

BODIES THAT SING:

SOMAESTHETICS IN THE AMERICAN POETIC TRADITION

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ABSTRACT: *This essay investigates the elements, motifs, and characteristics that the central American poetic tradition, from the Romantics to Modernism, shares with Richard Shusterman's concepts of somaesthetics. The key similarity, which underlies both parallels and differences between poetry and Shusterman's pragmatism, is the pursuit within the poetic text of the precarious and volatile channel of communication between the somatic and the linguistic. Poetry is seen as a condensation of the linguistic, which serves to bring the bodily dimension fully to its own reformative and meliorative consciousness. This operation will, in turn, influence the form and shape of the poetry. The essay illustrates three different modes of this reciprocity, found in three different poets: Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Wallace Stevens. Each poetics is found to be a different realization of the interdependence between the inescapable somatic element and the poetic form. In each case, however, the poetic somatic experience testifies to an aesthetic phenomenon that pragmatism shares with other strains of American intellectual tradition: the exhilarative response of the somatic and linguistic organism to its material surroundings.*

The business of philosophy is one among other human businesses. The lasting contribution of pragmatism is the tearing down of the illusion that philosophy could be a special kind of activity, freed from human needs and desires. James and Dewey broke new ground when they made clear how the interaction of the human organism with its environment falls in rhythms which defy any rigid division between the intellectual and the emotional, or the mental and the bodily. Humans do not merely react to the world, but respond with enthused intensity to its tangential presence. Pragmatism investigates how this charged response features in the life and death of ideas. In this sense, however, pragmatism participates in the larger life of American thought, from the evolutions of Puritanism in Edwards, to Emerson and the Transcendentalists, onwards to Peirce, James, and Dewey.¹ In this tradition thought takes delightful shapes,

¹ See Joan Richardson, *A Natural History of Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). For Richardson pragmatism is a late development of the

moving the whole human persona in the context of the material world.

Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics is a project that continues this larger, synthetic tradition of American intellectual history. Somaesthetics focuses on and enhances one aspect of the human interaction with the world without which the exhilaration and energy of exchange thematized by the Transcendentalists and classical pragmatists would not be possible. All interaction, including intellectual exercise, must pass through the medium of the human body. Somaesthetics is thus a corrective project which revives what most philosophies neglected. In this approach the human bodily sphere is not merely a "medium," though, in the sense of an intermediary tool, but a vital member and participant in subjectivity and personhood.²

Somatic awareness can and should be examined and cared for—such is the major claim of Shusterman's writings, from *Pragmatist Aesthetics* to the most recent *Thinking Through the Body*. For the most part, the somatic element is active on a level that, in its normal functioning, is not openly accessible to interpretive linguistic scrutiny. Shusterman calls it the level "beneath

strategies of interpreting the environment for the purposes of survival. The inaugural move in this lineage belongs to the Puritans. Their religious zeal is then transformed by Edwards, and then Emerson, into a mode of interpretation that retains the Puritans' strong volitional involvement, engaging the entire mind-body, while gradually abandoning their strict religious metaphysics. From here, the road is paved for William James, Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens.

² One of Shusterman's main goals is to increase our awareness of the ambiguity of the body as both subject and object, and subsequently to redress the heavy imbalance of relegating the bodily primarily to the status of tool or object. The subjecthood and objecthood statuses of the body are only derivations of a deeper background, where the body is to be "recognized as our most primordial tool of tools, our most basic medium for interacting with our various environments, a necessity for all our perception, action, and even thought." See Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4.

interpretation.”³ This level is vital for the work of interpretation, when circumstances call for it. It is this area of internalized habits that nourishes linguistic interpretation and secures the freshness necessary for our sense of the “ordinary.” The “ordinary,” as the major ingredient of the “real,” is never just obvious: it is a present state of our hermeneutic understanding which, however, progresses in a reciprocal rhythm with pre-reflective modalities of action. Stored and detectable in our somatic dimension, they are not fully tantamount to the understanding created by language, but remain in an oscillating contact with it. This oscillation is focal for somaesthetics but not easy to pinpoint: “Certainly there seem to be forms of bodily awareness or understanding that are not linguistic in nature and that defy adequate linguistic characterization, though they can be somehow referred to through language.”⁴

Not to be fully exhaustible by language does not mean neutral freedom from cultural underwriting. The somaesthetic activity will probe into culturally instilled, not fully conscious, but not incorrigible, elements of our personhood, for the sake of their renovation. This is Shusterman’s version of the meliorism and hope-oriented philosophy common to James, Dewey, and Rorty. However, besides this melioristic project of attending to, and correcting, the habits of comportment toward reality, somaesthetics is also continuing the larger cultural theme I outlined at the beginning. It is at the somatic level where inquiry, as a way of coming in touch with reality, becomes exhilarative: “There is . . . the beautiful experience of one’s own body from within—the endorphin-enhanced glow of high-level cardiovascular functioning, the slow savoring awareness of improved deeper breathing.”⁵ Contact with the external has its proper beginning in a correctly tuned

contact with one’s own body, which will also blur any easy external/internal divide.

