

HEALING POETICS

Prefatory note: This essay is an attempt to write about something that I've previously avoided addressing in a poetry context, although I speak about it often among friends. I explicitly do not wish to present myself as a healer or any sort of health professional, least of all a therapist. A very private practice of t'ai chi and bodywork has inevitably been shared with many in informal and non-professional contexts. Important recent work by poets, most recently Eleni Stecopoulos, has had the effect of drawing me out on matters central to my own practice of several decades. This moves me to welcome an opportunity to share certain "discoveries" that are important to me as basic *principles* which connect the unlikely domains of healing and poetics. Discussing principles of healing is not promoting "self-improvement" but, rather, optimizing what we can know of what we are, as it were, by nature. So, my goal here is, in a condensed but hopefully clear way, to lay out an approach to *thinking* the connecting principles. In that way it may serve as a follow-up to my previous piece, "[The Poetics of Thinking](#)." (The present piece is dedicated to Anastasia Hill who gave it occasion.)

*The Evolutionary moment of walking upright... could be responsible
not only for our epistemology but also for our ethics and aesthetics.*
Vilém Flusser¹

In Jean Cocteau's haunting 1950 film *Orphée*, the most powerful moment for me is when Orpheus himself walks into the mirror, a scene that stays in the mind like the memory of a powerful dream.² While *mirror* is intrinsically one of the most complexly charged images, Cocteau takes it somewhere further in making it the threshold between self-image and absolute otherness—the entry point to another dimension. This liminality between dimensions retains its mysterious force beyond our interpretations—perhaps in spite of them—and manages to serve us on diverse occasions and in unrelated contexts. Take the recent discovery of [mirror neurons](#) in the brain—a neuron that fires when one observes one's own kind of behavior performed by another: you smile and I can't help smiling back.³ We might speculate that the mirror-function is inherent in our very make-up, and it is thought to contribute, for instance, to how we learn and develop language. This threshold, the inscrutable point at which self and other are *con-fused*, may be a critical juncture where possibility shows up in our relation to the "outside world"—a threshold at once between the most dangerous and the most supportive, the most fearful and the happiest, indeed, the liminal state we name *ecstatic*; that is, immersion in oneself at a level where one seems outside oneself.

Can we extend this sense of mirroring to discover a principle, perhaps more than one, in common between poietic thinking and healing? Do such apparently divergent human concerns in some way reflect each other? A sense of poetics in relation to healing is vexed by the volatile status of both terms in Western thought. We can no longer locate secure models for either health or poetry, if in fact an appropriate idea of “model” was ever more than suggestive, learning wheels, a freely chosen aesthetic preference. For the most part modeling implies a stable perspective outside one’s changing experience, which is a convenient fiction for what we can scarcely do without. Overall, I see lack of authoritative modeling as a positive fact in poetry, not only for the good of diversity, but for the trust it encourages in conscious poetic process itself. No doubt we would have to betray poetry to pin it down.⁴ And yet we have to go beyond the pleasantness of not needing to evade over-definition and overdetermined authority. A *principle* is not a response to need or desire; quite the contrary, it is neutral, perhaps itself a threshold or a point of distinction that is decisive with respect to outcome. A principle—say, the attraction of physical bodies or gravitational force—is not cultural, but no doubt our way of dealing with it is. Principle may be hard to conceptualize, but it is useful to think of it as expressing some sort of “reality” behind appearance and choice.

As for healing, not being confident about what *health* is can be problematic, particularly when it’s challenged. We live in a lot of confusion about what is and is not good for us—and our mainstream medicine can’t seem to make up its mind. (The situation is not helped of course by the profit-driven status of the health industry—market over public good.) By contrast, the unclear status of “poietic health” rarely surfaces as a comparably pressing issue, but the *thinking* we do there cannot be divorced from the issues of health, both private and public. This goes beyond the question of what is represented, argued or thematized in poetry or its thinking. My interest in getting at an underlying principle common to healing and poetics focuses on how it is embodied in thinking. And my confidence in approaching this no doubt unresolvable concern derives from studying the issue in myself and my work, where the strongest sort of connection shows up as ever awaiting further attention.

Alternate mirrors

People may be unfitted by being fit in an unfit fitness.
Kenneth Burke

Chinese medicine works with a dynamic model of the state of health that is energy-based, whereas our more familiar medical model is basically biomechanical. And since the latter is science-dependent, it is always somewhat at odds with itself as each new trial-based revelation destabilizes an older preference—and tends to destabilize us along the way. (This issue is separate from whether, or to what extent, we can even *believe* reports from the health industry or trust its motivations.) By contrast, in many forms of non-Western medicine, as well as certain Western alternatives (cranial osteopathy, herbal medicine, homeopathy, hands-on bodywork), the core action, whether provoked by crisis or simply sustaining a process of basic living, is to maintain the well-functioning state of nutritional, chemical, or energetic *self-balancing*. Responsibility for health is ultimately individual yet its realization is interactive with others and dialogical. The “self” of self-balancing is inherently interdependent with environment, and the role of the healer is to sustain a certain state of awareness through corrective *dialogue*—effective “speaking together.” This involves a special kind of mirroring—by alterity.

