



‘Now—for a breath I tarry’: Breath, Desire, and Queer Materialism at the *fin de siècle*

Fraser Riddell

A. E. Housman’s marginalia to his copy of Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* demonstrate a characteristically assiduous engagement with questions of textual accuracy in Book III of the philosophical poem.¹ In offering his emendations, the poet and classical scholar revisits a materialist account of the universe in which the individual soul is composed of a momentary accretion of falling atoms—a combination of heat (*calor*), air (*aer*), breath (*aura*, *ventus*), and a fourth mysterious nameless substance (*natura*).² Lucretius’s *aura* (breeze) and *ventus* (wind) are translations into Latin of πνεῦμα (*pneuma*) from Epicurus’s Ancient Greek, and both terms retain associations with the movement of breath. The motion of such an *aura* informs Lucretius’s humoral model of character, in which individual temperament is determined by the dominance of one material element in the soul (47–48, ll. 288–313). Heat equates to anger (*ira*) and is aligned with the fierceness of the lion. The dominance of air equates to a character with a tranquil heart (*pectore tranquillo*), and is allied with the placidity of the cow. The dominance of breath, meanwhile, equates to timidity or

F. Riddell (✉)

Department of English Studies, Durham University, Durham, UK

© The Author(s) 2021

D. Fuller et al. (eds.), *The Life of Breath in Literature, Culture and Medicine*, Palgrave Studies in Literature, Science and Medicine,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-74443-4_17

345

fear (*pavor*), and is associated with the deer, whose limbs are pervaded by a tremulous movement (*tremulum [...] motum*) and who stands frozen with terror.

Housman's engagement with Lucretius occurs at a historical juncture at which Victorian writers turned with renewed interest to ancient materialist philosophers—Heraclitus, Democritus, Empedocles, Epicurus—to examine the manner in which their theories pre-figured the most significant developments in contemporary science, most notably the atomic theory of John Tyndall.³ Lucretius's poem, in this sense, became a prism through which Victorian writers confronted profound and unsettling questions about the relationship between mind and matter, individual free will, the coherence of the self and the nature of God.⁴ But it also draws to our attention something more specific: the striking queerness of breath's materiality in late-Victorian literature. In the works of some of the most important figures in the literary history of homosexuality, such as A. E. Housman, John Addington Symonds, and Walter Pater, tropes of breath and breathlessness act to articulate a queer subjectivity that is marked in its materiality by fearfulness, timidity, and withdrawal, and so often defined by a precariousness that drifts towards a breath-like insubstantiality. In tracing the boundary between inner and outer, self and other, privacy and disclosure, breath participates in the making and the unmaking of queer subjects at the *fin de siècle*.

Recent work in queer theory helps us think more carefully both about the queerness of this materialism, and about what it could mean to breathe in fear with Lucretius. Following the so-called 'negative turn' in queer studies, theorists such as Jack Halberstam and Lee Edelman have located in queer sexuality forms of resistance to normativity that arise from the materiality of those bodies which refuse coherence, subvert reproductive temporalities, and reject existing modes of sociality.⁵ Heather Love has demonstrated how the stigma of social marginalization—the weight of bad feelings—finds material embodiment in queer subjects through their negotiations with shared historical pasts.⁶ Sara Ahmed's work on 'queer phenomenology' has explored how non-normative subjectivities are formed through their fraught negotiation with and re-orientation of normative spaces and material objects.⁷ Queer materialism, for such theorists, becomes a materialism marked by failure: a failure of matter to cohere in the right place, in the right shape, or at the right time; a failure of matter to occupy space in the right way. But

it is also a materialism in which such failure might become productive—where new modes of sociality might emerge from not needing to matter. It is a way of thinking about how certain marginalized subjects come to breathe in fear, but also how they might find a space, perhaps, to breathe more freely.

SEXOLOGY, EMBODIMENT, AND BREATH: *ATMUNGSTYPUS MÄNNLICH*

The queer materiality of breath in *fin-de-siècle* literature is best understood in the context of late nineteenth-century sexological discourses through which the homosexual subject emerged as a specific category of material body. Recent work on the history of European sexology has built on the foundational insights of Michel Foucault to enrich our understanding of the complexity of pre-Freudian understandings of sexuality.⁸ In contrast to psychoanalytic models which viewed desire as rooted in the enigmatic psychic processes of the unconscious, *fin-de-siècle* sexologists located the origins of sexuality in congenital physiological and anatomical characteristics.⁹ The exhaustive empirical measurement, observation, and classification of the body was one of the central strategies adopted by sexologists such as Albert Moll, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and Havelock Ellis in order to demarcate the pathologized 'inverted' subject from the healthy 'normal' subject. Amongst a plethora of scientific data recorded by sexologists in their case studies—ranging from body shape to muscularity to vocal quality—modes of breathing became a key diagnostic indicator of non-normative sexuality.

