

From Voice to *Pneuma* and Back: Italian Pneumatologies Against Derrida's Grammatology

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In the last few decades, pneumatology has undergone a gradual but noteworthy revival. Reflections on air, wind, breath, and their primary linguistic product – the voice – as well as atmospheres and *Stimmungen*, have made a consistent appearance in various fields of the humanities and the social sciences at large.¹ The global event of the Covid pandemic has only given these approaches, paradoxically, new life.² There is in our breath – many seem now to agree – something worth studying but, more importantly, something decisive for human beings and for their world, if not foundational, with all the dangers that such a formulation implies.

And yet to some others, grounded perhaps in certain post-structuralist traditions, this will come as a surprise. After the ground-breaking works of Jacques Derrida and his grammatology fifty years ago, his retrieval of writing from phono- and logo-centrism, one could hardly have expected such a return of Derrida's first principal targets: the voice and the breath of self-presence, namely Spirit, *Geist*.³ Indeed, the paradox seems to be that if, as Michael Naas once noted, grammatology had come to 'announce the end or the closure of a certain Greco-

¹ Concerning different perspectives on and disciplinary approaches to breathing, from continental philosophy to political science, from environmental studies to the medical humanities, see *Atmospheres of Breathing*, ed. L. Škof and P. Berndtson (Albany: SUNY Press, 2018). On the voice, see *Zwischen Rauschen und Offenbarung: zur Kultur- und Mediengeschichte der Stimme*, ed. F. Kittler, T. Mancho and S. Weigel (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002). On *Stimmungen* and atmospheres, central are the reflections by the Neue Phänomenologie school started by Hermann Schmitz and advanced by Gernot Böhme. Hermann Schmitz, *System der Philosophie*, 5 vols. (Bonn: Bouvier, 1964–1980). Hermann Schmitz, *Atmosphären* (Freiburg: Alber, 2014). Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, trans. J. Thibaud (London: Routledge, 2016). For a general overview of the debate on atmospheres and *Stimmungen* see *Atmosphere and Aesthetics: A Plural Perspective*, ed. T. Griffero and M. Tedeschini, (Cham: Springer, 2019). Also fascinating is the rediscovery of the importance of the wind in Japanese and more broadly Eastern Asian thought, as well as in relation to 20th century continental philosophy. Lorenzo Marinucci, 'Structures of Breathing: East Asian Contributions to a Phenomenology of Embodiment', *Studi di Estetica* 45, no. 2 (2017): 99–116. Also in Black Studies, there has been a new interest in breath: Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

² Achille Mbembe, 'The Universal Right to Breathe', *Critical Inquiry* 47, no. 2 (2021): 58–62.

³ Pneumatology is here understood as any kind of reflection on *pneuma* or *spiritus*, words that for the Ancient Greeks and Romans meant at the same time spirit and breath, or more generally air.

Christian pneumatology', its effects have been the opposite.⁴ Or rather, the situation that has arisen from the ruins of deconstruction is much more complicated.

In this article, I argue that such a situation becomes more comprehensible if one grapples with a specific line of Italian philosophy that first appeared as Derrida was composing his early writings and, running parallel to them, gives centre stage to the voice and, subsequently, breath.⁵ The thinkers I have chosen to examine here are Giorgio Colli, Giorgio Agamben, Adriana Cavarero, and Emanuele Coccia. In fact, if a place of interest on the global scene has by now been re-established for Italian philosophy, thanks to the debate around the so-called 'Italian difference', the reflections on pneumatology proposed by these philosophers have been underestimated.⁶ And yet some of these thinkers are considered among the leading philosophers of our time.

What one finds, by turning to these thinkers, is that the return to voice and breath that one observes in many fields nowadays does not need to be a return to a metaphysics of presence of the kind theorised by Derrida.⁷ Rather it is the attempt to re-imagine the voice and its relationship to language, beyond the polarity of 'speech-writing' and 'subject-world', which characterises Western philosophy.

1. Derrida's *écriture*

In 1967, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, with the publication in a single year of what were to be three incredibly influential texts, began his life-long battle against logo- and phono-centrism in favour of writing (*écriture*), or what he called

⁴ Michael Naas confines Derrida's enmity towards pneumatology to European pneumatology. And indeed, less Euro-centric approaches are being developed around the world (see footnote 1). At the same time, although one could argue that the new pneumatologies are less and less Christian (Crawley's book is an interesting exception), most of them accept or try to retrieve a certain ancient Greek notion of *pneuma*. Michael Naas, 'Pneumatology, *Pneuma*, *Souffle*, *Breath* (OG 17; DG 29)', *Reading Derrida's Of Grammatology*, ed. S. Gaston and I. MacLachlan (New York: Continuum, 2011), 30.

⁵ In this sense, such a line of development should then be juxtaposed to and studied side by side with the philosophical traditions analysed by Lenart Škof in one of the most important books of the recent *breath turn*. Lenart Škof, *Breath of Proximity: Intersubjectivity, Ethics, Peace* (New York: Springer, 2015).

⁶ The expression derives from Antonio Negri's essay, firstly published by Nottetempo, and then reprinted in the English anthology of essays of the same title. Antonio Negri, *La differenza italiana* (Roma: Nottetempo, 2005). *The Italian Difference: Between Nihilism and Biopolitics*, ed. L. Chiesa & A. Toscano (Melbourne: re.press, 2009). See also: Roberto Esposito, *Living Thought: The Origins and Actuality of Italian Philosophy*, trans. Z. Hanafi (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2012). For a noteworthy summary of the various philosophical positions in Italian philosophy in the second half of the 20th century, see Giuseppe Cantarano, *Immagini del nulla. La filosofia italiana contemporanea* (Milano: Mondadori, 1998).

⁷ This also does not mean that some attempts to rethink the voice and breath cannot indeed fall back into metaphysics once again.

arche-writing (*archi-écriture*). This implied, however a fundamental critique of pneumatology, which would only be noticed by critics much later.

Developing Heidegger's critique of Western philosophy as 'metaphysics', Derrida argued that the origin of metaphysics lay primarily in a favouring of the voice over writing. Indeed, he maintained, it is due to the experience of the voice that something like universality, ideality, and all the binary oppositions upon which these concepts are based (universal/particular, ideal/sensible, *essentia/existentia*, soul/body), as well as the idea of a pure subject and a pure presence could arise. This is what he discerned in Plato's 'pharmacy',⁸ in Husserl's phenomenology,⁹ and in Rousseau's and Saussure's linguistic theories:¹⁰ according to his studies, the fundamental experience of 'metaphysics' amounted to the experience of the voice.