Palpable balancing

Traditionary approaches tend to contrast with our culturally normative “war-against” attitude that sees health interruptions as basically evil—nature’s terrorism, as it were, a reified devilish enemy. That a health crisis may be compensatory and part of a complex rebalancing, and in that sense potentially positive as an opportunity for life rectification, is not normally part of our thinking; yet it’s not so foreign to some traditionary approaches. Of course people do realize certain benefits after the fact, on the order of “life-threatening illness made me realize the importance of friends and family”—what Buddhists focus on as *impermanence*,—but not a view that sees illness itself as at some level embodying intention. Medicine in many traditionary practices, by contrast, views life as holistically intentional in ways not easily thinkable in our society. It is inherently integrated with both individual life and life at large; it’s part of nature inasmuch as we’re part of nature. Self-preservation is not viewed as oppositional to, or in competition with,

public well-being or environmental balance in that they are non-separate from the start. That's the theory, but one that's valorized processually in actual practice. Of course this level of concern is threatened when the instruments of health, along with those who operate them, are commodified. No theory's integrity can easily survive institutional greed.

In traditional medicine there tends to be a sense of transmission of values as much as techniques—personal/social values along with the know-how of (often literal) hands-on practice. The philosophical dimension of the medicine is a read-out of evolving practice and its working principles. Neither theory nor practice is *by the book*: the first step is *direct perception of an actual person*. Dialogue follows.

Would that we could be as clear about a state of *poietic* health and the way it benefits from previous instances—“tradition” as what *feeds* our work, but not a canonic and authority-driven “Great Tradition” that *governs* it and resists fundamentally new approaches.⁵ As with traditional medicine, precedent is suggestive, indeed inspirational, rather than authoritarian. Poietic health can be understood, in one polarity, according to either a critically minded, analytic sense of discriminating appreciation or a sense of vigorous poietic practice that supports one's mental and physical life—or, optimally, both. [Jerome Rothenberg](#)'s anthologies of traditional poetics⁶ remind us that indigenous peoples have apparently registered the connection between poetry and health from time immemorial. The famous case of the Mazatec shaman [María Sabina](#)⁷ comes to mind as an instance of poetry used in healing rituals and which, through the agency of [Henry Munn](#) and Rothenberg, has had an influence on American poets.⁸

Thinking thinking

How we think about almost impossibly complex issues like health and poetics depends in part on how we think about thinking. Can thinking about health contribute to a process of healing? Can thinking about poetry—that is, poetics—help poetry be what it needs to be as well as contribute palpably to our sense of well-being? Grand questions like these can lead us, not very usefully, into unresolvable abstract contraries (e.g., the “poetry wars”)

unless we ground them in principles active in actual practice. Poietic works, for instance, of the kind that alter how we think about poetry, sometimes embody principles that operate as well in non-literary/non-artistic contexts; and, understood appropriately, they may be seen as equally radical in multiple well-defined areas. The thinking we do, accordingly, can embody principles quite outside what we normally consider aesthetic. It is in this sense that I am exploring a direct connection between poetics and healing.⁹

Singular healing

Great healers and health innovators have often been motivated in their pursuit by a personal health struggle or crisis. [Eleni Stecopoulos](#)' richly conceived recent book *Visceral Poetics*¹⁰ gives such an account in a unique and powerful way, even as the personal perspective is transcended in its unprecedented path of reading and writing. This is a work with its own "poetics of thinking"¹¹ in that it embodies in a unique discourse the principles by which it is instructed and in which it would further instruct. In focusing on Antonin Artaud (as well as the now neglected American writer [Paul Metcalf](#)), she cites Artaud, for instance, in his complex identification of healing and art process:

I shall seek out what has been preserved and is reappearing, the old mythical tradition of the theater in which the theater is regarded as a therapy, a way of healing comparable to certain dances of the Mexican Indians.¹²

Her intricate account through a weave of health and poetics issues in *Visceral Poetics* inspired an earlier version of the present piece as an homage to her important work,¹³ and that continues here in my reliance on insights from my own path in *healing poetics*—understood variously as the poetics of healing, poetry as healing, and healing our poetics.¹⁴

My interest and practice in what I consider *singular healing*—one's own private process, that is, as well as the singularity of healing in its nature—began in studying William Blake and, a few years later, t'ai chi chuan. These core interests came to me independently of each other over four decades ago. And having taken hold in particular ways in my awareness, both were refined, in part, through inevitable encounters with issues of health and well-being. On that level, Blake was instrumental, for instance, in refocusing emotional issues as a multilevel process of biopsychical growth, whereas t'ai

chi taught me an approach to working in a principled way with physical challenges, such as the effects of minor accidents and changes in the body (often due to stress and ignorant misuse¹⁵). I came to see that the issues brought forward by both Blake and t'ai chi—like activating conscious energy, accepting challenges as revelatory, and working intentionally with the unforeseeable—were intrinsic to effective healing practice, which for me eventually focused largely on hands-on bodywork. And the emergent view of principle at every point has been mirrored in a *poetics of singularity*.

