth into bodies, bodies into objects, and which regulates and measures object, perception, and desire all at once.”¹² But the pervert, or the exhausted, “carries the earth into the sky. He frees the elements.”¹³ Here, the elements are “freed from bodies” (hence the shortage of “oxygen”) and take on a new density and agency of their own—what Deleuze calls “Sky-Necessity.”¹⁴ We encounter this necessity only in moments of catastrophe, Deleuze writes, when all possibility vanishes, as Prospero says, “into thin air.”

Although this “rarefied air” may sound like the purest form of nihilism, I want to suggest the opposite: that contrary to popularized versions of Deleuze (the Deleuze of affect, vitality, affirmation, and vibrant matter) that it is the dark Deleuze, the anoxic Deleuze of the “world without Others,” that forces us to *encounter* the Anthropocene in its starkest terms, namely, as a lack of air.¹⁵ The “world without Others” that Deleuze theorizes is thus a philosophical guide to the “world without us” that the Anthropocene forecasts.¹⁶ Moreover, given that bad weather is not just on the horizon but irremediably *here*, like the “stain” of the Real that we cannot wash clean, it might be time that we ditch the world of the “Other-structure,” which underwrites so much posthumanist and neo-vitalist theory, and ask instead what it would mean to breath this rarefied air?

This is the encounter with air that Shakespeare in the Anthropocene (read via Deleuze) forces one to think. We see it as well in the emerging genre of Cli-Fi films, in which the air has lost its translucence (its intangibility) and become a carrier of carbon ghosts. We can’t breathe it, nor can we see through it. The elements (air combined with unlivable quantities of CO₂) have become “phantasms”—i.e., “Doubles without resemblance and elements without constraint.”¹⁷ Deleuze’s strange world “from which the ‘oxygen’ is lacking” and the actors have all vanished (to be replaced by phantasms) is a frightening precursor to the world without us. It is also the world we encounter in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, in which time is disjointed and strange doubles contaminate the air. Hamlet encounters this vanished world of strange doubles and incorporeal bodies. The world of the play is no longer possible but impossible and out of joint. “*Enter Ghost.*”

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Elements-without-Bodies

The ghost that Hamlet encounters he encounters in a blind zone. The ghost is and is not there; he is an absent presence. What's more, he carries the dust of the past with him. The air of the play is unbreathable, and the more Hamlet does to exhaust the past, to unearth it (recall the Queen's admonition, "Do not forever with thy veiled lids / Seek for thy noble father in the dust" [1.2.70-71]), the more "rotten" Denmark becomes (1.5.90).

For Deleuze, this anoxic formula represents the very essence of encounters, which are always intensive. As he puts it, "intensity is the determinate in the process of actualization. It is intensity which *dramatizes*."¹⁸ From this perspective, "encounters between independent thinkers always occur in a blind zone," meaning that the object or other before us ("Shakespeare") evaporates into thin air, leaving only a blind spot or lacuna. To encounter "Shakespeare," then, by Deleuze's definition, is to encounter in parallax. It is only when we traverse the blind spot that inhabits our everyday vision and step into the object's umbra that we truly encounter something. In this sense, to encounter "in a blind zone" is to encounter a *problem*—without sight and without recognition, and thus without a readymade solution.

When Hamlet encounters the ghost of his dead father, he encounters him precisely as a problem. The Ghost appears behind armor. This armor, or "This protection," Jacques Derrida writes in *Specters of Marx*, "is rigorously *problematic* (*problema* is also a shield) for it prevents perception from deciding on the identity that it wraps so solidly in its carapace."¹⁹ What endures in this encounter is not the possible (which relies on the order of the Other, now vanished) but a problem or shield—a convenient emblem for endurance in that it hardens around an omission (from L. *durare*, "to harden"). Derrida continues: "The armor lets one see nothing of the spectral body, but at the level of the head and *beneath the visor*, it permits the so-called father to see and to speak."²⁰ This is not a disguised presence (something that would be *possible* to see) but a problematic non-presence that endures nonetheless. This is the meaning of parallax: the subject's gaze (in this case, Hamlet's) is structured around a blind spot, the irreducible point around which perception curves.²¹ What makes Hamlet's encounter problematic is that this blind spot, the "stain" of our material being, *looks* and *speaks* back. In other words, what the "Other-structure" enables is our distance from the material world; it allows us to believe that we can know the world at a distance. When this structure vanishes ("into thin air"), we find ourselves no longer at a remove but instead inscribed in the picture, the eye directly in things. It is because we are *of* the material Real that we cannot gaze at the whole; the stain that inhabits our vision reminds us of our material inscription and, in moments of catastrophe, *returns* the look. *It* (the ghost of Hamlet's father) looks back at Hamlet; *it* speaks—of spirits (from L. *spiritus*, "breathing, breath, air").

