The Descanter of Revelations: Singing as a Way to Life

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Abstract:

In this thesis I argue that singing is a way of creating an ongoing identity that is founded upon a particular way of being that is opened up through singing. In order to do this I draw upon Western Classical singing technique in order to highlight that singing requires an *entirely different* use and engagement of the body than when one is speaking or not singing. By looking in depth at the way the body is attended to differently when singing, I am able to then draw upon Phenomenology, particularly the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, to argue that when the body is utilised in a new way, a new way of being-in-the-world is brought forth. I call the way of being created by singing The Body-Bel Canto; Bel Canto is considered an ‘ideal type’ of singing, and I see its musical traits as descriptive of characteristics of the way of being I believe is awakened in any singing. I then look at some examples from Anthropology that highlight how singing can be transformative of one’s way of being. The second chapter argues that the new way of being that is awakened through singing can actually be committed to as a personally authored identity. I draw on Pascal and Kierkegaard in this chapter to underscore my argument that creating an identity of one’s own is a hard process and not something that has already happened before we have consciously chosen to do it. I give the name the Descanter of Revelations to the identity that is forged by singing. Chapter Three is an historiography that highlights how the traits of Bel Canto emerged historically. I use the tripartite structure of word-note-tone that constitutes most vocal music to argue that a shift of emphasis from word to note to tone led to tone being favoured in Bel Canto singing, and it is my argument that this is the most personal part of the tripartite structure; tone is where being resides. Finally I examine the life and poetry of Walt Whitman in order to highlight what the particular traits in my phenomenological analysis of being a singer look like. Whitman was awoken as a poet by the Opera, though I am arguing more specifically that Bel Canto singing awoke in Whitman a way of being that is analogous with Bel Canto and therefore his poetry describes for my thesis what it is like to *be* a singer. I then conclude by returning to what it means to be a Descanter of Revelations.
I, Daniel Rainer Rothschild, declare that this thesis comprises only my own original work toward a Ph.D.–Arts (Social Theory) and that due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other materials used.

This thesis is fewer than the maximum word count and is 78,000 words as approved by the Research Higher Degrees Committee.

Daniel R. Rothschild.

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Singing is a seizing of possibilities. To release the singing voice out of the body is so much more than a melodic rendering of the speaking voice with some musical attributes added such as rhythm and pitch. It is a declaration and actualisation of one’s ability to transcend the given structures of one’s being-in-the-world and enact a new way of being. Singing is no argument. It is an act in which the singer must comport his or her body and compose him or herself in a way that allows the optimal delivery of a mode of expression that is entirely different to speaking. The drawing in of more breath, the tension of the diaphragm, and the coordination of the whole body in producing the singing tone all facilitates a transformation. In that very moment, the transformation of the body enacts a transformation of the singer’s being-in-the-world beyond the conceptual logic of the natural attitude; it breaks fixed forms, and the world is seized in a new way. Victor Hugo writes: ‘To sing seems a deliverance from bondage’ (1930:71). The deliverance is from the limitations of an identity that has not sung, and thus singing begins as a cry, as Ernst Bloch writes, ‘a cry expressing an urge and appeasing it at the same time’ (Bloch, 1985:196). In the moment of singing I enact my deliverance and bring to expression that which was latent. I author it. What is expressed is mine; it is a way in which I may seize upon my ‘ownmost possibilities’ (Heidegger, 1962:318). As Heidegger (1962:33) states: ‘only the particular Dasein decides its existence, whether it does so by taking hold or by neglecting’. To sing is to take hold of existence.
This thesis is an attempt to show that the act of singing is a way of actualising a new way of being-in-the-world that is resonantly rich with personal significance and meaning. Singing involves a transformation of one’s physiology, which is unequivocally concomitant with a transformation of one’s being-in-the-world. Singing is not speaking, and thus the production of the singing tone enacts a different engagement with one’s body and one’s being. By looking at the act of singing through the lens of existential phenomenology, I will argue that singing opens up new horizons of possibility because the body is utilised in a new way. Further, I will argue that the ways of being opened up through singing are both more authentic and more poetic than when one is speaking. Singing reveals possibilities that can be considered more authentic because the sound is self-authored – it is not merely the given tone of the speaking voice but the personally cultivated tone of the singing voice out of one’s body as instrument (an instrument ultimately no one else can play) – and more poetic because the sounds, tones, and range of the voice in singing takes it beyond the everyday usage inherent in the ‘natural attitude’ or taken for granted assumptions associated with speaking, thus creating wider interpretive horizons than those associated with the usual use of the words we speak. It is my intention to argue that this opening of possibilities is inherent in any singing, not only that of professional singers.¹ More specifically however, because I am writing a phenomenology of singing, the primary argument is therefore that while existential

¹ It has become apparent to me during the course of writing this thesis that an important question many people have is “can anyone sing”? It seems, however, what is actually being asked here is “can anyone sing well”? My answer to this is that phenomenological sensitivity toward cultivating particular existential traits invoked through singing will no doubt have bearing on the quality of tone in one’s voice. But whether this endows a person with the properties of musicality beyond tone-deafness and listenability beyond private practice is not, of course, affirmative.
possibilities I find to be awakened in the singing act are available to all, singing is a particularly prime way of cultivating them. This particular way of being that I argue is opened up through singing is potentially present in those who do not sing. However, I am arguing that singing is a unique act that opens up a certain way of being, and therefore it is more than simply a musical act. Singing is a way of cultivating certain existential traits that I believe are manifested when a person sings, and if these seized upon, can potentially be a path to a transformation of identity, which I call The Descanter of Revelations. While the potentiality is universal, the quality of the particular poetic, authentic, meaningful being-in-the-world that is unleashed is just as personal as the voice is to any particular singer. Over the course of this thesis, this personal dimension I will refer to as tone. Tone can then be seen as the quality of one’s “voice”, whether one is literally singing a descant, or being a Descanter. This existential reading of musical terms is one of the key features of this thesis. I am choosing to focus in upon certain instances of singing which I feel best highlight and support these claims. Over the course of this thesis I will show firstly, by way of introduction and the first chapter, just how much singing differs from ordinary speaking by looking at the technique of learning to sing in the Western Classical tradition. This will serve to highlight the vast differences in one’s attention to, and one’s engagement with, one’s own body when singing as compared with speaking. This will provide the material for a phenomenological analysis of singing, where I will argue, by drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, that the physiological transformations associated with singing create a transformation of one’s being-in-the-world. Further, this transformation will be shown to be richer in significance than the ‘natural attitude’ for
the singer because it is, as mentioned above, both more authentic and more poetic. I will use several examples from Anthropology to highlight this claim. Therefore, Chapter One will lay the foundation for my thesis by arguing that singing is an act which opens up one’s being-in-the-world in a way which is more poetic and authentic. It is a seizing of possibilities.

Chapter Two will follow on from this claim to argue that once it has become clear that new possibilities are awakened by singing, these can be cultivated and committed to, to create a new identity. This identity I characterise as the “Descanter of Revelations”. Drawing from the philosophy of Pascal and Kierkegaard, this chapter will be an existential reading of singing to argue that the possibilities awakened by singing can be seized upon in an existential commitment in order to create an ongoing identity and foundation to one’s self-conception. Rather than just being a ‘singer’, by committing in this way the singer can become a Descanter of Revelations; taken as the foundation for an identity, it is not hyperbole to suggest that by doing so the singer sings him or herself into existence. Pascal and Kierkegaard’s philosophy will be used to help demonstrate the nature of such commitment to an identity, which involves not only a reasoned idea of the possibility but also a genuine change in one’s comportment in order to enact it. Further, it involves a kind of faith because it cannot be objectively determined that it is the ‘right’ way to commit oneself; there are no objective markers which reassure one, only the experience of the one singing. Being a Descanter of Revelations therefore is a personal forging of an identity which is only subjectively true – not true for anyone else – yet creates such a strong sense of purpose and definition that it can be relied upon, in
faith, to be a truly rewarding way to live and die. This is the existential reading of singing: the forging of an identity.

Once the structure of commitment to a specific way of being has been outlined, the next task is to determine the qualities that constitute this specific way of being. As I will argue, the body, through the comportment required to achieve the goal of singing, becomes itself the singing body. The widely regarded ‘golden age’ of singing is the age of ‘Bel Canto’, a term which, significantly, refers not only to the era of this type of singing, but has also come to be regarded as meaning both ‘beautiful singing’, and ‘beautiful singer’. It is for this reason that I have conceptualised the ‘ideal type’ of singing body as the Body-Bel Canto, which might mean ‘beautiful singing body’, but more importantly gives name to a specific way of being that I will explain in depth in Chapters Three and Four. To produce Bel Canto, so too must the body become, and thus the musical traits that constitute this style of singing will, in my argument, be read existentially. This is to say that the singer, in becoming the Body-Bel Canto will experience the three main traits that are outlined by music scholars as associated with the Bel Canto singing style. These are: 1) Joy, or a playful spontaneity, 2) Athleticism, or ease of expression, and 3) the Chiaroscuro, or bright/dark. In my thesis these are not only musical, but existential traits, which is to say that these traits become definitive of the singer’s being-in-the-world. These are the qualities which constitute both Bel Canto singing, and in my reading, the Body-Bel Canto. While producing Bel Canto as a specific singing style might be the arcane dominion of a select specialist practice, the Body-Bel Canto is something each person can cultivate within him or herself through
singing, by actualising these traits. It is my contention that these traits can indeed best be potentially forged and awakened through any singing, and not exclusively singing in the Bel Canto style. Yet before going on to analyse these qualities in detail, I will use Chapter Three as a historiography to show how these musical traits emerged in singing out of the birth of Opera in the late Renaissance. As a historiography, I will argue in Chapter Three that the changes in singing style throughout different eras in the development of Opera were concomitant with shifts of importance in the word-note-tone relationship of vocal music, and that by the time Bel Canto emerged as the predominant form of ‘beautiful singing’, tone had come to take precedence over the word and the note in the tripartite nature of vocal music. In the word-note-tone relationship which constitutes most forms of vocal music, the movement to tone during the ‘golden age’ of Bel Canto as the dominant aspect casts, in my reading, a new insight into the way of being of the singer, revealing the person singing. More than the notes or the words, the tone is where individual being of the singer resides, and the tone of Bel Canto singing is said to be beautiful if it consists of Joy, or playfulness, Athleticism, or ease of expression, and Chiaroscuro, or both bright and dark qualities. I will begin this historiography at the birth of Opera in the late 16th Century and argue that there the words were deemed most important to expressive and moving vocal performance. However, in Bel Canto it is tone that becomes dominant. This allows me to show that singing was thought about differently in regard to the word-note-tone relationship, and once tone was emphasised, certain characteristics became championed that are, in my thesis, those characteristics that can be thought of as constituting the way of being of a singer. Our tone reveals our singular body, and concomitantly, our being-in-the-world. It
is my argument that the qualities which constitute the way of being of the singer are indeed analogous with those described as inherent in Bel Canto, therefore I take the traits of Joy, Athleticism, and Chiaroscuro as not only musical but existential, and the singer is therefore, in my reading, the Body-Bel Canto. Further, to commit to this way of being in the creation of an identity is to be what I call a Descanter of Revelations.

After completing the historiography to see how these traits emerged historically I will explore them in much more detail in order to give a sense of what it is like to be the Body-Bel Canto. This will be in many ways the central piece of the entire thesis, as I will draw on what I consider to be a unique example in Western literature that will substantiate and support my theoretical discussion about what it is like to be a singer. This example is the poetry of Walt Whitman. To me, Whitman is the single greatest literary example of how the qualities I associate with the Body-Bel Canto actually look. Whitman provides the literary link between the musical traits of the Operatic singing style and the existential characteristics of the Body-Bel Canto. It is of course no surprise that Whitman was deeply indebted to Opera of the Bel Canto style for much of his poetic inspiration; in his own words he explicitly said as much: ‘Walt Whitman’s method in the construction of his songs is strictly the method of the Italian Opera’\(^2\) (cited in Faner, 1951:v). I will draw from this fact to argue firstly that the great transformation that took place within him in the early 1850s – the ‘puzzling mystery’ (Schmidgall cited in Whitman, 1999:xvi) of how he went from a hackneyed

\(^2\) This often quoted remark is from an anonymous review Whitman himself published in the *Saturday Press* on January 7, 1860 (Faner, 1951:v, vii).
journalist to composing what is considered by many scholars as the first great American poem – is directly related to his experience not only with the Opera but, more particularly, Bel Canto singing. Further than this however, I will take Whitman at his own estimation of himself as a ‘singer of songs’ (Whitman, 1999:232) rather than as a writer of poems, and argue that his poems emerge directly from his being a singer and thus are deeply imbued with traits I associate as those of the Body-Bel Canto. Whitman said to a friend late in life: ‘But for the Opera I could never have written Leaves of Grass’ (cited in Matthiessen, 1941:559-560). Yet where Matthiessen (1941:558ff) has noted the influence of Opera on Whitman’s poetic structure, and Faner (1951:82ff) rightly identifies Opera as the very thing that ‘made a poet of him’, I am suggesting something more participatory and direct. I am arguing that Whitman, a singer, has composed through his own self-made free-verse so many descriptions of what it is like to be a singer. This makes his work almost unique in that it provides probably the best example in all literature of how the musical traits of Bel Canto appear as existentially lived traits that define a way of being. Whitman’s poetry provides many rich descriptions of the characteristics I conceptualise as inherent in the Body-Bel Canto, namely Joy, Athleticism, and Chiaroscuro. This chapter will not necessarily be focused upon showing how his poetic techniques relate to or are indicative of the operatic style of Bel Canto. Rather, his poems will present a ‘world’, and define and express a way of being that I believe is indicative of the Body-Bel Canto. This is certainly not to say that one who invokes the Body-Bel Canto through singing will become a second Whitman. His poetry, flowing from his being a singer, will however show us that the world opens up in particular ways that are inherent in this type of being-in-the-world, yet how these
traits might emerge to any given individual would be deeply personal and subjective. The important task of this chapter will be not merely to demonstrate how the qualities of the Body-Bel Canto are substantiated through Whitman’s poetry, but more technically, to show how his entire inspiration and expression is founded upon the personal transformation that was awakened by Bel Canto, and that his poetry is a direct expression of the existential traits I have articulated as the Body-Bel Canto. I will use his poems to highlight the various aforementioned traits of the Body-Bel Canto in order to demonstrate that these are the qualities that constitute one’s being when one sings, and commitment to these as a guiding way of being for one’s life is to be a Descanter of Revelations. But before I go into the rest of the thesis, it is time to begin the argument proper by laying down the foundation of it here in the phenomenology of singing.
Chapter One

A Phenomenology of Singing

Singing is a form of creative expression that for two interrelated reasons can instigate a transformation of one’s being-in-the-world: first, its praxis precipitates a transformation of corporeality, and second, it expresses with the language of music; a language different to that which is expressed through spoken words alone, as I will argue below in relation to Alfred Schutz. In the act of singing, the body is an instrument. The expression of the body in singing becomes directed toward achieving a musical tone of qualitative difference to speaking. Despite whether the singer is trained classically or not, or what type of music is expressed – be it ritualised wailing or rap – through the production of a singing tone, the body is constituted in a different way from when one is speaking, and it is this reconstitution which invokes the transformation of being experienced by the singer. When expressing through singing – and this occurs with any activity – the body of the singer is seeking to attain its goal with what Merleau-Ponty calls a ‘maximum sharpness’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:292). The body is always seeking to apprehend the world, in a pre-reflexive, habitual way by which it makes sense to us. This is happening before we are even consciously aware of it, and thus the way our body is constituted is always situating us within a horizon of possibility. The world is pulled together with a certain relevance determined by this pre-reflexive engagement with it. Therefore possibilities of thought, action, and perception are all determined within this domain of engagement. As Käufer and Chemero (2015:70-71) write:
Possibilities, generally speaking, are basic purposes that can organize one’s existence and that accordingly structure the meaningfulness of the world… Depending on which of these possibilities structures your existence, you will encounter the world with a different set of emphases…Possibilities are ways of being that make sense.

In singing, the body must transform its habitual expression toward the production of a musical sound, thus rearranging the corporal schema for expressions beyond those of speaking. In this process a new horizon of possibilities is outlined. The ‘body schema’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:115) is our body’s readiness to engage with the situations we encounter in the world and thereby revealing the possibilities that will give a situation its significance (Käufer & Chemero, 2015:105). The world reveals itself with what is important to us and solicits from us certain actions, and in transforming our body in singing we are effectively revealing a new horizon of possibilities. Merleau-Ponty summarises how through our body we are always situated within a horizon of possibility by the term ‘intentional arc’ (1962:157).

The life of consciousness – cognitive life, the life of desire or perceptual life – is subtended by an ‘intentional arc’ which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation, or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects. It is the intentional arc which brings about the unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility. And it is this which ‘goes limp’ in illness.

This ‘intentional arc’ could be seen as the limit or horizon that is always already inherent in our being, thus our being is always being-in-a-world, whether we are consciously aware of it or not. Singing can be understood as a recasting of our intentional arc. If our intentional arc ‘goes limp’ in illness then singing, as a reconstitution of the optimal body required for a rich musical tone, would surely reinvigorate the arc of intention. In singing, the body itself is an instrument, and as
Bowling notes ‘it is rare to find a great voice emanating from a sickly cadaverous body’ (1980:27). In illness, perception, relevance, and one’s engagement with the world are all transformed, and the ‘arc’ cast out from this way of being determines a vastly different horizon of possibilities to those experienced or awakened in full health. As Merleau-Ponty (1962:94) writes:

> The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be interwoven in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them…my body is the pivot of the world.

The ‘world’ of illness therefore has changed from when one is in health. What seems possible in it, both consciously and pre-reflexively, is of a different quality to when one is in full health. In sickness, when our customary world opens itself to our habitual ways of engaging it, we can no longer be effectively drawn into it, and our body is marked by ‘regions of silence’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:95). However, what also needs to be considered is that even in a healthy body, through the voice the singer has the ability to recast the intentional arc by intentionally directing the comportment required for the production of a singing tone, which is a way of seizing upon a world; regions are no longer silent, and both body and world open out to new projects and possibilities. Singing offers a unique way of being-in-the-world; through the production of Bel Canto, so too must the body also become. Singing is then in my reading the invocation of the Body-Bel Canto, or ‘Beautiful Singing Body’.

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3 While Bel Canto is a singing style that is specific to a particular culture and historical time and place, I have chosen it to designate the particular way of being of singing for two specific reasons. First is simply because of the meaning it has of ‘beautiful singing body’, and secondly, more importantly, I argue – in Chapters Three and Four – that the traits inherent in this way of being are analogous with those of the singing style, despite whether one is singing that style or not.
Through the act of Singing, a person enters into a process of transformation which begins in the body and moves out, along the contours of the voice, into the world. The singer takes up a stance, a bodily posturing, which facilitates an optimal projection of the voice out of the body and into the open air around him or her, thus making manifest sounds and modulations which, once only immanent and amorphous, now become tangible and determinate. The sounds are unique to the singer; they emanate from his or her own body as instrument – an instrument that ultimately no one else can play (Fuchs, 1963:215). In short, I cannot sing your voice, and you cannot sing mine. In this context, that is, read phenomenologically, the sound can be conceptualised as a direct expression of the singer’s being-in-the-world, and thus as an important way by which identity might be forged and fostered. By making the expressive sound tangible, a singer actually commands an act of self-reflexivity that provides an insight into the ‘inner horizon’, or expressive intentionality of his or her being, and thus seizes upon a world. The singer’s being-in-the-world is simultaneously recognised and transformed. The release of musical sound into the immediate environment changes the environment in accordance with the internal ‘gestural sense’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:217) of the singer him or herself. It is not the conceptual meaning of words or identity that is inherent in the ‘natural attitude’ that is communicated or expressed but rather, as I will explain further below, it is what Merleau-Ponty calls the ‘emotional essence’ that is released, that is, the status the musical tone has as a vehicle for, or container of, the singer’s being. This is what is meant by the ‘gestural sense’. The differences between the singing sound and one’s speaking voice are manifold, and the implications of this distinction are
wide reaching. Singing requires a conscious attention to one’s ordinary bodily functioning in a manner that speaking does not. Breathing, one’s bodily posture, and even the articulation of words are all differently engaged and thought about when singing as compared with speaking. The goal is to create music with one’s own voice; to express oneself through one’s own body-instrument in a musical way.

This leads to the second consideration of singing which gives it a privileged place amongst other forms of creative expression: it is expressive of music. Other musicians express through music, however their expression is mediated by an object external to the body. Dance creates a similar transformation of the body through expressive gestures that go beyond mere functionality, but it is without musical sound. Poetry uses meanings of words lying beyond their conceptual sense and is in many ways closest to singing, yet the modulations of the voice are not as distinctively different from speaking

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4 While it might be argued that in performance an instrument becomes an extension of one’s body, as even Merleau-Ponty indicates (1962:168-169), I would like to stress that this is not the same as being the instrument. This distinction can be clearly seen when observing the differing personalities of singers and other musicians. The phenomenon of the “Diva” personality is a common one, where a singer makes ostensibly excessive demands on his or her colleagues and environment for the sake of their instrument, such as refraining from speaking, or demanding that air conditioners be turned off or fresh water be readily available. These demands indeed invite ridicule from those not required to be as sensitive to the full functioning of their whole body for an optimum vocal performance. There is a particularly salient example to be found in the autobiography of Keith Richards, guitarist for The Rolling Stones. What is fascinating and pertinent about this is that he had toured for many years as a guitarist with the Stones and was well known for his excessive partying behaviour. Yet in the late 1980s he set up a band on his own and went on tour, now as the frontman:

‘We went on tour. Suddenly I was the frontman…It made me far more sympathetic to some of Mick’s more loony things. When you have to sing every goddamn song you have to develop your lungs…When you sing lead in a band, it’s an exhausting business. Just the breathing involved. Singing song after song is enough to knock most people on their ass. It’s an incredible amount of oxygen you’re going through. So we would do shows and we’d come off stage and I’d go to bed!’ (Richards, 2010:533-534).

The physicality of singing is enough to even take the likes of Keith Richards off to bed, and this is a big part of what separates it from other forms of musical expression. As this chapter goes on I will elaborate more upon this theme.
as the singing voice is, and therefore its ability to engage the body differently is, I argue, less powerful. Painting and other visual arts also differ from singing because they lead to a completion of a fixed entity; a work which can be seen and apprehended in our perceptual field instantly. Singing is unique as both the body schema is transformed in its praxis, and it involves the creation of a musical expression which cannot be grasped as a fixed unit or form. Alfred Schutz (2004:206) describes this unique aspect of music as its ‘polythetic’ nature. By this he means that a ‘beholder’ of music cannot instantly grasp it as a totality, the way a telephone ring is heard or a road sign is seen. Rather, one has to co-perform the music as an arrangement in one’s own inner time. Unlike the polythetic unfolding of, for example, reading, whereby a resultant meaning may be then grasped monothetically, i.e. as one conceptual understanding, music, according to Schutz, must always be entered into and co-performed by a ‘quasi simultaneity’ of the beholder and the composer/performer’s stream of consciousness (2004:206-207). This ‘living through’ creates a shared ‘vivid present’ which constitutes a feeling of participation and what Schutz calls the ‘We-relationship’ (Schutz, 2004:207; Schutz, 1972:163ff). In this way, music aligns both the singer and the beholder in a mutual attuning of inner time, and it is this tuning in that creates a feeling of participation and inter-subjective communication between singer and beholder, or two singers, or more profoundly, the singer and his or her world. Of the latter, the singer, by expressing ‘that which cannot be said, and which cannot be suppressed’ (Hugo, 1930:71), seizes upon a unique way of bringing forth a world of one’s own creation, a world therefore potentially of more significance in its experiential relevance as kindred and life-giving.

5 This is not to say that the work is interpreted or understood instantly.
This is because it enables a more personal expression of one’s world which differs significantly from ordinary speaking. And when our personal experience of the world is more clearly articulated, it indeed creates a more complete experience of engagement with it.

1.1 Singing Technique and Phenomenology

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word “sing” as:

To articulate or utter words or sounds in succession with musical inflections or modulations of the voice so as to produce an effect entirely different from that of ordinary speech [my emphasis] (Vol. XV: 513).

This definition exemplifies what I see to be the fundamental characteristic of singing: it is to cast out a vocal expression which by its very nature requires a different usage of the vocal folds, the mouth, the lungs, and ultimately the whole body, than their usage in speaking. Singing is indeed entirely different to speaking, and this provides the foundational point for my entire thesis. The way the body’s muscles and organs are combined in singing forms a different physiology, and this is required to create a difference in the sound that emanates from the voice. When we use our voice for ordinary speech, very little attention is ordinarily paid to any physiological changes that direct the production of our speaking voice – even when we consciously manipulate it. From the very first cry of the newborn baby, we are using our voice to express ourselves without much conscious consideration at all. As children we learn to speak by merely imitating the speech of those around us, yet as Scholar and Opera Vocal coach Viktor Fuchs (1963:41-42) notes, nearly all of us learn from models that are gravely inadequate for providing a sound foundation from which to build up a beautiful and natural singing
voice. This is in part because regional and familial dialects tend to cut corners in pronunciation so as to be a kind of short hand, and partly because very little conscious attention is paid to the mechanics of voice production when imitating these imperfect forms. In clear contrast to this is the singing voice. Someone who begins to sing will immediately begin to change, even slightly, their physiology, and their body will be pre-reflexively drawn toward creating a ‘maximum sharpness’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:292) of performance. For example, if a person wanted to call out to another person across a wide space, he or she will immediately draw in a greater quantity of breath, and support the tone with their body quite naturally and instinctively. This is the body attempting to achieve its goal with a ‘maximum sharpness’ of performance. Yet singing is nevertheless much more complex than a single yell, and therefore a more conscious consideration of this process is usually required. This is to say that where speaking might be the result of what the voice emanates without any conscious manipulation, singing requires the voice to go beyond its ‘everyday’ use to create new sounds; there may be an increase in the range, the voice going both higher and lower than one’s ordinary speaking pitch, or a prolonged holding of a word, to give but two examples. The person singing will then be changing the way they use their voice to produce these new sounds, and attention will become focused upon the voice in order to achieve this purpose with the greatest effect. This formation of attention into one’s physiology through singing can be demonstrated most aptly by analysing the processes of how people learn to sing in the Western Classical tradition.
The purpose of outlining some aspects of singing technique of the Western Classical tradition is to highlight just how many physiological changes are required for the production of a singing tone. This will then be used to support my use of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology to argue that the transformation of one’s body through singing is thorough, and indeed a transformation of one’s being-in-the-world. Once I have outlined the techniques for singing, I will outline Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and provide some Anthropological examples which highlight the use of singing as a transformation of being-in-the-world. I will then go on to explain how the rest of my thesis will unfold over the course of the next chapters.

Perhaps the simplest example of how singing differs from speaking is in the use of breath. Although ostensibly something done straightforwardly and unthinkingly, breathing is one of the first things that must be thought about differently when beginning to sing. The breath is the ‘raw material’ (Fuchs, 1967:217) out of which the singer makes the tone, and its correct usage is much more important in the singer than in someone speaking. One common error is to assume that singing is like a pitched version of speaking. As Gardiner (1968:30) notes, many people learning to sing make this mistake.

Instead of applying a compression of breath against vibrating reeds, they blow breath up through the throat and out of the mouth, ignoring the very existence of the vocal cords. This in fact is what the average Englishman does in his ordinary conversation. Compared with the 100 per cent efficiency required by the singer, the English larynx in speech seldom achieves a standard of more than about 20 per cent of its true potential.
The breath is compressed in singing because it is brought down into the diaphragm through deeper breathing and then let out slowly to facilitate constant sustain and support of the notes being sung. This is not done in ordinary speech, which is why anyone learning to sing requires a rethinking of his or her breathing habits. Kellogg (1927:5) states that ‘singers are professional breathers…They alone have known the joy that comes with daily use of the diaphragm’. In his book *Why Breathe?* Kellogg (1927:6-8, *passim.*) goes on to argue that the deeper breathing techniques engaged in by singers can create multiple health benefits such as improving functioning of the brain and nervous system, aiding digestion, providing a greater sense of general well-being, and even creating a natural stimulant effect, reducing the desire for other ‘highs’. Even at this very basic level of the use of breath, singing can be seen as a way of enacting a positive transformation of one’s way of being, and the instruction of singing always maintains deep breathing to be of fundamental importance. As Fuchs (1967:217) notes, ‘It is important for singers to know that singing without adequate quantities of breath will jeopardise their voice sooner or later. And they must be taught to use their breath properly’. It must also be pointed out that most teachers in the Western Classical tradition also believe that such attention to the breath is not achieved in our habitual use of the voice, and singing is indeed a way of engaging the voice in a new and fundamentally different way to speaking. Fuchs (1967:217) continues, ‘The idea that good singing is based on good speaking only is basically wrong since speaking in daily communication requires much less breath’. Or, as Gardiner (1968:31) more bluntly

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6 In Michael Wadleigh’s film of the 1969 Woodstock Music Festival, there is a scene where a hippie is leading a large group of people through some breathing exercises with the promise that one can get just as high from utilising breathing without the use of drugs.
states, ‘To “sing as you speak” is in fact just as idiotic as to suggest that you can learn ballet dancing by going for long walks!’ . The literature is abundantly clear on this. Even the most habitual and instinctive bodily function, breathing, must be consciously adhered to and transformed in order to move from speaking to singing. This is important as it shows just how fundamental the transformation of one’s body is when engaging in singing.

Another vitally important factor in preparing oneself to sing is the conscious manipulation of bodily posture. The importance of breathing more deeply in singing than in speaking is both reliant upon and developed with good posture. The posture of the singer should be entirely directed toward maintaining perfect control of the breath and allowing the easiest application of the breath to the vocal folds in order to produce a note. From the ground up, the singer’s stance should be one of total support that allows the entire body from the feet to the top of the head to be in concord with the goal of singing with ease. When preparing to sing, we should take up, in the words of one vocal teacher, ‘a stance that encourages us to be taller, broader, nobler, and a little grander in aspect than usual. It is a confident stance’ [original italics] (Salaman, 1989:21). When attempting to sing, the body is likely to automatically move itself from any slouched position in order to best achieve its aim, again reiterating Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the body seeking to achieve a ‘maximum sharpness’ of performance. However, the attention paid to the body in creating this optimal stance for singing is not in order to relieve it of its relaxed state, but in fact is to increase the ease by which the singer has access to everything he or she might need to call upon in the body when singing. This is
important in singing even down to the detail of how one opens one’s mouth. As Fuchs (1967:43) states, ‘Good note placement always depends on the mouth position, and opening it too wide is as bad as closing it too tightly’. Fuchs (1967:43) cites an eighteenth century singing teacher who believed he found the right way to instruct correct mouth position and wrote: ‘I have at last fixed a general rule: Every pupil must shape his mouth for singing just as he shapes it when he smiles’ [original emphasis]. Salaman (1989:21) states that when singing ‘the gesture should be of happy surprise (not shock), as when we suddenly meet a friend, or when the sun comes out on a cloudy day’. She goes on to describe how to practice this gesture with the intake of breath when readying oneself to sing:

Stand taller than usual, and proud! ...Now take a breath through the mouth with the back of your throat open…Let this breath-taking gesture be as though you were suddenly surprised – astonished – by something happy or pleasurable, such as the unexpected arrival of a special person (1989:23).

It is perhaps not surprising that the very act of standing tall and proud and breathing deeply into the diaphragm with a happy countenance might induce some semblance of well being. Yet the argument I am leading toward is still more fundamental than that. Phenomenologically, these acts are more than a mere preparation for singing. They are a way of ‘taking a stand’ existentially too, because the way we engage bodily with the world is always already a declaration of one’s being-in-the-world, and not an attempt to signify something. In an influential article called ‘Knowledge of the body’, Jackson (1983) argues that if our immediate environment is suddenly disrupted it can cause us to lose orientation, or to fall, which does not gain its meaning by being applied later to the act but rather is inherent in the act itself. In other words, ‘in this sense, uprightness of
posture may be said to define a psychophysical relationship with the world, so that to lose this position, this ‘standing’ is simultaneously a bodily and intellectual loss of balance, a disturbance at the very centre and ground of our Being’ (Jackson, 1983:329). Consequently, the effect of standing upright in a supported and relaxed position, and holding an open, happy countenance would likewise induce a feeling of equanimity and surety in one’s own place. Comportment is, in the important way it orients us to our world, everything, and the preparations enacted to deliver the singing voice takes us well beyond the standard everyday comportment in which we usually engage with the world. A short account from Salaman’s (1989:22) interaction with her student demonstrates both the feeling of freedom associated with the act of singing, and the necessity for this freedom to allow for ease of execution:

Student: Is this wide-open enough?
Teacher: Yes! It is indeed.
Student: It feels good, open – free – even exultant! I would find this openness instinctively for my higher notes above the stave.
Teacher: Yes; and the feel of space back there in your throat…should be available at any time [when singing][original emphasis].

This example highlights both the sense of liberation associated with something as simple as opening the throat wider than usual, as well as the way that the body attunes itself toward this when the singer’s intentionality is directed toward producing the singing tone, particularly when achieving higher notes. Again, we see here the student remarking upon the instinctive way the body facilitates itself toward optimal expression.

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7 It is no surprise that the self-help literature of Anthony Robbins and the like also draws upon this phenomenon, such as when he asserts ‘If you really want to change your life, commit for the next seven days to spending one minute five times a day, grinning from ear to ear in the mirror’ (Robbins, 2013:29). Claims such as this draw upon and highlight the benefits associated with changing one’s countenance and comportment, though far more superficially and lacking in phenomenological understanding.
when singing, and thus it is certainly not surprising that vastly more people than those trained classically have found a competent singing voice within themselves. Furthermore, this accounts for the fact that many of the most recognisable voices in the history of singing are in fact without formal training, because the body ostensibly ‘trains itself’ to a degree, by doing automatically what is required to sing, which is then harnessed or nurtured by the singer him or herself. As Middleton (2000:28) notes in his essay ‘Rock Singing’ often the untrained voice has more appeal because it portrays the individuality of the singer to a greater extent than a technically perfect tone. This is significant for my thesis because as I will argue in Chapter Three, in the tripartite ‘word-note-tone’ relationship that makes up the majority of singing, tone is where the singer’s personal identity – his or her way of being-in-the-world – resides. When the body of anyone who sings ‘trains itself’ in order to produce optimally the singing voice, what is most individual about this expression is the tone produced by that individual.

8 Recently in the West the opportunities for untrained singers to perform on a live stage have increased significantly. To be sure, amateur performances had been very popular and widespread in England in the nineteenth century, but with the introduction of the music hall in the early twentieth century, amateur performers were replaced. Managers of these venues became increasingly concerned with making as much money as they could, and so they began booking more ‘professional’ acts to draw the biggest crowd (Kelly, 1998:92). Today it has come full circle; ‘amateurs’ without much formal training are regularly topping the music charts, and have mainstream commercial backing to help create a following. Far beyond the enthusiasm for participants of Karaoke – another major source of amateur singing performance that was introduced to Western audiences from Japan in the late 1980’s (Mitsui & Hosokawa, 1998:4) – the relatively new, and very popular phenomenon of Australian Idol and many other television shows like it have helped previously unknown ‘singers’ generate record-breaking sales. In his book The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical, Grant (2004: 36-40) traces the growing popularity of the untrained voice back to the introduction of the microphone in 1925. Every pop singer from this time on used a microphone, allowing them to project their voices without classical technique, and this, combined with the popularity of the new untrained voices utilising this technology, such as Robert Johnson, Bob Dylan, and Mick Jagger (Grant, 2004:42), had by the 1960’s shown that virtually anyone could be a ‘singer’. Untrained singing in a performative context has been around longer, however. For example, in England in the early part of the twentieth century it was a common practice when at a party or a working-men’s club to gather around the piano to sing songs together, with everyone having ‘their’ particular song (Beatles, 2000:19; Kelly, 1998:92-93).
body. The words convey the singer to some degree, in a more conceptual sense, and allow a listener to logically comprehend what is being sung. Yet words are not always understandable, or may even preclude other domains of meaning. Notes are also moving to a listener, as often a melody will capture our attention well before we ascribe any comprehension to the words. The notes chosen by an individual singer might indeed lend a certain character to the singing, such as the use of ‘blue notes’ etc. But singers don’t become highly regarded simply by singing the ‘right notes’. Rather, tone, I argue, is where the unique individual person as he or she is in that moment is to be found. It is the sound of that particular individual singing body expressing itself and thereby conveying the particular way of being the singer is grounded in. Where the words and melody set the scene, the tone is what the individual singer him or herself brings to the scene and imbues it with a certain character. As Middleton (2000:28) states, the popularity of untrained singers is due to the individuality they portray, and this, I argue, is due to the tone of each singer’s voice far more than the words or notes.

Despite whether or not the physiological manipulations inherent in producing a singing tone are reflected upon, scrutinised, and brought under conscious control as they are in classical technique, the body of every singer undergoes a transformation, to a greater or lesser extent, from how it is constituted in speaking. As I have described above, in its task of realising this, the body will position itself to attain this optimally. Drawing now further on Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, I will now describe this process more fully. Merleau-Ponty (1962:352) argues that in our relating to the world around us, the body is primary because it is always positioning us toward what is
significant and meaningful for us in a way which seeks to attain an optimal grip upon it. Just as when we walk through an art gallery and move ourselves into certain positions in order to clearly make sense of the works we are viewing, so the body is always seeking an optimal grip upon what we are directed toward, because our primary way of relating to the world of objects around us is through the body’s position. Thus when we sing, our aim or intentionality is directed toward expression of a musical tone through the voice, so the body naturally accommodates itself in order to achieve this with a ‘maximum sharpness’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:292). What is most significant about this is that by continually directing our intentionality in this way, we can actually bring about a ‘renewal and rearrangement of the corporal schema’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:164) whereby we will acquire a new bodily understanding of the world; awakening new possibilities for ways of being-in-the-world.

Merleau-Ponty states that our sense of reality is built up as a dialectic involving the world, which can always be seen from various perspectives, and our own fixed bodily perspective, which though its position can be changed, will always be a bodily perspective. Of the body, Merleau-Ponty states that it comprises ‘two distinct layers’ (1962:95). One layer is fundamental and pre-personal, which Merleau-Ponty calls the ‘habitual body’. The habitual body is constituted by all our acquired modes of relating to the world around us which we have built up over our lifetime. These habits are passed from conscious awareness and are always situating us within a certain way of being. What is significant about this is that the habitual body brings with it into the present moment a ‘horizon’ or fixed limit of possibilities which that particular way of
being entails. Each moment, our habitual body directs and guides the other ‘layer’ – that of the ‘lived body’ – and therefore simultaneously casts into the future a horizon of possibilities inherent in that way of being. Merleau-Ponty’s statements about this process elucidate the pre-reflexive nature of the habitual body and its relationship with our present moment:

There is…another subject beneath me, for whom a world exists before I am here, and who marks out my place in it. This captive or natural spirit is my body, not that momentary body which is the instrument of my personal choices and which fastens upon this or that world, but the system of anonymous ‘functions’ which draw every particular focus into a general project (1962:296).

This passage highlights not only that our body habitually situates us in a ‘world’ by drawing all our direct awareness of things into a ‘general project’, but that we also are able to make choices in the present moment which might change or modify our ‘world’ by modifying our habitual body. Because we experience ourselves as incarnate intentionality (a body with motility) we are able to direct the other layer, our ‘lived body’, toward things in accordance with our intentions. This constitutes the dialectic by which we constantly re-establish our horizon of possibilities beyond our facticity.

As Merleau-Ponty states, ‘habit is the coming into possession of a world’ (1962:176). When we utilise our body in a new way, we create for ourselves a new understanding by which we seize upon a new ‘world’ because it is always the body that understands and grasps the world. The knowledge acquired is not an objective process of calculating what the body is doing and then processing how or what that means for us, but is rather fully integrated into the gestures and habitual movements themselves. For example, when a person learns to play piano, the player does not attempt to calculate the position
of each key and then move the fingers toward them as one might move two objects toward one another. Nor are the player’s fingers moved by automatic reflex. Rather, the player acquires ‘knowledge in the hands which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:166). In this way, that is, through a ‘taking up’ into the body the requisite actions for performance, the player ‘incorporates within himself the relevant directions and dimensions’ (1962:168); the body is imbued with a new understanding, thus creating a new habitual body and a ‘fresh core of significance’ (1962:169). Through the new use of my body, I understand and grasp the world differently. Therefore, in the act of singing, an activity which, as I have pointed out above, invariably involves a transformation of one’s body schema, new significances are created in the body and a new horizon of possibilities is manifested; possibilities which at once provide a richer meaning and increased understanding of the singer and his or her world, because the body is utilised in a new way.

In the directed attention into a new bodily praxis, ‘a new cluster of meanings is formed; our former movements are integrated into a fresh motor entity [and] our natural powers suddenly come together in a richer meaning’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:177). This is especially acute in the cultivation and production of the singing voice. Not only am I transforming my body in ways that might naturally create tangible benefits, such as breathing well with correct posture, but I am also in doing so creating fresh cores of significance where my gestures and acts begin to open up new horizons of possibility in the world. As I am arguing, the act of singing involves an expression of otherwise
ambiguous feelings and emotions into a tangible, audible statement of I, and as the body seeks to attain this optimally the singer will be poised to create a balance between his or her intentionality and its realisation. Singing, to return to Ernst Bloch’s brilliant description, is a ‘cry expressing an urge and appeasing it at the same time’ (Bloch, 1985:196). Our being-in-the-world is simultaneously revealed and transformed, which gives sense to Hugo’s claim, also cited above, that singing seems a deliverance from bondage; the bondage of an unarticulated, shut-in world. In reaching out with the voice the singer is extending in some way beyond previous corporeal limitations, and redefining the limits of the regions that may be expressed. Furthermore, through this act the singer is ‘taking hold’ of his or her world and allowing it to become manifest in a personally authored way. This gives some sense to Heidegger’s statement that ‘To sing the song means to be present in what is present itself. It means: Dasein, existence’ (Heidegger, 2001:135).

One way singing brings to bear the deeper sense of the singer’s being-in-the-world is because of the distinction between words spoken in ordinary speech, and those that are sung. Just as dancing can be thought of as bodily movement which departs from the ‘literal’ functioning of the body that serves daily biological needs into more ‘figurative’ movements concerned not with function but with expression (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:169), so singing takes our vocal expression from functional everyday usage into its more ‘poetic’ sense of expression, that is, expression beyond more limited conceptual meanings inherent in the natural attitude. In a very telling passage regarding this point, Merleau-Ponty (1962:217) writes:
If we consider only the conceptual and delimiting meaning of words, it is true that the verbal form…appears arbitrary. But it would no longer appear so if we took into account the emotional content of the word, which we have called above its ‘gestural’ sense, which is all-important in poetry, for example. It would then be found that the words, vowels and phonemes are so many ways of ‘singing’ the world, and that their function is to represent things not…by reason of an objective resemblance, but because they extract, and literally express, their emotional essence.

