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BODY PHENOMENOLOGY, SOMAESTHETICS AND NIETZSCHEAN THEMES IN MEDIEVAL ART¹

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Introduction

Richard Shusterman suggested that Maurice Merleau-Ponty neglected “‘lived somaesthetic reflection,’ that is, concrete but representational and reflective body consciousness.”² While unsure about this assessment of Merleau-Ponty, lived somaesthetic reflection, or what the late Sam Mallin called “body phenomenology”³—understood as a meditation on the body reflecting on both itself and the world—is my starting point. Another is John Dewey’s bodily theory of perception, augmented somewhat by Merleau-Ponty.

With these starting points, I spent roughly 20 hours with *St. Benedict Restores Life to a Young Monk* (c. 1360), a work of tempera and gold leaf on panel, by Giovanni Del Biondo, active in Italy from 1356 to 1398, on display in the Art Gallery of Ontario’s permanent collection.⁴ Following Dewey’s suggestion that “[t]he eye ... is only the channel *through* which a total response takes place,”⁵ meaning that motor, emotional, intellectual and

non-visual perceptual capacities become active when we encounter paintings, I describe how the work engaged a range of bodily modalities; and how reflecting on these, in turn, supplied phenomenal articulations of life negating, preserving and enhancing forces important in the culture that produced it, and famously discussed by Friedrich Nietzsche. By virtue of the approach adopted, I also demonstrate Dewey’s belief that intimate engagement with art entails a total coordination of one’s capacities around the artwork, while simultaneously reinforcing Merleau-Ponty’s ideas about perception and how we can find phenomenal articulations of concepts such as the Nietzschean ones just mentioned. While focusing on Del Biondo’s painting, my main purpose is to engage in body phenomenology practices, and to show, in the words of Shusterman, how “[w]e might sharpen our appreciation of art through more attention to our somaesthetic feelings involved in perceiving art”⁶ and indeed the world.

The Body and Intermodal Perception

“Cézanne,” wrote Merleau-Ponty, “declared that a picture contains within itself even the smell of a landscape.” A lesson Merleau-Ponty drew is that “a phenomenon” mobilizing only one sense “is a mere phantom.”⁷ Thus seeing a candle flame might mean seeing something hot, with a waxy smell and intimate emotional resonance. By contrast, to register an isolated yellow flicker disconnected from anything else is not to perceive, but to undergo something like the haloing effects and other phantom sensations that migraine sufferers sometimes endure. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey reiterated this when he urged that total interactions take place through the eye, ear and other organs. So while “[w]e see a painting *through* the eyes,” it is mistaken to

¹ I would like to thank Alexander Kremer and Diego Nigro for their helpful suggestions.

² Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 63.

³ Mallin identified what he came to call “body phenomenology” with his notion of the four perceptual regions—namely, sensory perception, cognition, motility and emotion, including social and visceral feelings—which are modes of being-in-the-world and expressions of our global existence. See Samuel B. Mallin, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 15-6.

⁴ To view painting, visit

<http://artgalleryofontario.tumblr.com/post/7155105468/st-benedict-restores-life-to-a-young-monk-late>.

⁵ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934), 122.

⁶ Richard Shusterman, “Wittgenstein and Bodily Feelings: Explanation and Melioration in Philosophy of Mind, Art, and Politics,” in *The Grammar of Politics: Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy*, ed. Cressida Heyes (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 212.

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1962), 318

suppose that visual “qualities ... are central if not exclusive.”⁸

That perception entails a total coordination means that it occurs through modes other than but also including traditional categories of sense, for motor, intellectual and emotional capacities are also involved.⁹ If we consider, for instance, what it means to taste something, we see more than taste buds at play. Smell is involved, as is texture, temperature and therefore tactile senses. But consider also the actions of mouth and tongue when sucking candies, chomping pears or licking ice cream. Notice how we cradle and swirl a snifter of brandy, and how these patterns of activity permeate the overall experience. Picture the undulation of lungs as we blow cooling breath on coffee. Ponder the sights and sounds of food. Food can set an emotional tone and supply a socially integrative medium. Dewey posited that without “interaction between the total organism and objects”—an interaction in which doings and undergoings synchronize around objects and thereby become members of a “single act”—“[objects] are not perceived.”¹⁰ And, indeed, we experience food through just such a joint mobilization of capacities. Here hands, eyes, tongue and other organs are “instruments through which the entire live creature, moved and active throughout, operates.”¹¹

Clearly a rich array of capacities enters taste experience. However, their power to sense does not simply point outward. One capacity works on another, changing its perspective on things, as when an empty stomach makes taste buds delight in plain fair. This further reinforces the notion that in addition to seeing a painting, we may to some extent hear, taste (without licking) or smell it. A second implication is that objects select and pattern our capacities and invite certain perspectives. Hot oatmeal invites blowing, but not dry breakfast cereal. While the

tongue is capable of countless movements, it settles into a very particular pattern when it meets an ice cream cone. The body does not sweep over a passive world, but over one that asserts itself.

