



THE CLEVER BODY

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THE PATHIC ASPECT | As we carry out our manifold daily tasks, communicate with people, and move around in our familiar surroundings, we are exposed to a great variety of impressions, to colours, sounds, odours, or tactile qualities. When we enter into a public place – a shop or a restaurant – the strong smell or the loud music literally envelops us and elicits a bodily reaction. As the word “impression” indicates, the sensory qualities impress upon us, affect us. Inside an office building, we may feel ill at ease, or, while conversing, we may be struck by some changes in our partner’s facial or vocal expression.

The quality of the building or the inner disposition of the person facing us are lived rather than consciously known and represented. "In entering an apartment," says Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "we can perceive the character (*esprit*) of those who live there without being capable of justifying this impression by an enumeration of remarkable details, and certainly well before having noted the color of the furniture."¹ Indeed, there are many situations in our daily life wherein our reaction to events, spaces, gestures, and words occurs in absence of an explicit conceptual understanding. We relate to objects or to people with an implicit or tacit consciousness: our body knows much more than we are able to explain by words.²

We may consider all of these experiences as *pathic* in the sense that they are preconceptual and involve a bodily response. Pathic is the characteristic feature of communication itself: it is a transforming relationship to a situation that personally affects us in some way.³ When we aimlessly wander in a large hall and hear a gentle, familiar voice – with its particular pitch and colour – even without exactly knowing who is speaking or what is being said, we still cannot relate to the sound in a detached manner. Our body is seized, moved by the quality of a voice. From the induced feeling-tones follows a valuation of the sensory impression. If we are fatigued or cold and a fog presses upon us, we experience these sensations with a greater intensity and this bodily state prompts a particular relation to whatever we perceive; things are viewed as more frightening.⁴ When darkness falls and everything becomes quiet around us, we are "touched" by the spell of obscurity. As we enjoy our own bodily stillness and well-being, we become sensitive to the mystery of our lived space. We assign qualities and meanings to our environment according to our own momentary disposition and attitude.

In his luminous analysis of the human sensory experiences, Erwin W. Straus made a distinction between the pathic and gnostic aspects of our relation to the world.⁵ By pathic, Straus means an immediate, sensually vivid communication with tones, colours, odours, and tactile materials. Gnostic is the distant and neutral awareness of the constant properties of things. In the pathic, the *how* is grasped, in the gnostic, the *what* is apprehended. In the pathic sphere, we are taken by the momentary impressions and symbolic qualities; in the gnostic perspective, we are directed towards the determinable and objective features.

Since the spatial and temporal characteristics of our communication with objects unavoidably emerge together, there is a corresponding contrast between what we feel and how we move. In the pathic, we focus on what we do in the present and enjoy an unmediated union between our milieu and ourselves. Our movement has no specific starting point or direction and takes place in a space without a system of fixed valences. In the gnostic, we direct ourselves actively to the past and future, and the space around us is articulated through direction, distance, measure, and stability. Here, our movement is tied to a purpose and related to a "historical space."

It would be erroneous to strictly separate the pathic and the gnostic as two alternating aspects or moments of a global experience. The pathic does not appear when the gnostic fades; it does not belong only to particular objects or specific human actions. The pathic pertains to the characteristics of an activity's immediate experience and also to the reciprocal communication we have with things. For example, while making music, the pathic moment may receive a stronger emphasis, but, if it does, this occurs without the disappearance of the gnostic dimension.

Whether the pathic or the gnostic factor becomes dominant, the communication brings into play a particular bodily experience: “where we speak of the gnostic or pathic moments, we are definitely comprehending the experience of the live body (*Leib*) in relation to its surroundings or to the world.”⁶ How can we characterize the living body being “pathically” exposed to sensory impressions? A central element of the pre-conceptual and unmediated bond is, as I mentioned earlier, the experience of being affected. Something takes possession of us; our body is seized by a quality and delivered to its influence. The decisive factor here is the body’s ability to echo vivid and penetrating impressions, to resonate to the appeal of meaningful events. The words “echo” and “resonance” refer to the receptivity and responsiveness of the body, to its attunement to the outside world.