This is how Shakespeare's play begins, after all. Bernardo asks at the start of the play, under the cover of darkness no less, "Who's there" (1.1.1)? The play begins in darkness and raises the following problem: if there is no Other "there" (no possible place of the "Other"), but only a blind spot where all the actors have

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vanished and only the elements (“spirits”) remain, what endures? Or better still: what becomes of the thinker who suffers this problem (since to endure also means to suffer)?

In the epoch of the Anthropocene, Hamlet’s problem is much like our own. What we are confronted with is primarily an atmospheric problem traced by carbon ghosts—specters of what Andreas Malm calls “fossil capitalism” colliding with the present carbon imaginary.²² Recent attempts to cognitively map this problem, such as Timothy Morton’s “hyperobjects,” attest to the quantum entanglements and temporal loops that the planetary carbon cycle now orchestrates in out of joint tempos that go well beyond our everyday habits of recognition.²³ In short, the Anthropocene is a problem *of* air—the elemental substance that, being the perennial blank spot of our perception (matter that just doesn’t *seem* to matter, to return the look), poses a real problem to our endurance. The very thing that philosophers have long recognized as the animating principle of our existence—air, *anima*, *pnuema*, and *psyche*—has become the “Thing” that puts our existence at risk. Yet it is perhaps also at this juncture of critical climate feedback, when political dissensus manifests most powerfully in statements such as “I can’t breathe,” that the encounter between Deleuze and Shakespeare takes on new importance.

In fact, Deleuze’s answer to the question of endurance is strikingly simple: only the elements endure. The elements are the enduring support of our existence on Earth and will remain in our absence. What’s interesting about Deleuze’s way of thinking about endurance is that it forces us to imagine the elements as “stand alone”—something like pure *force*—without adding “our” self-image. To encounter air for Deleuze is to do so in the absence of self-image. Moreover, Deleuze isn’t just thinking of apocalyptic scenarios (although he does style his work in that way). To be clear, there is no encounter in Deleuze’s oeuvre that is *not* an encounter with “thin air,” since to encounter something outside our sensory-motor-apparatus is perforce to undergo an experience that will make it hard for one to breathe and to go on living as before (*anima*, life, is a matter of breath). In Deleuze’s encounter with Sade, for example, “we discover a surprising affinity with Spinoza—a naturalistic and mechanistic approach imbued with the mathematical spirit.”²⁴ It is not the “relation” between speaker and audience that interests Sade: “The descriptions, the attitudes of the bodies, are merely living diagrams illustrating the abominable descriptions.”²⁵ The content of the descriptions are “merely living” (a remarkable statement) and so “represent the *personal* element” in Sade’s work. But “the second and higher factor represents the *impersonal* element in sadism.”²⁶ This second “impersonal element” (a kind of sadism of the air) “accounts for the endless repetitions, the reiterated quantitative process of multiplying illustrations.”²⁷ “Sadism,” in other words, *names* a certain suffocating relation with Sade’s work. And yet it is only the anoxic quality of that work that forces thought to think. As Deleuze wagers, the encounter with Sade pushes thought into a new atmosphere of differential quantities—elements-without-bodies. An encounter in this sense takes one to the limit of what is possible; it is a matter not of the lived but of the *unlivable* (elements so “rarefied” as to shatter our image).