Initial Experience of Painting

I initially found the painting’s pallor sickly. The earth tones hint at melanoma or jaundice. The building to the right is the bruised purple of over-prodded blemishes or the puffy fatigue that shadows eyes. The work appears as if painted on chalk-fine sand that might be swept away by wind.

The piece is old. Faint splotches—perhaps watermarks—smudge its surface; its gild is slightly flecked; its colors dulled. How much of this is age, it is difficult to say, but the aged appearance lends to the overall effect. The painting looks worn, and I feel worn looking at it. The land is barren, or nearly so. One monk’s head twists at an angle evoking a hanging. Another lies crushed under brickwork. Benedict clutches his side, marked by the stab-wound of Jesus. The body language of these monks reflects obsequiousness: mouths closed, chests drawn inward, shoulders slumped, three kneeling. The monks cast no shadow; their robes hide their feet, excepting the corpse. Staring at the hems of the standing men, I see no evidence that they are actually on the ground, and the men, especially Benedict, appear to hover like apparitions. They are emotionally detached considering that Benedict has just restored life to the young monk. I wonder why he bothered since there is little to hold one to the barren world of this painting. Indeed, the monks already appear physically detached from the earth, ghost-like, floating up, departing. This work is Christian.

⁸ Dewey, 122.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 22, 53.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 54; also see 58-59.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

Counter Reaction

With more time, I arrived at a different reaction to the work. I came to notice, for example, how Benedict's inlaid halo gleams, while the ruined building and collapsed brickwork radiate fleshy salmon pink; and how the lips of the monks shine the same salmon hue, and, to a lesser extent, their cheeks. Once noticed, Benedict's lips stand out as a focal point, which seems appropriate since "Benedict" is Latin for "good speech" or "good word." When my gaze falls on his lips, his face softens, becoming human.

The work is still old—nothing can change that—but its age speaks of strength and substantiality. Indeed, at one point I am genuinely astonished that some of these monks have been planted on their knees for over 600 years. "How could anyone have such endurance?" I ask myself before remembering I am looking at a painting. The monks are alive to me, and I feel a hint of exhilaration and swirling in my belly. The figures are not the emaciated, mutilated horrors common to Christian art. Yes, they seem somber, maybe sad and tired, but also calm, peaceful and so very real. My eyes bob along their faces set at various heights. In some places they waver, then eddy counter-clockwise, held circling around clustered points of interest. My body eases into a rocking, swaying, almost figure-eight of pivoting from the hips, which seems to both follow out of and facilitate the counter-clockwise lilt of my head. The relaxed but constant rocking is in rhythm with the folds of earth that roll like easy ocean swells and resemble patterns of diffused sunlight speckling river beds or shallow ocean floors. A shimmering, vibrating quality ripples at a higher frequency through the men's robes. Rhythms of life animate the composition. It is dominated by earth with only a tiny and easily missed triangle of gold leaf sky. This work is Christian?

Preconceptions and the Painting's Response

To Del Biondo's painting, I carried notions of "life" and "health" largely acquired from Nietzsche. I also carried Nietzsche's feeling that Christianity has "*ressentiment* against life at the bottom of its heart."¹² Not surprisingly, therefore, I first saw the painting as an expression of frailty and impotence. However, as with foods and other things, which invite and resist certain responses, the painting did not yield passively to my perspective, allowing me to superimpose whatever I like. As terrain presses its contours against the press of my body, the painting pressed the weak points in the theoretical perspectives I pressed on it, leading to the second reaction.