In the first volume of Magnus Hirschfeld's *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Homosexualität* a distinction is drawn between distinctive male and female 'respiration types' ('*Atmungstypen*'):

In civilized races, the man primarily breathes from the abdomen, i.e. with the diaphragm and stomach muscles, and the woman more from the ribs, i.e. with the chest muscles. In children, the breathing type in early years is largely abdominal. Meticulous investigations by a variety of researchers have shown that these sex differences in respiratory movements are simply the result, reinforced by heredity, of an artificial constriction by the customary women's clothing.¹⁰

Despite acknowledging the significance of environmental factors, such as the wearing of corsets, in shaping characteristic modes of breathing, Hirschfeld nevertheless draws upon this distinction in his sexological case studies as indicative of congenital abnormal sexuality. Subsequent issues of Hirschfeld's *Jahrbuch* repeatedly record whether 'inverted' male or female subjects or 'hermaphrodite' (intersex) subjects have, for example, a 'masculine respiration type' or a 'mixed respiration type, abdominal-thoracic'.¹¹ Hirschfeld's *Die Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes* (1914) cites the earlier work of Karl Ulrichs, which similarly suggests that homosexual subjects breathe in a manner which is atypical of their sexed bodies: 'I have seen homosexual men with heaving bosoms and homosexual women without a trace of costal breathing'.¹² Homosexual subjects, Ulrichs suggests, are also peculiarly capable of 'influencing' the type of respiration that they use (so as to change from stereotypically masculine abdominal breathing to stereotypically feminine costal breathing, or vice versa).¹³

An awareness of the intense focus on the non-normative body in these sexological texts might allow us to read with greater sensitivity the tropes of embodiment prevalent in queer literary texts of the *fin de siècle*. Posture, voice, gait, and breath—the basic gestures and movements of the body all became potentially fraught through their disclosive potential. Another reason to be particularly alert to the relationship between the presentation of breath and embodiment in sexological texts and the tropes of breath in literary works is that *fin-de-siècle* literary authors were themselves closely engaged in the consumption, production, and circulation of such sexological texts. The significance of John Addington Symonds's contribution to English sexology has been well recognized by Sean Brady and others.¹⁴ Housman's attentiveness to contemporary developments in sexology remains less well-known.¹⁵ He followed new work in European sexology closely. His extensive personal collection of sexological and pornographic texts includes a complete set of Hirschfeld's *Jahrbuch* (23 vols, 1899–1923) and Max Marcuse's journal *Sexual-Probleme: Zeitschrift für Sexualwissenschaft* (vols 5–10, 1909–1914), amongst the only extant copies of these texts in the United Kingdom.¹⁶ Reading work by *fin-de-siècle* writers in the light of such an archive alerts us to the manner in which literary texts complicate and subvert such pathologizing discourses. The queer body in texts by Housman, Symonds, and Pater is often

inscribed with a Lucretian timidity and fear bound up with the experience of social marginalization—yet it is also the site at which alternative materialisms first draw breath.

A. E. HOUSMAN: 'BENEATH THE SUFFOCATING NIGHT'

Slit throats, suffocation, strangling, hanging—stifled breath in A. E. Housman's Shropshire becomes the mark of a queer martyrdom sadistically enacted by the poet on the bodies of his unfortunate victims. Catching one's breath in Housman's poetry expresses the precarity of queer subjectivity and the impossibility of fulfilled queer desire. The movement of breath becomes emblematic of a pessimistic Lucretian flux, in which individuals must confront their inevitable dissolution into the material 'stuff' of the universe.¹⁷ Such queer materialism of breath comes into sharpest focus in three consecutive texts from Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*: 'Others, I am not the first' (xxx, 31–32), 'On Wenlock Edge' (xxxii, 32–33), and 'From far, from eve and morning' (xxxii, 33–34).¹⁸

'Others, I am not the first' is a poem in which the immediacy of the demand for breath becomes a way of talking about the intense materiality of embodied queer desire, and how such a materiality refuses the comfort of abstract philosophical consolation:

Others, I am not the first,
Have willed more mischief than they durst:
If in the breathless night I too
Shiver now, 'tis nothing new.

More than I, if truth were told,
Have stood and sweated hot and cold,
And through their reins in ice and fire
Fear contended with desire.

Agued once like me were they,
But I like them shall win my way
Lastly to the bed of mould
Where there's neither heat nor cold.

But from my grave across my brow
Plays no wind of healing now,
And fire and ice within me fight
Beneath the suffocating night.

In a letter to Grant Richards in December 1920, Housman described the poem as ‘contrasting the passions of youth and the unwholesome excitement of adultery with the quiet indifference of death’.¹⁹ For Laurence Housman, this text is the most strikingly autobiographical of all those collected in *A Shropshire Lad*: it gives the ‘most direct expression’ of his brother’s ‘personal experience—and suffering’.²⁰ Such ‘passions’, ‘excitement’, and ‘suffering’ are felt viscerally here at the level of a body that ‘shivers’ and ‘sweat[s] hot and cold’; desire is a ‘fight’ in the ‘reins’ between ‘ice and fire’. ‘Quiet indifference’, if it can be achieved, might be reached through a Lucretian philosophy that situates the torturous nature of one’s unfulfilled desires in a historical span that marks them as both continuous and inevitable: suffering is merely part of the universal order and is thus simply to be endured. However, as the final stanza makes clear, such consolation is not easily arrived at: death might offer comfort in the future, but it provides none ‘now’. Rather, the weight of unacted desire is itself ‘suffocating’, drawing the speaker back to the intensity of the present moment felt in the body. Characteristically, the tripping lilt of Housman’s regular meter—a ‘contend[ing]’ between trochaic and iambic tetrameter—is itself smothered by the awkward scansion demanded by this ‘suffocating’.