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That Deleuze derives his anoxic formula (in part) from Shakespeare is not surprising, given that it is Hamlet's encounter with spirits that unhinges time and sets it on the path of the inexorable line and the inclusive disjunction. "To be, or not to be" is not a choice between two possibles, since Hamlet's encounter with his father's ghost already brought "to be" and "not to be" into a zone of irreducible indistinction, a veritable Möbius strip of life (spirit, air, breath) and nonlife (impersonal elements, the world without others). The encounter with spirits is therefore the sadistic side of a play in which the possible has been emptied and forces beyond our control force us to encounter elements *beyond us*, elements as standalone or autonomous: air without actors.

Air: it is a material envelope, an aerial surround, an interval, a gaseous exchange of respiration and exhaust, an aura, a mixture of nitrogen and oxygen, an electromagnetic field, and, in cases of political struggle, a matter of the unequal distribution of life and death in late capitalism. Air is all of this and more. And given its dispersed physicality, it makes sense that it would cause such figurative drift.²⁸ But what makes air definitive of the Anthropocene is the feedback loop of surplus production and energy derived from fossil fuels, which is rewriting the Earth's atmosphere (releasing unprecedented amounts of CO₂) and doing so at rates that outstrip the photosynthetic and respiratory powers of the biosphere. In short, air has become a stumbling block to human endurance as all of Gaia now suffers from suffocating attacks. In the case of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, it would make sense then to read air not only in the literal sense of "spirits" but also as the affective spirit of our times: tragedy is *in* the air.

On the one hand, as Dipesh Chakrabarty points out, this affective climate "saturate[s] our sense of the now," with individual responses "ranging from denial, disconnect, and indifference to a spirit of engagement and activism."²⁹ On the other hand, there is a dearth of any real affect or force that would, in Horatio's words, "bode a strange eruption to our state" of climate indifference (1.1.68), since, as Claire Colebrook asserts, we have a dizzying array of affections (lived qualities of the body) and not enough affect (unlivable intensity): "As long as affects are confused with affections, or feelings of the lived body," Colebrook argues, "then nothing will ever be felt; the body will only re-live itself."³⁰ One would need to isolate the affect "tragedy" in its autonomy—as standalone—from any lived experience of tragedy in order to grasp the spirit of our times as distinct from, say, the human spirit or its modern prosthesis, the spirit of capitalism. Only then might we truly encounter the element of tragedy—the terror of a faceless air that nonetheless looks and speaks, both in Shakespeare's play and today, of extinction—and feel *outside* our organic networks of meaning. I am suggesting, in short, that we need to read tragedy as inhuman—along the lines of that "more elementary energy" of which Deleuze, following Shakespeare, Sade, and Spinoza, speaks.

After all, the problem air poses in the Anthropocene is not a lack of human initiative against an inhuman Capitalocene. The tragedy is that we are not inhuman enough, because we still read the climate in ways that are all-too-human. The turn to vital materialisms, for example, stresses the liveliness of things in order to reanimate a planet on life support through appeals to symbiotic union with

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plants, animals, and minerals. But what Deleuze always insisted on, to the contrary, is that thought does not think, and the body does act, without encountering what is *not* life—the exhausted, the “rarefied air” of “Sky-Necessity,” Hamlet’s ghost. The appeal to “life,” then, misses precisely the thing that is most vitalizing in encounters: the *ek-static* relation to what is beyond life and beyond the human. What if we read Shakespeare’s tragedy according to the letter of Deleuze, not as inspiration sent from life (*L. inspirare*, “to breath into”) to fill the human spirit (*L. spiritus*, “air”), but as elemental force—akin to what Deleuze calls “forces of the future,” because they do not index a human subject or “Other” but do violence to both in order to survey a world without us?³¹ Air, in this case, would have to be *read*.

Reading in the Dust

Of course, reading air is precisely what makes air such a problem for environmentalists and literary scholars alike. As Tobias Menely rightly points out, “It is because air is so supple a metaphoric vehicle, so felicitous a symbolic medium—effortlessly effecting translations between material and ideal, proximity and distance, particular and general, interior and exterior—that its status as tenor, as literal matter, is so difficult to represent.”³² This difficulty has resulted in a widespread “forgetting of air,” as feminist philosopher of the elements Luce Irigaray contends.