At the same time, the two preliminary sketches of the painting, insofar as they are descriptions, are not competing hypotheses. Accepting one does not entail rejecting the other. That the monk is buried under the bricks does not refute the salmon pink hue of the ruined building. There is, however, something theoretical in how qualities are selected and ordered along conceptual lines of health and unhealth, vibrancy and weakness, endurance and fragility. But while the phenomena might have been organized otherwise, the tension itself is a phenomenal quality of the painting. That is to assert: The organization—which results partly from my preconceptions about Christianity—does not manufacture tension but helps to make it evident in a way analogous to how the hand, by virtue of having its own structural organization, reveals aspects of bottles and other things it handles. The first sketch terminates unequivocally: "This work is Christian." The second with ambivalence: "This work is Christian?" The initial reaction is a product of a preconception carried into the encounter: Christianity is hostile to life. But the painting converts the idea to a question.

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 562.

Life from Destruction

An easily overlooked feature is the mound of destruction in the painting's top left corner. The fleshy pink bricks are more organic than jagged, like fat globules or sacks of grain. The pile is shaped like a breast, having even a nipple-like protrusion on top. There is a common thread in these impressions. Breast milk nourishes, and in the Bible symbolizes peace and abundance;¹³ the breast itself is associated with fertility and procreation. Fish and grain are staples, both in the context of the Bible and the world; as with milk, grain can symbolize abundance. Fat is a nutritional reservoir—again a sign of abundance, and also of fertility, as in some ancient Venuses. In the Bible oil is an important part of the diet; it is also used to treat wounds, in bathing, ritualistic anointings, the making of perfumes and as lamp fuel.¹⁴

The destruction fits peripherally into the painting's visual and temporal (narrative) scheme. It is distanced and away from areas of major interest, with dead monk smaller and less detailed. The scene is also distanced in a temporal sense. In the foreground the monk is restored to life, so relative to this, the death and destruction are past events. However, the destruction is not of merely peripheral importance. By the accounts of St. Gregory the Great, the Devil caused the building to collapse, and we see him presiding over the destruction, silhouetted against the gold patch of sky, indeed, the only sky present, suggesting again that the painting is not merely an otherworldly expression. Benedict's antagonist and the event that brings the story to life are therefore in this painting. Without this fleshy mound of destruction, with its undertones of fertility and nourishment, there would be no restoration; hence no miracle and story.

Christianity and Preservation

The Bible views "flesh" with some suspicion, and the body—particularly sexuality—is often seen as unclean. This extends even to birth: Women are unclean seven days after bearing a son and fourteen for a daughter.¹⁵ In more extreme cases, flesh is subjected to real and symbolic violence. Jesus hangs broken upon the cross. Self-flagellation, self-denial and severe asceticism, while not necessarily promoted, enjoy special significance in the art and literature of the religion. Monks are celebrated for depriving themselves of adequate nourishment, bedding, sometimes clothing, basic hygiene and shelter.

All this of course seems antithetical to life, yet when life is falling to pieces, the rigid structure demanded by asceticism may be just the thing to hold it together, to guide it from self-destructive courses. Nietzsche entertained Christianity in this light:

You will guess what ... the curative instinct of life has at least *attempted* through the ascetic priest, and why it required for a time the tyranny of such paradoxical and paralogical concepts as "guilt," "sin," "sinfulness," "depravity," "damnation": to render the sick to a certain degree *harmless*... to *exploit* the bad instincts of all suffers for the purpose of self-discipline, self-surveillance, and self over-coming.¹⁶

Considering the rise of Christianity, especially in the Middle Ages, and how during this time European life was under siege and much of its cultural heritage lost, we can see how the preserving force of Christianity was important to life, indeed, in very concrete senses. After all, it is through Christian scholars and scribes that many great works are preserved to this day. Nietzsche wrote that "[m]an has often had enough; there are actual epidemics of having had enough (as around 1348, at the

¹³ John McKenzie, *The Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan), 576.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 625.

¹⁵ Leviticus, 12: 2-5

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1967), 564.

time of the dance of death).¹⁷ Christianity arguably helped people survive such trials. Yet Nietzsche compared endless preservation, which Christianity stresses with its emphasis on eternity, to embalment and mummification,¹⁸ and Martin Heidegger, summarizing Nietzsche, wrote that “life that restricts itself to mere preservation is already life in decline.”¹⁹ In what remains, I will endeavor to articulate how the painting resolves these competing life affirming and negating themes.

Dry and Wet

Sandy earth predominates the painting. Its tones enter even the flesh of the monks, which is almost the same hue as the earth itself. The vegetation is sparse—lonely scattered scraps, with a slightly denser cluster near the top, and the leaves on these plants are the narrow, fibrous, pale sage-green of arid climates.