With its appreciation of the pleasurable aspect of the human condition of embodiment as the basis of all aesthetic experience, somaesthetics touches the theme of the positive excitement detected by the pragmatists as a deeply ingrained aspect of human inquiry. As his predecessors in this kind of enlightened broadening of the spectrum of our connectedness with the world, Shusterman cites (besides the obvious references to Dewey and James) Montaigne and Jean-Marie Guyau.⁶ However, there is one other field of aesthetic activity that should be listed as sharing a number of crucial concerns with pragmatism in general, and somaesthetics in particular. This field is poetry. Vitally present in the same tradition that gave rise to pragmatism, and very close to somaesthetics in its caring attention to the indeterminate oscillation between the bodily and the linguistic, American poetry, since the Romantics onwards, has constituted an important aesthetic predecessor and an interesting present day parallel context in which to place Shusterman’s project. In this paper I will indicate a number of possible ways in which to pursue, examine, and use the similarities (without the exclusion of differences), between American poetry and the somaesthetic agenda. In doing that, I also hope to throw light on the very precarious spot occupied by somaesthetics between the somatic dimension and its linguistic counterpart. It is this blurry borderland between the linguistic and the somatic that American poetry has also occupied. For the sake of specificity, I will narrow down the discussion to three poets who should be seen as related by their participation in the mainstream tradition, from American Romanticism to the present moment.

My departure point is with Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. Both of these poets represent the major move

³ See Richard Shusterman, “Beneath Interpretation,” in *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 115–35.

⁴ Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 127.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁶ *Ibid.*

that American Transcendentalism made in relation to the forms of religiousness it inherited: it abandoned the metaphysics of the otherworldly story told by religion, while retaining the element of strong emotional attachment to the process of reading the material surroundings. The languages of adjustment, as languages of inquiry, excite the whole human persona.⁷ There are intense exchanges between the corporeal and the linguistic, and Whitman and Dickinson were acutely aware of them. Poetry focuses and enhances the complex reciprocity of the word and the soma.

Whitman had an instinctual understanding that democracy, which he saw clearly before Dewey as a form of life, not just a numerical form of government, will require a new relation to the condition of embodiment. This awareness is an important part of all his writings.⁸ The vision of a new political form of life is inseparable from the vision of the participation of the bodily in both the level of personal development and communal consciousness. On the personal level, Whitman's self-reliant pursuit of a novel form of the poem—a life-long free verse chant—starts with the lyrical subject appraising the empirical bodily form, the form that puts the subject in touch with the world. Whitman frequently sounds like Shusterman's predecessor:

The atmosphere is not a perfume, . . .
.....
I am mad for it to be in contact with me.

The smoke of my own breath,
Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, . . .

⁷ See note 1.

⁸ Whitman's focus on the bodily informs his prose, as well as his poetry. In *Democratic Vistas*, he envisions a religion of democracy that will require new conception of beauty, bodily form, and health. Literature is to be the tool of bringing all these elements together: "A strong mastership of the general ... by the superior self, is to be aided ... by the literatus, in his works, shaping, for individual or aggregate democracy, a great passionate body." Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 989.

My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs.⁹

It is difficult to absorb Shustermanian praise of the inner somatic flows cited earlier without hearing the echo of Whitman, whose poetic project is fully coincident with the program of somaesthetics. A new poetic form, a democratic political program, an aesthetic proposal, and a somatic awareness—all of these are aspects of the same action in this poetry. Whitman understood that the "poetry" of his time simply did not know the bodily dimension, and he took it on himself to address this absence through an aesthetic gesture that was radical and prophetic. In what might well be the style of a pop artist of today who uses ready-mades or found materials, Whitman decides to include the body into the poem through wholesale lists—his famous "catalogues." In them, the body is acknowledged in its versatility and complexity. One such fragment is found in "I Sing the Body Electric," perhaps Whitman's most well-known hymn to the bodily. In section eight of the poem, Whitman reasserts the unity of aesthetics and biology, appraising the glowing energy of both male and female biospheres. This is soon to be followed, in the next section, by an extended catalog of body parts.¹⁰ The catalog is intentionally radically long and exhaustive, a statement and demonstration of an artist who is fully confident in the power of a strategy that is not to be seen in any of his contemporaries. Detailed enumeration of minute body parts, carried through an ample stretch of long-lined free verse, is a cultural and aesthetic manifesto.

