

Humming

Talk to the Sydney Biennale, “Revolution—Forms that Turn”

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Note to me: Add lamonte young if poss

This essay begins HERE:

Taking my lead from Winnie the Pooh and F. Nietzsche I want to explore a site between singing and talking where the hum of the Great Bumble Bee meets the body of our faltering world . . .

Bees hum. So does the traffic outside my window five stories down except for early morning when the garbage truck shrieks and groans, lifting and grinding, compressing and thumping. Interstitial sounds they be--bees and cars and even the shrieker--sounds that fill the void, sounds that don't really count, background, we might say, stuff for the likes of John Cage who taunted the line demarcating sound off from music. A dog whimpers and twitches in its sleep. The wind hums through the trees and the river has a humming, cruising sound that never stops as it runs over the rapids when I go upstate to the land without traffic or the shrieker. And then there's the pretty well continuous ringing in my ears, the ur-hum, the movement of the warm blood through the inner ear, that blends with the outside world so as to form the one great hum of the great bumble bee.

I look at this train of ideas and images and am surprised at how they themselves hum along like automatic writing. They form a sequence back and forth from animal to human as well as from machines to humans. Most significant, I feel, is that the sequence comes to rest where you hear your body perched on the membrane of the ear where exterior meets interior.

There are few bees around now, less pollination and less food, fewer flowers, and less green. The hum of the great bumble bee is not what it used to be as planet earth falters and the ringing in the ear gets louder. I hear screaming even when I sleep. Is it outside or inside or both? Could this be the unconscious that was central to Nietzsche's definition of philosophy as the understanding, or rather misunderstanding, of the body?

Bees offer plenty to the allegorist. They appeal to me because their hum radiates through the vibrating heat of summer along with the meandering flight of butterflies, those other great pollinators, but while bees are considered industrious workers par excellence—the word “drone” comes to mind—butterflies are not. They are not industrious. They are flighty and they are unpredictable, a boss’ nightmare. In their interaction with flowers, they are also held to be eminently sexual—as by that utopian schemer, Charles Fourier. So then, what of pollination, an activity as natural to the industrious drone as with the flighty flaneur? Does not pollination disturb our notions of work, implicating it with sex and vice versa to the benefit of what we sometimes call the “birds and the bees” and hence the regeneration of life?

In his chapter on the labor process in *Capital*, Marx writes approvingly of bees as skilled architects but faults them because they lack the capacity to create a plan in the imagination prior to building their honeycomb cells. They just act, whereas man is conscious of a purpose before setting to work and, says Marx, must subordinate his will to it.”¹ And as regards bees, Marx had to reckon with that nimble-minded satire, Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees* of 1714 with its motto of private vices, public benefits.

But nowadays some of us wonder where all that human imagination, human purpose, and subordination of our will that Marx mentions have gotten us in terms of public benefits? Nowadays both Marx and Neo-Liberalism can seem deficient in so far as they neglect to question this alleged thoughtlessness of the bee, let alone that of the butterfly. Nowadays we are prone to be less certain about the distinction between man and animal as well as finding ourselves with increasing frequency wondering whether things have souls, and what it means to call a thing a thing? We ask more pointedly, What is an Animal? What is Man? What is Life? We might also want to ask how praxis actually operates in relating hand to mind and vice versa, and how to master the ubiquitous need for mastery we see all around and within each of us?

It is as if our humming be a conversation with the hummings of the world at large.

Let us assume, for the sake of a larger argument, that pollination opens our eyes to the erotic quality of work as an interaction of materials no less than of the maker with the thing being worked on. And let us recall the vibrating heat of summer. You put your head close to the ground on a summer’s day hearing a multitude of hummings and you see wavy lines of colored heat rising and dancing along with the hums through which bees patrol and butterflies circle while dragonflies hum as they copulate close to the surface of the river. Without shame. These vibrations of sight and sound, music and color, are turnings that to some people appear unpredictable, ephemeral, and may make you frighteningly vulnerable. Think of van Gogh’s last paintings in which form surrenders to the vibrations of color as when he writes his brother Theo how the “effect of daylight, of the sky “makes it possible to extract an infinity of subjects from the olive

¹ Marx, *Capital* Vol 1, p 284, Fowkes trans

tree.”² It was as if there was no such thing as the olive tree. It was more like a momentary artifact, a blaze of colors on their way to becoming blue flies and emerald rose beetles on their way to becoming leaves with that tinge of violet to be found on ripe figs.

All this humming, and this was the painter who at that same time cut off his ear and then his life.

There must have been some humming action with Sergei Eisenstein too, as when he tells us that “Disney is astonishingly blind, with respect to landscape—to *the musicality of landscape* and simultaneously the *musicality of color and tone*.”³

But then what is it to hum? My Webster’s dictionary is helpful here. It scans like a poem. A deep ecology poem.

As etymological reckoning the entry for humming gives us “middle dutch,” an exotic formulation, to be sure, the reference being the word *hommel* followed by the word *bumblebee*. Next comes an array of meanings relevant to today’s usage, at least in American English. To hum can be to utter a *sound that sounds like speech* or to make the *natural noise of an insect in motion or a similar sound*. It can also mean singing with the lips closed without articulation, although speaking for myself my main interest is with that something that lies between words and sounds no less than between singing and speaking. Humming is like alphabet soup, wetlands, where all manner of life forms thrive.

Of course there are hums of mine that are words such as

You always will be welcome
That cup of Bushells’ tea

which was an advertising jingle on the radio when I was a kid in Sydney in the 1940s. But when today I sing this, which is not often, the emphasis is more on the cadence of sound than on the words which, to tell the truth, are meant to be picturesque and a little absurd. What we call a “conceit.” But the days of the advertising jingle are over as being a tad too silly for the serious business of consumer capitalism? And, to continue further with this historicizing, I doubt whether today young people hum and whether, given the

² W.H. Auden (ed) *Van Gogh, A Self-Portrait: Letters Revealing His Life as a Painter*, Selected by W.H.Auden, NY Graphic Society Greenwich, Connecticut, 1961, p. 396

³ Eisenstein, 98. The quotes are from another book of Eisenstein’s, *Non-Indifferent Nature*, cited by the editor in the “Notes and Commentary” section of *Eisenstein on Disney*, p.98

ubiquity of the iPod, their membrane mediating inner and outer sound-worlds, has the function it used to have?