There is something else inherent in the word other than objective resemblance. Merleau-Ponty calls this the ‘emotional essence’, and directly calls the expression of ‘emotional essence’ singing. Yet there is something more happening in the act of singing than merely an expression of emotion. This is the bodying forth of latent potentialities which perhaps remain hidden when we ordinarily use words, our voice, and our body. The voice is not simply pre-given and rigidly defined; singing, new timbral subtleties are at play, words are extended or forgone entirely, and the range of expression and interpretation is expanded. Through singing, the body’s own delimiting structure and meaning is also cast off, and a larger range of interpretive meaning is created. Indeed, even the singer’s body can be thought of as extending. The extension of the singer’s vocal sound out into the environment is itself a kind of extension of the singer’s corporeality;9 as the singer’s voice ‘fills the room’ he or she is no longer a fixed entity in one place but is borne out and all around in a truly transcendent expression; in that moment the body is more. It is this transcendence of fixed meanings and structures

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9 This idea is developed from Dennis (2005) who, following Katz (1999), observed during anthropological fieldwork with smokers that a large part of the appeal of smoking is the sense of an extension of one’s corporeal limits into the air, as represented by the smoke. Apparently, according to Dennis’s research, governmental anti-smoking campaigns fail when they only consider the effects of inhalation and fail to acknowledge the importance of exhalation for the smoker. I feel the same experience of liberating corporeal extension into the air is likewise true for the singer through his or her voice resounding into the surrounding environment.
which I am referring to as ‘poetic’. The ‘poetic sense’ is that which transcends fixed signifiers and ordinary conceptual meanings. It is a revealing of the world in a new way, with new significance and new possibilities. Singing can be a catalyst to being informed by the poetic sense – an open, receptive, wider interpretation of one’s self – and in doing this, singing can create a way of being fundamentally different to one which does not draw upon the poetic.\textsuperscript{10} And as Merleau-Ponty’s comments above help to articulate, the poetic is always already inherent in the world, awaiting our formation of bodily perception to draw out its latent potentiality.

1.2 Anthropological Examples

An example of how singing can generate significance for a person’s life can be found in Hall (2009) who conducted sociological research on the relationship between singing and identity in young teenage boys. In her research Hall found that singing in a choir is seen by adolescents as an effeminate practice, mainly because it involves using the voice to go above the normal speaking register which, for boys especially of that age, contravenes the natural inclination of the voice to get lower. At such a critical time of identity formation, teenage boys are wont to show they are becoming men through their voice breaking into its lower register. Therefore, to sing in a choir and use one’s voice in ways that take it beyond its monotone use is to seriously jeopardise one’s identity as a young man. This becomes especially pertinent when considering how integral our voice is to our identity. As Potter (2000:1) notes in his introduction to the \textit{Cambridge Examples from Music Therapy} abound in this regard, though within a different theoretical framework, such as the woman with Parkinson’s Disease who was able to feel her sense of self-regard and self-worth expand through being able to creatively redefine her identity with others through singing (Kondo, 2011:269ff.).
Companion to Singing ‘our voices are us, directly expressive of our personalities and emotions’ [original emphasis]. The same point is made by Bowling (1980:11) in her book about the consubstantiality of the voice and identity which begins with the premise: ‘Your voice is the cutting edge of your personality…It can elicit…irritation, rejection, even hatred. Or it can bring forth love, peace [and] happiness’. With this type of power, the way the voice is used at such a critical time for identity formation and one’s sense of self as the teenage years are becomes especially significant. However, in her research, Hall found that despite the gendered stereotypes as to how a young man’s voice should sound, many boys find that through the greater range and expressiveness of their voice as it is actualised in singing, their identity becomes richer and more personal, two facets I am arguing throughout this thesis. As Thomas, a thirteen year old interviewed by Hall attests, ‘without [singing] I’d just be another kid’ (2009:18).

The significance of the practice of singing for this boy’s identity becomes clearer as he succinctly describes the expressive capacity of singing: ‘Ultimately singing, I feel, is a way to express yourself even if they don’t actually get it, at least it’s out in the air…you feel a whole relief when it’s all out’ (Hall, 2009:22). For my argument, the relief one experiences through the release of the voice into the air is due to the simultaneity of two aspects. First, as mentioned above, the way the singer’s physiology is changed when singing brings about a change in the horizon of possibilities for the singer because the world is grasped and attended to in a new way. The singer seizes upon a new world through the transformation of his or her bodily comportment. More straightforwardly, as mentioned above, in singing there is an increased control of the breath and a relaxed
exertion of certain muscles which facilitate an ease in the creation of sound. This in and of itself can create positive effects. To refer again to Jackson (1983:334), ‘altered patterns of body use may induce new experiences and provoke new ideas, as when a regulation and steadying of the breath induces tranquility of mind, or a balanced pose bodies forth a sense of equanimity’. Because singers are very likely – and indeed trained – to exhibit both breath control and a balanced pose in the creation of the singing voice, they are therefore very likely to experience quite naturally both an equanimity and tranquility of mind. Secondly, the ‘new experiences’ which are induced through the changing habitual body in singing, draw upon and reveal the ‘poetic sense’ of the singer. This is first of all because the singing tone goes beyond conceptual notions given in ordinary speech and elicits a potentially more personal expression; the singer may have the feeling that expressing through singing is a richer and more authentic expression because through the act itself, the singer brings forth latent horizons of possibility, and in doing so, seizes upon a world. Once again the thirteen-year-old Thomas highlights this process in his own words:

Singing for me – I guess each piece is a different world that you visit each time. Depending on how you sing it the world changes slightly and you get to see different things and stuff. That changes how you feel (cited in Hall, 2009:23).

Taking this further by looking at this statement in Merleau-Pontian terms, we might say each time singers ‘take up’ into their bodily praxis the cultivation of a singing tone, they are essentially recasting their intentional arc in a new way, engaging with the world differently, and thereby recreating it. The transformation begins immediately, as mentioned above, with the change of comportment, that is, the stance, the breath, the position of the mouth and throat, etc. As the singer prepares for the creation of their own
unique tone – their personally ‘poetic’ and creative voice – its release is a new world that was not there before, and is different with every new enactment. Yet there is also another dimension to this moment’s uniqueness that lends further depth to Thomas’s statement above. This sense of uniqueness to the present lived moment is not due solely to the physiological transformations that are enacted when singing. It is also due to what I am referring to, following Schutz (2004), as the ‘polythetic’ nature of music. However, where Schutz’s account emphasises the inability to discern music as an immediate totality – a ‘beholder’ of music must ‘co-perform’ the music by going along with it for the duration – what I am here describing is the way music is never predetermined, and only is when it is actually playing in the present moment. This, I am arguing, is most significant in regard to singing. When Thomas says he changes with every new singing of a song he is also touching on the notion that only by actually singing can we experience the world in those particular ways. Singing must be done again and again in order to be lived, not once and then it is done, but taken up again. This aspect of what might be considered an ‘ontology’ of music, is all-important in Music Therapy, as it emphasises the present moment and how being present in this way enhances the ability to engage with spontaneity, creativity, and receptivity within the immediate here-and-now. As Garred’s (2002:39) article ‘The ontology of music in music therapy’ suggests:

Music does not present itself as something completely determined and defined beforehand. In the encounter with music there will always be something surprising and unpredictable. In the last resort music will always be indefinable, indeterminate, because it is always in the given situation, in the given moment that it opens itself. How the encounter with music turns out cannot in any case be completely determined. From this it follows that music will not have any definitive and determined particular effect. Music as we encounter it in the moment, present and real, is immediate in its effect. It is through each new encounter that it reveals
itself to us as a unique experience each time. Thus it is not reducible to a technical/mechanical cause and effect relation. It is a matter rather of an open reciprocity in relation to the music [original emphasis].

Despite a piece of music being written as fixed and finished notation, or whether a tune has been memorised perfectly beforehand, its impact on us as beholders, or more potently as singers, only manifests itself through its performance in the present moment. This is emphasised more in the act of singing, because through the body becoming the musical instrument, the Body-Bel Canto, our being-in-the-world is constituted by the music we ourselves are creating. Every enactment of the singing tone requires a new living, breathing engagement with one’s body in the present moment, and the sound produced only lasts as long as the living, breathing singer him or herself is singing. Every act of singing is therefore not fully realised until it is out in the open, and thus it may take on new and different qualities with every new performance. Singing is then a powerful way to ‘create’ a world; one that is not there without the singing, and is only through singing realised. Cultural Anthropologist Seeger (1987) expresses this idea of singing as world-creating in detail in his work with the Suyá people of the northern Amazon, and his descriptions of their singing demonstrates their use of singing in precisely this way.

After doing over twenty-four months of fieldwork in the northern Amazon investigating why the Suyá people spent so much time and energy singing, Seeger found that singing was the primary way they established order; order of space, of relationships, of the cosmos itself. As Seeger puts it, the essential nature of singing for the Suyá is its ability
to create and re-establish form in a way which is both spontaneous and integral. Seeger writes that through singing they ‘created euphoria out of silence, a village community out of a collection of residences, a socialized adult out of physical matter’ (1987:86). This ability to create form is in some way the potency of singing; one’s ‘natural power’ – a sense of one’s own self – is taken hold of and a distinct and differentiated world is seized upon. Recall Thomas’s comment above which suggests through singing he becomes more than ‘just another kid’. This re-creation is such because it happens anew with each performance. As Rapport (cited in Seeger, 1987:130) describes, ‘the performance does more than remind individuals of an underlying order. It establishes that order’ [original emphasis]. The singer is not singing about a different way of being, they are cultivating and living it in the very moment of singing. In the language of this thesis, to sing is to seize upon a way of being in a strident choosing for oneself, and the newly awakened possibilities are incorporated into the body schema: the body itself becomes the Bel Canto, and, as I am attempting to demonstrate, it is not hyperbole to say that the world becomes rich with new significance.

This notion of world-creation can also be seen in many various ritual processes where events are not representations but re-creations in the present moment, such as the Blessingways ceremony of the Navajo (Spickard, 1991). In this ritual, events of the past are re-created and therefore re-experienced through chanting. Chanting is integral to the functioning of the ritual, which has as its goal the restoration of beauty. Beauty cannot be restored by talking about it at a distance but by once again bringing it forth into the present lived moment. As Spickard (1991:201) notes
The story says that thought and speech created the world at the beginning of time; in the ritual retelling they create it once again. But this time the creation is in inner time – in the experience of teller and hearer. Every retelling is an origin. As people experience the story again, the world is renewed.

Like the Navajo, the Suyá also similarly understand singing as a way of establishing reality in the ‘here and now’. As Seeger writes, ‘singing…brought many aspects of the cosmos into direct personal experience. [It] made the events [in] myths real to every member of society’ (1987:132). To paraphrase Spickard, *every act of singing is an origin*. Taking a stand, changing one’s bodily comportment in the act of singing and releasing one’s voice in a way that cannot be totally predetermined is a creation of a new way of being-in-the-world, and it establishes this as a new ordering of the world itself. In my reading, the Suyá sing to re-establish their world because, as I have argued, it is a way by which the poetic sense can be made manifest in a coherent and tangible way. Something always already there can be brought forth by the song, cultivated and lived. This is especially clear when considering what is for me the most poignant reason the Suyá sing: ‘because through song they…re-establish the good and the beautiful in the world and…relate themselves to it’ (Seeger, 1987:128). Through singing I establish my body as the Body-Bel Canto, bringing forth the existential structures of this singing body and in doing so re-establish a world rich in significance and meaning and experience myself as connected to it in the present moment.

As these examples from anthropology show, singing can create a tangible difference not only as a personal act, but also on the world as one envisions it, because it is engaged with and re-established in a different way. While it might seem a little soft to simply
refer to the newly created world through singing as ‘beautiful’, I will be attempting to show, particularly in Chapter Four, that the qualities of the Body-Bel Canto, or ‘beautiful singing body’ are not limited to any particular conception of beauty, nor for that matter any particular conception of singing, but actually are clearly defined, existential characteristics that allow the singer an engagement with life that goes beyond mundane and vague impersonal notions into something potentially both passionately engaged with and personally rewarding. To sing the Bel Canto style is a specialist practice that requires not only years of intense training but also exceptional gifts that are even outside the domain of most singers. However, to become a Body-Bel Canto is, as a way of being, ostensibly universal, as it is a way of utilising singing in order to actualise a life resonant with rich personal significance, and a depth of meaning that is the manifestation of relevant possibilities for the individual. Bel Canto is musical, the Body-Bel Canto is existential, and my thesis is an attempt to reveal and analyse the existential transformation that is inherent in the act of singing so that its traits can be recognised and drawn upon as a way of attaining added dimension to one’s life. However, it is not enough to merely see these possibilities in the act of singing in order to become a Descanter of Revelations. For the cultivation of an identity through singing, an existential commitment is required, which will enable the singer to seize upon the new horizon of possibilities opened through singing in order to utilise this as a defining and solid foundation for how one chooses to be in the world. Though not as specialised as singing Bel Canto, this type of transformation requires both a phenomenological sensitivity and commitment to certain possibilities that cannot be assumed or taken for granted. Therefore, my next task in the following chapter is to outline the structure of
this commitment in order to show that a singer can define one’s identity through singing by becoming what I call a Descanter of Revelations.
Chapter Two:

On Becoming a Descanter of Revelations: Pascal, Kierkegaard, and the Existential Dimension of Singing as Identity

Singing is no argument. It is an act; an act necessarily requiring a transformation of one’s bodily comportment in order to achieve the result. Yet, as this chapter aims to demonstrate, this act is by no means limited to the body effectively becoming a musical instrument by emitting a musical sound through the voice. What I hope to portray in this chapter is that the transformation of the singer’s being-in-the-world that accompanies the physiological transformation required for singing, if recognised and seized upon, can be utilised as catalysts for a profoundly radical transformation of one’s identity. As outlined in Chapter One, a phenomenology of singing reveals that with the bodily transformation required to produce a singing tone there is a concomitant transformation of one’s being-in-the-world; the body comports itself differently in order to sing, and thus one’s intentions and focus are drawn together in a new coherence. One’s world opens up, momentarily and with the temporal flux of the song itself, in a new way, and a new horizon of possibilities is revealed. The present chapter now seeks to characterise this transformation and argue that by extracting the latent transformations of one’s being-in-the-world associated with singing, one can actually create a defining commitment for one’s life – a subjectively purposeful way of being – and the very act of singing can open the singer out to the confrontation of much deeper existential issues.
such as ‘who am I, and how am I to live’? My characterisation of this process I call becoming *The Descanter of Revelations*. To understand the full implications of this title and why I characterise a singer as such is the purpose of both this chapter and the thesis as a whole. In pursuing this theory my task is to ask existential questions; it is to extract the latent potentiality for being-in-the-world differently that the act of singing invokes, and demonstrate that further than just creating music with the voice, a singer has the chance to reveal and redefine themselves and their world anew; a singer, in my argument, is a Descanter of Revelations.

### 2.1 The Descanter

The word ‘descant’ derives from the Latin ‘dis-cantus’ which means ‘a song apart’, or ‘singing apart’. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, a descant is ‘a counter melody either composed or improvised above a familiar melody. Descant can also refer to an instrument of higher-than-normal pitch, such as a descant recorder’. There are several very important points in these definitions which go a long way toward shaping my characterisation of the Descanter, and I will elaborate on these in much more depth momentarily, but firstly I will continue to define the purely musical term before embarking upon an existential reading of it.

In its earliest usage, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a ‘descant’ referred to a melody which was: a) the highest part, and b) the part which was added to the tenor, thus producing polyphony (many voices). The word ‘tenor’ is from the Latin ‘tenere’ which means ‘to hold’ and this was the voice used to deliver liturgical texts in the large
reverberant cathedrals where the singing tone was more resonant and therefore clearer and easier to discern than the speaking voice. The tenor was the voice used to deliver Holy Writ, and this, combined with the ‘held’ nature of the part in music, meant that it was quite impersonal. Indeed, this type of singing was called ‘plainchant’ and singers of it consciously avoided expressing personal feelings (Mellers, 1987:36; Burkholder, Grout & Palisca, 2010:89,53). As Potter & Sorrell (2012:51) aptly put it, ‘One might argue that the chant performed them rather than the other way round’ [original emphasis]. The descant melody stands in contrast to this depersonalised, ‘held’ tenor part and in my reading can be seen as its antithesis. Where the tenor part is impersonal, the descant melody is highly personal; it is often semi-improvised and sounds apart, rising out of and above the familiar. Where the tenor is ‘held’ and fixed – the so-called ‘cantus firmus’ – the descant is moving and mellifluous, ostensibly spontaneous, and ornate; its melodic contour moves above the given harmony and offers new melodic potential with each new note. It is not fixed but flourishing, standing out above the pre-established harmonic structure and the familiar tonal framework. In another musical context, the descant refers to the high melodic line which appears, usually in the last verse of hymns or other four-part choral or instrumental works, soaring above all that has preceded it. Over the course of four or five verses of a piece of music with this structure, a harmonic context has been established and a melody has been heard, usually given by the upper part, and repeated the same way in each subsequent verse, giving a solid grounding of the song’s melodic framework and essential features. Then in the last verse, ostensibly out of nowhere, arises something new: the descant melody. It is florid, strikingly brilliant, and soars above both the original melody and pre-established
harmony in a clear, high register, leaving all else beneath it as it reveals new melodic potentialities which were not explicitly present before its arrival. This new melody seems to dance and play above the given harmonic structure and all else preceding it, making manifest latent melodic possibilities which though not explicit, nevertheless haunted the harmony throughout; awaiting discovery by the right voice.\footnote{This is an allusion to Whitman’s poem ‘Vocalism’: ‘All waits for the right voices’ (Whitman, 2006:287). This poem will be explored in more detail in Chapter Four.} The descant makes explicit all the potentialities for melody that the harmony contains, and while it doesn’t create a new structure for itself, it nevertheless reveals, within the given structure, melodies and details which did not exist until it came soaring into being.

Haunting throughout, awaiting the right voice to reveal and articulate it, the descant goes above and beyond the familiar melodic line, giving new shape and revealing new possibilities within the established harmonic order of the music that preceded and supports it. This is the descant melody.

In my existential reading of this term and its subsequent characterisation of my idea of a singer, to be a ‘Descanter’ is, therefore, not simply to be a singer of this type of melody or this melodic line. Rather, to think existentially, it is through singing to reveal potentialities of the singer’s \textit{being-in-the-world} that haunted the pre-established harmony of one’s world before one took up the song. To be a Descanter is to transcend the familiar through utilising the act of singing as a way of revealing latent potentialities which haunted one’s own pre-established being-in-the-world; the Descanter makes explicit all potentialities for being that the particular singer him or herself contains. To
further elaborate my existential reading of the definition of the term offered above, it is
to elevate oneself to ‘higher-than-normal’ levels of coping, with a combination of a
partly improvised and partly composed way of being and limn one’s life with a new
sense of richness and significance that was always potentially there yet was never
explicitly revealed until becoming the descanter revealed it. It is not to give up one’s
structure entirely and become someone else – in the words of R.D. Laing: ‘I cannot be
you, and you cannot be me’¹² – rather it is to rise above all that has gone before and
flourish in a unique, personally significant way which gives new sense, interpretation,
meaning, and identity to what one is. However, importantly, as I will argue throughout
this chapter, this only occurs through one’s commitment to it. This is what it is to be a
Descanter. And of course, this is the revelation.

2.2 The Revelation

The word ‘revelation’ comes from the Latin ‘revelare’ which means ‘to reveal’. To sing
is not only to reveal one’s self in a new way but also the world. When I sing, a new part
of me is revealed; something that a moment before was not present is suddenly there,
something formed inside my body – by the conscious manipulation of the breath
striking the vocal cords – is put out into the open, and thus arises the feeling that
something deeply personal is being let out and exposed. When something personal to us
is given expression or revealed it often creates anxiety, like any venture in which we
‘stand out’.¹³ As Rollo May (1996:45) writes in The Meaning of Anxiety ‘Anxiety and

¹³ From ‘ex-istere’.
guilt are potentially present at every instant that individuality is born into community’.

This anxiety and guilt are not present simply because one might be embarrassed about
the sound of the voice or because there is a fear of singing a wrong note, although as
noted above, what is to be put out can never be completely predetermined. Rather, these
are existentially grounded structures which are present to some extent in any moment of
creativity or creative act, which in my reading, singing undoubtedly is. As May states,

Now creating, actualizing one’s possibilities, always involves destructive as well as
constructive aspects. It always involves destroying the status quo, destroying old
patterns within oneself, progressively destroying what one has clung to from
childhood on, and creating new and original forms and ways of living. [Therefore]
the more creative the person…the more anxiety and guilt are potentially present

To reveal oneself as something new, to be a Descanter, is in this way to therefore invoke
existential anxiety. However, I believe there are two ways that this is so. The first, as
has been cited here in May’s account, is because old ways of being must give way to
new in the creative self-making act. One must give up old interpretations and meanings
in order to become something new, and this is never straightforward, or easily achieved.
But there is a second, and potentially much more interesting way in which anxiety
becomes present through the creative act, and this is inherently tied to the notion of
revelation. If a singer is sensitive to the existential transformation implicit in the act of
singing, then the new way of being-in-the-world which is revealed through becoming a
Descanter really does become a revelation in this important sense: something is
disclosed that was not there before, and once disclosed, cannot be forgotten. This is the
sense in which a revelation is more than just revealing something. It is a striking
disclosure that might profoundly affect the one who experiences it, possibly enough to
alter entirely and irrevocably the way one thinks about him or herself. The way this invokes anxiety and guilt is not due to a breaking with the past but due to a new existential weight given to the future. Not only do I face the anxiety-invoking breaking with the old habits or ways of being to create something new; by making the latent potentialities manifest I must admit to something more of myself. The revelation admits that I hold these possibilities within; I have actualised and recognised them once. Now I have the burden explicitly placed upon me that I cannot but acknowledge this new self-conception, and if these possibilities are life-giving I cannot in good faith neglect them. To deny these once experienced would be a source of guilt, in a way similar to Heidegger’s conceptualisation of it. To face one’s potential indeed creates anxiety, possibly more than that associated with breaking away from the past, because it demands that one continually act out of that new sense of identity, as these possibilities can no longer be neglected. This gives an existential context to La Rochefoucauld’s brilliant maxim when he states that ‘greater virtues are needed to bear good fortune than bad’ (1959:40). The misfortunes of the past may generate stoic acceptance or prompt one to change, but the constant present commitment to newly awakened possibilities for the future requires a kind of faith that is the real test of one’s character. This is especially acute when the chosen project or commitment is only of subjective importance and not in the domain of obligation or social responsibility. A task or way of being freely chosen for one’s self as a way of creating a life of greater personal significance and value is a much harder process. Not only is there no outside force

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14 The hope of therapeutic change in Music Therapy.

15 Thus Nietzsche’s Zarathustra admonishes ‘For creators are hard…This new tablet, O my brothers, I place over you: become hard! [original emphasis] (Nietzsche, 1954:326).
demanding anything, or any punishment for refusal, but because the guiding principles adhered to are only subjectively true, there is no guarantee that it is indeed right. Further, being only internally driven requires the hardness Nietzsche encourages because while it is already hard enough to cultivate and live by personally chosen possibilities, certain social sanctions may actually begin to arise exactly upon doing so, and thus the temptation is great to not live by such a commitment. A life personally authored is indeed hard, and not something we are already doing prior to any kind of conscious commitment. As I will presently attempt to demonstrate in relation to singing and becoming a Descanter of Revelations, commitment of this personal kind requires a phenomenological sensitivity to one’s experience, because the only sanction one faces is the existential guilt, mentioned above, that arises from knowing that one is not living the life he or she could.

2.3 Commitment

Singing is a temporary, finite act. It is born from a living, breathing body and cannot come into existence without breathing life into it with one’s own bodily comportment. The purely bodily act of singing – which is the only way to enact the existential transformations I maintain are potentially present within singing and, incidentally, I also maintain cannot be fully realised with the mechanical manipulation of one’s voice using technological devices – is as finite as the breath by which the tone is constituted. The full potentiality of singing as a method of transforming one’s being-in-the-world is therefore only properly revealed through taking up the song continually, again and again. However, in that transitory moment of singing, potentialities are momentarily
revealed. Another dimension – in my argument a more poetic, authentic dimension – is awakened. It is more authentic because it is self-authored; it comes from one’s own decision to cultivate the tone, and is a wider-reaching sonic representation of one’s being-in-the-world. The tone itself is revealing, and its relationship with its author, the singer, will be fully explored in a later chapter.\textsuperscript{16} The dimension opened up through singing is also, I argue, more poetic because the meanings of the singer’s voice, words, and ultimately his or her entire being are not fixed; they go beyond the necessarily limited conceptualisations inherent in the natural attitude of everyday speaking. The poetic is, in my rendering, the unlimited depth of meaning and interpretation, out of which a personally significant, new account may emerge. As R.D. Laing (1967:34) writes:

What is called a poem is compounded perhaps of communication, invention, fecundation, discovery, production, creation. Through all the contention of intentions and motives a miracle has occurred. There is something new under the sun; being has emerged from nonbeing; a spring has bubbled out of a rock. Without the miracle nothing has happened.

The miracle lies in the way new life can be rendered from the rock of fixed forms. An individual interpretation awakens from the ordinary. Every act of singing is an origin. There is something new under the sun. Yet whilst it might seem that there is an ostensible dichotomy between a radical transformation resulting from creation \textit{ex nihilo} and the idea that potentialities lying latent are there waiting for the right voice to discover and awaken them, I am arguing that this dichotomy is more apparent than real. Returning to the phenomenon, the Descanter, as my theory calls it, is but a single person who, through singing, is changing their way of being-in-the-world. Through singing

\textsuperscript{16} Whitman: The Body-Bel Canto
they are engaging with their body, their expression, their world, and in my analysis their life, differently. As a body-subject, my sensing, experiencing body is the seat of perception, and all that I experience is inextricably locked into my body. Yet though the body is always the only seat of perception, it is not a pre-programmed machine with only one line of possibility awaiting inexorable development. Rather, the body has an open-ended, constantly improvising and changing relationship with the world, which is always open for re-interpretation through changing habits, comportment, or engaging with new phenomenon. And this is the crux of perception. As Abram (1996:50) notes:

However determinate one’s genetic inheritance, it must still, as it were, be woven into the present, an activity that necessarily involves both a receptivity to the specific shapes and textures of that present and a spontaneous creativity in adjusting oneself (and one’s inheritance) to those contours. It is this open activity, this dynamic blend of receptivity and creativity…that we speak of by the term “perception”.

Through the fixed form of my body, open and indeterminate relationships with the world are entered into. This is the way by which wider interpretive horizons of meaning and possibility can be cultivated – even possibilities that were simply not there before. It is in this way that new ways of being ostensibly appear to be arising ex nihilo and the transformation is indeed radical. However, by comporting myself differently, a new way of being could nevertheless be cultivated and captured, domesticated, which simply awaited my chosen engagement with it. Relating this to the Descanter, like the descant melody, which appears ostensibly out of nowhere above a pre-established harmonic structure – it does not change the harmonic structure but lends it a new mood, a new interpretation, offers a new sensibility and a new melodic potency – the descant draws out the harmony to its fullest, and flourishes above the given in a wider-ranging, freer
delivery. So the Descanter does not replace the pre-established structure of the body but lends it a radically new significance, a new way of engaging it, and enters into a ‘new’ world by existentially transforming the significance of both themselves and their past\(^\text{17}\) and the world around them. It is not a dichotomy between cultivating potentiality that was already inherently present, and creating something new out of nothing. Rather, possibilities that are seized upon in the creation of an identity always lie latent as possibilities, yet the new identity is indeed a radical transformation, and a revelation.

Whitman captures this moment of revelation brilliantly in ‘Song of the Open Road’ in a few lines that are, to me, indicative of the feeling of drawing breath and producing the singing tone:

Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of the holds that would hold me.  
I inhale great draughts of space,  
The east and the west are mine, and the north and the south are mine.  
I am larger, better than I thought,  
I did not know I held so much goodness.  
All seems beautiful to me (Whitman, 2006:114).

The point here is to show that singing can be utilised as a way of pulling the world together in a personally meaningful way, that holds a significance about which we will be passionately attracted to pursuing. As the phenomenology of singing in Chapter One pointed out, the greater sense of one’s being-in-the-world developed through singing can be ascribed to a widening horizon of possibilities that singing, as a reconstitution of one’s body instigates. Yet the phenomenological inquiry does not of itself demonstrate

\(^{17}\) As Sartre (2003:520) states, ‘Who can decide the educational value of a trip, the sincerity of a past love, the purity of a past intention etc.? It is I, always I according to the ends by which I illuminate these past events’.\[55\]
how these possibilities may be seized upon and maintained, and that is the topic and purpose of this chapter. It is only through a commitment to the new way of being inculcated through singing that a personally significant identity as a Descanter might be forged and fostered. The starting point is a phenomenological sensitivity, by which one becomes aware that these possibilities exist. The next stage is an existential commitment to these possibilities, which eventually transforms one’s being-in-the-world into an ongoing identity that I have characterised as the Descanter of Revelations. The two best philosophers to help me describe this process of commitment to a transformation of one’s being-in-the-world are Pascal and Kierkegaard. Though both philosophers write of commitment and faith in relation to God, in my reading I argue that phenomenologically, commitment to anything which reveals one’s potential and the world in the best possible way for him or her, and creates an identity and a passionate engagement with that identity is a form of faith. It is a form of ‘faith’ because it is only subjectively true; one alone has to decide for oneself whether it is the best way to live – there is no transcendental guarantee. Thus in my thesis, I am outlining what it is like to existentially commit to being a singer in order to reveal the latent potentialities of being-in-the-world for the singer this form of engagement holds. I am attempting to portray that in committing to being a singer in this way is to be a Descanter of Revelations.

2.4 Pascal

One of the central tenets of Existential philosophy is ‘existence precedes essence’ (Cf. Sartre, 1975:348). This means that first we exist, and then who we are is arrived at later.
Rather than having a fixed purpose or ‘essence’ for the sake of which we exist, we exist first and then are free to define for ourselves how we choose to be, what is of utmost significance to us, and thus our identity as a human. Things in life therefore only gain significance through what we lend to them ourselves, and meaning and significance do not reside outside of our own personal attachment to it. As Mooney (1991:48) states, ‘existential perspectives reflect a particular way things seem to a given individual, regardless of how widely the perspective may be shared’. This is in part what Kierkegaard means by his claim that ‘Truth is subjectivity’ (Kierkegaard, 2009:226, passim.); my life is made sense of only through my own attachment to what I choose to engage with, and what I hold to be true for my life is not true for everyone, or independently true, but only true to me. But further, only through my own defining commitments do I indeed become subjective, that is, an individual, and thereby actualise truth (Schacht, 1973:300; Dreyfus, 2009:144). Pascal is often considered an existential thinker because he argued that ‘custom is our nature’ (Pascal, 1995:125). Because as humans we can have different customs, we can be something different. How we feel about ourselves and our life, and what we consider to be right and true is determined only by the customs we are used to, and not by some unalterable fact that lies fixed at the heart of things. As Pascal (1995:16) writes: ‘Larceny, incest, infanticide, parricide, everything has at some time been accounted a virtuous action…nothing is just in itself, everything shifts with time. Custom is the whole of equity for the sole reason that it is accepted’. Pascal argues that custom reaches down even into our morality, and therefore the way we structure our thinking and our lives is the result merely of custom, and not an innate nature. The idea that ‘custom is our nature’ in Pascal’s philosophy is
central to understanding how his philosophy can be utilised to think about the transformation of one’s identity; we can change our identity because we can change our customs. For Pascal, one’s transformation was to be directed toward becoming a Christian, however, as stated above, I think it can be more broadly applied to any form of existential commitment, that is, a commitment which shapes one’s personal existence in a subjectively meaningful way.

The implication of the idea that ‘custom is our nature’ is, first and foremost, that it is indeed possible to change our nature, or who we are, and further, that this can be achieved by changing our customary, habitual ways of thinking and acting. As Pascal notes, change in one’s thinking and character does not happen through Reason alone. Just because one understands intellectually the right way he or she should act, this does not in itself guarantee that this will change one’s character. Rather, one’s comportment must change. One must begin to act differently, and this is the most important thing. The mind may reason correctly about something but as Pascal (1995:127) states, ‘the heart has its reasons, about which reason knows nothing’. This is to say that Reason alone might – and probably should – provide an impetus to start to live differently, however it is entirely impotent if it does not change the material, quotidian habits of one’s life. It is only through actually living differently that change leading to inspiration can occur. In other words, beliefs that do not translate into actions obviously do not work. Yet this is not to say that for Pascal, one will find inspiration in randomly changing one’s habits. To deny reason is an equally implausible way to live. As Pascal states: ‘Two excesses: to exclude reason, to admit nothing but reason’ (1995:55).
However, Pascal argues that the best use of reason is for it to understand its own limits; ‘Reason’s last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it. It is merely feeble if it does not go as far as to realize that’ (1995:56).

The reason why one must allow Reason to give way to the heart is because, for Pascal, it is only the heart that is capable, at any moment, of a spontaneous eruption of feeling which can be the source of inspiration. Where Reason will question its foundations and relent to improbabilities, the heart is always ready to respond to the openness of a situation and flood the person with the passionate feelings required to keep going. But this can only happen if we have inculcated the habits required to allow for this opening. As Pascal (1995:248) states:

Reason works slowly, looking so often at so many principles, which must always be present, that it is constantly nodding or straying because all its principles are not present. Feeling does not work like that, but works instantly, and is always ready. We must then put our faith in feeling, or it will always be vacillating.

Pascal refers to this as ‘hardening the heart’ (1995:174), which is a way of keeping one’s desire consistently tantalised so as to not forget the reward involved. Yet when Reason might not take us far enough, and the heart is not awakened fully to the passion of one’s pursuits, habit is the foundation upon which the faith of one’s life may be sustained. As mentioned above, habit is the way we act and shape our lives on a day-to-day basis and thus constitutes our actual beliefs even more than any that might be espoused by our reason alone.\textsuperscript{18} Pascal refers to this type of quotidian behaviour as ‘the automaton’ in us, and ostensibly echoing the dualism of his (almost) contemporary,

\textsuperscript{18} This is given weight by the fact that the word ‘actual’ comes from the Latin ‘actualis’ which means ‘active, pertaining to action’.
Descartes, argues that belief with reason alone will not take us the full way toward faith.

As Pascal (1995:247-248) states:

Proofs only convince the mind; habit provides the strongest proofs and those that are most believed. It inclines the automaton, which leads the mind unconsciously along with it... We must resort to habit once the mind has seen where the truth lies, in order to steep and stain ourselves in that belief which constantly eludes us, for it is too much trouble to have the proofs always present before us. We must acquire an easier belief, which is that of habit. With no violence, art or argument it makes us believe things, and so inclines all our faculties to this belief that our soul falls naturally into it. When we believe only by the strength of our conviction and the automaton is inclined to believe the opposite, that is not enough. We must therefore make both parts of us believe: the mind by reasons...and the automaton by habit.

This relates back to the phenomenology of the introduction, and while it may seem I have led here to a mind-body dualism, I want to point out that it is in fact not my intention to argue a contradistinction between the mind-body split of Cartesian dualism, and a Merleau-Pontian body-mind. Again returning to the phenomena – the actual lived experience here being described – we can sit quietly in our room and contemplate tremendous foolproof arguments that convince us to live a certain way, yet we also require a knowledge that is, as Merleau-Ponty writes, only forthcoming when the effort is made and cannot be detached from that effort (1962:166). This is to read Pascal in light of Merleau-Ponty, when Pascal writes that only by comporting ourselves differently will our habits change, and thus lead us to a different kind of understanding of our living that pure speculation alone cannot entail in total. The body itself, by walking the road prescribed, actualises a new knowledge that is not the result of careful thinking and reflective analysis, but is actually conjured and lived in the present
moment of action itself. As Abram (1996:46) writes of the phenomenology of this process:

“‘I’ do not deploy these powers like the commander piloting a ship, for I am, in my depths, indistinguishable from them…Indeed, facial expressions, gestures, and spontaneous utterances like sighs and cries seem to immediately incarnate feelings, moods, and desires without “my” being able to say which came first – the corporeal gesture or its purportedly “immaterial” counterpart.

Pascal wants our gestures or our commitments to pass from reflective awareness so that we might ‘still believe’ in the proofs even without the proofs immediately at the front of our minds. This is why for Pascal habit is so important, as it is for Merleau-Ponty, who writes that ‘habit is the coming into possession of a world’ (1962:176). By changing the comportment of our actions on a daily basis we incorporate into our bodily schema new ways of inhabiting the world, which then pass from conscious awareness and new significances are formed. This is how we can, in the words of Pascal cited above, go beyond all ‘art or argument’ and then ‘steep and stain’ ourselves in beliefs which once eluded us. It is only then that we will be open to actual transformation, or to use a more Christian word in line with Pascal: conversion.

However, we also require inspiration. As Pascal (1995:244) writes,

There are three ways to believe: reason, habit, inspiration. Christianity…does not admit as its true children those who believe without inspiration. It is not that it excludes reason and habit, quite the contrary, but we must open our mind to the proofs, confirm ourselves in it through habit, while offering ourselves through humiliations to inspiration, which alone can produce the real and salutary effect.

Inspiration is required to convince the believer that the path they are walking is right. Reason may indeed convince us intellectually, yet it is open to counter-argument and
contradiction. Habit may indeed keep us walking along a path even without the help of
the intellectual proofs of the conscious mind, but runs the risk of becoming a mindless
exercise without passion that can actually conceal us from the very faith we seek to
attain. Inspiration provides the realisation that we are on the path that is right for us.
Inspiration will flood the heart with a new proof beyond reason and habit that will
ultimately convince us that we are right in our pursuits. Inspiration lies beyond
contradictions, and Pascal goes to lengths to make this clear: ‘Contradiction is a poor
indication of truth. Many things that are certain are contradicted. Many that are false
pass without contradiction. Contradiction is no more an indication of falsehood than
lack of it is an indication of truth’ (1995:54). Inspiration, which is the revelatory source
of faith, is what allows us to go above contradiction in reason, and mindless automatic
reflex in habit. It is not contrary to what we know, but rather beyond, or above it. As
Pascal (1995:56) writes: ‘Faith certainly tells us what the senses do not, but not the
contrary of what they see; it is above, not against them’.

Pascal’s own inspiration for his lived philosophy and apologetics for Christianity
occurred on a specific night in 1654. It was a moment, lasting about two hours, which
subsequently changed his whole life, and he sought to never forget it. When Pascal died
in 1662, a sheet of paper was found sewn into the inside of his coat that detailed his
revelation and what had occurred to him that particular night; he had written it down
and he carried it with him at all times for the rest of his life. Among the list of thoughts
written on it were:

The year of grace 1654
Monday, 23 November...From about half past ten in the evening until half past midnight.

Fire

‘God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob’, not of philosophers and scholars.

Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace.

God of Jesus Christ.

God of Jesus Christ.

[...] Thy God shall be my God.

[...] Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.

[...] Everlasting joy in return for one day’s effort on earth.

_I will not forget thy word._ Amen. [Original italics].

What is of most significance in this account is Pascal’s realisation that God is _not_ an eternal, intelligible presence as described by scholars and philosophers, but rather an incarnate God that, through Jesus, exemplifies a contradiction that is the foundation of what it is to be human. Faith in the Incarnation then, allows a recognition and reconciliation of the living contradictions that constitutes the human being – a point I will elaborate further below – and with this comes a joy that surpasses all worldly pleasures that then become simply concupiscence, desire, or diversion. Also of significance is the word ‘Fire’. Inspiration is the spark that can set us racing and give fuel to our beliefs, or that can illuminate the path in ways that reason and habit alone cannot. Although Pascal wrote that ‘it is too much trouble to have the proofs always present before us’ (1995:247), ironically, Pascal kept the ‘proofs’ of his experience with him at all times, so as to provide a constant personal reminder of the experience that would guide his actions. This suggests how hard it is to keep even the most powerful revelations in mind throughout daily life, which is why habit is needed to maintain commitment, when inspiration and reason elude us.
Inspiration is the ‘fire’ that ignites and lights habit and reason with something powerful and passionate, invoking the ‘joy’ that reason and habit alone may not have. It is, furthermore, that purely subjective source of truth that makes it clear for us alone that we are right, though it cannot be quantified or objectively translated or interpreted. Further, it has a revelatory quality that opens us up to possibilities that can only be arrived at by keeping the heart open in readiness, and comporting ourselves in a way that opens us to this readiness. It is this subjective feeling of truth that will become all important for Kierkegaard’s notion of Faith, and its subjective nature is the reason why it is not an easy thing to cultivate and commit to. However, again, for Pascal, his faith was that of becoming a Christian, and his detailing of these processes was as an apology for Christianity. For my thesis, this process is structurally the same as that required to become a Descanter; we may intellectually acknowledge its worth, yet we must change our comportment in order to continue to ‘take up’ the song, thus changing our habitual way of being. The inspiration occurs in the realisation of a new horizon of possibilities being cast, and new potentialities for ways of being-in-the-world revealed. Yet, as Pascal’s own revelatory moment and subsequent response demonstrates, inspiration is only transitory, and while the revelation opens us to new possibilities, it is only through ongoing commitment that a new way of being might pass from a momentary feeling to a deep faith and identity forged through that faith. Commitment to this path is the faith that these potentialities are not transitory, but in fact define one’s life as an individual, and provide the foundation upon which an individual can stake his or her own life.
Yet there is no way of knowing for certain that the way one chooses to commit is indeed the right way. This is why Pascal said that it is a wager. For Pascal’s most famous *Pensée*, the wager was for whether God exists or not, and therefore, whether one should believe. As Pascal (1995:115) writes elsewhere: ‘I should be much more afraid of being mistaken and then finding out that Christianity is true than of being mistaken in believing that it is true’. But again, I argue that this can be taken in more secular terms to be a wager that when confronted with our death, will we believe we have lived in the best possible way by committing to a way of being that is rich with possibility and personal significance. For Pascal, the only way one can know is by starting out along the path; just as those one considers to have successfully lived a life of faith once did, so too must one walk him or herself. They ‘know the road’, and provide an example by which one can live oneself.

