

THE BODY IS A HOUSE: APPROACHING PROPRICEPTION¹

Kate Tarlow Morgan²

“...that I am one/with my skin
Plus this—plus this: that forever the geography...
which leans in
on me I compel
backwards...to yield, to
change...”

Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27ⁱ

In search for a definition

Proprioception (pronounced /,prɒʊpri.ə'sɛpʃən/*PRO-pree-o-SEP-shən*), from Latin *proprius*, meaning "one's own" and perception, is the *sense* of the relative position of neighboring parts of the body. It is the sense that indicates whether the body is moving with required effort, as well as where the various parts of the body are located in relation to each other. Unlike the *exteroceptive* senses by which we perceive the

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outside world, and interoceptive senses, by which we perceive pain and the movement of internal organs—proprioception is a third distinct sensory modality that provides feedback solely on the status of the body—as if it were a house and sited in place.

Reflexively, proprioception is experienced viz. pressure through the joints which fires locator messages into the nervous system at the insertion sites of joint-end tendonous fibers and fibrous muscle bundles called “golgi bodies.” Gravity also participates, as *pressure through* needs the Earth Element with which to interact. Some would say that such interdependence of body and earth recapitulates the embryogenic experience of the maturing fetus in the womb—as the space in which the fetus grows becomes tighter and tighter, gentle pressure to the joint capsules simulates the sensation of gravity.

Conceptually, proprioception has been described as connector from body to world and, as anchor to “self”, functions as a built-in technique for consciousness. Interestingly, this is an idea that continually crosses disciplinary boundaries and has been used to describe nervous sensation, cognitive development, and the ego.

How I came to this idea, however, was not through the field of somatics, but through the work of one poet, Charles Olson who—over the course of his extensive career as state official, archaeologist, frontier pedagogue at Black Mountain College, dancer and local historian—managed to come up with a theory of knowledge that not only includes the body, but begins with it.

In 1975, I discovered Charles Olson’s book *Proprioception*ⁱⁱ and too, *The Maximus Poems*ⁱⁱⁱ from which the title poem in this essay is excerpted. The words “lean” and “yield” are used as a key to “proprioception”. Proprioception, he taught me, was the seal, the stamp, upon which each person’s life is impressed. It thus became a significant cross-disciplinary experience for me that I should meet up with these same terms used, in 1986, as an integral piece to the Basic Neurological Patterns; words, which every practitioner of Body-Mind Centering must learn. And, we shall come back to this later.

In 1955 Charles Olson typed four pages that follow under the title “The Body is A House.” I found this piece in the archives at Storrs^{iv}—it has never been published, and yet it is a phenomenological gem concerning the nature of body awareness. “The Body is A House” considers a very important question for the dancer, which is: how to navigate the experience of one’s anatomy and how, in the process of navigating, one discovers one’s own anatomy of experience. Or *how we come to know*.

Olson writes,

Inside the body is thing as vast and as difficult to experience as the universe. But it has this advantage that it is inside. It can be experienced directly.^v

This consideration—of the experience and of the directness—was and continues to be the subject of an entire field of study in what we now call Somatics. This is a field that subsumes the movement arts and sciences ranging from kinesiology to sports and from choreographic techniques to dance therapy. And so, after thirty-five years of living with Olson’s poetry, I realize that his work descends from a long history of somatic research. However, there may be no one, preceding or subsequently, better equipped to describe the nature of such an experience with *soma*.

Cenesthesia

In 1794, Johann Christian Reil, anatomist and psychiatrist of the early 19th century coined the two complementary terms “gemeingefuhl” or “general sensibility,” and “cenesthesie” or “cenesthesia” which is defined in Webster’s Dictionary as “the vital sense,” or, “the undifferentiated complex of organic sensations by which one is aware of the body and bodily conditions “(1945).