What I here call humming was for me over twenty years an essential component of the hallucinogenic healing of misfortune by indigenous curers in the Putumayo region of southwest Colombia, South America. On and off, this humming lasted all night and maybe the next and the one after as well.

There were few words. Instead was this stream of vibrating sound that set your body a quiver, a sound I sometimes thought of like the creaking of tree branches grating back and forth against one another in the night's wind. Yet it could change pace with alarming speed and now and again—and this is terribly important—would be pierced by unexpected loud clicks from the back of the throat as loud as a gunshot or else by a cascade of frothing sound from the beating of the curing fan of rustling leaves. Other times there was a whispering soft murmur like fairy dust falling from the stars.

This was a humming that got to you alright, deep into your bones. It is said that smell tends to obliterate the subject-object division, an epistemological quirk that fascinated Freud in his meditations on the causes of repression. Well, that humming, too, certainly played havoc with subject and object, assisted as it was by hallucinogens such that your body as whole, eyes and thoughts included, would vibrate along with the great hum of the great bumble bee. But then there were those crazy clicks piercing, as I said, piercing the flow, jolting you into another channel altogether.

Drinking *yage* several times with shamans in the Putumayo and alone in Lima in 1953, William Burroughs came up with an image that served him his entire writing career from *Naked Lunch* on. That was the swirling hallucinogenized image of what he called *the composite city* which at one point he alludes to as “Canned heat, great rusty iron racks rising 200 feet into the air from swamps and rubbish with perilous partitions built on multileveled platforms and hammocks swinging over the void.”⁴ Allen Ginsberg likened it to the view from Burroughs' window on East 7th street, Manhattan. The concluding note Burroughs added was that this city was a “*place where the unknown past and the emergent future meet in a vibrating soundless hum. Larval entities waiting for a live one.*”⁵

Reading this I thought of Walter Benjamin's idea in his last writing, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” where he evokes the paradox of the “state of emergency” as not the exception but the rule in which all seems deathly quiet and still, yet ready to explode at any moment. This is of a piece with Benjamin's advocating as historical reckoning the unexpected, flash-like, encounter of past with present to form a new constellation, “the dialectic at a standstill.” Burroughs' formulation, of the unknown past

⁴ William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, *The Yage Letters, Redux*, edited by Oliver Harris, (San Francisco: City Lights), 2006, p. 51

⁵ *The Yage Letters*, 53

and emergent future meeting in a vibrating soundless hum, seems appropriate here. “Larval entities waiting for a live one.”

Put otherwise, is it too much of a stretch to regard Benjamin’s “dialectic at a standstill” as a continuous hum? In which case his “dialectical image” is the visual equivalent of the curer’s song, a hum punctuated by a sudden click as loud as a gunshot sending us off into a different channel, body vibrating along with the hum.

I have come to think that singing is close to divinity—a strange thought, to be sure. In other words by merely altering the sounds one makes with one’s mouth and throat so as to diverge from speech, something miraculous is achieved. It is not the singing per se but the *divergence* that does this—speech in an Other key, we could say, where the angels fly.

Modes of singing that are like talking are especially fascinating in this regard because they estrange this estrangement. They throw the field wide open, as does humming in its quiet way.

With her *cantastoria* or *singing history*, Clare Dolan the Go-Go Girl of the Bread and Puppet Theater of Vermont finds a space midway between song and speech that, with some hesitation, we might call operatic. It is a capacious space offering many opportunities for contrast of song and talk as well as their mixing, and although there is little by way of rhyme or lyric, there is indeed lyricism in the wider sense, opening up the world.

Commenting on the sense of a “mystic potence” known as *orenda* in the world of the Iroquois, being neither a god nor a spirit but a diffuse power informing all things, the anthropologist, J.N.B. Hewitt, son of a European trader and Huron mother, wrote in 1902 that shamans have *orenda* in abundance, as do successful hunters and gamblers. To exert his or her *orenda* the shaman “must sing, must chant, in imitation of the bodies of his environment.”ⁱ Indeed the very word, *orenda*, means to sing or to chant in the earlier speech of the Iroquoian people. Small wonder then that Hewitt repeatedly returns to sound, to music, singing, and the sounds of nature, as the privileged domain of *orenda* and magic.

Nietzsche would have been delighted. Didn’t he say that music in Dionysian states of being had the capacity to intensify bodily states so that you discharge all your powers of representation, imitation, transfiguration, transmutation, every kind of mimicry and play acting, conjointly? In such a state you possess to the highest degree the instinct for understanding and divining, enjoying the art of communication, entering into every skin, into every emotion, continuously transforming yourself.ⁱⁱ

Listen now to Hewitt and note how he uses the word “bodies” here where you might instead expect him to use the word “spirits.”

The speech and utterance of birds and beasts, the souging of the wind, the voices of the night, the moaning of the tempest, the rumble and crash of the thunder, the startling roar of the tornado, the wild creaking and cracking of wind-rocked and frost-riven trees, lakes, and rivers, and the multiple other sounds and noises in nature, were conceived to be the chanting—the dirges and songs—of the various bodies thus giving forth voice and words of beastlike or birdlike speech in the use and exercise of their mystic potency.ⁱⁱⁱ

So might I be permitted in thinking that my humming, and yours, too, is not without its quotient of *orenda*?

In 1938 in remote northwestern Australia in the Kimberleys, Andreas Lommel from Frankfurt was unexpectedly invited to meet with Allan Balbungu, shaman and poet. Disfigured by leprosy and despairing of his people dying and childless, Allan would sit on the ground and, holding leafy branches in front of his face, commune with the dead.