You want to find faith and you do not know the road. You want to be cured of unbelief and you ask for the remedy: learn from those who were once bound like you and who now wager all they have. These are people who know the road you wish to follow, who have been cured of the affliction of which you wish to be cured: follow the way by which they began. They behaved just as if they did believe (Pascal, 1995:124-125).

Following the path marked out by others who have walked before is not of course to simply emulate another’s life. Rather it is to utilise the insights provided by others who have been similarly afflicted, who have asked similar questions or sought similar answers, and take these insights into the ground of one’s own life, to allow them to help fashion the road one is already on. After all, as Pascal (1995:51) also points out, helpless as we are, we live and die alone: ‘It is absurd of us to rely on the company of our fellows, as wretched and helpless as we are; they will not help us; we shall die
alone. We must act then as if we were alone’. This is the crux of the wager. Choosing for ourselves, we have no guarantee that whatever might be right for anyone else is ultimately right for us. We can only know where the path leads by walking it for ourselves. Only through our actions, or ‘putting ourselves out’ (Pascal, 1995:21), will the revelation become possible.\(^{19}\) However, we often succumb to folly in this regard, confusing new ideas with the comportment they prescribe. As Pascal puts it: ‘Men often take their imagination for their heart, and often believe they are converted as soon as they think of becoming converted’ (1995:323). The truth of a way of being is only revealed in living it. In this way, Pascal was against the Platonic notion of absolute Ideas. Rather than give up the body in order to live purely in the soul, as Socrates argued those wanting the Good life must, Pascal argues that we need to return the body and not deny its fact, and this is indeed essential to humble the pride which might be induced by the presumption that one might clearly ‘know’ what is right. Though inspiration might generate a subjective truth about what is right for us, the very fact that it is subjective and cannot be proven objectively means that one’s faith is never based on a certainty, and therefore never falls into pride or a taken-for-granted presumption. That is why it is always a wager. And this also is why, importantly, Pascal states that ‘God is hidden’ (1995:127,333).

God is ‘hidden’ for Pascal because ‘God wishes to move the will rather than the mind. Perfect clarity would help the mind and harm the will’ (1995:72). This is to say that if

\(^{19}\)‘If respect meant sitting in an armchair we should be showing everyone respect and then there would be no way of marking distinction, but we make the distinction quite clear by putting ourselves out’ (Pascal, 1995:21).
we knew with perfect clarity what we were seeking was right, there would be little need to engage the will and change our comportment and our life. The outcome would be known before the path had been walked, and this is clearly not the way Pascal conceives of the way faith is practiced. While inspiration might (must) flood the heart with passion, commitment is essential, and this only happens through actually changing our actions. Yet the point is also much more subtle and complex than this, as it touches on one of the most fascinating ideas in Pascal’s philosophy: the human being as a living contradiction, a synthesis not of mind and body, but in Pascal’s terms, greatness and wretchedness. For Pascal, Man (being Human) was such a paradox that only through the attempted reconciliation of our great contradictions can we begin to fathom what it is to be human.

If he exalts himself, I humble him.
If he humbles himself, I exalt him.
And I go on contradicting him
Until he understands
That he is a monster that passes all understanding (Pascal, 1995:32).

The human is, for Pascal, ‘only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed’ (1995:66). This is to say, we are so materially small and irrelevant that we are swallowed up in the infinite vastness of the universe, yet, unlike the universe, we can know of our limitations in a way the universe does not, and thus we maintain dignity in the ordering of our thought (Pascal, 1995:29,66). Further, we are equally capable of both great deeds and evil acts, and these sets of factors are for Pascal, not to be denied if we are to be faithful to the truth of being human. For Pascal, this meant becoming a Christian.
As mentioned above, Christianity was so important for Pascal because faith in the
Incarnation shows us how the contradictions of being human can be brought together.
The contradiction for Pascal lies in the fact that if we were to know only our grace, our
good deeds, our capacity for great thought, we would be full of pride and therefore
unworthy of God, and likewise if we were to only know our own weakness, our
mortality, our flaws, we would be in despair and also unworthy of God. Yet as Pascal
(1995:106) writes we have ‘neither an abasement which makes us incapable of good nor
a holiness free from evil’. Therefore any ‘true’ religion must take both of these aspects
of our nature into account, which Christianity does so.

Christianity is strange; it bids man to recognise that he is vile, and even
abominable, and bids him to want to be like God. Without such a counterweight his
exaltation would make him horribly vain or his abasement horribly abject (Pascal,

More specifically, it is through the Incarnation that this is made clear, as Pascal
Incarnation shows man the greatness of his wretchedness through the greatness of the
remedy required’. The remedy is that through Christ we can overcome the pride of our
good deeds by tempering them with the knowledge of our own weaknesses. This is in
itself greatness, yet it is greatness that does not preclude wretchedness, as Pascal
(1995:29) notes: ‘Man’s greatness comes from knowing he is wretched: a tree does not
know it is wretched. Thus it is wretched to know that one is wretched, but there is
greatness in knowing one is wretched’.
This great contradiction inherent in being human lies at the heart of Pascal’s thinking and his apologetics of Christianity. Unlike other philosophers such as Plato, Pascal saw these two sets of factors not as a combination but as a synthesis; something unavoidable and essential. Therefore, our highest achievement as a human is not to deny or overcome this contradiction, or pursue one side at the expense of the other, but to comport ourselves in our daily lives in a way that makes us ‘fully alive to the tension’ between them (Dreyfus, 2009:140). It is not through great one-off efforts that our virtues might be judged, according to Pascal, but how we live, as I have stated above, in our quotidian, ongoing pursuits. This is the heart of commitment. As Pascal (1958:98) writes ‘The strength of a man’s virtue must not be measured by his efforts, but by his ordinary life’. It is this ongoing commitment that develops our character because in order to cultivate our human capacities toward greatness we must continue to live in a way that maintains a sense of both our greatness and wretchedness, yet without falling into either pride or despair. ‘We do not display greatness by going to one extreme, but in touching both extremes at once and filling all the intervening space’ (Pascal, 1958:98).

However, there are two important ways that achieving such a way of being is hard. Part of the difficulty in achieving this, as Pascal demonstrates through many of his Pensées, is because as humans we are, according to Pascal, truly miserable and in need of constant diversions that distract us from this condition:

If man were happy, the less he were diverted the happier he would be…Yes: but is a man not happy who can find delight in diversion? No: because it comes from somewhere else, from outside; so he is dependent, and always liable to be disturbed by a thousand and one accidents, which inevitably cause distress…Being unable to
cure death, wretchedness and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things (1995:37).

The problem with living a life of diversion is that we never come to terms with the two given aspects of what makes us human. Both wretchedness and greatness are avoided in the diversion of constant activities. Pascal says this is both the real punishment of prison and the real pleasure of being a king; the former because we will have nothing to do, and the latter because we can procure every type of pleasure we might want (Pascal, 1995:38). Yet even a king is subject to the same human condition as everyone else, ‘and you will see that a king without diversion is a very wretched man’ (Pascal, 1995:42). This is not limited solely to recreational pursuits. As Pascal (1995:153) writes, ‘Without examining every particular kind of occupation it is sufficient to put them all under the heading of diversion’. The all too human inability to pursue greatness while remaining alive to the sorrows and wretchedness of life means that the potential for understanding greatness through the knowledge of our wretchedness is forgone; one cannot then live in faithful acknowledgement of both sets of factors, and the diversions that keep us from encountering this are therefore anathema to a committed life of faith.

The second way that the task of living in relation to both these extremes and being fully alive to the tension between them becomes difficult is because of a tendency to want the answers without submitting in humility to the question.

‘If I had seen a miracle,’ they say, ‘I should be converted’. How can they be positive that they would do what they know nothing about? They imagine that such a conversion consists in a worship of God conducted, as they picture it, like some exchange or conversation. True conversion consists in self-annihilation before the...
universal being whom we have so often vexed and who is perfectly entitled to destroy us at any moment (Pascal, 1995:110).

Pascal believes we flatter ourselves by thinking we would understand the work of God if we saw it, as if we are automatically on the same level as God without actually doing anything. The mistake is that we are waiting for the ‘hidden God’ to show itself before we are prepared to see it. As Pascal argues, the miracle comes after faith, not faith from the miracle. As he bluntly states to people who might ask: “Why does God not show himself?” – ‘Are you worthy?’ – “Yes.” – ‘You are very presumptuous, and thus unworthy.’ – ‘No.’ – ‘Then you are just unworthy.’” (Pascal, 1995:333). This is what keeps so many people from a life of faith and commitment, and another reason why such a life is extremely difficult. The very thing that we require to help us believe is the very thing we cannot have certainty about. Thus, as Pascal states, it is ‘a vicious circle from which anyone is lucky to escape’ (1995:246).

As I have attempted to portray here, Pascal’s philosophy goes to lengths to show us that as humans we are ensnared in contradiction and confusion, which we seek to overcome in many acts of diversion or skepticism. Therefore his philosophy is helpful in understanding how we can reconcile ourselves with these facts and overcome them through commitment to our own revelations. Although his understanding is of the nature of Christian belief, he nevertheless maps out a way by which we can structure our own lives around faith, which happens only in the form of ongoing commitment. This commitment requires not only a reasoned argument but also, even more importantly, a transformation of our comportment, our habits – that is, the way we
actually live our lives on a daily basis. Further, faith requires inspiration, something deeply personal and subjective that provides the ‘fire’ that ignites and illuminates our path so that we do not only rely upon rational proofs, which can be contradicted, or habits that might lose passion in their daily practice. Pascal’s philosophy helps articulate the structure of commitment and therefore can be related phenomenologically to my argument of how one can forge an existential identity from singing by becoming a Descanter of Revelations. Through the bodily transformation required to produce the singing voice there is, as I have argued above, a transformation of the singer’s being-in-the-world. This can provide the inspiration for personal transformation through commitment to a new identity: that of the Descanter. Yet while this inspiration, derived from the opening possibilities brought forth through transforming one’s body in singing, might provide the impetus to change – the insight into new ways of being – it is transitory, and therefore it is only through ongoing commitment to this transformation that it actually occurs. This is the real test of character, because commitment involves changing our habits, our comportment, and we have no guarantee that what we now spend our finite time on might ultimately be right. Nevertheless, as Pascal shows us, we can continue to act as though it is right, not only because it is only through ongoing commitment that a new identity may be forged, but also because our commitment is based on our own insights and subjective ‘truth’ that a revelation has occurred and should be adhered to. This is why it is a form of faith, and as I have argued throughout this chapter, commitment to anything that defines for us a world – an ongoing settled meaning, a sense of purpose, things to do – and an identity is a form of faith. While Pascal’s ideas help explain the structure of commitment, and what we need to overcome
and reconcile through this commitment, namely the two extremes of our greatness and wretchedness, he does little in the way of explaining what living this way actually looks like. For that we now need to turn to Kierkegaard who, taking up in a way where Pascal leaves off, can help to articulate what it looks like to live a life committed to an identity, as what he calls a “Knight of Faith”. Kierkegaard’s philosophy will help clarify not only the way one can utilise singing as a defining commitment by becoming the Descanter, but also how doing so transforms one’s sense of self and one’s world.

2.5 Kierkegaard

Like Pascal, Kierkegaard was deeply concerned with the task of understanding how a human is to live in a way that matters to the individual and not just following along the various customs and diversions of the present age one happens to live in. Kierkegaard firmly believed, again similarly to Pascal, that knowledge is only worthwhile to the extent that it informs our actions, and that our ability to rationally understand is in fact secondary to our personal choices and our existential situation as an individual. In a passage from his Journal that articulates the concerns he was to develop for the rest of his life, Kierkegaard, at age twenty-two, wrote:

What I really lack is to be clear in my mind what I am to do, not what I am to know, except in so far as a certain understanding must precede every action. The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes me to do; the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die….What good would it do me to be able to develop a theory…if it had no deeper significance for me and my life[?] I certainly do not deny that I still recognise an imperative of understanding and that through it one can work upon men, but it must be taken up into my life, and that is what I now recognise as the most important thing. [original emphasis] (Kierkegaard, 2003:44).
As this brilliant passage articulates, for Kierkegaard, all knowledge, theory, and understanding is only significant if it changes one on a personal, existential level. Kierkegaard, like Pascal, saw faith as something ‘not of philosophers and scholars’ (Pascal, 1995:285), but as something hard, something deeply personal and ambiguous, requiring ongoing commitment beyond conceptualisation. As he writes in *Fear and Trembling* ‘Even if one were able to convert the whole content of faith into a conceptual form, it does not follow that one has comprehended faith, comprehended how one entered into it or how it entered into one’ (Kierkegaard, 2006:5). Kierkegaard was, like Pascal, against philosophers and scholars who thought they could organise life into a completely self-sufficient, totalising account. The main target of Kierkegaard’s animus was Hegel, whose philosophical System was, at least in a vulgarised form, fashionable at the time, and was an attempt to synthesise history into a total account that overcame contradictions at the expense of the personal life and existential position of a single individual. In opposition to this, Kierkegaard sought to emphasise the personal and make it his ultimate concern, to give it back the weight he believed it had in the way we, as individuals, live our lives. More important than ‘knowing thyself’, for Kierkegaard the ultimate task is to ‘choose oneself’. As Mooney (1991:4) summarises Kierkegaard’s position,

The first stage of self-formation is to accept the *task* or *project* of self-formation. One strives to become the very self one is [and] one’s fundamental responsibility in life is to become oneself.

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20 As Kaufmann (1980:202) writes, ‘[Kierkegaard’s] relation to philosophy is best expressed by changing one small word in Marx’s famous dictum: “The philosophers have merely interpreted the world differently, but what matters is to change” – not “it”, as Marx said, but ourselves.’

21 Beyond here meaning above, not contrary to, thus not precluding their own, or my, attempt to convey theoretically what must ultimately be lived.
However, Kierkegaard, like Pascal, thought that we often believe falsely that being an ‘individual’ is easy, something we are already doing before we have even thought about it. Kierkegaard’s task therefore was to place the individual ‘higher than the universal’ (Kierkegaard, 2006:48) and demonstrate that only by relating oneself ‘absolutely to the absolute’ (Kierkegaard, 2006:61), that is, to live in a personally significant and personally defined relation toward one’s own life, can a person become himself or herself as an individual.\textsuperscript{22} Kierkegaard wrote that ‘faith is a passion’ (2006:59), and argued that the problem with modern life – as was contemporay for him in nineteenth century Denmark at least – was that ‘passion has been abandoned in order to serve scholarship’ (Kierkegaard, 2006:5). Therefore Kierkegaard made an attempt to put the passion back into life, which can only come, not through detached, objective thinking, but through engaged, subjective acting.

It is because of these considerations that Kierkegaard (2006:5) states in his Preface to \textit{Fear and Trembling} that ‘The present writer is not at all a philosopher’, and subtitles the work ‘a dialectical lyric’ rather than say a philosophical treatise. It is also in part why his work tends to be very obscure and hard to decipher,\textsuperscript{23} though perhaps for different reasons to most other philosophical writers. Kierkegaard’s writing utilises aesthetic techniques such as imaginative poetic descriptions and narrative portrayal to convey his ideas rather than solely relying upon traditional arguments, thus inviting the reader to

\textsuperscript{22} Kierkegaard, placing such importance on this idea, requested his epitaph to be ‘That individual’, a request that was unfortunately not granted (Calarco & Atterton, 2003:55).

\textsuperscript{23} Not that this charge is at all avoided by other more purist philosophers!
challenge him or herself to engage with the work, rather than simply reading it. For example, *Fear and Trembling* opens with a section entitled “Tuning Up”, and involves several differing accounts of the story of Abraham and Isaac in which various alternative endings to the story are given – curiously without any commentary or analysis whatsoever. This indeed introduces the reader to a very different way of engaging with the text. By simply presenting alternative versions without discussion, we are forced to think for ourselves how they stand in relation to the original story, and thus perplex our presumptions about its interpretation. The idea is to jolt us into a realisation that the task that was set before Abraham by God was not replete with a foregone miraculous conclusion. As Kierkegaard’s opening section demonstrates, many confusing thoughts on how to proceed would have occurred to Abraham, and many ways to try to comprehend the task given to him would have been considered. Thus Abraham would only have been able to proceed in ‘Fear and Trembling’, not knowing, as we know, how it was all to end. This is the unfathomable aspect of faith because for Kierkegaard, the question is how could one carry onward with such a task, for three-and-a-half days, and still have faith? The fact that Abraham is known now as ‘the father of faith’ suggests that he did not fall into despair but carried on in faith, and this provides the impetus for Kierkegaard to try to outline the difficulty of faith, and the hard, existential commitment required to live with it. This most important aspect has been, according to Kierkegaard, all but forgotten, and thus the tendency has become to

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24 To emphasise this aesthetic approach, Kierkegaard employs the pseudonym ‘Johannes de Silentio’ (John of Silence) as the author of the *Fear and Trembling*, a device which allows Kierkegaard to be more fluid in the style and ideas expressed than something penned under his own name. While some commentators refer to Johannes throughout their discussions as the author of *Fear and Trembling*, I will only refer to Kierkegaard when discussing any of his works, despite this and many other works of his being written under different pseudonyms.
fall into a comfortable ‘knowledge’ of the story and of the miracle, without any mind
being paid to the actual struggle it must have been to live through it. As Kierkegaard
(2006:44-45) writes,

People construe the story of Abraham in another way. They praise God’s grace for
giving Isaac to him again; the whole affair was only a trial. A trial – this word can
mean so much and little, and yet the whole affair is over as soon as it is said. One
mounts a winged horse; at that very moment one is on Mount Moriah, at that very
moment one sees the ram. One forgets that Abraham only rode upon an ass, which
goes slowly along the way, that he had a three-day journey, that he needed some
time to chop the firewood, bind Isaac, and draw the knife....If I were to speak about
him, I would first depict the pain of the trial. To that end I would, like a leech, suck
all the anxiety and distress and torment out of a father’s suffering in order to be
able to describe what Abraham suffered while still believing through it all.

Kierkegaard’s diagnosis of the problem of contemporary approaches to faith echo
Pascal’s earlier analysis, mentioned above, that ‘Men often take their imagination for
their heart, and often believe they are converted as soon as they think of becoming
converted’ (Pascal, 1995:323). We see the end in the beginning, and any hard work we
might do is buoyed by this inevitable conclusion. That is why Kierkegaard would, he
says, ‘suck all the anxiety and distress and torment’ out of the story to show us that far
from being inevitable, we can never be sure of whether what we choose to
wholeheartedly commit to will end as we want. Such commitment toward something is
always done in subjective faith and this is what gives it its existential dimension. As
stated in Chapter One, choosing to engage in singing, one can never entirely
predetermine what will emerge, and we must follow along immersed in the ongoing
flux of the performance in order to realise it. Yet more than this, commitment toward
singing as an identity is a form of faith because the result of this commitment is not
known in advance; the safety net of either remaining uncommitted or knowing the end
before we set out is not a luxury for those who pursue this form of faith. Kierkegaard’s
task then was, as I have stated, to put back the ‘heart’ or passion into faith in order to
show that through the many different ways we can live our life, the greatest
achievement is to live with a profound sense of personal commitment that
simultaneously helps us walk through the various tribulations and trials of temporal,
everyday life, while connecting us to something larger and beyond our everyday
understandings of our self and our life. While for Kierkegaard, like Pascal, this was a
faith toward God, I will argue, by looking phenomenologically at Kierkegaard’s
structure of faith and commitment, that connection to a new way of being that gives a
solid identity and a sense of reality is also a form of faith. As Dreyfus (2009:144-145)
writes

    Any such unconditional commitment to some specific individual, cause, or
vocation, whereby a person gets an identity and a sense of reality would do to make
the point Kierkegaard is trying to make. In such a case, a person becomes an
individual defined by his or her relation to the object of his or her unconditional
commitment...By responding to the call of such an unconditional commitment and
thereby getting an identity, a person becomes what Kierkegaard, following the
Bible, calls “a new creation”.

The important point here is that any unconditional commitment, that is, a commitment
that involves one totally and gives one both a defined identity and a sense of reality is a
form of faith. It is the contention of my thesis that commitment to the way of being-in-
the-world that I argue is opened up through singing indeed satisfies these criteria,
though this is not without my own interpretations of Kierkegaard’s difficult philosophy.

25 More specifically, Kierkegaard’s commitment which forged his identity was to redefine
Christianity by making being a Christian hard, in the sense I have described.
To reiterate more specifically, my interpretation argues that not only might a specific cause, or vocation, or love of another person be the source of one’s world-defining commitment, but that one’s own way of being-in-the-world can be highlighted, made sense of, transformed, and thereby utilised to forge a sense of identity and ongoing reality, which can be committed to in a form of faith. The descant melody reveals new melodic potentialities in the pre-established harmonic structure. The Descanter reveals him or herself as rising out of the pre-established world he or she has been in and actualises a ‘new creation’; “I am this. And I resolutely choose to define my identity and my life by this”. By analysing our ways of being-in-the-world, which requires a phenomenological sensitivity, we can set up a distinction between one way and another. These can be drawn out and opened up to reveal them in as much detail as possible and highlight the qualities and possibilities associated with each. Singing opens up a particular way of being and through sensitive inquiry, this new way of being can be seized upon and forged and fostered as a guiding way of being for one’s life. I have given this way of being the title of Descanter of Revelations because giving a name to a certain way of being – which might otherwise be ephemeral and amorphous, something we pass through from time to time without clearly recognising its potential for creating an authentic identity – gives it a richer, more solid grounding, adds character, and gives it more shape, thereby making it easier to recognise. Further, the title itself highlights the important characteristics this way of being entails, which makes it a kind of shorthand for calling forth all the manifold qualities contained within this way of being-in-the-world. I will now outline and demonstrate how I believe becoming a Descanter of
Revelations can be a defining commitment, by going into more depth in relation to Kierkegaard’s philosophy.

In *The Sickness Unto Death* Kierkegaard (1989:43-44) tells us:

The human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates to itself…A Human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity. In short, a synthesis… Such a relation, which relates to itself, a self, must either have established itself or been established by something else… Such a derived, established relation is the human self, a relation which relates to itself, and in relating to itself relates to something else… The self cannot by itself arrive at or remain in equilibrium and rest, but only, in relating to itself, by relating to that which established the whole relation.

In this difficult passage, Kierkegaard is reinforcing Pascal’s aforementioned idea of the human being as a synthesis of contradicting factors. For Kierkegaard, like Pascal, our task as humans is to attempt to get these contradicting factors into a relationship whereby both are fulfilled without diminishing one or the other side. However, doing so is an incredibly difficult task which most do not ever achieve; ‘very rare indeed is the one who in truth is not in despair’ (Kierkegaard, 1989:57). There are many ways in which humans conceal this contradiction and thus neglect the task altogether, and Kierkegaard outlines the various approaches and how they ultimately break down throughout his works. In *The Sickness Unto Death* Kierkegaard writes that our inability to face this problem is in itself to be in despair, and that to be in despair is the sickness unto death. What is so intriguing about his concept is that unlike an illness, where one who falls into illness can be said to have been healthy before becoming ill, with despair, if one falls into despair, it must be the case that the person has *always* been in despair,
and thus, ostensibly paradoxically, to fall into despair, thereby becoming conscious of being in despair, is to be some ways closer to being cured of despair. As Kierkegaard (1989:54) writes:

> Once despair appears, what is apparent is that the person was in despair. In fact, it’s never possible at any time to decide anything about a person who is not saved through having been in despair. For when whatever causes a person to despair occurs, it is immediately evident that he has been in despair his whole life [my emphasis].

This gets at the heart of despair because what this suggests is that until we have felt the breakdown of the life we have been living, and felt the despair that we could never be truly and lastingly contented by living the way we have been living, we are in despair. We are in despair until that breakdown – which is itself despair – because, as I have indicated above, for Kierkegaard we do not automatically live as an individual before having done anything to cultivate our life in a personally meaningful way. The aforementioned synthesis of contradicting factors constituting us as human beings are not automatically already reconciled, and this is what makes being a human so difficult. The difficulty is, as I have argued, not in achieving bliss in a single transitory moment of clarity, but to infuse our ordinary life with the fullness of faith. For Kierkegaard, to not yet have done this is to be in despair. As Dreyfus (2009:142) summarises, ‘according to Kierkegaard, everyone who has not managed to perform the impossible task of getting his or her self together in a stable, meaningful life is in despair’.

Before I take us closer to how this ‘impossible task’ might be actually achieved, it is worth looking into Kierkegaard’s notion of despair in a little more detail to see why it is
so perplexing. After all, it seems a slightly absurd claim to say that we are in despair even though we might be perfectly happy, and yet as Kierkegaard (1989:55) states:

Deep, deep inside, deep within good fortune’s most hidden recesses, there dwells also the dread of despair…for that is where despair has its most cherished, its choicest dwelling-place: deep in the heart of happiness.

How is it that Kierkegaard can make such a claim? Part of the reasoning is that without any reason to question our lives or ourselves, there is no need to look further than what has been taken for granted and assumed without effort. After all, if something has yet to break down, there is little need to transform or renew it. Yet as I have been outlining, we do not automatically live in such a way that the conditions and contradictions of life are adequately addressed. Despair is the realisation of this, as well as the recognition that these issues are always there – that is, have always been there, and always will be. The more philosophical point of this claim then, is that despair has ‘eternity’ in it: ‘despair is an aspect of spirit, it has to do with the eternal in a person. But the eternal is something he cannot be rid of’ (Kierkegaard, 1989:47). Because it is a sickness of spirit and not merely of the finite and temporal aspects of being human that all other forms of sickness and misery relate to, it is present at all times that a human is not relating to themselves as a contradicting synthesis that has both the finite and the infinite within it – in short, as an individual. As Kierkegaard (1989:55) writes, ‘despair is exactly man’s unconsciousness of being characterised as spirit’. To live ‘as spirit’ is another way of saying what I mentioned above, that the task of ‘the self’ (the human) is to become itself, that is, become an individual, by not neglecting either set of factors constituting the self. As Kierkegaard (1989:59-60) writes,
The self is the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude, which relates to itself, whose task is to become itself... To become oneself, however, is to become something concrete. But to become something concrete is neither to become finite nor to become infinite, for that which is to become concrete is indeed a synthesis... If, on the other hand, the self does not become itself, then it is in despair, whether it knows it or not... To not be oneself is exactly despair.

We are already in despair, because we do not automatically live in a way which is ‘concrete’, and yet it is only through despair that we might have the realisation that this is the case. To become concrete is to become an individual – an *in-divisible* entity in which both sets of contradicting factors are indeed undivided; concrete, complete, and whole. In Pascal’s terms, ‘touching both extremes at once and filling the intervening space’ (*cited in* Dreyfus, 2009:141). Yet the first step toward living in such a way indeed may be a complete breakdown of the life one has attempted to live, because this can provide the impetus to look beyond what has been hitherto taken for granted toward a life of far greater personal significance. Thus as Kierkegaard (1989:56) writes, ‘despair is that sickness of which it is true that it is the greatest bad fortune never to have had it; it is truly providential to get it’. Just as Pascal (1995:29) said ‘there is greatness in knowing one is wretched’, so with Kierkegaard (1989:56), those in despair are ‘a little nearer [to] being cured than all those...who do not regard themselves as being in despair’ because they are one step closer to moving out of it.

Moving out of despair is also difficult for other reasons. It needs to be made clear that it is still not guaranteed that even by having gone through a breakdown one will indeed make the right ‘movements’ – that is, changes in attitudes, assumptions, and actions – that will lead one into a more personally significant and subjectively meaningful life.
Not only is one’s happiness potentially guarding against a life of committed faith in Kierkegaard’s sense, it is not even guaranteed that if one does experience a thwarting of one’s plans and a deep realisation that one would never achieve lasting fulfilment living the way one has been living, that one will take the steps necessary to achieve a personally authored, fulfilling life. As mentioned earlier in this chapter highlighted by Rollo May, any creative act of self transformation inevitably will involve at the very least a reconsideration, if not a complete break from, one’s past assumptions and values. This provokes anxiety, and the avoidance of such existential anxiety is one of the major forces that prohibit such a transformation. Further, the commitment required toward the future also is anxiety provoking, because it is only our own subjective inspiration, and not an objectively guaranteed ‘right’ answer that is our guide. Kierkegaard actually claims in *Fear and Trembling* that it is *only* this type of self-determined act that has value as commitment; it would not be the same existentially to be forced to commit to something; change made purely out of necessity would strip commitment of its ‘concretising’ power. As Kierkegaard (1985:74-75) writes:

> People believe very little in spirit, yet it is precisely spirit that is needed to make this movement; what matters is its not being a one-sided result of *dira necessitas*; the more it is that the more doubtful it always is that the movement is proper. To insist that a frigid, sterile necessity is necessarily present is to say that no one may experience death before actually dying, which strikes me as a crass materialism.

Like Pascal, Kierkegaard seems to be concerned that our commitment is both born of the fire of our own inspiration (spirit), and borne out through our own (material) daily life; not as something automatic, or simply something to be gotten over, but rather as something total, lasting, and enriching. Through this movement properly made however, we can make sense of our life. I will now turn to Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* to
develop theoretically the way we engage with commitment, before I then summarise and conclude this chapter.

In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard writes of the moment a young man falls in love with a princess in order to demonstrate the way a particular moment in our life can become a catalyst for defining commitment in our life. In an important footnote he states that he has chosen a love affair to illustrate his theory due to its simplicity and universality, yet *any* other interest ‘in which an individual has concentrated the whole reality of actuality’ (Kierkegaard, 2006:35n), can yield the same results. For Kierkegaard, there are three basic approaches one can take toward their life experiences, which correspond basically to lower immediacy, mediation, and higher immediacy.26

Lower immediacy represents the ordinary content of one’s life as it is, and one’s engagement with these is arbitrary and uncommitted, and someone living in this way would go through life simply seeking simple solutions or distractions and thereby avoiding the vulnerability of having any commitment. If you’re unattached to everything, if something goes wrong you remain (existentially) safe and unaffected. Kierkegaard of course holds much contempt for this kind of person, referring to this type as ‘slaves of misery’, and ‘frogs in the swamp of life’ (Kierkegaard, 2006:35). In relation to his example of the youth and the princess, he depicts such a response to the situation in which the youth’s love for the princess is unrequited as one of saying ‘such a love is foolishness; the rich brewer’s widow is just as good and sound a

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26 This tripartite summary has been taken from Hubert Dreyfus’ lectures on Kierkegaard at UC Berkeley, which I attended in the Spring semester of 2012.
match’ (2006:35). In other words, these kinds of people live as though one should be practical and parochial in one’s dreams and desires, and if something doesn’t turn out, any substitute is just as good. For these people there is no necessary, solitary purpose for which to live. Anything is as good as anything else, and the less pain it all causes the better.

Mediation concerns living by concepts and theory, which might help us understand life more deeply, yet may also hold our everyday, subjective life at a distance. Yet this is also where Kierkegaard’s concept of commitment begins to be very interesting. Another response to the situation in which the youth falls in love with a princess and this love is unrequited is to become, out of this experience, what Kierkegaard (2006:35) calls a ‘Knight of Infinite Resignation’. This response is to indeed make an unconditional commitment, though it is not yet faith, which is the last stage I will describe. In infinite resignation, the youth ‘undertakes the movement’ of ‘concentrating all of his reflection into a single act of consciousness’ (2006:36), which then will define his identity and his life as an individual. In this response, the contingent becomes necessary through the youth’s commitment to it. A transitory moment, which could just as well be let go of and passed over, is held to and is life-defining. For the ‘movement’ to be ‘right’, however, passion is required (Kierkegaard, 2006:35n), which is to say that for the love to become a defining commitment, the youth cannot be detached, nor disengage if his love proves unrealisable. Rather,

He is not cowardly, he is not afraid to let it steal into his most secret, his most remote thoughts, to let it wind in countless coils around every ligament in his
consciousness – if the love becomes unhappy, he will never be able to wrench himself out of it. (Kierkegaard, 2006:35).

This is, according to Kierkegaard, the first and necessary movement toward faith, though it is not yet faith. However, in infinite resignation, a person indeed has created a defining commitment, though it is still a mediated position as opposed to the higher immediacy of the knight of faith, which I will elaborate on further below. While complete engagement with the object of defining commitment is required, and mediating detachment is overcome, infinite resignation is nevertheless ultimately still a ‘safe’ position because the love maintains a fixed position – in eternity – and whilst it defines an identity and a world for the person, they do not have the faith that their eternal love might be possible again in time. Thus the finite and temporal is ‘mediated’ by the infinite and eternal, and the two contrasting factors of infinite and finite are not yet fully reconciled. Nevertheless, this is still one way to reconcile oneself with existence. As Kierkegaard writes:

The knight [of resignation] will remember everything; but this recollection is precisely the pain, and yet in the infinite resignation he is reconciled with existence. The love for the princess became for him the expression of an eternal love…was transfigured into a love of the eternal being, which to be sure denied the fulfillment of the love but still reconciled him once again in the eternal consciousness of its validity in an eternal form that no actuality can take from him (Kierkegaard, 2006:36-37).

Thinking about this in more concrete terms, Kierkegaard regards the youth’s infinite resignation as being one way to reconcile himself with existence even though it is not complete because in so doing, he must renounce the finite. It no longer matters about the actual princess as a person living a life; she has been internalised, and indeed *eternalised* in order for the youth to attain his sense of identity. Bolder and more noble
than the ‘slaves of misery’, the youth met the princess, fell in love, and when he realised that this was not simply a fleeting feeling – for ‘his soul is too healthy and too proud to waste the least thing on an intoxication (Kierkegaard, 2006:35) – he decides that he will allow this love to plumb and permeate him deeply. When he hears back that the love is in fact an impossibility, this is when he makes the movement of infinity. The love becomes the defining commitment which forges his identity, and moves into eternity. He now has an identity which, for the rest of his life, is made sense of through his commitment to it. He resigns everything infinitely and he thereby becomes self-sufficient. He no longer needs the world to tell him who he is, nor can the circumstances that might occur in the course of life be defining of who he is. He knows for himself; he has infinitely resigned to this identity, and in doing so is reconciled with existence. Thus, as Kierkegaard (2006:38) writes, ‘In infinite resignation there is peace and rest’.

Looking in detail at infinite resignation now prepares the way for looking at the notion of faith, which is the main purpose of this discussion. The knight of faith, according to Kierkegaard, makes a further movement than that of the knight of resignation. While both depict ways of reconciling oneself with one’s existence, faith reconciles both the infinite and the finite, which is a much more risky, and thus much harder thing to accomplish. It is more risky because the love does not exist as a memory, or an eternal love, but is fully alive in the everyday, finite world, in a way that keeps the knight of faith open and totally ready to experience it in the present moment, yet despite having no secure or objective fact in his life reassuring him. In other words, despite what may
happen, my commitment gives me a sense of reality whereby my life is now defined as this identity. This is the ‘higher immediacy’ of being fully engaged in the finite, temporal present moment, and that present moment holding in it the infinite through a defining commitment made to an identity. As Dreyfus (2009: 146) writes:

Kierkegaard calls an unconditional commitment an infinite passion for something finite….an infinite passion can legitimately be called infinite because it opens up a world. Not only what actually exists gets its meaning from its connection with my defining passion; anything that could possibly come into my experience would get its meaning for me from my defining commitment…one’s commitment defines one’s reality [original emphasis].

In faith the youth would believe ‘by virtue of the absurd’ (Kierkegaard, 2006:39), that somehow he will get the princess despite all evidence to the contrary. This is the crux of faith. While we might be able to understand defining ourselves and our life though an event or an experience that has shaped our entire sense of identity and our world, it is quite another thing to have the faith that through living our life in the way we have chosen to live, we can ‘dance’\textsuperscript{27} subtly along the blade’s edge; it is not merely a strong feeling, as feelings come and go, rather it is seeing the tremendous futility in our finitude, yet fully invested in what we are doing, but without falling into either the despair of uncertainty or the blind optimism of ignorance. As Kierkegaard (2006:41) writes, it only takes a ‘purely human courage…to renounce the whole of temporality in order to gain the eternal…But it takes a paradoxical and humble courage next to grasp the whole of temporality by virtue of the absurd, and this is the courage of faith’.

\textsuperscript{27} ‘The knights of infinity are dancers and have elevation’ (Kierkegaard, 2006:34).
2.6 Conclusions

While Kierkegaard’s knights of resignation and faith are designed to portray certain ways of responding to the conditions of existence, I have drawn on these concepts in order to articulate how singing can become a defining commitment which gives the singer an identity and a world. This is a far more engaged and impassioned approach to singing than approaching it as merely a pastime or even a career, which is in part why I call this process becoming a Descanter of Revelations. With a phenomenological sensitivity, a person who sings can begin to realise the transformations that accompany the production of the singing tone actually go beyond physiology and are concomitant with existential transformations. By producing the singing tone, so too must the body become. Yet these transformations are not permanent and offer no more than a transitory insight into a certain way of being that accompanies singing. However, it is my contention that by committing to this way of being that reveals itself through singing, a singer can utilise the act of singing as determining an identity and a world. Pascal’s philosophy helps understand what is required in order to maintain commitment. With a reasoned understanding of why we would benefit from living a certain way, we need to change our comportment to the point where habit can take over, so that we are following along the road we consciously want to take without having to keep all the reasons for doing so in front of us at all times. Further, we need the ‘fire’, the inspiration, which ignites the spark of our commitment, and illuminates the way ahead. In terms of Pascal’s philosophy, to be a Descanter is to feel inspired by singing, decide that it is a positive pursuit, and therefore go about living one’s life in accordance with what is required day-to-day in order to maintain access to and facility over both the
singing voice and the possibilities singing reveals. The revelation, as I have stated above, is the striking disclosure of new possibilities that are awakened through changing one’s comportment to produce the singing tone. This is the inspiration, the ‘fire’ that ignites and illuminates one’s passion by revealing that something new is available to one; that one is not limited to past forms of expression and engagement. Like the rising descant melody that emerges out of a pre-established harmonic structure, the Descanter similarly arises out of a pre-established, pre-given way of being in a creation of something truly personal, partly spontaneous but completely self-authored. Yet the revelation is only momentary, and though this can provide the fire of illumination and passion, in order for such a personally defined way of being to be lived as an identity, that is, in order to become a Descanter of Revelations rather than just a person who sings, one must commit fully, in a daily, ongoing existential pursuit and practice of the possibilities awakened through singing. This is what can then lead to transformation, both of one’s self and one’s world, and thus it can be a commitment that defines one’s identity and the quality of one’s world.

While Pascal’s philosophy helps articulate the structure of commitment, through Kierkegaard a more detailed account is added as to how this commitment indeed forge and fosters an identity and a world. By making the transitory moment of singing a defining moment which one decides is exactly how one wants to be at all times, the Descanter of Revelations has given him or herself a world of personal significance by deciding how he or she is to live, and thereby personally authored and revealed the quality of his or her particular way of being-in-the-world. It is truly subjective, because
he or she is the *only* person privy to the experiences that he or she has decided are of utmost importance to his or her life, and it requires a subjective passion to maintain, in the face of the external objective world, that he or she alone, as an *individual*, is accounted for; that is, has determined who he or she is through his or her own experience. Further, it is only through ongoing, daily commitment to this that the identity becomes what it is, and therefore the world of the Descanter is changed because the significance it has is shaped and determined through this ongoing commitment and not by whatever else might happen to take place. The objective world is peripheral, the personal is fundamental; truth is subjectivity.

Now that I have explicated the existential dimension of singing, which has looked in some detail at how the transformations outlined in Chapter One can be committed to in order to forge a personal identity, it is now my task to go into this identity more deeply to examine the particular traits this way of being has. I am arguing that the way of being forged through singing can be best highlighted by looking at the very same characteristics that are evident in the most ‘ideal type’ of singing itself, that of the Bel Canto. As stated in Chapter One, to sing is to invoke the singing body. In other words, by producing Bel Canto, so too must the body become. Singing is therefore the invocation of the Body-Bel Canto – the beautiful singing body. This conclusion leads me to read the musical traits present in Bel Canto as existential structures present in the Body-Bel Canto. I am arguing that the traits that made Bel Canto so widely regarded as the ‘golden age’ of singing were Joy, Athleticism, and Chiaroscuro. Importantly, these were all qualities that resided in the *tone* of the singers of Bel Canto. This emphasis on
the tone of the voice in the tripartite nature of vocal music came about through a long historical development that I intend to show began with the emergence of Opera in the late 16th Century. In the earliest operas, words were deemed the most important aspect of singing. Later, in the Romantic period, the emphasis shifted from words to notes, and melody was considered the most important facet of music. Yet out of this emerged Bel Canto singing, which was a style that championed the individual singer and his or her ability to effortlessly imbue the music he or she was given to sing with his or her own particular identity. The identity was conveyed through the tone, which, as I have stated, ideally portrayed Joy, Athleticism, and Chiaroscuro. The reason I have chosen to focus upon these traits and Bel Canto is because I believe they accurately describe, when taken existentially, the way of being-in-the-world a person can assume when they sing. To me there is no greater literary example of these traits and how they look than the poetry of Walt Whitman. Therefore, to develop a clearer idea of what being a Body-Bel Canto looks like I will, in Chapter Four, analyse the poetry of Whitman through this lens. But first, it is important to see how these musical traits associated with Bel Canto emerged historically, to examine from where they have arisen, and how they would become so important in Whitman. Therefore the following chapter aims to show how a shift of emphasis in vocal music occurred over time to where the traits of Bel Canto became prominent. I will now turn to an historiography of the Bel Canto.
Chapter Three

Historiography of Bel Canto

‘Bel Canto’ literally means ‘beautiful singing’ (Fuchs, 1963:159). The term also refers to a style and period of Italian singing considered to be the ‘golden age’ of singing, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (1963:159). For these reasons alone it may serve as a paradigm for the presentation of the qualities of singing I wish to portray. Yet there is so much more that can be gained by looking in more depth at the Bel Canto style. By focusing upon the Bel Canto as a paradigmatic style, I hope to uncover not so much the particular stylistic traits associated with it, the concern of which has long been the familiar domain of writers on singing technique and music historians. Rather, the way I want to engage with it is by looking at how the characteristics of the style of Bel Canto can serve as a basis for understanding and expressing the existential characteristics associated with the being-in-the-world that singing instigates. Because Bel Canto is a unique form in the history of Western Classical music, and because its very characteristics are analogous to those I argue are potentially made manifest as existential structures by any act of singing, it serves perfectly as a way to study in depth how these characteristics appear. Therefore, this chapter will look at how Bel Canto emerged historically from the very early beginnings of Opera, which will give it an historical context that reveals a changing emphasis toward favouring the traits associated with this style. This change of emphasis saw a movement from the importance of words in singing, to the importance of notes, or melody, and then finally
to the importance of tone. It is my argument that tone is where the most personal part of expression through singing is found, and the traits of Bel Canto tone are, in my argument, analogous with the particular existential traits of a singer’s way being-in-the-world. This will then prepare the way for the following chapter, which will portray the poetry of Walt Whitman as a literary example of what it is like to be what I call the Body-Bel Canto – the ‘beautiful singing body’.