Such a claim, however, remains incomprehensible unless we understand what Derrida means by voice. For him, the experience of the voice means the experience of hearing-oneself-speak or, in French, the experience of *s'entendre-parler*. What is at stake for Derrida in the voice as *s'entendre-parler* is the *entendre*, a verb that in French can mean, at one and the same time, 'to hear', 'to understand', and to 'intend', a direct cognate of the German *Intention*, a central concept of Husserl's phenomenology. It is on the meaning of *entendre* that his criticism of the voice turns: the voice is the voice of self-presence because in the act of hearing one's own self speak all of these meanings come to coincide and the subject/consciousness both hears and intends itself at the same time. Or as he puts it:

When I speak, it belongs to the phenomenological essence of this operation that I hear myself [*je m'entende*] at the same time that I speak. The signifier, animated by my breath and by the meaning-intention (in Husserl's language, the expression animated by the *Bedeutungsintention*), is in absolute proximity to me. The living act, the life-giving act, the *Lebendigkeit*, which animates the body of the signifier and transforms it into a meaningful expression, the soul of language, seems not to separate itself from itself, from its own self-presence.¹¹

At this moment, when my voice is present, I am whole. I am here and fully here only in this voice, which I hear, possess, and in which I understand the meaning I wanted to impart to it. Meaning (intention/*entendre*) and presence

⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', in *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981). First published in *Tel Quel* in 1968.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. D. B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

¹¹ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 77.

(hearing/*entendre*) coincide and do so without the necessity of an outside or of any medium. It is here – Derrida claims – that the dream of a pure interiority, of universality and of pure presence is created and metaphysics begins.¹²

Interestingly, Derrida only seldom mentions what makes this experience of the voice possible, but when he does his judgement is final. Notice a particular *undertone* in the previous quotation. The voice, the origin of metaphysics, the origin of all the conceptual chasms of Western philosophy is, in turn, based on the *souffle* (breath), on *pneuma*:

When I speak, it belongs to the phenomenological essence of this operation that I hear myself [*je m'entende*] at the same time that I speak. The signifier, **animated by my breath** [*souffle*] and by the meaning-intention [...] is in absolute proximity to me. The living act, the life-giving act, the *Lebendigkeit*, which animates the body of the signifier and transforms it into a meaningful expression, **the soul of language** [*l'âme du langage*], seems not to separate itself from itself, from its own self-presence.¹³

When describing the voice, Derrida automatically conjures up pneumatological language. The experience of the voice that he describes is based in its turn on the possibility of breath and of something like a 'soul' or a *Geist* (spirit). Indeed, almost anticipating some of the criticisms that will make an appearance later in the present work, Derrida claims in his introduction to *Speech and Phenomena*:

For it is not in the sonorous substance or in the physical voice, in the body of speech in the world, that he [Husserl] will recognise an original affinity with the logos in general, but in the voice phenomenologically taken, speech in its transcendental flesh, in the breath, the intentional animation that transforms the body of the word into flesh, makes of the *Körper* a *Leib*, a *geistige Leiblichkeit*. The phenomenological voice would be this spiritual flesh that continues to speak and be present to itself – to hear itself – in the absence of the world.¹⁴

¹² "The operation of "hearing oneself speak" is an auto-affection of a unique kind. On the one hand, it operates within the medium of universality; what appears as signified therein must be idealities that are *idealiter* indefinitely repeatable or transmissible as the same. On the other hand, the subject can hear or speak to himself and be affected by the signifier he produces, without passing through an external detour, the world, the sphere of what is not "his own". Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 78.

¹³ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 77.

¹⁴ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 16.

What is problematic according to Derrida's view is not the corporeal and physical voice, but rather the internal, silent voice of the consciousness/conscience, the animating soul, or rather, the spirit, as he keeps repeating through accumulations in more than one language: in other words, pneumatology. Even if the criticism is not about the physical voice, everything begins from the *souffle*, the breath, the same 'pure breath' that, in *Of Grammatology*, he would claim to lie at the foundations of Rousseau's onto-theological vision.¹⁵

It is for this reason that grammatology can after all be read as an anti-pneumatology. Derrida hints at it once and quite enigmatically, but after the previous discussion, it becomes quite clear:

Natural writing is immediately united to the voice and to breath. Its nature is not grammatological but pneumatological. It is hieratic, very close to the interior holy voice of the Profession of Faith, to the voice one hears upon retreating into oneself: full and truthful presence of the divine voice to our inner sense.¹⁶

As Michael Naas has pointed out, what makes this passage ambiguous is the reference to a writing that is pneumatological instead of grammatological.¹⁷ But to make sense of it, it is enough to stress the adjective 'natural'. With 'natural writing' what is meant here is a writing that preserves its origin, almost a divine writing, such as the Scriptures would be, in which the voice of God is always present and expressing itself. This kind of writing, Derrida claims, can therefore be considered pneumatological – it has a direct link to the breath and the voice of the speaker – and has nothing to do with grammatology.¹⁸ But then grammatology and pneumatology should really be considered apart and in opposition for Derrida. The way out of metaphysics that he envisions in the *gramma*, in the letter, a grammatology, a theory that is founded not on the originary voice of presence but on a non-originary difference offered by writing (*écriture*), means a complete rebuttal of pneumatology.

A few months after Derrida's death, his colleague and then dear friend Jean-Luc Nancy honoured him with a brief text reporting three sentences he had heard from Derrida during his life, and which had never been written. At stake, Nancy wrote, was the necessity to report Derrida's voice itself, perhaps for one last time, 'because it is the voice that carries the traces and creates the differences, it is vocal writing (and not, obviously, the silent and transcendental voice)'.¹⁹ Furthermore,

¹⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 247–55.

¹⁶ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 17.

¹⁷ Naas, 29.

¹⁸ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 17.

¹⁹ Where an English translation does not exist or is not indicated, the translation is mine. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Trois phrases de Jacques Derrida', *Rue Descartes* 48 (2005): 67–69. Nancy himself reflected on the voice at various times in his career and in ways that diverged from his teacher.

he added, Derrida himself claimed in 1980, against some people who wanted, in his presence, to discredit the voice: ‘But I have never said anything against the voice!’ And, indeed, Derrida’s later works are full of very different references to the voice in its physicality, above all to its rhythm, its tone, and its intonations, as fundamental aspects of *écriture*. As he wrote in *Monolingualism of the Other*, for example:

If I have always trembled before what I could say, it was fundamentally [*au fond*] because of the tone, and not the substance [*non du fond*]. And what, obscurely, I seek to impart as if in spite of myself, to give or lend to others as well as to myself, to myself as well as to the other, is perhaps a tone. Everything is summoned from an intonation. And even earlier still, in what gives its tone to the tone, a rhythm. I think that all in all, it is upon rhythm that I stake everything.²⁰

His criticism of speech notwithstanding, Derrida saw the physical voice as a place of *différance*, as another text in which traces are always at work: against the pneumatological interior voice of presence, he tried to stress the voice as tone and rhythm.