Lommel was told that when a shaman loses this ability, he lies on the ground and men in a circle sing around him for hours, humming

mmmmm nnnn mmmmm nnnn

For hours.

The shaman goes into trance. Spirits tear his soul to pieces and each carries a piece to the underworld. Deep in the earth, they put the shaman's soul back together. They show him the dances and sing songs to him.⁶

In the case of my Putumayo curer friend, the late Santiago Mutumbajoy, it seems that the hum comes from the spirits of the hallucinogen, allowing the person humming—the *person thus hummed*, we might say—to work with this power that lies beyond the visible. But like humming itself, there is no sure or solid ground here, could be the spirits, maybe not, and so it goes along with the hum.

All this suggests to me that humming is the connecting itself and not just the connection between insides and outsides, animal and human, machines and human, but the mediating medium—the *becoming*--that connection of any kind beckons to, if not

⁶ Andres Lommel and David Mowaljarlai, “Shamanism in Northwest Australia,” in *Oceania*, vol 64, No 4, June 1994, pp. 277-87

requires, most especially in that special moment of space-time travel where imitation or mimesis becomes poesis, or change—ie where mimesis propagates itself into metamorphosis.

Nietzsche and Winnie The Pooh

Humming implies rhythm, meaning first off the rhythm of the body in motion. When we walk and when we work at some repetitive task we may hum. Nietzsche was a great walker but we do not know if he hummed although, for sure, music was extremely important to him. Leslie Chamberlain says after the death of god, what was left for him was music and color.⁷ I wonder if humming should be included here too, along with Eisenstein's musicality of landscape that unfolds before and behind as you walk?

Speaking of repetitive activities such as walking conducive to humming, and vice versa, Walter Benjamin thought the art of the storyteller was made easier when listeners were working at some mindless or repetitive task which made it easier for them to recall and repeat the story when their turn came around, storytelling being but one side of the operation, story-listening being the other.

And with regards to stories, perhaps while you were falling asleep as a child some of you may remember that Winnie-the-Pooh is a great hummer and it is instructive to study his humming which, surely, has a lot to do with his love of honey, the stuff bees make. In fact his first adventure, or misadventure, is to raid a beehive in search of honey. He is a child's Ulysses, this Pooh of ours, always ready to outwit the forces of nature in the approved Enlightenment manner as he prepares an umbrella to act as a parachute so he can descend on unsuspecting bees.

A great hummer, he has a day job as well—as an inert teddy bear who makes a noise as he is dragged downstairs then upstairs by his loving companion, an androgynous child named Christopher Robin. Bump, bump, go the sounds as he is pulled first down and then, at the end of the tale, upstairs. Bump bump.

Yet in between downstairs and upstairs he comes alive as Winnie-the-Pooh. He is animated, we might say, and he speaks and he hums and he sings a lot. In the second chapter, which is when we get to really meet this transformed little bear, we read the first sentences:

Edward Bear, known to his friends as Winnie-the-Pooh, or Pooh for short, was walking through the forest one day, humming proudly to himself. He had made up a little hum that very morning, as he was doing his Stoutness Exercises

⁷ Leslie Chamberlain, *Nietzsche in Turin: The End of the Future* (London: Quartet Books), 1996

in front of the glass.: *Tra-la-la-la*, as he stretched up as high as he could go, and then *Tra-la-la-la, tra-la—oh, help!—la*, as he tried to reach his toes.

Here is what I would like to point out. First he hums as he walks. What's more, he is humming proudly, conscious of what he is doing, humming that is, and proud of the hum he has invented while performing exercises in front of the mirror. It is as if he is seeing himself from the outside and whole, yet the self he is presencing is something like an unconscious self, not necessarily in the Freudian sense of the unconscious but more like what I would call the bodily unconscious. Humming, we might say, is the happiness of the bodily unconscious or at the least its idling modality.

We might also note that this hum hovers between being nonsense syllables or sounds, on the one hand, and more conscious language, on the other, reminiscent of Futurist and dada sound poems, as when he exclaims "*Oh help!*" in the midst of his "*tra-la*" and "*la*". The exclamation "*Oh! Help!*" rises up. It is like an eruption in a stream of humming.

Actually the hum is longer than I have indicated.

Tra-la-la, tra-la-la
Tra-la-la, tra-la-la
Rum-tum-tiddle-um-tum
Tiddle-iddle, tiddle-iddle,
Tiddle-iddle, tiddle-iddle,
Rum-tum-tum-tiddle-um

What is more, as formatted, it occupies the bottom of a full page devoted to a drawing of Pooh looking very small and overwhelmed with his hands behind his back walking through the forest lost in thought looking up at the trees and the sky, somewhat like Heidegger, we might say, lost on one of those paths made by woodsmen and animals that go round and round.

As he hums Pooh wonders what it feels like to be somebody else. It is as if humming frees him up to think big thoughts and even become something else. Humming facilitates speculation and it facilitates metamorphosis, invigorating the mimetic faculty, the ability or the fantasy to be Other which, after all, is the necessary pre-requisite for thinking.

At the beginning of this scene the narrator informs us that Winnie-the-Pooh is known as Pooh for short. This is an indication that language and naming are as much the subject of this book as are the adventures of Edward Bear.

Changing his name from Edward Bear to Winnie-the Pooh is another sign of this. The name change represents the change from the adult world where he is known as a teddy bear, a strange neologism said to hail from big game hunter, nature enthusiast, and gung-ho imperialist, US President Teddy Roosevelt. But our teddy shrugs off this weird appellation no less than the name Edward so as to enter that other world of the child-fairytale alliance where he now becomes Winnie-the-Pooh and with this new name become animated and breathes the life of make-believe.