But it is more than that too. Through this radical opening of the poem onto the bodily reality, Whitman also touches on one of the themes that are important to somaesthetic awareness: the relation of the bodily and

⁹ Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, 189.

¹⁰ Walt Whitman, "I Sing the Body Electric," in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, 257–58.

the linguistic. His bare gesture of including a long anatomical list almost without comment is an expression of his faith that the two dimensions have a lot to offer one another. Here, the absorption of the anatomical names by a formal gesture into the “body” of the poem is significant in itself: a real biological body, although first seen through lexical fragmentation, is brought into a unifying focus by the form of the poem. The poetic form performs an operation on the body: it acknowledges it in its complexity and lifts it into a whole by making it a material of a poem as an implied unity. The result is a heightened awareness of a synthetic, integrative and holistic aesthetic impact of the human bodily form, an impact that exceeds all fragmentary definition. The body itself is a poem—a complex aesthetic reality transcending the mere sum of its parts:

But the expression of a well-made man appears
not only on his face,
It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in
the joints of his lips and wrists,
It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the flex
of his waist and knees, . . .
.
To see him pass conveys as much as the best
poem, perhaps more.¹¹

In an amazing fit of visionary imagination, Whitman surmises a much larger, so far untapped somatic-aesthetic—clearly proto-somaesthetic—potential of human corporeality. But to see the body in this way in the text of the poem will necessarily change the poem itself. It is the energy and self-assuredness of the acknowledged and liberated corporeal form that stands behind the proliferation of Whitman’s free verse. It feeds the form, liberates it from convention, lends it its own aesthetic conviction. Together with the body, Whitman’s verse is truly free in its expansive breathing. Additionally, this quality of the verse frees the lexical side from the need of standard poeticizing. Just as normal elements of the body do, so the lexicography of the everyday is now receiving sanction as poetic material.

¹¹ Ibid., 251.

In Whitman, the word enters the body, not in order to invade it, but to devise a language in which this dimension can be comprehended. Through this kind of reciprocity, Whitman built his own poetic persona, thus exerting a palpable influence on his empirical—not just textual—life. His verses project an embodied persona that sets an instructive reference point for obtaining future somatic shapes, both personal and national. Numerous studies show that Whitman’s somatic verse is a mixture of an enhanced report of his own real physique and a project for its improvement. Although Whitman exalted in the advantages of good health, his own health collapsed, especially after the strenuous experience of serving as a nurse in Washington, D.C., military hospitals during the Civil War. Harold Aspiz has gathered biographical evidence suggesting that Whitman’s real physical condition, although not radically different from the projected persona of an outdoors-loving champion of impeccable health, makes this persona a poetic project more than a given reality.¹² On the other hand, though, there is also convincing evidence suggesting that it was precisely the poetic projection that really did have a transformative and sustaining effect on Whitman’s bodily presence among the wounded soldiers, allowing both himself and the soldiers to find encouragement through a somatic boost in strenuous existential passages. The soldiers did derive physically sustaining comfort from Whitman’s appearances, while Whitman’s own empirical persona continued to be able to recover from health failures even in older age.¹³ In other words, rather than being merely an exaggeration or idealization

¹² Aspiz states: “The mythic Whitman persona sometimes appears to be a plausible extension of Whitman’s flesh-and-blood self, sometimes a barely recognizable shadow of physical reality, and sometimes the product of pure invention.” Harold Aspiz, *Walt Whitman and the Body Beautiful* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 3.

¹³ Convincing testimony suggests that, in his self-sacrificial devotion to wounded soldiers in Civil War hospitals, Whitman did manage to get across a healing bodily presence, a “‘new and mysterious’ bodily quality which was indescribable.” Also, it seems that Whitman did emanate a healing and benevolent physical presence even in old age and times of illness. Aspiz, *Walt Whitman*, 9–13.

of an otherwise fallible physique, Whitman's poetry is a charged program of somatic awareness resulting in increased powers of self-renewal and self-sustenance. His poetry is thus representative of various related levels and forms of somaesthetic practice. It builds a language of somatic mindfulness, which helps to bring the existing bodily form into view and consciousness, both personal and cultural. This gesture leads to projecting future-oriented somatic forms which begin to have widespread cultural reverberations.¹⁴ In a sense, Whitman's poetic practice anticipates a fascinating exchange between the pre-reflective soma and its linguistic resonance that is to become one of the crucial themes in Shusterman's somaesthetics.