Such ‘suffocating’ is a reiteration, and intensification, of the ‘breathless night’ through which the speaker ‘shiver[s]’ in the first stanza. This is another ‘now’ made intensely present by the shortage of breath. This shivering breathlessness presents ‘mischief’ left undone in terms that still evoke the doing of it; one might, of course, be pleasurably out of breath as one shivers with the ‘excitement of adultery’. Housman’s earlier draft, in which the speaker endures a ‘*smothering* night’ (32), makes more immediately present the primary sense of ‘breathless’ here—being deprived of air, being unable to breathe freely. There are specifically queer reasons here for the manner in which ‘fear contend[s] with desire’ on the part of Housman’s speaker, or for such desire rendering him ‘agued’. As Carol Efrati has observed, sexual desire is rarely disentangled, in Housman’s works, from *fin-de-siècle* legal and medical discourses that would render queer sexuality a matter of intense shame, criminality, and pathology.²¹ The speaker attempts to find distance from this social reality by dissolving or diminishing the self into the historical past (‘not the first’, ‘nothing new’, ‘more than I’). Yet the poem’s metrical scheme works against this

forcefully to assert the present moment: the trochees that open lines four ('Shiver') and eight ('Fear') place their stress to foreground the affective immediacy of embodied experience. We might also think back here to Lucretius's shivering, fearful soul, whose character is defined by a dominance of breath. Housman's poem suggests, at the last gasp, that to be intensely, even fearfully, aware of the social marginality of one's queer sexual desire feels something like being unable to breathe.

Being breathless in bed, for Housman, is also to find oneself wishing for the comforting breath of a lover and finding this to be painfully absent. In 'I lay me down and slumber' (*More Poems* xiii, 122–23), the 'night-long breathing / That keeps a man alive' (ll. 3–4) represents the unconscious, automatic respiration of the speaker himself as he sleeps. But it also indulges a wish for the benevolent care of a desired other who sleeps (and breathes) beside him: a 'kind and foolish comrade / That breathes all night for me' (ll. 19–20). To be 'breathe[d] for' by another is to be desired by them, but it is also to be sustained by them—for the body of the other to function as something akin to a phantasmatic iron lung. As Phillip Horky explores elsewhere in this volume, there is a well-established tradition in materialist ancient philosophy (with which Housman was closely familiar) in which shared breath (*conspiration*) functions as a figure for sustenance—most notably, in this context, for the reciprocal bond that sustains domestic and sexual intimacy within marriage.²² Housman wonders aloud about the possibility of a same-sex equivalent of this breathing-together. The text reflects upon the extent to which feeling desired by another might be connected to feeling sustained; whether, that is, being *breathed* for allows one to feel *breathed for*.

Elsewhere in Housman's works, breath becomes a more immediately material vehicle for the transmission of queer desire—the Lucretian *aura* carried on the wind. In the opening stanzas of 'The winds out of the west land blow' (*ASL*, xxxviii, 38–39), the movement of breath functions to overcome the spatial distance between the speaker and the men he loves, partially restoring the lost intimacy of the speaker's far-off 'friends':

The winds out of the west land blow,
 My friends have breathed them there;
 Warm with the blood of lads I know
 Comes east the sighing air.

It fanned their temples, filled their lungs,
 Scattered their forelocks free;
 My friends made words of it with tongues
 That talk no more to me. (ll. 1–8)

The ‘breath’ of these men ‘warm[s]’ the air with the ‘blood’ of their desire, so that this desire might be transmitted by the wind through space to the speaker. The inhalation of breath into the lungs charges the neutral air with the warmth of erotic presence—a presence avowed by the inverted foot that opens line three on ‘Warm’. Also made buoyant on this ‘sighing air’ are the displaced traces of contact with these friends’ bodies. Like an attentive lover or nurse, the wind ‘fan[s] their temples’, and ruffles their ‘forelocks free’. The repeated stressed ‘f’ fricatives (on ‘fanned’, ‘filled’, ‘forelocks’, ‘free’), and the inverted foot on ‘Scattered’, capture something of the materiality of the animated breeze as it brushes the flesh. An earlier draft of the second stanza reinforces this underlying desire for a loving caress—here the wind ‘stroke[s] their faces’ (39), playing out a tactile fantasy seemingly denied to the speaker himself. There are hints of envy here too. The wind gains easy entry to the private interiors of these men’s bodies, absorbed to ‘fill their lungs’. The transformation of this air into speech sees a refusal of communication: when this breath becomes ‘words’ it does nothing to acknowledge or reciprocate the desires of the speaker. The queer desire encoded in the breath evaporates before it finds concrete verbal expression.

The ‘sighing air’ of ‘The winds out of the west land blow’ becomes the more characteristically Lucretian ‘gale of life’ in ‘On Wenlock Edge’: a blindly destructive dispersal of matter in which all individual identity must ultimately be subsumed within a constant cosmological process of flux. Here, the ‘heaving hill’ of Housman’s Shropshire landscape seems itself to rise and fall like a diaphragm—a spectral displacement, perhaps, of the strained breathing of a long-dead Roman. The ‘old wind in the old anger’ functions in this poem as another form of breath that might bring queer bodies into contact.