Games with language—or should I say games with names and language—are crucial to this book. And the fact that Pooh is the name of a person, or should I say of a teddy bear, yet is also the name of excretory matter, is another signal that names, games, and toys, are plastic entities that classify and give meaning to the world, yet are prone to change the world as well, if we so desire, and hence they live in a permanent state of ambiguity, chance, and strategic misunderstanding as is the very foundation of the adult's imagination of the child's imagination, which is pretty much where Winnie-the-Pooh lives and why he is animate.

Such plasticity is not achieved lightly, however. Names and words are meant to designate one thing and one thing only. Look at what happens to people who turn left instead of right or are caught cheating at *scrabble*. Yet to sabotage language can be fun and, what is more, the definiteness of language depends on its being transgressed—the role allotted children and teddy bears—and dare I say it, the role allotted humming? We sense this transgression with Pooh's name which is scatology rendered sweet by the innocence of childhood. Occupying an inbetween land of considerable ambiguity, it seems doubtful that *pooh* would make it past the censors of today concerned with child abuse.

Winnie-the -Pooh is a book that adventures with language as much as with bumble bees, honey, Heffalumps, and the lost tail of Eeyore the donkey. That is why there is so much attention paid both to spelling and to pronunciation in this book which can be thought of as a comedy in language, at the same time providing a lesson in reading and writing, plying the boundary separating man from animal and kids from bears. There is a love of misspellings and of mistaken meanings of words, such as ambush taken to mean a kind of bush. "*Expedition, silly old Bear,*" explains Christopher Robbin. "It's got an 'x' in it." (112) In other words young Christopher Robbin treats his beloved bear as he himself is probably treated by adults because he has his adventures with language too, as with his spelling and love of making signs to be stuck up in the forest such as his sign PLS RING IF AN RNSWER IS REQIRD. (48) This is a rich theme. How many links in the mimetic chain of being are there, after all, linking adults to children and children to animals?

The singular importance of writing and reading as the subject matter of this tale is beautifully rendered when Piglet writes a message in a bottle which he casts onto the rising floodwaters, a message that is found days later by Pooh. "“Bother said Pooh as he opened it. “All that wet for nothing. What's that bit of paper doing?” He took it out and looked at it. “It's a Missage, “ he said to himself, “that's what it is. And that letter is a

‘P.’ and so is that , and ‘P’ means ‘Pooh,’ so it’s a very important Message to me, and I can’t read it. I must find Christopher Robbin” (137)

That is what this book is too, a *missage* in a bottle thrown in the rising floodwaters of becoming—becomings between child and adult, child and animals, child and toys, most especially that toy we call language, both spoken and written, both heard and read. That is the *missage* of this book for children much loved by adults. It thus behooves us to think of humming as central to language, humming being neither conscious nor unconscious, neither singing nor saying, but rather the sound where the moving mind meets the moving body—as when Winnie-the-Pooh walks lost through the forest dreaming of honey and the hum of the great bumble bee.

Hums and Cries

Many years ago Rodney Needham wrote a memorable and memorably short essay in that arch Oxford style about percussion, noting (a) it was terribly common at times of transition and (b) he could offer no explanation of why that should be (he must have read Wittgenstein on Frazer).⁸

But when Pooh exclaims “**Oh help!**” in the midst of his “*tra-la*” and “*la*,” are we not made aware of a far more intricate yet just as common and just as momentous a phenomenon as percussion? For it seems that the combination of hums and cries is a “fact of life” like night and day, forming a curious dialectic with the “**Oh help!**” erupting out from a smooth surface and then collapsing back into it.

I say “fact of life like night and day” but there is body-seizing surprise and convulsion here as well, despite its familiarity. Indeed, that is the point, this coexistence of routine and shock. There is a lot going on inside this dialectic, with cries acting like exclamations marks. Think of reading and writing skimming across the lines at a good clip—humming, it be--then hitting the cliff face of an exclamation mark, grand chief of all punctuation!

In a remarkable essay entitled “Punctuation Marks,” Adorno tells us that an exclamation point “looks like an index finger raised in warning,” and goes on to say that punctuation marks are like “friendly spirits whose bodiless presence nourishes the body of language” (shades of Hewitt on the chants/songs of Iriquois shamans!). But am I not doing the opposite here, focusing not so much on the pointing finger but on what I call the platform or mediating medium of the hum necessary for all meaning and exclamation to occur? Or, to put it another way, is not humming the most basic punctuation mark of all and is that why it has such a prominent part to play in healing?

Let us review some of these dialectics here, dialectics of hums and cries, hums and shrieks.

⁸ Rodney Needham, “On Percussion,”

The traffic beneath my window hums, except for the shrieks and groans of the garbage truck. The Putumayo shaman's hum quavers, dips, and ascends along with the trembling of his body, your body, and the body of the world, enlivened and re-set by those gunshots like lightning and thunder erupting when you least expect it, spiraling you and the world into bottomless vortices. A magical spell uttered in the earliest stage of gardening in one of the Trobriand Islands, east of New Guinea has "anchoring" as its predominant motif, as follows:

It shall be anchored, it shall be anchored!
My soil is anchored,
My *kamkokola*, my magical prism, shall be anchored,
My *kavatam*, my strong yam pole, shall be anchored⁹

And so forth.

Noting that the first two lines of this spell are

Anchoring, anchoring of my garden,
Taking deep root, taking deep root in my garden,

my sense is that the impulse of the spell as a whole is to root the plants into the soil which, so I wish to argue, is the equivalent of humming, a suggestion fortified by the fact that at end of the spell a forthcoming "portent" is announced by which is meant "*a convulsion which in native belief, is a by-product of magic*. Usually it is lightning or thunder, sometimes a violent wind or a slight earthquake" (emphasis added). Be it noted that in pronouncing the spell in a loud voice, the garden magician ensures that its magical force is made to "flow over the fields and penetrate the soil," and we learn, from many iterations, that magical power inheres in the voice—and I mean "in," like what Barthes implies by "the grain of the voice" and what I mean by "the mediating medium" that is humming. Note also that by and large magical spells are whispered under one's breath into an object or material substance.