A similar reciprocity between poetic-linguistic and somatic forms of understanding is active in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Whitman's poetry, as we have seen, relates language to the somatic dimension in two important ways: it reaches down to the somatic and synthesizes it into a holistic aesthetic force, thereby allowing it to shape the poetic verse. In so doing it also projects corrective future somatic patterns. Dickinson's poetry displays the former mode by bringing the somatic and the poetic into fruitful mutual tension. In her case, however, the somatic is revealed as a site of strain, suggestive of a larger conflict in the culture. While Whitman projects pleasurable somatic experience for the sake of cultural emancipation, Dickinson, a single woman amidst a still strict Protestant culture, builds a poetic utterance whose uniqueness is in its subversive

usage of existing linguistic materials, resistant to dominant cultural patterns.¹⁵

The opposed themes include both the Puritan dogma and the Romantic ideology. Where the standard religious message of the day spoke of the promise of immortality, Dickinson subjects the idea of eternal existence to a stringent scrutiny. One of Dickinson's primary suspicions concerns the religious dogma of the bodily form of resurrection. In Dickinson's poems, the disembodied, otherworldly existence, either before or after the Day of Judgment, appears as a fantastic, highly unreal and, in short, largely concocted story. In one poem, the souls who are "the members of the resurrection" are seen as immobile, infantile patients of dubious timelessness. Either bodiless, or with their bodies changed into indolent pods, lying under "Rafter of Satin—and Roof of Stone," they are oblivious to the passage of human time ("Untouched by Morning— / And untouched by Noon"), and they float with cosmic revolutions, sound asleep and "meek."¹⁶ The reduced somatic dimension results in a kind of half-real coma, undermining the religious mythology of her own culture.

Much as the body is a well-acknowledged reality in Dickinson, it is also a site and detection instrument of conflict. Unlike other Romantics, the poet of Amherst was not so eager to accept the belief in continuous organic unities of the self and nature. While the Romantic aesthetics is one of organic unity with larger wholes, Dickinson reads an "internal difference," which frequently sets her apart from both nature and herself. One of the best examples of the internal division is the

¹⁴ One great example of these long-range somatic-cultural effects of Whitman's verse is his influence on the dancer Isadora Duncan. Duncan was an avid reader of Whitman, and claimed that his poetry was an inspiration behind her revolutionary approach to dance forms. See Ruth L. Bohan, "'I Sing the Body Electric': Isadora Duncan, Whitman, and the Dance," in *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. Ezra Greenspan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 166–193.

¹⁵ Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "Emily Dickinson," in *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, ed. Jay Parini (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 121–147. Wolff's main argument concerns the strategies through which Dickinson is able both to utilize, but also oppose, the poetic discourses transmitted to her from the Bible, the Elizabethans, Milton, and Poe.

¹⁶ Emily Dickinson, *Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems*, ed. Tomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1961), 26.

winter landscape lyric beginning with “There’s a certain Slant of Light.” The beautifully caught moment of the glorious fullness of a winter afternoon turning quickly into its ghostly negative, a cold and vacuous evening falling over a grey, snow-covered expanse of land, does not, as it would have in Whitman, inspire the thought of belonging with the process of the natural change from day to night. In Dickinson, the change is from fullness to a surprising, breathtaking, but also painful absence: “When it goes, ’tis like the Distance / On the look of Death.”¹⁷ It exceeds the Romantic hope of spiritual reunion with nature and introduces a sense of alienation characteristic rather of later twentieth-century than of nineteenth-century poetic consciousness. The whole landscape “oppresses” with its “Heft.” It creates a split in the self, the absence being read also in the very midst of the poetic mind, creating an “internal difference / Where the meanings are.”¹⁸

While the absence—the sense that nature may be the realm of death as easily as it is acclaimed to be the realm of the spirit—is a surprising realization, the poetic evocation of the surprise coalesces into a physiological reaction. The confrontation with the waning landscape is first merely heavy (the “heft” of the “cathedral tunes” announcing the changing hour of the day), but then it becomes painful. The changing light gives the speaker a “heavenly hurt.” And even though she says that no “scar” can be found, the whole poem creates an impression that the emerging “internal difference” is accompanied with a strong sensual discomfort.