3.1 Pre-Operatic Vocal Music

By the late sixteenth century, Music had begun to reach an unprecedented level of sophistication. During the middle of the fifteenth century, music went through a decisive break with the music of the Middle Ages (Jeppeson, 1939:8-9). Tinctoris, a contemporary musician (Chapelmaster) in Naples, was one of the first to theoretically acknowledge this break in 1477, and over the following century general rules about harmony and voice leading began to shape musical works in both sacred and secular domains. The resulting style which developed out of these general rules was called counterpoint, which simply means ‘point against point’, or ‘note against note’ (Jeppeson, 1939:3). This became the dominant style across Europe, particularly in England, Netherlands, and most importantly for my study, Italy, where it significantly influenced the developments that led to the formation of Opera. Counterpoint became an increasingly complex style because music was thought of melodically, that is, as a part to which another part or melody could be added. Rather than the music being a single melody over a cluster of vertical notes making a separate harmony, music was thought of horizontally, as a series of melodies that moved along together, creating
harmony or dissonance depending on how the notes of each melody met and interacted. As this music became more developed, the treatments of consonance and dissonance between parts were carefully dealt with by composers. Further, through the ongoing development of musical notation, which had begun in its very earliest form around 800 (Treitler, 1991:19), composers became more and more sophisticated at adding parts to either plainchant melodies or repeated bass figures, thus showing off their skill and inventiveness by doing so.

In the early Middle Ages there was little regard for treatment of consonance and dissonance and thus the music stayed relatively simple contrapuntally. Indeed, most of the music written at this time reflected the solitary contemplation of God, and thus the music was mainly for one voice or melody (monophony) in order to give a solemn mood to the religious services. In the very earliest music with two parts, the lower part acted like a drone which centred the tonality of the melody that moved above it. This early music, called Organum, was impersonal and contemplative, and usually consisted of a chant-like character, reflecting the gravitas of the religious text it accompanied. However, as the Middle Ages progressed, greater decoration was allowed for as it was seen to enhance the beauty of the text it accompanied. The music did accompany the text, which was of foremost importance. Melody was important not only because it enhanced the grandeur and atmosphere of the religious sentiment, similar to the way the Gothic architecture of the time also did, but it also helped for the practical purpose of making the text more audible in churches and cathedrals in which excessive reverb
made ordinary speech less clear than a sustained singing tone (Burkholder, Grout & Palisca, 2010:53, 84-85).  

Moreover, the medieval ear was not originally as sophisticated as it later became. That is to say, only relatively simple harmonies such as the fourth, fifth, and octave were deemed “correct”, and so the range of what was considered consonant was quite narrow (Jeppeson, 1939:7). It can perhaps be taken as axiomatic that with the growing sophistication of society itself the music of the society becomes more complex too, and thus with the development of city life in the late Middle Ages, which led to growing specialisation in activities, music was able to be thought about more consistently, and composers, who were usually just singers or clergymen in the church, were able to refine their skills and even begin to have a more personal style (Singman, 1999:171ff; Burkholder, Grout & Palisca, 2010:92; Potter & Sorrell, 2012:46ff). It is perhaps for this reason that the first sophisticated polyphony to be composed primarily in writing emerged from Notre Dame in Paris, which was the largest city at the time (Burkholder, Grout & Palisca, 2010:92).

Of course, during this time more common songs would also have been a feature of daily life, however due to the widespread illiteracy of the population outside the courts and cathedrals, little is known of the precise character of such songs (Buckholder, Grout & Palisca, 2010:72). However, one type of ‘professional’ composer/singer during the late

28 How the voice was used melodically at this time to enhance the atmosphere of the texts as well as sustain longer and more clearly in the cathedrals is here an example of my argument in Chapter One that singing is an entirely different mode of expression than speaking.
Middle Ages whose music has survived was the Troubadour. Originating in the South of France, the troubadours were sponsored by aristocrats of the courts and were highly influential in their poetic characterisation of sentiments of love, elegance and refinement. In fact, the ideal of ‘courtly love’, in which a particular individual woman is held in the highest esteem as an object worthy of personal sacrifice and devotion, still to a large extent characterises our Western thinking about romantic love (Clark, 1969:59).

The chivalrous gesture and the unrequited longing of romantic love were popular themes for the troubadours, and in that sense, they have not only influenced Western ideals on love but many of the lyrical themes modern popular song lyrics of today have as well. The melodies of the songs of the troubadours were simple, usually within an octave, and had a slightly different relationship to the text than did the chants of the church. Where church singing began as a mostly syllabic (one note per syllable) chant used to heighten the effect of the words, and subsequently grew to a greater decorative use of melisma (many notes per syllable) and many separate parts (polyphony), the songs of troubadours and the other ‘professional’ singers, the minstrels, usually had a single melody which was used for all verses of the poem. While the melody might change slightly for the different lines within the verse, the overall melody would be repeated for the different verses, thus giving an overall ‘feel’ to the words, rather than directly representing them (Treitler, 1991:26-27; Burkholder, Grout & Palisca, 2010:76-77). The troubadours were like an early version of the ‘singer-songwriter’, composing and singing their own poetry and melodies solo, both with and without accompaniment. While the troubadours were to influence both ideals of love and styles of songwriting up to the present day, it was in the more formal music of counterpoint.
that music composition significantly developed over the next centuries where it reached an unprecedented level of complexity in the Renaissance.

Through the development of musical theory up to the early sixteenth century, and more widespread acknowledgement of rules for good writing, composers became much more sophisticated in both the way they heard music, and in the way they could interweave many notes, adding complexity yet keeping the general standards of good taste regarding the relation of consonance and dissonance intact. Zarlino, a contemporary sixteenth-century theorist, writes of this developed attitude:

Dissonance [is] not displeasing but, on the contrary, it arouses great pleasure through the increased mildness and sweetness which it lends to the succeeding consonance. (cited in Jeppeson, 1939:16).

For this reason, counterpoint was a perfect form for both sacred and secular music at the time. Where in sacred music polyphony (many voices) could be experienced as a simulation of the divine many-in-oneness (Mellers, 1987:36), in the secular realm polyphonic counterpoint allowed for a great range of complex harmony, giving delight to the ear through the multifaceted emotions and effects it could display.

Perhaps the most experimental music of the early sixteenth century was composed in the form of the madrigal. Madrigals were the most popular form of secular music in Italy at this time (Jeppeson, 1939:17), and developed out of a renewed attitude toward text which was in part influenced by the contemporary literary theorist Pietro Bembo. Bembo wrote an influential treatise which was to provide a ‘powerful authority for the newly acknowledged dignity of the Italian language’ (Miller, 1991:3). The word
‘madrigal’ quite possibly comes from the word ‘matricalis’ which means ‘in the mother tongue’ (Roche, 1990:1), and thus it is perhaps not surprising that the early madrigalists chose the work of Bembo for their theoretical perspective, and the poetry of Petrarch, championed by Bembo, for their text. Yet the approach to text taken by the madrigalists was to prove highly inappropriate for the conveyance of personal emotions. The focus was more on effects and ornament, with the resulting music being incredibly sophisticated and complex. Most times, very literal techniques were employed, for example any mention of ascent or descent in the poetry was portrayed with corresponding movements up or down the scale (Jeppeson, 1939:18). The overall approach to the text was mimetic (Treitler, 1991:20), and the ‘kaleidoscopic interplay of sonorities and harmonies’ (Mellers, 1987:32), which were the result of experimentation by composers seeking to create a dazzling array of effects to highlight the words, soon became too fanciful for the scholars who began to seek a more direct line between the emotional sentiment of the words being sung, and the emotions of the person listening to them. Moreover, the text was much harder to appreciate when it was broken up into the ‘many voices’ of polyphony (Potter & Sorrell, 2012:78-79). It was partly these considerations which led to the attitudes of the scholars who would provide the theoretical basis for the formation of what we now know as the birth of Opera by the end of the sixteenth century. The principle group responsible for the epochal shift in style, which essentially gave rise to modern music, was the Florentine Camerata.²⁹

²⁹ Where it was once obvious, the Camerata’s precise role in the development of Opera has become much less certain, and it has even been claimed that there were in fact two ‘competing’ cameratas (Palisca, 1989:2-3). However, it is without doubt that though their discussions and ideas were part of the general intellectual milieu at the time, Bardi’s Camerata was of such significant importance to the stylistic development of Opera that I am choosing to base my own focus solely upon their publications and their activity.
3.2 The Florentine Camerata

The Florentine Camerata was a group of noblemen in Florence who began, around 1572, having more and more serious theoretical discussions about the state of modern music. In particular, they were concerned with the way modern music did not match the ideals they believed ancient Greek music contained. In the widespread appeal to Classical Greek ideals that was prevalent in all cultural fields around this time, the goal was to learn what could be known about the music of Ancient Greece, and allow this study to inform and improve modern music, which they perceived was in a stage of decline (Palisca, 1989:6). The group consisted of Poets, Musicians, Philosophers, and other learned men, and was hosted by Giovanni Bardi, whose essay ‘On Ancient Music and Good Singing’ provided one of the principle theoretical statements of the group. The tone of the discussions was both educational and recreational, and their use of the word ‘camerata’ to characterise their meetings reflected the informal nature of how they dealt with these ideas.30 Before looking in more detail at the ideas of the Camerata, it is worthwhile first to situate the group’s perspective in the general historical context of the intellectual climate of Florence and Rome as it was at that time.

The beginning of the fifteenth century in Italy saw a huge transformation in attitudes about life and the power and importance of ‘Man’,31 which ultimately gave rise to the philosophical perspective of Humanism, and the Renaissance. From the ‘dark’ middle

30 The first reference to the group as a ‘camerata’, which means ‘an assemblage of people who live and converse together’, was made by Giulio Caccini in 1600 (Palisca, 1989:3). Caccini was, along with Jacopo Peri, one of the very first composers to write in the dramatic recitative style conceived by the Camerata (Grout, 1988:49).

31 Obviously this refers to both Women and Men, but I am leaving it as Man because ‘the Human’ seems to not give the correct emphasis.
ages, arose a new faith in the light of learning. And this happened nowhere else with such confidence and certainty as in Florence, an independent city-state in what would become Italy. During the fifteenth century, Florence was governed by men of learning; scholars with a belief that the cultivation of all the faculties through a study of the humanities was more conducive to prosperity than material wealth (Clark, 1969:77). Studies of Classical texts began in earnest around this time, with a much greater accessibility than had been available in the Middle Ages, and this lent a feeling of incredible confidence to the scholars who studied them. Florence was even being compared by some of its greatest artists and architects to Classical Athens (Clark, 1969:77). Where in the Middle Ages faith had been given solely to God, now faith was in Man and it was felt that all the works of Literature, Art and Architecture should assert the dignity of Man and make each individual more conscious of his or her powers (Clark, 1969:79). The growing sense of confidence these works and these attitudes instilled is what led to the high esteem of the individual. As Clark plainly states, ‘The discovery of the individual was made in early fifteenth-century Florence. Nothing can alter that fact’ (1969:86). Portraits at this time began to be more faithful to the personal idiosyncrasies of each individual face, rather than a reflection of status, and there was virtually no gap in the knowledge of the Arts between the Patron and his Artist (Clark, 1969:82-83). Leon Battista Alberti, sometimes called the ‘first universal genius’ (Spencer cited in Alberti, 1966:15), even wrote a special treatise at the time called On Painting designed to bring concepts of high art to a wider readership. Characteristically, he argues within it for the painter to become ‘as learned as possible in all the liberal arts’ (Alberti, 1966:90), and advises ‘that each painter should make
himself familiar with poets, rhetoricians and others equally well learned in letters’ (Alberti, 1966:91). This well-rounded approach will only serve to help the painter with his specific work, because it will cultivate and demonstrate a love of learning generally, which is, in the humanistic spirit, the most important characteristic anyone can have. As he states, ‘Nothing is ever so difficult that study and application cannot conquer it’ (Alberti, 1966:93). It is not surprising that we use the term ‘Renaissance Man’ (or Woman) to refer to people with a broad, deeply cultivated interest in the humanities, because this was the period when learning in this way was most highly valued. Other contemporaneous accounts, such as Castiglione’s The Courtier also praise the ‘uomo universale’, the many-sided man (Bull cited in Castiglione, 1967:17). Despite the obvious neglect of much of the population not privileged to live the courtly life portrayed in these works, they demonstrate with particular clarity the openness of cultural pursuits in that location at that time; these privileged men and women were free to sit and talk and joke and speculate on many various themes which took their fancy, and as Clark (1969:89) notes, sometimes it is only through the wilful, superfluous actions of individuals that a society might discover its powers. The courtly life gave rise to the opportunity for such individuals to cultivate their tastes and talents in long ‘many-sided’ discussions with others who similarly believed in the enlightening power of the Human. And with the confidence instilled by such a rich cultural climate it is perhaps little wonder that a group of men talking somewhat informally about music might generate ideas which would go on to invent what we know as Opera.
This was the historical context for the discussions of the Florentine Camerata. Yet however broad and interdisciplinary the context for their meeting was, they had a particular goal in mind. One of the main questions inciting the group to think and discuss was ‘How was ancient music capable of such marvelous effects, when modern music is unable to achieve them?’ (Palisca, 1989:51). The ‘marvelous effects’ the Camerata saw in the music of the Greeks was its power to ‘move the soul’ of the listener. Valgulio, one of the first scholars to express in print the sentiments later taken up by the Camerata, states ‘Theophrastus rightly said in the second book on music that the essence of music is the movement of the soul, which drives evils from the soul invaded by confusion’ (cited in Palisca, 1989:32). Music was thus to be taken seriously, and it should not just be a way of giving pleasure through ornamental phrases and decorative harmonies. They believed that their music had reached a wilful stage where composers had become carried away by advanced technique rather than returning to the more direct and simple goal of relating affections through music in order to deeply move the listener. The main culprit they thought responsible for the decline of modern music’s ability to do this was counterpoint.

The music the Camerata were interested in was vocal music, and there were several reasons for this. First is that vocal music was in fact the most common form of music at the time. There was always text involved, both in the Madrigals, which were the highest form of secular music, and in the sacred polyphony of the church. Purely instrumental music was scarcely more important than merely incidental music, more to dance to than to listen to (Burkholder, Grout & Palisca, 2010:269ff). Further, although purely
instrumental music outside the realm of song and dance was beginning to develop at this time, the Camerata were concerned with investigating why the music of Ancient Greece moved its listeners so much more than modern music, and this music was most explicitly tied to Greek tragedy. Thus the sung texts of the Greek tragedies were one of the main sources of inspiration and guides as to how their own music might move the listeners’ affections more powerfully. The other main source of their thinking was Plato.

Before elaborating further on the nature of the singing in Greek tragedies and why this was an important focal point for the Camerata, it is worthwhile articulating what Plato has to say in the *Republic* in regard to music. Plato begins a discussion on music at line 398c. It becomes clear very quickly that he sees music as having such a profound effect upon people that even certain modes and instruments must be banned from those chosen to be guardians of the Republic, lest it corrupts their character. At line 401d, Plato states explicitly that good education in music is most important for the guardians of the Republic because

> Rhythm and harmony permeate the inner part of the soul more than anything else, affecting it most strongly and bringing it grace, so that if someone is properly educated in music and poetry it makes him graceful, but if not, then the opposite.

Plato states at line 398d that ‘a song consists of three elements – words, harmonic mode, and rhythm’. The discussion which follows this had a direct influence upon the thinking of the Camerata. First, Plato declares that words ‘are no different in songs than they are when not set to music’ (398d). This is then followed by the statement that ‘the mode and the rhythm must fit the words’. These ideas were integral to the Camerata. They
believed, following Plato, that singing was not merely to please the ear with harmonies, but rather,

by imitating the very nature of the instrument they were using [that is, the voice], to express completely and with efficacy all that [one] sought to convey when speaking through the medium, and with the aid of the highs and lows…to distinguish it from the continuous voice of common speech (Mei cited in Palisca, 1989:74).

In other words, singing should be like a heightened version of speaking, lending a natural affection to the thought already inherent in the words themselves. In the same letter quoted here, which was written by Girolamo Mei, a Classical scholar in Rome who was sought out by the Florentine Camerata to answer some of their questions, the rhythmic aspect of singing was also addressed:

This [should be] accompanied by a methodical tempering of the rapidity and slowness of the voice in pronouncing its units of time, according to how each of those tempos by itself naturally fits some determinate affection (Mei cited in Palisca, 1989:74).

The most important aspect of this account is the demonstration of Plato’s ideal that the words are the most important, and the rhythm and harmony added to them must not get in the way of the sentiment already there, but rather simply enhance its directness by helping the voice to move beyond a ‘common speech’. First and foremost, the words themselves hold a kind of rhythm, and for Plato, the words a person uses correspond directly to the ‘rhythms’ of the speaker’s soul (400d). As he puts it at 399e, ‘we should try to discover what are the rhythms of someone who leads an ordered and courageous life and then adapt the meter and the tune to his words, not his words to them’. Words are primary here, and the music must allow them to ‘speak’ directly to the listener. Thus the ultimate music for the Camerata was music which effected a kind of transmission of
consciousness – not that they would have called it such – whereby the listener was led to the same affections portrayed by the singer of the words.

If the goal of music should be to affect a movement of the soul, and if words are directly related to the soul as Plato states, then the most important aspect of music must be the words, and this is precisely what the Camerata believed. Following Plato, they thought that for the music to be affecting, the words must be understood. The problem with their modern music, they thought, was the complexity of counterpoint. When multiple parts are all singing the words, the thought is dispersed into contrary elements, thus diffusing the sentiments of the words beyond recognition. Giovanni Bardi (cited in Palisca, 1989:115) writes in his essay ‘On Ancient Music and Good Singing’:

> When composing, you will strive above all to arrange the verse well and to make the words comprehensible, not letting yourself be led astray by counterpoint… Keeping in mind that just as the soul is nobler than the body, so the text is nobler than the counterpoint.

Here we see a definitive statement on the Camerata’s thinking about music, with a nice analogy echoing Plato’s equation of words and the soul.32

The fact that the music of Ancient Greece had moved its listeners so much, and the Camerata, who were self-proclaimed lovers of music (Palisca, 1989:32), had not felt similar affections for their own, led them to believe that the difference between the two styles must be the counterpoint. Some statements from Mei’s letter to the Camerata on the style of singing in Greek tragedy serve to highlight this reasoning.

32 As I will show in the following chapter, Whitman also saw a correlation between words and one’s character.
What chiefly persuaded me that the entire chorus sang one and the same air was observing that the music of the ancients was held to be a valuable medium for moving the affections, as witnessed by the many incidents related by the writers, and from noticing that our music is apt for anything else.

[…] I began to reason that if in their music the ancients had sung several airs mixed together in one and the same song, as our musicians do with their bass, tenor, contralto, and soprano…it would undoubtedly have been impossible for it ever to move vigorously the affections that it wished to move in the hearer, as may be read that it did at every turn in the accounts and testimonials of the great and noble writers (Mei cited in Palisca, 1989:57,58).

It was Mei’s reasoning that ‘all contrary qualities, whether natural or acquired, are weakened by mixing…and somehow blunt each other’s force’ (cited in Palisca, 1989:59). Comparing the mixing of high and low voices to water, he writes:

If you mixed equal quantities of boiling and iced water…not only would each have no effect, but both would be reduced. [Therefore] it is necessary that the forceful effect in stirring affections which one reads that the music of the ancients had arose solely from those properties that had the capacity of stirring those affections when nothing contrary was mixed in that might impede and weaken their operative force….And this could not be anything but a united and plain song directed at a single end through its natural and rightful means.

Taking this idea as far as possible, it was reasoned that for the chorus to have the affect on the listener so often described by the Greeks, they must have sung not only in unison, but also one note to a syllable, making the words stand out with maximum clarity; something unable to be achieved in the complexity of counterpoint.

Speculation on the sound of the music of tragedy came only through the literature about it, as there were no actual written samples of ancient music extant at the time. Since fragments of music have been recovered, mainly in the twentieth century, scholars can now write with some confidence that the music sung in Greek tragedy was indeed
syllabic, sung either as a solo or in unison, and most likely accompanied by an aulos, a kind of reed instrument (Burkholder, Grout & Palisca, 2010:18; Lang, 1941:11). The use of singing was regarded as heightening the overall emotional effect, and it is likely that the music was written by the tragedian himself. Lang (1941:12) for example, argues that Aeschylus created works based on profound inner experiences, and that to convey these moods to the public successfully he would have used the heightened expressiveness offered by music. As he writes (1941:12), for Aeschylus, ‘music and lyricism formed an indivisible entity, and word and tone, poem and melody were created simultaneously’. Furthermore, Aeschylus’ dramatic depiction of some of these states was apparently so profound that the singing of the Chorus in his Eumenides was said ‘to have such a terrifying effect that children in the audience were thrown into convulsions from fright’ (Grout, 1988:13).

The idea of singing adding to the emotive emphasis of the tragedy is also present in Aristotle’s definition of tragedy in his Poetics (49b), where he writes:

Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts...By ‘language made pleasurable’ I mean that which possesses rhythm and melody, i.e. song. By the separation of its species I mean that some parts are composed in verse alone; others by contrast make use of song.

Rhythm and melody were added to the words, but only to emphasise the drama of what was being said, which also according to Aristotle was of the most importance. It is indeed the plot and structure of events that gives the most effective results in tragedy, rather than characters that are simply very expressive (50a). It is also clear in Aristotle’s account that some of the speech is in verse alone, while other parts, most likely the
chorus, makes use of song. Grout (1988:12) argues that at least the chorus would have definitely sung actual melodies, rather than just rhythmic chants, yet both aspects may have been utilised for the main dialogue. Whatever the precise nature of the performance of the Greek Tragedy – and there is indeed still much to speculate on – the important fact was that music, that is singing, and drama were combined in a unique way which undoubtedly had a powerful effect upon those who witnessed it. And it was the recreation of this type of drama and its effect that the Camerata sought to achieve by ensuring the emphasis of vocal performance lay with the words – an emphasis that would nevertheless shift over time, as we shall see.

3.3 The Emergence of Opera

While a master of counterpoint like Palestrina achieved ornate beauty through the fusion of individually independent melodic lines into a higher unity where no one element was above another (Jeppeson, 1939:83), the Camerata believed that the real way to achieve the most moving music was to return to a single, sung melodic line, which would reflect, and indeed be directed by, only the natural inflections already inherent in the words themselves. This singular line was called ‘monody’, and its suitability as a form for dramatic expression is what led to the formation of Opera. Monody differed even from the singular melodies that had appeared before, both in the early plainchant of the Middle Ages, and the songs of the troubadours. Plainchant was totally impersonal; it was a sound used to lend depth and atmosphere to the religious text. The depersonalisation was emphasised further by the sustained length of many of the notes – the word ‘tenor’ actually derives from the Latin *tenere* meaning ‘to hold’ –
and the singers consciously tried to avoid expressing personal emotions (Mellers, 1987:36; Burkholder, Grout & Palisca, 2010:89,53). As Potter & Sorrell (2012:51) put it, ‘One might argue that the chant performed them rather than the other way round’ [original emphasis]. The dramatic monody differed from the troubadour songs too, because where the troubadours created the melody as a generally stylistically appropriate melodic ‘gestalt’ (Treitler, 1991:27), the very first composers of monody treated not lines or phrases, but each individual word as significant, to be sung ‘with correct and natural declamation, as they would be spoken’ (Grout, 1988:42). This form of singing was therefore something very new, and it was the Camerata’s belief that it could be used to recreate the powerful dramatic force the Greeks had achieved with their singing, which would be of revolutionary importance to modern music and thus important as defining Florence as the cultural centre of the world.

The first and most obvious place this new style could be used was in the courts, where it was slowly becoming customary to integrate various artistic forms into the entertainments provided for special occasions. Opera was indeed considered from the beginning as a secular form, albeit one with a much greater level of sophistication and integration than what was already happening. As I have mentioned above, the arts were not trivial in the Renaissance, and more and more effort was being put into the courtly entertainments, which began to combine elements of music, dance, costumes, theatre, and scenery and stage effects (Grout, 1988:25). The closest forerunner of what became opera was the ‘Intermedio’. Beginning in the late fifteenth century, a revival in theatre pieces occurred, and many new adaptations of classical models were written in Latin or
Italian, which inserted many obsequious innuendos into the text to please the court and the Patron who commissioned them. There was always plenty of music within the general festivities of the courts, but during these theatrical pieces the music was often separated from the rest of the work by placing it either as a prologue or between the acts of the play itself, as an ‘intermediate’ entertainment. However, the court musicians were of course extremely gifted, and soon these ‘intermedios’ became so elaborate that they began to overshadow the rest of the play. Grout (1988:32) gives a description of just how complex the music was becoming. On one particular occasion – the wedding of Duke Ferdinand de Medici – the music, which was composed simply to accompany a comedic play, involved over forty musicians and basically completely ‘stole the show’ from the play itself:

There were five- and six-part madrigals, double and triple choruses, and a final madrigal calling for seven different vocal ensembles in a total of thirty parts, each part sung by two voices…The orchestra included organs, lutes, lyres, harps, viols, trombones, cornetts [sic], and other instruments, used in different combinations for each number (Grout, 1988:32).

This music must have sounded both very complex and captivating. Indeed, such musical spectacles were becoming the most memorable part of the entertainment, and while all the singing was still composed in counterpoint, these ‘intermedios’ were an important step toward opera because they combined music, drama, set designs and stage effects, costumes, and dancing, all in a somewhat coherent way (Grout, 1988:34-35). Once the new singing style capable of actually conveying the dialogue of the play itself, as proposed by the Camerata, could be married to a dramatic setting in which it made sense, the final step would be complete and Opera would be born.
While there had been some tentative experimentation with the new style of monody, the first actual opera as such was performed in 1598 in the court of Jacopo Corsi, who was a sort of rival to the Camerata, and had held his own intellectual meetings with various musicians and poets. There was some crossover between the groups however, and it was the general discussions of both these groups and others with whom they corresponded in Rome and elsewhere that all set the backdrop for what became Opera. The first opera was called *Dafne* and was composed by Jacopo Peri, who was an active member of the intellectual discussions of both Corsi’s group and the Camerata. The opera has not survived however, and very little is known about it. The second attempt was *Euridice* and this time the story, with a Libretto33 by Rinnucini, was set by both Peri and Caccini, who was also a member of Bardi’s Camerata (Palisca, 1987:3). A performance that included parts from both composers’ settings of the text was given in Florence in 1600 as part of the festivities for a wedding (Grout, 1988:49). In this opera, the story opens with the same obsequious flattery to the nobility in attendance as was common at the time, and the myth of Orpheus is radically altered to give it a happy ending. Yet despite the common elements with much of the courtly entertainments extant at the time, the opera differed in several important ways, which might have contributed to it being rather less successful than they had hoped (Goodall, 2000:64). First, the music was much simpler compared to the polyphonic counterpoint of the madrigal. Not only was the accompaniment scaled down in both instrumentation and harmony compared to what people would have been used to, but the main feature, the singing, was so strict in

33 “Libretto” is simply Italian for ‘little book’ and originally referred to the copies of the text which were printed to give audience members something to help follow the story. It gradually came to refer to the text itself, and “librettist” was coined to refer to the author (Douglas, 1996:142n).
its keeping with the Cameratan principles of effective dramatic portrayal of the text that it probably had an odd effect rather than a powerfully emotive one. As Grout (1988:51) notes:

The operatic monody of Peri and Caccini [was] an absolutely faithful adherence to the natural rhythms, accents, and inflections of the text, following it in these respects even to the extent of placing a full cadence regularly at the end of every verse.

It is likely that this style of singing sounded somewhat unmusical to those in attendance, and when considered as a corollary to my next point, might have seemed almost a little too maudlin for such a celebration.

The second main reason this new attempt at opera might not have met with success is because of the choice of the myth of Orpheus as its subject. It is worth detailing how the myth appears in Ovid before looking at how it was dealt with by the librettists of the early operas. In Ovid’s classical telling, Eurydice, only very recently married to Orpheus, is bitten by a serpent on her ankle as she wanders through a field and she dies. After mourning her to the full in the upper world, Orpheus dares to descend to the underworld of the dead, to try to gain Eurydice back. Singing his plea accompanied by his lyre, he acknowledges this place as the final destination for all mortals, and begs that Eurydice has been taken too soon. He finally claims that he would rather stay there than go back without her. His song has been so movingly beautiful that all the bloodless ghosts were in tears, and even Sisyphus sat idle on his rock. The king and queen of the underworld cannot refuse him and they offer Eurydice back on the condition that he does not turn to look back at her until they have emerged from the underworld, or else
she will be permanently taken from him. Sadly, just before they emerge, Orpheus is anxious that Eurydice may not have the strength to make it through the difficult journey and looks back to see her. She immediately sinks back below. Devastated, Orpheus tries to stay in the underworld but is rejected. He goes to a clearing on a hill and as he begins singing in mourning a dense garden of trees grows round him in sympathy. He has now rejected all women and hearing of this, a group of crazed maenads attack him, drowning out his song with their Bacchic howling and tear him to pieces. His decapitated head and his lyre float downstream together, still murmuring music, to which the riverbanks lament in reply. He is finally returned to Eurydice in the land of the dead (Ovid, 1955:225-228,246-247).

There are some good reasons why this myth might have seemed a perfect choice for the birth of Opera. The first of which is that because the new style of opera involved singing to relate the entire story, a story which centred on a singer and had singing explicitly utilised within it at key plot points perhaps seemed already perfectly set up for this kind of treatment, as it would have justified the completely sung text. Further, the more philosophical reasoning following from the Camerata might have been that Orpheus was a singer who was able to move not only gods and mortals but also inanimate objects like trees and rocks with his singing, thus he was the perfect exemplar for the direct portrayal of emotions meant to move the listener sought by the new singing technique. However, despite the transformation of the ending in Renuccini’s libretto, the fact that Orpheus’ new bride dies soon after they marry was perhaps not the
wisest choice for wedding entertainment. As Hutcheon & Hutcheon (2004:101) point out:

> Even watching and listening to those versions of the story that insist upon the reunion of the lovers, audience members who know the basic elements of the Orpheus story know it as one of loss.

Orpheus loses Eurydice, and though the rewritten version returns Eurydice to Orpheus in the land of the living, the audience was probably only too aware that this was a fantasy. As Hutcheon & Hutcheon argue, it is not even clear in this early telling of the story whether it was the impassioned plea of love through song that overcame death, or whether Eurydice was released from the underworld because of a convincing argument (2004:104-105). Whatever the reason, be it the new music or the treatment of the story, the opera was not a real success. However, two of the guests attending the wedding were the Duke of Mantua, Gonzaga, and his Poet and Secretary, Striggio (Goodall, 2000:64). In the spirit of the healthy competition that was a general feature of the Renaissance (Clark, 1969:82) – and according to Nietzsche a feature of every healthy society34 – Gonzaga and Striggio decided they too might like to have an opera. They were however more fortunate than the Florentines because their court composer was one of the very great geniuses of the age: Monteverdi.

In Monteverdi’s hands the Opera was finally fully grown. Striggio wrote the libretto, again setting the story of Orpheus, but it was Monteverdi’s music which suddenly gave full realisation to the vision the Camerata had in the last decades of the sixteenth century. Premiering in 1607 in Gonzaga’s court in Mantua, Monteverdi’s Orfeo

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effortlessly combined the very best of both the old and new styles. Being a master of both sacred music and the madrigal, Monteverdi had a firm command of all contemporary styles and so when he dedicated himself to the task of composing in the *stile recitativo* (the ‘reciting style’) he was able to bring out its best, giving the accompaniment a refined grace and balance, while pushing the expressivity of the recitative to an almost aria-like beauty (Carter, 2004:14). Aria had not yet been invented. But Monteverdi was not as strictly bound to the philosophical principles of the Camerata, and while he saw the new style as an opportunity for music to directly represent a single human’s feeling (Goodall, 2000:69), he was much more concerned with maximising the potentialities of the art of music than he was with philosophical theories (Grout, 1988:58). He even allowed himself moments of beautiful melisma (many notes to a syllable) but these were purposefully placed within the ‘otherworldly’ singing of Orpheus’ plea to the underworld. In perhaps the most striking example of the mix of older musical styles and the new humanistic values, he places the most florid passage of music at the moment, in the centrepiece of the entire work, when Orpheus announces: ‘Orfeo son io’ (Orpheus I am), thus revealing and maximising to brilliant effect the emotional power of one single expressive human being (Mellers, 1987:44). This expression of the single human, as represented by the solo monody, was what made Opera at once so new, and so perfect a reflection of the humanistic values inherent in the Renaissance. As Donington (1981:41) writes:

> Opera could not arise except through monody, the single song, of individuals in personal conflict and development. The claims of personal individuality took over from those of collective authority more conspicuously in renaissance humanism
than at any other period since antiquity. We might almost put it that the predisposing cause of opera was humanism.

*Orfeo*, Monteverdi’s first opera, attempted to apply the full resources of what was available to him, and in its symmetry of form, and beautifully expressive music for the recitative, set the standard for all operas to follow. Concomitantly, it set the tastes of the listeners too: they wanted more music. And though it was to be still several decades before the aria reached its dominant place, Monteverdi revealed the expressive potential in the solo voice which indeed conveyed the emotion of the words being sung like no other form had before.

### 3.4 The Importance of Words

Yet Monteverdi, for all the expressivity of his music, was still heavily tied to the words, and thus recitative did not yet fully plumb the depths of personal expression as Aria later would. As Flemming (*cited in* Grout, 1988:215) states, ‘The recitative loads the gun, the aria fires it’. But perhaps this was due not only to the *word* being the most important element in singing at this point. The emphasis upon the word as the essential element in singing was also reflective of the way words were so important culturally during this time, and the music composed for the earliest operas can be seen as analogous with this importance. Cultural expression at this time was in fact deeply connected with words. It was the texts of classical Greece and Rome that had influenced the humanistic scholars, and some of the greatest architecture of the fifteenth century was of libraries to house these texts (Clark, 1969:78). Further, when looking at the ideal comportment required for a life in the courts, it was above all an ability to converse on
various topics that seemed the most impressive. Recall Alberti’s statements cited above, that painters should make themselves familiar with poets, rhetoricians, and other men of letters, that is, become learned in the use of *words*. The ability to use words well was a sign of a good person, and Castiglione’s widely-read handbook for graceful comportment at the time, *The Courtier*, is perhaps the best example of this. The book itself written in the form of a playful dialogue between people in leisured conversations, and contains innumerable instances where speaking well is considered essential to good grace, such as the following:

As well as this, attractive figures and modes of speech belonging to grave and serious discussions can nearly always be used in games and pleasantry as well. When words are set off against each other, with one sentence in antithesis to another, the result is extremely agreeable; and this way of speaking can be very witty (Castiglione, 1967:171).

Not only does this example show that the ability to use words well was highly regarded, the emphasis is on cleverness and wit, on intelligence and mild-mannered decorum, not on personal insight or subjective truth.\(^{35}\)

Another similar example of the importance of using words well in relation to character is of course found in Homer. In *The Iliad* in particular, the speeches are a way of revealing the character of the person giving them, and numbering no less than 666, the speeches that various people give make up around forty per cent of the entire poem (Jones, cited in Homer, 2003a:xxxi). Griffin (2004:156) argues that without the revelation of these characters through the many speeches given, Greek tragedy would

\(^{35}\) In a striking example of this, Bull, in his introduction to Castiglione’s *Courtier* notes that ‘when James Joyce first read *The Courtier* his brother told him he had become more polite but less sincere’ (cited in Castiglione, 1967:15).
never have become what it did. Through these speeches the characters reveal what type of people they are. Further, these speeches, within the world of the poem itself, are of great import for determining how characters in the text relate to one another. Perhaps the best example of this is from Book Three of the Iliad, where Priam, the Trojan King, is speculating with Helen about the character of some of the Greeks he can see. Antenor, another Trojan elder, recounts of how he once hosted Menelaus and Odysseus at his palace. The substantiation he uses when recalling ‘how intelligently they thought’ is based on how they spoke when at table:

When their turn came to express their views in public, Menelaus spoke fluently, not at great length but very clearly, being a man of few words who kept to the point, though he was the younger of the two. By contrast, whenever quick-thinking Odysseus sprang up to speak, he stood there and looked up from under eyes firmly fixed on the ground; he did not swing the speaker’s staff either backwards or forwards but held it stiffly, as though he had never handled one before. You would have taken him for some surly or simply stupid fellow. But when he liberated that great voice from his chest and poured out words like the snows of winter, there was no man alive who could compete with him [my italics] (Book 3, lines 210-220 approx.).

The most important aspect of this marvellous account is how it was through his use of words, his speaking, that Odysseus revealed himself to be the ‘god-like’ character he is often referred to as. Not his abilities as a warrior, nor his broad and muscular appearance, but his manner of speaking, is what impressed his status upon the Trojan Elders. Further, this account is indicative of what I have argued in Chapter One, namely that through the voice, though in my argument the singing voice, a transformation is enacted. The Renaissance looked to the Classical texts for their inspiration, and thus it is not surprising, with accounts such as this found in Homer, as well as those of Plato cited
above, that the word came to be so highly prized, and became the ideal to which music itself should only seek to enhance.

And so in music, the word, both written and spoken, was sought out with utmost care by scholars and lovers of music, to achieve its maximum expressive potential through singing. Therefore, the type of singing at this time was indubitably the singing of the words. The words were the most important, and this, I argue, reflected the culturally appropriate mode of expression at the time. As I will go on to show through the course of this chapter, the emphasis changed, next to the notes, that is, the music, as exemplified by the aria, and then to the tone as exemplified by the Bel Canto. These shifts of emphasis, from word to note to tone, reflected different ways of expressing for the singer. Words could only take the singer and the internal landscape of a character so far. With greater personal expression, the emphasis began to shift toward a style of singing that more powerfully reflected the personal feelings of the character, rather than simply moving the story along. But in the increased expressiveness of melodies, words had to be somewhat relegated in importance. However, the Opera had established itself as a way of allowing a single person to convey a story through singing, and audiences, composers, and singers all wanted to expand upon the drama offered by this medium, by bringing to it greater expressivity that could convey the personal experiences of the character, and vicariously, the singer and audience also. This led to an emphasis on notes, or melodies. However, the style of Bel Canto led to a set of traits that favoured the individual singer’s tone more than the notes and words. This historiography will lead me then to my argument that it is the Bel Canto which can be thought of not
historically, but as paradigmatic for highlighting the particular traits I see as present in
the way of being-in-the-world that is forged by singing.

3.5 The Movement From Recitative to Aria – From Words to Notes

With Monteverdi’s recitative, the potentialities of music’s expressive power were
increased, and the audiences wanted more (Grout, 1988:101). The moments of greatest
emotional impact in the dialogue now had a form with which they could be conveyed.
However, as Kerman (1988:28) notes, recitative was still too bound to the words. In
effect, the music became boring when it simply followed the words (Grout, 1988:56),
and perhaps this is also because the recitative style was used for everything. Before the
development of aria, the emphasis of the music was still upon carrying the story along,
and while it did lend emotional weight to those words, it could never really slow down
and sink into a certain mood for an entire piece. Recitative alone could not create
musical tension (Grout, 1988:215). But when the aria was introduced, recitative could
maintain its place of effectively moving the dialogue along, and then give way to the
aria for the moments in the story of greatest emotional significance. Audiences of
course loved these more melodic pieces, with simple harmony and strong, emotive
melodies. Thus over the next century, Opera essentially became ‘aria opera’, that is, it
consisted of a series of arias separated by recitative (Grout, 1988:208).
This then introduced a shift of emphasis in Opera\textsuperscript{36} from the \textit{words} to the \textit{notes}. Where once it had been the words of the singer which would hold the most emotional weight, now it was the notes. Music itself was now able to ‘tell the story’. The meaning of a scene, or a character’s emotion actually resided in the notes themselves, rather than merely in the words. Where in the earlier operas ‘hardly anyone gave a thought to melody, but everything was centered on harmony’ (Mattheson, \textit{cited in} Grout, 1988:210), now harmony was used simply to back up the melody, which during the eighteenth century became highly stylised and developed. But the important point here is that meaning and emotional emphasis now resided in music – in the \textit{notes} – and not in the words. Using Gluck’s own telling of the Orpheus myth, \textit{Orfeo ed Eurydice}, which premiered in Vienna in 1762, over one hundred and fifty years after Monteverdi’s, Kerman (1988:30) relates the difference between the two operas, highlighting the development of music as the quintessential method of relating the meaning of the narrative, and putting form to inner feelings.

Orpheus asks to be left alone...then at once he begins his first aria. [The] elegy is sung by Orpheus in this opera, not by the chorus as in Monteverdi’s. Orpheus is equal to it; his previous inarticulate wailing is transformed to a tranquility beyond anything Monteverdi could achieve. Through his two utterances, Orpheus is shown to pull himself together, to a point where grief is viewed and understood. [He] transcends his sorrow by controlling it into song. This art of control was what had been learned: the art of the aria, after recitative the second of the two fundamental elements of operatic dramaturgy. Composers now could take a momentary sentiment and project it as a realized emotion rather than as a momentary flash of passion in the manner of Monteverdi. Ideally the lyric aria comprehends a full, considered experience, and fixes it by means of a musical form. [Therefore] the

\textsuperscript{36} Notes had been of far more importance than words in earlier forms of music, but not for Opera, which is what my argument is centred on.
aria or some lyric substitute for the aria has become the prime power of musical drama.

In other words, the drama is in the aria, the melody. Orpheus’ expression is now not a reaction to what is happening externally, and a relation of actions he will take, but more a representation of how he is feeling internally. The aria allows this feeling to manifest itself through the form of the song, thus we understand what is happening through the melodic realisation of Orpheus’ feeling, rather than through the words describing what is happening. While in terms of recitative, Gluck, according to Kerman, ‘pales beside Monteverdi’ (1988:32), in aria Gluck developed an economy of style and a facility which allowed the notes to be of most importance. Still without ornament, yet not directed solely by the words (Grout, 1988:267). Gluck is perhaps a unique example because he attempted to restore opera as a high-minded art form, as drama, and not let it be carried away by the singers in great virtuosic displays (Lindenberger, 1998:12). In this respect he was similar in his aspirations to the founders of Opera, albeit with the eighteenth century sensibility of prioritising music over words.