Energetic palpation of threat

A key aspect of my approach to dealing with health challenges, in myself and in others, has been to extend t'ai chi *martial art* principles, a fact which at first might seem counterintuitive. In the martial discipline of push-hands (*tui shou*) you learn to quite intimately *ride* your opponent's attack until you can “neutralize” its force without either avoidance or direct opposition. You *read* your attacker through sensitive touch and mirroring of energy. Instead of resisting or evading (fight or flight), which shuts down perception and strengthens your attacker, you join and undermine force, causing the energy to redirect or to return on itself. The fight-or-flight reflex, often thought to be a fundamental aspect of our biological evolution, can itself in fact be neutralized; it's a dominant but not an inevitable human response pattern. Discovering neutralization of force in a concrete way can have a lasting effect on one's mind and health potential—indeed on one's view of human relationship. And it contributes its own “logic” to one's way of thinking. It informs a poetics as operative principles.

I spontaneously began doing hands-on bodywork in response to friends' distress. I soon realized that if *martially* I could neutralize outside force aimed at me, I could do the same in relation to highly patterned tension in others. My analysis of undesirable levels of tension showed it to be *personal force modeled on resistance to external threat* which has been *inadvertently directed against oneself*. I came to view such tension as a stressful and misguided response to challenge. Moreover its roots appear to be in failed communication; that is, communication with oneself as well as with others.

When a t'ai chi martial engagement neutralizes oppositional force, which includes riding and mirroring the opponent's energy, one becomes imperceptible. The other person literally cannot feel you or indeed find you. Applying the same to hands-on healing, one merges with the person's energy field, so that *otherness disappears*. One tracks what is needed to happen by accessing the person's self-directing cognition. Ordinary communication is replaced by a kind of communion. I think of this as shared proprioception, or what I will discuss further as *eco-proprioception*.

How the center holds, despite appearances

The process of neutralizing force and tension, respectively in t'ai chi and bodywork, led me to further understand what I call the *axial principle*. Initially based on theorizing “poetic torsion” in William Blake,¹⁶ *axiality* (the phenomenon of flexibility in turning on an axis) resonated with the basic *centering* principle of t'ai chi. In studying the latter, one becomes acutely aware of the centrality of physical posture in how we develop physically *and* mentally. This means in practice that, no matter what physical position one is in, there's a specific relation to gravity, and this relation can either *serve* the body, accommodating one's given body structure, or *distort* it, due to misalignment. The consequences, in the short run, can go unnoticed in daily life or show up dramatically in a dance or martial art; and, in the long run, they will be in some degree life-determining.

The challenge of *gravity* is pervasive in our life, while remaining in large part outside ordinary awareness. Its double nature is that it *holds* us to the planet (stability) and *destabilizes* us, drawing us toward the ground (precarity). And we tend to oppose its effects by muscular resistance, a response basically modeled on protecting ourselves against falling. This is so constant that we barely know it's happening. So, quite without our registering it, we form “anti-gravity” patterns of postural behavior; we *fight* imbalance somewhat like a threat. If a posture is successful—that is, if we think it looks good and it keeps us feeling stable—we automatically repeat it. We manage our uprightness by styles of posture, initially inherited from trusted models of behavior “imprinted” in early youth.

What we never discover “in the natural course of things” is that this oppositional attitude not only distorts our actual self-true “natural” alignment and balance; it corrupts the organism—the living system and its approach to homeostasis or self-correction/-balancing.

Talkative posturing

Our ongoing choice of models is generally subject as well to changeable peer pressure and fashions of public behavior. Posture, in fact, is also *linguistic*—it communicates who we are and our status in a given context; it reflects ethnicity, social class, group allegiance, personal style, state of mind, mood, emotion, health, and so on. It talks for us even when we’re silent; our stance shows who and how we are. Communicative posturing is not exclusively human; rather it’s pervasive in nature—birds in mating and combat rituals, for instance, and octopuses too.¹⁷ Rarely does anyone deliberately choose posture, except circumstantially and superficially (e.g., under parental pressure, military discipline, formal social occasions, etc.) and then mostly temporarily. Even more rarely does one alter posture according to awareness of *optimal alignment with non-resistance to gravity*. The postural focus of t’ai chi offers just this sort of option—*direct awareness according to principle*. In such conscious postural practice, one discovers intentional balancing amidst continuous change and self-variance interacting with surroundings. Strangely, the most natural and structurally easy human relation to gravity is also in practice the least often adopted.