In Dickinson the transgressive explorations of ends of consciousness are accompanied by specific references to bodily states. The poet frequently registers a sense of numbness and somatic rigidity, as is the case with the poem beginning with “I felt a funeral in my brain.” Situated in a peculiar region between life and death, the speaker dreads the ceremonial and ritualistically

mechanical presence of mourners, which she receives only auditorily, but which nevertheless exerts a strain on her general spiritual condition. While the pervasive sound of bells “numbs” the speaker’s mind, the numbness resonates throughout the persona triggering a sensation nearing pain. When the coffin is raised, the movement and sound hurt the consciousness of the speaker, and this sensation is conveyed through a masterfully unpleasant consonance: “And then I heard them lift a Box / And *creak across* my Soul.”¹⁹

While in this poem the body may seem a secondary and even unexpected product of the formal fleshing out of the theme—the possibility of the life of consciousness after death—there are many poems in which it is the physical presence of the body that is confronted openly. Unlike in Whitman, however, this is frequently a body in pain. Dickinson is interested in pain as a condition that is fully human, one that has to be confronted as a sensation tantamount with being alive. “I like a look of Agony,” the speaker confesses in one poem, because, as she claims further, it cannot be pretended.²⁰ Dickinson seeks intense encounters on the borderline of life and death.

When, in another lyric, the speaker asserts that “pain has an element of blank,” she brilliantly combines the somatic condition with its psychological and cognitive reverberation. Pain erases personhood and seems to be a transport to numbing generality: “It cannot recollect / When it begun—or if there were / A time when it was not.”²¹ We encounter here the nucleus of all strain and conflict in Dickinson. The fact that the thought of erasure belongs to a specific poem returns a certain individuality to the experience. The specific crafted shape of the poem confers a contour on the sensation of proliferating absence. The strained muteness of the form matches the bodily state, but, since it is the form of an individual

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 42. Emphasis mine.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 166.

poem, it also maintains a sense of the self, even as this self is in a state of crisis. It is this formal-poetic individuation of a state of crisis, of a sliding down to the vacuous generality of pain, that both acts against the consciousness-nullifying reality of pain and is painful in itself. The same process takes place in the poem beginning with "After great pain a formal feeling comes." In this lyric, also a reminiscence of pain, the greatest threat is not pain itself, but the numb "hour of Lead," the frozen "formal feeling" that comes afterwards. The paradox, then, is that the poem brings back the sensation of pain as some sort of a cure that prevents a terminal freezing. This contradiction is reflected in the form of the poem. On the one hand it is muted, slowed down, with a formal quality to inverted syntax: "The Feet, mechanical, go round— / Of Ground, or Air, or Ought— / A Wooden way / Regardless grown."²² But this deliberately numbing quality is counteracted by the harrowing intelligence of metaphors. The nervous system itself, after the survival of pain, is compared to "tombs." In the complex final figure pain is compared to snow covering a freezing person: the chilling touch of snow is now a distant memory, with the death by freezing getting near. In fact the sting of the snow's coldness would now be something desired, suggestive of a chance for survival. In a sense, the poem itself—through the nerve-racking logic of its figures—brings such a difficult revival. It saves by being cold, by a painful bringing of a lethargic body back to sentience.

A pile of contradictions, Dickinson's form matches the linguistic action of the poem with a sense of metaphysical and cultural crisis and a sense of specific individuality which becomes the site of this conflict. This form is famously strained and blocked—heavy with its internal conflicts. The poet breaks rhythms, introduces awkward sounds and plays with tongue twisting lexicon, uses elliptical syntax, and intervenes with pauses. As a critic notes, Dickinson's imagery is "recalcitrant" and

²² *Ibid.*, 73.

"obdurate," and her figurative layers do not coalesce into coherent and harmoniously complementary wholes. There is a "figural mismatch," and a "resistance to correspondences" between "different levels of experience" which might, but do not, work as metaphors for each other.²³ While this is clearly a poetics of cultural resistance, this form would not be possible without an engagement and evocation of the bodily. In a nutshell, to oppose the present day decorum and aesthetic assumption, and to transgress so deeply in the metaphysical dimension, is synonymous, in Dickinson, with producing/reflecting a very tangible somatic sensation, a poetic version of "pain" provoked for the sake of aliveness. Language in Dickinson, as in Whitman, is fully alive, engaged with the vital interest of the organism, even if and when the whole exploration seems to begin and proceed from abstract and intellectual motivations. Dickinson realizes and perpetuates an aesthetic that is the Puritan heritage: the language touches and convinces by being closely interrelated with specific somatic states. It listens to and resonates with the body. The word is painful and, thus, truly alive:

She dealt her pretty words like Blades—
How glittering they shone—
And every One unbared a Nerve
Or wantoned with a Bone—²⁴

The poetry of Whitman and Dickinson is a poetry of radical openness to the novelty of a physical world that is only now acknowledged in its independence from European schemes of perception. In both cases the openness results in a "song"—an aesthetic condensation of language which enlivens nature. In Dickinson the song opens the body, predominantly the female body, and makes it vulnerable. These American poets stumble upon the exhilarative aspect of being that was to become a departure point for pragmatists. "I find ecstasy in living,"

²³ Shira Wolosky, "Emily Dickinson: Being in the Body," in *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*, ed. Wendy Martin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 130.