Towards the end of his life, he made this implicit view of the voice even more clear: ‘I expanded the notion of trace to include the voice itself, with the idea of reconsidering the subordination in philosophy, from Greek antiquity, of writing to the word (logocentrism), and to the living present of the voice (phonocentrism)’.²¹ Derrida’s plan was never to subordinate the voice, but rather to make of the voice itself a trace, a writing. But for him, this never meant a return to or a rediscovery of pneumatology.²²

Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Vox Clamans in Deserto’ in *The Birth to Presence*, trans. B. Holmes et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. P. Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 48. I wish to thank Ernest Julius Mitchell for this reference and for many other suggestions regarding the present work. See also Verena Andermatt Conley and Jacques Derrida, ‘Voice II...’ *boundary 2*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1984): 68–93.

²¹ Jacques Derrida and Jérôme-Alexandre Nielsberg, ‘Jacques Derrida, penseur de l’évènement’, *L’Humanité*, January 28th, 2004.

²² It is also at the basis of his critique of Heidegger in *Of Spirit*. Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989). For more on Derrida’s critique of breath see Škof, 127–56. Perhaps the closest thing to a different, materialist pneumatology that Derrida wrote is his early essay on Artaud: Jacques Derrida, ‘La parole soufflée’ in *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (New York: Routledge, 2001).

2. Giorgio Colli against writing

To understand how a certain line of Italian philosophers came to develop a new pneumatology against the prohibition of deconstruction, it is necessary to begin at an earlier point and with a philosopher who, although less well-known to Anglophone scholars and still untranslated into English, was readily available and widely read by the philosophers discussed in the final part of this article: Giorgio Colli. What one finds in Colli's 'philosophy of expression', as he called it, is a powerful and noteworthy attack on writing, which he developed at almost exactly the same time that Derrida was publishing his defence (1969) and which was destined to mark later Italian responses to deconstruction.

At first sight, as Edoardo Toffoletto has also noticed, Colli's critique of writing appears as a mere repetition of what Derrida calls the logo- or phonocentrism of the Western philosophical tradition.²³ He repeats the classic Platonic arguments that one can find in the *Phaedrus*, and which Derrida had deconstructed in 'Plato's Pharmacy' (as well as the books already mentioned).²⁴ Colli claims that: writing is 'exterior', a mere 'surrogate' (Derrida would say 'supplement'); it is mortifying and illusory, because it gives a fake impression of durability and eternity; instead of clarifying, it opens to 'multiple interpretations;' finally, detaching words from the subjects of enunciation, it transforms their speeches into mere spectacle.²⁵

However, what is fascinating about Colli's philosophy is that he reaches these conclusions, diametrically opposed to Derrida's conception of writing, by starting from extremely similar premises to Derrida's. Indeed, behind Colli's apparent phonocentrism, there is not a proper logocentrism, but rather a critique of language and the word (*logos*). At the origin of Colli's philosophy of expression there is the belief that words are completely unable to reach universals, because the whole world is representation, expression, continuous reference of something to something else, without a possible leap towards the *arché* of these series.²⁶ There is, literally, nothing beyond the text.²⁷ But the text happens already at the level of the voice and of words, and this situation leads Colli to derive precisely the opposite theory to Derrida: it is not in the intention of the voice, namely in self-presence, to which the voice testifies, that universals are born; but in and through writing.

²³ Edoardo Toffoletto, 'Espressione e scrittura. Dall'economia ristretta all'economia generale', in *Alle origini del logos. Studi su La nascita della filosofia di Giorgio Colli*, ed. G. M. Cavalli e R. Cavalli (Torino: Accademia University Press, 2018), 138.

²⁴ Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy'.

²⁵ Colli, *Filosofia dell'espressione*, 197-200.

²⁶ Toffoletto agrees that it is thanks to this claim that Colli's philosophy of expression can be spared the label of 'metaphysics of presence': 'Colli's suggestion can hardly be reduced to a metaphysics of presence, since all the elements (from proxemics and the voice to the experience of the instant), on which the metaphysics of presence depends, are considered in the philosophy of expression as expressions and not as something immediate'. Toffoletto, 144.

²⁷ And yet there is an *arché*, which is perhaps the decisive difference between these Italian philosophers and Derrida. Colli, *Filosofia dell'espressione*, 97.

The living word recalls directly the universal [Colli clarifies numerous times that this is, however, an illusion and a falsification], while when one confronts writing, which should recall it indirectly, one skips the step of the word, or rather one confuses word and universal and takes them to be one thing.²⁸

According to Colli, when speaking, one believes oneself to be directly touching universals but, at the same time, one is reminded of the fact that this is not the case, because of the weakness of words. It is in writing, on the other hand, that universals are given free reign, and one believes that they are everything one is left with. It is writing that produces abstract universals and, in the end, the possibility of something like objective discourse, science.

As Colli argues more straightforwardly in *La nascita della filosofia*, it is then with writing that metaphysics begins and not with the voice. Philosophy, as Colli seems to call what Derrida, following Heidegger, named metaphysics, is precisely ‘*philo-sophia*’:

On the other hand, Plato himself allows us to attempt such a reconstruction, [...] when he calls his own literature ‘philosophy’, opposing it to the earlier ‘*sophia*’ (wisdom). There are no doubts on this point: at various times, Plato designates the age of Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Empedocles as the era of the ‘sages’, before whom he presents himself merely as a philosopher, namely as a ‘lover of wisdom’, which means one who does not possess wisdom.²⁹

For Colli, *wisdom* was the largely oral tradition of Greek poetry and religion, already murky by the time of Plato, who (like every philosopher after him) constantly tried to recover it by covering it further through the act of writing. Colli argues that metaphysics, which he calls ‘*philo-sophia*’, was precisely this fundamental forgetting of the spoken voice of wise men and women – sybils and Pythias included – in favour of *writing*.³⁰

Colli and Derrida start from extremely similar premises to reach divergent conclusions. And yet, what they are looking for is extremely similar too. Colli tells us so right in the middle of his critique of writing. What writing erases is ‘what by necessity counts the most, the living language in its breath rhythm, rooted in animated things’.³¹ The two have, paradoxically – and this will be true for all the philosophers studied in this article – the same aim: to retrieve the physical voice in its intonation, tone, and rhythm. There seems to hide beneath both traditions a common Nietzschean root, which leans, however, to the side of Colli and the other

²⁸ Colli, *Filosofia dell’espressione*, 200.

²⁹ Giorgio Colli, *La nascita della filosofia* (Milano: Adelphi, 1975), 110-11.

³⁰ Colli, *La nascita della filosofia*, 109-116.

³¹ Colli, *Filosofia dell’espressione*, 197-200.

Italian philosophers we are examining. In an unpublished fragment from 1882, which Colli would have known very well since he was, with Mazzino Montinari, the editor of the critical edition of Nietzsche's complete works, Nietzsche writes:

296. The most comprehensible part of language is not the word itself, but rather tone, force, modulation, tempo, with which a series of words is spoken – in short, the music behind the words, the passion behind this music, the person behind this passion: thus all of those things that cannot be written. So it has nothing to do with writing [*Deshalb ist es nichts mit Schriftstellerei*].³²

At the bottom of their philosophical search, there is the necessity to find a different voice. But this seems to have hardly anything to do with writing.