The rub

We tend to think of balance as a fixed state of calm and passivity involving a mastery of intensities, emotional, physical or otherwise—a sort of Ben Franklin temperance. But this is far from the reality. There is no lasting balance in nature, but only *balancing*—a state of going in and out of balance more or less continuously. In working with balancing stones over many years, which became an art form named in the title of my book, [*Axial Stones: An Art of Precarious Balance*](#), I discovered that *balancing has no norm*.¹⁸ Every act of balancing is unique, and different by the instant. It requires an awakesness appropriate to the precise challenge. We try to cut down on order-ruffling variables by

resorting to muscular effort, which is patterned by precedent. (This is analogous to how we use beliefs, concepts, truisms, clichés, and other mental fixities to avoid uncertainties and ambiguities.) But the physical cost of this approach to tensional stability is reduced flexibility and eventual rigidification, which “ages” us prematurely.

Here’s the tricky part. Our usual way of correcting imbalance, even when making a conscious effort, is wedded to exterior models—a passive mirroring. We look to the model and make the adjustment. Even t’ai chi is traditionally taught much this way—sometimes counter-productively, at least as transposed to the Western context. This modeling approach emphasizes *rectification by mirroring*—cognitively guiding body position according to a received image. For most things this approach works well enough, because repetition over time of preferable patterns supplants the undesirable ones. But there are good reasons why it doesn’t work well for more fundamental matters.

Rectification by mirroring works best if the thing mirrored is unfamiliar— *experientially unprecedented*—so that the subliminal message sent to the mind says that *even the deepest patterning is reversible*. Our deep-patterning mind—supported by the keep-the-status-quo role of the autonomic system—literally doesn’t know it’s changeable: its job is to *sustain* successful patterns, not to think change. It helps us believe that our patterns are as strong as our bones. And we rarely think of bone as flexible (actually it is, relatively, minutely). The autonomic resistance to change is itself reinforced by our conscious desires: keep me stable! We stay in self-preserving denial. So that when we think of changing our posture—the status quo—we feel our own resistance to what we fear would take “bone-breaking” effort. But this is an unfortunate error based on misunderstandings that are culturally passed on to us, with serious consequences for health.

Mirroring by alterity

A more direct route is possible. It involves what I think of as *radical centering*. And this means something a lot simpler than it sounds: *self-rectification through trusting the release into one’s core axis*. This in fact is a rather small shift in attention, but it takes a process of discovery to locate in practice.

Radical centering has two dimensions: one is physical and *gravity-aligned*; the other is mental and could be called *virtual mind-aligning*. The mirroring process of rectification does produce a certain *learning alertness* necessary for being receptive to change. Ordinary model-mirroring, however, doesn't usually succeed in overriding our protective resistance, which runs deep, so that in learning we have a push-pull relationship to the intended change. This tends to wear down our resolve. We can't easily get out of a self-set trap, since we don't register that we did and are still doing the unconscious trap-setting. So, somehow, we have to *get under* the whole mechanism of fearful self-protection—and not just *tell* it to change, especially in the harsh voice of authoritarian instruction that makes us bristle. The toughened voice betrays our unacknowledged fear that change may be impossible. To a much larger extent than is commonly assumed, healing is a function of how we address ourselves. Forced change is abuse and, like fighting an opponent, strengthens resistance.

Getting *under* our resistance can happen when the model we are mirroring quite thoroughly *embodies* the actual intended change and we have discovered how to invoke, by a kind of visualizing, the alternate state inside our own body. Learning is greatly enhanced through physical touch, such as bodywork, especially of the “movement reeducation” kind.¹⁹ The effect of *mirroring an unrecognized state of change*, as opposed to merely correcting our own mirrored action, can introduce a kind of “natural hypnosis.” The new message flies under the self-protective radar. In this way we take in the novel *patterning principle* at a level *previous* to current patterning; that is, below the threshold of our defense against change. Such an exposure to a *transformative* model of change can deliver a minor shock to the system and thereby introduce a sort of *still point*, a useful state of suspension in which self-repatterning can occur. Instead of engaging us according to how we are patterned, which subtly reinforces established patterns, it engages us at the level of unprecedented *experience* of principle. We *mirror restorative strangeness*. And the strangest thing about it is that it rather quickly comes to feel natural. Because it is. And our mirror neurons fire as never before.

The poetics of healing thinking

We're talking here about bodymind awareness, but we're doing it at the level of poetics—not only, that is, as the concept of (bio)mechanics or aesthetic appearance. We're addressing the actual problematic of alerting the mind to *unexperienced possibility*. Reading the body's subtle messaging is not fundamentally different from reading a difficult or unfamiliar poem. At first glance it feels alien. But poems secretly teach a way of reading. When we can easily get into a poem, it corresponds to how we already know how to read. Poems operating on unfamiliar or novel principles instruct in new ways of reading. It takes patience and special attention to get in step with it, but if there's a vision of language operative in the poem, over time it creates a new reading possibility. Poems create readers. They open us to alternative selves. Like Whitman, seeing that we contradict ourselves we embrace it as evidence of our intrinsic diversity.