The movement of breath in ‘From far, from eve and morning’ (xxxii) is similarly co-extensive with the blowing of the wind, which here enacts a blind dissolution of the self:

From far, from eve and morning
 And yon twelve-winded sky,
 The stuff of life to knit me

Blew hither: here am I.

Now—for a breath I tarry
 Nor yet disperse apart—
 Take my hand quick and tell me,
 What have you in your heart.

Speak now, and I will answer;
 How shall I help you, say;
 Ere to the wind's twelve quarters
 I take my endless way.

Housman's text is about the connection between desire and precarity; about the difficulty of sustaining a subject position from which one can express desire. Housman's temporally and spatially displaced queer subject comes into being only long enough to experience a fleeting hope of requited love. As Archie Burnett has noted, the text evokes a specifically Lucretian weaving and un-weaving of the 'stuff of life' here: *pereat dispersa per auras* ('it perishes dispersed abroad through the air').²³ Housman's text draws upon Lucretius's associations of 'aura' with the movement of breath. This material accretion and 'dispers[al]' are notably performed at the level of sound: the fricatives of 'stuff', 'life', 'hither', and 'breath' are softly insubstantial when set in opposition to the more concrete plosives in 'knit', 'apart', 'heart'. The 'breath' for which the speaker 'tarryes' functions in two ways. First, as a measurement of time—the transitory moment for which the speaker might be sustained before 'dispers[ing]', breath-like, onto the wind's 'endless way'. A quiet desperation to make the most of this moment is asserted by the inverted feet on 'Now' and 'Take my hand'. Second, as an unspoken indicator of the fleeting possibility of reciprocated desire, akin to the 'quick' touch of a hand. The speaker's repeated requests for the verbal affirmation of such desire ('tell me', 'speak now', 'say') remain conspicuously unanswered. The speaker waits, perhaps in vain, for the desiring breath of the other, just as he awaits their spoken response.

Tropes of breath and breathlessness in Housman's poems function to materialize forms of queer desire that cannot quite find expression. As 'fear contend[s] with desire' in these texts, desire often becomes encoded in breath, rendered material only at the moment of its dispersal. But these texts' engagement with the materialism of Lucretius also becomes

a means for articulating a queer impulse towards disappearance and withdrawal. Here breath marks the failure and precarity of certain subjects; the inability of marginalized individuals to inhabit their bodies securely in time or space.

JOHN ADDINGTON SYMONDS: 'I SEEM TO FEEL THE AURA IN HIM'

For the Victorian poet, historian and literary critic John Addington Symonds, the materiality of breath is similarly associated in his autobiographical writings, private correspondence, and essays on classical culture with the indirect transmission and fearful negotiation of queer desire. In Symonds's *Memoirs* (1893), the lung disease that came to dominate his life is presented as partially the result of his inability to 'yield to the attraction of the male'.²⁴ In the unfolding narrative of his 'pulmonary disease' (276), his decision to marry Catherine North—a woman for whom he feels 'the strongest admiration and the firmest friendship' but 'not the right quality of sexual passion'—is followed immediately by his being 'pronounced consumptive' (523). Only years later, at the age of twenty-nine, does he finally 'indulge his inborn homosexual instincts'. He 'rapidly recover[s]' his health, to 'some extent surmount[ing] his consumptive tendencies': 'the phthisis—which had progressed as far as profuse haemorrhage and formation of cavity—was arrested' (533). In striking opposition to the dominant Victorian pathologization of homosexuality, Symonds presents the free expression of homosexual desire by queer subjects as vital to their physical and mental well-being: he is 'quite certain that he suffers or benefits in health of mind and body according as he abstains from or indulges in moderate homosexual pleasure' (533). Symonds presents the breathlessness symptomatic of his lung disease in a manner similar to Housman's 'shiver[ing]' speaker, for whom the inability to indulge his 'mischief' feels like a form of suffocation.

After first meeting Symonds in October 1877, Henry James wrote to his brother William of his encounter with 'a mild, cultured man, with the Oxford perfume'.²⁵ James refers here, with characteristic restraint, to the potent mix of Hellenism, aestheticism, and homoeroticism then prevalent in certain sub-communities at the University of Oxford.²⁶ The turn of phrase also alerts us to the possibility of queerness as something which lingers as a material trace in the air, as something inhaled unawares—but also as something that might be caught only by those

with a sharpened and subtle sensitivity. A similarly breath-like metaphor for the material encoding, transmission, and recognition of queer possibility occurs in Symonds's own writings. In his letters to close friends who share his interest in love between men, Symonds uses the word 'aura' to refer to a material presence that he senses in certain individuals or works of art. This 'aura' acts covertly to communicate and disclose the hidden homosexual subtext of an artwork or the homosexual identity of an individual. To Edmund Gosse in April 1890, Symonds recounts reading works by Christopher Marlowe, Pierre Loti, and Charles Warren Stoddard and notes that '[t]he *aura*, when I feel it, seems to me very distinct'. Openly acknowledging this 'diagnosis', he warns Gosse, remains 'difficult & dangerous'.²⁷ The 'aura' of an individual can also be sensed indirectly through the material referent of an artwork produced by him. In a later letter to Gosse in February 1892 he reports receiving a photograph of John Donoghue's sculpture of 'The Young Sophokles Leading the Chorus of Victory after the Battle of Salamis' and comments: 'I never saw the man. But I seem to feel the *aura* in him'.²⁸ In similar terms, he writes to Horatio Forbes Brown in March 1891 of a painting by Henry Strachey of boys playing football in a Somerset meadow as being 'full of the *aura*'.²⁹ In both cases, this 'aura' is presented in terms that draw attention to its materiality as breath; it is a quality that can be felt *in* an individual or that can *fill up* an object.