Where words had been the effective locus of meaning in singing, over time it became the notes, and as this tendency became more developed in the Romantic period, it is not unrelated that some of the philosophical writings of the time reflected this turn also. A notable example of this is the writings of Schopenhauer. In his most influential text, The World as Will and Representation, Schopenhauer writes quite a lot about music, seeing it as an expression of ‘the innermost nature of all life and existence’ (Schopenhauer, Vol. II 1958:406). In his philosophy, he divides the world into Will, which is the irrational,
endless flux of life underlying everything, and Representation, which is the objectified world we actually encounter. The Arts are ways of revealing the Will in the Representation, but according to Schopenhauer, no art form does this so completely as music. Music moves us on a deep level, the level of feelings and passions – and Schopenhauer is referring to melody, that is, notes – because it reveals the will itself. As he states:

Because music does not, like all the other arts, exhibit the Ideas or grades of the will’s objectification, but directly the will itself, we can also explain that it acts directly on the will, i.e., the feelings, passions, and emotions of the hearer, so that it quickly raises these and even alters them [original italics] (Vol. II 1958:448).

What this implies is that melody, revealing the latent ‘metaphysical to everything physical’ (Vol. I 1958:262), gives a deeper level of meaning to everything, whether it be words or scenes accompanying the music, or our own personal emotions and experiences. On both these points, Schopenhauer states:

When music suitable to any scene action, event, or environment is played, it seems to disclose to us its most secret meaning, and appears to be the most accurate and distinct commentary on it. Moreover, to the man who gives himself up entirely to the impression of a symphony, it is as if he saw all the possible events of life passing within himself (Vol. I 1958:262).

In this sense, music is a universal language which has its own level of significance and meaning, which words by themselves cannot offer. It is for this reason that Schopenhauer suggests the opposite of what was developed by the Camerata, writing that ‘it might perhaps appear more suitable for the text to be written for the music than for the music to be composed for the text’ (Vol. II 1958:449). He goes on to show that the union of words and music may work in harmony on two levels simultaneously. Music expresses the stirrings of feelings, the will, that is, the deeply embodied
connection with life, while the words appease the intellectual faculties, and provide reasons for the feelings that are stirring. Thus in Opera, he goes on to say, words, characters, and events all hold together as a material, coherent whole, but music ‘becomes the expression of the inner significance [of these events] and of their ultimate and secret necessity that rests on this significance’ (Vol. II 1958:449).

Through the philosophy of Schopenhauer, it can be seen that by this time, in the nineteenth century, a new dimension of meaning had opened up by the change of emphasis from words to the music itself, the notes. Where in the Renaissance, the emphasis on words had brought forth a new expressive depth in singing which related individual emotions in a unique and powerful way, now the emphasis on notes, over and above the words, offered a new level of meaning. A final statement of Schopenhauer’s explicitly states the newly relegated position of the words:

The words are and remain for the music a foreign extra of secondary value, as the effect of the tones is incomparably more powerful, more infallible, and more rapid than that of the words. If these are incorporated in the music, therefore, they must of course occupy only an entirely subordinate position (Vol. II 1958:448).

Schopenhauer was not an isolated case in this new way of thinking. Composers and audiences sought more emotional expression in music, and thus a new style of singing was required to expurgate these. A good example from the literature of the time that highlights the way pure melody affects the emotions is to be found in Goethe’s The Sorrows of Young Werther, which is one of the quintessential examples of ‘Romantic’ mood. Werther, in one of the many letters constituting the book, writes:
She plays a melody on her clavichord with the touch of angel, so simple, so ethereal! It is her favorite tune, and I am cured of all pain, confusion, and melancholy the moment she strikes the first note (Goethe, 1990:47).

I think it is safe to say that this says more about the passions of Werther than any remarkability of the actual melody, and is thus characteristic of the emotional landscape of this era. Moreover, he continues in a passage which echoes the words taken up by the Camerata of Valgulio (cited above) to argue that ‘the essence of music is the movement of the soul, which drives evils from the soul invaded by confusion’ ([cited in] Palisca, 1989:32). Where the Camerata used it to press the importance of words, in Goethe now it is the melody, the notes, which achieve the same end:

Not one word about the magic power of music in antiquity seems to me improbable when I am under the spell of her simple melody. And how well she knows when to play it, at the moment when I feel like blowing out my brains. The confusion and darkness of my soul are then dispersed, and I can breathe more freely again (Goethe, 1990:47).

Now it is the melody, rather than words, which ‘move the soul’ in music; the meaning lies in the heart’s comprehension of the melody, rather than the mind’s comprehension of the words.

Where in the Renaissance there was a healthy dialogue between the arts and between the Patron and his artist, over time, a more cynical stance developed toward society, and especially toward high society, which might be conceived of as a cultivated or ‘intelligent misanthropy’ (De Botton, 2005:125ff). Artists and other individuals were now willing to go against ideals upheld by society in favour of their own, personally

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37 This is in contrast to the Formalism of Eduard Hanslick, who also argued for the priority of music over words during this same period. Cf Hanslick The Beautiful in Music (1957).
developed ideals. Chamfort, writing his observations around the same time these changes in the emphasis of singing took place, is indicative of this new cultivated misanthropy. His opinion of courtiers, for example, is a long way from the Renaissance sensibility cited above of seeing it as any sort of ideal: ‘Courtiers are poor men who’ve got rich by begging’ (Chamfort, 2003:50). This shift in cultural awareness was reflected in the different emphases given to aspects of singing. Rather than being ‘pleasing to princes’ one should mistrust the prevailing attitudes of society and think for one’s self. As Chamfort states, ‘In society there are very few things which any decent man can feel comfortable with, in his heart or his mind’ (2003:51). The greater freedom offered by the new importance placed upon both the internal emotions of the individual and, concomitant with this, the melody over the word, is what helped move recitative into aria, and it was from this development, and in this context that the singer was able to have a real sense of cultivating their own individual voice.

One of the most significant effects of the development of aria in the eighteenth century, was the foremost prominence given to the singers. With the rising dominance of the aria, the singers who sang these arias also gained prominence, and it was during this time that the technique of singing developed to a level that has never since been equaled (Grout, 1988:224). There was a fascinating interplay at this time between the singers and the composers. Although even in Monteverdi’s time, specific singers of his court would have been in his mind when composing his music (Carter, 2004:13), the emphasis still lay with the composer. The singer’s talent might suggest certain effects or vocal ranges as melodic potentialities, however many of the details were worked out by
the composer. This is evident in the score of Monteverdi’s *Orfeo*, where every facet of the drama is expressed through the written music, and all the detail is worked out and written down by Monteverdi himself (Goodall, 2000:73). Yet by the mid- to late-eighteenth century, the performance of an aria was much more of a balance between what the composer wrote down, and what the singer him or herself added to it. The composer essentially just wrote the ‘basic idea’ of the melody, while the singer embellished it with their own personal flourishes. This singer could add to the music composed in two basic ways: in ornamentation of the melodic line – known as coloratura – and in the fully improvised passages of the cadenzas – a free-form virtuosic interlude showcasing the singer’s expertise (Grout, 1988:224). Ideally, these would be in concord with the composer’s intent, however because of the great love audiences had for the aria, much excess was tolerated and the improvisational aspects often drastically changed what was written. Yet slightly preceding this fall into excess was a harmony between the notes the composer wrote as the melody and the added notes the singer sang in its delivery. There was a sense that the singer was something more than just another instrument there to play the music. The singer was the performer who gave living identity to the composer’s work. As Lee (*cited in* Grout, 1988:221) puts it, the composer wrote merely the outline.

The composer gave the unchangeable, the big notes, constituting the essential immutable form, expressing the stable, unvarying character; the singer added the small notes, which filled up and perfected the part of the form which depended on the physical material, which expressed the minutely subtle, ever-changing mood. In short, while the composer represented the typical, the singer represented the individual.

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38 This is not to say that it is at all clear to the modern reader precisely what is required in a performance of this work (Goodall, 2004:73).
This was indeed definitely a new perspective than the one inherent in the Renaissance. Coming now into the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the notion of the individual had changed significantly. The individual here could lend something personal to what he or she has been given. Where words once directed the notes, now notes could direct the words. Although in this new development of singing the words have become secondary to the notes, the best singers always articulate clearly, and always have something to say. Douglas (1996:134) recounts a maxim of a famous tenor who stated that ‘the singer who does not articulate clearly shows that he distrusts himself’. The singer puts him or herself into the music by adding the small notes to the big ones already there; by conveying the words in their own interpretation; by singing their own way. But furthermore, they articulate their words clearly, unafraid of the full expression extending to the listener. They believe in what they are singing, and this in turn helps the listener to believe. One instructional book insists that only the very best singers do not neglect the subtle enunciation of all the minute sounds that constitute the words (Shakespeare, 1938:49), however this was more focused upon the articulation of consonants. When tone became the primary factor of singing, as it became in the era of Bel Canto, the vowels took precedence. As Shakespeare (1938:46) states ‘the terms tone and prolongation of the vowels become therefore practically synonymous, for the purer your vowel the richer is the tone’. When tone took precedence over words and notes, particular traits could then be thought about as to what constitutes a good tone.

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39 This is reflected in the development of ‘innerliness’ that was a major feature of Romanticism. Cf. Charles Taylor (1989) *The Sources of the Self*.

40 Not the Bard.
The study of Bel Canto offers that tone is beautiful if it consists of Joy, Athleticism, and Chiaroscuro. It is here, finally, that these traits emerge, and this is significant for my thesis because these are the traits that I argue are structurally present in my existential analysis of the way of being of the singer.

3.6 From Notes to Tone – Bel Canto

Despite wide ranging definitions, and discrepancies of its origin, some qualities stand out which make Bel Canto a fascinating concept that relates body, voice, and emotion in a unique and complex way. More recently, Bel Canto has become somewhat sanctified as a barely attainable ideal in singing because it is seen as the perfection of a clear, sonorous, and sweet high tone which appeals for itself and not for the sake of the music being sung.\(^\text{41}\) Furthermore, there is a general widespread tendency to believe that since its ‘golden age’, when the Bel Canto style was (literally) flourishing, there has been a steady decline in vocal technique (Duey, 1980:6-7; Manen, 1987:21). Kay (1963:16) describes Bel Canto singing as a kind of free play of tones which inherently express emotion and to which words are merely ‘incidentally attached’. There is also an ease of delivery present in Bel Canto, and this pertains to a virtuosity of expression by which a full command of all the timbral subtleties of the voice is exercised without any unnatural strain or force (Stark, 1999:225; Gescheidt, 1930:49).

\(^{41}\) This description is very similar to that given by Homer to the Sirens’ voices in *The Odyssey*. The Sirens’ captivating voices lure sailors to their doom with their ‘honey-sweet tones’, and ‘high, clear songs’ (Bk. XII:180ff).
These aspects form part of the complexity of Bel Canto as a style of singing. The free play of tones that is a feature of Bel Canto is present in the voice to the extent that phonation is unstrained and not forced; it is a natural result of a voice that is used naturally. As Kay (1963:16) notes, it is usually a lack of emotional vitality which gives rise to a strained technique, resulting in an unnatural sound, and culminating in vocal deterioration. Husler & Rodd-Marling (1965:8) similarly declare that ‘it is safe to say that if the emotional impulse is entirely lacking, the tonal quality that belongs specifically to singing can never be produced’. When the voice is allowed a natural, unrestricted vibration through the correct utility of the vocal tract without effort, the result is, according to Gescheidt (1930:67), a ‘revelation in the artistry of singing’. Gescheidt’s book is called Make Singing a Joy and for her the way this is done is through development of one’s faculties to the extent that they are working harmoniously without effort. When the singer is attuned to his or her body in such a way, the revelation arrives through the joyous experience it creates. There is a close link here between natural sound production, easeful expression, and joyful disposition. Joy is one of the three traits of Bel Canto, the other two being Athleticism and Chiaroscuro. The interrelatedness of these concepts is fundamental to my discussion of the Body-Bel Canto, but before I develop my discussion of the body, I will first discuss these concepts in the context of the Bel Canto style.

In her discussion of the way Bel Canto utilises the body and emotion in a more direct way, Kay (1963:81) describes the singing voice in its optimal mode of expression as producing ‘a simple, almost naïve and childlike effect which is immensely evocative
and moving to the listener’. The allusion to ‘childlike’ qualities in the singing voice can be thought of as an example of the powerful effect of spontaneity in emotional response by the singer. This is what Kay believes separates the artist of Bel Canto and the modern singer, the former being an artist who spontaneously releases a vitality through a natural ease of expression, whilst the latter is reliant upon elaborate effects and contrived techniques which compensate for true spontaneity (Kay, 1963:80). Paradoxically, the ability to be spontaneously graceful and at ease in vocal production is normally the result of many years of training, which is why, some philosophers and poets have seen this type of ‘child-like’ capacity as the highest stage of expression. But the point Kay is making is much more interesting for my argument. She states that the artist of Bel Canto becomes more attuned to their body rather than the sound they are producing; the attention is directed inward, to their own body, rather than externally derived from the reflexive analysis of the sounds which fly around them. The resulting tone is not an imitative or contrived attempt to regulate the tone but rather a direct personal manifestation of an emotional and physical disposition. For Kay, ‘the true artist neither imagines his tone in advance nor consciously listens to it when it comes’ (1963:80); the singer’s body is what gives rise to the song rather than thinking about how he or she

42 Spontaneity is often likened to child-like qualities, such as when Nietzsche (2005a:23-24) speaks of the three transformations, which highlights how spontaneity is most rewarding after the hard work of learning and overcoming. Having transformed from a Camel, which was necessary for bearing a great load in learning, into the Lion, which was necessary for the destruction of all ‘Thou-Shalt’s’, each would-be creator must then become as an innocent child, for this is a ‘forgetting, a beginning anew, a play, a self-propelling wheel, a first movement, a sacred Yea-saying’. The child creates its own world; rolling out of its own centre, unmediated by external forces and not alienated from itself. In the book of Matthew 18:3, we can see that child-like spontaneity is not only a form of wisdom, but is also an act of the highest virtue, where it is written that ‘unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’. Wordsworth (1994:139), following Plato, wrote that ‘child is the father of the man’, and Emerson also (2000:6) writes, ‘the lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to one another; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood’.

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might be sounding. This requires sensitivity to what she calls ‘Kin-aesthetic sensation’: an awareness of how the body feels when it produces the right sound. Initially the singer will need to focus upon the sound he or she is producing, but eventually this will be replaced by concentrating upon the feel of the body only. As she puts it:

The hearing sense becomes secondary and incidental, and the Kin-aesthetic sense, direct and primary. The singer continues to hear his own voice, but he does not listen to it, his conscious attention being directed to how his voice feels Kin-aesthetically… The problem is to induce the student to experience, identify and repeat the effective physical feelings when he sings (Kay, 1963:32-33).

While Kin-aesthetic sensitivity can allow the singer a direct and primary relationship between the body and the singing, my argument goes one step further to say that in arousing or preparing the body in this way the singer is actually realising a way of being. In this case, the ‘problem’ is not only to induce the singer to experience, identify, and repeat effective physical feelings, but to experience and identify his or her way of being-in-the-world during that moment so that the specific traits that way of being entails may be brought forth and made tangible to the singer him or herself. Bel Canto is in this way predicated on the Body-Bel Canto, and it is in the dialectic of Singing and Singer that these traits may emerge more fully and lead to spontaneous realisation of the traits through taking up the song. In this way, the singer will then know how the voice is sounding not only by reflective listening to the notes, nor simply by experiencing physical feelings, but by being aware of being-in-the-world as a Singer, as what I call the Body-Bel Canto.

Spontaneity is manifest when the body itself is awakened in this way through the music, and the singer responds to it pre-reflexively. This is the quality which requires the singer
to be acutely aware of his or her body, and the more attuned the singer is, the more ‘beautiful’ the singing may be. As Husler & Rodd-Marling (1965:3-4) put it:

We must get used to the idea, that the normally unmelodious, ugly or insignificant voice is simply the accurate reflection in sound of the devitalized, distorted or unawakened condition of the organ emitting it… The great singer has free access to his organ, and that is all; it is awake, it is ‘unlocked’, and this alone is enough to make his voice such that we consider it beautiful.

The Body-Bel Canto, or ‘singing body’ is a physiological manifestation of artistic expression, and Bel Canto, is a musical manifestation of a physiological disposition. It is for this reason that many proponents of the early Bel Canto style saw the term meaning not only ‘beautiful singing’, but also ‘beautiful singer’ (Kay, 1963:18). In short, Bel Canto, or ‘beautiful singing’ is predicated upon the Body-Bel Canto; beauty here being the ability to express in one’s fullest, ‘unlocked’ capacity. Free access to all our particular potential ways of expressing in any activity is no doubt likely to produce a feeling of surety, equanimity, and perhaps even Joy. Yet the physicality of singing means that this awakened feeling is a kind of Athleticism in which no facet of one’s expressive capability is unavailable; all range of tonal and timbral variation are accessible. In the Bel Canto operas, the highlight for the singer was to demonstrate their vocal athleticism to its full extent.

When operatic aria was developed it of course became a highlight for the singers. In its early form it had a *da capo* or A-B-A structure, where the repeated section (A) allowed for a personal elaboration of the melody by the singer. This often resulted in highly flamboyant displays of skill and dexterity – sometimes outrageously at odds with the rest of the composition (Reid, 1950:8). Because of these stylistic developments,
premium was placed upon the singer’s ability to give a wide-ranging, virtuosic interpretation extemporaneously, and thus the singers of the Bel Canto age became highly skilled in personal expression, always with the impression that it was accomplished with ease. Writing of a singer in the seventeenth century, Bontempi (cited in Reid, 1950:10-11) gives a first hand impression of just how accomplished the Bel Canto singers were:

One who has not heard this sublime singer can form no idea of the limpidity of his voice, of his agility, of his marvelous facility in the most difficult passages, of the justness of his intonation, the brilliancy of his trill, of his inexhaustible respiration. One often heard him perform rapid and difficult passages with every shade of crescendo and diminuendo. Then, when it seemed as if he ought to be tired, he would launch on his interminable trill and mount and descend on it all the degrees of the chromatic scale through a range of two octaves with unerring justice. And all this was but play for him.

The two most important aspects of this extraordinary account are the conveyance of the sheer abundance of energy required for such singing, and the description of it all as ‘but play’. Here we see two of the main traits of Bel Canto on display. There is playfulness, or Joy, present in the way different techniques are effortlessly moved through and ‘played with’, and there is athleticism in the agility of his voice and the ease with which he can maintain a ‘justness of intonation’ and an overall control to the wild flamboyant display. Yet it is not the control of measured steps and calculated risk. There is a sense of free abandon that nevertheless is not chaotic. Joy and Athleticism in this way are a realisation of a deeply personal expression through a technique that has been mastered to such an extent it allows for total freedom of delivery which nevertheless makes sense and releases in the appropriate way. Unlike Nietzsche’s (2005a:36) ‘spirit of heaviness’, which he suggests is the solemn seriousness that takes us out of our spontaneous
engagement and diminishes our capacity to engage with life, Bel Canto is light, and has almost an effortlessness to it that belies the complexity of its execution. This lightness is a form of Athleticism, and it is an integral feature of Bel Canto. As the citations of Husler & Rodd-Marling, and Kay mentioned above indicate, spontaneity in singing is present when the singer is primarily related to the music through the body, unmediated by a reflective listening. Rather, the response is pre-reflexive, that is, based upon the body’s disposition, and this is what fosters an ability to move freely through many timbral and emotional subtleties with ease. As Manen (1987:20) notes:

The more accomplished the artistic performance is on the stage, the simpler the achievement appears to the public. Voice-production...as it was taught in the schools of Italy, requires...the entire physical and psychic participation of the artist. The inner disposition of the Bel Canto singer is reflected in posture, gestures, breathing, and heartbeat.

The Bel Canto artist must be aligned and attuned to his or her body in a way scarcely achieved in any other activities – even other forms of singing – and it is through this heightened Kin-aesthetic awareness that spontaneity in posture, gestures, breathing, heartbeat and all the concomitant facets of tone production may be achieved and, concomitantly, the Body-Bel Canto.

Another facet of the complexity of Bel Canto is in the idea of Chiaroscuro. Chiaroscuro means ‘bright/dark’, and has developed since the eighteenth century as an ideal vocal quality which should be present in every trained singer. Stark (1999:33-34) argues that the presence of chiaroscuro is what separates classically trained singers from more informal styles. It refers to a tone which is at once bright and distinctively clear, yet has also a deeper ‘darker’ quality which betrays a vast harmonic richness and resonance.
The ability to flexibly manipulate the voice to resonate all its potential subtleties of timbre is indeed an acquired talent doubtless requiring training and technical expertise. However, to believe that this quality is available only to trained singers in the classical sense is to deny something fundamental to the act of singing, and that is: by changing one’s body in order to sing, a transformation of one’s being is enacted. If the resulting expression allows for realisation of all the subtleties of experience, emotion, feeling, memories, in short, the singer’s being, then it surely will have a rich complexity to it that I argue exemplifies chiaroscuro. There is often something captivating in a voice that has nothing to do with words or notes. It might not even be a joyful tone or display athleticism. And yet it still moves us with a depth and complexity that is compelling and undefined. This is chiaroscuro. Of course, if a singer is robotically emitting sounds in a correct sequence then he or she may not have the quality of chiaroscuro. But any singer has an ability, simply through the sheer physicality of the process of phonation, to reveal more than the notes themselves. The singing voice is not limited in its conceptualisations by ordinary meanings of words, and in this way, the tone of the voice says more than the words or even the melody can. Singing, a person may become a living embodiment of pain, despair, joy, melancholia, or piety, through the way the being of the singer is manifest through the song. Not everyone may be able to stay on pitch or sing the right notes in sequence, but all become in some sense ‘singers’ when the tone of the voice is beautiful – revealing subtlety and ‘chiaroscuric’ resonance. Bel Canto offers not only chiaroscuro, but also joy and athleticism, and in my concept of the Body-Bel Canto, all these are present.
The relationship of the emotion expressed to the melody is often rather arbitrary. A song of mourning may appear to be melodically haunting, yet may sound tepid and flat, and a song with humble melodies may be heartfelt and rich. The singer brings forth the emotion in singing a song to the extent that he or she effectively portrays what Stark (1999:188) calls the ‘word-note-tone relationship’ [original emphasis]. When singing a song or an aria, the emotional quality of the piece may only be communicated so far with words and melody alone. Of course, melody and instrumental music can of itself be incredibly emotive and communicative, yet this is a different form of communication than that which involves words, and it is not my task to discuss this complex issue. However, as soon as there are words, a different understanding is invoked, and the communication may actually be ‘reduced’ to a limited conceptual logic, which though indispensable for communication generally, is in fact secondary in singing. In other words, the singer cannot necessarily rely upon words alone to communicate. Nor may the singer even rely upon merely the melody to express the full extent of the song. Rather, I argue that it is through his or her tone that a fuller meaning, the poetic sense, of a piece may be expressed. And when this is in concord with the composition, we will see an effective use of the ‘word-note-tone relationship’ and the meaning of the song may be clear. Furthermore, when a singer sings with a tone that is both bright and dark, the result will invariably be an emotive piece. This pertains to any cultural

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43 An excellent contemporary example of an effective word-note-tone relationship may be found mid-way through a Swedish film about a community choir called ‘As it is in Heaven’. During the choir’s first formal concert a woman performs a solo with incredible passion and seems to transform the words and melody – both poignant, though not outstanding – into a personal expression that is quite moving. What is truly remarkable about the film however, is that the final ‘performance’ is undeniably the most moving ‘song’ of all, as we learn that words, and even melody, are completely subordinate to the real beauty already naturally inherent in the pure tone of spontaneously unleashed singing voices.
context, as there is always something so penetratingly vivid and yet deeply mysterious in any ‘beautiful singing’; singing which is unfettered from the conceptual sense of words and melody and rolls out of the singer as a direct emotional and physiological aesthetic act.

My discussion thus far is obviously a much more liberal usage of Bel Canto than applying it strictly to classical singing of a given era or requisite formality. It could even be said that any singing that has the quality of chiaroscuro – a brightness or vivid clarity supported by a deeper harmonic and timbral complexity – as well as an athletic quality, and the spontaneity of an awakened and attuned body is Bel Canto – it would certainly evince a Body-Bel Canto. All singing requires a transformation of the body, and the Body-Bel Canto is simply the highest ideal. Bel Canto is idealistic because it is a way of singing which emerges most directly from a physiological disposition; it goes beyond any stylistic attribute or trained technique. Stark’s comments on the ‘true artist’ reflect the priority of one’s pre-reflexive awareness for ‘beautiful singing’:

The true artist ultimately relies on his or her musical instincts and intuition in order to be expressive, and this results in a thousand nuances and imponderable elements of singing that elude our meager analytical templates and transcend our intellectual arguments. Despite the best vocal training and the best understanding of musical styles, truly expressive singing is ultimately a matter of the heart, and in this lies its mystery and its beauty (1999:188).

Thus in Stark’s terms, the mystery and artistic beauty of any singing is ‘ultimately a matter of the heart’. Perhaps this ‘mystery’ can be understood by utilising the concept of the Body-Bel Canto. When a person transforms their body to sing, they are cultivating a new way of being. In the dialectic of the singing and being, both are more explicitly
developed and awakened. When a singer, any singer, is releasing their expression as a Body-Bel Canto what we experience will be a fully ‘unlocked’ voice that has lightness, athleticism, an ease of expression, and a depth to it. These musical traits are existential traits that also; they structure the way of being-in-the-world, and the singer revealing them will seem like they are indeed expressing from the heart, and offer something uplifting and rich in their expression, even if only to themselves.

3.7 Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter is to place the traits I am associating with the Body-Bel Canto in a historical context by outlining how the musical traits of Bel Canto singing came to be favoured and appreciated over other aspects of singing. Bel Canto is widely regarded as the ‘golden age’ of singing and it has traits which I argue are present in the particular way of being-in-the-world that singing opens up. I began this historiography by looking at the birth of Opera because this is where the expressive voice of one particular singer was first academically sought and championed. The musical culture before Opera saw a growing complexity in the way vocal music was written and when the Florentine Camerata attempted to get back into music the power they understood Greek Tragedy as having to move its listeners, they decided that in order to make their own music more powerful, one voice should deliver the message of the song. Over time emphasis changed as to what compelled people the most in music, and using the word-note-tone relationship to highlight this change of emphasis allowed my reading to focus on how Bel Canto offered a way of understanding singing whereby not the words, nor the beauty of the melody, but the tone of the voice, was most important. The traits of
Bel Canto singing emerge historically out of a specific time and cultural background, and highlighting this is important to a deeper understanding of why Bel Canto is considered ‘beautiful’. In the course of this thesis, I am arguing that firstly, when we sing there is a different use of the body to when we are speaking. This change ushers in a new way being-in-the-world which offers a new horizon of possibilities. If this is recognised, seized upon and cultivated it, can be something worthy of committing to, to establish a particular identity as a singer. I call this identity a Descanter of Revelations. Giving an identity a name makes it more tangible, and this name also reflects the process of what is happening, making it a shorthand for articulating the guiding principles this identity has within it. Whether becoming a Descanter or not, a singer, by changing the body, concomitantly changes his or her being-in-the-world. Just as Bel Canto has its own particular traits, the concept of the Body-Bel Canto is used to provide a way of understanding the ‘singing body’, and what is happening existentially in the singer him or herself. This is made possible by reading the traits of Bel Canto singing as existential structures of that particular way of being, rather than simply musical traits. To my mind there is only one figure in all of literature that best exemplifies these specific ‘musico-existential' traits in their writing. That is the poet Walt Whitman. When Whitman heard Bel Canto he became a poet. It was, I argue, his encounter with these musical traits that awakened in him a new way of being-in-the-world that held these characteristics. Therefore his life and his work provide an important reference for my argument for how Joy, Athleticism, and Chiaroscuro look when they inform one’s way of being-in-the-world.
Chapter Four

Whitman: The Body-Bel Canto

Perhaps the greatest literary example of the traits of Bel Canto is the poetry of Walt Whitman. Whitman’s poetry provides, in my reading, the literary link between the musical traits of the operatic singing style and the existential characteristics prevalent in being a singer. Whitman’s poetry describes what it is like to be a singer. Whitman was deeply indebted to Opera of the Bel Canto style for much of his poetic inspiration, and I will draw from this fact to argue firstly that the great transformation that took place within him in the early 1850s, when he went from being a hackneyed, average journalist to composing what is considered by many scholars as the first great American poem, is directly related to his experience with the Opera and, more particularly, Bel Canto singing. Further than this however, I will take Whitman at his own estimation of himself as a ‘singer of songs’ (Whitman, 1999:232) rather than simply as a writer of poems, and argue that his poems emerge directly from his being a singer. Whitman, who often referred to his poems as ‘songs’, characterised his activity variously as ‘trilling’, ‘singing’, ‘carolling’, and ‘warbling’, and not merely as writing (Matthiessen, 1941:559). His songs are deeply imbued with a ‘Bel Canto feeling’ (Reynolds, 2005:56), and his poetry indeed provides many rich descriptions of the existential characteristics I conceptualise as inherent in the Body-Bel Canto. The purpose here will not necessarily be to focus upon showing how his poetic techniques relate to or are indicative of the operatic style of Bel Canto. Nor am I as interested in descriptions of Opera or singing within his poems, though recounting some of these is perhaps
inevitable. Rather, his poems will be referenced as presenting a ‘world’ and defining a way of being that I believe is indicative of the Body-Bel Canto. I will do this by looking firstly at how Whitman became a poet; arguing that his becoming a poet was a profoundly radical transformation which was self-authored. To do this I will draw upon Nietzsche’s distinction between the Apollonian and Dionysian. Whitman’s transformation has some very fascinating parallels in this aspect of Nietzsche’s philosophy. I will then look in depth at what I believe are the most significant constitutive experiences of Whitman’s poetic sensibility and argue that of the few revelatory experiences in his life, his encounter with Bel Canto was in fact the most significant. I will then look at how the traits associated with this style are given expression in his poetry. The important task will be to demonstrate how these qualities are substantiated through Whitman’s poetry, in order to demonstrate that these are the qualities that constitute one’s being-in-the-world when one becomes a singer, a Body-Bel Canto.

While Whitman’s love of Opera, and indeed his indebtedness to it for his inspiration, has been well documented, I feel there is still much to be made of how his love of Opera has forged his particular style of poetry. Whitman stated to a friend near the end of his life: ‘But for the opera I could never have written *Leaves of Grass*’ (*cited in* Allen, 1955:114). The Opera Whitman encountered was Bel Canto, and it is my argument that how this influenced his work was more than just as an inspiration toward a ‘cantabile’ or ‘aria-like’ flowing style (Reynolds, 2005:56). Bel Canto awakened in Whitman his own *Body-Bel Canto*, and out of this way of being he composed his songs. My task will
therefore consist in firstly demonstrating how Whitman’s transformation from amateur journalist to awakened poet was predicated upon not Opera in general, but a specific aspect of Opera, namely Bel Canto singing. I will then look at the three main traits of Bel Canto singing, that of Joy (playfulness, richness), Athleticism (abundant energy, ease of expression), and Chiaroscuro (a bright/dark character to the tone) and then show how these are present in Whitman’s poetry not as musical traits but as existential, lived traits, descriptions of a way of being-in-the-world. I am taking as my starting point for this argument Whitman’s own estimation of himself as a singer of songs, Whitman as the Body-Bel Canto.

### 4.1 Whitman’s Radical Transformation

Walt Whitman, the poet we now know and whom I consider to be the Body-Bel Canto, was a self-created man. How Walter Whitman Jr., born into a poor rural family on Long Island, and completing his formal education by the age of eleven (Loving, 1999:32), went from being a second-rate, somewhat dilettantish poet and journalist to composing ‘the first great poem in American literature’⁴⁴ (Miller, 1968:85) has been described as the single most ‘puzzling mystery in American letters’ (Schmidgall cited in Whitman, 1999:vi). This mystery is to some extent the puzzle of all genius, but as Zweig (1984:5) points out, Whitman offers this puzzle in a starker form. By the age of thirty Whitman had not written a single thing that stood out from ‘the lowest and most ordinary’ writing of his time (Zweig, 1984:4). Yet six years later, in July 1855, a book emerged, with no

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⁴⁴ Referring to the first poem in the first (1855) edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which was later to become known as ‘Song of Myself’.
name given on the title page, that was so original that Emerson – perhaps the most well-
respected figure in American letters at the time – was to call it ‘the most extraordinary
piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed’ (cited in Whitman, 1999:166). The transformation of Whitman was so profound that R.M. Bucke chose to
include Whitman as a figure, along with others such as The Buddha, Jesus, and Dante,
as a representative of what Bucke calls “Cosmic Consciousness”, which he most simply
describes as ‘a higher form of consciousness than that possessed by the ordinary
man’ (Bucke, 2009:1). Bucke was a younger contemporary of Whitman and his
recollections of his encounters with Whitman late in the poet’s life have an almost
worshipful tone. His countenance, his body, dress, manner, and voice, all seemed to
inspire reverence in Bucke (2009:216-217). Bucke dates Whitman’s ‘illumination’ to
the Summer of 1853 or 1854, just a year or two prior to the first printing of Whitman’s
first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. What is interesting at this point for my argument is the
way Bucke speaks of Whitman’s radical transformation:

> We expect and always find a difference between the early and mature writings of
> the same man…But here is something quite apart from those and similar cases…
> [I]n the case of Whitman…writings of absolutely no value were *immediately*
> followed (and at least in Whitman’s case without practice or study) by pages across
each of which in letters of ethereal fire are written the words ETERNAL LIFE;
> pages covered not only by a masterpiece but by such vital sentences as have not
> been written ten times in the history of the race [original emphasis] (Bucke,

Once again we see reiterated in this account a general conclusion that Whitman’s work
before the watershed year of 1855 was simply plain, yet somehow, immediately
following, as great a poet as had ever lived suddenly was born fully grown in an
extremely short time. Was Whitman’s ‘instantaneous evolution’ (Bucke, 2009:226) the
result of some divine revelation? Or was he simmering, filled to the brink with ideas and impressions and then suddenly set ablaze by an intoxication that became a final catalyst to his whole identity locking together in a full and complete expression?

There is perhaps always some mystery – even miracle – in how a person can render, out of the amorphous, intangible flood of feelings and impressions, art that not only distills, refines, and translates his or her own experience of life, but also then awakens and bears it out in others across generations. Yet I believe this is even more pronounced when the artist has come of age in a second birth as artist; who was not simply born with a gift but who fashions him or herself out of their ostensibly settled personality into something which is qualitatively different to what he or she was before. Whitman offers this perspective. He was thirty-six when he first published – self-published – the first edition of his book *Leaves of Grass*. By this time the poet had already had a career as a journalist, printer, and country schoolteacher, and had lived in places as diverse as Manhattan, rural Long Island, and New Orleans. Such a book then, must have taken a long time to gestate, and Emerson was surely right in his congratulatory letter to the poet that his book ‘must have had a long foreground somewhere’ (*cited in* Whitman, 1999:166). Yet I will be arguing here that out of the manifold deep impressions life made on the burgeoning poet, it was only in the immediate ‘foreground’ of the first 1855 edition that these impressions were able to finally crystallise and coalesce, finally giving the poet an identity and form which was able to hold and express them. Specifically, I am referring to Whitman’s encounter with Bel Canto Opera in the years 1852-1853. This, I argue, was the awakening moment of an inspiration which folded all
other inspirations into it and gave them an expression; a voice. The encounter with Bel Canto unlocked his ability to transcribe his thoughts and impressions into the flowing free verse he created, and transpose his writing into singing. How a person who had already written so much of so little transformed his already adult personality so completely warrants our attention, for through the singing voice he found a new way of being and identity.

Historian Daniel Boorstin (cited in Zweig, 1984:14) said that the ‘self-made man’ was an American ideal in the nineteenth century. Nietzsche (1984:112) similarly admonished us during that century not to speak of gifts or innate talents; that greatness is acquired through inexhaustible diligence; we become great. I believe it is possible to see in Whitman a paragon of personal transformation; a self-made man who was awakened by certain encounters and seized upon these as guiding lights in his greatest work of art: himself. In order to see how this transformation took shape, I will first outline some biographical details about Whitman’s early life in order to give a sense of how Whitman’s openness to experience may have developed. I will use this material to then draw upon Nietzsche’s ideas of the artist, in relation to his notions of health, and the Apollonian and Dionysian. Then I will look in turn at what I consider to be the most significant influences upon Whitman’s poetry, namely his encounter with Oratory, his solitary walks along the seashore of Long Island, and the writings of Emerson. This will then lead me to conclude with an analysis of the traits of the Body-Bel Canto by looking at how Whitman’s work highlights the way Joy, Athleticism, and Chiaroscuro can be seen as not simply musical traits of a singing style but of a lived experience.
Born in 1819, Whitman was the second born son of an eventual nine children, one of whom died in infancy. It was far from an idyllic childhood. Over the years his older brother became pathologically violent, another brother died young of tuberculosis, one sister was a lifelong hypochondriac, and the youngest was born mentally disabled (Zweig, 194:16-17). As Whitman (cited in Kaplan, 1980:62) himself stated, ‘The time of my boyhood was a very restless and unhappy one; I did not know what to do’. Walter Whitman, Sr. was ‘not cut out for success’ and was very likely an alcoholic (Kaplan, 1980:58; Loving, 1999:30). His father’s alcoholism, while apparently not unusual for the time, deeply affected Whitman. Two of his brothers would also become alcoholics, and he even alluded to his father’s alcoholism as the reason his youngest brother was born mentally disabled (Loving, 1999:30; Kaplan, 1980:58). When Whitman was five years old, his father was forced to sell the family homestead in Long Island, where Whitman was born, and the family moved to Brooklyn where his father worked as a builder, building houses and attempting, mainly unsuccessfully, to sell them for a profit. The constant moving and financial straits led the family back into farming on Long Island, though by this time Walt was seventeen and had been working as a printer. However, while he did try to independently remain in Brooklyn, a great city fire in 1835 had caused mass unemployment, and Whitman reluctantly moved back to Long Island where he could get work as a teacher.

Part of the reason Whitman may have been despondent or depressed about having to go back to country Long Island to teach was because he had enjoyed being in Brooklyn and
the city. The city inevitably offered a wider range of cultural events and opportunities for different experiences. A significant opportunity that the time in Brooklyn presented to the boy was a subscription to a large circulating library. After finishing school at age eleven, Whitman worked as an office boy and through this employment he not only received help in handwriting and composition, but also was given access to the library. Whitman (1963:13) later called it ‘the signal event of my life up to that time’ as it opened him up for the first time to novels and poetry. Another reason that moving back to Long Island was depressing was that by the age of sixteen, Whitman had received enough training to become a ‘journeyman printer’ (Allen, 1955:24). He had actually enjoyed his typesetting and printing work at various newspapers and bookshops until he was forced to leave due to the great fire of 1835 destroying most of the printing district (Loving, 199:34; Allen, 1955:25). What is significant about this is that it introduced Whitman to a skill that would later be directly related to putting out his first book. Whitman developed from this time a lifelong love of printing, and he set much of the type of his first edition of *Leaves of Grass* himself, utilising innovative long lines and spacing (Loving, 1999:34). This made it not only even more of a truly self-made book, but also adorned it with even greater originality and distinctiveness. But that was not yet on his horizon, and for the time being he was forced back to country Long Island to be a teacher, even though he was still in his teens himself.

This was a restless period for the young Walt. At the time, country school teaching was not well paid nor well respected, and Walt simply went into it for lack of anything better (Allen, 1955:26; Loving, 1999:36-37). Over a period of about five years Whitman
taught in eight different schools. There was a tendency at the time for many casually employed teachers to be in and out of different schools, moving around as their need to do this unenviable job necessitated, or being forced to move on by strict quality-control inspections from the school board (Loving, 1999:37). Whitman may not have necessarily been a bad teacher, though he was certainly bored by his role as well as by his life at this time. He referred to one school as a ‘wretched hole’, and wrote in a letter to a friend at the time ‘Life is a dreary road, at the best; and I am just at this time in one of the most stony, rough, desert, hilly, and heart-sickening parts of the journey’ (Loving, 1999:40). Whitman even wrote a short story during this period about a young man who is ‘mentally depressed’ due to having to leave the city after the great fire of 1835 and go to the country to work in a little district school (Allen, 1955:26). His restlessness in his life is further evidenced by considering that though his family were also back living in Long Island, he was shiftless in his lodging, sometimes staying with his family and sometimes ‘boarding round’ at the homes of his students’ parents (Loving, 1999:38; Whitman, 1963:15). When he was staying on his father’s farm, he stubbornly refused to do farm work, preferring to think and write, which culminated in animosity from his father, who was sarcastic and critical of his ‘loafing’. By this time, his father’s sense of failure had become deeply ingrained, making him detached and ironic. He would sometimes say resignedly ‘keep good heart…the worst is to come’ (Kaplan, 1984:59). Obviously not such an inspiring climate for a young curious mind, this led to Whitman confiding in no one and keeping his writing and ideas mainly to himself (Allen, 1955:30; Kaplan, 1980:85).
All this is in stark contrast to the ‘perennial joyousness’ that Bucke (2009:227) states ‘are among the characteristics of the state to which he attained’ after 1853. The fact that the traits I associate with Whitman’s poetry as poetry of the Body-Bel Canto were ostensibly not present in Whitman’s work before the first 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* is why his transformation was indeed radical. I argue that accompanying this Joyousness was also Athleticism as an emphasis on health and abundance of energy, and Chiaroscuro as a complex admixture of deep themes and simple, direct language and imagery. These three traits are characteristics of Bel Canto singing, and, in my argument, existential characteristics of the Body-Bel Canto. Whitman transformed himself out of a life and circumstance that seemed to offer very little of these, and through a poetic style that I argue was awoken through singing, revealed himself to be, in my reading, a singer who experienced life imbued with these traits; a Body Bel-Canto. Yet before I go on to highlight these throughout Whitman’s poetry, I want to analyse Whitman’s transformation more deeply, firstly with the help of Nietzsche’s philosophy, and then by looking in turn at some important inspirational precursors to Whitman’s encounter with Bel Canto Opera.