Following the fine analyses of Buytendijk and Jean Ladrière, who both find their inspiration in the thought of Martin Heidegger, we could evoke here the concept of *Stimmung*, the mood, the experience of being-affected, -tuned, -disposed of the body.⁷ This expression signifies the body’s passivity, its receptivity, its capability to be influenced by outside impressions. At the same time, various valuations, meanings, and modes of behaviour arise out of the mood. Therefore, we find in the *Stimmung* the “paradoxical unity” (Ladrière) of passivity and activity. The body and the concrete milieu reciprocally define each other: the body is moved while it virtually or concretely moves itself and assigns meanings.

In his essay on the body’s receptivity to living spaces, Ladrière, widely relying on the views of Michel Henry on affectivity, contends that our bodily responsiveness does not occur only on the level of our intentional-pathic relationship to the world.⁸ Our feelings – joy, sadness, contentment, distress – are constituted thanks to the fundamental capacity of

our body to affect itself and to feel itself. This self-feeling does not lead to any theoretical representation; rather, it is immediately lived and indubitably apprehended within the context of our personal life. Ladrière admits that the affectivity, as such, cannot be understood solely as the body's relation to itself. It surely connects us with events, allowing us to resonate to a stream of qualities, to be touched and moved by them. He argues, however, that our affective attunement to the other is made possible by the "primal responsiveness" (*réceptivité originnaire*) of our body, by its indubitable and effective receptivity towards itself. Beyond its dynamic interaction with things and people, our body is eminently receptive; it has the capacity to be affected by itself and this auto-affectation, the immediate passivity towards itself, constitutes the original reality of the living body and makes possible its openness to the world: "We are affectivity, in as much as our being is essentially passive. But this passivity is the body itself, we are thus affectivity in as much as we are body."⁹ If external impressions are able to induce in us affective dispositions, this is ultimately due to the capacity of our lived body to affect itself, feel itself, relate to itself without any mediation and distance.

DELICACY OF THE BODY | To more adequately describe the body's affective communication, I would like to introduce the notion of sensibility. It refers to our elementary pathic responsiveness to appearances, changes, and challenges, the body's constant and unavoidable exposure to impressions. As sensible beings, we are subjected to all sorts of influences from external events and developments. "Because of our sensibility," says Louis Lavelle, "we cannot stand aloof from the world without; through our sensibility, the world acquires a sort of consubstantiality with us; our body is bound to it by mysterious fibres, so that no one of these can be

touched without our whole being being affected."¹⁰ The bond between our body and the everyday realities allows us to exist; at the same time, however, it may bring an end to our existence. We are at the mercy of random happenings. Similarly to Ladrière, Lavelle claims that sensibility is not only a primary form of contact with objects and people, but also an essential sort of self-awareness, an immediate and indubitable revelation of our own existence. Without sensibility we could hardly recognize our body as belonging to us and, to a certain extent, to everything that affects us. It is because of its constitutive vulnerability that we are eminently conscious of our body: we become conscious of what can be affected, perturbed, or even lost.¹¹

C. S. Lewis remarks, in his *Studies in Words*, that "sensibility always means a more than ordinary degree of responsiveness or reaction."¹² Indeed, being a mere vulnerability, a pathic exposure to a particular outside influence does not exhaust this particular bodily capacity. It is through our sensibility that we become aware of changes, contrasts, differences, deviations, even if our discrimination remains vague and lacks precision. Lavelle speaks of the "delicacy of the body, which reacts to the subtlest and most remote happenings outside it, enabling it to distinguish their finest differences."¹³ We meet someone and, if we are attentive enough, can sense immediately that something is not right, something has happened, or she is just not the same as before. Or if we encounter two brothers, we are able to detect instantly, sometimes with an extreme accuracy, qualities that distinguish one from the other. We sense small differences in their manner of greeting us or in their facial expressions, yet we are unable to tell what exactly prompted this recognition. Like a very delicate and sensitive seismograph, our body is able, from a very

early age, to register and respond to variations, nuances, and shades in attitude and behaviour of people around us.¹⁴

Our body's discriminative sensibility relates to the surroundings in accordance with our activities and interests. When, for instance, we deal with important practical issues, we tend to ignore superfluous or distracting sensory impressions. We pick out zones of interest and become indifferent to irrelevant information. The focus on specific tasks or objects prompts our sensibility to select aspects or areas and pay closer attention to them. Straus illustrates this tacit modification with the following example.¹⁵ Entering a crowded hall, we are assailed by a loud and distracting noise. But as soon as we meet someone and engage ourselves in conversation, the situation changes: we are no longer overwhelmed by the enveloping noise. As we become attentive to the words and gestures of our partner, the steady and disturbing din of the crowd fades away. The same experience occurs when, driving in heavy traffic, we turn on our car radio or use our cellular phone: both the visual and auditory impressions become less insistent. Our bodily sensibility is now bound to a restricted sphere of interest. If, on the other hand, we fail to exhibit an interest in specific occurrences, we find ourselves exposed to a wide variety of visual and auditory information. In this connection, Straus contends that an extreme sensibility to noise, exhibited by sick persons, is due to a disturbed communication with the world and not to an altered functioning of the acoustic nerves.