The queer 'aura' that Symonds senses is striking in two ways. First, it is a quality exuded by certain objects or persons unintentionally. Second, it can be detected only by those with a particular sensibility to 'discern' its presence. There are notable parallels here with Symonds's characterization of Lucretius's conception of sexual desire, in Book 4 of *De Rerum Natura*, as a 'a fierce and overmastering force [...] which men share in common *with the world of things*'.³⁰ The physical materiality of this 'force' which flows between human and non-human objects should also be understood as informing Symonds's response to contemporaneous work being undertaken by his close friends in the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), such as Frederic Myers and Henry Sidgwick.³¹ In its fascination with telepathy, hypnotism, and other 'supernormal communication', the SPR was pre-occupied with the detection of 'effluences, as yet unknown to science, but perceptible by sensitive persons, [which] radiate from living human organisms'.³² Myers's *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903) offers a useful definition of an 'aura' as an 'influence environing each human being, whose limits it is not easy to

define'.³³ Significantly, this means that Symonds does not posit the detection of queer 'aura' merely as the product of an inquisitive interpretative reading strategy (something akin to an early 'queer reading'). Rather, detection depends on a receptiveness to the transmission of queerness, here understood in material terms as a physical 'influence' or 'effluence' given off by bodies and things. As in Housman's poetry, Symonds's *aura* affords to breath a sensuous tactility through which queer bodies might come into closer contact.

Underlying this connection between the transmission of a breath-like *aura* and the recognition of desire between men is Symonds's interest in the Spartan pederastic tradition of the εἰσπνήλας (*eispnelas*)—the elder lover who 'breathes in' to the receptive younger 'listener'.³⁴ Writers of the Victorian period would have been familiar with this idea from Karl Otfried Müller's influential study of Spartan civilization, *Die Dorier* (1824), which was translated into English by Henry Tufnel and George Cornwall Lewis in 1830.³⁵ Symonds draws attention to this model in *Studies in the Greek Poets* (1873) in order to praise the dignity and purity of Platonic same-sex 'comradeship': 'a kind of chivalry[...], which, like the modern chivalry of love and arms, as long as it remained within due limits, gave birth to nothing but honourable deeds and noble friendships'.³⁶ Such 'inspiration' marks another means, for Symonds, through which the material dispersal of breath allows for a tentative affirmation of desire between men.

WALTER PATER: 'FADE OUT OF THE WORLD LIKE A BREATH'

Queer forms of materialism can also be traced in the movement of breath in the works of Walter Pater, the most important writer in English Aestheticism. As recent work by Benjamin Morgan has suggested, Pater's status as a self-proclaimed Epicurean makes him a significant figure in the nineteenth-century re-evaluation of materialism.³⁷ Pater's remarks in 'The Genius of Plato' might be understood as a summary of his own literary project in materialist terms, when he speaks of 'the redemption of matter' and 'the vindication of the dignity of the body'.³⁸ At the same time, Pater's texts stage what Heather Love has called a 'shrinking politics' of the ephemeral 'diaphanous type'—something close, perhaps, to those fearful breath-like souls identified by Lucretius.³⁹ Metaphors of breath in Pater's works often function as tools for negotiating this tension between

marginalized subjectivity and its precarious grounding in the experience of the material world. This is at its most striking in Pater's series of short fictional prose works known as 'Imaginary Portraits', and particularly in his treatment of consumption in 'Sebastian van Storck' (1886).⁴⁰

Set in the Dutch Republic of the mid-seventeenth century, 'Sebastian van Storck' focusses on the fate of the only child of a wealthy merchant family. The text's queer materialism arises through its central character's 'passion for *Schwindsucht*' (153)—his 'continual effort at self-effacement' (164). Sebastian aspires towards the condition of evaporation: he is drawn to 'fade out of the world like a breath' (158). This breath-like dispersal is closely aligned in the text with both the gradually wasting symptoms of consumption and the queer refusal of a normative sexual materiality bound up with what Lee Edelman calls 'reproductive futurity'. Pater's use of the term '*Schwindsucht*' gestures in two directions. First, towards a strict medical sense of the term—it is the consumption (or *phthisis*) with which Sebastian will subsequently become infected. Second, towards Hegel's use of the phrase in *Vorlesungen über Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft* (1818) to characterize those 'beautiful souls' that 'remain enclosed within themselves', fearing every concrete contact with the material external world lest their 'infinite self-consciousness' be forced 'to enter the sphere of limitedness'. Hegel associates this mode of subjectivity with Spinoza, whom Pater in turn uses as the explicit model for Sebastian's philosophy. Spinoza, Hegel suggests, 'died of consumption because [he] regarded pure objectivity only as something vanishing or consuming away [...] not as something actual'.⁴¹ What is most significant here is the connection between consumption and the refusal of materiality. In one respect Pater's text invokes the common nineteenth-century trope of consumption as *the* characteristic disease of modernity; Sebastian suffers from a condition that blights 'people grown somewhat over-delicate in their nature by the effects of modern luxury' (166). But Pater inverts the other prevalent cultural association—one much in evidence in other 'Imaginary Portraits' such as 'An English Poet' (1878) and 'Duke Carl of Rosenmold' (1887)—between consumption and aesthetic creativity.⁴² In Pater's densely material depiction of the Dutch Republic—full of painters, paintings, furniture, fabrics—Sebastian's consumption is the physical manifestation of his queer withdrawal from the sensuous pleasure of material objects. Instead, he holds himself apart in a realm of cold, pure, disembodied thought.