3. Agamben's critique of Derrida

Colli's critique of writing is certainly not the only or even the main factor in the development of a certain interest in the voice and pneumatology in Italy in opposition to Derrida's grammatology. This article only wishes to take Colli, whom Agamben claimed to be among the three most important Italian philosophers of the 20th century, as representative of moods and attitudes that were prevalent in Italy at the time Derrida was renewing the philosophical and literary scene in France.³³ Indeed, when read in the context of Colli's attack on writing, certain developments in Italian philosophy become much clearer, with particular regard to Agamben's and Cavarero's critique of Derrida and his conception of the voice.³⁴

Agamben's first reading of Derrida appeared extremely early. Already in an article about the discipline of linguistics in 1968, entitled 'The Tree of Language', Agamben argued against contemporary linguistics by claiming that both linguists and their critics, among whom he mentioned explicitly and solely Derrida, had not been able to abandon the conception of the sign that defines metaphysics.

³² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, vol. 14, *Unpublished Fragments from the Period of Thus Spoke Zarathustra (Summer 1882-Winter 1885/84)*, trans. P. S. Loeb and D. F. Tinsley (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 75. On Nietzsche and breath see also Michael Lewis, 'A Voice that is Merely Breath', *The Philosopher* 106, no. 1 (2018). As Lewis points out, Derrida had noticed that Nietzsche had the word 'being' derive etymologically from 'breath'.

³³ 'On the bookshelf down the left there is a picture of Giorgio Colli, whose works, together with Enzo Melandri's and Gianni Carchia's, will certainly endure as testaments to 20th Century Italian thought. Of the others, who are presented on television as the major philosophers of our times, nothing at all will remain'. Giorgio Agamben, *Autoritratto nello studio* (Milano: Nottetempo, 2017), 128.

³⁴ Although numerous books have been written on Agamben and his 'philosophical lineage', very few studies have analysed the importance of Colli for Agamben. A very recent exception is Alexander Ferguson's dissertation, 'Agamben's Philosophy of Language: Reflections on *Experimentum Vocis*', MA dissertation, University of Bologna, 2021.

Despite radical critiques by philosophers – who have recently even spoken of ‘the historical closure’ of the ‘age of the sign’³⁵ – the dogma of the sign remains intact. In this sense, it can be said that contemporary linguistics remains faithful to Saussure’s semiological project to the very end. Language, for this project, remains *phônê sêmantiké*; a sonic emission that signifies something.³⁶

According to Agamben, linguists and critics alike keep preserving the original conception of the sign as an indivisible union of signifier and signified and they do so because they understand language as ‘*phônê sêmantiké*’, as a ‘signifying voice:’ a voice in which, to use Derrida’s terms, the meaning (intention/*entendre*) and the hearing (*entendre*) coincide.

It would take Agamben ten more years to formulate his fundamental criticism of Derrida’s grammatology in a more complete form. In 1977, in the very final chapter of *Stanzas*, Agamben returned to the problem of the sign but this time focused explicitly on the role of the letter and writing in the history of metaphysics. According to Agamben, Derrida was an extremely significant thinker, and he will keep maintaining this until at least the 1990s:³⁷ because Derrida had finally shown, in extremely clear terms, the ‘solidarity between the history of Western metaphysics and the interpretation of signification as the unity of a signifier and a signified’.³⁸ However, Derrida had committed one mistake, albeit a fundamental one: he believed that he had found a way out of metaphysics in the letter, in the *gramma*. Suddenly, the issue with Derrida’s theory is precisely its central tenet, that same tenet which Colli’s philosophy of expression could not accept: the recovery of the priority of writing over the voice.

Writing is not a way out of metaphysics, but why not? Because writing is, ironically, as Colli had claimed, at the very origin of metaphysics. But while Colli was writing at the same time as Derrida, Agamben is writing afterwards and can

³⁵ There is here a footnote in the original text and the reference is to Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, which had just been published the year before. Giorgio Agamben, ‘L’albero del linguaggio’, *I problemi di Ulisse* 63 (1968), 112. The essay has recently been republished (with an English translation) in this journal. Giorgio Agamben, ‘The Tree of Language’, *The Journal of Italian Philosophy* 1 (2018), 19.

³⁶ Agamben, ‘The Tree of Language’, 19.

³⁷ Still in 1989, in the preface to the French edition of *Infancy and History*: ‘The voice has never been written into language, and the *gramma* (as Derrida has in due time demonstrated) is but the very form of the presupposing of self and of potency’. Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*, trans. L. Heron (New York: Verso, 1993), 8–9. Translation modified. On the Agamben-Derrida debate before the publication of *What Is Philosophy?* (2016) see: Kevin Attell, *Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015) & William Watkin, *The Literary Agamben* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 4–38.

³⁸ Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. R. L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 155. Translation modified.

explicitly take a stand against his theory. Writing is at the origin of metaphysics because metaphysics is not simply ‘the interpretation of the fracture of presence as a duality of appearance and essence, of signifier and signified, of sensible and intelligible’; but rather ‘that presence be always already caught in a signification’.³⁹ The issue is again that of the *phone semantike*:

Both *gramma* and *phone* in fact belong to the Greek metaphysical project, which, defining ‘grammar’ as the reflection on language and conceiving of the *phone* as *semantike* (that is, as the sign of a ‘writing in the soul’), thought of language from the outset from the point of view of the ‘letter’.⁴⁰

From the very beginning, Greek metaphysics, what is usually called philosophy, is a reflection on grammar, on a voice that has meaning, in the sense of a voice that reads something written in the soul: this tradition thinks language always already from the point of view of the ‘letter’.

However, this formulation from *Stanzas* is not extremely clear. There seems to be a missing step in the argument, a step Agamben continues to contemplate to this day.⁴¹ What is difficult to understand is why it should be the letter that causes presence to always already be caught up in a signification and not the voice, the *phone*, which signifies something. The reason is finally given in *Language and Death* (1982). The aim of the book is to show that metaphysics is, precisely as Derrida claimed, a search for the Voice.⁴² But that this eternally inconclusive search is caused by the original articulation (*arthron*) of the animal voice into a *phone semantike*.⁴³ And what has made possible, in turn, such an articulation is precisely the *gramma*, the letter, and writing.

To show this, Agamben decides to interpret once again a famous passage from Aristotle’s *De interpretatione*, which Derrida had read as phonocentric. A closer look at Agamben’s reading will show his vicinity to Colli. Aristotle’s text runs as follows:

That which is in the voice [*ta en te phone*] contains the symbols of mental experience, and written words are the symbols of that which

³⁹ Agamben, *Stanzas*, 156.

⁴⁰ Agamben, *Stanzas*, 156.