There's a lot to gain from pursuing a problematic analogously relevant to both poetry and healing. This involves productively working through a break with consensual reality or engaging, in Heraclitus's formulation (emphasized by Charles Olson), the awareness that “we are estranged from that which is most familiar.” We may not initially recognize such awareness as our own, yet it's a way of thinking that can bring about unanticipated change. It involves *healing the thinking* we do about healing—and the language we do it in. This can be a language capable of reflecting the alienated “most familiar” not only as the *context* we feel cut off from, but *ourselves*—alienation from our own body and mind. “Reflecting” here carries meanings pertaining both to body and mind—and their languaging. Rethinking “reflection” can open a way that the discipline of poiesis/poetics is relevant to healing—and, on the mirror principle, vice versa.

Free space

The blankness of the paper on which the poem is to be written is notoriously threatening at times and can be associated with “writer's block”; but without it and its vertiginous challenge there is no space or energy for poetry. The poet has to find a way of being there that invites or indeed conjures the poem from zero point. By analogy, inside our gravity-negotiating bodies there is an axis, the space of the spine, which is also potentially

blank—empty—when not governed by effort, tension, pattern, repetitive automatic behavior. We don't get "walker's block" in part because we don't register that the blank space is there. (In an effective first class of t'ai chi some people faint, thanks to the shock of experiencing the empty center!) We seem to unconsciously fear our own free space, but, according to a poetics analysis, it's because we haven't experienced it in its creatively renewing potential.

It took me a long time to discover that I could neutralize force by remaining in a free and flexible space in my own axis, but once I did, it led me to a parallel discovery: namely, that I could connect with such free space in others. I think of this as *transitive mirroring*. (Orpheus passing through his "reflection" to its elsewhere.) What began in a martial context now flourished in a therapeutic one. Its medium is direct contact, the haptic connect—a *radical manual alignment with the other person's obstructed (or undiscovered) axis*.

This is an instructive instance of "self perception" (proprioception) as expanded self perceiving as non-separate from otherness/environment (ecoproprioception).

Through long practice of physically and energetically identifying with another person, I came to feel a person's physical-energetic center—the dynamic zero point—which, without a comparable experience through practice, they could not feel on their own. This allowed me to haptically amplify the space and directly impart an experience of free movement—transitively reawakening a kind of whole-body flexibility and responsive openness not fully experienced since early childhood (before one learns to look like others). And this sudden experience can happen right away, usually within several minutes. And I found that, astonishingly quickly, this altered the other person's awareness with respect to the "possible body"—imparting a new, posturally free self-picture, without tension and without opposition to gravity. This quickly subverted the whole tension system for that moment; and repeated engagements have the potential to extend an ongoing free movement principle.

In effect, this “shared proprioceptive sense”—*transitive self-perception* or *ecoproprioception*—introduced them to their own basic free space, covered over by social habit since childhood.²⁰ What is imparted is not something “I” own in a proprietary sense but a *property of being itself*. The principle is: if you directly address this ambivalently personal/impersonal property and make actual contact, it responds to being recognized. And it’s response is a self-recognition without name. Without identity. And non-isolated.

Instant freedom in the body at some level translates into freedom of mind. This is because the distinction “mind and body” is conceptual, not actual. No domain—physical, mental, linguistic (and including social, political)—operates outside the others; they all condition each other. Opening up one system can open the others too, provided one has a wide enough focus to explore extended unfamiliarity as reflecting oneself. But these effects, although accessed more or less immediately, develop only gradually. Extending a new state of openness requires, first of all, a person’s active consent, and, second, some degree of commitment to ongoing conscious engagement. That’s the hard part.

This is the problematic of freeing up any human domain—indeed, of anarchistic philosophy and why, in part, it is resisted so vehemently. The key ingredient in sustaining an altered internal state is conscious embrace of the free state itself, once it has been recognized by the mind. It requires what has become perhaps too loosely mentioned these days, namely, mindfulness. A useful sense of mindfulness involves cultivated focus: *directed immediate unflinching awareness of what is happening in the present moment*. Like any consequential activity it takes practice and can be enhanced over time and expand its focus; but this basic practice is not solemnity or devotion to religious ideology. Just simple, non-judgmental awareness of what is actually happening—in this case, first of all, in the body. Observation followed by release—return to the *open axis* in whatever medium—body-, mind- or language-centered—and their interaction.

The ecoproprioceptively awakened bodymind shows our deep connection to the paradoxical nature of language, which “confuses” us in that we know it as ours

personally and yet it is at virtually every level a property of our social nature. It's not easy to keep both ends of this spectrum actively in mind simultaneously; it takes practice. Failure to understand the liminal personal-social reality of language can lead, as dramatized in *Romeo and Juliet*, to tragic error.

Mindfulness in poetry is activated poetics

Poetics in this sense is *the process of recognizing the principle at work in an evolving mediated awareness*. Language is virtually always the medium of mediation, even at the level of body awareness. This means both (1) that we tend to represent perception to ourselves in language thinking and (2) that the body already *is* linguistic in its own systemic communication. And this is one reason that *how we think* matters in healing as much as in poetry, where the question is whether our verbal language-thinking discovers how to be true to our body language. Language in actual use contains hidden ideology. And it functions according to our active belief structures, which in many respects are not consciously recognized. It is difficult to sustain active attention without first getting at our underlying beliefs and ideology and letting them also evolve in more creative, less personal-history-encumbered language.