In her investigation into the “clearing” that metaphysics covers over, Irigaray writes, “Metaphysics always supposes, in some manner, a solid crust from which to raise a construction. . . . Whether philosophers distance themselves from it or whether they modify it, the ground is always there.”³³ Despite Heidegger’s “strange attraction toward the clearing of the opening,” which figures Dasein’s unique relation to the “open,” or existence subtracted from any *doxa* or norm, “his near exclusive love for the earth” sets the “opening” of Being (and time) in something solid and human (*homo*, “human,” is related to *humus*, “earth”).³⁴ But “The clearing of the opening, ‘of what [material]’ can this be,” Irigaray asks, other than air? “Since air never takes place in the mode of an ‘entry into presence’—except in wind?—the philosopher can think that there is nothing but absence there, for in air he does not come up against a being or a thing.”³⁵ On this point, Irigaray and Deleuze would agree: whereas the ground possibilizes in their arguments, the air lacks any possible—it a “groundless ground.”³⁶

Although Genesis tells us of man’s beginning in dust, “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life,” the air that animates in Genesis is all but lacking in *Hamlet*. As Horatio intones, “A mote it is to trouble the minds eye” (1.1.111). The “mote” in Horatio’s line is of course the Ghost of Hamlet’s father, who is air-borne (“For it is as the air, invulnerable” [1.1.144]). Rather than animating dust or giving dust its proper form, the air in *Hamlet* scatters dust irrevocably, disseminating its corrupt form with mad abandon. But the most salient definition of “mote” for my purposes is

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the literal one: “mote” refers to an excess of digging. Consider Hamlet’s exclamation just after “old mole,” the phrase he uses in reference to the underground ghost, whereby he transforms the “mole” into “A worthy pioneer!” (2.1.165). The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists *Hamlet* as only the second source in English history to use “mole” to refer to “A person who works underground,” such as a miner. As Jason W. Moore notes in *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, England saw a major upsurge in mining for fossil fuels in the form of coal deposits in the 16th and 17th centuries.³⁷ Thus it is not at all surprising that a play concerned with excavating the past would do so in geologic terms.

What *is* surprising is that the play registers the consequences of this mining (of earth, origins, family history) as a contamination of air—air that Hamlet rightly renames, “perturbèd spirit” (2.1.183). In fact, Michael Marder credits Shakespeare for inventing the self-negating verb that so accurately describes Hamlet’s activity of searching for answers in the dust. Marder writes: “To dust something is, at once, to add and to remove that which lends this occupation its name. Dusting is also undusting, to revive a nearly obsolete Shakespearian word.”³⁸ Although Hamlet looks for the “clear air” of truth, a truth he would inherit, like land, in the dust, dusting only leads to more pollution. Moreover, this is not the stationary dust of origins and depths, but an elusive, shifting, groundless dust that obscures both vision and knowledge. It is a dust that “trouble[s] the minds eye” because it is always already of the air.

Thus it is not only in “Rome,” as Horatio intones, that “The graves” and mines “[stand] tenantless,” emptied of their contents and threatening “Disasters” and “feared events” “Unto our climates,” but also in England and the Denmark of Shakespeare’s play, where dust from the past returns in scattered form and makes the air materialize precisely because it is no longer the container of “our” mold but the maddening wind (“I am but mad north-northwest,” Hamlet says) that disseminates “our” mold irrevocably (1.1.112, 114, 117, 120, 124; 2.2.306). As Hamlet remarks: “the air, . . . why, it appeareth nothing more to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors” (2.2.261-64). In Hamlet’s inversion of sky and earth, the sky above looks to be “nothing” more than a mass of earthly gases. Far from being an idealized escape from earthly muck, then, the air in *Hamlet* is a material and tragic force: real but abstract, intangible but thingly. As Hamlet says to Horatio, “air bites shrewdly; it is very cold,” so much so that it is no longer clear why or whence air was sent: “Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned, / Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell” (1.4.1, 40-41). This is air from which the oxygen is lacking; it is a cold, sadistic, and impersonal air that is “stand alone” in Deleuze’s sense. No longer a life-giving breath, as in Genesis, Shakespearean air poses the problem of life’s endurance.