²⁴ Dickinson, *Final Harvest*, 116.

Dickinson is noted as confiding to Thomas Higginson, “the mere sense of living is joy enough.”²⁵

A contemporary poet and Dickinson’s poetic heir, Peter Gizzi, observes how Dickinson’s poetry is a mode of a radical, and thus risky, openness and responsiveness to the exigency of human thrownness into the physical world, “a world in which everything teaches—everything emits some note—every body is a singer.”²⁶ Such a complex is also a form of intensification of experience, in which several aspects meet—the physical/material, the linguistic, the psychological, and the somatic. Such focusing of experience becomes a site of the *real*. But the condensation of language into reality—Gizzi wrote of her that “she empties the dictionary into her Real”—exact a price felt in the somatic dimension.²⁷

Whatever the price, however, Whitman and Dickinson show how poetry brings language to a level that exceeds mere discursivity. In them, discursivity becomes closely interwoven with other layers through various aspects of the poetic form. They are precursors of somaesthetic practice in the sense that they seek exchanges between the linguistic and the somatic level “beneath interpretation.” In both cases, the body is made visible, either affecting the empirical reality correctively (Whitman), or as an often vulnerable product of the linguistic condensation of concepts and ideas (Dickinson). But poetry may also keep the body as a kind of remote implication. In such cases, it remains a deep background of the ideas taking shape in the poems. Such is the case of Wallace Stevens, the last poet I would like to engage here.

²⁵ Emily Dickinson, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1997), 474.

²⁶ Peter Gizzi, “Correspondences of the Book,” in *A Poetics of Criticism*, ed. Juliana Spahr et al. (Buffalo: Leave Books, 1994), 179.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 184. It might be noted at this point that Gizzi’s own poetry is an example of how the somatic awareness of Dickinson’s poetry continues to exert a strong influence on contemporary American poets.

Stevens is interesting for us because his poetry, famously abstract, seems to avoid references to the somatic. As I am going to argue, however, a latent level of somatic awareness is indispensable for this poetics. It is an inescapable background of the capacity for subtle mental pleasures and imaginative power—the espoused goals of Stevens’s poems. Stevens is a poet of the mind watching its own operations in a meditatively repetitive, often philosophically abstract language. Such abstraction frequently results in asceticism. Helen Vendler notes how Stevens’s primary instinct is toward reduction of perception towards a reality of basic percepts. One such example of a radical reduction of both perception and emotion is “The Snow Man,” in which a winter landscape is dismantled until all sensations are rejected, and the speaker is left with a peculiar mental region, empty but curiously active, called “the nothing that is.” Vendler notes that this is an exercise in a deliberate numbing of the senses and an active forgetting of nature. While one motivation of this process may be epistemological—to get down to some sort of Cartesian bare basis of belief—Vendler also detects a hidden personal and emotional element behind Stevens’s reductions. For the critic, Stevens’s early aesthetic flurries already hide a “harsh” ascetic drive, “a brutality of thought or diction” stemming from the fact that Stevens is a deeply secretive “poet of human misery,” who mourns, but also hides, his anguish over the exigencies of emotional realities: “[he] sees dream, hope, love, and trust . . . crippled, contradicted, dissolved, . . . embittered.”²⁸ Abstraction of diction and imagery, colder tones, become a defensive gesture, and when Stevens reduces nature he performs an act of active forgetfulness, trying to liberate himself from the natural necessities of death and dissolution. His poetic genius battles nature, wants to prove itself capable of dissolving the standard human associations, by which gesture he would also be suggesting a power of reconstruction. But the opposite operations of

²⁸ Helen Vendler, *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), 10–11.

dismantling and construction of a conceptual system require an emotional discipline, which results in coldness. In a later poem entitled "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," he states this purpose openly: "But the wise man avenges by building his city in snow."²⁹

Stevens's poetic discipline is then a matter of regrouping the psychological forces of the subject, who battles the necessity inherent in nature by devising his own coldness in response. In his letters, diaries, essays and his *Adagia*, Stevens saw this discipline as a result of an epistemologically careful search for an equilibrium between what he calls "imagination" and what he calls "reality." His entire output may be seen as a vacillation between these two poles. He seeks a unity, a state of complementariness between the two. But Vendler is right, on the whole, in detecting a personal element: the equilibrium is sought as a shape of the self. He wants poetic *imagination* to be one with *reality* in which he lives. The "reality" that Stevens seeks is supposed to be an element with which the poet may identify, something alive that is not opposite to the poem, not merely the "rock" of the given world.

