SAMPLER

Imagens 2
By Richard Berengarten

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Not Chaos, not
The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,
Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out
By help of dreams, can breed such fear and awe
As fall upon us often when we look
Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man,
My haunt, and the main region of my Song …

William Wordsworth

[...] in its own terms there is no way that language can break out of the world language creates — except by allowing language to go beyond itself in poetry…

Iain McGilchrist

There is nothing that cannot be said and it is possible to say nothing.

Pierre Bourdieu
On Poetry and Sound: 
The Ontogenesis of Poetry

Twelve Propositions

1. Where and how does poetry begin in a person’s world? I contend, first, that its origins are in rhythm and, more specifically, sound rhythms; and second, that these sounds are pre-linguistic. They occur in the womb of the mother, before the ears of the foetus have fully developed as organs and well before full aural exposure to language as a referential system can possibly have occurred. In short, the ontological origins of both poetry and music precede birth. They are intra-uterine.

2. Rhythm itself means habit and familiarity. What constitutes rhythm of any kind is, precisely, the patterning of regularity, repetition, ritual. These features and functions overlap, merge and cohere. Familiarity is primary. Rhythm is familiar because it belongs and pertains to the family and arises from the first familial condition: that of the foetus in the womb. Being by definition regular and repetitive, sound rhythm develops a sense of safety, security and surety for the foetus. Rhythm, which means wave motion, confirms, comforts, consoles and conditions.

3. The developing human foetus is bombarded constantly by multiple sounds from its environment, the all-encompassing body of the mother. First, there are the noises that come from the interior of the mother’s body. These include the intermittent peristaltic whisperings, gurglings and swooshings of the mother’s digestive process. Even more regularly, the foetus registers the secure background rhythms of the mother’s breathing, and the pitter-patter of her heart as it pumps and pulses blood. Here is the beginning of every human being’s sense of music. We might call it a proto-music. In a study as detailed and delicate as it is profound and far-reaching, Giselle E. Whitwell collates and synthesises recent research by foetologists as follows:
Uterine sounds form a “sound carpet” over which the mother’s voice in particular appears very distinct and which the prenate gives special attention to because it is so different from its own amniotic environment. These sounds are of major importance because they establish the first patterns of communication and bonding. Some researchers have discovered that newborns become calmer and more self-regulated when exposed to intrauterine sound […] The soothing sounds of the ocean and water are probably reminiscent of the fluid environment in which we began life. Tomatis suggests that the maternal heart beat, respiration and intestinal gurgling, all form the source for our collective attraction to the sound of surf and may have to do with our inborn sense of rhythm. Prenatal sounds form an important developmental component in prenatal life because they provide a foundation for later learning and behavior. (Whitwell 1999)

4. The foetus also registers sounds that come from outside the mother. The mother listens to music, she drives in traffic, a dog barks, other humans make sounds in her presence, including speech sounds. The foetus’s senses cannot be entirely blockaded by the mother’s protective body, and all of these affect the foetus, in ways not yet fully understood, even if they are muffled and filtered by the various layered organs and membranes of the mother’s body. “Many pregnant women report a fetal jerk or sudden kick just after a door slams or a car backfires,” writes Janet Hopson (1998).

5. Evidently, then, the foetus/embryo is exposed to sound rhythms at all stages of development; and perception and registration of sound begin very early. The embryo begins to develop a cerebral cortex after only five weeks. “At nine weeks, the embryo’s ballooning brain allows it to bend its body, hiccup, and react to loud sounds” (ibid.). By 17 weeks, the vocal chords have formed (SPUC, ‘Foetal Development’). Furthermore:

Estimates of the date at which the human foetus begins to hear currently range between 16 and 24 weeks gestational age (GA), depending, inter alia, upon the kind of sound presented and the exact criterion according to which hearing is deemed to be present. At 20 weeks GA, the human cochlea reaches
a developmental state similar to that in other mammals when responses to sound can be evoked, and sounds may be encoded and messages sent along the auditory pathways.

