
. . . We Have Found the Wonders of Difference . . .

(1994)

My themes have to do with opening new pathways in lived experience, breaking with the taken-for-granted, setting aside the crusts of mere conformity. It takes work, as we know, as so many have reminded us, work to be done on the part of those of us who are perceivers lending some of our lives to the works before us as we attend to and gather together the particulars, the details that are there for us. “The one who is too lazy, idle, or indurated in convention,” wrote John Dewey, “will not see or hear” (1980, p. 54). Jean-Paul Sartre, describing the mutual interdependence of artist and perceiver, talked about how we have to create what the artist discloses to us, to work along with the artist in bringing into being the universe of *Hamlet*, let us say, or Doctorow’s *The Waterworks*, or “The Wind as a Knife.” If, Sartre said, we are “inattentive, tired, stupid, or thoughtless,” most of the relations will escape us; we will never manage to “catch on” to what is before us (in the text, on the stage, on the wall) in the sense that fire catches or does not catch (1949, p. 43). Both Dewey and Sartre were paying tribute to the potential of those who come, through their own free choosing, to make certain works objects of their experience—to attend to them with the particular kind of effort that allows them to become works of art. It is, as you already recognize, the concern of the aesthetic educator to enable persons to exert that effort in whatever way they can, to break with the automatic or with purely conventional norms, to awaken themselves from passivity so they do not simply wait to absorb.

We have shared a number of experiences that make some of this particularly clear. Friday afternoon, as those who were here recall, we saw the sky darken outside the windows, the clouds gather, and a storm begin. Watching the light change, the rain pour down for a few minutes, remembering

what I said the other day about having aesthetic experiences with nature, I asked myself about the difference between what I was seeing outside the window and what, say, the painter Turner made me see when it came to storms, steam, mist—or a Hudson River painter rendering clouds gathering over the Catskills. And I thought about the haze in the hours before the rain here in the city and about Monet's painting of mist—in that work called "Impression: Mist." If Monet or Turner had been here on Friday and had been moved to make the look of the city the subject of a painting, we might have waited for a rendering of the storm as Turner or Monet saw it, but neither one would have captured it at the moment, as we do when we take a snapshot; he would have kept looking, trying to see it in terms of oil paint, pondering later what he had seen, finding new possibilities of color, of vaguely emergent form, transfiguring the storm we saw on 65th Street into a concretion, something called formed content, something—at last—that never existed in the world before. And if we reached out to understand, to engage with its shapes and colors and relationships, we would discover a wholly new storm-on-65th Street, something we could not conceivably have anticipated, and perhaps something new about storminess and the meaning of sudden darkening, curtaining, storming in our experience—which might have changed that experience in some fashion even as it altered our perceiving of city storms in time to come and offered us different perceptions of the city itself, perceptions that might play against one another—as they do when we read novels about the city (Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, Doctorow's work) making us ask ourselves what do we (here in the first person) really see.

I hope you think about the wonder of multiple perspectives in your own experience. I hope you think about what happens to you—and, we would all hope, to our students—when it becomes possible to abandon one-dimensional viewing, to look from many vantage points and, in doing so, construct meanings scarcely suspected before. That makes me think of another experience many of us shared: David Gonzalez telling the story of Orpheus and Eurydice—because he tapped so many styles of sound and movement, moving us to actualize one of the most familiar tales there are in multiple and unfamiliar ways. Again, we had to *be* there with him, let our imaginations work so that, in collaboration with him, we could make visible and palpable the musician Orpheus and the lost wife he goes in search of to the underground. We had to be personally participant, imaginatively participant when he tried not to look back until he and Eurydice were back on earth; we had ourselves to be drawn to look back, to assure ourselves that the "as-if" Eurydice was really there—even though we knew. What we shared was an enactment of art-making—someone raising up a world before our eyes

through movement and the sound of his voice and the expressions of his face. It reminded me of a Rilke poem called "Initiation" that begins with going out into the evening and lifting one's eyes from the worn-out door-stone—and then:

*slowly you raise a shadowy black tree
and fix it on the sky: slender, alone.
And you have made the world (and it shall grow
and ripen as a word, unspoken, still).
When you have grasped its meaning with your will,
then tenderly your eyes will let it go.*

(1940/1974, p. 21)

It reminded me of it because it seemed to ask of me the same effort—to raise something against the sky by means of my imagination—and then choosing it in some way meaningful, making it my own.

None of this signifies that you are required to like these works or that you are bound to discover openings within them. I am pointing to, suggesting to you the possibilities opened by imagination—possibilities that something may happen in your experience, that something may open to a new way of seeing or feeling or coping with the world. I want—to extend the point I am trying to make about perceiving and imagining and opening—to refer to another experience some shared, the listening to the Mendelssohn octet, which I well realize sounds differently to each of us, which may well be heard differently—phase by phase, phrase by phrase. I could not but recall an essay that has always meant a good deal to me. It is called "Making Music Together" and was written by a philosopher named Alfred Schutz. He looked at a performance like the one we heard as a particular kind of "web of social relationships," a mutual "tuning-in relationship" by which, he wrote, the "I and the 'Thou' are experienced by the participants as a 'We' in vivid presence." He spoke of listeners coming into communication with a composer through the mediation of the performers, and he also spoke of the relation among the performers and "the flux of tones unrolling in inner time and an arrangement meaningful" to composer and listener and performers "because and in so far as it evokes in the stream of consciousness participating in it an interplay of recollections, retentions, protensions and anticipations which interrelate the successive elements" (1964, p. 173). He saw this as one of the best examples of persons communicating, becoming mutually concerned with one another, creating a relationship founded upon a common experience of living simultaneously in both inner and outer time. There

are other ways of explaining the musical experience, but this is one that, at least for me, relates it to the other participatory experience we are having here and, at once, suggests what can happen in situations here and in our classrooms when, by means of a performance, an enactment, a reading, or an exhibition, a "We" can emerge in vivid presence—something crucial to our lives.