4.2 Nietzsche and the Need to Create

Out of the restlessness and dissatisfaction Whitman did however find inspiration; in particular, he found it mainly during this time on his solitary perambulations along the shores of Long Island. But before I get into more detail about the importance of the seashore as an influence upon Whitman I want to offer a conceptual framework for my argument about how Whitman developed into the poet he eventually became. To do this
I will draw upon the philosophy of Nietzsche. The reason I have included a brief biographical sketch of his formative years is to argue, following Nietzsche, that the first impetus toward creativity is a need. What Whitman’s life lacked in reality, he had to create for himself, and where the home-life was uninspiring and flat, he had to fill his own life with fecund density. As Miller (1968:9) writes, Whitman’s poems themselves tell a story quite different to the one he espoused publicly about his ‘idyllic family life centering in an angelic mother’. Rather, his poetry often betrays a ‘lonely, unappreciated child who was in deep conflict with his parents’ (Miller, 1968:9). For example, it can be argued, as Miller does, that if as a young boy he had received artistic encouragement from his parents, he would not have so imaginatively depicted the awakening of the boy-poet, alone on the seashore in his poem ‘Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking’. This is a seminal poem of Whitman’s and the account he gives of his awakening poetic sensibility is an extraordinary insight into how his later encounter with Bel Canto gave shape to the inspiration he found on the beach at night alone as a child. I will return to this poem in detail later.

Nietzsche’s philosophy touches often on this kind of ‘spiritual self-affirmation’ – to use a term from Tillich.\textsuperscript{45} Where life is inadequate, or we ourselves are mired in mediocrity, the greatest (Nietzschean) virtue is to create oneself out of such a condition, first by affirming the givens of one’s life, then utilising and transforming these to one’s own

\textsuperscript{45} Cf. Tillich (1952) \textit{The Courage to Be}, pp. 53-54. Tillich writes that when we engage and participate in cultural life and its contents, we are actively affirming ourselves as these can, when used creatively in our own personal way, provide a sense of meaning and belonging: ‘Everyone who lives creatively in meanings affirms himself as a participant in these meanings. He affirms himself as receiving and transforming reality creatively...This is what one can call “spiritual self-affirmation”’.

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individual end. Each creator is a person who is not weakened by malady or maladjustment but rather is strengthened by these; strengthened in the resolve to create something greater, and through the creations to grow stronger in turn. As a creator, a person has the ability to make something that becomes him or her, the completion of the work being the completion of the creator him or herself. Thus Nietzsche writes:

A Homer would not have created an Achilles nor a Goethe a Faust if Homer had been an Achilles or Goethe a Faust (Nietzsche, 1967:101).

Through art, a dimension can be added to the creator’s life which was there in spirit but not yet realised. As Nietzsche so powerfully writes in Zarathustra, when a creator has managed to realise their possibilities of spirit through their art, it is as if they have ‘written in blood’ (Nietzsche, 1954:152), the very art bearing and becoming the remade body – being – of the artist. This, of course, is not at all an easily pursued task, as Nietzsche passionately admonishes us, where he writes:

Do you want to go the way of affliction, which is the way to yourself? Then show me your right and your strength to do so. Are you a new strength and a new right? A first movement? A self-propelled wheel? Can you compel the very stars to revolve around you? (Nietzsche, 1954:174-175).

The fascinating point here is how Nietzsche equates the way of affliction with the way to oneself. Why is it not the way of one’s joy that leads to oneself? As I have demonstrated similarly in relation to Kierkegaard in Chapter One, only through the openly acknowledged inadequacy and incongruity of one’s actual life can the possibility of despair arise and thus compel one to generate a new life. And like Kierkegaard points out, only after having been in despair is a realisation of joy truly possible. Yet where Kierkegaard was concerned with spiritual matters, Nietzsche states bluntly that ‘blood is
spirit’ (1954:152); it is the body in its living, breathing, finitude that supports and sustains one’s endeavours, and thus he writes that those who ignore this – the ‘despisers of the body’ – will thereby ‘become silent’ (Nietzsche, 1954:146). In this way affliction becomes the starting point by which one can begin to speak; it compels one into the pursuits of greater regions of expression because there is a need – in would-be creators – that was not awakened until one became so afflicted.

Nietzsche also put it more straightforwardly:

> It does not seem possible to be an artist and not to be sick (cited in Kaufmann, 2013:130).

‘Sickness’ for Nietzsche is a necessary step in creativity. Without the test of mettle borne by suffering, a creator has no rock upon which to sharpen his sword; no need to create, cultivate new values, or refine and reconfigure the old to his or her own end. Health is then conceived as the ability to deal with and overcome suffering, not simply the absence of sickness (Kaufmann, 2013:131). It is this theme that underlines what has become the most well known quote of Nietzsche (2005b:157): ‘What doesn’t kill me makes me stronger’. But further, these lines I have referenced are touchstones of a Nietzschean theme that suggests that creativity is born out of overcoming what one lacks; a self-overcoming by creating a world which offers completion, or belonging, to one’s self not as an escape but as a more real or full expression of personal truth. ‘Art alone’, writes Nietzsche, ‘can re-direct those repulsive thoughts about the terrible or absurd nature of existence into representations with which a man can live’ (Nietzsche, 1999:40). This is, to Nietzsche, for example, why the Greeks were so ‘beautiful’.
Through their tragedies was born an artistic triumph over the terrible sufferings of the world and world-history. Tragedy was able to celebrate these through the aesthetic form, allowing the Hellene to be face to face with the horror of life, yet simultaneously deriving pleasure from the encounter, rather than denying life or negating it. This, I believe, can also be read in more individual terms. Rather than being solely a cultural response to the horrors of the nature of existence itself, the same reasoning can also be applied to a personal response to the incongruity or incomprehensibility of one’s own existential situation.

This is highlighted by Miller (1968:19) in regard to Whitman, where he writes:

Whitman meditates on the nature of the isolated self in the nineteenth-century world. These meditations, originating in deep personal dissatisfactions and cultural inhibitions, take the form of literal or symbolic journeys in search of a unifying principle that will simplify and harmonize the disparities of life.

However, my argument does not follow Miller further. The idea of a unifying principle is, in my conceptualisation, in contrast with Miller’s psychological argument (1968:19). I do not agree, as he goes on to suggest, that ‘these journeys are regressive in nature [and] constitute a return to the peace and security of an earlier existence’ (Miller, 1968:19). I feel this is to minimise the transformative power such creativity enacts. Rather, I feel the concepts of Apollonian and Dionysian are much more capable of theoretically conveying the nature of poetic creation as a unifying experience, while leaving intact the notion of radical transformation. Regression is a Freudian concept referring to a reversion back to former modes of libidinal gratification through modes that have been tried and tested to work in the past (Freud, 2005:540). For example if,
when we were a baby, crying and screaming attained the affections of the mother – a highly cathected object capable of alleviating psychic tension – to act the same way as an adult due to mounting psychic tension, would be a regression. Yet without the ‘corrective recapitulation’ of these experiences facilitated through psychoanalysis, this type of behaviour is not conducive to personal growth and transformation. Similarly, if we only consider the creation of work as a safe place in which a poet can hide away, and his or her work simply the seeking of a return to a ‘womblike’ (Miller, 1968:19) state, then the potency of radical transformation is lost; the creator is not hardened, nor healthier for his or her efforts, and indeed may even be unconsciously complicit in further sickness.

The Dionysian is also a unifying principle, yet it is far more dangerous than the womb. Left unchecked, Dionysian energy is frenzy and chaos, and as Euripides shows in The Bacchae this energy can ultimately be destructive. This is why it needs tempering with the Apollonian, which is the principle of form, of individuation. However, the Dionysian is also responsible for the individual feeling – often overwhelmingly – subordinated and lost into the whole. While this loss of boundaries and growing sense of being a part of something larger than one’s individual self may indeed be catastrophic, through aesthetic experience – such as the Greek Tragedy of which Nietzsche wrote – the feeling may generate a sense of unification and participation in something greater than the bounds of reason or the bounds that limited, conceptually

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46 Cf. Euripides (1954) The Bacchae pp. 191ff. in which high-minded conservative King Pentheus attempts to deny and imprison Dionysus, only to be torn to shreds by the bare hands of the women of Thebes, including his own mother.
expressible forms may be able to account for. More pointedly, Greek Tragedy dealt with
the failure of the Apollonian – the devastation of vulnerable individuals – and Nietzsche
theorised the chorus as the reinstitution of the Dionysian principle, where people could
lose themselves in the music and therefore abandon their individuality and,
concomitantly, their vulnerability (Magnus & Higgins, 1996:22). Further, however,
where ‘regression’ might be an escape from such responsibilities of reason and reality
into the plenitude of an infantile ‘freedom from’ individuality, the Dionysian may
actually provide a greater sense of reality than that experienced under the constrictions
of isolated individuality, giving unity to the disparate, unreasonable factors of life in its
ostensibly chaotic wholeness. This is how Nietzsche saw the chorus functioning in
tragedy: it used singing to cut through individuality by creating a sense of abandon and
rapture in the audience as a whole – an experience that a more dispassionate, distanced
apprehension cannot attain:

This sense of self as part of a dynamic whole gave a different ground for
experiencing life as meaningful than one would recognize in the more typical
Apollonian condition, which entails a certain psychic distance. Feeling oneself to
be part of the joyous vitality of the whole, one could take participation in life to be
intrinsically wonderful, despite the obvious vulnerabilities one experiences as an
individual (Magnus & Higgins, 1996:22-23).

Through the Dionysian eruption of singing, the vulnerabilities of individuality are
momentarily transcended; they are not ignored or avoided, but overcome in a larger
sense of participation. This form of unifying experience offers not a retreat from reality
but a reconciliation with it, and that is why it is conceived as an affirming experience. It

‘freedom to’ and negative ‘freedom from’ which haunts the process of the birth and growth of
individuality.
is, as Nietzsche puts it, a ‘metaphysical consolation’ that helps us to realise ‘that
whatever superficial changes may occur, life is at bottom indestructibly powerful and
joyful’ (Nietzsche, 1993:39). Yet this is not to say that the Dionysian is essentially a
feel-good song and dance routine in which one can triumph over tragedy by losing
oneself in the throng of mass participation. In order for it to be effective it must still be
developed through form. The Dionysian still requires the Apollonian. This is the real
power of art, for where the frenzied, formless chaos of Dionysus can be wielded
through a recognisable and translatable form, humans can feel the full energy and power
of engaging with it without being totally destroyed. More than this however, this
coalescence has its power as something beautiful, something worthy of appreciation and
life-giving. ‘Beauty’ then becomes, as Kaufmann states of Nietzsche’s position, ‘the
monument of Apollo’s triumph over Dionysus’ (Kaufmann, 2013:130). Then aesthetic
achievement becomes the highest achievement, as it is a form that can wield and weld
these life forces together in a way that achieves reconciliation between an individual
and his or her world in a positive way. The creator takes the world as a figure in the
ground of his or her own creation, yielding it to his or her own ends. As Nietzsche
famously said: ‘It is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are
eternally justified’. It is surely in a Dionysian spirit of regarding the world aesthetically
that Whitman wrote in his preface to the first edition of Leaves of Grass that ‘The
United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem’ (Whitman, 1959:5).
However, this is actually less important than Whitman’s own personally justified

48 As Kaufmann (2013:128-129) points out, Nietzsche’s conception of the Dionysian changed
over time from being solely the raw, frenzied, ceaseless energy, into his later conceiving it as the
ability to control these passions; in other words, as a synthesis of both Apollonian and
Dionysian.
existence cultivated out of his own aesthetic completion of himself as poet. The songs Whitman was to create were born precisely out of this need to add dimension to a life that, as I pointed out above, was somewhat depressed, flat, ordinary. The need is present to the extent that one’s life does not yet feel justified, and that is where the aesthetic form may be redemptive. A work of art gives form to the otherwise intangible flood of feelings and sensations that without such a form could be depressing and debilitating. The work becomes the person, and in the work is found the expression of the person’s particular voice. In other words, an individual’s existence, as an aesthetic phenomenon, may become justifiable to him or herself in a way that without this aesthetic dimension it may not be. This again reiterates how a person can ‘make’ themselves into something more through perfecting their art: ‘in art’ states Nietzsche, ‘people enjoy themselves as perfection’ (2005b:196). While this is arguably a fulfilling aim in most artists, with Whitman, as mentioned above, we see this idea in a starker form. Whitman held a ‘broadcast denial of literature as a separate skill’, and aimed to demonstrate that ‘his life and his work were necessarily one’ (Zweig, 1984:13). Thus one commentator can write of this very “Nietzschean” approach of Whitman, stating that for Whitman, ‘Perfection of the work is the perfection of the life’ (Zweig, 1984:16).

I have taken some time to outline the Dionysian and Apollonian and Nietzsche’s philosophy because it is pertinent for at least three reasons in relation to Whitman’s radical transformation. First, it allows us to see that Whitman’s birth as artist was born from a need; it was required to create the dimension to his world that he required but which his circumstances lacked. Second, rather than being a regression, the search for a
unifying principle was, I argue, more in line with the coalescence of the Apollonian and Dionysian whereby new forms were required to state what could not be expressed through the old forms, and this is so pertinent for Whitman’s style, as I will turn to presently. And third, these factors are also indicative of that Nietzschean ‘health’, which, as I stated above, is imperative of any creator; a health or vitality which demonstrates that one’s circumstances, life, and personality can be overcome and transformed to reveal new unity of purpose and expression. More than this, however, it is health and vitality in the sense of an amor fati, or a love of fate. As Nietzsche (2000:714) writes:

My formula for greatness in a human being is amor fati: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it…but love it [original emphasis].

This is an attitude that Whitman portrayed and promulgated extensively also, such as when he writes in ‘Poem of the Road’:

The earth - that is sufficient,
I do not want the constellations any nearer,
I know they are very well where they are,
I know they suffice for those who belong to them.

Still here I carry my old delicious burdens,
I carry them, men and women - I carry them with me wherever I go,
I swear it is impossible for me to get rid of them,
I am filled with them, and I will fill them in return (Whitman, 1999:140).

This is the health that can withstand to see the conditions of life not as a dreary burden but as joyousness and abundance. Whitman acknowledges that he is filled with his shortcomings and flaws, yet he will ‘fill them in return’ by transforming them in a way
which, as Nietzsche states, does not conceal them but rather coalesces them into a new form that ultimately contributes to health and life.

4.3 Whitman’s Style, Nietzsche, and the Body.

Whitman’s style was pervaded by this sense of health and vitality, and he stated in a conversation near the end of his life that his main purpose in his poems was ‘to leave men healthy, to fill them with a new atmosphere’ (Whitman, 1999:446). This new atmosphere was what he himself had experienced in his radical transformation, and he needed a form of expression that allowed him to express its fullness without diluting it. Where the Dionysian provides creative energy and passion for such a task, only by transmuting it through the form-giving principle of the Apollonian can the energy become understood and represented. Yet what makes this task difficult is that in principle, the Dionysian explodes fixed forms, and the old forms may not suffice to contain and portray the ever-renewed energy. Therefore, new forms are needed in order to express the Dionysian content which allow it to come through in its original strength, yet without being destructive of that form. Whitman’s poetry was new. He invented a ‘free-verse’ style that exploded traditional forms, and he portrayed a poetic sensibility that was so radically new it was almost anti-literary. While there were important precursors for this sensibility, I am arguing that it was his encounter with Bel Canto singing that crystallised his style as a poet; it was this that allowed him to find a suitable
form amid the surging passions and inspirations that could portray these in their original intensity without falling into undisciplined, bombastic exclamations.49

Perhaps the most startling example of how Whitman’s new-found form was able to let through so much of Whitman’s primal, Dionysian inspiration can be found by looking at his spontaneously written notes following an opera performance of Bel Canto and comparing these to their final expression as poetry. Here we see the full force the encounter with Bel Canto had for Whitman. The following particularly striking example from his notebook allows us to see exactly how close he stayed to his own first spontaneous eruptions of feeling, which then entered without significant alteration into the final drafts of his poems:

I want that tenor, large and fresh as the creation, the orbed parting of whose mouth shall lift over my head…all delight… I want the soprano that lithely overleaps the stars, and convulses me like the love-grips of her in whose arms I lay last night. – I want an infinite chorus…wide as the orbit of Uranus…I want the chanted Hymn whose tremendous sentiment shall uneach in my breast a thousand wide-winged strengths and unknown ardors and terrible ecstasies…startling me with the overture of some unnamable horror – calmly sailing me all day on a bright river with lazily slapping waves – stabbing my heart with myriads of forked distractions more

49 Though at times it comes very close, such as these lines from ‘Enfans d’Adam 6’ to give but one example:

O furious! O confine me not!
[…]O to drink the mystic deliria deeper than any other man!
O savage and tender achings!
[…] O the puzzle – the thrice-tied knot – the deep and dark pool!
O all untied and illumined! (Whitman, 1999:217).

However, I do think that this gives a good representation of the difficulty of the task of trying to give form to feeling. As Whitman got older and gained wider recognition, he spent much time revising and re-working his poems, and many exclamation points were the first excisions made, along with much of the sexual imagery. It was an attempt to tame the wild exuberance that was no doubt in part due to his youthful ’halcyon days’, but also significantly part of his original ‘Dionysian’ inspirational fire. Cf. Schmidgall, (cited in Whitman, 1999:xx-xv), for a longer account of Whitman’s ’expurgation’.
furious than hail or lightening – lulling me drowsily with honeyed morphine –
tightening the fakes of death about my throat, and awakening me again to know…
the most positive wonder in the world, and that’s what we call life (Whitman cited
in Matthisessen, 1941:559).

This was to become lines 600-610 in the first published (1855) edition of *Leaves of
Grass*:

A tenor large and fresh as the creation fills me,
The orbic flex of his mouth is pouring and filling me full.

I hear the trained soprano….she convulses me like the climax of my love grip;
The orchestra whirls me wider than Uranus flies,
It wrenches unnamable arords from my breast,
It throbs to gulps of the farthest down horror,
It sails me….I dab with bare feet….they are licked by the indolent waves,
I am exposed….cut by bitter and poisoned hail,
Steeped amid honeyed morphine….my windpipe squeezed in the fakes of death,
Let up again to feel the puzzle of puzzles,
And what we call Being. (Whitman, 1999:38).

This startling passage reveals so many points I wish to make about Whitman. First, his
immediate inspiration was able to be transposed into verse almost completely
unchanged, and it was specifically the opera that gave him this. Second, he was a poet
whose engagement with the aesthetic experience of singing was so physiologically
penetrating that it went much deeper than a contemplative appreciation. He felt it in the
body as a series of undulating revelations which seem to have taken him to extremes of
rapture and horror. This physiological response to aesthetic experience reveals an
intoxication that is most Dionysian. It is not a detached, intellectual account, and it has a
writhing, surging quality that is highly sexual, even explicitly so, as the lines attest. This
experience has some striking similarities to the way Nietzsche describes inspiration in
his *Ecce Homo*:

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The idea of revelation in the sense of something suddenly becoming visible and audible with unspeakable assurance and subtlety, something that throws you down and leaves you deeply shaken - this simply describes the facts of the case… A delight whose incredible tension sometimes triggers a burst of tears, sometimes automatically hurries your pace and sometimes slows it down; a perfect state of being outside yourself, with the most distinct consciousness of a host of subtle shudders and shivering down to the tips of your toes; a profound joy where the bleakest and most painful things do not have the character of opposites, but instead act as its conditions…as necessary shades within this sort of excess of light; an instinct for rhythmic relations that spans wide expanses of forms… the need for a rhythm that spans wide distances is almost the measure of the force of inspiration, something to balance out its pleasure and tension [original emphasis] (Nietzsche, 2005b:126-127).

This is surely in prose a description Whitman has captured in poetry in relation to his awakened inspiration through his encounter with Bel Canto. We see in this passage the same shudders of undulating powerful emotion, the simultaneity of tears and joy, tension and release, movement and stillness; all opposites drawn together in an expanded unity that feels all and expresses all yet in doing so is almost torn to pieces by the tension and release that such a mix of forces creates. Whitman is sailing, his feet licked by the waves; Nietzsche too is in motion, sometimes faster sometimes slower, feeling it through to his feet also. Whitman is exposed and cut by hail and nevertheless steeped in morphine; whether it is the hail or Whitman himself that is steeped in honeyed morphine matters not, the presence of both feelings simultaneously is what is remarkable. Nietzsche similarly writes of the ‘bleakest and most painful things’ that nevertheless are necessary for the profound joy he is experiencing. And Whitman’s whirling farther than the orbit of Uranus is surely the wide distance Nietzsche states is required to balance the great tension such an inspiration needs for its release. This is the inspiration Bel Canto offered Whitman. It gave him, I argue, not only the profound
sensations of experiencing a musical form that he loved, but even more crucial, awakened his own voice as a singer. In my reading, he at once became aware of himself as the bearer of the traits that were made manifest to him by Bel Canto, and through the long melodic lines of the singing it was revealed to him how to finally structure his own expressions of this newly awakened experience. As Faner (1951:84-85) writes,

[B]y opera Whitman was first lifted to the heights of mystical rapture wherein he realized that he was a poet with a poet’s message for the world. Following this inspiration came the recognition that in opera lay the elements of a technique which would enable the “outsetting bard” to present his message in a manner which could preserve its largeness and naturalness.

I am going further than Faner in that what I am arguing is that what was specifically significant in his encounter was the singing. More specifically was the fact that it was Bel Canto. And even more precisely, it was this that awakened in him not only the sense of being a poet but his sense of being a singer. Yet going further still, I am arguing that the awakening was to a specific way of being that held existential structures analogous to those in Bel Canto singing, namely Joy, Athleticism, and Chiaroscuro. Therefore, in my reading, Whitman was awoken not as a poet but as a Body-Bel Canto, and his subsequent poetry was an expression of this way of being. This, I am arguing, was the catalyst for the way of being that Whitman could subsequently draw from for the rest of his life. And what is most extraordinary was that he was able to do so. Whether or not we call this experience mystical, it is still extraordinary that Whitman’s transformation never faded, and he was truly born as a new person. His encounter with Bel Canto offered the revelation both of the experience of a new way of being-in-the-world, and the capacity to express it fluently. Whitman’s new self-understanding allowed him to see himself as complete an incarnation of humanity as it was in him to be, and in this no
part of him was to be rejected. This meant that he had thoroughly accepted himself in his totality. This invariably led to his promulgation of sex and sexuality.

These are qualities endorsed by Nietzsche as being seminal to the artist in a section of *Twilight of the Idols* called ‘Towards a psychology of the artist’, where he writes:

One physiological precondition is indispensable for there to be art or any sort of aesthetic action or vision: *intoxication*. Without intoxication to intensify the excitability of the whole machine, there can be no art. There are many types of intoxication…Above all, the intoxication of sexual excitement, the most ancient and original form of intoxication. There is also an intoxication that comes in the wake of all great desires…intoxication of the festival, the contest, of the *bravura* performance [original italics] (Nietzsche, 2005b:195-196).

One immediately interesting aspect of this account for my argument is how Nietzsche sets out to describe a *psychology* and in doing so immediately speaks about *physiology*. The two are, for Nietzsche – and my thesis generally – inseparable. When Nietzsche speaks of physiology, he is talking unequivocally about the *body*; not as a seat of possibilities or a corporeal schema that fixes upon a world, but simply as an actual body that becomes aroused, intensified with energy, burns with fever, and becomes intoxicated. As he says elsewhere:

[My] muscular dexterity has always been at its best when the richest creative energies were flowing through me. The *body* is inspired: let us leave the ‘soul’ out of it (Nietzsche, 2005b:128)

This is very close to Whitman’s conception, and Whitman too not only favoured physical health, he saw the body with a radical perception, especially for the time, which denied nothing, particularly its sexuality. It is this which Nietzsche highlights as the most significant form of intoxication, and it is of course this which is aroused in
Whitman also. Yet it is not simply this. Or at least not simply a genital sexuality, but rather it is more ‘polymorphous’, whereby the whole body is eroticised as a locus of arousal. As Miller (1968:22) notes. ‘the very nature of Whitman’s art rests upon his evocation of the polymorphously perverse in his own and human nature’. Whitman’s new self-understanding led him to not reject any part of himself; indeed he knew the value of his own sexuality for the fulfilment of his expression. Not only did Bel Canto arouse in him desires that were related to the sexual urge, but more importantly he knew that a rejection of this facet of life would preclude one of the most significant aspects, if not the most significant part of being human. ‘Sex contains all’ writes Whitman in ‘Poem of Procreation’ (1999:149). This was part of the self-realisation Whitman wanted to celebrate with others, and in accepting himself so completely he became accepting of all. As Miller, (1986:23) writes:

“Peace and joy and knowledge” come, not through asceticism, but through orgasm. And, figuratively, the artist is no longer a lonely recluse: he has found the illumination that is to be his art, his comrade. For with self-understanding Whitman was no longer an idle drifter; he was ready to burst forth in assured song.

This highlights the purpose Whitman found in his transformation. He was no longer the idle drifter hiding away his ideas and thoughts from his father and family, but now was ready to share them with all. He was very clear about this. He attested that we too as his readers could assume the same for ourselves. His poetry was therefore not only a poetry to be read, but he wanted it to impart himself in his fullness to us. Thus his first poem of his first edition – later to be called ‘Song of Myself’ – begins with the lines:

I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you (Whitman, 1959:25).

There are many passages in Whitman’s poems where he goes to lengths to connect with us on a personal, intimate level, such as when he states in ‘Poem of the Road’

I and mine do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes,
We convince by our presence (Whitman, 1999:145).

Whitman gives us the sense time and again in his writing that his words are not separate; that his words are his body, such as when he writes:

This is no book, who touches this touches a man
[…] It is I you hold, and who holds you,
I spring from the pages into your arms (Whitman, 1999:266).

He even urges us as readers to work past the physical object of the book itself to reveal the person ‘beneath’ the pages:

Push close my lovers and take the best I possess
[…] I was chilled with the cold types and cylinder and wet paper between us.
I pass so poorly with paper and types…I must pass with the contact of bodies
(Whitman, 1959:87).

Whitman saw his songs ideally affecting people with the same physicality which he experienced in listening; if his poetry was to have the same affecting force as the Bel Canto that inspired it he needed to address his readers on intimate terms. In this way, as well as through singing explicitly about his and others’ bodies, Whitman sought to directly engage the body of the men and women reading him, believing that it is through physical engagement that a deeper understanding may emerge. As Zweig (1984:14) puts it:

[Whitman] believed, as few writers ever have, that a poem’s true aim is to change a man’s life, to make him anew by inviting him to share, in a mode of intimate love, the poet’s own remade personality.
The preceding discussion has aimed to highlight that Whitman, through an awakened ‘Dionysian’ inspiration invoked by his encounter with Bel Canto singing, did, out of this, invent a new style of poetry that was entirely original. Not only could the long lines and irregular spacings of his free-verse contain the rapture of his expression without diluting it, his style also made an attempt to get beyond the page and engage on far more intimate terms with his readers. He wanted to express and reveal his body, and it was through the heightened intimacy of physical contact that he wanted to connect with his readers. Further, what he wanted to impart was the sense that he had felt of a new way of being-in the-world, which I argue was opened up specifically by his encounter with Bel Canto. Therefore the traits of his poetry are those of the Bel Canto, namely Joy, Athleticism, and Chiaroscuro. Whitman is the Body-Bel Canto because he lived and expressed its traits. Although he didn’t necessarily actualise these through singing, at least not publicly, he nevertheless lived and expressed them, as, I argue, is evident by his poetry, and they are the same traits that I claim are manifested through changing one’s physiology in the practice of singing. Because of the way poetry for Whitman was an expression of himself – as I have argued throughout this chapter by also drawing on Nietzsche – his poetry is an account of his being a singer. Yet there were three other constitutive elements to his poetry that all contained aspects of what became crystallised in Bel Canto, and I will touch on each of these before returning to what constitutes the specific way of being I call the Body-Bel Canto.
4.4 Oratory

Whitman referred to oratory in his biographical prose work *November Boughs* as ‘the rarest and most profound of humanity’s arts’ (Whitman, 1982:1143), and it is arguable that some of the most significant stylistic traits Whitman employed in his poetry were drawn from his experiences listening to certain public speakers. Whitman’s experience with two speakers in particular – Father Edward Taylor and Elias Hicks, both of whom he wrote about in his prose works – offers an insight into his poetic style that I feel encapsulates a very important aspect of his work: his influence on, and personal connection with, his reader. What moved Whitman so much in his encounters with these orators was something so intrinsic to the person speaking that it could not be measured simply by the words they were using, or the way any formulas or rules were employed. Rather, it was a ‘personal electricity’ (Whitman, 1982:1146) inherent in the speaker that attracted Whitman, and it was this quality that distinguished ‘real orators’ from the many actors, preachers, lawyers, and lecturers Whitman had encountered through haunting the courts to witness notable trials, and hearing many actors on the stage in New York (Whitman, 1982:1145). Despite Father Taylor being a preacher of little renown and preaching in a ‘fourth-class church down by the wharves in Boston’ (Whitman, 1982:1144), Whitman wrote of feeling the ‘deepest impression…which invariably affected me to tears’ (Whitman, 1982:1144) when listening to him:

For when Father Taylor preach’d or pray’d, the rhetoric and art, the mere words, (which usually play such a big part) seem’d altogether to disappear, and the live feeling advanced upon you and seiz’d you with a power before unknown. Everybody felt this marvelous and awful influence…hearing such men sends to the winds all the books, and formulas, and polish’d speaking, and rules of oratory [original italics] (Whitman, 1982:1144-1145).
Whitman had a long-held fascination with oratory, and for a time he considered becoming an orator or delivering lectures. As he stated late in his life to his friend Horace Traubel:

When I was younger – way back: in the Brooklyn days… I was to be an orator – to go about the country spouting my pieces, proclaiming my faith….I was afraid I would get no chance to say it through books: so I was to lecture and get myself delivered that way (cited in Faner, 1951:90).

There are two aspects this brief account that are of interest. First is Whitman’s fear that by simply writing books he would not be able to ‘get himself delivered’. The literary discipline of the written word was perhaps not visceral enough to get across the manifold impressions and feelings about life he wanted to portray; perhaps at this stage for Whitman writing books would not convey the feelings he had felt hearing orators. This is because, second, it was himself he wanted to impart; the physical and ‘personal electricity’ of his own body was paramount to the meanings he wished to convey. Oratory would be therefore far better suited for achieving this than writing.

The other singular event that had particular significance for Whitman’s love of oratory was seeing the Quaker preacher Elias Hicks speak. Although this happened when Whitman was only ten years old, the occasion left such a deep impression on Whitman that he could remember the experience vividly for the rest of his life (Allen, 1955:13). Comparing Hicks with Taylor, whom he witnessed much later in life, Whitman wrote:

\[51\] Whitman had Quaker heritage in his maternal line, and he often utilised Quaker language in many of his mature poems, such as by referring to months as ‘fifth month’ or ‘ninth month’ as Quakers do (Cf. Whitman, 1982:694; Whitman, 1999:208; Kaplan, 1980:67-70).
‘Both had the same inner, apparently inexhaustible, fund of latent volcanic passion’ (Whitman, 1982:1145). The theme of the talk would not have been lost on the young boy, as it was simply to do with being less concerned with glorifying God and instead living a full, joyous life heeding to the ‘light within’ one’s own soul (Allen, 1955:13; Kaplan, 1980:69). While the preacher’s intellectual theme has much democratic resonance with Whitman’s later work – a theme which indeed was quite radical and divisive within the community — what created the real lasting power was the physical delivery itself. Writing of this childhood experience near the end of his life in November Boughs, Whitman describes Hicks’ style as:

> A pleading, tender, nearly agonizing conviction, and magnetic stream of natural eloquence, before which all minds and natures, all emotions, high or low, gentle or simple, yielded entirely without exception...very many were in tears (Whitman, 1964:637-638).

What is significant in this account is the way Hicks captivated his audience not through high intellectual reasoning but rather through ‘natural eloquence’. This ‘unstudied oratory’ (Whitman, 1964:638) conveyed a different form of reasoning, and it was this aspect that was to have a profound effect upon Whitman later in his life. He wrote that it was ‘so penetrating – so different from anything in the books’ (Whitman, 1964:638) because it was born of personal conviction and passion, and could be delivered to the common person in a language that was not exclusive. The experience was no doubt in mind when Whitman wrote in his ‘Poem of Joys’:

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52 As Whitman describes, ‘Sometimes when he presented himself to speak in the meeting there would be opposition – this led to angry words, gestures, unseemly noises, recriminations [from] some violent orthodox person objecting to the new doctrinaire’ (Whitman, 1964:645).
O the orator’s joys!
To inflate the chest – to roll the thunder of the voice out from the ribs and throat.
To make the people rage, weep, hate, desire, with yourself,
To lead America – to quell America with a great tongue

O the joy of a manly self-hood!
Personality – to be servile to none – to defer to none – not to any tyrant, known or unknown,
To walk with an erect carriage, a step springy and elastic,
To look with calm gaze, or with flashing eye,
To speak with a full and sonorous voice, out of a broad chest,
To confront with your personality all the other personalities of the earth
(1999:207).

In the aforementioned short passage lies the other main reason Whitman found this experience so exciting. It was Hicks’ personal ‘magnetism’ that drew him in. The way the physical body itself delivered the words was what attracted Whitman so much. In the passage cited here from ‘Poem of Joys’, Whitman seamlessly interweaves the self-affirming stance of an erect and limber posture with the unapologetic proclamation of one’s personality through a sonorous voice. The voice is physical here, and further, it is consubstantial with self-affirmation and confidence. It was this positive physical presence that Whitman felt oratory delivered. It is, however, important to note that though I have included them here, these lines of poetry cited above were not, on first awakening to the power of oratory, yet available to Whitman. They were only arrived at, in my argument, after he had also had the transformative encounter with Bel Canto, that is, after he himself became the Body-Bel Canto. Once he had been awoken as the Body-Bel Canto, with the existential traits it possesses – Joy, Athleticism, Chiaroscuro – the
fullness of his experience of oratory could be rendered in the fullness of his expression and taken to its end. In other words, as I will demonstrate in more detail below, it was only Whitman The Body-Bel Canto that could have finished the passage cited above with the lines:

O to have my life henceforth my poem of joys!
To dance, clap hands, exult, shout, skip, leap, roll on, float on,

The oratorical experience here spills over into a much larger exuberance, predicated upon the consubstantiality of words, athleticism, and joy that I argue is indeed awakened through singing.

Although Whitman’s poetry happened later, the initial experiences with orators he loved instigated his sense of the physicality of words. Whitman (1964:637) remembered Hicks’ voice as ‘resonant, grave, [and] melodious’, and through this voice, the deeper power Whitman found in the physical delivery of oratory was able to emerge. As Whitman writes in November Boughs:

If there is, as doubtless there is, an unnameable something behind oratory, a fund within or atmosphere without, deeper than art, deeper even than proof, that unnameable constitutional something Elias Hicks emanated from his very heart to the hearts of his audience, or carried with him, or probed into, and shook and arous’d in them – a sympathetic germ, probably rapport, lurking in every human eligibility, which no book, no rule, no statement has given or can give inherent knowledge, intuition – not even the best speech, or best put forth, but launch’d out only by a powerful human magnetism (Whitman, 1964:643).

This ‘unnameable something’ was what occurred beyond the arguments, or ‘proofs’. It could only be launched out through the powerful presence of one person being with another, which is why, as mentioned above, Whitman went to great lengths to remind us
that he was in our presence when we read his poems. This sense of ‘powerful human magnetism’ is what Whitman always wanted his poems to portray, and he went to great lengths to get that physicality into his poems, as I have demonstrated above. Yet he knew also that not every presence was simply ‘convincing’. He said of Elias Hicks that his power was ‘constitutional’. It was something in the man himself that gave such resonance and power to his words. Whitman did not like to think of his *Leaves* as an aesthetic philosophy which could be explained in a detached, purely intellectual manner. Rather, he took pride in its ‘heroic animality’ and said his main purpose was ‘to leave men healthy, to fill them with a new atmosphere’ (Whitman, 1999:446). This is something that Emerson certainly admired when he read the first edition Whitman sent him personally, stating ‘It has the best merits, namely, of fortifying and encouraging’ (*cited in* Whitman, 1999:166). It was, I argue, because Whitman held such a power to uplift within himself. Not every presence is automatically convincing, and this is why Whitman only loved certain few speakers of all those he had heard. This is another aspect of oratory that influenced Whitman: the way the voice delivered the man or woman speaking. This is, as I have argued, heightened when the voice goes beyond the everyday usage of speaking and lifts into singing. Not only is the voice expressing more, the body is transformed also and it too is revealed in greater detail. Where the words used convey meaning, and melody gives the words form, ultimately it is in *tone* where being resides. This can be seen here as the certain character that a man or woman gives to the words or melody. In oratory it is words without melody, and the voice wasn’t quite expressive enough to be the catalyst for Whitman’s transformation in the way Bel Canto was. But oratory certainly has *tone* and this is a way of describing what
Whitman was connecting with in the oratory of Father Taylor and Elias Hicks. Yet what was it about the tone of their oratory. Of what did it consist? I will go on to show that it consisted of a familiarity with life; their oratory was so powerful was that it contained life in it in a way that enabled them to speak directly and without pretence.

As I have pointed out above, Whitman’s own impetus to lecture came in part from his encounter with the powerful lecturing style of Elias Hicks, whose personal delivery bolstered every message with some ‘unnameable’ atmosphere that convinced well beyond the meanings of the words themselves. Added to this, however, Whitman's own conception of the importance of the body in developing and facilitating rich words was fundamental to how he conceived his deliverance; whatever message he was to convey, and whatever medium he was to use, it was always himself that he intended to ultimately reveal. As Whitman writes in *An American Primer*: ‘A true composition in words, returns the human body, male or female – that is the most perfect composition’ (Whitman, 1904:27).

Written mostly around the time of the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, *An American Primer* was a series of notes Whitman made that were actually intended to be given as a lecture but never were. With his *Leaves* surviving into new editions over the following years the lecture was abandoned, though he was still thinking and talking about it well into his old age (Whitman, 1904:iiiiv). While the notes were eventually published posthumously and therefore are not entirely a well-planned definitive statement – a fact Whitman himself was conscious of (Whitman, 1904:vii) –
they nevertheless contain some fascinating insights into the way Whitman conceived of the link between the use of words and the person using them. ‘Words follow character’ (Whitman, 1904:2) he wrote, and then elsewhere: ‘character makes words (1904:6), implying that who we are – the constitution of our way of being – determines our ability to use words. Yet this does not imply that it is merely the ability to construct complex arguments, or write sophisticated poetry, that is predicated upon a developed character. As Whitman (1904:16) states in *An American Primer*:

> The greatest writers only are well-pleased and at their ease among the unlearned – are received by common men and women familiarly [and] do not hold out obscure.

What Whitman calls for is a richness and fullness of experience; it is a familiarity with life that creates a kind of inner power to give words their richness and fullness. He goes on:

> Latent, in a great user of words, must actually be all passions, crimes, trades, animals, stars, God, sex, the past…and the like – because these are the words, and he who is not these, plays with a foreign tongue, turning helplessly to dictionaries and authorities (1904:16-17).

Words, as Whitman wrote, ‘return’ the body and this is why, as Matthiessen (1941:518) states, ‘[Whitman] believed that such a writer must have realised the full resources of his *physical* life’ [my italics]. Without having enfolded many facets of life into oneself, a person may not have the flexibility required to give words a richness of character Whitman always sought. Far from speaking with a ‘foreign tongue’, Whitman sought an intimacy and nearness with things through his work that even in a prose-like text such as the *Primer* he resorts, with child-like enthusiasm, to simply naming long lists of words. As Matthiessen (1941:518) writes:
Whitman’s excitement carries weight because he realized that a man cannot use words so unless he has experienced the facts that they express.

‘Names’ Whitman goes so far to say, ‘are magic’ (1904:18) and in these long lists of places, occupations, and events that would become a main feature of most of his poetry he wanted to express his close rapport with all life; in short, he wanted to ‘deliver’ the fullness of the large, multitudinous being he knew himself to be. As he writes in ‘Song of Myself’ (1999:65):

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then …. I contradict myself;
I am large …. I contain multitudes.

What is of course more significant for my argument is Whitman’s love of the voice. More powerful than the written word, the vocalisation of words gave for Whitman an even closer representation of the character of the person speaking. As Whitman (1904:29) writes, 'Voices follow character, and nothing is better than a superb vocalism’. While Whitman was to find this quality expanded out to its fullest expression in Bel Canto, in his earlier encounters with oratory he felt the personal presence of the orator open up the words employed in ways which revealed deeper meanings than any dictionary could account for. The character of the speaker him or herself lent particular articulations and pronunciations to their words, and it was this aspect of their delivery which Whitman most valued. Whitman wrote of his experience of this phenomenon in a wonderful passage in the *American Primer* (1904:20):

The subtle charm of the beautiful pronunciation is not in dictionaries, grammars, marks of accent, formulas of a language, or in any laws or rules. The charm of the beautiful pronunciation of all words…is in perfect flexible vocal organs, and in a developed harmonious soul. – All words, spoken from these, have deeper, sweeter
sounds, new meanings, impossible on any less terms. – Such meanings, such sounds, continually wait in every word that exists…until that comes which has the quality patiently waiting in the words.

This passage was later turned, with very little change, into Whitman’s most explicit statement of his love of the voice, a poem entitled ‘Vocalism’, which is worth quoting here also:

Now I make a leaf for voices – for I have found nothing mightier than they are,
And I have found that no word spoken, but is beautiful, in its place.

O What is it in me that makes me tremble so at voices?

Surely whoever speaks to me in the right voice, him or her
I shall follow, as the waters follow the moon, silently,
with fluid steps, any where around the globe.

Now I see that all waits for the right voices;
Where is the practised and perfect organ? Where is the developed Soul?
For I see every word uttered thence has deeper, sweeter, new sounds, impossible on less terms.

I see brains and lips closed – I see tympans and temples left unstruck,
Until that comes which has the quality to strike and to unclose,
Until that comes which has the quality to bring forth what lies slumbering, forever ready, in all words (Whitman, 1999:200).