This brings us to another important aspect of our bodily sensibility: its relationship to movement. Whether focusing on particular objects or relating to a broader range of situations without a specific concern, our sensibility, involved or disinterested, is bound to movement. Touching

manifests this relationship in a striking fashion. When we touch an object, the impression obviously originates from the movement of our hand. If our hand stops moving, the tactile impression remains constant and eventually ceases to affect us. It is the deployment of our movement that makes possible the affective resonance to an object. On the other hand, our movement itself is the result of the tactile contact: the hand's exploring movement is guided by some tactile qualities – hardness, softness, smoothness, or roughness – and the affective tones induced by these qualities. The nature and the intensity of the movement depend, to a great extent, on the affective attunement to the object. The motor competence of some basketball or water polo players are surely enhanced by the playful relationship that their hand entertains with the ball because, being a round, simple, and perfect sphere, it naturally exerts an attraction. Repeatedly catching and throwing a ball evokes in the player a particular satisfaction: in Buytendijk's words, the "feeling of co-existence without any resistance."¹⁶ The same feeling could be elicited by the caress of an infant's head or any other similar round and smooth object.

A caress, of course, can have various motives and meanings: its affectionate gentleness may be perceived under the aspects of reassurance and comfort, or exploration and discovery. But whatever is expressed, the rhythmic contact of the hand with the body of the beloved person is prompted by the affective component of the tactile impression. Following Jean Nogué's suggestion, we may compare the caress to music-making: just as the flow of sounds provides an impulse to the subtle and delicate movements of the violinist's fingers, the feeling-tones stemming from tactile contacts induce the approaching and withdrawing motions of the hand.¹⁷

The execution of tactile movements is not a “groundless process” (Straus); we introduce variations of rhythm, speed, and form into our movement patterns because we stand in relation to our milieu and establish a subtle communication with its significant elements. As sensible beings, we experience things, events, and people that speak directly to our body and thus induce various types of motor responses.¹⁸

Different types of sensory impressions exert distinct affective resonances. The encounter with an object may involve the simultaneous collaboration of two or more senses. In a concert hall, we see the pianist playing a piece and, at the same time, hear the melody. If we close our eyes, we are aware only of the sounds, but not of the moving fingers. While watching the same concert on television, we might do the opposite: we turn off the sound and observe merely the pianist’s manual dexterity. The switching from seeing to hearing or from hearing to seeing is not just a matter of focusing or shifting our sensory attention. When we suddenly “turn off” a sense, our experience is not merely less vivid and intense. The change is qualitative: we establish an altogether different kind of relation to the concert itself. If, while watching a frightening movie or a sporting event, all sound is suddenly cut off, the scene ceases to take hold of us. A converse transformation occurs when the “gate” of an additional sense – tasting or touching – is opened. As Straus has shown, in passing from the tactile sphere to the visual or from the visual to the audible, or the reverse way, we experience a significant change in the manner things, people, or events affect us. Objectively, these realities remain the same; what is altered is the mode of stimulating our sensibility.¹⁹ “At an emotional level,” observes Anthony Storr, “there is something ‘deeper’ about hearing than seeing; and something about hearing other

people which fosters human relationships even more than seeing them."²⁰ Lovers know that a gentle touch of the hand of the other creates a more intimate and personal form of relationship between them than the mere exchange of words or glances. In passing from seeing to touching, their relation reaches a different level: the distance yields to an immediate reciprocity, the possibility of participation to a claim for exclusivity.

WIDER SPECTRUM OF THE SENSES | Our body's sensibility and its achievement cannot be explained only by the impressions received by the five major sensory organs. Recent research has called our attention to the significant role that other sensory systems play in our experiences and relationships.²¹ When we travel on an aeroplane or stand close to a loud speaker, we are able to detect vibrations of different frequencies. We receive vibratory sensations when we establish tactile contacts with objects, especially with machines using combustible substances. If so many people today are infatuated with a motorcycle, a ski-doo, or a sea-doo, their ardour is caused, in part, by the vibratory sensations they feel at the point of contact between their body and the vehicle. They are thrilled just as much by the changing magnitudes of vibratory impressions as by the high speed and power of the conveyance they drive.