Abundant anecdotal evidence exists regarding the effect of sound heard prenatally upon the behaviour of the newborn infant. For example, in 6th century Europe, it was believed that sounds, conversations and especially music heard by the unborn child affected the personality and disposition of the baby after birth. (IIP Services)

“By the end of the second trimester, it can hear” (Hopson). “A very premature baby entering the world at 24 or 25 weeks responds to the sounds around it [...], so its auditory apparatus must already have been functioning in the womb” (ibid.). Whitwell observes:

The ear first appears in the 3rd week of gestation and it becomes functional by the 16th week. The fetus begins active listening by the 24th week. We know from ultrasound observations that the fetus hears and responds to a sound pulse starting about 16 weeks of age [...]; this is even before the ear construction is complete. The cochlear structures of the ear appear to function by the 20th week and mature synapses have been found between the 24th and 28th weeks. [...]. The sense of hearing is probably the most developed of all the senses before birth. (Whitwell, ‘The Sound environment of the Womb’; emphases added)

Some researchers suggest that the mother’s body is no barrier at all to the foetus’s developing hearing:

Until recently, it was thought that the sound of the mother’s voice was masked by the strong sounds of her heartbeat and other internal organs. However, it is now well established that external speech sounds, including the mother’s voice, can be heard clearly inside the womb. (Harris and Butterworth 143)

We may also infer that the partial permeability of the mother’s body to sound, especially voice, serves as a conditioning, preparatory or educative purpose in the foetus’s pre-linguistic development.
6. As a distinct sub-category of sound, the foetus also registers the mother’s own oral sounds, as she talks, hums, sings, murmurs, snores, shouts, laughs, etc. And although the general observation made in the last quoted observation by Harris and Butterworth is likely to be accurate as far as it goes, it needs to be emphasised that, from the foetus’s perspective, acoustically the mother’s voice is not merely “external”. For her speech sounds begin in her vocal chords and vibrate to the foetus through the membranes of organs in the interior of her body as well as from the projection of the sounds onto surrounding air. Since the mother’s voice resonates to the foetus from both inside and outside her body, we may also infer that the foetus experiences the mother’s voice not merely as intimate but as all-pervasive.

7. Apart from sign languages used by the deaf and dumb, primary language transmission occurs by sound: it is universally vocal and its reception universally oral. So here are the beginnings of a human being’s sense of language. And even though, obviously, the referentiality of language to specific objects in the exterior world cannot begin to be fully recognised and determined until well after birth, according to Hopson the work by De Casper and colleagues at the University of North Carolina suggests that a foetus: (a) can distinguish between individual voices; (b) prefers the voice of its mother to those of others, “especially the way it sounds filtered through amniotic fluid rather than through air”; and (c) also prefers to hear the rhythms of the mother “speaking in her native language than to hear her or someone else speaking in a foreign tongue” (Hopson). The same author reports that Lecanuet and colleagues in Paris have found that foetuses (a) distinguish between strangers’ voices, and (b) prefer certain stories to others:

The fetal heartbeat will slow down when a familiar French fairy tale such as ‘La Poulette’ (‘The Chick’) or ‘Le Petit Crapaud’ (‘The Little Toad’), is read near the mother’s belly. When the same reader delivers another unfamiliar story, the fetal heartbeat stays steady. […] The fetus is likely responding to the cadence of voices and stories, not their actual words, observes Fifer, but the conclusion is the same:
the fetus can listen, learn, and remember at some level, and, as with most babies and children, *it likes the comfort and reassurance of the familiar*’ (ibid.; emphases added).

8. Some researches on the perception of language rhythms by the foetus are as astonishing in their correspondence to expectation and intuition as they are beautiful. Here is Whitwell again:

Verny and others have noted that babies have a preference for stories, rhymes, and poems first heard in the womb. When the mother reads out loud, the sound is received by her baby in part via bone conduction. Dr. Henry Truby, Emeritus Professor of Pediatrics and Linguistics at the University of Miami, points out that after the sixth month, the fetus moves in rhythm to the mother’s speech and that spectrographs of the first cry of an abortus at 28 weeks could be matched with his mother’s. *The elements of music, namely tonal pitch, timbre, intensity and rhythm, are also elements used in speaking a language.* For this reason, music prepares the ear, body and brain to listen to, integrate and produce language sounds. *Music can thus be considered a pre-linguistic language* which is nourishing and stimulating to the whole human being, affecting body, emotions, intellect, and developing an internal sense of beauty, sustaining and awakening the qualities in us that are wordless and otherwise inexpressible (Whitwell: ‘Introduction’; emphases added).

9. All of these observations support the theory that, ontologically, sound is chronologically far more significant than vision in the very earliest formation of both language and poetry. Just as the rhythmical sounds experienced by the foetus constitute a proto-music, so the speech-sounds experienced constitute a proto-language and a proto-poetry.

10. If these contentions are accepted, and if language is considered as a referential and representational system whose primary function, individually and communally, is to register, co-ordinate and regulate spatial and temporal relationships and phenomena, then it might be said: that proto-poetic rhythms are patterned into the body before anything like an ‘image’ even gets a look in.