In this poem, which I have quoted in full, we see a complete poetic articulation of Whitman’s conception and love of the voice. For Whitman, voices can convince, have the power to lead us, bring forth new meanings, and make us tremble. Again, this is not through arguments, similes or rhymes, but through presence. A spoken word delivers more than the word itself; it delivers the character, soul, body, of the speaker. The poem first tells us not only of this intrinsic power of the voice to move us, but importantly, that ‘in its place’ any word spoken can become ‘beautiful’. This is an example of the
importance of ‘Apollo’s triumph over Dionysus’ (Kaufmann, 2013:130), where form ultimately must prevail over even the most aroused or most solemn speech. It is not the untrained naivety of a momentarily stirred soul, but the ‘practised organ’, the ‘developed soul’ that has the power to unlock and unleash the manifold latent meanings of words and make them beautiful. The character inherent in the ‘right voice’ opens up possibilities of meaning that are ‘impossible on less terms’. Yet this is not of course to say that cultivating such a voice is a specialised discipline requiring training in the formal sense, and I will show in the section below on Emerson how Whitman was given further theoretical justification for this instinctively felt sense. It is simply to say that without the particular pronunciation delivered by the individual person him or herself, the meanings would simply not be there. Whitman, like Emerson, believed in a cultivation of one’s individual self that took place as much in the fields and farms as in schools and sermons, and the personally developed, self-reliant individual had just as much to offer as a respectable well-heeled ‘thinker’, to use a term from Emerson’s essay ‘The American Scholar’, who perhaps cannot speak with the same directness.53

These ‘deeper, sweeter, new sounds’ offered in the voices of such speakers, are like an atmosphere that pervades the manifest content, and Whitman accurately reflects this by his use of the word ‘silently’. Like an invisible force such as that of the moon upon the water, these deeper meanings are personal, both personally developed in the speaker and

53 As Emerson wrote in a journal entry: ‘The language of the street is always strong…Cut these words and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive; they walk and run. Moreover, they who speak them have this elegancy, that they do not trip in their speech. It is a shower of bullets, whilst Cambridge men and Yale men correct themselves and begin again at every half sentence’ (cited in Matthiessen, 1941:35).
personally meaningful to the beholder. These secondary, sweeter sounds, reflect the true presence of the speaker to the listener; intimate – as person to person. Reflecting this ‘unnameable something’ that Whitman found lurking within the oratory of Elias Hicks and others, Whitman was to say of his own work ‘The words of my book nothing, the drift of it everything’ (cited in Matthiessen, 1941:521), the silent pull upon the reader being of far more worth than any literal meaning.54

The water metaphors employed here are not trivial but seminal. They are an example of the second main influence upon Whitman during his development leading toward his radical transformation. Whitman never became an orator. While the voice of Elias Hicks and other voices he heard awakened him as a child to the ‘orator’s joys’ (Whitman, 1999:200), they did not take him all the way into his own self-realisation. It was not until his encounter Bel Canto that the full realisation of himself could awaken. Oratory was but a precursor, a necessary step toward Bel Canto, and there were two other very important precursors to this also: the seashore of Long Island, and Emerson.

4.5 The Seashore

Whitman loved the seashore, and his tactile, sensuous experiences of it as a boy and young man never faded as he grew older. His fondness for the atmosphere there penetrated into his work throughout his life. The experience of the shore was a liminal, private one for Whitman. He mostly had the beach all to himself and he used his

54 This is given further poignancy when considered in light of an etymological note of Whitman’s (Whitman, 1982:1166) ‘If you influenc’d a man, you but flowed into him’ [original italics].
freedom and solitude there to race along the sand, swim naked, and loudly declaim passages of Shakespeare and Homer to the waves and seagulls, a practice he kept into later life (Whitman, 1982:698, 906). In his autobiographical prose work *Specimen Days* Whitman wrote:

Even as a boy, I had the fancy, the wish, to write a piece, perhaps a poem, about the sea-shore – that suggesting, dividing line, contact, junction, the solid marrying the liquid – that curious, lurking something…which means far more than its mere first sight…Hours, days, in my long island youth and early manhood, I haunted the shores of Rockaway or Coney island, or away east to the Hamptons or Montuak…I remember well, I felt that I must one day write a book expressing this liquid, mystic theme. Afterward, I recollect, how it came to me that instead of any special lyrical or epical or literary attempt, the sea-shore should be an invisible influence, a pervading gauge and tally for me, in my composition…

There is a dream, a picture, that for years at intervals (sometimes quite long ones, but surely again, in time,) has come noiselessly up before me, and I really believe, fiction as it is, has enter’d largely into my practical life – certainly into my writings, and shaped and color’d them. It is nothing more or less than a stretch of interminable white-brown sand, hard and smooth and broad, with the ocean perpetually, grandly, rolling in upon it, with slow-measured sweep, with rustle and hiss and foam, and many a thump as of a low bass drum. This scene, this picture, I say, has risen before me at times for years. Sometimes I wake at night and I can hear and see it plainly [original italics] (Whitman, 1982:796-797).

I have included this long passage from Whitman because it is as complete a description in prose as Whitman gave of the way the shore ‘influenced’ him. There are some very important themes touched upon in this passage, and I will look at them presently in turn.

As I have outlined in relation to oratory and the spoken word, there is here again this idea of a pervading influence that comes upon him ‘noiselessly’ which contains a ‘curious, lurking something’ of more depth and impression than first glance might suppose. In oratory, this was a latent meaning hidden in all words awaiting the ‘right voice’ to unlock them. Here in the seashore we see again an atmosphere impressing
upon the poet, but this time it is more musical in its sweep; undulating, rolling, and rhythmic. Thoreau (1947:565) wrote that a man should ‘step to the music he hears, however measured or far away’. For Whitman, his music had its foundational rhythm in the lapping waves upon the shore. Unlike Thoreau, who, characteristically, said he felt the marching more than the music (Matthiessen, 1941:84), Whitman’s gait was freer, more a dance than a march, and the music he most definitely felt. This rhythm is the endless, ever-renewing energy that Whitman loved in life, and the seashore offered up a moment in which Whitman could feel that abundance flowing through himself, and no doubt feel a part of it. It is this kind of experience that Whitman’s poetry invokes and exalts, and the undulating rhythmic flow exhibited by the seashore is, I believe, an important precursor into his development of the free-verse style of his poetry. Free-verse is where Whitman differs from his contemporaries, and from all poetry that had gone before, and I feel it is this experience of the seashore as pervading ‘influence’ that set the foundational framework for this style; through the rising and falling of the breakers, the lapping of the sea upon the sand, and the sibilant rustle of the wind along the shore, Whitman found an apt rhythm and melody to guide his own expressions. Yet it was still only a precursor to an awakening that was fully manifested by Bel Canto. However, we may see here that the seashore was already a pervading influence on Whitman’s rhythm, and so when he encountered Bel Canto he already had a foundational experience to draw from that was then brought to its full force by the opera. It is therefore not coincidental that in his ecstatic description cited above of

55 Yet both men felt that there indeed is a rhythm, and through their shared sensibilities echoing the Transcendentalism theorised most fully by Emerson, they both came to similar views on how a person can encounter the wealth of all life through the present moment at hand.
hearing Bel Canto singing he specifically mentions the rhythm of waves licking his feet, as this was a positive, wistful and liberating experience that was deeply embedded in his experience.

There are a number of reasons why the scene of a flowing, ever-changing line of the rolling sea caressing the hard, smooth sand might be important. First, this very juxtaposition is akin to the creative process itself. There is, primarily, the ongoing flux of experiences and impressions which, in a curious, open human are likely to be perpetually renewed and refreshed which then must, through some intuitive grasp, be forged into an aesthetic form capable of containing and relating them – the triumph of Apollo over Dionysus – whether this be speech, action, poetry, or prose. It is my contention that the seashore pervaded Whitman’s being with the suggestion of a form that allowed for the undulating roll of impressions, and that could rise and fall in lines that were continuous yet ever-changing. Whitman’s poetry is not blank verse, which although it does not rhyme, is still governed by the rhythm of iambic pentameter. Free-verse is the perfect name for Whitman’s poetry, because it truly marches to its own drum; the metre changes from line to line, there is no rhyme scheme, and the form is open, with verses and lines being of varied length. Yet there is an unmistakable feeling and flow to the words and lines in Whitman’s work that is startling and inspiring. This is perhaps largely due to the extemporaneous way much of his poetry was composed. Friends of Whitman said he spent very little time actually writing, and what was written was jotted down on any scrap of paper that was to hand, or, as he walked, scribbled into his notebook that he placed upon his knee (Bucke, 1956:60). This way of composing
helped Whitman stay as close as he could to his original inspiration, and this is what differentiated Whitman’s style from somebody like Thoreau, another contemporary writer, for whom writing was a more solitary, disciplined task that ultimately involved sacrifice. As Matthiessen (1941:80) notes,

[Thoreau] was much more of a craftsman than Whitman, much more aware of the necessity of sacrificing himself to the work to be performed. He came to realize, when occupied with Walden, that no ‘valuable work’ is accomplished except ‘at the expense of a life’.

This is a far different attitude to Whitman, despite their similar foundational beliefs about the importance of personally cultivated character inherent in writing of any kind.

Whitman wrote of his need to express his manifold feelings as he wandered along the shore in a poem that first entered his book in the 1860 edition. In its poignant opening passage we see Whitman revealing himself for the first time in his poetry to be contemplative; he possibly felt that the halcyon fire of the last few years and first two editions was fading, and in his effort to assess the cinders he turned again to the landscape of his primary inspiration: the seashore. As he wends his way along the beach, Whitman considers his life up to this point, and experiences the inevitable ebb to the full-force flow of creativity he had been riding for the past several years. The seashore offers him opportunity to review and renew, and he there seeks consolation in knowing that amid the debris and windswept windrows washed upon the shore, he will find congeniality and likeness. Whitman always referred to Long Island in his poetry by its original Algonquian name ‘Paumanok’, which means ‘fish-shaped’ (Whitman, 1982:696; Whitman, 1999:495). This poem was intriguingly entitled ‘Leaves of Grass I’
when it first appeared, which I think adds to its sentiment of renewal, or starting over. It was finally entitled ‘As I ebb’d with the ocean of life’, which more pointedly states its mood, as well as marks the sea imagery. In fact, by the final edition of *Leaves of Grass* – the so-called “Death-Bed” edition of 1892 – this poem had become part of a cluster of sea-related poems called ‘Sea-Drift’.

Elemental drifts!
O I wish I could impress others as you and the waves have just been impressing me.

As I ebbed with an ebb of the ocean of life,
As I wended the shores I know,
As I walked where the sea-ripples wash you, Paumanok,
Where they rustle up, hoarse and sibilant,
Where the fierce old mother endlessly cries for her castaways,

[…]

Miles walking, the sound of breaking waves the other side of me,
Paumanok, there and then, as I thought the old thought of likenesses,
These you presented to me, you fish-shaped island,
As I wended the shores I know,
As I walked with that eternal self of me, seeking types (Whitman, 1999:195-196).

As Knapp (1993:169) points out, this poem, along with others in the section entitled ‘Sea-Drift’, focus upon reminiscences and childhood experiences, deeply connected with the sea, as a way of assessing and healing his present torments. According to Knapp (1993:169), Whitman’s life around this time, 1860, had become ‘problematic’, and in this poem we see Whitman struggling to maintain the same affinity and original correspondences he had both known and expressed so completely and enthusiastically in his earlier poetry. As he goes on to say:
As I wend the shores I know not,
[
As the ocean so mysterious rolls toward me closer and closer,
At once I find, the least thing that belongs to me, or that I see or touch,
I know not;
I, too, but signify, at the utmost, a little washed-up drift,
A few sands and dead leaves to gather,
Gather, and merge myself as part of the sands and drift (Whitman, 1999:196).

The ambivalence here is that Whitman does not feel, as he so often had, completely in command of his experience. The seashore was, in my argument, the primary place Whitman held the feeling of likeness to the landscape; it was the liminal place – betwixt and between the land and the sea, where the rolling water seems to offer up a constant flow of pre-form potentiality onto the solid ground of actuality – and while he first discovered that this rhythm was intrinsic to his expression – his poetry predicated on its influence not as a theme but as an atmosphere – what this also means is that expressing it was akin to expressing himself, its influence being that he wants to express precisely as the seashore does. In this poem, he is walking for miles along the shore, looking down at the little rows of debris, and musing ‘I, too, but signify, at the utmost, a little washed-up drift’. At this realisation he becomes ‘baffled, balked…Oppressed with myself that I have dared to open my mouth’ because he has not, he realises, understood anything nor expressed himself adequately. But what he does know is that:

I too Paumanok,
I too have bubbled up, floated the measureless float, and been washed on your shores;
I too am but a trail of drift and debris,
I too leave little wrecks upon you, you fish shaped island.
…
Breathe to me, while I hold you close, the secret of the wondrous murmuring I envy,
For I fear I shall become crazed, if I cannot emulate it,
and utter myself as well as it.
Sea-raff! Crook-tongued waves!
O, I will yet sing, some day, what you have said to me.

In this last line is reiterated the point I am trying to make in this section. Whitman wanted to express as the sea expressed to him, and be able to impart to others the same sense and feeling that he had gotten from walking along the shore. Yet like oratory, this was only a preliminary precursor, and not something that alone could give Whitman his full poetic voice. Whitman had been wending the shore since he was a child, and while he had always been enthusiastic about getting it into his poems, it was through Bel Canto that the particular elements that spoke to him when he was there were able to crystallise into full realisation of expression. Whitman said to a friend later in life that his ‘spinal purpose form the start’ had been to ‘surcharge Leaves of Grass’ with the open air, the sky, and the sea and that ‘no one knows how precious these are - have been - to me’ (Whitman, 1999:440). While the sea was there first, Bel Canto offered the full expression of this same freedom of feeling. Further, Bel Canto tied the flowing rhythm of the seashore with the vast expressiveness of the human voice and that is why, in my argument, it became the catalyst for Whitman’s transformation; it not only brought together and re-established everything that he had already loved into a new unity of expression that was more powerful than the individual elements could ever be on their own, but added to these a new expression that penetrated him deeply and awoke him powerfully to a new way of being within himself.
This particular aspect is the theme of what has been considered one of Whitman’s greatest poems, ‘Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking’ (2006:186). In this poem, Whitman tells of being moved to tears by the endlessly rocking sea remembering how he experienced a profound awakening on the shore as a boy over the course of a summer when he heard the singing of a mockingbird for his mate that went missing. He translates the singing of the bird and it is a sad song of mourning for his lost mate. In the moment that the singing finally stops, the boy, moved to tears and ecstatic, begins to have a revelation; his own deep feelings become suddenly loosed and in that moment of the bird’s lament, the sea’s constant husky undertone, and the flood of his own feeling he realises his purpose:

Demon or bird! (said the boy’s soul,)
Is it indeed toward your mate you sing? or is it really to me?
For I, that was a child, my tongue’s use sleeping, now I have heard you,
Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake,
And already a thousand singers, a thousand songs, clearer, louder, and more sorrowful than yours,
A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me, never to die (2006:190).
...
Never again leave me to be the peaceful child I was before what there in the night,
By the sea under the yellow and sagging moon,
The messenger there arous’d, the fire, the sweet hell within,
The unknown want, the destiny of me.

This is a dramatic portrayal of Whitman’s birth as poet. The singing of the mockingbird was the catalyst for his own songs coming to life in him, in a flood of feeling that has awoken the ‘sweet hell within’ of the calling he is now faced with. There can never again be the peace of childhood, and the imagery of fire, and the ‘sweet hell within’ portrays that the path is not an easy one. His songs will be sadder than that of the
mockingbird, and the thousand warbling echoes will no doubt torment as they push for expression. Yet out of the sea comes the clue to it all:

    A word then, (for I will conquer it,)
    The final word, superior to all,
    …
    Are you whispering it, and have been the whole time, you sea waves?
    Is that it from your liquid rims and wet sands?

    Where to answering, the sea,
    Delaying not, hurrying not,
    Whisper’d me through the night, and very plainly before daybreak,
    Lisp’d to me the low and delicious word death,
    And again death, death, death, death,
    Hissing melodious, neither like the bird not like my arous’d child’s heart,
    But edging near as privately for me rustling at my feet,
    Creeping thence steadily up to my ears and laving me softly all over,
    Death, death, death, death, death.

    Which I do not forget,
    But fuse the song of my dusky demon brother,
    …
    With the thousand responsive songs at random,
    My own songs awaked from that hour,
    And with them the key, the word up from the waves,
    The word of the sweetest song and all songs,
    That strong and delicious word which, creeping to my feet,
    …
    The sea whisper’d me (Whitman, 2006:190-191).

The scene Whitman paints in this poem is vivid, and most commentators see it as one of Whitman’s most direct expressions of an operatic structure and setting. Faner (1951:86-87) says the poem ‘serves as the most unquestionable proof of the fundamental importance of opera to [Whitman’s] artistry’. I feel that it highlights the importance of the seashore in Whitman’s poetic constitution. However, what this poem
also highlights is that it is only through his later encounter with Bel Canto that Whitman was able to conjure and express the power of such a moment first experienced upon the seashore. Where the seashore was a precursor for the feelings that Whitman wanted to express, they only found their full realisation after Whitman’s encounter with Bel Canto. The imagery in the poem is particularly striking. In the background whispering is the sea. It is whispering a word that perhaps was there all along yet did not make sense until the call or sense of purpose was first revealed for the poet. It is not a single element that gives the importance to this dramatic moment, but all three elements together; the sorrowful lament of the mockingbird that acted as a catalyst for the pouring out of emotion in the child; the thousand songs that were born in response; and the word up from the waves: death. Without the first, the second may not have occurred, without the second, the third may not have been revealed either. The word out of the sea\(^{56}\) is death, and the boy instantly knows this word is the key to everything. It is a ‘delicious’ word, perhaps in one sense because only through coming to terms with it does one fully ignite one’s appetite for life. The key it holds is that the poet now sees the meaning of his task: in order to be reborn as ‘the outsetting bard’, he needs to die to what he was was before. Only through death is one reborn. To feel the call of the inspiration is to be face to face with a defining moment whereby if one chooses to move forward with that inspiration, one would need to die to what one was before that moment awakened one. This is the crux of Whitman’s radical transformation; his encounter with a singer brought forth and awakened his own songs, his own *singing,*

\(^{56}\) The poem’s original title in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* was ‘A Word Out of the Sea’ (Whitman, 1999:208).
and the rhythmic whispering of the sea reminded him that death would be the key to his rebirth.

While Whitman put his experience into symbolic form, no doubt echoing an actual childhood reminiscence, it is most plausible that the actual singer Whitman was symbolising in the poem was the singing of the great contralto Marietta Alboni (Faner, 1951:87). Alboni sang in New York in 1852-1853 and Whitman was so enamoured with her that he saw every single one of her performances of that season, probably twenty times in all (Matthiessen, 1941:559). Alboni was the only singer Whitman named personally in his poems, referring to her as ‘The lustrous orb, Venus contralto…Sister of loftiest gods’ (Whitman, 1999:326), and he wondered later in his life whether ‘the lady will ever know that her singing, her method, gave the foundation, the start, thirty years ago, to all my poetic literary effort since’ (cited in Loving, 1999:167). The seashore provided Whitman with the openness to space and rhythm, and was a liminal place he could encounter nature and feel enchantment, but only after these experiences were given the context of Bel Canto singing was he fully able to express their significance to his character and identity.

4.6 Emerson

Emerson’s influence upon Whitman is the third of what I consider the three major precursors of Whitman’s self-realisation, which were all part or parcel of the full awakening of himself as a singer – the Body-Bel Canto. The significance of these, I argue, were only realised in their fullest capacity later with his contact with Opera, the
revelation of which I am arguing encompasses and folds all these precursors into it. Emerson offered an important literary description and justification of many of the manifest impressions Whitman knew only intuitively. Moreover, Emerson was an orator – at least a lecturer – and therefore his writing has both the grand insight of developed thought and the common touch inherent in personally delivered plain speech that Whitman valued so highly. Most of Emerson’s most influential essays were written in the 1830s an 1840s, and while it is likely that Whitman knew at least of Emerson during the 1840s, it is, most significantly, during the extraordinary year immediately preceding the first publication of *Leaves of Grass* that Whitman was reading and absorbing Emerson more thoroughly. As Matthiessen (1941:522) notes:

Whitman dated the fecund reading to the summer of 1854 when he had been working at his trade of carpenter and had carried a book with him in his lunch pail. One day it chanced to be a volume of Emerson; and from that time he took with him no other writer.

The first significant essay of Emerson’s to appear in print, in 1836, was *Nature*, and it certainly influenced Whitman’s conceptualisation of his experience, whether through a long acquaintance with the work or in a moment of crystallisation immediately preceding *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman said of Emerson: ‘I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil’ (cited in Reynolds, 1995:82), which might suggest that through the ‘long foreground’ of his adult life up to the 1850s, which produced no writing of any significance, he was simmering and that perhaps a chance finding of Emerson’s work helped finally set off his flood of inspiration into the peerless 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Emerson too had been moved so profoundly
in the natural environment that his experiences in the woods and meadows led to his first significant published work *Nature* in 1836. While there are many passages in Emerson’s work describing being in the wild in rich moments of personal experience – which, as I will elaborate on below, were of fundamental importance to Whitman’s work also – these descriptions are still developed in a considered, literary style that never quite breaks free of form. This in fact was something Emerson struggled with somewhat, wishing to be a poet more than he actually was. As he wrote in a letter in 1835:

I am born a poet, – of a low class without doubt, yet a poet. That is my nature and vocation. My singing, to be sure, is very husky, and is for the most part in prose. Still I am a poet in the sense of a perceiver and dear lover of the harmonies that are in the soul and in matter, and specially of the correspondences between these and those (cited in Matthiessen, 1941:47).

We see here that Emerson felt himself to be naturally a poet, yet it was something that was more ideal than real. While he championed poets as those who can draw out significance and unity through their keen perception and relatedness to themselves and their own environment, unlike Whitman, the rhythm of his experience never quite took hold of him. As Matthiessen (1941:45-46) points out:

[Emerson] had perceptions of the most delicate and poignant beauty, he was continually being flooded by the fullness of the moment. But when he came to set it down on paper, the rhythmical wholeness of the experience slipped away from him…He could manage only seldom to build an organic form of his own.

While Emerson may not have been able to escape the more conventional form of the essay or lecture, his felt natural sense of being a poet rather than say a philosopher, lends his essays and lectures with a deep poetic sensibility, or ‘integrity of impression’ (Emerson, 2000:5) that comes from a feeling of integration with the life
around one.\textsuperscript{57} By looking at two passages, one from Emerson and one from Whitman, their distinctive styles can be appreciated.

In the presence of nature a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says – he is my creature, and maugre all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me. Not the sun or the summer alone, but every hour and season yields its tribute of delight; for every hour and change corresponds to and authorizes a different state of the mind, from breathless noon to grimmest midnight. In good health, the air is a cordial of incredible virtue. Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear (Emerson, 2000:6).

Emerson’s account tells about the experience of an almost overwhelming sense of congeniality and delight by being out of doors. It moves from the impersonal voice to the personal voice as Emerson shares of his own experience of exhilaration in the common.\textsuperscript{58} He is describing an experience of renewed or awakened significance in life, simply by sensing the latent fecundity of life present and pregnant in the natural landscape, which does not so much shun or deny grief but renders it impertinent, at least temporarily, while we are with nature. Whitman’s account of a similar experience is different:

\begin{quote}
Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road!
Healthy, free, the world before me!
The long brown path before me, leading wherever I choose!

Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I am good fortune,
Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{57} Such as in these lines from his essay \textit{Nature}:
‘The charming landscape which I saw this morning is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet’(Emerson, 2000:5).

\textsuperscript{58} The deliberate pun on ‘common’ here is of course very appropriate.
Strong and content I travel the open road.

The earth – that is sufficient,
I do not want the constellations any nearer,
I know they are very well where they are,
I know they suffice for those who belong to them.

Still here I carry my old delicious burdens,
I carry them, men and women – I carry them with me wherever I go,
I swear it is impossible for me to get rid of them,
I am filled with them, and I will fill them in return.

You road I travel and look around! I believe you are not all that is here!
I believe that something unseen is also here (Whitman, 1999:140).

Here Whitman is on the open road, not talking about it! this is the essential difference, and the exhilaration is palpable from the first exclamation point. The sense of acceptance of life could not be written larger: ‘The earth – that is sufficient’. In this short line is a powerful commitment to the present moment; a sense that all that could be read, known, sought, thought, and said, is already here, has already been, or is awaiting discovery. There is the sense that the conditions of existence have been happily agreed upon in an amor fati that makes his burdens ‘delicious’. The latter is an interesting choice of words as it evokes an important link with ‘taste’, not only as a sense experience but, more interestingly, in its second meaning, as ‘style’. It conveys an appreciation of his own character as exuding a particular style that is what it is because of his flaws, hang-ups, burdens. Through the particular personal struggles of his own private individual living and questioning, his own unique identity and character is created and manifested. Not through neglecting or concealing these but by incorporating them into his general character – ‘filling them in return’ – Whitman’s character is given
its unique style. This is a point Nietzsche might have agreed with; we can only give style to our character by not trying to be other than what we actually are, but by instead making our flaws fruitful. That is, having not only an acceptance of our failings, but a love that it is in fact these particular traits that will give us the greatest original insights into our selves and our life, and through these demonstrate a particular example – for others possibly, though not necessarily – of how a person can come to terms with life and live it. As Nietzsche (2001:163-164) writes:

One thing is needful. – To ‘give style’ to one’s character – a great and rare art! It is practised by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses that their nature has to offer and then fit them into an artistic plan until each appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye…In the end, when the work is complete, it becomes clear how it was the force of a single taste that ruled and shaped everything great and small – whether the taste was good or bad means less than one may think; it’s enough that it was one taste!

Whitman’s burdens become delicious when they have their place in his overall ‘taste’, which was to be as complete a human being as it was in him to be.59 Like many artists, Whitman knew the importance of all experience and human characteristics, not simply ‘good’ ones. Yet unlike those who might ‘romantically’ induce melancholia in order to inculcate a poetic state, Whitman’s poetry is far healthier, in the Nietzschean sense I have written about earlier in this chapter. The poem cited above is written as an affirmation of this way of being; he no longer needs good fortune, he is self-contained, healthy, strong, and content. Further, through the poem his private self-overcoming is made public, and he makes it clear to ‘men and women’ that he has surely come to terms with what others might consider would hold one back. Here the echoes of

59 Whitman can easily be seen to concur with the famous dictum of Terence that states ‘I am a human therefore let nothing human be foreign to me’.
Nietzsche continue, as Nietzsche knew that in the task of becoming an individual, of giving a style to one’s character, it is imperative to approach life in a genuinely different way to prevailing norms and standards. As Nehamas (1998:142) writes of Nietzsche’s position:

To become something significantly new, one must develop an unprecedented way of doing things, of thinking, feeling, and living. And to accomplish that, in turn, it will be necessary to break some long-accepted rules, some principles and practices that have been taken for granted so far.

We see in Whitman’s opening lines to ‘Poem of the Road’ above an attitude vastly different to an ‘ordinary’ state; he is joyous and content in himself in all his flaws, he feels the world itself to be lacking nothing, and in fact, can detect even more in it that can be perceived at first glance. Whitman writes, ‘something unseen is also here’, which hints at a perception so tuned in and creative that he alone might be privy to a fecundity that most people may not be aware of. And of course, it is this ‘seeing clearly’ that made him the poet he was; it provided him the unique and personal insight into the landscape that he wanted his poetry to be merely the accurate expression of.

This ability of Whitman’s to boldly create and live by such a distinctive style of character was surely also helped by Emerson’s essay ‘Self-Reliance’. In this essay, Emerson wrote some of the best sentences ever written on the virtues of non-conformity, such as when he states:

He who knows that power is inborn, that he is weak because he has looked for good out of him and elsewhere, and, so perceiving, throws himself unhesitatingly on his thought, instantly rights himself, stands in the erect position, commands his limbs, works miracles (Emerson, 2000:153).
This is echoed in Whitman, who made sure to never quote anyone in his work, but not only that, stated near the end of his life that ‘Leaves of Grass is an iconoclasm, it starts out to shatter the idols of porcelain worshipped by the average poets of our age’ (Whitman, 1999:445). Whitman, from the watershed 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, bore out fully Emerson’s (2000:150) dictum in the same essay to ‘Insist on yourself; never imitate’, and that in fact ‘imitation is suicide’ (Emerson, 2000:133).

Emerson also writes that:

> A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition as if every thing were titular and ephemeral but he. I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to names and badges (2000:135).

Whitman, talking to his friend in his later years offered no such capitulation:

> Here, Horace - here in *Leaves of Grass* - are 400, 430 pages of let-fly. No art, no schemes, no fanciful, delicate, elegant constructiveness - but let-fly [original emphasis] (Whitman, 1999:444).

Perhaps Whitman’s most profound gesture of independence came in the way he first published his first edition of *Leaves of Grass* without a name given on the title page. He did not put his own name, any name, on the book. Rather, he presented instead an unsigned image of himself in a slouch hat, and an undershirt showing from a wide-spread open collar. It is a haughty and disarming image, one hand is on his hip and the other in his pocket, and it certainly presents an original figure. Not until we get to line 499 of the first poem that a name suddenly appears: ‘Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos’ (Whitman, 1999:34). All of a sudden he has arrived, and done so in such an original manner. Surely no one ever before in history had referred to themselves in such a striking way. As Zweig (1984:16) says, his personality, his identity, emerges ‘as if produced by the poem’. This is integral to understanding Whitman. His
work was him, in a way that was more than autobiographical, though it most definitely was that too, as he himself said (Whitman, 1999:445-446). Rather, the poetry is both a completion of himself and the expression of his own rebirth as poet; it is a portrait of a world that opened up for Whitman through his radical transformation and birth as poet.

It was Whitman’s great gift that he not only put his singular worldview into an accessible form, but more importantly, he always said it was not extraordinary and in fact all could take part in it. As he said (Whitman, 1999:443), ‘In my philosophy – in the bottom meanings of Leaves of Grass – there is plenty of room for all’. He stated a similar concern more emphatically in ‘Song of Myself’:

By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms (1999:34).

In this democratic vision, Whitman was offering not an argument or a teaching, rather he was presenting a world as he had seen it. Whitman once said that his book has no purpose, no beginning, middle, and end, but is simply a statement of ‘a world, with all the mystery of that, all its movement, all its life’ (Whitman, 1999:447). This ‘world’ was the world of Whitman the Body-Bel Canto. As Bucke (2009:218-219) states:

With Walt Whitman his body, his outward life, his inward spiritual existence and his poetry were all one; in every respect each tallied the other, and any one of them could always be inferred from any other.

It is my contention that his way of being was that of a singer; awoken specifically by Bel Canto singing, Whitman’s world conveyed through his poems is the description of what it is like to be a singer. Therefore, by looking at his poetry as descriptions of the traits of Bel Canto, we can see what the traits of being a Body-Bel Canto actually look like.
4.7 Joy

As I outlined in Chapter Three, Joy is one of the essential features of Bel Canto singing. I am arguing that the traits associated with Bel Canto can be read as existential structures that can be cultivated through singing. Whitman’s own voice, awoken as it was by Bel Canto, thus has these traits. I am arguing that the traits of Bel Canto were actually the traits of Whitman’s particular being-in-the-world, and as his poetry was such a direct expression of himself and his way of being, his poetry offers insight into how these traits actually look. A sense of joy is found on virtually any page of Leaves of Grass as it is, in my argument, along with Athleticism, and Chiaroscuro, one of the pervading traits of the ‘world’ Whitman presented in his poetry. Bucke (2009:227) describes Whitman as having a character of ‘perennial joyousness’ and another acquaintance who met Whitman in 1866 said of her encounter:

> I remarked him as he entered the room; there seemed to be a peculiar brightness and elation about him, an almost irrepressible joyousness, which shone from his face and seemed to pervade his whole body. It was the more noticeable as his ordinary mood was one of quiet, yet cheerful serenity (cited in Bucke, 2009:236).

Even Whitman’s ordinary mood was one of cheerful serenity. This is Joy. It is a deep, lasting feeling, and not a fleeting happiness. With such joyousness as a basic foundation of his way of being, Whitman often he could be roused, especially in moments of inspiration, to a level of rapture that is most uncommon, such as when he writes:

> I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and am happy,
> To touch my person to some one else’s is about as much as I can stand (Whitman, 1999:38).

Again in the same poem we see a basic temperament of Joy:

> I am satisfied …. I see, dance, laugh, sing;

...
Alone far in the wilds and mountains I hunt,
Wandering amazed at my own lightness and glee

... The press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections (1999:17, 21, 24).

There is a wonderful sense of tactility in Whitman’s poems, and as I will elaborate upon further below, this was facilitated by the sensuousness he felt in his own body in health. Health was a basic prerequisite of Whitman’s way of being, and like the singer who would suffer under sickness or an ‘unlocked’ vocal organ, so Whitman’s Body-Bel Canto was likewise founded upon physical health. This I refer to as Athleticism, though it is also related to Joy. The Joy resulting from expressing in one’s fullest capacity is predicated on health. The most sustained account of Joy in Whitman’s poetry is ‘Poem of Joys’, which first appeared in the third edition (1860) and was later given the title of ‘A Song of Joys’. In the original poem, almost every stanza begins with an ecphonesis, an exclamatory ‘O’. The poem begins:

O to make a most jubilant poem!
O full of music! Full of manhood, womanhood, infancy!
O full of common employments! Full of grain and trees (Whitman, 1999:201).

The poem is over 150 lines long and continues with the same exuberance throughout. Toward the end of the poem Whitman begins to demonstrate how Joy can actually give one’s life a deeper meaning in a way that strengthens one’s resolve. Through Joy one can know how good life can feel and therefore hold a vision for one’s life that can act as a buoy against the conditions of existence. He writes:

O, while I live, to be the ruler of life - not a slave,
To meet life as a powerful conqueror,
No fumes - no ennui - no more complaints or scornful criticisms.
...
O the joy of suffering!
To struggle against great odds! to meet enemies undaunted!
To be entirely alone with them! to find out how much I can stand!
To look strife, torture, prison, popular odium, death, face to face!
…
O to have my life henceforth my poem of joys!
To dance, clap hands, exult, shout, skip, leap, roll on, float on,

Here Joy begins to look something like resolve, and indeed it is, to the extent that when established as a defining trait of one’s being-in-the-world, Joy can act as a bulwark against outside influences and other world views. Joy can be seen as the equilibrium that comes from the resolve of knowing our life to be fecund and deeply rich. When Bel Canto singing is felt as a way of being, we can feel ourselves too, like the soprano, to be lithely soaring over and above the mundane. When Whitman writes:

But now the chorus I hear, and am elated,
A tenor, strong, ascending; with power and health, with glad notes of day-break I hear,
A soprano, at intervals, sailing buoyantly over the tops of immense waves,
A transparent bass, shuddering lusciously under and through the universe,
The triumphant tutti – the funeral wailings, with sweet flutes and violins – all these I fill myself with (Whitman, 1999:241).

He is describing explicitly that the singing is portraying a health, vitality, which he himself, as he fills himself with it, then actualises as a way of being. As Zweig (1984:202) writes of Whitman’s development, ‘He was seized by a feeling of buoyancy. His buoyancy became a vice, an ambition’. More than that, it became a way of being, one that was given its buoyancy by singing. This is the way of being that is reflected in Whitman’s writing, not only his writing on singing and singers, but all his writing, as it reflected his daily activity, his being-in-the-world. As Matthiessen (1941:568) states, ‘Whitman’s cadences here do not reflect primarily the purposeful activity but his
enjoyment of a relaxed buoyant existence’. The *tone* of Whitman is constituted by the factors he felt in the singing of Bel Canto. And in this short passage we see not only the Joy, or elation of becoming aware of these experiences, but also the inherent athleticism – strong, ascending, with power and health; rising above immense waves – and chiaroscuro – the shuddering bass running through everything; the funeral wailing that also has its place. This is what constitutes the resolve and attitude that can be seen throughout Whitman’s writing, and especially in Poem of Joys. While as literature, or something read from the standpoint of the natural attitude, a lot of this poem might seem exaggerated – and indeed Whitman’s exclamatory style was easily imitated and mocked – however, read from perspective of Bel Canto singing the poem almost seems moderate. The dancing lightness and glee of Bel Canto singing, lived as a way of being, is indeed also a lightness and an enthusiasm that encounters life as a glorious experience in which these specific traits become prominent. I believe Whitman is simply writing as largely as he can the distinctive experience of the world in a state of Joy. And it is a Joy that can, in my argument, be specifically traced to the characteristic of Bel Canto.

4.8 Athleticism

Closely related to Joy is Athleticism. There is an emphasis on physical health running right through *Leaves of Grass*. Oftentimes Whitman refers explicitly to the need to be healthy in order to both fully accept what life has to offer as well as fully express what one has to offer also, and indeed all three of these traits are intimately interwoven. For example, by first attaining a state of full health, the sensuousness of the body can more easily facilitate a buoyant, relaxed feeling that is conducive to Joy. Just as the singer
must stand upright in posture, control the breathing and relax the countenance in a way that is open as if in a smile, so existentially we can also prime our capacity for joy by comporting ourselves in a way that is conducive to an ease of expression and a facility over our full capacity. This is the trait I am referring to as Athleticism. It is a feeling of being in full health, that is, having a facility over and ease of access to our fullest capacities of expression. From here the world can open up differently. Whitman (1999:15) mentions health in one of the first lines of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*: The feeling of health …. the full-noon trill …. the song of me rising from bed and meeting the sun.

The pace of this opening section is languid and serene. It portrays a way of being where he does not need to struggle against great odds, but is simply taking in the world in a deep and relaxing way and marvelling at it all. From the starting position of his body in full health, the world reveals itself to be infinitely curious and fecund, even in the most minute things.

I loafe and invite my soul
I lean and loafe at my ease …. observing a spear of summer grass …
Loafe with me on the grass …. loose the stop from your throat,
Not words, not music or rhyme I want …. not custom or lecture, not even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice (Whitman, 1999:14,18).

This ease is part of Athleticism. As an existential trait, Athleticism means being at ease with oneself, and experiencing oneself to be in full health. By health I mean a sense of being one’s own master. Nietzsche, though he was physically very ill and suffered most of his adult life in sickness and pain, nevertheless had what I would call an existential athleticism, because he was in full command of his relationship to himself. This relates

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back to the practitioners of Bel Canto mentioned in Chapter Three who reached the peak of performance through a kin-aesthetic sensation, not through reflective listening and constant adjusting. The quality of their expression was predicated on their ability to be in the body and let it be in full flight. In these opening lines to ‘Song of Myself’, Whitman displays such an ease of expression and relaxed yet alive demeanour that it is not a form of laziness but a result of wisdom. Indeed, during this opening section Whitman describes that he now stands apart from ‘trippers and askers’ who surround him with constant questions, and recalls the days when he ‘sweated through fog with linguists and contenders’ (Whitman, 1999:17-18). He is beyond all that now, and has found a place in himself where all those things are burdensome to the simple and direct expression of life as he is aware of it unfolding. His bodily ease is what has opened this awareness. What is also striking about the last stanza quoted above is Whitman’s preference for pure tone. Words, and even melody, won’t be natural enough for such a direct experience so Whitman here recognises that it is only the lull, the pure tone of the voice that can be fitting for such a moment; words and notes, not even the best, can really add anything in such a situation. The most immediate and natural thing is tone; tone is where being resides. It is this type of heightened awareness that I argue is opened up through a kind of health that can be described as existential Athleticism. This heightened awareness is like a keen awareness where one can see what is important and what is trifling without much effort. There is a sense of the world slowing down, just as Whitman describes it, and things can be taken in in more depth and more immediately. In this process what becomes of concern are the things that bring one closer to what deeply matters, and overall, aesthetic appreciation is heightened. In such a state the
world of ‘busy-ness’ falls well into the background and a person has an ability to cut through what is unnecessary and focus with more intent and depth upon what is most deeply cared for.

There is a second aspect to Athleticism also, and this is concerned with readiness and engagement. Whitman did not spend all his time loafing on the grass, and in other passages he makes it clear what else is required when he talks about health:

Allons! Yet take warning!
He traveling with me needs the best blood, thews, endurance,
None may come to the trial till he or she bring courage and health.

Come not here if you have already spent the best of yourself!
Only those may come who come in sweet and determined bodies,
No diseased person – no rum-drinker or venereal taint is permitted here (Whitman, 1999:145).

In this passage there is a marked emphasis on being physically healthy, because only through this may we endure the long task of self-realisation. These lines, from ‘Poem of the Road’, speak of the necessary sacrifice required to forge one’s way forward into a life of one’s own making. Whitman knew the road well, and he admonishes us that if we too are to travel it, we had better be prepared. Whitman made similar statements in An American Primer, written a few years earlier, about the way these particular vices would hinder the ‘song of ourself’, the quality of our expression into the world. He writes:

Drinking brandy, gin, beer, is generally fatal to the perfection of the voice; – meanness of mind the same; – gluttony in eating, of course the same; a thinned habit of body, or a rank habit of body – masturbation, inordinate going with
women, rot the voice...All sorts of physical, moral, and mental deformities are inevitably returned to the voice (Whitman, 1904:9-10).

Whitman here highlights that these things specifically destroy the voice. Indeed, the words could be mistaken for those of an austere vocal coach. He is not necessarily talking about singing, however he does go on to say that ‘The great Italian singers are above all others in the world’ (1904:10) in their ability to use the voice to its fullness. What is significant here is that the voice, in my reading of this passage, is existentially revealing. How we are determines the quality of our expression, and this is revealed most clearly through the voice. Our way of being can be transformed by changing our physiology, and likewise so can it be diminished. As Bowling (1980:27), whom I quoted in Chapter One writes ‘it is rare to find a great voice emanating from a sickly cadaverous body’. Whitman knew the importance for his own expression the quality of being in full health and that is why he emphasised it. It is also why I see the trait of Athleticism as one of the constituents of his being-in-the-world.

In one particular poem Whitman made the connection between fortifying our being and our ability to express something valuable extremely clear:

Are you eligible?
Are you full-lung’d and limber-lipp’d from long trial?
   from vigorous practice? from physique?
Do you move in these broad lands as broad as they?
...
For only at last, after many years – after chastity, friendship,
   procreation, prudence, and nakedness,
After treading ground and breasting river and lake,
After a loosened throat – after absorbing eras, temperaments,
   races – after knowledge, freedom, crimes,
After complete faith – after clarifying, elevations, and removing obstructions, After these, and more, it is just possible there comes to a man, a woman, the divine power to use words (Whitman, 1999:191-192).

The important word here in this is after. After experiencing all these things – and more! – we may come to one the power to use words. This is why Athleticism is required. Existentially, it is a trait that allows one to do all this and more in the pursuit of development that leads to a voice of one’s own. This is of course not an easy task, and it takes away so much of the work required to think of Whitman solely as having had some divine revelation into cosmic consciousness whereby he achieved his powers.60

Here Whitman is writing about orators, and as I pointed out in the section on oratory above, what mattered for Whitman was the personal magnetism of the individual inspired speaker. More important than the rhetorical devices or logic was the physical presence of the speakers themselves. How much of them was in the speech? And more importantly how much life did they have in them? This trait of Athleticism can now be shown to be more wide-ranging than simply concerned with oratory and orators.