By touching an instrument, deaf persons are exposed to rhythmic vibratory impressions and some even claim to enjoy music. David Katz published a thorough study of a "deaf music enthusiast" who, sitting at a distance from the orchestra, could not only feel with delight the different sound waves streaming through his body but also distinguish the specific character of a musical composition. Katz believes that the powerful effect of organ music on some of us can be explained by the strong

vibratory impressions that, in addition to the majestic sounds, emanate from the instrument.²²

Our body is also responsive to thermal impressions, even if our clothing shelters us to a certain degree. As we go out from our house to the street, we immediately become aware of changes in the temperature. Whether we realize it or not, we always undergo a specific thermic stimulation: the thermoreception of our body is not under our conscious control. Exposure to high temperatures during a hot summer day forces us to admit, sometimes not without irritation, how much our body is bound to, and dependent upon, a specific environment. The heat pursues us, we are unable to hold it at a distance and get away from it. Jean Nogué rightly notes that variations in temperature deeply affect us and alter both our experience of the lived space and our bodily attitude and conduct.²³

We establish the meaning of rooms, houses, or streets on the basis of our internal state, natural affinities, and actual temperature conditions. In warm weather, the space around us appears friendly and inspires confidence; on a cool day, things seem to resist our intentions. Scorching heat is connected to the feeling of burden, the bitter cold to that of hostility. Warmth has a natural kinship with life and it is for this reason, perhaps, that our body seeks it the most: we enjoy swimming in warm water or lying in a warm bed. Warmth gives to our living spaces the character of intimacy, familiarity: it arouses the desire to abolish distance, eliminate all forms of separation. The warmth of hearth creates a more relaxed and intimate atmosphere and, consequently, fosters a better communication among individuals.

Bodily sensibility is usually rooted in specific sensory systems that function independently from, or in synchrony with, each other.

However, we may respond to impressions or signals without being able to identify the sensory system inducing our response. Our experience is unified, global, and occurs without the awareness of a particular mode of sensing. René A. Spitz speaks of “coenesthetic communication,” which is based on a “total sensing system” of the body. Coenesthetic responses are not localized; they are extensive and involve a pervasive sensibility. “The sensorium plays a minimal role in coenesthetic reception; instead, perception takes place on the level of deep sensibility and in terms of totalities, in an all-or-none fashion. Responses to coenesthetic reception also are totality responses, e.g., visceral responses.”²⁴ Infants are exposed, in the first months of life, to changes of equilibrium, tension, vibration, rhythm, contact, time duration, and tone, arising from their immediate contacts. They register impressions not through separate sensory channels but by the coenesthetic organization of their body.

In a similar way, Daniel N. Stern draws our attention to the “infant’s formidable capacities to distil and organize the abstract, global qualities of experience.”²⁵ These qualities can be captured in terms of intensity, movement, pleasure, urgency, or shape. Elicited by the vital processes of the infant’s life, they give rise to a global and elementary interpretation of events and people, and may later lead to creative expressive activities.

Spitz stated that such an undifferentiated and non-verbal appraisal of a situation or a person, disappears from the life of many adults. The coenesthetic communication tends to diminish in the course of our development and is replaced by a diacritic, conscious perceptual experience. “Our deeper sensations do not reach our awareness, do not become meaningful to us, we ignore and repress their messages.”²⁶ Those, however, who “deviate somehow from the average Western man” and seek to transgress the rational mode of thinking – musicians, dancers, acrobats, painters,

poets, and others – are still able to retain and reinforce the functioning of their coenesthetic organization. During their creative moments, they are able to experience a form or an event in terms of “deep sensibility stimuli.” They remain attentive to the slightest changes around them, detect coenesthetic signals, and respond to perceptual phenomena with the totality of their body.²⁷