⁴¹ Agamben returns to the problem of the *phone semantike* and of grammar in *What Is Philosophy?* as well as in some of his reflections following the Covid pandemic in *Quando la casa brucia*. However, the critique of writing is the same. Giorgio Agamben, *What Is Philosophy?* trans. L. Chiesa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 1-28. Giorgio Agamben, *Quando la casa brucia* (Macerata: Giometti & Antonello, 2020), 40-48.

⁴² Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death*, trans. K. E. Pinkus and M. Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 35-36.

⁴³ Agamben, *Language and Death*, 39.

is in the voice. Just as all men do not have the same writing [*grammata*], so all men do not have the same voices [*phona*], but the mental experiences, which these directly symbolise, are the same for all, as also are those things [*pragmata*] of which our experiences are the images.⁴⁴

According to Agamben, Aristotle explains here the signifying nature of language through the interconnectedness of three elements: ‘that which is in the voice interprets and signifies the mental experience that, in turn, corresponds to the *pragmata*’.⁴⁵ What remains unexplored and what was already puzzling to ancient commentators was the role of the *grammata*, of writing. Why did Aristotle introduce writing here? Following the ancient commentators, who passed on this interpretation to Western culture, Agamben argues that once one understands language’s power of signification as ‘a reference between voices and mental experiences, and between mental experiences and things’, letters then become necessary to interpret the voices, which otherwise would once again escape signification.⁴⁶

This is the heart of the matter. Letters intervene – Agamben claims – to save the hermeneutical circle and to allow signification in the first place. In this way, they achieve a privileged status, which ancient Greek grammatical thought summarised by defining the letter as both a sign (like the voice, the mental experiences, and the objects) and ‘also an element of voice (*stoicheion tes phones*)’.⁴⁷ It is only because of the letter that the material sound, the animal voice, could be articulated into a signifying voice: it is the letter that creates this internal difference within the voice between a disarticulated voice, the material sound, and what in Derrida would be ‘the transcendental, silent voice’. But, then, this means that, as Colli claimed, it is in and through writing and not through the voice that universals and the idea of a universal subject are formed:

This means that, from the beginning, Western reflections on language locate the *gramma* and not the voice in the originary place. In fact, as a sign the *gramma* presupposes both the voice and its removal, but as an element, it has the structure of a purely negative self-affection, of a trace of itself. [...] Metaphysics is always already grammatology and this is *fundamentology* in the sense that the *gramma* (or the Voice) functions as the negative ontological foundation.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Aristotle, *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. 1, *De interpretatione*, trans. E. M. Edghill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), 16a.

⁴⁵ Agamben, *Language and Death*, 38.

⁴⁶ Agamben, *Language and Death*, 38.

⁴⁷ Agamben, *Language and Death*, 39.

⁴⁸ Agamben, *Language and Death*, 39.

The purely negative self-affection that Derrida believed himself to have found in the experience of the *s'entendre-parler* is actually a product of the letter itself. Derrida did not find the way out of metaphysics, but simply determined its fundamental problem.

4. The voice in Italy: from Agamben to Cavarero

It is not simple to reconstruct, forty years later, the influence that Agamben's reflections on the voice – which means his critique of Derrida's grammatology – have had on Italian culture. And yet, it is necessary to lay a few pathmarks in order to understand how such a reflection on the voice could lead to a new interest in breath, a new pneumatology.

In the early 1980s a series of interesting conferences and events took place that were devoted to the voice. The proceedings of one such series was collected in the book, *Fonè. La voce e la traccia* and still awaits further study.⁴⁹ But perhaps the book that best encapsulates the interest in the voice that developed in Italy at that time and which has still not been extinguished is Corrado Bologna's *Flatus vocis. Metafisica e antropologia della voce*. Written initially in 1981 as an entry for the *Enciclopedia Einaudi* – on Agamben's suggestion – and published in 1992, the book makes use of many of Agamben's findings to formulate a wide-ranging, pluralistic view of the voice.⁵⁰ Bologna's approach can be, at times, ambiguous. Sometimes it is hard to differentiate philosophical views from one another – Derrida's and Agamben's claims, for example, are juxtaposed without any real critical discussion of their premises.⁵¹ And yet Bologna's *Flatus vocis* has a particular merit: it opened the reflection on the voice to different influxes. Pneumatological ones proved the strongest. He developed, for example, the analysis by Elémire Zolla, an Italian writer and scholar of mysticism, of the various aerial metaphors used for the soul in different traditions from his *Le potenze dell'anima. Morfologia dello spirito nella storia della cultura* (1968).⁵² And he reinterpreted Agamben's pneumatological readings of Mediaeval love poetry from *Stanzas* in the context of the voice, where Agamben had hardly made such an explicit connection.⁵³ One could say that with Bologna's book, the voice returned to being a pneumatological issue, though he did not at the time employ that word.

⁴⁹ The series of talks took place in Florence between 1982 and 1983 and was then repeated in 1984 in Paris at the Centre Pompidou. Among the speakers were Jacques Derrida himself, Emmanuel Levinas, Julia Kristeva, Giorgio Agamben, Giorgio Caproni, and many others. *Fonè. La voce e la traccia*, ed. S. Mecatti (Firenze: La Casa Usher, 1985).

⁵⁰ Corrado Bologna, *Flatus vocis. Metafisica e antropologia della voce* (Bologna: Il mulino, 1992), 16.

⁵¹ Bologna, *Flatus vocis*, 23–27.

⁵² Elémire Zolla, *Le potenze dell'anima. Morfologia dello spirito nella storia della cultura* (Milano: Bompiani, 1968).

⁵³ Bologna, *Flatus vocis*, 41–44. Agamben, *Stanzas*, 90–109.

But the most powerful expression of this new development can be found in Adriana Cavarero's philosophy, in which the critique of writing in Colli and Agamben is reinterpreted through the pneumatological references found in Bologna and in an explicitly materialist fashion, thanks to the interventions of Julia Kristeva's and Hélène Cixous's feminist philosophies. In her book, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (2003),⁵⁴ in which she explicitly mentions Colli but not Agamben, it is claimed that the history of metaphysics should be read as the history of the *devocalisation* of the *logos*.⁵⁵ In line with the critique of writing analysed in the first part of this article, but bringing it to its materialist extreme, Cavarero shows that metaphysics is the history of the way in which the material voice was slowly ostracised from the realm of thought and made something merely sensible.⁵⁶ Once again, what she finds is that something like the difference between sensible and intelligible, particular and universal, which Derrida had claimed to be caused by the experience of the voice, is caused instead by the experience of the loss of the voice. She rereads Plato and Aristotle in ways similar to Colli and Agamben, sometimes even borrowing directly from Agamben, as in her analysis of the *phone semantike*.⁵⁷ But she takes these claims to an extreme, rethinking the voice from the ground up, more explicitly than Agamben has ever done.