It is fascinating to read that these great gardeners out on their coral reefs give vent to cries while gardening. In what manner they are "cries" is uncertain, and that uncertainty can deepen our understanding of what we mean when we call something a cry. Malinowski at one point calls them "melodic cries," for instance, which butts against my notion that a cry is anything but "melodic." Indeed a "melodic cry" to me seems to bring us right back to that privileged space that is my touchstone, the space between speech and singing. A melodic cry would seem to be both a cry and a song, yet neither. We are given as an example the following "cry" uttered while planting the staple yams called *taytu*:

⁹ B. Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, Vol 1, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1965 [1935], pp.129-30

Kabwaku E-E-E-E-E-E!
Ula'i taytu wakoya
Wawawawawawa . . .

Note the exclamation mark at the end of the first line!

Kabwaku refers to a bird with an extremely melodious call which the islanders mimic with such perfection that Malinowski says he was at a loss as to whether he was “listening to art or nature.”¹⁰ I assume that the E-E-E-E-E-E! is that bird call.

The second line means “Thou taytu, sprout in the mountains of the *koya*,” referring to a site famous for its yams on the far off mountain Koyatuba on Fergusson island—the “mountain of taboo” rearing high above the sea and shrouded in cloud where strange bird calls echo in chasms of what is called the voice of the waterfalls falling into the sea, itself prone to changing colors as the sailors engaged in Kula trade approach its magical domain.¹¹

Given this magical and multi-layered reference, it would seem that the “cry”—this “melodious cry”—is like a prayer in condensed and charged short-hand running all manner of poetic associations together in the one burst of sound as do the bird songs and the voice of those far away waterfalls. Here there is action aplenty, speed and movement as mighty natural forces are, in the cry, placed side by side with the delicate tapestry of strange bird calls

(In a note reeking with ambiguity Malinowski informs us that although not “really” magic this cry is indispensable for plant growth and it is taboo to sing it before planting or at any time other than planting.)

Another “melodic cry” is described by Malinowski as a “chant,” or rather an “antiphonic chant,” sung after the work of planting is finished. The antiphony consists of a verse in what is probably a foreign language from another island, each line being answered by the cry *Yohohohoho* which he describes as like the neighing of a team of horses!¹²

Here again the sense of a stream of meaning—the verse in the foreign tongue—being abruptly met by the “exclamation mark” of the “neighing of horses” is suggestive of my theme of “hums and cries.”

¹⁰ Ibid, 134

¹¹ Michael Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred?*, p 99

¹² Malinowski, 135

With reference to “hums and cries” Father Martin Gusinde, writing at much the same time as Malinowsk, has much to tell us with his minute description of the several month’s long initiation that occurred among the Yamana people of Tierra Del Fuego with whom he spent time in the early 1920s. He reports that in this initiation a deep sense of the holy in general and of spirits in particular depends on what I call “an aesthetic of interruption” in which each day a rhythm is set up among a group of people wherein a quiet humming and stillness of the body is paramount, yet changes quite radically in the late afternoon when there is an eruption of discordance, of voices and dancing, which, for some people, peaks with spirit possession. Let me quote what I once published on what Gusinde called “the extraordinary state of mind” created by this “aesthetic of interruption” in which humming is so essential.

. . . there must never be complete silence in the Big Hut, day or night. So, together with the “enduring silence” in terms of speech, there is this constant hum of a singer chanting, repeating a single word with a slight deviation in pitch. Instead of words spoken between people, there is one word sung again and again, interchanged with silence. In the small hours of the morning the humming passes from one person to the next, softly building in intensity and number of participants as the day stretches into afternoon. . . People say “I can reflect best when I am singing softly.”

By late afternoon each and every day there begins a dance that Gusinde would have us understand as catharsis, letting off steam after hours of sitting still in meditation. This is the time when people’s “inner agitation” reaches its climax and seeks expression in voice and body . . . Every so often a person is seized by a special excitement and moves trembling from one exit to the other shoving aside anyone in the way. The others say “That person has been seized by *kespix* [spirit, enthusiasm].”¹³

As I thumb through my papers and thoughts there seems no end to this pattern of “hums and cries,” of vibrating plateaus seized and shattered by an eruption from within—hence the expression in English, “the calm before the storm.” Perhaps this is banal and obvious and I am making too much of it and this cliché of the calm before the storm is an indication of that. But then clichés exist for good reason and to such an extent that we could say that the banal itself is the equivalent of humming and that the profundity within or behind it is what erupts. I recall Maya Deren’s pointed description of the most effective way to induce spirit possession in Haitian *vodun* is the “break” performed by skilled drummers who suddenly alter and suspend rhythm. *Then* spirit descends—into

¹³ Taussig, *Defacement*, pp 153-54

one's body, which acts accordingly, strange and inspired, incorporating the dead now brought back to history's grand theater.¹⁴

Can I go so far as to suggest that Benjamin's "state of emergency that is not the exception but the rule" is all this, too? For here also we find that uncanny hum of the devil himself, quiet and calm (on the surface), filing his nails and combing his locks while waiting to lunge like Elias Canetti's image of the secret as a tiger concealed with infinite patience waiting to leap on its prey then secreted into the black fastness of the enveloping mouth and dank intestines?¹⁵ Hums and shrieks indeed.

I see now how this torsion and rupture I call "hums and shrieks" began as a footnote or minor detail for me long ago, in 1972 to be exact, in the blazing sun in the sugar cane fields of aggressively expanding plantations in western Colombia. There I was told by my women friends while cooking lunch for the workers in the cane fields that among the cane cutters was the occasional man contracted with the devil who now and again would utter strange cries as he cut a swathe through the forest of cane, plunging ahead of the other workers, earning more money, thanks to the devil, but rendering the entire field barren.