“Barren parched earth” is a phrase that keeps tumbling to mind, yet I sense something wrong in this. After all, the painting is also soft, slightly murky. The ripples and folds of the earth appear through variations of color and tone, not hard line. The plants and trees, likewise, look more like brush strokes than outlines filled with paint. Line contributes to certain forms, to be sure, and to rendering delicate details. The hems and folds of the robes are accentuated by line, as are the hands and ears of the monks, building edges, certain facial details and so on. Yet the lines that contribute to these forms and details are soft and diffused, as if painted on a wet surface.

Though these impressions are primarily visual, they are reinforced by other modalities, for there was a moment when I experienced a slight whiff of ocean. The tongue corroborated this with a salty aftertaste of seawater. These were not full-blown sensations, but rather like an echo or afterimage. Yet these impressions are important. They draw attention to repeating patterns within the painting, and they help reconcile antagonisms. With the fish-like bricks and water splotches, the rolling and eddying composition, the ripples of earth resembling light on riverbeds, the blurred lines and liquid shimmerings of the robes and other qualities, the painting positively flows with water. The earth itself cascades like falling water. The terrain recalls sculpted sands on ocean floors. The light is soft and diffused as if carried through water—the men, plants and buildings cast no shadows. The monks, it was said earlier, float like apparitions, but why not like men in water? Indeed, the plants and robes express the sway of gentle ocean currents, as does the rhythmic bob of my body when engaging the painting.

This opens a path of mediation between the painting’s thirsty, barren tones and its wet and fleshy alter ego. Thirst in wetness: As there is sand in the painting and thirst in deserts, there is sand on beaches and thirst in the sea. Drinking the ocean’s wetness leaves us parched. From fertility to sterility: Irrigating land promotes seed germination and abundant harvests. Yet irrigation also produces “salt lands”—a term often synonymous with “desert” in the Bible—and a means by which ancient Mesopotamian agriculture was destroyed.²⁰ The ocean—like life itself—can at one moment be calm, peaceful, nurturing and restorative, while at another powerfully destructive, at least from a human perspective. Saltwater reflects how sterility and abundance, thirst and wetness, destruction and procreation are sides of one reality.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 557.

¹⁸ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 479-480.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *The Word of Nietzsche*, in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 73.

²⁰ Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2004), 77-78.

Final Remarks and Reevaluation

Recall, in the preliminary passages, that sense of awe at the monks kneeling for over 600 years. This reaction implies strength and endurance, and accordingly seems at odds with both Nietzsche and basic facts at hand. Monastic asceticism, at least in its more severe forms, hardly benefits health. Self-improvement is what famously ruined St. Francis of Assisi. Asceticism speaks of weakness, decline and hostility to life—or so I had supposed. The painting forced a re-examination of my own assumptions, including my interpretations of Nietzsche.

Nietzsche does consider asceticism in a negative light—a “grimace of overrefinement,” “a grotesque perversion”;²¹ extreme measures such as the mortification of the flesh are a radical cure taken by those too weak to master their impulses.²² At the same time, Nietzsche believes that one of the highest degrees of power consists in self-mastery. For such reasons, he regards the ascetic as a powerful, strong kind of individual.²³ Yes, the ascetic suppresses and does injury to the body, and the ascetic ideal, according to Nietzsche, is soiled sick with degenerating life. Yet the ideal also “springs from the protective instinct of a degenerating life which tries by all means to sustain itself and to fight for existence.”²⁴ By shepherding order into life that has fallen into disarray, “this ascetic priest, this apparent enemy of life, this *denier*—precisely he is among the greatest *conserving* and yes-creating forces of life.”²⁵

Birth and destruction and life’s overcomings are in the painting. They are in a certain sense even essential, at least to the story inspiring the painting. Yet they are not the main focus. The fleshy mound of destruction, with all its procreative coloring, is pushed to the background. The foreground is a relatively barren world occupied only by men—men who have effectively rendered themselves reproductively sterile by renouncing that part of their being. A miraculous restoration is also a subject of the work, so preservation, the restorative movement that allows life to continue, keeps emerging as an issue. The painting is a plurality, but it remains emphatically a Christian work reflecting on an issue central to the religion—namely, preservation.

²¹ Walter Kauffman, citing from Nietzsche’s *Dawn*, (§113), *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974) 195, 197.

²² *Ibid.*, 245.

²³ *Ibid.*, 252.

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1967), 556.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 556-557.