Through our own personal voice, our life is revealed. This is revealed less through the words, or the notes, but through the tone. Tone is where being resides, and our tone is shaped by how we are in the world, by our being. Whitman’s tone, as the Body-Bel Canto, is, I argue, constituted by the same existential characteristics that can be cultivated through singing. These traits are existential analogies of the musical traits associated with Bel Canto singing. Whitman, inspired as he was by Bel Canto, therefore

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60 In fact, the poem cited here is very reminiscent of a passage of Nietzsche, referred to above, in Human, All Too Human, Section 163, where Nietzsche rails against thinking someone as born with inborn talents and innate gifts, and thus ignoring how hard it actually is to achieve something of worth (Nietzsche, 1984:112).
developed his own voice out of a way of being that has these traits. There is in Whitman Joy, Athleticism, and Chiaroscuro. I have shown how Whitman’s way of being was constituted by Joy through the way he was often pervaded by a cheerful serenity that could erupt into a joyousness over simple pleasures and body sensations. Further, Joy for Whitman was a kind of armour which could act as a bulwark against the external world of other opinions and personalities, and against the conditions of life generally. I also showed how this buoyancy was derived from Bel Canto singing and that when seen as such, makes more sense than seen without that context. The second trait of the Body-Bel Canto is Athleticism, and I have shown how that is apparent for Whitman in both his ease of expression and relaxed and deep engagement with life, as well as in his acknowledgement that one’s expression only gains its authority and personal magnetism after a longer engagement with life, without succumbing to detrimental vices. Existential Athleticism allows one to take on a vast amount of life experience without falling into ruin, and in this sense, health is very important. I will now look at the final trait of the Body-Bel Canto before I summarise and conclude this chapter.

4.9 Chiaroscuro

Chiaroscuro is evident in Whitman as an existential trait to the extent that everything in him was accepted. The good and the evil, the bright and the dark. More specifically, these were not opposites, but infused, just as Chiaroscuro is, and this is why it specifically can be seen as a trait of Whitman’s character. Musically, Chiaroscuro refers, as I have outlined in Chapter Three, to a bright/dark quality whereby there is a clarity or directness of expression that is immediately felt, like a defining character, and yet there
is a depth or ‘dark’ side to that character also – something deeper that is not immediately present on the surface that gives a richness to the tone. As a characteristic of a way of being-in-the-world as portrayed by Whitman, this comes about in his insistence that good and evil, soul and body, light and dark, calm and storm, are not all simply good but are necessarily and undeniably here, and it is the acknowledgement and acceptance of this fact that gives Whitman his distinctive insight into life and thus his distinctive attitude and personality. Too often it seems there is a tendency to regard Whitman as only concerned with the bright side. He became known in his lifetime as ‘The Good Gray Poet’, thanks to a contemporary biography written about him which used that title (Allen, 1955:361ff.), and perhaps with his own excisions throughout his later life of some of the more explicit passages of his book, many, including Whitman himself to some extent, began to believe that was what he was (Schmidgall, cited in Whitman, 1999:xxii). Yet he is far more complex than the sentimentalism that moniker suggests. Another source of Whitman’s appeal as perhaps simply a happy, optimistic poet was William James, who, in his book The Varieties of Religious Experience, which was first published in 1902 wrote this about Whitman:

The supreme contemporary example of such an inability to feel evil is of course Walt Whitman…[He] owes his importance in literature to the systematic expulsion from his writings of all contractile elements. The only sentiments he allowed himself to express were of the expansive order; and he…ends by persuading the reader that men and women, life and death, and all things are divinely good (James, 1982:84-85).

James sees Whitman as the quintessential example of the psychology of healthy-mindedness, which he defines as ‘the tendency which looks on all things and sees that they are good’ (1982:87). I feel that this is not exactly correct; while it may be true that
Whitman bore out the expansiveness of even the smallest and mundane thing, I argue that what in fact made his poetry more than simply expressing the ‘good’ can be recognised more accurately by looking at Chiaroscuro. Through looking at the quality of Chiaroscuro as an existential trait, we can begin to see that Whitman indeed had both bright and dark aspects to his tone. And this can be drawn out in two distinctive ways: both as an acknowledgement of all facets of one’s personality; and as the ability to offer genuine compassion and insight into another.

First, Whitman never championed one aspect of his nature over another. He never lost sight of himself as a man, despite however loftily he might have regarded himself. Bucke states that unlike other figures whom he had described as being endowed with ‘Cosmic Consciousness’, Whitman was alone in not being ‘carried away and subjugated by it’ (Bucke, 2009:230). In most cases, Bucke argues, when someone has been awoken through revelation, there is a tendency to negate one part of life and promote only another; often there is the tendency to then believe there is one part of ourselves to be cultivated and another to be hidden away, such as despising the ‘evils of the flesh’ or through the abasement of the ‘natural man’. Whitman, however, was not like this at all. Whether or not he was endowed with a ‘Cosmic Consciousness’ his revelation seemed to draw all aspects of himself into a larger coherence. As Bucke (2009:232) writes:

It may be that Walt Whitman is the first man who, having Cosmic Consciousness very fully developed, has deliberately set himself against being thus mastered by it, determining, on the contrary, to subdue it and make it the servant along with simple consciousness, self consciousness and the rest of the united, individual SELF…He believes in it, but he says the other self, the old self, must not abase itself to the
new; neither must the new be encroached upon or limited by the old; he will see that they live as friendly co-workers together.

Whitman’s transformation led neither to self-indulgence or self-denial but to self-celebration, which is a totally different emphasis than that in which one must deny certain aspects of one’s self or one’s life in order to be fulfilled. What these means in more concrete terms however, is that Whitman knew the body was as important as the soul, and his burdens and flaws were just as necessary as his virtues. I have touched upon this above in relation to Nietzsche and *amor fati*, though through the lens of Chiaroscuro we can see that Whitman’s expression is not simply of seeing all things as good, but of all things being worthy; worthy of celebrating and not to be denied. In this way Whitman goes somewhat further than Pascal, though I am reminded of Pascal in the lines:

> I believe in you my soul …. the other I am must not abase itself to you,
> And you must not be abased to the other (Whitman, 1999:18).

Whitman’s emphasis on both sides is reminiscent of Pascal’s notion of greatness and wretchedness, outlined in Chapter Two. For Pascal there is greatness in knowing our wretchedness, and the point is to not fall into either pride or despair by knowing only one side. Rather we must touch both extremes at once and fill the intervening space (Pascal, 1958:98). This is what would give us a solid grounding to our identity and this is what Whitman portrays in his poetry. There is a depth to his expression that acts as an undertone to the joyous optimism and enthusiasm. He simply could not sing the praises of another in the way he suggests he would if he was blind to, or unwilling to look at, the ignorance, vileness, and stupidity that is concomitant with being human. Yet he nevertheless states:
O I could sing such grandeurs and glories about you!
You have not known what you are – you have slumbered upon yourself all your life
…
The mockeries are not you,
Underneath them, and within them, I see you lurk,
I pursue you where none else has pursued you,
…
The pert apparel, the deformed attitude, drunkenness, greed, premature death, all
these I part aside,
I track you through your windings and turnings – I come upon you where you
thought eye should never come upon you (Whitman, 1999:133).

Here in this poem, called ‘Poem of You, Whoever You Are’, Whitman gives expression
to the feeling of compassion and wanting to uplift another human. In this particular
poem he shows that he is not afraid to see beneath the mask, to see the least glamorous
traits and yet still not only accept these but sing the glories of the totality of such a
person. Such a gesture would only be genuine if the giver was without prejudice or
judgement of the receiver’s shortcomings. This capacity is best formed as an
acknowledgement that one too, but by the grace of God, could be in a similar situation,
and it is this level of complexity to Whitman’s character that gives his voice its depth
and dimension. Chiaroscuro is present in Whitman’s voice because it has tremendous
capacity for holding in tension both the greatness of life and its wretchedness, and his
unadorned way of expressing and celebrating both is why he resonates and connected
with so many people, both personally and through his poems.61

61 ‘In 1856, Thoreau dropped in to see him in Brooklyn and, afterward, remarked, with some
exasperation, that Whitman seemed to know everyone they met on their walk down to Fulton
Street to the ferry. Thoreau had never encountered such a thoroughgoing democrat’ (Zweig,
1984:16).
Yet Whitman was not offering a feel-good place to relax and ease one’s burdens, and this is also what gives his expression its depth and dimension of bright/dark. As I outlined above in relation to Athleticism, going with Whitman meant comporting oneself in a way that opens full access to one’s capacities, which is usually predicated upon health. Similarly with Chiaroscuro, Whitman admonishes that what he is suggesting is not easy. ‘Listen!’ he says in ‘Poem of the Road’, ‘I will be honest with you, I do not offer the old smooth prizes, but offer rough new prizes’ (Whitman, 1999:145). What he offers is a way to realise a greater understanding of ourselves that goes beyond the superficial mask of polite society and into the ‘rough’ territory of our own uncharted development. The self he celebrates is greater in the sense of being larger, and it is larger simply because it has more facets to it, facets that are both bright and dark. Having acknowledged these in himself he is then prepared to recognise these in others, and in doing so offer a sort of solidarity. In a section toward the end of ‘Poem of the Road’ Whitman makes this clear:

Allons! out of the dark confinement!
It is useless to protest – I know all and expose it.

Behold through you as bad as the rest!
Through the laughter, dancing, dining, supping, of people,
Inside of dresses and ornaments, inside of those washed and trimmed faces
Behold a secret silent loathing and despair!

No husband, no wife, no friend, no lover, so trusted as to hear the confession,
Another self, a duplicate of every one, skulking and hiding it goes, open and above-board it goes,
…
Smartly attired, countenance smiling, form upright,
   death under the breast-bones, hell under the skull-bones,
Under the broad-cloth and gloves, under the ribbons and artificial flowers,
Keeping fair with customs, speaking not a syllable of itself,

Whitman here acknowledges the private personal suffering that goes on in every human, whether we acknowledge it or not. In one sense he comes very close to describing something akin to what Jung would call the Shadow almost a century later. Specifically, he mentions a secret silent loathing and despair that causes not only physical pain and heartache but psychological hell too. To acknowledge these is to acknowledge that there is always struggle, that life is not simply a happy time we always feel great about, no matter how buoyant we might be. Beneath our buoyancy are the surging waves, and without acknowledging this, we might too easily lose our way and end up drowning in despair. Chiaroscuro is the result of way we have acknowledged these tendencies within ourselves and mastered the struggle to rise above them. Existentially, it is a trait that reveals a definitive and clear character that has depth and dimension; it is the inner power that gives compassion authenticity; it is the gratitude and grace of a love that knows tragedy. As one acquaintance of Whitman stated to Bucke (2009:223):

How could Walt Whitman (said my interlocutor) have taken the attitude toward evil, and all things evil, which is behind every page of his utterance in “Leaves of Grass” from first to last – so different on that subject form every other writer known, new or old – unless he enfolded all that evil within him.

Whitman, in my reading The Body-Bel Canto, thus held these traits I have presented as constituting that way of being, namely Joy, Athleticism, and Chiaroscuro. These traits

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62 ‘The shadow personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself and yet is always thrusting itself upon him directly or indirectly – for instance inferior traits of character and other incompatible tendencies’ (Jung, 1989:399).
are of course interwoven; Joy is a kind of resolve of having arrived faithfully at a conclusion and acceptance of oneself that brings equanimity; Athleticism is an ease of expression that is conducive to Joy, and it is also the ability to experience a lot of life and not be overwhelmed; Chiaroscuro is revealed to the extent that one has acceptance of oneself, usually portrayed by Joy, as well as a sense of a definite character that has clarity and depth, usually the result of existential athleticism. Whitman’s poetry and his person, one and the same, were expressive of these traits and thus his work gives us an insight into this particular way of being that I argue is forged by singing.

4.10 Conclusions

Throughout this chapter I have aimed to argue that Whitman is the poet of Bel Canto. I have suggested that his poetry is indicative of what it is like to be a singer, and therefore he provides the literary link between the musical and existential traits I am arguing are made manifest when a person sings. To begin with, I wanted to highlight that Whitman was not automatically born expressing these traits but rather that they were born in him as a result of a radical transformation that occurred when Whitman encountered Bel Canto Opera. To do this I drew on Nietzsche’s philosophy to help argue that Whitman’s birth as a poet came about through a need to give his life the dimension it was lacking; through his birth as a poet he became Walt Whitman. Further, I argued that Whitman’s particular style was born out of his encounter with Bel Canto singing. It was Bel Canto that opened Whitman’s eyes to the possibility of expressing such tremendous feeling and gave him a form by which to do it. Throughout this section, Nietzsche’s philosophy helped articulate the underlying mechanisms of such a radical developmental process;
more specifically, the notions of Apollonian and Dionysian helped me to articulate what Whitman was wrestling with in his search for an expression that would both fulfil himself and give form to his strivings. From there I wanted to look at the precursors to Whitman’s encounter with Bel Canto Opera in order to show that Whitman already had a creative passion, and he had already had some deeply moving experiences in certain areas, yet none of these could yet make him the poet he became. This highlighted that the encounter with Bel Canto, or any encounter whereby we might actually finally transform, is usually not a singular, one-off event, but has some important precursors that paved the way for the piece that unlocks the new identity. These precursors were his love of Oratory, the Seashore, and the writings of Emerson.

Whitman’s encounter with oratory, right from an early age, gave him the powerful sense that through the spoken word, a person had the power to invest into others deep feelings of passion and insight. Further, it was a way of ‘delivering’ oneself in the sense that one’s life experiences, thoughts, and the totality of one’s identity can be given expression and release through the public lecture. Here Whitman realised that certain speakers drew great passion more than others, and it taught him that more than the written word, oratory gave a personal touch to ideas that when promulgated through the personally cultivated tone of the individual voice, went deep into the hearts of listeners. It was not what was said but how it was said that moved Whitman. This, I argue, is tone, and while the voice didn’t soar to the heights of Opera, it was nevertheless an important precursor of a love for the voice that reached its fulfilment when Whitman encountered Bel Canto.
The Seashore gave Whitman a sense of freedom and rhythm. It was a personal space, betwixt and between worlds where he was more in contact with nature than anywhere else. The rolling waves upon the shore gave Whitman a rhythm that stayed with him all his life. More than this, it gave him the distinct feeling that if he could impress others the way the sea impressed upon him – if he could get across the feelings he felt there alone on the shore – then he could be satisfied that his yearnings were not in vain. In what many consider his best poem, Whitman sets the scene of his awakening as a poet on the seashore. In the climactic moment there, the warbling of the mockingbird sets off an outpouring of emotion which leads to thousands of songs being unleashed within the young boy. He realises his purpose on the seashore, and the secret word was given there to him in the rolling waves that licked at his feet. If it wasn’t for the husky whispering of the sea lapping the shore, the poet may not have realised the full implications of the scene. But the ocean repeated to him ‘Death’ and I argue that this was the realisation that he was from then to be reborn again as one who would sing the thousands of songs that were sprung to life by the sorrowful song of the mockingbird. However, the mockingbird is only a symbol, and Whitman didn’t write that poem as a child. It took years before he encountered in his life the one singer who could have such an affect. This was Marietta Alboni, the Italian Bel Canto singer whom Whitman saw in every one of her performances when she was in New York City, in those critical years immediately preceding the first 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The Seashore awakened his love of rhythm and spaciousness, but the Opera brought these to their fullest height.
The writings of Emerson were also an important precursor for Whitman as Emerson gave a theoretical structure to Whitman’s love of nature. More importantly, Emerson gave Whitman the encouragement of Self-Reliance, and in this way he quite possibly shaped Whitman’s confidence in never relying upon former writers or outside ideas. Emerson’s writing helped Whitman ‘find himself’ (Matthiessen, 1941:522), and so he was an important influence on Whitman’s development. However, Emerson alone was only a precursor. It set Whitman up with the courage that when he did find his own expression, he would be able to go through with it. When Whitman encountered Bel Canto and it opened him up to Free-Verse, Whitman was able to actualise Emerson’s idea of Self-Reliance and trust himself and his own authority as to what he was attempting. These three precursors, Oratory, the Seashore, and the writing of Emerson, were all folded into Bel Canto, which I argue for Whitman, contained all the elements Whitman had been inspired by in these three precursors and, even more, opened Whitman up to his own being as a singer. This was the real transformation, and something the other things couldn’t accomplish. Bel Canto inspired, in my reading, Whitman as the Body-Bel Canto. The traits of the singing style he most loved became lived existential traits, and Whitman’s poetry became, as I argue, the poetry of the Body-Bel Canto.

There is an account by Bucke (2009:219) of a personal encounter he had with a musician who was taken with Whitman that offers us an insight into what it was specifically that drew people in to Whitman’s genial personality. As Bucke writes,
People could not tell why they liked him. They said there was something attractive about him; that he had a great deal of personal magnetism, or made some other vague explanation that meant nothing. One very clever musical person, who spent a couple of days in my house while Walt Whitman was there, said to me on going away: “I know what it is; it is his wonderful voice that makes it so pleasant to be with him.” I said: “Yes, perhaps it is; but where did his voice get that charm?” [my emphasis].

This chapter has been in some ways a long answer that question. Whitman’s voice was the voice of a person who had cultivated within himself the traits of Bel Canto. The Body-Bel Canto is that of a person who expresses the traits of Joy, Athleticism, and Chiaroscuro as existential traits. These give the voice a character, and the charm is the result of these specific qualities being present in the tone of the voice. And Whitman’s own voice, developed and cultivated, indeed awakened, as it was by Bel Canto, revealed and expressed these qualities in their fullest capacity. He is, in my reading, a singular example of what the particular musical traits of Bel Canto singing look like when they become existential structures of one’s being-in-the-world. Whitman’s voice did not always have these qualities; his world did not always appear as imbued with Joy, Athleticism, and Chiaroscuro. But through his radical transformation that was instigated by his encounter with Bel Canto singing, these were the traits that I argue came to define the quality of his being and his world. Whitman always referred to himself as a singer, his activity as carolling and trilling, and his poems as songs. Yet he wasn’t in fact strictly a ‘singer’, and he especially was not a singer of the Bel Canto style. Yet he was a Body-Bel Canto; he manifested the traits of singing as existential traits, and from this we can see that one does not necessarily have to be a singer to actualise this way of being-in-the-world, represented in my argument by the Body-Bel Canto, but it is
unquestioningly a “singerly” way of being. My thesis is an attempt to show that through singing a particular transformation takes places, first with the body, then existentially, and what is invoked is what I call the Body-Bel Canto, or ‘beautiful singing body’. Therefore my thesis argues that through singing, a new way of being may be seized upon, and this way of being has certain traits, namely of Joy, Athleticism, and Chiaroscuro. However, it is not necessary that one in fact sing in order to embody a way of being. Existentially, this is potentially available to anyone who might invoke or express these traits, whether they are singing or not. My argument is however, that singing is the ‘royal road’ to the Body-Bel Canto, and that through actively engaging the body and taking up the song, one’s being-in-the-world can change, and one’s horizon of possibilities can be renewed. The particular traits this way of being has are, in my argument, life giving; there is a Joy, which can be a spontaneity and playfulness, as well as a lasting sense of purpose, resolve, and equilibrium; Athleticism, which is a healthiness that allows one the fullest access to his or her fullest expression that is ‘unlocked’ and perpetually available; and there is Chiaroscuro, which is an unflinching acceptance of both the light and the nightside within one and within the world, not as two opposites at odds but fused and necessary. Singing, in this way, is a way to life. Life is opened up in a new way that is richer in meaning and more personally rewarding when the newly experienced traits are given credence. This life, once awakened and experienced, can then be committed to as an ongoing guiding path that one can then define oneself by. Out of the pre-established harmony of one’s life rises something new,

Yet if you attained these traits in ways other than singing, the identity you create could not be called a Descanter of Revelations. The purpose of this thesis is to show how singing is a powerful way of cultivating these traits, and that these can be committed to as an ongoing identity, which I call the Descanter of Revelations.
a new expression, that gives new beauty (possibilities) and meaning to that which one is. Through this opens the revelation that one’s identity had not yet been fully awakened until one began singing; going above, standing apart from what one was, singing is a seizing of possibilities. Singing is a way to life.
Conclusion

The Descanter of Revelations

The Descanter of Revelations is the name I have given to a particular way of being-in-the-world that has been forged and fostered through singing and then committed to as an identity. By giving an identity a name it makes it something tangible and real; it is a title that one can go by and therefore it can be a help in guiding one in his or her ongoing daily pursuits. This particular title is deliberately poetic, as it is referring to a way of being that is also poetic, or meaning-dense, which means it might be intangible, amorphous, or otherwise transient and hard to recognise. Yet the poetry of the title nevertheless strikes right at the very centre of what I believe is awakened when one tunes in to the shift in being revealed through singing. When a person begins to sing, there is an opportunity to recognise oneself through that act as something different to how one was before. By taking up the song, the singer rises up out of a predetermined harmony – or disharmony – to actualise potentialities that were simply not there before the particular act brought them forth. These can then be seized upon to create an identity for oneself. Simply put, the Descanter of Revelations is a singer who, through descanting, has revelations. Like the descant melody, the singer makes a ‘song apart’; above what has preceded it, not contrary to it but beyond, bringing all the elements of the pre-established harmonic structure into a higher unity that reveals their possibilities in a new way. Reading the musical term existentially is the key to unpacking the meaning of this title and this identity. It is a title given to a way of being, and therefore it must be taken, poetically, as an identity with certain characteristics. The Descanter is
the singer who does not necessarily literally sing a descant, but ‘sings apart’, that is, sings a unique expression that is the catalyst for the revelation of one’s life. The revelation occurs because the singer in this sense awakens a new potentiality for expression, for liberation, and for how one is to be in the world. This is not at all hyperbole, and my attempt to describe this process using Phenomenology, Existentialism, Musicology, and Poetry, has been an effort to clearly define this particular way of being-in-the-world that singing awakens. Further, my thesis argues that it is not only simply the manner of expression that offers new potentialities. In other words, using the voice to create music rather than simply speaking does indeed, as I have outlined in Chapter’s One and Five, allow for a new kind of expression that reveals oneself in the world in a new way and offers new forms of communication and self-reflection. Yet my thesis is saying more than this. My thesis argues further that the real revelation happens when a singer becomes ontologically sensitive and notices the new way of being offered when singing, and decides to choose this new way of being as a guiding light for how he or she can be in the world. This moves singing from its transitory place in one’s life and makes it more than just ‘feeling good’ when singing. It puts singing as a way of being; whether one is singing or not, the traits offered through singing become defining characteristics of how one is to be, and this is chosen by the individual alone as a subjective truth that can be lived by. There is no objective or transcendental guarantee for this being ‘right’, and so only the singer’s commitment to it reveals its worth. Yet in this commitment it is revealed that singing is a way of rising above what may have preceded and established itself as fixed in one’s identity, and renewing it in a way that is personal, chosen for oneself, and to that extent capable of
being a revelation. This thesis has been an attempt to analyse the process of what it means to become a Descanter of Revelations, in terms of its constituent elements, the historical context of these particular traits, and the analysis of the subjective and intersubjective worlds these traits create.

C.1 A Song Apart.

It is really only a minority of people who might be called ‘individual’. Individual in the sense of an in-divisible unit, not in the Foucauldian sense of ‘subjects’, but in the existential sense of living authentically as choosing for oneself how one is (Heidegger, 1962:312). Authenticity comes from the Greek authentes meaning ‘to author’, and so there is, along with the existential notion of ‘standing out’, a way whereby choosing for oneself how one is and living by it, in other words, consciously and resolutely being one’s own author, is to be an individual. Where Foucault (1977:170ff,190-193) highlights the disciplining function of ‘descending individualism’ in which we do not exist as a homogenous mass but rather, through the ‘ignoble archives’ of kept records and knowledge of each and every person – not of the nobility only – we are all individualised and subjected, I want to point out that while this may be to some extent arguably true, within this we have an ability to decide for ourselves how and who we want to be. This is all the more important when considering how quickly and permanently externally given definitions can be given and attach themselves to us in ways that can be potentially undermining and damaging (Cf. Goffman, 1961; Goffman, 1961).

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64 Cf. Sartre (2003:574) ‘[M]an being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being...He must assume the situation with the proud consciousness of being the author of it’.
1963). It is arguably quite possibly the case in society that potentially stigmatising definitions are in fact the one place where permanence of character is granted. Yet Goffman also highlights that although we might inevitably be drawn into social roles and institutions that largely define us, it is through our own specific ways of taking ownership of our situation that we maintain an integrity of selfhood. As he says:

Without something to belong to, we have no stable self, and yet total commitment and attachment to any social unit implies a kind of selflessness. Our sense of being a person can come from being drawn into a wider social unit; our sense of selfhood can arise through the little ways in which we resist the pull. Our status is backed by the solid buildings of the world, while our sense of personal identity often resides in the cracks (Goffman, 1961:280).

Defining oneself as a Descanter of Revelations is not a resignation but a resolution to make the ‘small crack’ we have as a kind of starting place for our own self-definition the most solid foundation of all. This is why it is a form of faith because existentially, it is only our own personal decision that is trying to account for ourselves, rather than being drawn into the larger institutions and structures that, in the words of Goffman, ‘[do] not so much support the self as constitute it’ (1961:154). As I pointed out in Chapter Two, there is invariably a break with the past in every creative act, and this can create anxiety. Yet without the courage to move forward guided by our own self-defined way of being the world will be all too willing to supply our definitions for us. This I believe is true not only in the sociological sense outlined by Goffman, but also in the existential sense outlined by Heidegger, where he states ‘Only the particular Dasein decides its existence, whether it does so by taking hold or by neglecting’ (Heidegger, 1962:33). To be a Descantor of Revelations is a way of taking hold of existence. To do this, however, is to stand out from not only others but also what we were before also.
That is why the descant melody is an appropriate term. It not only covers the musical meaning of being a ‘song apart’, which also might mean ‘singing above’, but also accounts for the existential shift that takes place where the singer moves out and beyond old ways of being, and, by virtue of defining one’s life for oneself, moves apart from others also.

C.2 Summary

In order to conceptualise my argument of how singing is more than simply a musical act and can in fact be defining as a way of being, I decided first upon this title, which to me, in a word captures the essence of what I want to argue: Being a singer is an identity that holds in it a certain way of being-in-the-world that goes beyond pre-established meanings and creates new ones that are personally authored and significant. In order to theorise this claim I first drew upon the fundamental distinction between singing and speaking, as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, namely that to sing is:

> To articulate or utter words or sounds in succession with musical inflections or modulations of the voice so as to produce an effect *entirely different* from that of ordinary speech [my emphasis] (Vol. XV: 513).

In order to fully explicate this distinction I looked at singing technique in the Western Classical tradition as that helped identify and bring attention to how so many aspects that are usually taken for granted when speaking, such as breathing, facial gestures, bodily positioning and comportment, and diction, all require significant conscious attention when singing. This was in order to therefore show that singing is a completely new way of engaging our body and expressing ourselves than when we are speaking, or not singing.
Using this information I then drew on the Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty to argue that if it is through our body that we grasp the world, then the significant changes in our physiology when singing are actually concomitant with changes in our way of being. My formulation of this process was to say that in producing the Bel Canto, so too does the body become. Therefore my theoretical construct for the ‘singing body’ I called the Body-Bel Canto. This enabled me to have a theoretical construct that allowed me to highlight the singing body as one that also holds certain existential traits, which, over the course of the thesis, I argued are similar to those that define Bel Canto singing. Taking these musical traits as existential structures helped me to define the quality of the way of being of the ‘singing body’, and this theoretical manoeuvre allowed for these traits to be more clearly explicated and brought out. Bel Canto has become, in the literature on singing technique, an almost ideal way of singing, and it serves well as a foundation for basing what I consider to be strikingly similar existential traits in any singing that has similar attributes. The attributes associated with Bel Canto singing are, as I argued later in my thesis, Joy, Athleticism, and Chiaroscuro. These are, I have argued, easily transposable to existential traits in any singer, because there is, ideally, a sense of equanimity or relaxation and release that comes with readying the body when singing; there is, ideally, an ‘unlocked’ kin-aesthetic sensation of the body being in direct spontaneous expression when singing; and there is also, ideally, both a clarity, or distinctiveness as well as a depth and emotional fecundity when singing. These traits therefore not only describe the singing style but the existential style of the singer also.
Singing is a particular type of bodily engagement and so it therefore holds a particular way of being associated with it, which while holding specific traits, reveals itself uniquely for each person. Every act of singing is an origin, and each time a person begins to sing what may emerge may not ever be fully predetermined but only can be revealed by performing the act. Therefore the act of singing is a way of connecting with the here-and-now moment as through this, creating and defining a world in that moment. By drawing on examples from Anthropology, I wanted to show that singers of vastly different cultural backgrounds articulated similar ways in which singing was beneficial; it tends to establish a world, whether through a sense of personalised identity, as in the case of a young boy in a choir, or through a sense of recreating a connection with the world that establishes it as a defined space with its own particular characteristics as opposed to the landscape being a homogenous, undefined whole. So the task of Chapter One was to highlight how changes in the physiology of the singer instigate changes in the ontology of the singer, which lead to a sense of establishing oneself or one’s world.

In Chapter Two I wanted to take this idea further and state that while the singing voice might be a transitory event in the sense that the way of being it instigates is only in existence so long as the singer is singing, these traits, this way of being-in-the-world, may nevertheless be committed to as a defining commitment by which one could make sense of his or her life. In other words, the experiences that singing creates can be committed to and drawn upon to create an identity. This identity I call the Descanter of Revelations. I spent the first part of Chapter Two trying to show why this title is the
most expressive, and yet exact title that I could give such an identity by defining firstly the words themselves and then how these concepts can be thought about existentially. I then looked at two philosophers in detail whose work I feel best articulates the structure of commitment in the way that I am describing, namely commitment to a subjective truth that is decided for by oneself and yet can be more meaningful than any other given custom or cultural practice that we might be surrounded by. Pascal’s work is to me invaluable in describing how so often no commitment is made to anything and we just accept the predominant customs of our day as decisive, when really they are nothing more than distracting and arbitrary. He helps articulate that commitment requires a three-fold approach where inspiration can act as a fire that gets our heart racing and fills us with a sense of personal purpose; reason can offer a grounded proof that our time is worth investing in something, yet it must know its own limits so as to not dissuade us from inspiration; and habit can help when inspiration and reason fail us. Not through one-off great actions, but by our daily habits do we eventually find ourselves walking upon the road we wish to be walking on. And while reason might help with the initial choice as to the road we take, only by taking action do we manifest the possibilities we hope will bring revelation to our life and allow us to be filled with ongoing inspiration.

Yet there is something more fascinating at the heart of Pascal’s philosophy and that is his notion of greatness and wretchedness. Either of these is dangerous by itself yet by bringing these two factors together we become fully human. Singing, I argue, or more specifically, becoming as Descanter of Revelations, is not to leave behind one ‘wretched’ way of being for another that is ‘great’, but rather it can be thought of, by drawing on Pascal, as a way of moving beyond our limitations by accepting and
expressing them. Just as the descant melody does not shatter the underlying harmony and change it to some new key or mode, so the Descanter as a way of being simply allows what is there to be revealed in a new way and given a new identity. This implies acceptance, as any expression arguably does. Through the expression of this identity the singer has the ability to reformulate oneself in a self-authored way, and yet ideally remains fully alive to the tension of the fragility that such a task inevitably has. Not only is there no guarantee it is right, what has been deemed right might be lost and we would be back where we started. Because singing is a human act done by a living breathing human it is open to loss, tragedy, and finitude, and singing is an act that cannot be done only once and then has defined us forever, but must be taken up again and again. The ongoing commitment means ongoing acceptance and coming to terms with ourselves, and this, I think, is how drawing from Pascal to understand commitment, can help us see that it can be done with a humility that understands both greatness and wretchedness.

In order to analyse the concept of commitment even more deeply I also turned to the work of Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard takes us somewhat further than Pascal because it is not simply about a ‘wager’ whether how we choose to live might be right, but Kierkegaard says unless we indeed do make that choice we are in despair. We are in despair until we actually are in despair and now being in despair we realise that we were always in despair. And even once we realise we are in despair and thereby begin to move out of it, there is no guarantee that we won’t be pulled immediately back into it again. This is why it is the sickness unto death. I think this aspect of Kierkegaard’s
philosophy is extremely interesting as it is a way of showing that until we have really chosen for ourselves how we want to be, we are living a life that is not ours and to do this is to be in despair, despite how happy we might be during it. If we neglect our task to define ourselves through our own personally cultivated commitment then we will inevitably one day realise that we have not lived our own life and this will throw us into despair. We will then realise we were always in despair, despite having been happy, because we weren't living our own life and it thus ended up in despair. Despair then is the realisation that you have not been living your own life and therefore your life was not yours. Yet the only way to realise this is to fall into despair. Therefore it is only through despair that one may be cured of despair, though even that isn’t a guarantee that you won’t end up back in it. After all, cultivating your own individual life as defined by your own unconditional commitment, faith, to something is indeed hard and most of the time we neglect this task by either refusing to commit entirely, or commit in resignation to something that offers no possibility of being engaged in the present moment in an open way. Kierkegaard (1985:106) says the ‘true knight of faith is always absolute isolation’, and so it cannot be up to anyone else to decide what we do or how to do it. Yet without our own defining commitment we are in despair. However, it is my argument that commitment to singing as identity can be a form of faith. If the existential traits brought out by singing have been recognised, these can potentially be an epochal point around which one’s life can then be defined. How I am to be is now informed by that moment and my commitment to it. How I was living before that moment is also defined in relation to that moment. My commitment draws this line and it is an ongoing
commitment to something that is finite, that is, is only available through my engagement with it and not eternal. As Dreyfus (2009:146) writes:

Kierkegaard calls an unconditional commitment an infinite passion for something finite….an infinite passion can legitimately be called infinite because it opens up a world. Not only what actually exists gets its meaning from its connection with my defining passion; anything that could possibly come into my experience would get its meaning for me from my defining commitment…one’s commitment defines one’s reality [original emphasis].

The commitment of becoming a Descanter of Revelations defines reality not only because it opens up a world existentially speaking, but because everything one does is then done from that standpoint. The commitment is ‘grounded transparently’ to use Kierkegaard’s phrase (1989:44), and the identity is manifest. To my mind, Kierkegaard adds a larger degree of necessity to Pascal’s notion of commitment, though by looking at both of these philosophers I hoped to highlight that existential commitment to an identity is a way of making tangible a particular way of being that is self-authored, and can act as a way of defining oneself and one’s world in a way that is subjectively true, and therefore holds existential weight. Further, I wanted to also highlight that this type of commitment is not straightforward, already happening before we have done anything, or something that we might want to have from time to time. In short, I wanted to highlight that becoming a Descanter of Revelations or using singing as a defining commitment for one’s identity is indeed a possibility, yet it might involve having to take a risk of going against pre-established harmony of one’s world. However, the reward for that risk might mean that one will always carry within a self-made identity that holds specific traits that can be drawn upon for clarity in the face of a world that is all too
ready to pull one into it with its own definitions and tasks that seem right and true, yet only lead to despair.

To follow from Chapter Two I wanted to begin to articulate more clearly what the particular traits are that one has as a Body-Bel Canto, as these are the traits that inform the singer whether commitment to an identity is worthwhile. In order to do this I wanted to show how the traits of Bel Canto emerged by looking at its place historically and culturally. Bel Canto is a style of Italian singing and so I developed a historiography which looked at how it emerged in from the birth of Opera in the Renaissance in Florence. This Chapter allowed me to investigate singing by drawing more specifically from Musicology than Philosophy, and in doing so I wanted to highlight how specific intellectual concerns that were predominant at the time gave rise to musical styles that then became predominant. In this Chapter, I argued that the expressiveness of singing, from the birth of Opera, moved firstly from the importance of Words, then to the importance of Notes, or melodies, then finally to the importance of Tone, which was the heart of Bel Canto. By using the tripartite word-note-tone formula that constitutes most vocal music, I was able to create reading of history which showed a shift of emphasis in each of these before arriving at the Tone of Bel Canto. Initially, the Florentine Camerata, the group of intellectuals responsible for the theoretical underpinnings of what became Opera, wanted a way to convey the emotional power of music they believed was present in Greek Tragedy and yet was missing in their own music. They believed the problem was that in counterpoint you couldn’t hear the words, and so they wanted to get back to a single singer singing a single melody that subordinated itself to
the words. This, they thought, would generate the most understanding in the listener and therefore be the most moving. However, music dominated by the word meant the melody wasn’t as expressive as it could be, and so there was a movement into more melody, and this allowed for a greater emotional expressivity, as exemplified by the aria. The aria allowed the composer, and singer, to sink down into one particular moment of the story and rather than just move the story along, as recitative does, aria could take a moment to really explore a particular emotion to its fullest capacity. This, I argue, was due to a growing complexity in the nature of subjectivity, and people felt more that their internal world was of worth and in need of articulation. The zenith of this was Bel Canto, and this added the dimension of Tone to the character of what made ‘beautiful singing’. In Bel Canto, the body of the singer was emphasised, and it was seen as a style where not only the notes were beautifully arranged, but the tone had a playfulness, a sense of ease, spontaneity, and a depth of character that really meant it was the singer him or herself that was producing the beauty, more so than the words or the notes. This is why Bel Canto came to mean ‘beautiful singer’ as much as ‘beautiful singing’. The emphasis on tone and on the body of the singer is what stands out for my argument. I have taken this to be a more universal phenomenon than only something available for the highly accomplished practitioners of the Bel Canto style. In my argument, anyone who sings may engage their body differently and create a unique tone that is directly personal. Further, this tone may hold one or more of the qualities of Bel Canto, though perhaps not to their highest fulfilment. Nevertheless, despite whether the traits are there in the *singing*, I am arguing that that are potentially present in the *being* of the singer, and that is why I have used the term Body-Bel Canto to describe the
singing body. So the purpose of Chapter Three and the Historiography was to be able to draw more specifically from Musicology to both give singing and my thesis a musical background, as well as show that the traits of Bel Canto emerged from a historical context that helped shape and define them. Understanding this gives a good background to the term.

In order to highlight how these traits actually look I drew upon the one literary figure that perfectly exemplifies them. Walt Whitman, I argue, came to be a poet through his encounter with Bel Canto singing. Therefore his poetry is imbued with the traits of this particular singing style. From the Free-Verse, to the multiple exclamation points and euphoneses, to the calling of his poems songs and referring to his writing as ‘carolling’ and ‘trilling’, and not to mention his many references to musical terms and the voice, Whitman was deeply indebted to Bel Canto for his inspiration. But more than this, I wanted to show in this Chapter how Whitman was transformed by Bel Canto; how what was awoken in him was his being a singer. The transformation that took place of his identity that led him from an ordinary journalist and schoolteacher to America’s first great poet, is to me a paradigm for how singing can awaken the Body-Bel Canto. What was not there previously is suddenly there, and all aspects of one’s personality now coalesce and find an expression that is truly unique. It was Bel Canto specifically – he called it Opera – that initiated this change, and I wanted to show in this Chapter how his expression in his poetry was indicative of the world that being the Body-Bel Canto creates. His poetry exemplifies, in an ideal or paradigmatic form, what it is like to be a singer, and more specifically shows the traits of Joy, Athleticism, and Chiaroscuro.
Whitman was influenced in his poetry by other factors too, and I draw upon his love of Oratory, the Seashore of Long Island, and the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson to show how these all played an important role in his development. Yet the main purpose of outlining these influences is to show how Bel Canto singing was the final catalyst that actually brought everything that was important of these aspects into one unique expression; The love of the human voice, moving in a way that is not doctrinal and laborious but has magnetism and bodily presence; a sense of swaying movement, like that of the sea, yet also opening up a sense of expansiveness as the open landscape does; and finally, that the single person could express his or her own feelings and it be a truth that is as valid as anything else, which was one of the cornerstones of Emerson’s philosophy. In Bel Canto singing, Whitman found all this and more, and the transformation it facilitated in him was so that he himself became the Body-Bel Canto. His expression was not in singing, but he called his poetry that because, as I argue, it came from the same embodied disposition a singer has, it is the poetry of the Body-Bel Canto.

More than this, however, the real significance of this Chapter was that I could begin to draw out more fully the particular existential characteristics that constitute the Body-Bel Canto. In other words, through Whitman I could highlight more fully, what it is like to be a singer. I have argued throughout this thesis that by reading the traits of Bel Canto singing as existential traits, we can gain an insight into the way of being that is manifested by singing. A way of being is of course available to anyone, singer or not, however my thesis is arguing that singing is the ‘royal road’ to a way of being that has
these particular traits, namely, Joy, Athleticism, and Chiaroscuro. Through Whitman I have been able to analyse these traits more deeply, and therefore get a deeper insight into the way of being of the Body-Bel Canto, which, I argue, is the potential way of being that is opened up to a greater or lesser extent when one begins to sing. I attempted to show that Joy, as an existential structure, has a quality of deep personal satisfaction and serenity; it is not a whimsical feel-good song and dance but rather like a pervading sense of equilibrium that can then act as a guiding vision on how one’s life can be. Further, it can instil a sense of resoluteness where one can begin to trust oneself in the face of harsh realities or other opinions. Related to this is Athleticism, which when thought about as grounded existentially, gives a person an ease of expression or comfortability in themselves. It slows things down and allows a person to have the flexibility and facility to deeply engage with what is deeply important and set aside what is not, and to know the difference between the two. Accompanying this is a heightened sense of aesthetic appreciation and wonder, and a detachment from superficial trivialities. Another aspect of existential Athleticism is the fortifying of oneself to be able to encounter manifold experiences and situations. This is in part related to physical health, and physical health is also important in Athleticism because the body needs to be functioning well to allow full access to the fullest capacity of expression. Yet it is also more than this in the sense that it is the ability to develop oneself through ongoing trials without succumbing to vices or being overwhelmed. Existential Chiaroscuro can be seen first as the quality of having accepted and folded into your personality both bright and dark sides of yourself, and not believing yourself to be one or the other, but acknowledging both. Further it is the ability to recognise this
not only in yourself but through this acceptance offer genuine compassion to others as equally human as yourself. And finally, it is to offer in expression a definitive, individual character that has a clarity i.e. can be recognised and understood, and yet which also has dimension and depth that is not simply a superficial persona. These existential traits are necessarily interwoven and they constitute, in my argument, the way of being of a singer. To a greater or lesser extent these will be present to the singer, for it is my thesis that a singer is a Body-Bel Canto. These traits are what make up the tone. That is where they will be present. Despite what words one is singing, despite what the melody is dictating, the tone is where this way of being is found. It gives the character to the delivery; it adds the personal dimension to the expression. Singing is a way of potentially cultivating these particular traits, and in so doing it can open up in a singer a new way of being. If one decided that this particular way of being is how one wants to be, then it can be committed to in an ongoing way that can then forge an identity. This identity I call the Descanter of Revelations.
References