As I write this I can almost feel the sun and the unimaginable monotony, the itch of the cane leaves, and the sweat pouring, the men in long sleeve shirts, long pants, hats, and scarves around their necks, like armor. It is extraordinarily hard work and they keep at it eight to ten hours, day after day. Even though there is continuous alteration in the speed and movement of their bodies and of the flashing machete, there is also a rhythm to their working and even as I write I hear the hum of that work shimmering in the fierce sun; the steady cutting of leaves, then the stalks, and the barely perceptible thud as the stalks are thrown into a pile.

But the screams? What of the screams?

I do not know. But what I want to suggest is that the scream is part of an opera, signature of the contract with the prince of darkness uniting soil and sky in the unholy matrimony we nowadays call agribusiness. It is like lightning and might I also suggest—I am not above making my own cries, after all—that the cry is also signature of that moment in history when long-established "pre-capitalist" rhythms of labor and use of the body are appropriated by agribusiness converting the human body into a bio-machine creeping along the unnaturally flat expanse of the vast sugar cane fields. If you look at the flexed upper arm of someone who has been working several years as cane cutter or loader you will be surprised to see that what should normally be a smooth ellipsoid mass of biceps muscle is instead a square or rectangular block, like a block of wood. It is astonishing to see this block of wood ascending and descending, emerging and disappearing, as the man flexes his arm or what you thought of as his arm.

¹⁴ Maya Deren. *Divine Horseman*

¹⁵ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, opening page of the secret chapter

If my suggestions appear melodramatic and in themselves “operatic,” take the workers standing up to their chests in vats of stinking, fermenting, indigo liquid under the hot sky of British Bengal in the 1850s. For hours at a time they beat the blue-green liquid with paddles, thereby oxygenating it so the chemical reaction necessary to make indigo dye can take place. They work collectively, in unison, maybe fifteen men to a vat, standing close to one another and working not just with each other but with the swirling back and forth of the liquid. Girded by a necklace of blue foam a foot high, the vat is in violent commotion.

As they advance and retreat along with this incandescent wave, their bodies blue, the workers sing what my British eyewitness, name of Colesworthy Grant, says are obscene songs and they give voice to vehement cries.¹⁶ Here the record halts. We can go no further. Why obscene? we ask. Why songs? And why the vehement cries?

As for obscene songs sung while working, I also recall Laura Bohannon describing women working collectively, weeding in Tiv land in Nigeria in the 1950s. Men were frightened to get too close to the women singing lusty songs for fear of sexual molestation.¹⁷

Women weeding collectively in the Trobriands “enjoy special privileges” says Malinowski. Men must not approach them and in the south of the island where he lived women can seize and mishandle any man in sight. If he is from their own community, they merely insult him verbally but if a stranger he might be “ill treated in a sexually degrading manner.” What is more some of the gardening songs are “somewhat obscene,” likening planting, for instance, to sexual intercourse and the soil to the wide open vulva.¹⁸

With respect to the West Indian work songs she collected in the Panama Canal Zone in the 1940s, Louise Cramer tells us that many “of them are too obscene for inclusion.” In one instance she came across a carpenter dancing and singing while planning wood.¹⁹ This really captures my imagination.

African American laboring men in the USA before and after slavery seem to have had many such songs. In the Gandy Dancer crews maintaining the railroads in the video I have seen, you hear the rhythmic cadence and then the grunt or “cry” as the collective force is applied. It is impossible to convey this in words alone because so much depends on voice and the music therein, but two things stand out for me; one is the sexualization

¹⁶ Grant, 129. The passage reads:” The operation of the beating continues for about two hours—the men amusing themselves and encouraging each other the while by sundry vehement cries and songs—generally not particularly distinguished for elegance or purity.”

¹⁷ See Laura Bohannon (pseudonym Elenore Smith Bowen), *Return to Laughter* New York: Random House, 1964 [1954], pp 75-6; and E.E. Evans-Pritchard article

¹⁸ Malinowski, *Ibid*, 135-36; 140

¹⁹ Louise Cramer, “Songs of West Indian Negroes in the Canal Zone,” *California Folklore Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 3, (July 1946), p. 245

(“slide them in/ slide them out . . .,” “I can make your belly grow . . .,” “I don’t know, but I been told/ Suzie has a jelly roll”) and the other is singing to otherwise inert matter such as railroad spikes as if they are people.

“Gandy Dancer” seems to say it all. Gandy was the name of the factory that made the tools such as the crow bar, while Dancer refers to the laborers “dancing” their way into materiality through “hums and cries.” The very name of the iron tool, *Gandy*, well conveys this coalescence of the animate with the inanimate, of inertness with lively life. Where would southern slavery and the black foundations of industrial capitalism have gotten without appropriations of tradition such as this appropriation of “hums and cries?”

A Magical Snare

It is often said by scholars that singing, especially collective singing, makes labor more efficient by facilitating coordination between workers, diminishing boredom and—given that most labor is carried out for a boss or rich person—helps keep the workers in line even when the songs sound rebellious. As a young boy aged about seven I marveled at the marching Australian troops near my home who would be singing as they marched

I had a good job for twenty five bob
And I socked the manager in the gob
With a left,
A left,
A left, right, left

But what is “efficiency”?

Following the many German theories of work rhythm, such as that of Karl Bucher, around the time of WW 1, Malinowski made a detailed argument to the effect that in much the same way as collective singing, magic organized communal labor in the Trobriand islands.²⁰ He had in mind the big picture of the agricultural timetable, it being magic in the form of group rituals staged at discrete intervals, so he claimed, that staggered the work in a sequence in accord with the demands of nature—rainfall, weed growth, etc--and coordinated the several workers into the one human instrument. This is one reason why his books contain many time-charts. Yet as he is at pains to point out, the islanders are not short on knowledge of agriculture and are hardly in need of a magician to tell them what to do and when to do it. More persuasive is the claim for aesthetics and performance in work itself, such that we can see the magician as orchestrating a large scale “happening” out there on the coral gardens and their magic. This fusion of work with beauty is not an easy idea for us moderns to understand or digest, nor the possibility that the beauty of growing

²⁰ see Michael Cowan, *Technology’s Pulse*; also Karl Bucher, *Arbeit und Rhythmus*

plants feeds into the aesthetic creations of song, dance, body painting, house and canoe construction, etc..