‘Sebastian van Storck’ has typically been read as a salutary warning of what might go wrong if idealist philosophy is not sufficiently grounded in the ethical commitments that arise from an acceptance of the embodied, material world that surrounds us.⁴³ In this view, Sebastian’s solipsistic withdrawal into ‘pure intellectual abstraction’ (160)—a hyper-rational world of geometrical precision—represents a refusal of the material world *per se*. A different reading emerges, though, with closer attention to the text’s presentation of the underlying motivations for Sebastian’s refusals and rejections. The materialism of the Dutch Republic that Sebastian rejects is inextricably entangled with heteronormative values of reproduction. The text presents a society in which the dominant modes of material plenitude exclude certain subjects—an exclusion enacted through tropes of breathlessness. To Sebastian, the ‘crowded and competing world of life [...] seem[s] wellnigh to suffocate’ him (143). Pater thus stages a distinctively queer ‘redemption of matter’—materialism redeemed from its entanglement with heteronormativity. Dominant materialisms, the text suggests, will always leave someone out.

The ‘vanishing or consuming away’ of the Spinozan Sebastian acts to resist the normative reproductive expectations that attach to Pater’s protagonist as the only son of a rich mercantile family. Such expectations arise both from his specific family dynamics and from the imperatives of wider Dutch society. As a ‘rich and distinguished youth’, he is continually sized up by ‘mothers of marriageable daughters’ (145), who wish to make a prudent and profitable match. His ‘calm, intellectual indifference’ (159), however, will ultimately see him spurn the romantic attention of the hapless Mademoiselle van Westrheene. He is subject to pressure from his father to ‘play his part’ in an ‘age [...] still fitted to evoke a generous ambition’, one in which ‘there was a tradition to be maintained’ (146). His mother is keenly aware of the ‘measure of cold in things for a woman of her age’ (158)—that is, the inevitable dwindling of her family tree where she herself is no longer able to bear children, and her only son refuses to grant her grandchildren. Pater’s Dutch Republic is similarly sustained by an aggressive mercantile ethos of productivity and accumulation: Sebastian’s story unfolds against the backdrop of ‘the nation’s hard-won prosperity’ (145), by ‘heroic industry that had triumphed over nature’ (154). The only form of ‘practical career’ (155) that Sebastian can countenance in this mercantile society represents a striking inversion of its capitalist values. He is drawn towards something in the spirit of

exploration that leads his compatriots to the Arctic in search of a North-West passage. However, his underlying motivation is not the discovery, for instance, of shorter and swifter trading routes to Asia but rather the 'charm in the thought of that still, drowsy, spellbound world of perpetual ice' (156). The economic imperatives of activity, growth, accumulation, and expansion are here replaced by a desire for frozen stasis—a queer rejection of the unfolding of the future.

As Sara Ahmed's work on 'queer phenomenology' has described, for those who cannot fit snugly into 'straight spaces'—such as the normative family home—the weighty material presence of the stuff of bourgeois domesticity might be experienced as leaving no space to breathe.⁴⁴ Sebastian's desire to escape to 'a world of perpetual ice' forms part of the text's broader interest in scrutinizing how heteronormative values of reproduction, replication, and accumulation are entangled with material objects and environments. The text contrasts Sebastian's obsession with the 'abstract or cold in art' with the 'busy well-being', 'thriving genius', and 'delicate homeliness' of bourgeois domestic space (147). Sebastian purposefully removes himself from a house 'crowded with the furniture and the pretty little toys of many generations' (150). He sets himself in opposition to those Dutch realist painters whose detailed depictions of domestic interiors represent 'the ideal [...] of the good-fellowship of family life'; 'the ideal of home', preferring instead paintings of wide-open skies that present 'things seen from a distance' (148–49). The material world of Dutch realist domesticity is imprinted with expectations of heteronormativity: patrilinear inheritance sustained through the passing on of furniture, traditional bourgeois family structures marked through the accumulation of domestic objects. The pressures of normativity are experienced by Sebastian through the crowded profusion of these objects, leaving no space for those who exist outside of what Judith Butler calls the 'heterosexual matrix'.⁴⁵ We might recall here the passage quoted above, in which the word 'crowded' evokes Sebastian's feeling of being 'suffocated' by the 'world of life'. It is no coincidence, then, that the sympathy of this young Storck is drawn only to 'the creatures of the air' (150): 'the caged bird on the wing at last' (149) is afforded a freedom to dissolve into the 'clear breadth of atmosphere' (148) that Sebastian desires for himself.⁴⁶

