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Statement of Plans for Invisible Horses

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Adaptation of earlier statement

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What follows is probably an inexcusably opaque and pedantic overview of what I thought I was trying to do in the book.

Viz.: Primarily what I want to focus on is what it feels like to think; what actually happens inside the mind. In other words (and here I'm basing my remarks on various statements I've had to make previously, in my applications to Bellagio and elsewhere), what I want to concentrate on in this book is nothing less (!) than human consciousness itself. I want most of the poems in the book to explore the physical and emotional aspects of what's going on inside the mind from minute to minute and from second to second. And I want to express all that, as nearly as I can, without losing sight of the mind/brain entity considered not only as the dwelling place of "the self" — whatever that is — but most particularly on the "micro" level, in all its dazzlingly intricate, infinitely small biological, chemical, and neurophysiological processes. For the activities of our minds — our selves? — occur in the midst of a seamless, constantly humming web of experience, a ceaseless interchange between "subjective" and "objective" experience that has always fascinated me.

Hardly surprising, I suppose, for someone who's lately been reading mountains of molecular biology, neurophysiology, and other investigations
of human and animal cognitive processes. Or for the daughter of a (Freudian and Roman Catholic psychiatrist who was also a neurologist. "Why", I wonder along with Auden -- or rather, how -- is "loneliness/not a chemical discomfort/nor Being a smell?" What is an idea or an emotion; where is it located, what does it look and feel like, does it have any physical substance at all?

And, since poetry's central aim is quintessentially involved in the business of intermingling mind and body, the "word made flesh" of imagery, how better than in poetry might I attempt to express our experiences of such intangibles as the how and the what of thought? Especially nowadays, when science seems to be more and more convinced that such concepts as "ideas", as the mind's constituting an entity in itself, quite aside from the physical world, simply do not occur as such, but rather as nothing more than a strictly physical, minutely complicated and often simultaneously occurring series of the smallest biological, chemical, and neurophysiological processes.

It's the old mind/body problem again, a duality which, even as I try to resist it, seems impossible to get away from. But I'm not trying to answer anything -- the book is not a polemic. Mindful of the distinct possibility that, as Daniel Dennett says, "Human consciousness is just about the last of the surviving mysteries," these poems are just trying to respond, as intelligently, as physically, as emotionally, and as humanly as they can, to some of the systems and processes which are currently being analyzed and illuminated at the very outermost edges of humanity's attempts to know itself. (All of which, I know, probably sounds dreadfully grand, not to mention repetitious! But these are generalities, after all; not the dear particularities of poetry. And they're in prose, too, the writing of
which has always been a special bete noire of mine.)

I'm also going to be trying to write about the mind in terms of music. (Again, not surprising in someone whose parents were both musicians). For, in addition to my biochemical (and metaphysical, yes of course) interests, I have a strong intuition that there are major parallels between the overall workings of the mind and the essentially mathematical forms, shapes, and patterns of music. The philosopher musician John Blacking says that there is so much music in the world "that it is reasonable to suppose that music, like language and possibly religion, is a species-specific trait of man." Moreover, he says, "Many, if not all, of music's essential processes can be found in the constitution of the human body and in patterns of interaction of bodies in society."

Then, too, there's the obvious way that, in music, the abstract (perhaps eventually even quantifiable) structures of the creative intelligence can so strikingly be made manifest, embodied in actual physical sounds. In my reading of Leonard Bernstein and Gerald Edelman, for instance, I have been struck by the idea that the activities involved in the creation of various musical forms can be seen as paradigmatic not only of so vital a human characteristic as metaphor making, but also — think of theme and variation — of evolution of human consciousness itself.

In addition, something about the endlessly repetitive, endlessly varied shapes and patterns of music — shapes we all recognize as real, live entities, despite our being unable to touch, taste, see, or feel them — seems to me to speak directly to the question of the kind and quality of the material/immaterial existence of ideas themselves, and finally perhaps even to the entire question of the existence or non-existence of the nowadays old-fashioned idea of a uniquely discrete self. For if such entities do indeed exist, surely they exist — at least — as shapes that
permanently, however transiently, inform all our lives.