Now I know, as all of us now concerned about cultural diversity know, that there are other kinds of music than the Mendelssohn, other kinds of arrangement in inner time than the one Schutz had in mind. I know, for example, that the experience of listening to Indian music is different from the experience of listening to Mendelssohn; I know that the Indian aesthetic is different from ours—with its emphasis upon an intuitive grasp of what is happening in an art form and a move outward from that art form to a transcendence of the sensory world and an escape to a state of superior pleasure, practical betterment, and spiritual bliss. We will be in some way participant in Indian dance this week and the sounds that accompany it, and I would like to believe that, for all the difference in aesthetic theory, we can somehow experience the "I-Thou" moment Schutz described when listening to Indian music. It is interesting to read that dance and music are thought to outrank sculpture and painting in Indian culture because of the Indian belief that art should have a dimension of time. While paintings, for instance, freeze the action of the subject in a single instant, music and dance unfold in time. Without sharing the religious resonances, I think many of us have experienced the moments of "vivid presence" in, say, the music of Ravi Shankar.

Our object, where public school children and young people are concerned, is to provide increasing numbers of opportunities for tapping into long unheard frequencies, for opening new perspectives on a world increasingly shared. It seems to me that we can only do so with regard for the situated lives of diverse children and respect for the differences in their experience. But this need not mean shutting the doors to the possibility of making music together, not always the same music, not music governed by the same norms. The point seems to me to be experiential, not theoretical. My own experience opened when I first heard Ravi Shankar (who helped me, as time went on, listen to Philip Glass, to attend to the *Mahabharata*, to push back my horizons, to realize there were multiple musics and multiple ways of making music together—but that I was entitled to listen to the musics of other cultures against my own lived situation, on my own ground. It may be that some day we will find our studies revealing what some scholars call a "single Calliope"—Calliope, the daughter of the goddess of memory and of

Zeus, Calliope who gave us the gift of art. It may be that some day we will find a common unity shared by art around the world as more disparate artists work to imbue sensuous media with potential meanings. We have not yet found it, but we have found the wonders of difference, the wonders of diversity, and the possibility of experiencing the "I" and "Thou" in particular cases and with regard to specific art works as an emergent "We."

I believe that this is more likely to happen if the participatory engagements we are involved with here become more likely in the schools around the country. Working together to discover Indian dance movements, learning something about the importance of styles, young people will open themselves to the language of Indian dance—on the basis of who *they* are and what they are willing to explore. Some of us have had this experience with African dance, some with Mayan symbols and images in literature as well as visual art. We have not become African or adopted Mayan creeds, but some of us, along with the young strangers in our classrooms, have reached out as reflective knowers in a world changing daily in the light of views from what used to be the margins, in the light of new eyes looking, new voices speaking. We all have to look out as persons somehow in pursuit, somehow leaning toward a future of possibility. Empathy is required, the kind of empathy that imagination, of all human capacities, makes possible. An imaginative reaching out and toward is needed, as we learn—all of us, old and young—to look through more and more perspectives at what we hold in common—and as, using our imagination, we become able to imagine what Cynthia Ozick describes as "the familiar heart of the stranger" (1989).

Opening ourselves, putting one-dimensionality aside and shallow conventions, we can nurture a desire or *communitas* by means of art experiences while preserving differences. We need to affirm ourselves and touch our own horizons as we work to fuse with others, as we offer more and more pathways out of the fixed and the ordinary, pathways toward what might be. I like what Sartre wrote about pathways, after writing that we all perceive things against the background of our world.

If the painter presents us with a field or a vase of flowers, his paintings are windows which are open on the whole world. We follow the red path which is buried among the wheat much farther than van Gogh painted it, among other wheat fields, under other clouds, to the river which empties into the sea, and we extend to infinity, to the other end of the world, the deep finality which supports the existence of the field and the earth. So that, through the various objects which it produces . . . the creative act aims at a total renewal of the world. (1949, p. 57)

And, now forgive me. I need to end with a woman's words, words written by a woman poet, Muriel Rukeyser, writing (yes) about Orpheus in her "The Poem as Mask," in which things come together with "their own music." First, she tells of writing about dancing wild women, singing, and she says it was a mask when she wrote of Orpheus, exiled; it was really herself, "unable to speak, in exile from myself."

And, wonderfully:

*There is no mountain, there is no god, there is memory
of my torn life, myself split open in sleep, the rescued child
beside me among the doctors, and a word
of rescue from the great eyes.*

No more masks! No more mythologies!

*Now, for the first time, the god lifts his hand,
the fragments join in me with their own music.*

(1982, p. 435)

It is not only renewal. It is a wholeness for each of us, for ourselves.

Maxine Greene , "Variations on a Blue Guitar"