What is more, utilitarian explanations of such magic minimize or even ignore the possibility, or point of view, that song per se, either collective or solo, like incantatory speech, can in itself be an engagement with the material life of things, uniting, so to speak, the human body with other bodies and the body of the world through the bodily unconscious.

Malinowski emphasizes the communal character of labor in the Trobriand gardens, yet seems oblivious to an outstanding element of such communality, and that is the participation of the plants themselves as sentient, human-like, beings. As one of the islanders tells him, “We plant taytu, already it lies (in the ground); later on, it hears magic above, already it sprouts;.” (141) Like most anthropologists he is caught in a conflict of philosophies or ontologies; on the one hand the modern European view of nature as an object, not a subject, in some sense dead and distant, and this other view which understands nature in human and spiritual terms as a subject, too.

Okay, but what about the obscenity?

What I would like to propose is that we understand obscenity as not only transgression of boundaries, defined in terms of the more obvious erotic zones, but as transgression of bodily propriety more generally understood—by which I mean the “sexualized” body of the world including of course the human body within that body.

I am thinking of Bataille’s dense analysis of erotism as a specific manner of eliding taboo, finding that strange, charged, space of being that is created by setting the taboo aside. When thinkers such as Malinowski beat us over the head with utilitarian explanations of magic in gardening or in the construction of a canoe, they are a long way from this point of view—that “magic,” so called, is an entailment, a script, if you like, required by and facilitated by such a “space.”

As with the bees and the butterflies, it seems like working on nature is to partake sexually, so to speak, with the inner life of materials. In the indigo vat it is the density and intimacy of the interaction with the inner life of the object-world that astounds me, whether it be the harmonies and self-transforming movements of animating materials confined by the vat, or whether it be their exploding into obscene song and color. All labor has something of this quality-- this eerie intimacy with things and with motions inseparable from the thing we call mind, only we take it for granted and rarely notice it until hit with a broadside from the colonies and from sites of manual labor where the mix of horror and the fabulous makes us sit up and take note. Magic is sometimes said to be just this dazzling fusion of the human with the thing-world too, although the work is likely to be more involved with theater and incantation. The *collective* nature of the work I have cited makes this magical movement and fusion with the intimacy of the material world all the more

noticeable especially when the bodies move like one as in a chorus line in time to the music which brings the social and the natural worlds together.

In his relentless analysis of the famous dancing troupe, the Tiller Girls, Siegfried Krackauer, leaves no stone unturned in arguing that that their collective, unified, movements are analogs of industrial labor in which the body has itself become a slave-like extension of the machine.²¹ Not much room here, you might say, for what I call the “eerie intimacy of things.” But think again!

The magic is there in spades. It is literally spell-binding to witness the human bodies perform as do these scantily dressed Tiller Girls all in a line, legs high, in perfect unison, a spell that has as much to do with our never ending appreciation of the immense mimetic capabilities of the human body. Here the female body performs the machine (and is not just *like* a machine). What is more—much more—Kracauer completely ignores the erotic charge these dancers emit and hence the place of Bataille’s erotism in the body of the world more generally.²² Whether it be the erotic potential of machinery or the erotic power of the erotic is unimportant. It is as present there as it is in “the obscene” presented in Tiv land and with Trobriand women’s collective weeding.

As I watch these harmonious legs all in unison, I cannot but refer once more to humming and think of Nietzsche, who loved moving his legs too, walking every day as part of his thinking. I see him pointing to the age old magical power of rhythm, not only in prayer as a magical snare to make the gods pliable, but in mundane activities as well, such as rowing or bailing water from a boat. Still today, he thought, even “after millennia of work at fighting such superstition,” this magical power of rhythm exerts itself.²³

So I ask myself, is humming, then, a “magical snare” too, a rhythm of sounds without words making a prayer without any obvious Church or priest? Can humming snare the violence of state, as well, where William Burroughs’ “unknown past and the emergent future meet in a vibrating soundless hum?”

MR. WEINGLASS: Will you please state your full name?

THE WITNESS: Allen Ginsberg.

MR. WEINGLASS: What is your Occupation?

THE WITNESS: Poet.

²¹ S. Krackauer, tiller girls essay

²² “The mass movements of the girls, by contrast, take place in a vacuum; they are a linear system that no longer has any erotic meaning but at best points to the locus of the erotic.” From “The Mass Ornament”

²³ Gay Science #84, pp 83-86 Cambridge University Press, 2001,

THE WITNESS: I was chanting a mantra called the "Mala Mantra," the great mantra of preservation of that aspect of the Indian religion called Vishnu the Preserver. Every time human evil rises so high that the planet itself is threatened, and all of its inhabitants and their children are threatened, Vishnu will preserve a return.

MR. WEINGLASS: And what occurred in Lincoln Park approximately 10:30, if you can recall?

THE WITNESS: There were several thousand young people gathered, waiting, late at night. It was dark. There were some bonfires burning in trashcans. Everybody was standing around not knowing what to do. Suddenly there was a great deal of consternation and movement and shouting among the crowd in the park, and I turned, surprised, because it was early. The police were or had given 11:00 as the date or as the time---

MR. FORAN: Objection, your Honor.

MR. WEINGLASS: What did you do at the time you saw the police do this?

THE WITNESS: I started the chant, O-o-m-m-m-m-m-, O-o-m-m-m-m-m-m.

M R. FORAN: All right, we have had a demonstration.

THE COURT: All right.

MR. WEINGLASS : Did you finish your answer?