Cavarero returns the voice to its very materiality: breath.⁵⁸ While she uncovers the constant attempt of Western philosophy at devocalising *logos*

⁵⁴ Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. P. A. Kottman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). Cantarano was right when he read Cavarero's previous book, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, in explicit contrast to Derrida's conception of writing, as he rightly began his first chapter with Colli. Interestingly Agamben is almost entirely missing from his discussion and Coccia could not yet have been included. Cantarano, *Immagini del nulla*, 13–18, 34–36. Cf. Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. P. A. Kottman (New York: Routledge, 2000). Originally published in Italian with the title, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti: Filosofia della narrazione*.

⁵⁵ One could say that Cavarero's argument mirrors Gérard Verbeke's famous reconstruction of the development of the conception of the spirit (*pneuma*) from the Stoics to Augustine. According to Verbeke, the initially material *pneuma* was gradually made immaterial and 'spiritualised', in particular with the advent of Christianity. In the same way, Cavarero argues that language and thought were slowly spiritualised and the material voice made immaterial. Gérard Verbeke, *L'évolution de la doctrine du pneuma du stoïcisme à S. Augustin* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1945), 511–544.

⁵⁶ Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*, 33–46.

⁵⁷ Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*, 75–78.

⁵⁸ In bringing the metaphysical project back to the materiality of breath, Cavarero does not seem too far from Verbeke's interpretation of the history of pneumatology (see footnote 54) but also from Antonio Negri's idea that materialism is what is always repressed in the history of philosophy. Antonio Negri, 'Kairos, Alma Venus, Multitudo', in *Time for Revolution*, trans. Matteo Mandarini (New York: Continuum, 2004), and already in *The Savage Anomaly: The*

(language and thought), she also turns to traditions, preceding or immanent to the metaphysical one, in which the physical voice – as air, as breath, as fleeting materiality – was considered to play a fundamental role in the thinking and linguistic process. She returns, for example, to the ‘origin’ of the Judeo-Christian tradition and reflects on the importance of breath (*ruah*) and voice (*qol*) in *Genesis*, where the voice of God is understood materially.⁵⁹ But perhaps one of her most interesting rediscoveries is the work of a now mostly forgotten 20th-century Cambridge philologist, Richard Broxton Onians.

In his book, *The Origins of European Thought: About the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time and Fate*, Onians emphasised the shift in the ancient Greek understanding of body, mind, and soul from Homer and the Presocratics to Plato and later philosophers. In particular, Cavarero stresses one of Onians’ most fascinating findings, namely that: ‘before the advent of metaphysics, it was more natural to believe that thought was a product of the lungs’.⁶⁰ Onians shows that later conceptions of the soul as breath and air, which one can find in Diogenes of Apollonia or in the Stoics, are already partially abstractions and reductions of an original traditional belief according to which consciousness, or thinking and emotions, take place in the lungs in and through respiration.⁶¹ Thinking was speaking and speaking was breathing, Cavarero claims. The Greek word for soul (*psychè*) derives from the verb *psycho*: to breathe, just as the Latin *anima* comes from *anemos*, the Greek term for wind or breath, as Elémire Zolla has explored at length, with Bologna following her lead.⁶² This link between thought and breath, for Cavarero, is the truth that metaphysics came to erase.

Like Agamben, Cavarero acknowledges her debt to Derrida’s deconstruction, but she also knows how powerful a critique she poses to his grammatology. Cavarero is, after all, retrieving the voice from the pit in which, if not Derrida himself then deconstruction had left it. That is why she concludes her book with an appendix ‘Dedicated to Derrida’. Here, she explains how the French philosopher, like the rest of the metaphysicians, never talked about the voice in its materiality, or he at least misread the voice in his interpretations of modern and ancient philosophers. She takes as an example Derrida’s book on Husserl, *Speech and Phenomena*, and shows that he takes Husserl’s conception of the voice as the internal, silent voice of pure consciousness and reads it automatically as the voice

Power of Spinoza’s Metaphysics and Politics, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xix-xxiii.

⁵⁹ Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*, 19-25.

⁶⁰ Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*, 62.

⁶¹ Richard Broxton Onians, *The Origins of European Thought: About the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time and Fate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 32-34. Extremely similar findings are at the basis of Hermann Schmitz’s New Phenomenology. Hermann Schmitz, *System der Philosophie*, vol. 2.1, *Der Leib* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1965), 373-445.

⁶² Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*, 66.

in general. As she wrote in a shorter version of this appendix published in French in 2014:

There is in fact the rather serious risk that the voice of phenomenological consciousness, here deconstructed by Derrida, is a voice of thought, totally insonorous. Since Derrida himself insists on the ‘living’ presence of which the voice is precisely the guarantor, the question is crucial: of which voice are we speaking? Does this voice vibrate in the throat? Does it issue from the mouth and touch upon the ears [...]?⁶³

The reason why this question is crucial, according to Cavarero, is that ‘in its acoustic materiality, in its sonorous communication – vibrating and, therefore, living – the voice never has, in Plato as in Husserl, a foundational role’.⁶⁴ For Cavarero, Derrida follows too closely the theories he deconstructs and is not able to differentiate sufficiently between the internal, silent, phenomenological voice and the sonorous, material one. And it is for this reason that he privileges writing over the voice.

Cavarero’s critique of Derrida might appear at first sight superficial: as we have already shown, Derrida himself knew his attack on the voice to be directed solely against the phenomenological voice, the interior, silent voice of consciousness. He too was interested in retrieving the voice as tone, intonation, and rhythm. Therefore, in this sense, Cavarero’s critique seems to tackle a simple straw man, and quite an ugly one at that. And yet, if read in the context of the larger work and its broader arguments, the appendix conceals a kernel of truth. Indeed, what seems to be at stake in Cavarero’s understanding of the voice and her implicit critique of grammatology is not really the difference between the silent voice of consciousness and the material, sonorous voice but rather what makes both possible: air, breath, spirit. This is perhaps the real critique that Cavarero’s book puts to Derrida. If he had indeed believed that another conception of the voice was possible, he also thought that this could not be based on the *pneuma*, the *souffle*. He never thought that a different pneumatology, a materialist pneumatology, was possible.

5. The breath of the world: Coccia’s plants

Emanuele Coccia’s book *The Life of Plants* is probably one of the most fascinating and profound contemporary attempts at re-imagining pneumatology for 21st-century thought. It is certainly not by chance that it was written by an Italian philosopher, writing in French, a one-time student of Agamben now based at Derrida’s EHESS. Coccia’s ideas in this book seem almost too straightforward, but

⁶³ Adriana Cavarero, ‘La voix de Derrida’, *Rue Descartes*, no. 82 (2014): 33. But also Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*, 224.