In his description of the coenesthetic perception, Spitz refers to the sensibility of the infant in relation to his nursing mother. There are other forms of interpersonal communications in which the coenesthetic reception may play an important role. When members of a string quartet make music together, they follow the notes on the music sheets and hear the tones of the instruments. These sensations give to their experience a diacritic character. However, the successful synchronization of the different musical events requires that each member plays his own part and, at the same time, takes into account the performance of the others. As Alfred Schutz has pointed out, a co-performance calls for the awareness of the measurable time and the sharing of the lived temporalities, in which his own part, and that of the others, unfold.²⁸ The violinist hears and anticipates the cellist’s interpretation while he takes into account the similar hearing and anticipating, by the cellist, of his own play. This complex process of communication and “tuning-in relationship” is not possible without sharing space with the other members of the quartet. The synchronization and reciprocal experience of the inner time of the co-performers demand the immediate sensory perception of the other’s bodily expressions. Beyond the perception of a series of tones assigned by the composer, the participants are oriented towards the postures, facial expressions, and gestures of the others. Their body’s deep sensibility perceives and interprets all these messages as meaningful signals. If,

as Anthony Storr suggests, playing in a string quartet is an exhilarating experience, the enjoyment is no doubt due to the richness and vividness of the non-verbal, non-directed communication between the musicians.²⁹ Their delight is provoked not only by the production of ordered sounds but also by the sheer experience of togetherness, the “mutual tuning-in relationship” (Schutz), and this is based on the ongoing process of subtle, hardly perceptible, but profoundly meaningful coenesthetic exchanges.

STYLE AND ATMOSPHERE | Style is the personal and distinctive use of variables (rhythmic structure, key centres, tone colours, tempo deviation, and so on) that make up a musical composition. The recognition of an individual character, the result of many years of practice and experience, calls for the capacity to perceive a unity beneath the diversity of forms, the *Stilgefühl* – as the sensibility for integration and stability is aptly called in German. Thanks to this feeling and before any reflective analysis, we are able to identify the author of a particular artistic work. After hearing a few notes of a sonata, or casting a glance at a painting, we say that this must be by Schubert or Raphael, even though we are unable to articulate our judgment in words – a judgment that is primarily subjective and prone to errors.³⁰

It is surely so that artistic sensibility presupposes the repeated encounter with forms. Once experiences have been accumulated, we accomplish an immediate discrimination and sense the characteristic manner of composing or portraying – the acoustical or visual fingerprints. The ability to recognize the personal style and identity of a composer or a painter is based on our talent to echo some invariable elements. Copies or imitations can be discovered, or doubts about the authenticity of an

artwork prudently advanced, because our body is able to feel, with equal confidence, the absence of a personality or its presence.

Our feeling for style is operative outside an aesthetic context. Thus, we encounter individuals who express their personality through their gestures, attitudes, and ways of moving. "A style," according to Merleau-Ponty, "is a certain manner of dealing with situations, which I identify or understand in an individual or in a writer, by taking over that manner myself in a sort of imitative way, even though I may be quite unable to define it; and in any case a definition, correct though it may be, never provides an exact equivalent, and is never of interest to any but those who have already had the actual experience."³¹ Towns and cities also have their own distinctive character. Merleau-Ponty explains that the style of a city consists in a distinctive and singular figure, a fundamental and concrete structure, an affective essence that is discovered at the very first encounter with certain material realities. We do not have to roam through all the streets, squares, parks, and combine these impressions into a totality in order to get acquainted with a style. Although partial and inexplicit, one glance at some streets and houses makes us aware of a definite style, and although further corrections and subsequent unfolding may make it more complete and articulate, they do not touch its indelible feature. In the following passage, Merleau-Ponty relates how the streets nearby the railroad station in Paris gave him an access to a distinct style:

Paris for me is not an object of many facets, a collection of perceptions, nor is it the law governing all these perceptions. Just as a person gives evidence of the same emotional essence in his gestures with his hands, in his way of walking and in the sound of his

voice, each express perception occurring in my journey through Paris – the cafés, people's faces, the poplars along the quays, the bends of the Seine – stands out against the city's whole being, and merely confirms that there is a certain style or a certain significance which Paris possesses. And when I arrived there for the first time, the first roads that I saw as I left the station were, like the first words spoken by a stranger, simply manifestations of a still ambiguous essence, but one already unlike any other. Just as we do not see the eyes of a familiar face, but simply its look and its expression, so we perceive hardly any object. There is present a latent significance, diffused throughout the landscape or the city, which we find in something specific and self-evident which we feel no need to define.³²