Indeed, Sebastian's 'preference in the matter of art for [...] prospects *à vol d'oiseau*' (149) is another extension of his queer rejection of the dominant materialism of the Dutch Republic: he refuses to be visually

represented in the period's distinctive art of portraiture. 'All of his singularities appeared to be summed up', Pater's narrator notes, 'in his refusal to take his place in the life-sized family group [...]—painted about this time' (158). Sebastian figuratively terminates the van Storck family tree. The artists of the Dutch Republic, against whom Sebastian sets himself, become emblematic in the text of normative patterns of replication and reproduction. That this artistic community is 'exemplary in matters of domestic relationship' manifests itself most clearly in Pater's family tableau of the Hondecosters: 'three of them together, son, grandson, and grandfather [...]—Giles, Gybrecht, and Melchior' (152). Sebastian, for whom there will seemingly be no such line of descent, places himself outside this heteronormative sequence of reproduction. In absenting himself from the 'life-sized family group', he not only signals his queer opposition to the pull of 'reproductive futurity', but also acts to forestall the circulation of material objects that reinforce heteronormative discourses of family and domesticity. This queer act of disappearance represents an external manifestation of Sebastian's breath-related illness, figuratively enacting his desire to dissolve into thin air.

It is fitting, then, that Sebastian's death at the conclusion of the text—seemingly from consumption—is also a decidedly queer moment that gestures towards non-normative reproduction: 'when the body of Sebastian was found, apparently not long after death, a child lay asleep, swaddled warmly in his heavy furs' (166). In this sudden and unexpected appearance of an infant, the narrative enacts a fantasy of masculine parthenogenesis—a childbirth from within Sebastian's oddly mammalian 'heavy furs'. As Sebastian breathes his last, the text cautiously allows for a queer reformulation of materialism that might accommodate those who feel otherwise 'suffocate[d]' by the 'crowded and competing world of life' (143).

Queer writers at the *fin de siècle*, then, use images of breath as a central part of their interest in materialism, from Classical sources to contemporary science. The embodied but insubstantial quality of breath enables a language of materialism that explores and negotiates experiences of social marginalization. Examining the significance of modes of respiration in sexological texts alerts us to the centrality of the material body to emergent conceptions of the homosexual subject at the *fin de siècle*. In Housman's poetry, tropes of breathlessness and suffocation articulate negative affects that attach to queer desire, such as fear and shame. For

Symonds, the connection between breathlessness and repressed homosexual desire is marked more directly in his personal experience of lung disease. In works by Pater, the mobility of breath expresses a wish for disappearance, withdrawal, and disembodiment. An inability to breathe freely in these texts signals a precarious feeling of not occupying space in a way that aligns with heteronormative imperatives. Yet for each of the writers, the movement of breath also becomes a tool for some form of affirmation of queer desire—either as a mode of material transmission of desire between men, or in its resistance to normative materialisms. The interest of these writers in the experience of the material body represents a shared preoccupation with envisioning what Pater calls ‘a really social air to breathe in’—even if their individual hopes for discovering such an atmosphere range from the avowedly pessimistic to the tentatively utopian.⁴⁷

NOTES

1. A. E. Housman's copy of *T. Lucreti Cari De Rerum Natura Libri Sex*, ed. by H. A. J. Munro (Cambridge: Deighton Bell, 1873) is now in the library of St. John's College, Oxford. See also *On the Nature of Things, Book III*, ed. by E. J. Kenney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 116. Hereafter *ONT III*.
2. *ONT III*, 45–46, ll. 231–57.
3. Tyndall was President of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. His influential ‘Belfast Address’ of 1874 (the presidential address to the Association for that year) offered a teleological intellectual history of materialism, ranging from Democritus to Darwin and culminating in an account of the emergence of human consciousness from matter. For discussion of the address see Benjamin Morgan, *The Outward Mind: Materialist Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 143–46.
4. See Martin Priestman, ‘Lucretius in Romantic and Victorian Britain’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, ed. by Stuart Gillespie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 289–305.
5. Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). My interest in the productive place of negativity in queer subject formation at the *fin de siècle* takes an alternative approach to recent work by Dustin Friedman, who situates this process in the intellectual lineage of Hegel's idealist aesthetics;

- see *Before Queer Theory: Victorian Aestheticism and the Self* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019).
6. Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
 7. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
 8. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1978).
 9. See Lucy Bland and Laura Doan, eds, *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998).
 10. Magnus Hirschfeld, *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Homosexualität*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Spohr, 1899), 7. Translations from German by Tom Smith.
 11. Hirschfeld, *Jahrbuch*, vol. 6 (1904), 260; *Jahrbuch*, vol. 10 (1908), 73.
 12. Karl Ulrichs, *Memnon: Die Geschlechtsnatur des mannliebenden Urnings* (Schleiz: Hübscher, 1868), 130, cited in Magnus Hirschfeld, *Die Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes* (Berlin: Marcus, 1914), 140.
 13. Ulrichs, *Memnon*, 130, cited in Hirschfeld, *Die Homosexualität*, 140.
 14. Sean Brady, 'Introduction', in *John Addington Symonds (1840–1893) and Homosexuality: A Critical Edition of Sources*, ed. by Sean Brady (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1–38.
 15. A notable exception is Peter Howarth, 'Housman's Dirty Postcards: Poetry, Modernism, and Masochism', *PMLA* 124/3 (2009), 764–81.
 16. For further details of Housman's personal book collection, see P. N. Naiditch, 'The Extant Portion of the Library of A. E. Housman: Part IV. Non-Classical Materials', *Housman Society Journal* 31 (2005), 154–80.
 17. On Housman and Lucretius, see Donald Mackenzie, 'Two Versions of Lucretius: Arnold and Housman', *Translation and Literature* 16/2 (2007), 160–77.
 18. All references to Housman's poetry are to *The Poems of A. E. Housman*, ed. by Archie Burnett (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).
 19. A. E. Housman to Grant Richards, December 20, 1920, in *The Letters of A. E. Housman*, vol. 1, ed. by Archie Burnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 460.
 20. Laurence Housman, 'A. E. Housman's "De Amicitia"', *Encounter* 29 (1967), 34.
 21. Carol Efrati, *The Road of Danger, Guilt, and Shame: The Lonely Way of A. E. Housman* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002).
 22. See Phillip Horky (above, §6) on *conspiratio* or συμπνοία as 'concord' such as might obtain between a husband and wife, which (as he explains) may be given a specifically sexual colouration, as in Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, 4.1215–16: 'semina cum Veneris stimulis excita per artus / obvia confligit conspirans mutuus ardor' (when the seeds stirred up through the