Some of us do manage to develop not only awareness but also a certain affection for body, mind, and language. Quite early in life I found that I have a primary love of language, which allows me to work with it in much the way that I came to work with body and mind. A truly open poetics stays open and responsive. And the implication is that what could be called “healthy” poetics is able to avoid constructing yet more ideological fixities, while still thinking in precise and complex ways. Awake presence (as distinct from the “metaphysics of presence”) inside language tracks “events” that show only there, as if we overhear language speaking to itself. There is feedback—indeed *feedthrough*—amidst body, mind and language. They work with and through each other, and create a new *linguality*—reality-creating language.

Blocked energy is prosodic failure (aprosodia)

When the *hands listen* to a body, the body speaks silently for the person touched, saying what the person didn't know was there to be said. And this non-verbal speaking is fresh and direct. The body has prosody (from Ancient Greek *prosōidiā* "song sung to music; tone or accent of a syllable"), which in linguistic terms means *it tracks the sounded dynamics of singular expression*. The lingual body articulates its state of health. Palpation is a finer instrument of detection in that its distinctions are not "externalized" as measurable (where quantifying cognition tends to close down the very intention to listen). Unfortunately, the consequence of a cultural ambivalence to—indeed a puritanical fear of—touch results in a low level of *touch literacy*. Intimate self-perception is a casualty of this inherited cultural fear, where puritanical prohibitions distort into molestation, becoming the self-fulfilling prophecy of prudency-into-prurience, and further into self-pleasure avoidance generally. *Freed* energy by contrast is self-regulating, self-organizing, self-regenerating, yet without preemptive self-limiting.

A root problem of healing is that, while the body speaks directly with great precision, no one is listening. Or listening is not proportionate to the speaking. Direct perception of the body's messaging, much like a poem's, depends on *the seasoned receptivity of the practitioner*—a species of sensitivity, with respect to the healing arts, which with rare exceptions seems to have disappeared from allopathic medicine. The remarkable increase in bodywork in recent years, both in different modalities available and in number of practitioners, is a response to the haptic void in medicine. In Chinese medicine health lives or dies according to the flow of energy (*ch'i/qi*), and a doctor is one who reads energy accurately—discriminated directly with the higher precision peculiar to organic (non-robotic) engagement. Blocked energy like repressed emotion putrefies, or as Blake said: *He who desires but acts not breeds pestilence*.

Prosodic equivalence

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.
William Carlos Williams

There is radical centering within language and voice just as in the body. It involves awareness within a free-moving zero point—the empty space that is also the blank page. The axial principle understands bodymind phenomena as self-regulating and self-organizing; again Blake: *No bird soars too high if he soars with his own wings.*

I call this principle *axiality* but any number of names would be possible. Discovering how to work with it allowed me to evolve my practice across multiple art forms—poetry, drawing/painting, sculpture, music. I discovered that making art, like remaking body awareness, can happen with minimal commitment to formulaic aesthetics or concept and, instead, free-centering within a medium. I found that a truly new awareness—a language awareness or a body awareness—evolves of its own accord. Axiality can allow language—poetic language and body language—to locate its intrinsic authority to speak for itself. It involves *tuning* (to use David Antin’s preferred term). When I manually engage with another person’s body I start by tuning in; and it’s much the same putting pen to paper; both involve self-tuning.

It is hardly necessary to bolster confidence in this process by a narrative of “causality,” whether presuming a Freudian unconscious, cognitive science, channeling, or any other dogma. Healing requires a break in what we have been doing—a willing suspension not only of disbelief but of belief itself, especially in how we rely on it. Believing is mostly rather passive, a sort of default position of the mind or, as Ezra Pound said, “a cramp of the mind in a certain position.” Positional mind is not a healing mind. In principle healing accesses a mystery of what we are that has integrity beyond explanation. When one discovers radical listening, what is listened to begins to respond of its own accord. You hear what cannot otherwise be heard. You sense what is waiting to speak—in oneself, in

another, in language, in sound, indeed in any medium with which one allows a connection to develop.

What I have come to realize is this:

Healing = radical listening
Self-healing = radical self-listening

So: axial poetics = radical listening to and inside language. What we get is what we are ready to hear. *Healing poetics* means, in one register, we are healed by the poetics we heal.

Not being heard by others and not listening to oneself have much the same effect—closing down. And if one is not listening to oneself it's in part because self-listening at the level of dynamic health is not valorized in our thinking. An aspect of non-ordinary reality is that we don't register it, or know when something is missing. *Non-ordinary listening* goes beyond ordinary sense and sensation. What could be called the art of self-palpation is unrealized in our ideology.

If poiesis is speaking with listening—language as threshold—then its practice has the potential to teach healing.