Dead Air

Previously I described the Anthropocene as an encounter with carbon ghosts, referring to the excess of CO₂ currently inhabiting the Earth’s atmosphere. Although there is no consensus among geologists as to when exactly the Holocene

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ended and the Anthropocene began, Shakespeare's play that is about the extimacy of earth and air, to the danger of life, should be counted not only as an artifact of the early modern past but also as a key element of the geologic now. That is to say, Shakespeare's play in which the oxygen is lacking (to the benefit of phantasms) is as much our problem as it is Hamlet's. It is worth considering, then, why Deleuze's encounter with Shakespeare (albeit brief) has been far less utilized in Shakespeare studies than, say, Derrida's or Freud's. Whereas the "Other-structure" goes unquestioned in Derrida's Levinasian-inspired analysis of the Ghost and is indeed *the* structure of time insofar as "hauntology" names the time of the future and "justice-to-come," for Deleuze, by contrast, the "other" is missing in Hamlet's encounter with air and has been replaced by impersonal elements. The difference in their respective ontologies is obvious, and it points in the direction of a different Anthropocene ethics.

Whereas so much of what passes as Deleuzian-inspired theory champions potentialities and vitalities as well as a return to the ethics of embodiment, care, and compassion with "others" (animals, plants, the biosphere), it must be said that Deleuze always insisted on coldness and cruelty as essential signposts to a world *without* others—i.e., without *us*—and draws on Hamlet's encounter with air to unhinge time from its parochial human bearings. In other words, it is not "our" time—the time of human movements, actions, and interests—that concerns Deleuze, but rather the empty form of time that I mentioned at the beginning. In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze attributes this ethical capacity (the capacity to self-subtract) to art, since it is the power of art, he writes, to persist in the absence of any model:

Art preserves, and it is the only thing in the world that is preserved ... although actually it lasts no longer than its support and materials—stone, canvas, chemical color, and so on.... The air still has the turbulence, the gust of wind, and the light that it had that day last year, and it no longer depends on whoever was breathing it that morning.... What is preserved—the thing or the work of art—is *a bloc of sensations, that is to say, a compound of percepts and affects*. . . . They could be said to exist in the absence of man because man, as he is caught in stone, on the canvas, or by words, is himself a compound of percepts and affects. The work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself.³⁹

Deleuze's defense of the autonomy of the work of art returns our investigation to my opening question: what endures (in Anthropocene air)? Deleuze's answer is strikingly simple: the elements endure as expressive material ("stone, canvas, chemical color, and so on"). It's as if the artist who renders air or the person "breathing it" become so only because of this autonomous material. The "work of art," then, is an art of extinction: it "exist[s] in the absence of man" and always gestures towards that absence.

Although Deleuze's aesthetic philosophy sounds tragic, it is a distinctly Shakespearean form of tragedy that unhinges time to put the tragedy of "now" in

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direct conversation with the materials of the past: our “air still has the [same] turbulence, the [same] gust of wind” as Shakespeare’s air. Indeed, what we call “tragedy” in *Hamlet* is precisely this expressive air or spirit, which not only speaks independently of any model but also enables our processes of reading and writing, even after the actors are all gone. We see traces of this expressive material still, as when Claudius asks Hamlet, “How is it that the clouds still hang on you?” (1.2.66). A question that could easily be explained (away) by literary criticism as personification or projection, the clouds in Claudius’s figure, when read from the standpoint of the event, do not merely express Hamlet’s humor; rather, Hamlet’s melancholy is the *result* of climatological events (expressive matters) prior to and beyond the human. Ethics, for Deleuze, or art (they amount to the same thing), is the process of releasing inhuman events beyond any lived.

On the one hand, then, we can wager the hypothesis that there is something intolerable about Deleuze’s encounter with *Hamlet*, which, unlike most literary criticism, not to mention most Anthropocene criticism, does not stress human possibility but rather inhuman necessity. The forgetting of air would thus be symptomatic of our refusal to think matters outside the human mold, that is, as truly post-human. On the other hand, this symptom of forgetting is also Hamlet’s, the same Hamlet who reads air through the scheme of oedipal desire. Contrary to Margreta de Grazia’s account in *Hamlet without Hamlet*, the problem with Hamlet is not his airy-abstractions but that he is too earth-bound.⁴⁰ He reads the air as *his* support, making it yet another figurative “ground” for survival. In a metaphysical/melodramatic speech act that would give even Douglas Sirk a run for his money, Hamlet, at the end of the play, imagines himself written on the wind, suspended in mid-air, living after death. He calls out to Horatio:

Death,
Is strict in his arrest—oh, I could tell you—
But let it be. Horatio, I am dead.
Thou livest: report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied.
.....
If thou did ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story. (5.2.314-318, 324-327)

“I am dead”: Hamlet says it twice. As speech acts go, it is hard to imagine a better, more perplexing statement of endurance. It’s as if Hamlet’s proleptic postmortem address were postmarked for the Anthropocene and for readers who are everyday confronted with the likelihood of a near post-human future. If, as some theorists suggest, “we” are living in the end-times, gulping the last breathes of a planetary carbon cycle that is no longer hospitable to “our” energy-intensive ways of life, then Hamlet’s nonsensical speech act represents the paradox of enduring after the end—after the age of Man, Progress, and Nature. “Death,” the *event* of death, would force Hamlet to “let it”—air, the elements, impersonal matter—“be,” and

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“be” in the absence of his (or his father’s) story: “oh, I could tell you— / But let it be.” Endurance in this sense would be a matter of living to “let . . . be” by letting go of life: “I am dead.”

That this is *not* ultimately what Hamlet says, however, testifies to the difficulty of the encounter that Deleuze spies in Shakespeare. Air remains a blind spot. As Hamlet beseeches Horatio, “And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story,” air is not just supplemental to Hamlet’s words—a material in which to inscribe Hamlet’s “story”—air is pharmacological: Hamlet repeats his father’s injunction to “remember me” and, in doing so, further spreads his poison (“cursed hebona” [1.5.62]), which travels from father to son through the ears and, in the final instance, on the air. Hamlet’s final bid for survival is figured as air pollution, making his penultimate command, “draw thy breath in pain,” more than a little ironic. In the aftermath of those rarefied words, “draw thy breath in pain,” our task is to read Shakespeare’s air outside the narrow limit of human endurance—to think, that is, the persistence of what decreates “our” world.

Notes

1. Gilles Deleuze, *Kant’s Critical Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), vii.
2. Deleuze, *Kant’s Critical Philosophy*, viii.
3. Gilles Deleuze, “The Exhausted,” in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 153.
4. Citations from *Hamlet* are taken from Stephen Greenblatt, gen. ed., *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2016), cited in the text by act, scene, and line.
5. Deleuze, “The Exhausted,” 153.
6. Deleuze, “The Exhausted,” 153.
7. Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume’s Theory of Human Nature*, trans. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), x.
8. Deleuze, “The Exhausted,” 152.
9. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 320.
10. Adrian Johnston, “Jacques Lacan,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/lacan/>.
11. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 308-309.
12. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 318.
13. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 317.
14. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 313.
15. I borrow the phrase “dark Deleuze” from Andrew Culp. See Culp, *Dark Deleuze* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).
16. See, for example, Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (New York: Picador, 2007), for a speculative account of a world without humans.
17. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 315.
18. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 245.
19. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 7.
20. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 7.

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21. See Slavoj Žižek's definition in *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006): 17.
22. See Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2026). On the "carbon imaginary," see Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
23. See Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
24. Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, trans. Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 20.
25. Deleuze, *Masochism*, 19.
26. Deleuze, *Masochism*, 19-20.
27. Deleuze, *Masochism*, 20.
28. For an account that tracks air's figurative drift in three early modern forms (Global Winds, Embodied Breath, and Nothing), see Steve Mentz, "A Poetics of Nothing: Air in the Early Modern Imagination," *postmedieval* 4.1 (2013): 30-41.
29. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter 2009): 197.
30. Claire Colebrook, "Earth Felt the Wound: The Affective Divide," *Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture* 8.1 (Winter 2011): 49.
31. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 51.
32. Tobias Menely, "Anthropocene Air," *minnesota review* 83 (2014): 96.
33. Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, trans. Mary Beth Mader (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 2.
34. Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, 3.
35. Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, 9.
36. Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, 5.
37. See Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015), 132.
38. Michael Marder, *Dust* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 2.
39. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 163-164.
40. See Margreta de Grazia, *Hamlet without Hamlet* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

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