



Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia. Tales of Music and the Brain*, New York 2008

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This book contains twenty-nine essays or, rather, twenty-nine novels or, better yet, twenty-nine variations on a theme, a slow and obsessive theme that runs through the entire composition or, more exactly, the entire book. Though repetition was always a typical component of Ravel's style, as Sacks says at the end of this long investigation into the brain and music, the *Bolero* is only repetition and nothing more. However, one suspects that Sacks is talking about himself: "Though repetition has always been a typical component of Sacks's style, *Musicophilia* is repetition and nothing more".

Once again, the author shows his ability to describe with scientific precision, though never tiresomely, the numerous clinical cases with which he is in daily contact. This book, whose underlying theme is revealed in one of the last chapters ("it is possible, in effect, to talk of a specific 'musical intelligence', as Howard Gardner did in his theory of multiple intelligence"), is divided into four sections, whose boundaries are more blurred than the table of contents suggests. In part I, *Haunted by Music*, Sacks provides examples of people unable to stop singing or listening to music. In part II, *A Range of Musicality*, he analyzes the differences in musical perception of people who are either particularly gifted or handicapped. Part III, *Memory, Movement, and Music*, hypothesizes the existence—in those same activities—of strong neurological connections. Part IV, *Emotion, Identity, and Music*, explores the relationship of music to the more subjective aspects of the human brain.

The subject matter holds interest for philologists; the book's themes are presented more as food for thought—intuitions and allusions for receptive minds—than as a systematic investigative method to apply to textual criticism. Philologists should focus on how this type of research can be applied to modern discussions on intertextuality, which should consequently not be analyzed only from a literary perspective, but also through the prism of new scientific knowledge regarding the neurological factors that control the activation (or inhibition) of mnemonic mechanisms.

In an interesting passage, Sacks introduces us to the Polish neurophysiologist J. Konorski, who elaborated the idea of a dynamic system, incorporated in our brain, which can generate perceptions, images or hallucinations, though only under exceptional circumstances.

The existence of such exceptional circumstances—confirmed by later studies—opens enormous opportunities for literary experts obsessed by the possibility of spying into the minds of authors: feeling the same sensations they felt when listening to psalms, *cansos* or ballads, that have come down to us only as printed characters on paper, but that in the Middle Ages were continuously repeated in the mind, like the musical "brain worms" of which Sacks speaks in the fifth chapter of his book.

Benedetto Croce used to affirm that "when I read Dante, I am Dante"; a statement that in normal reading is hardly true. However, in *exceptional circumstances*, possibly thanks to this essay, we can objectively increase our capacity "to be Dante", i.e., to identify ourselves in the poets we study, to consider texts, not as a closed world, but as the sum of all experiences lived—and mnemonically elaborated—by a single individual.