Afterword

Recently I have returned after many years to reading Gregory Bateson, whose [*Steps to an Ecology of Mind*](#) reoriented thinking for many of us in the 1970s. I had the opportunity to sit in on his truly amazing seminar in 1974 at Naropa Institute (now University) during its first summer where Charles Stein, Rick Fields and I were teaching poetry (Allen Ginsberg, Diane di Prima, John Cage, and Anne Waldman came the second semester). I realize once again engaging the powerful reinvention of thinking in Bateson that he planted seeds that would grow into my later sense of ecoproprioception. Exploring this

notion further I will want to pick up on strands of his thinking—his emphasis on systems theory and homeostasis, for instance, as well as, overall, on the notion that discovering the “ecology of mind” requires a broad interdisciplinary inquiry—thinking beyond specialization. There is poiesis in his thinking that also respects the role of poetry and the arts generally as keys to developing our eco-thinking—the thinking beyond self-interest and narrowness of perspective. I hope to continue this thinking toward further exploration of what we are calling *configurative poetics*—the view that sees the relativity of all views—what Charles Stein first called “configurative ontologies”—and the need for continuous reformulation in discovering possible language. There can be no definitive poetics and no definitive approach to healing. Instead of seeing this as a problem, we can celebrate it as the poietic equivalent of biodiversity.

¹ [Vilém Flusser](#)’s extraordinary “vampire squid from hell” *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis: A Treatise*, with Louis Bec, transl. Valentine A. Pakis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012; original German 1987).

² Margarita Landazuri writes of Cocteau’s remarks, in an interview with Andre Fraigneau for the book *Cocteau on the Film*, “when characters walk through mirrors, Cocteau used two rooms, mirror images of each other, and an empty frame between, and doubles for the actors. In the scenes where Orpheus plunges his hands through a mirror that turns liquid, the mirror was actually a huge tub of mercury, because mercury shows only the reflection, and not what’s on the other side.” <http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article/141994%7C0/Orpheus.html>

³ I discuss this notion of mirror neurons at length in “[The Poetics of Thinking](#),” including how it relates to proprioception and, my new formulation, *ecoproprioception*—how “self” included the field with which we consciously identify and how “mirroring” evolves to recognize alterity.

⁴ Since 2002 my video project in “Speaking Portraits,” *art is/poetry is/music is*, has asked well over a thousand artists, poets and musicians in eleven countries to say what it (art, poetry, music) *is*. And of course, it’s as impossible to be definitive as it is unavoidable to try. The effect of the resulting assemblages of videos tends to destabilize the authority of definition and point to the singularity of makers’ actual sense of what it is they do. See for instance [poetry is \(Speaking portraits\)](#).

⁵ Jerome Rothenberg and I experienced this resistance first-hand after the publication of our anthology in 1974 *America a Prophecy: A New Reading of American Poetry from Pre-Columbian Times to the Present* (Random House/Vintage; reissued in 2012 by Station Hill of Barrytown), when Helen Vendler denounced it in the *New York Times* as if it aimed to destroy the Great Tradition rather than supply texts and perspectives that had been occluded. See the review and our response at https://media.sas.upenn.edu/jacket2/pdf/Vendler_on-America-a-Prophecy.pdf. Also Rothenberg re: [our new edition](#). For an unprecedented analysis of the larger context in which the Vendler-culture has operated, see Jed Rasula's essential critique *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940-1990* (The National Council of Teachers of English: 1996).

⁶ These include *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania* (1968/1985), *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americas* (1972), *Symposium of the Whole: A Range of Discourse Toward an Ethnopoetics* (co-ed. Diane Rothenberg) (1983/2016); and on the integration of traditional poetries with the rest of continental poetry: *America a Prophecy: A New Reading of American Poetry from Pre-Columbian Times to the Present* (1973/2012).

⁷ *María Sabina: Selections*, ed. Jerome Rothenberg (2003); <http://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520239531>. The complexity of the issue of whether María Sabina was creating poetry in any sense related to non-traditional poetry is the subject of ongoing discussion and is no doubt unresolvable in any final sense. See Nathaniel Tarn's discussion in his review of the above book in *Jacket2*. Defining poetry is ultimately context specific and perspectival according to view (see note 1 above).

⁸ For instance, [Anne Waldman](#) acknowledges a debt to María Sabina in her *Fast Speaking Woman: Chants and Essays* (1985).

⁹ In two recent pieces, "[Poetry in Principle](#)" and "[The Poetics of Thinking](#)," I have looked at work (including that of Jackson Mac Low, David Antin, Franz Kamin, and Gary Hill) as Principle-based work as distinct from Conceptual, and how they embody extra-aesthetic principles like proprioception and what I have called *ecoproprioception*.