A city presents a material configuration just as much as a human face displays its basic components. Thus, each city has a pattern or a system composed mostly of paths and places where the various elements have a specific purpose, alternate in a rhythmic manner, and communicate with each other. Such a physical organization can be represented, studied, and described through a definite set of abstractions. But a city also possesses a "latent meaning," an "emotional essence" that requires a concrete, bodily apprehension. We become aware of this essence while weaving in and out of side streets, touching the doors and trees, and seeing the houses and stores. As we move through an alley or a park, remaining alert for subtle and complex perceptual cues, we detect the underlying affective quality of our specific surroundings. Tony Hiss notes that people concerned with the preservation of historical buildings describe their own experience of the individuality of a place in terms of "character," "essential spirit," "quality of life there," or "livability, genius, flavor, feeling, ambience, essence, resonance, presence, aura, harmony, grace, charm, or seamliness."³³ Their interest in the protection of historical

districts depends upon the affective dimension of their experience, alluded to by these expressions and terms.

Jean Ladrière believes that, in the emotional essence of the city, two basic feelings, joy and sadness, are united in an incomparable and peculiar way. They represent the fundamental aspects of our human condition and destiny, namely the imminence of decay and disappearance, and the promise of perfection and completion. Each city conveys sadness and joy, despondency and exaltation, emptiness and fullness, and, whether we are its visitors or inhabitants, we sense, with our body, their incomparable unity.

Kent C. Bloomer and Charles W. Moore also consider the body as a source of an affective reaction to architectural forms.³⁴ They relate the environmental meaning to the unconscious and changing image we have of our body and to the various values, feelings, and “psychophysical coordinates” arising from it. Reciprocally, our experience of the physical coordinates of houses develops and modifies our body image. In addition, the body image is extended to visible objects through our haptic sense. We relate to buildings as if we were touching them and, through our tactile imagination, we project on them some of our internal states. Qualities such as heavy, stable, protective, or centred depend for their meaning on the haptic sensations we have preserved in our body.

The city of our childhood leaves a decisive mark on us. We remain forever attached to the first impressions of a familiar yet mysterious space because of the strong emotional bonds created during the early part of our life. Every ensuing approach to an unfamiliar place, as well as every preference and feeling, is tied to our childhood experiences. The meanings we give to new houses and streets embody a decisive reference to the “city of our heart.”³⁵

The styles that we consider to be the underlying essences of cities and towns are, in fact, atmospheres. These are affective qualities that we detect in our immediate or wider surroundings. Because they touch and move us, in the deepest senses of these terms, atmospheres are, in the words of Gernot Böhme, “stirring emotional powers” (*ergreifende Gefühlskräfte*).³⁶ We may resist these powers or yield to their compelling influence, but we cannot eliminate them. Wherever we are, in a small room or in the middle of the ocean, we are constantly exposed to a particular atmosphere. Even though we do not always notice it, the contact with an atmosphere is just as much a fundamental feature of our existence as are consciousness and language.

The nature and functions of atmospheric emanations have been illustrated and analyzed with remarkable subtlety by Hubertus Tellenbach.³⁷ He speaks of the “atmospheric mode of being human” and considers it as one of the most important fields of study for philosophical anthropology.³⁸ Our sense of smell gives us a primary access to an atmosphere. Hospitals, schools, churches, apartments, all give off a particular odour, endowing the whole spatial structure with a certain tonality. Odours, like sounds, detach themselves from their sources, permeate the lived space, and induce a reaction. There is, however, a difference in the ways by which we are affected by odour and sound. Whereas the former encompasses us rather gently, discretely, without inducing a shock or a significant resonance, the latter – sound – exerts a more compelling influence and elicits a more marked response.³⁹

Newborn babies achieve a primary mode of contact with their mothers through their olfactory and gustatory senses. They sense not only the scent of a perfume and the taste of the breast, but also an emotional

essence, namely the specific atmospheric tone of their mother. "There is," writes Tellenbach, "in nearly all sensory experiences, a surplus which remains inexplicit."⁴⁰ To detect a particular atmospheric quality means to reach beyond the factual, the objectively given: to hear, beyond the sound, the timbre of a voice, and to see, beyond the shape, the glimmer of a colour. Thus we are able to grasp, sometimes with great accuracy, the inner state and character of a person who is speaking or gesticulating. We "hear through" the voice or "see through" the movement, to use Nicolai Hartmann's expressions.⁴¹ Our first impression of a man or a woman occurs by virtue of such an immediate experience of a distinctive atmospheric quality.⁴²