⁶⁴ Cavarero, ‘La voix de Derrida’, 33.

they hide a sophisticated mingling of ancient cosmologies with contemporary philosophical and biological theories, a mixture of the highest forms of spiritualism with a pervasive materialist intensity. What he achieves is a revitalisation, through a precise and subtle comparison with contemporary and older biological theories, of one of the most influential and yet mostly forgotten pneumatologies of the Western tradition, and one that, *pace* Derrida, is not *spiritualist*, but rather *materialist*: ancient Stoic cosmology.⁶⁵

In *The Life of Plants* (2016), Coccia tries to go beyond 20th century Heideggerian understandings of the world, which he claims are still based on the relationship between the human being and the animal,⁶⁶ through a rediscovery of those ever-present beings that have remained, in the history of Western philosophy, almost invisible – plants. Starting from plants means, for Coccia, to start from a simple, straightforwardly intuitive, biological fact and take it seriously: plants created what humans call the world, namely a space that humans can inhabit. They created the world by making the atmosphere in which human beings live:

They have transformed for good the face of our planet: it is through photosynthesis that oxygen came to feature so heavily in our atmosphere; it is thanks to our plants and their life that higher animal organisms can produce the energy necessary for survival. It is through them and with their help that our planet produces its atmosphere and makes breath possible for the beings that cover its outer skin. The life of plants is a cosmogony in action, the constant genesis of our cosmos.⁶⁷

Through the process of photosynthesis, plants created breathable air. For Coccia, what plants can teach us, first and foremost, is the priority of the breath.⁶⁸ But this

⁶⁵ There is a famous debate around the question of whether Stoicism could be considered a form of materialism. The Stoics had, in fact, a very peculiar and complex conception of matter, but at the same time one of their most fundamental beliefs was that everything one can see in the world is corporeal. The incorporeals were only four: time, place, void, and the sayables. *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, ed. H. von Armin (Leipzig: Teubner, 1903–1905), II, 331. From now on cited as *SVF*. For the debate see Max Pohlenz, *Die Stoa: Geschichte einer geistigen Bewegung*, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1948), 64–69.

⁶⁶ In this regard, Coccia explicitly cites Agamben's *The Open: Man and Animal* and its analysis of the 'anthropological machine'. Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. K. Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004). With Agamben, Coccia edited an anthology on angels in the three main Abrahamic religions. Giorgio Agamben and Emanuele Coccia, *Angeli: Ebraismo Cristianesimo Islam* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2009). Furthermore, Agamben wrote an introduction to Coccia's first book, *La trasparenza delle immagini: Averroè e l'averroismo*, by Emanuele Coccia (Milano: Mondadori, 2005).

⁶⁷ Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*, trans. D. J. Montanari (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 9.

⁶⁸ Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 35–53.

mere biological fact has enormous, metaphysical consequences. He writes:

In making possible the world of which they are both part and content, plants destroy the topological hierarchy that seems to reign over our cosmos. They demonstrate that life is a rupture in the asymmetry between container and contained. When there is life, the container is located in the contained (and is thus contained by it); and vice versa. The paradigm of this mutual overlap is what the ancients called ‘breath’ (*pneuma*).⁶⁹

This priority of the breath, to which plants testify, implies that to live is, according to Coccia, ‘immersion’, that to live in a world is to be immersed in it. But such formulations remain obscure, unless one understands what ‘the ancients called ‘breath’ (*pneuma*)’, which means to understand Stoic pneumatology.

According to the Stoics, the whole *cosmos* is an organism completely pervaded by *pneuma*, a *corporeal* breath that gives life to it and to everything in it.⁷⁰ Analogically, the same counts for every other being, humans included: humans are bodies penetrated by *pneuma*, what is usually called the soul.⁷¹ What is fascinating about this theory, and what probably attracted Coccia in the first place, is that according to the Stoics, everything in the world is material, the soul included.⁷² Yet, this created a huge issue for ancient Stoicism and it is the solution they found for this issue that Coccia has transformed into the central tenet of his philosophy. If both body and soul are corporeal, their critics insisted, then how could one be *in* the other, as everyone can see that the soul is *in* the body? The only solution was to admit the possibility of something like a total mixture and interpenetration. Thus, Chrysippus argued that in nature there are three kinds of union: 1) mere connection or juxtaposition, in which two things are simply together by virtue of being contiguous, as in the case of a heap of grain; 2) fusion, when two things completely lose their substantiality and qualities to form a new object, such as in the case of medicaments or perfumes; and finally, 3) total mixture, when two things completely interpenetrate one another but do not lose their ‘nature’, their substances and their qualities in the process, and thus could later be separated once again, as in the case of a mixture of water and wine.⁷³ According to Chrysippus, it is through this third kind of union that the soul is in the body (and vice versa), and, at the cosmological level, that the corporeal spirit pervades the world and every entity in it.

⁶⁹ Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 10.

⁷⁰ *SVFII*, 471-73.

⁷¹ *SVFII*, 772-79.

⁷² The main argument for the corporeality of the soul is that only bodies can act on bodies and, therefore, the soul could not be able to act on the body if it were incorporeal. *SVFII*, 790.

⁷³ *SVFII*, 463-81.

Coccia's idea of the world as a state of immersion now becomes comprehensible. Coccia has taken Stoic pneumatology and its characteristic theory of complete mixture to the extreme. If before everything else, before every other possibility of our being, there is first and foremost 'breath' and breath is in things as *krasis*, as a complete mixture and interpenetration, then this means that the world is not a place that confronts us — as an object confronts a subject — but a state of immersion.⁷⁴ We are already constantly immersed in the world and the world is always already immersed in us, thanks to and through air.

To inhale is to allow the world to come into us — the world is in us — and to exhale is to project ourselves into the world that we are. To be in the world is not simply to find oneself in a final horizon containing everything that we are and will be able to perceive, live, or dream. From the moment we start to live, think, perceive, dream, breathe, the world in its infinite details is in us, materially and spiritually penetrating our body and our soul [*âme*], giving form, consistency, and reality to everything that we are. The world is not a place; it is a state of immersion of each thing in all other things, the mixture that instantaneously reverses the relation of topological inherence.⁷⁵

On the basis of Stoic pneumatology, Coccia has developed a new ultra-materialist pneumatology, which by understanding the soul, the psyche itself, as corporeal, namely as breath, goes beyond any polarity typical of the Western metaphysical tradition and undermines every conception of a pure interiority and a pure subject. This pneumatology achieves precisely the opposite of what Derrida thought pneumatology (and the voice) implied.

It should come as no surprise that such a pneumatological conception of the world would then imply the critiques of writing and of the conception of language found in the other Italian philosophers we have spoken of. In a review essay on Pierre Guyotat's literary works published in the same year as *The Life of Plants* in the journal *Critique*, which bears the telling title 'La cosmologie du souffle' (The Cosmology of Breath), Coccia directly connects his new pneumatology to the problem of language. The myth against which his pneumatology — as well as Guyotat's texts — fight is the myth of language as the 'main organ and place of separation'.⁷⁶ The European tradition, from Anaxagoras onwards, has made of language as *logos* something detached from the world, which thanks to this separation can order and differentiate things, ending the eternal movement and mixture of everything. For Coccia, Structuralism — but Derrida's deconstruction is cited negatively a few lines later and seems still to be encompassed in his critique — is just the conclusion of this process:

⁷⁴ Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 66.