¹⁰ Foreword by Alphonso Lingis. (ON Contemporary Practice: 2016); <http://www.spdbooks.org/Products/9780983504559/visceral-poetics.aspx>. Focusing on Antonin Artaud and Paul Metcalf, the book is described as tracking "the chronic syndrome of the West' and the cruel treatments of poetry's resistance. At once a call for an embodied scholarship, a poetic work of criticism, and a fragmentary autoethnography of the author's health crisis at the millennium, [her] book moves in a complex field of languages and bodies, between symptom and art, diagnosis and composition, fascia and form. Stecopoulos aligns her method with

diviners of entrails and holistic healers, tracing the resonance between locations that range from demonic possession and parasitic vowels to acupuncture and diaspora Greek. This poet-scholar seeks "to overwrite discourses of pathology with currents of empathy." See also her [discussion](#) of "somatics" and "the poetics of healing."

¹¹ For a fuller exploration of this notion see my recent "[The Poetics of Thinking](#)."

¹² "Draft of a Letter to the Director of the Alliance Française," in *Visceral Poetics*, p. 103.

¹³ The event was a panel "For Opacity: Visceral Poetics" at The Poetry Project, St. Mark's Church on the Bowery, March 15, 2017, 8:00 PM, with appearances and video by Cornelia Barber, Charles Bernstein, Melissa Buzzeo, Declan Gould, Jeanne Heuving, Brenda Iijima, Madhu Kaza, Robert Kocik, Liz Latty, Andrew Levy, EJ McAdams, Marissa Perel, Kristin Prevallet, George Quasha, Emji Spero, and Mg Roberts. And statements by Will Alexander, Margit Galanter, Petra Kuppens, Sean Labrador y Manzano, Miranda Mellis, William Rowe & Robin Tremblay-McGaw.

¹⁴ This multivalent title is modeled on the one I gave a book by James Hillman, *Healing Fiction*, implying fiction that heals as well as healing the fiction, which we published in 1983 at Station Hill Press. See [my account](#) which bears on the present issues, written as a publisher's preface, re: fiction in Freud, Jung and Adler, with emphasis on the "poetic basis of mind."

¹⁵ An example of the latter is my work as a drummer in my high school band where a drum too large for my body affected my left leg and hip: the lazy leg (sort of dragging it along in long parades) led to arthritis in the left hip. I made many important discoveries in avoiding a hip replacement for five years—effective practices that I wouldn't have been motivated to discover (like inventing a ch'i kung for small trampoline); when I saw that that my process of learning from the injury was complete I surrendered to getting a hip replacement.

¹⁶ "[Orc as a Fiery Paradigm of Poetic Torsion](#)," *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic*, eds. David V. Erdman and John T. Grant (Princeton University Press: 1970), reprinted in David Punter, *William Blake: Contemporary Critical Essays* (New Casebooks, Macmillan Press, Ltd.: London, 1996). Blake's Orc in "America a Prophecy" is seen as embodying a poetic principle of torsion which drives the prophetic works and focuses poetic action on multiple levels simultaneously, a transformative force operative from the political to personal reader consciousness. This essay is a forerunner of my later theory of "axial poetics" and contains the essentials of that poetics viewed in relation to Blake.

https://www.academia.edu/20670685/Orc_as_a_Fiery_Paradigm_of_Poetic_Torsion_Blake_poetics_

¹⁷ Vilém Flusser (see note 1) gives a remarkable description in his phenomenological study of Cephalopods and their connections to us: “Although the natural color of the epidermis is ‘pneumatic’—optically transparent—it is equipped with chromatophores that enable the animal to alter its coloration entirely or in part. These discolorations are not only reactions to outside stimuli but also expressions of what is taking place within the body, and the meaning of these chromatic expressions is understood by others. The discoloration of the skin is an intraspecific code: Cephalopods ‘speak’ by changing color of their skin....” See also Richard O. Prum’s extraordinary *The Evolution of Beauty: How Darwin’s Forgotten Theory of Mate Choice Shapes the Animal World - and Us* (Doubleday: New York, 2017) for, among other important contributions, a major reevaluation of consequential aviary body language in evolution.

¹⁸ Foreword by Carter Ratcliff (North Atlantic Books: Berkeley, 2006).

¹⁹ Movement or somatic reeducation includes, among others, Trager Psychophysical Integration and Mentastics, Feldenkrais Method, Alexander Technique, as well as movement systems like t’ai chi chuan and what I call Axial Bodywork; these methods work best when movement practices work together with related direct hands-on bodywork. Subtle release systems like Cranial Osteopathy and CranioSacral Therapy have related principles. All of these systems are also specialized or coded language systems which, on close study, have a relationship to poetics, perhaps mostly unnoticed by practitioners of the systems. The effect too frequently of healing-oriented uses of language (which sound like self-improvement schemes) is to alienate poetic mind. My hope in breaking my silence on these matters is to make a little dent in the problem.

²⁰ I have discussed [proprioception](#) (as first suggested by Charles Olson)—the physiological system of self-perception—as applied to poetics in “[Poetry in Principle](#)” and extended this notion in “[The Poetics of Thinking](#)” to a hypothetical “ecoproprioception” where the sense of self extends beyond oneself as individual to include others, indeed to a *field* awareness. This notion could be useful in understanding the kinds of communication that arise in bodywork and in other intimate connections between people, including, for instance, improvisatory music performance.