THE BODY, MUSIC, AND HEALING

Music is the sound of life – Carl Nielsen¹

As true stillness comes upon us, we hear, we hear, and we learn that our whole lives may have the character of finding that anthem which would be native to our own tongue, and which alone can be the true answer to the questioning, the calling, the demand for ultimate reckoning which devolves upon us – Henry Bugbee²

Nothing is more ironical than strengths that generate weaknesses. I think particularly of the ability of Western philosophy and science to objectify the world. To so sharply demarcate things and pin them down that they become objects. Ob-jecta – the Latin roots connote things thrown in front of us. So framed and constituted in experience, things transformed into objects “out there” are subjected to scientific observations and experimentations that tease out, or force out, some of their hidden features.

But this strength comes only with a price that is typically hidden. Acts of objectifying the world and turning things into objects become greatly effective within the sphere of scientific and technological control. So effective they become automatic. The result? We tend to lose touch with things in the full amplitude and impact of their immediate sensuous presence; that is, things as they appear to us before they are objectified for the purposes of science, technological control, or for any short ranged gain.

But within things' immediate sensuous presence our species has grown up and taken shape over millions of years of pre-human and human evolution. Indeed, our own immediately lived personal selves tend to be occluded! What we gain in the right hand, we tend to lose from the left.

Probably most who have introduced undergraduate students to philosophy have encountered the first obstacle. Most students come in as “naive realists.” “How do we know the world? Well, there are objects out there that stimulate our senses. We open our eyes and see them, and can choose to examine them closely.” The students are assuming – without knowing they are assuming – that a prior question has been asked and answered: What makes objectification possible? How have we come to regard things as objects “out there” to be inspected and controlled, rather than as presences that are, perhaps, spirits that control us?

And one's own body, naively-realistically understood? It is another object, just one that is always with us somehow. The price paid for this detachment from one's body is great. We lose touch with ourselves.

immediately involved in the world. Capitally, we lose touch with the fundamental roles that both art-making and religion-making play in constituting who we are.

On one essential level of analysis, what I immediately sense visually (I don't say perceive) are electro-chemical events in my brain. And what I immediately sense auditorially are also electro-chemical events in my brain. Each of us must learn to construct a world-experienced – a world of things that sound and show themselves – things that can later be treated as objects. A necessary condition for this being possible at all, is that we are human bodies that become mimetically engulfed in other human bodies that have already learned to construct a shared world-experienced.

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My topic is the role of sound and music in healing. Any remnant of naive realism fatally poisons what we can learn about this. Since sight is the distancing and detaching sense, par excellence, and since we today tend automatically to objectify the world and to detach ourselves, it is all too easy to privilege the visual and to eclipse, dampen down, or occlude the auditory. This of course would defeat my project.

We look around and find ourselves in a family of snares. The quicksilver movement of detachment is endemic, affecting all that we think before we think that it does. For example: Why do we facilely assume that each of our lives begins with our birth, begins with detachment and separation from the mother? This is a fatal patriarchal prejudice.

Our eyes were closed in the womb, but after a certain point we could hear. The muffled commotions and sounds of the day alternated rhythmically with the relative quietness of the night. But always foggy sounds, basal rhythms and novelties coming from outside the mother's body interweaving silkenly with basal rhythms and sounds from inside her. And both these with sounds from within the unborn infant's own body, the beating of its own heart and the gurglings of its fluids. And all in the darkness! This was – and still is, I think – the primal generative and regenerative matrix for each of us. For instance, Dylan Thomas cites “the close and holy darkness” in his “A Child's Christmas in Wales.”

Here is the first clue to why music can heal. The past is not simply left behind. One moment in our lives is not simply severed from those that precede it – or that follow it. The past has left a living, vibrant residuum in our nervous and glandular systems. Artfully formed sounds can excite the residuum's regenerative powers. As R. W. Emerson (1982, p. 85) knew, the whole universe pours back regeneratively through each node of itself – as