Indeed, a particular atmospheric nimbus permeates human beings and endows their movements, gestures, and words with a certain tonality. The personal atmosphere reminds us of the phenomenon of expression: a glance, a vibration of the voice, a gesture of the hand discloses a "breath," a "halo," or a "fine cloud" that constitutes, for Eugène Minkowski, the "spiritual aspect of a personality."⁴³ We all have encountered strong personalities who exerted on us a distinctively vivid impression: they seemed to radiate energy, wisdom, and conviction. They have inspired us to bring forth our best. Here is, in a sentence, the description of the powerful effect of a charismatic musician: "Liszt was a guru figure, an enormously attractive personality, and while you were in his magnetic presence, as more than one student testified, you played the piano better than you dreamed possible."⁴⁴ In some cases, such a personal magnetism could also become a dangerous gift, tempting its possessor to stifle our true individuality and self-expression. A less powerful personal atmosphere pervades the lived space around every encountered person. We

sense a particular presence or aura and, with it, a certain tonality – joy, vitality, sincerity, or sadness – that, like perfume, gradually infiltrates the whole surroundings. Children are keenly responsive to the atmosphere created, consciously or unconsciously, by their parents. As J. Rudert remarked, the parental atmospheric radiation is a “kind of spiritual food” that children need for healthy growth.⁴⁵ Their personality is considerably shaped by the atmosphere they “breathe in” at home. For the same reasons, students either resent or enjoy their learning experience in the classroom. An interpersonal atmosphere, where trust, confidence, and kindness are felt, is needed to make possible their healthy growth. In general, an atmosphere permeates every sector of our life-world, and influences, to a greater or lesser degree, the characteristics and outcomes of human activities.

Specific objects may also be charged with emotional accents and hence disclose an atmospheric quality. We may find them frightening, strange, pleasant, agreeable, nice, or hateful. Besides their objective, categorical appearance, which is relevant for our practical conducts, they may be endowed with some physiognomic characteristics. The world of children is fraught with a physiognomic structure: they see the flowers, clouds, or furniture as animated and affectively toned realities that speak and respond to them in some way. Even adults perceive familiar objects, with their dynamic and expressive qualities, as pertaining to specific feelings or events. Minkowski tells us that the cherished practical objects on our desk do not merely symbolize or recall a segment of our life: we do not simply supplement our perception by memory images. Our past is truly present in them and animates them. Thus we perceive a “breath of life” in a book or a pen just as much as we detect a “holy atmosphere” in a

forest or a mountain. If the theft of some cherished objects deeply affects us, it is due to the destruction of an important part of our being. In his remarkable novel *An Innocent Millionaire*, Stephen Vizinczey reflected on this vital bond between people and their possessions and considered it as the cornerstone of our sense of reality. "Things embody something of the years that drift away and evaporate like smoke. Possessions are proof, concrete evidence of all that has disappeared; to rob a man of what he has is to rob him of his past, to tell him that he didn't live, that he only dreamed his life."⁴⁶

In a similar way, Buytendijk studied the expressive and dynamic structure of forms.⁴⁷ An affective quality is embodied in both living and non-living things: sadness, aggressiveness, or gracefulness may be perceived in a tree, a bird, or a cloth left on a table. Artists are particularly sensitive to these expressive qualities. They not only listen to the "suggestions" of various materials but also argue with them. To their hands, a piece of stone or wood is not an indifferent, inert matter; it speaks to them and calls for an answer. The "reactions" and "objections" of their medium often modify their initial conception. Many unexpected solutions and discrepancies between the envisaged shape and the final realization are the result of the artist's attentive dialogue with the artistic medium itself.⁴⁸

Such a questioning communication with the physiognomic structure of "living things" does not occur automatically. Children's activity is not always guided by the expressive quality of objects. Nor do artists, while eating, look for the "hidden meaning" of a tomato or an apple. They come to display sensibility towards the "language of things" when they temporarily suspend their practical intentions and view objects with an

attitude of sympathetic receptivity. In other words, things “speak” to them when a matter-of-fact and practical approach yields to a more flexible and playful contact⁴⁹

Our understanding of the language of forms brings into play a reflective, gnostic and unreflective, pathic moment. On the one hand, the form is apprehended as an objective reality, independent from the perceiver, and subsumed under a definite idea or concept. On the other hand, the various affective meanings are grasped immediately and without any conscious representation. The body senses the significance of the form and shapes the appropriate motor response. Thus, during a mountain hike, we encounter forms with their expressive qualities – the soft murmur of the brook, the gloom of the forest, or the gay light of the refuge – which are not ideas, but meaningful realities grasped by our body and inducing a particular motor behaviour.⁵⁰