Cenesthesia was—according to Reil—one of three that informed the soul. First, was “external sensation” or the perception of the outside world through the senses. Second, was “internal sense” otherwise called “the organ of the soul,” where the abilities of imagination, judgment, and consciousness were housed. The third was this “vital sense” otherwise named “cenesthesie.”^{vi}

In 1826, Charles Bell expounded the idea of a “muscle sense” and is credited for theorizing on the idea of a physiologic feedback mechanism where commands are carried from the brain to the muscles, and that reports on the muscle’s condition could be sent in the reverse direction.^{vii} In the second half of the nineteenth century, evolutionists incorporated Reil’s second principle, “cenesthesia” by calling it “the primary body sense.”^{viii} In spite of the classic dichotomies of external and internal perception or the body-mind split, it was still maintained, that in addition to sensations of placement and orientation that “mental life was determined by sensory activity” as well.^{ix}

Later, in 1880, Henry Charlton Bastian suggested “kinaesthesia” instead of this muscle sensing on the basis that some of the afferent information (back to the brain) was coming from other structures including tendons, joints, and skin. In 1889, Alfred Goldscheider suggested a classification of kinaesthesia into 3 types: muscle, tendon, and articular sensitivity.^x

There still remained a blurring between self-perception with internal sensing. Theodule Ribot wrote in his *Diseases of Personality* (1891) that personality varied as organic (physical) sensations varied. Therefore, the unity of the ego was dependent on both consciousness and physiology. And, the unconscious, as it was then perceived, continued to find its origin in the life of the body.^{xi}

By 1900, Freud had maintained that while mental suffering may express itself through the body, it was ultimately linked, in origin, to the psychic process alone. This groundbreaking paradigm shift relocated the unconscious by assigning it the task of being “custodian of language and the producer of palimpsests or puzzles that were then open to being deciphered.”^{xii} In other words, it was from within the mechanism of human language-making that the life of the body could be tapped and understood.

This new approach moved psychic healing from the world of science (medical) and placed it in the world of symbols (metaphor and metonymy). And by the first quarter of the twentieth century, the interpretation of the unconscious, with its labyrinthine potential for creativity and obfuscation, became the project of Psychoanalysis.

The systematic investigation of body-feeling and body-movement, as it related to personality and personal history was abandoned. By this time, there were very few clinicians who believed that the body could be a direct source or place of psychic suffering. Rather than the body being a house, it was a hall of mirrors with no direct connection to its contents or, for that matter, consciousness. Proprioception, then, simply became a function of the body rather than a mechanism for discovery.

In 1906, Charles Scott Sherrington published a landmark work that introduced the terms *proprioception*, *interoception*, and *exteroception*. The exteroceptors are the organs responsible for information from outside the body such as the eyes, ears, mouth, and skin. The interoceptors then give information about the internal organs,

while proprioception is awareness of movement derived from muscular, tendon, and articular sources. Such a system of classification has kept physiologists and anatomists searching for specialized nerve endings that transmit data on joint capsule and muscle tension (such as muscle spindles and Pacini corpuscles).^{xiii} It would be interesting at this juncture to note that the project of psychoanalysis came before the identified term “proprioception.”

As I have written elsewhere,^{xiv} there persisted an interest, in the early 20th century, to find methods for ‘reading’ the body in relation to the mind. Sandor Firenzi (1916) observed expressive body movements as they occurred in the psychoanalytic session. Allport and Vernon (1933) studied human movement style as a reflection of personality. Wilhelm Reich (1933) made his ‘character analysis’ based on scanning the physical self in musculature, posture, gait, gesture and breathing. Deutsch, Mahler (1940’s) and Lowen (1950’s) all looked at body movement in relation to development and psychoanalytic principles. Warren Lamb’s ‘posture-gesture-merging’ (1965) was a technique for observing movement style and integration with emotional states. And in the 1970’s, Judith Kestenberg was using Laban Movement Analysis with a psychoanalytic grid to examine early childhood and mother/child interaction.^{xv}

Current with these personality/body language therapies were the developmental movement theorists of which Arnold Gesell (1945)^{xvi} was one, who viewed the human infant as a “growing action system” whose specifically sequenced movements led to the infant’s ability to function in the world both cognitively and spatially. Later, Piaget’s views put forth that the foundations of intelligence were unconditionally supported by the type and manner of a child’s motor development. It was D.W. Winnicott, both pediatrician and psychoanalyst who coined the term “good holding/bad holding” in the effort to educate parents of the impact of a healthy developmental movement history on a child’s cognitive abilities.^{xvii}

This single idea of citing movement as a precursor to knowledge is what Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen has used, since 1970, as the basis for her work—Body-Mind Centering.^{xviii} Her work comes at the end of a century-long interest in the impact of motor development on both cognition and emotion. This quest may, in fact, have been spearheaded from the cocktail provided by Freud and Sherrington. Cohen and others continue to be interested in creating a pedagogy that demands an interdisciplinary approach to somatics (as per body/mind) and to implement research that explores not simply the existence, but the agency of movement impacting on the mind. Of infancy, Eileen Heaney, infant specialist has said “The infant must move or act on his world in order to know it.”^{xix} Therefore, movement is a primary sense of the caliber of Reil’s “censesthie” or that “vital sense.”