Being a "poet of reality"—a phrase coined and aptly used in reference to Stevens by the critic J. Hillis Miller—Stevens is a poet of imaginative power who saves the real. However, such co-creation of reality is inseparable, for Stevens, from the capacity for joy ensuing from a subtle feeling of the external layers of the world. The imagination of reality walks hand in hand with an appetite and a desire for it. To be able to imaginatively desire the simplest, most basic elements of the world, is to experience the regenerative power that belongs to the self. Stevens's voracious appetite for this imaginative capacity makes him want to experience it in its pure form (hence the paradox of a variety of idealism in this very *earthy* poet). This wish for purity leads to

²⁹ Wallace Stevens, "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," in *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), 128.

abstractions and reductions. He wants to be a poet who "knows desire without an object of desire,"³⁰ which means that he is more interested in the very capacity of instigating and initiating the delight. The delight itself becomes a state of mind, and Stevens achieves this purification by reducing the scope of the perceived world to a meager minimum. His cold asceticism is a proof of imaginative power: it shows a capacity to derive pleasure from very little.

Here we come to a paradox of this poetics: the purity of the delight-capable state of mind which re-imagines reality depends on evoking the bodily. The "real" which is supposed to be the necessary base of his poetry is nothing if not a feeling of vital contact with the physical element. This is what Stevens holds against the reality of death. His most famous poems of affirmation of the human finite condition necessarily return to the images of the body. In "Sunday Morning," a manifesto of the poetic freedom from religion, Stevens envisions a "supple and turbulent" gathering of men who "shall chant in orgy on a summer morn / Their boisterous devotion to the sun, / . . . / Out of their blood, returning to the sky; / And in their chant shall enter, voice by voice, / The windy lake wherein their lord delights."³¹ This fragment has been criticized as an absurd masculine utopia,³² but the criticism misses an important somatic element which should make us look beyond simplistic phallocentrism. Here the world is de-divinized, as Stevens envisions a new covenant with nature, the reality of both the human and the natural being transmitted through the channel of somatic enjoyment. When Stevens closes the stanza—"And whence they came and whither they shall go / The dew upon their

³⁰ Wallace Stevens, "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion," in *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 311.

³¹ Wallace Stevens, "Sunday Morning," in *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 55–6.

³² See Frank Lentricchia, *Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 157.

feet shall manifest”—a genuine somatic sensation is called upon. Stevens envisions a return to the bodily.

The real Stevens was a voracious consumer of gourmet foods and teas. He was also an avid walker, especially in his younger years. His early journals and letters abound in references to the amazingly long walks he took on Sundays in the vicinity of New York City and New Jersey countryside. The sensations they produce often sound like stock Romantic response to nature. And yet the Romantic elation always hints at the somatic, as it combines the physical with the intellectual.³³ This kind of subtle compatibility of spiritual uplifting derived from a simple but powerful somatic self-satisfaction is what he also sought in many of his poems, without openly divulging that he writes about somatic pleasure.

It must be admitted that the open, Whitmanian, “boisterous” affirmations of the kind we see in “Sunday Morning” are rare in Stevens. Most of his poems assume a much more reticent mode of affirmation. However, while they pretend that they are concerned with the pleasure of the mind only, they are first about the pleasures of the body. The “cold,” which we have seen as a prevailing tone and a correlative to the imaginative power in treatment of landscapes, is, after all, a physiological sensation. An abstract notion—a cold discipline in imaginative capacity—finds its equivalent in a specific somatic positioning. In some of his letters Stevens describes a curious exercise of reading for a number of hours in the cold of his attic in winter.³⁴ Although such exercise may be exacted by the specificity of Stevens’s domestic situation—Stevens withdrew all his poetic activity at home to the attic—the habit has a place in his larger aesthetic and psychological economy. Stevens says that poetry is “a violence from within that

protects us from a violence without.”³⁵ The capacity to withstand or even enjoy the cold of a Connecticut winter – if we see this capacity not as a given gift but as a poetic fiction to be achieved by the subject – becomes a version, a product, an objective correlative of the poetic, imaginative “violence from within.”