THE WITNESS: We walked out of the park. We continued chanting for at least twenty minutes, slowly gathering other people, chanting, Ed Sanders and I in the center, until there were a group of maybe fifteen or twenty making a very solid heavy vibrational change of aim that penetrated the immediate area around us, and attracted other people,

and so we walked out slowly toward the street, toward Lincoln Park.

MR. WEINGLASS: I now show you what is marked D-153 for identification. Could you read that to the jury?

THE WITNESS: Magic Password Bulletin. Physic Jujitsu. In case of hysteria, the magic password is o-m, same as o-h-m-, which cuts through all emergency illusions. Pronounce o-m from the middle of the body, diaphragm or solar plexus. Ten people humming o-m can calm down one himself. One hundred people humming o-m can regulate the metabolism of a thousand. A thousand bodies vibrating o-m can immobilize an entire downtown Chicago street full of scared humans, uniformed or naked. Signed, Allen Ginsberg, Ed Sanders. O-m will be practiced on the beach at sunrise ceremonies with Allen and Ed.

MR. WEINGLASS: Could you explain to the Court and jury what you meant in that last statement of your message?

THE WITNESS: By "immobilize" I meant shut down the mental machinery which repeats over and over again the images of fear which are scaring people in uniform, that is to say, the police officers or the demonstrators, who I refer to as naked meaning naked emotionally, and perhaps hopefully naked physically.

MR. WEINGLASS: And what did you intend to create by having that mechanism shut down?

THE WITNESS: A completely peaceful realization of the fact that we were all stuck in the same street, place, terrified of each other, and reacting in panic and hysteria rather than reacting with awareness of each other as human beings, as people with bodies that actually feel, can chant and pray and have a certain sense of vibration to each other or

tenderness to each other which is basically what everybody wants, rather than fear.

MR. WEINGLASS: Now directing your attention to the next day which is Sunday, August 25, what, if anything, did you do in the park?

THE WITNESS: First I walked around to the center of the park, where suddenly a group of policemen appeared in the middle of the younger people. There was an appearance of a great mass of policemen going through the center of the park. I was afraid then, thinking they were going to make trouble---

MR. FORAN: Objection to his state of mind.

THE COURT: I sustain the objection.

MR. WEINGLASS: What did you do when you saw the policemen in the center of the crowd?

THE WITNESS: Adrenalin ran through my body. I sat down on a green hillside with a group of younger people that were walking with me about 3:30 in the afternoon, 4:00 o'clock. Sat, crossed my legs, and began chanting O-o-m---O-o--m-m-m-m, O-o-m-m-m-m, O-o-m-m-m-m-m.

MR. FORAN: I gave him four that time.

THE WITNESS: I continued chanting for several hours.

THE COURT: Did you say you continued chanting seven hours?

THE WITNESS: Seven hours, yes. About six hours I chanted "Om" and for the seventh hour concluded with the chant Hare krishna/hare krishna/krishna krishna/hare hare/ hare rima/hare rama/rama rama/hare hare.

MR. WEINGLASS: Now, directing your attention to Monday night, that is August 26, in the evening, where were you?

THE WITNESS: I was by a barricade that was set up, a pile of trash cans and police barricades, wooden horses, I believe. There were a lot of young kids, some black, some white, shouting and beating on the tin barrels, making a fearsome noise.

MR. WEINGLASS: What did you do after you got there?

THE WITNESS: Started chanting "Om." For a while I was joined in the chant by a lot of young people who were there until the chant encompassed most of the people by the barricade, and we raised a huge loud sustained series of "Oms" into the air loud enough to include everybody. Just as it reached, like, a great unison crescendo, all of a sudden a police car came rolling down into the group, right into the center of the group where I was standing, and with a lot of crashing and tinkling sound of glass, and broke up the chanting, broke up the unison and the physical---everybody was holding onto each other physically--broke up that physical community that had been built and broke up the sound chant that had been built. I moved back. There was a crash of glass.²⁴

Back to Pooh

A dog whimpers and twitches in its sleep. The wind hums through the trees and the river has a humming, cruising sound that never stops as it runs over the rapids when I go upstate to the land without traffic or the shrieker. And then there's the pretty well continuous ringing in my ears, the ur-hum where insides meets outside in the one great hum of the great bumble bee.

Inoculating himself against the nostalgia of childhood, Walter Benjamin wrote how the hunchback from nursery rhymes who plagued him as a child, making him a perpetual loser, preceded him everywhere he went. You didn't see him but he always saw you. Under his gaze everything receded—the garden, the bench, his room—it was if they grew a hump. “When I go into my little room/ To have my little sweet,/ I find a little hunchback there/ Has eaten half the treat.” But he has long since abdicated, wrote Benjamin, even though “his voice, like the hum of the gas burner, whispers to me over

²⁴ Testimony of Allen Ginsberg, downloaded from the internet, “Trial Transcript Page, Chicago 7 Trial Homepage.

the threshold of the century: “Dear little child, I beg of you/ Pray for the little hunchback too.”²⁵

Yet did he really abdicate? Does not the humming implicate screaming? What else was the Angel of History but this same hum, this same hunchback, eyes staring, mouth open, and wings spread, staring at the wreckage piled at his feet, the feet of history?

Forty years ago a poet of the people found a very different relation to history, deflecting the standard revolutionary wisdom of the West with his call not to arms but to O-m-ms. At once profound and open, a Winnie-the-Pooh character if ever there was one, Allen Ginsberg updated that philosophy of history in which Walter Benjamin speaks of “chips of Messianic time,” referring to what can happen when something from the traumatic past is suddenly brought into the present such that another world seems possible.

Bees of the world unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains.

the end

²⁵ Benjamin. *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, Harvard, p 121-22

ⁱ J.N.B. Hewitt, "Orenda and a Definition of Religion," *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol 4 No.1 (January-March 1902), pp. 33-46, page 40

ⁱⁱ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, and *The Anti-Christ*, Translated by R.J. Holingdale, London: Penguin, [1889] 1968, p. 84

ⁱⁱⁱ Hewitt, 35-36