It was Cohen, I feel, who returned to the original vitality of the meaning of the “vital sense,” and infused new meaning to the term “proprioception” which at this date is just over a hundred years old. And so too, Olson, through his poetry, recovers meaning to this word and understands it to be a primary mover in the state of human consciousness.

The question remains whether “proprioception”—which lies in very specific places in the body: the inner spindle fibers of muscle, the Golgi Bodies, and the articular capsules of the joints—contributes to this “vital sense”? And too, whether one is able to deepen one’s knowledge of self simply by *moving*.

I think Olson wrestled this—

To which

PROPRIOCEPTION: the data of depth sensibility...^{xx}

I believe that Cohen, some years hence from Olson's *Proprioception* (1965), came up with a response to the deeper significance of proprioception by introducing her developmental movement patterning sequence. The Basic Neurological Patterns as presented through Cohen's Body-Mind Centering principles captures the humanistic, if not philosophical, drive behind development, growth, the self and too, proprioception.

In the universe of the spinal animal

The terms, Yield, Push, Reach and Pull, are the four basic qualities Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen has assigned to the progression of human movement development.^{xxi} They are the foundation stones for "depth sensibility" or the "vital sense," that defines and determines tone, placement and orientation. Through Yield, Push, Reach and Pull, we come to know where we are.

Proprioception is the functional dynamic of Yield, Push, Reach, and Pull, which is subsumed in all the patterns and responses that exist as a long-evolved technology for survival. Earlier patterns provide a solid base for later ones and, once established, are subsumed into higher levels of movement ability and increasingly complex physical and mental tasks.^{xxii}

If we return to the question of the possibility of the mind and the body joining somewhere, it would be somewhere found in Olson's words:

...the body of us as object which spontaneously or of its own order produces experience of, 'depth' viz. SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES.^{xxiii}

What propels us is a fundamental desire to move and also a fundamental desire to know. After all, it is from the sheer act of moving that the baby find ways to interact with people and with objects in space. This is learning at its very base. Therefore, what we think and perceive is tied up with the history of our body's movement-sense (sensation) and our body's body-feeling (cenesthesia). And it begins with proprioception. If the beginning begins with proprioception then are no disciplines to cross since, in the beginning, there is no distinction between self and world, until proprioception is put to work.

Movement knowledge, then, has to have a body-mind function as it facilitates both re-patterning at the motoric level and re-collecting at the level of the psyche. When people are touched, they feel something; when they feel something, they are moved. When they move, they remember. Therefore, the proprioceptive purpose of movement is, like psychoanalysis, a hermeneutic—it carries a message and leads the follower, be it even an infant, along the path of interpretation. *To move is to know thyself.* To move is to know thyself in the present and the past.

Olson's brilliant point in one of his many versions of "The Place, & The Thing, & The Act of the Action," is that the body (our physiology) has to look at itself without stopping.

...to make action like a pond with a clear frozen surface, look down into

it—without freezing it at all!! It has extreme value to do.^{xxiv}

Olson calls it the Vector Experience (dimension, density, complexity), and he writes:

...one knows something one can't know without so disposing oneself to one's self: one acquires the outward experience inside...^{xxv}

The acquisition of this knowing is housed in what Reil would identify as the cenesthetic domain, and too, Sherrington, or even Freud. Charles Olson's mission, like his forebears, was to "expose the machinery" (as Brecht would have it) and, at the same time, use it to build the house, with all its contents and placement.

We might return here to the terms exteroception, interoception, and proprioception—the magnificent sensing apparati of the body for its outside, its inside, and *the place*. Proprioception puts us IN IT and it gets us THERE. It is the approach and the arrival, or better yet, it propels us so that we may own the meaning of existence as we dance from one synapse to the next to find ourselves again and again inside, not only our bodies, but also the universe.

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^{xxiii} Olson, Op. Cit., 4.

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