On the whole, then, the “cold” in Stevens is both an abstract concept representing an aesthetic mannerism and a real somatic sensation. The two come together, giving the poet his hoped-for union of imagination and reality, through a poetic action in which the soma responds to the physical stimulus of the world. For reasons discussed above, the formula or the response is the notion of “coldness.” In Stevens the poetic coming together of self and world happens in the element of cold. This notion—both an abstract concept of an aesthetic discipline and an actual somatic feeling—represents the poetics of the exhilarative contact with the external reality, common to the larger pragmatist aesthetic tradition. This mode of poetic responsiveness—as much somatic as it is cerebral—is beautifully seen in a late poem entitled “On the Way to the Bus,” in which a man walks on an early morning after a light snow fall. At first, his mood is gloomy, but he begins to respond to the coldness and the response changes into coherent and vibrant self-recognition:

A perception of cold breath, more revealing than
A perception of sleep, more powerful

Than a power of sleep, a clearness emerging
From cold, slightly irised, slightly bedazzled,

But a perfection emerging from a new known[.]³⁶

The poem, as always in Stevens, seeks and finds its discipline. The clarity of vision reaches a linguistic form—the poem itself: “a way of pronouncing the world inside

³³ See Holly Stevens, ed., *Letters of Wallace Stevens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

³⁴ See Holly Stevens, ed., *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 272.

³⁵ Wallace Stevens, “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” in *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 665.

³⁶ Wallace Stevens, “On the Way to the Bus,” in *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 472.

of one's tongue."³⁷ The atmosphere of this coalescence of sensation into linguistic form is what Stevens calls the cold. But beneath this metaphor is the reality of the very physical, somatic responsiveness of a specific, bodily personhood to a climate of a place, which underlies and legitimizes the whole poetic operation. However abstract or allegedly chilly, Stevens's poetics is in fact an intense holistic response to his own subjective, as well as generally human, relatedness to the material world, one in which the mind and body come to reaffirm and complement each other.

Somaesthetics is an instructive project reforming badly skewed relations between mind and body. From this point of view there is no easy or immediate correspondence between somaesthetics and poetry, as the latter will often abstain from moving toward instruction and projection of better ways of living. However, there is a sense in which American poetry, even when it attends to painful and discordant moments of existence, does so for the sake of possible liberation from the crust of habit. In this aspect poetry meets somaesthetics in the meliorative and exhilarative moment of the coming together of bodies, languages, and material realities. The thrust toward regeneration of the self in and through poetry has been closely related in American poetry with forms of wakefully enthused bodily awareness, and with a mindfulness of physical surroundings. The language of this poetry is the variously modulated "song"—a condensation of many-leveled responsiveness to the environment—emitted when mind-bodies delight in their finding themselves in their material contexts.

Somaesthetics and poetry converge on the meeting ground of two types of inventiveness—the linguistic and the somatic—which seek and enhance each other. The poets I have discussed formed languages which save the bodily from oblivion and let it influence the poetic

utterance. Even if this is often a painful strategy, in each case a vital and fruitful interchange occurs. Whitman's "song" projected a body belonging to individuals of a future equalitarian culture in a language that bursts the confines of a literary genre. His poetry became a tool of refiguring democratic corporeal potentials, an operation which changed poetic language itself, making it more natural, authentic, daring and trustful in experimentation with forms of everydayness. Dickinson's intense verse confronts somatic limitations of the over-idealized poetic culture of her day, thus allowing new levels of poetic and political self-awareness to be realized in the twentieth century. She mobilizes a plethora of contradictions, thus constructing an analogy between the disruptive, even painful, freshness of authentic poetic form and the fragile, complex reality of the human body. Both form and body are revealed as unstable fields, capable of continuity and break, of life and death. Finally, Stevens's poetry is an instructive lesson on the return of the body in a most cerebral and abstract poetic project. His reductive poetics of "coldness" functions as an abstract concept, but ends up recalling a living body. As a form of restraint meant to modulate and reinforce imaginative desire for reality, it begins to speak of pleasures belonging to an individual personal body. The reimagining of reality requires a discipline not only of imagination, but also a shaping of the somatic sphere. It is the body that craves a contact with reality and for Stevens this is realized in the element of cold.

Poetry as an enhanced language benefits from its somatic backgrounds, returning new modalities of expression to liberated bodies. In each case, a poetic strategy produces the living shape of a specific body which speaks beyond the individual experience. At the same time, such somatic-aesthetic-poetic production of the body has an indelible, formative influence on the shape of the poem.

³⁷ Ibid.