⁷⁵ Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 66-67.

⁷⁶ Emanuele Coccia, 'La cosmologie du souffle', *Critique* 824-825, no. 1 (2016): 121.

Structuralism could be considered the ripest fruit of this long-lasting myth: under its aegis, language, understood as a separated cause, has become the principle of intelligibility of everything existing, by constituting itself as the realm of difference and differentiation. Language would be the medium in which and through which everything becomes capable of differentiating itself and of opposing everything else: and it is from this difference, whose nature is purely linguistic, that the value, the greatness, and the nature of things would derive.⁷⁷

Coccia claims that it is this separation of language that has created the illusion of something like a ‘pure ideality, a space detached from becoming, from matter’.⁷⁸ The prejudice that something like a spiritual human subject could exist separately from all materiality and becoming derives from an understanding of language as immaterial. All those concepts whose origin Derrida had found in the voice Coccia recognises as a consequence of the ontological separation of language from the world.

It will not be surprising once again that Coccia would find the origin of the myth of the separation of language in the phenomenon of writing and in the letter. He reaches this conclusion through Guyotat’s works but the similarities with and the hidden references to Colli, Agamben, and Cavarero are undeniable:

Guyotat’s answer is very surprising: it is writing that prevents language from coinciding completely with the totality of its own possibilities. It is indeed writing that, before anything else, produces the illusion of language as something fixed, ‘given once and for all’, as if of ‘divine origin’, while ‘we speak a language that is a language in becoming, that has not always been spoken in this way, that will not be spoken in this way in fifty, or thirty years.’⁷⁹

It is writing that has given the impression that language could be something different from the world, something unchangeable and divine; and it is on this difference that the difference between subject and world, sensible and intelligible, material

⁷⁷ Coccia, ‘La cosmologie du souffle’, 122.

⁷⁸ Coccia, ‘La cosmologie du souffle’, 122.

⁷⁹ Coccia, ‘La cosmologie du souffle’, 129. A new defence of writing appears in Coccia’s latest book, *Filosofia della casa*, but it is here based on the premises of *The Life of Plants*: writing is even said to have, perhaps, nothing to do with language; it is simply another, fundamental way in which humans can pervade and be pervaded by life, by the breath of the world. Emanuele Coccia, *Filosofia della casa* (Turin: Einaudi, 2021), 72–74. In his recent dissertation on Agamben’s *What Is Philosophy?*, Alexander Ferguson has pointed out that, in the end, Agamben’s philosophy too, which owes so much to its writing style, seems to need a retrieval of writing. Ferguson, ‘Agamben’s Philosophy of Language’.

and immaterial is predicated. And if writing is what prevents language from coinciding with itself it is because of the letter, because the letter is an extra-linguistic element.⁸⁰ As Agamben has shown, the letter is both an element of the voice and a sign of itself or, as Coccia claims by citing the Latin grammarian Priscian, the letter is ‘a visual image of language’. What this implies is that it detaches language from itself, from what it is originally: namely rhythm and breath.

Coccia’s pneumatology encompasses the critique of writing found in Colli, Cavarero and Agamben. And at the same time, it opens up towards a different conception of language. Against the European tradition that thinks language as writing and, therefore, as the place of difference, Coccia invites us to rethink language as the space of complete mixture, and this means to rethink language on the basis of breath (*pneuma*). This is what he finds in Guyotat’s works as well: once one understands ‘every speech act’ as ‘breath and life of a body’ and if one understands breath through the paradigm of *krasis*, which he takes from the Ancient Stoics, language cannot be separated from the world any longer;⁸¹ it *is* this very world in the totality of its possibilities. According to this view, ‘there is no need to invent another language. It is enough to transform the letters of the alphabet into those accents of the breath that animates the world’.⁸²

The voice is not, as the metaphysical tradition thought, the place in which letters are inscribed. As we have already demonstrated, it was that event that had caused the split between transcendental and physical voice, between immaterial and material voice. But in Coccia’s view, this difference does not stand any longer and without such a split there is no other voice to be reached, neither the eternal voice of presence nor the always already lost breath that engenders it. And letters become in the end mere accents of the voice of the world.

6. Conclusion

Pneumatology and the thought of the voice are indeed one thing, as Derrida had shown. Yet, the Italian philosophers examined here have demonstrated that neither the voice nor the *pneuma* lie at the origin of metaphysics. The illusion of a pure interiority and an eternal presence, which created all of the original, hierarchical, binary oppositions in which Western thought has been trapped from its very inception – universal and particular, *essentia* and *existentia*, soul and body, subject and object, consciousness and world – cannot be traced back to the voice, as Derrida thought. And this is because the experience of the voice can hardly be reduced to a silent *s’entendre-parler* of a spirit with itself. According to these philosophers, such a misunderstanding of the voice is possible only because of writing. It is only thanks to the letters inscribed within the vocal sounds that something like a silent voice completely detached from its materiality could be made visible.

⁸⁰ Coccia, ‘La cosmologie du souffle’, 130.

⁸¹ Coccia, ‘La cosmologie du souffle’, 123–25.

⁸² Coccia, ‘La cosmologie du souffle’, 131.

Both Derrida and his Italian critics have always been interested in the voice and its materiality as intonation, tone, and rhythm. What escaped Derrida is that this voice is only thinkable in and through breath, a breath that calls into question the very nature of the word ‘spirit’.⁸³ Indeed, to return the voice to its materiality means to rethink materially everything that the Western tradition has associated with the term ‘spirit’. The *spiritualist* conception of the spirit must be abandoned if we are to understand our very soul, our cognitive and emotional life, as breath. Agamben himself seems gradually to have moved towards a similar position. In one of his recent reflections, he writes: ‘That soul and body are indissolubly joined – this is spiritual. The spirit is not a third between soul and body: it is just their helpless, wonderful coincidence’.⁸⁴

Paradoxically, to think the spirit materially means to go beyond the dichotomy materialism-spiritualism, itself a legacy of metaphysics. *Pneuma*, at once breath and spirit, is not the foundation of metaphysics, which from the beginning divides being into two planes, but rather what comes before any rift, what holds everything together.

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⁸³ Perhaps the basis on which to re-imagine the voice as breath is already present in the Stoic pneumatology discussed above, which thinks the voice as the material ‘*tonos tou pneumatous*’ (tone of the spirit) or, in Seneca’s translation, the ‘*intentio spiritus*’ (intention of the spirit). Seneca, *Naturalium quaestionum libri*, ed. H. M. Hine (Leipzig: Teubner, 1996), II.6.3-4.

⁸⁴ Agamben, *Quando la casa brucia*, 14.

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