- frame by the goads of Venus have been thrust together by the passion of two breathing as one [Loeb translation]).
23. See Burnett, ed., 343; *ONT III*, 55 (l. 544).
 24. Symonds, *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds: A Critical Edition*, ed. by Amber K. Regis (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 532. Hereafter referenced in the text.
 25. Henry James to William James, February 28, 1877, in *The Correspondence of William James, Vol. 1: William and Henry, 1861–1884*, ed. by Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992), 280.
 26. See Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).
 27. Symonds to Gosse, April 4, 1890, in John G. Younger, 'Ten Unpublished Letters by John Addington Symonds at Duke University', *Victorian Newsletter* 95 (1999), 6.
 28. Symonds to Gosse, February 23, 1892, in *The Letters of John Addington Symonds*, vol. 3, ed. by Herbert M. Schueller and Robert L. Peters (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967–69), 553–56. For Donoghue's bronze, 'The Young Sophocles' (c. 1890), see a version in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston: <https://www.gardnermuseum.org/experience/collection/13481>.
 29. Symonds to Forbes Brown, March 6, 1890, in *Letters*, vol. 3, 559–60.
 30. Symonds, 'Lucretius,' in *Sketches and Studies in Italy and Greece* (London: Smith, Elder, 1879), 96. My italics.
 31. See H. G. Cocks, 'Religion and Spirituality', in *Palgrave Advances in the Modern History of Sexuality*, ed. by H. G. Cocks and Matt Houlbrook (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 173–74.
 32. Frederic W. H. Myers, *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, Green, 1903), 208.
 33. Myers, *Human Personality*, vol. 1, 485.
 34. See William A. Percy, *Pederasty and Pedagogy in Archaic Greece* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 73–89.
 35. K. O. Müller, *The History and Antiquities of the Doric Race*, vol. 2, trans. by Henry Tufnell and George Cornewall Lewis (London: Murray, 1830), 306–07.
 36. Symonds, *Studies in the Greek Poets* (London: Smith, Elder, 1873), 84. Walter Pater defends this tradition in similar terms in 'Lacedæmon', in *Plato and Platonism* (London: Macmillan, 1893), 233.
 37. Morgan, *Outward Mind*, 133–73.
 38. *Plato and Platonism*, 124–49 (at 146).
 39. Love, *Feeling Backwards*, 58.
 40. Pater, 'Sebastian van Storck', in *Imaginary Portraits*, ed. by Lene Østermark-Johansen (London: MHRA, 2014), 143–66. Hereafter referenced in the text.

41. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on Natural Right and Political Science: The First Philosophy of Right*, ed. and trans. by J. Michael Stewart and Peter C. Hodgson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 127–28.
42. For an overview, see Clark Lawlor and Akihito Suzuki, ‘The Disease of the Self: Representing Consumption, 1700–1830’, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 74/3 (2000), 458–94.
43. For example, Billie Andrew Inman, ‘“Sebastian van Storck”: Pater’s Exploration into Nihilism’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 30/4 (1976), 457–76.
44. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 65.
45. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1999), 45–48.
46. Pater’s choice of name also aligns his protagonist with an apposite tradition of St Sebastian as a figure of queer sexual martyrdom, for which see Richard A. Kaye, ‘“Determined Raptures”: St. Sebastian and the Victorian Discourse of Decadence’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27/1 (1999), 269–303.
47. Walter Pater, ‘The Age of Athletic Prizemen: A Chapter in Greek Art’, in *Greek Studies: A Series of Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1910), 276.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahmed, Sara. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bauer, Heike. 2009. *English Literary Sexology, Translations of Inversion, 1860–1930*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Efrati, Carol. 2002. *The Road of Danger, Guilt, and Shame: The Lonely Way of A. E. Housman*. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Halberstam, Judith. 2011. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Howarth, Peter. 2009. Housman’s Dirty Postcards: Poetry, Modernism, and Masochism. *PMLA* 124/33: 764–81.
- Lawlor, Clark and Akihito Suzuki. 2000. The Disease of the Self: Representing Consumption, 1700–1830. *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 74/3: 458–94.
- Love, Heather. 2009. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Morgan, Benjamin. 2017. *The Outward Mind: Materialist Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