Our atmospheric sensibility cannot be reduced to a one-directional attunement. Sounds, odours, and colours certainly come to us, press upon us, and resonate in us, but, just as we like to approach flowers and smell their pleasant perfumes, so, in the same manner, we like to focus actively on some impressions, and reinforce their effect. Minkowski uses the French *aspirer* when he refers to the active aspect of our atmospheric experience.⁵¹ With all our being, we are able to detect and inhale a particular sensory or moral atmosphere without, of course, taking, literally, a larger quantity of air into our lungs. It is worth remarking that, for Minkowski, the act of *aspirer* – as well as that of seeing, tasting, or touching – is not only a distinctive mode of sensory contact with an object but, above all, a fundamental way of being in the world. Thanks to a phenomenological approach, we are truly able to grasp the function and significance of this vital and dynamic category of human life.

I have already alluded to the various responses to atmospheres: streaming traffic on a busy street induces a different reaction than a peaceful meadow. In general, a natural environment seems to arouse in us a higher degree of sensory and atmospheric alertness than does the ambient noise of a large city. "A quiet place that offers no threat seems to invite people to redistribute their attention, and any number of subtle perceptual cues can then come into play."⁵² All those who consciously create or modify our immediate surroundings cannot ignore the possible effect of an atmospheric quality on our behaviour and mood. Architects, city planners, landscape designers, artistic managers, or party hosts must be well aware of the correlation between an atmosphere and the way we respond, act, and feel. Performers and lecturers must learn to correctly apprehend and modify a prevailing atmosphere. They all should know that atmospheres can exercise a significant power over human sensibility which, as Paul Valéry observed, is not only a "faculty of sensing," but also a "mode of reaction," "mode of transmission."⁵³

The responses to atmospheres are not consistent. Music tends to unite the listener and singer and thus creates a "community of consonance" (Straus). But a particular song, played as a background to conversation, instead of inducing a vivacious participation and an experience of intimacy, can sometimes produce adverse effects. The character and intensity of our responsiveness depend on a great variety of factors, such as taste, culture, living habits, as well as our will, awareness, desire, and momentary mood. These determine our reaction to music, whether we display an attitude of enthusiastic acceptance or that of strained resistance.

The link between the hearing of tones and the bodily response of the listener has been repeatedly pointed out. "Even a seemingly motionless

subject generates muscular activity while listening to music," remarks Nils Lennart Wallin.⁵⁴ Anthony Storr expresses the same idea: "If we find that a piece of music *moves* us, we mean that it arouses us, it affects us physically. Bodily involvement always implies some kind of movement, whether it be tensing muscles, swaying, nodding in time, weeping, or vocalizing."⁵⁵ According to John Blacking, creative listening and music-making not only engage our own body but also produce a heightened awareness of our emotions.

*Although the musical conventions with which it can be expressed are part of a cultural system, like the syntax of a language, participation in performance (by listening carefully as well as by actually playing) can involve the body's sensorimotor system in such a way that people's responses to the music are felt as an expression of the very ground of their being and an intrinsic part of their human nature. In literally being moved, both internally and externally, by participation in musical performance, they can become more aware of the human body and its repertory of sensations and emotions.*⁵⁶

As already mentioned, it is the pathic character of the sounds that elicits the bodily response. Music presses itself on our body and compels us to move. When we thoroughly relish a musical recital and come to understand it in our bones, we can hardly refrain from moving our hands or some other part of our body. The particular form of our movement depends on the characteristics and organization of the music and the sense of form acquired in a specific cultural environment. If our body responds differently to march music than to a waltz, this is due to the particular harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic patterns of the musical movement as well as to our learned susceptibility to forms.⁵⁷ Music's

enticing effect is not merely the consequence of the listener's ability to "hear and think music muscularly." Culturally learned habits equally shape the response to musical forms. Hearing and understanding music involve both bodily sensibility and the intelligent recognition of some patterns in sound sequences.

The perception of style, atmosphere, and physiognomic characteristics is based on an intimate and sympathetic experiencing of the world. It is our bodily sensibility that allows us to open ourselves to these realities in an immediate and nonreflective manner. This contact involves both an awareness of a meaning and a dynamic adjustment to a situation. The nature and variety of motor responses arising from the body are the subject of the following chapters.

