

ESSENCE AND LANGUAGE THE RUPTURE IN MERLEAU-PONTY'S PHILOSOPHY

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What I am going to present here is recent issues in research on Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Over the last eight years, there have been a lot of developments. In 1995, one of Merleau-Ponty's lecture courses from the Collège de France in 1956-57, *La Nature*, was published.¹ Then in 1996, his *Notes de cours* from 1959 to 1961 was published.² And finally, in 1998, the notes to Merleau-Ponty's final course at the Collège de France, which was on the later Husserl, in particular, on "The Origin of Geometry" and on the text frequently referred to as "The Earth Does Not Move."³ These publications have given us a much better idea of how to understand Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy, and, in particular, of how to understand his incomplete masterpiece *The Visible and the Invisible*.⁴ Moreover, the publication of these later courses has led to the writing of some remarkable essays by Françoise Dastur, Renaud Barbaras, and Mauro Carbone.⁵ What I am

¹ Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY, *La Nature, Notes de cours du Collège de France*. Établi et annoté par Dominique Séglaud, Paris: Seuil, 1995; English translation forthcoming by Robert Vallier at Northwestern University Press, 2003.

² Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY, *Notes de Cours, 1959-1961*, Paris: Gallimard, 1996. Hereafter cited with the abbreviation NC.

³ Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY, *Notes de cours sur l'origine de la géométrie de Husserl*, suivi de *Recherches sur la phénoménologie de Merleau-Ponty*, sous la direction de R. BARBARAS, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998; English translation of the *Notes de cours* by Leonard Lawlor with Bettina Bergo as *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002. Hereafter cited as BN, which refers to the Bibliothèque Nationale numbering of Merleau-Ponty's course note pages.

⁴ Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY, *Le visible et l'invisible*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964; English translation by Alphonso Lingis as *The Visible and the Invisible*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968. Hereafter cited with the abbreviation VI, with reference first to the French, then to the English translation.

⁵ Françoise DASTUR, *Chair et langage*, Paris: Encre marine, 2001. Renaud BARBARAS, *Le tournant de l'expérience*, Paris: Vrin, 1998. Mauro CARBONE, *La visibilité de l'invisible*, Hildesheim: Olms, 2001. Leonard LAWLOR, *Thinking Through French Philosophy*, forthcoming, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003. Many of the essays in these volumes were first published in *Chiasmi International: Trilingual Studies Concerning the Thought of Merleau-Ponty*.

going to do here builds on their work and my own concerning these “new” courses. My thesis is that there is a rupture between the early Merleau-Ponty, the Merleau-Ponty of the *Phenomenology of Perception* and the Merleau-Ponty of these final courses. To see this rupture, we need to recall a well-known statement from the famous preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception*:

[...] language [makes] essences exist in a state of separation which is truly only apparent, since through language they still rest upon the predicative life of consciousness. In the silence of originary consciousness can be seen appearing not what words mean, but also what things mean.⁶

The rupture in Merleau-Ponty’s thought goes from this comment concerning the relationship of essences and language – that “language makes essences exist in a state of separation” – to what we see in his last courses – that language is no longer secondary to and derived from originary consciousness. In the later courses, language, for Merleau-Ponty, is fundamental, and because of this, Merleau-Ponty sets up the moment of the great French philosophy of the sixties. This rupture occurs because of Merleau-Ponty’s reflections on Heidegger.

Indeed, the later Merleau-Ponty discovers “convergences” between the phenomenology of Husserl and the ontology of Heidegger. Despite the pervasive influence of Husserl in Merleau-Ponty’s thought up to the very end, it is not possible now to say that Merleau-Ponty’s later thought is merely phenomenological. The courses demonstrate clearly that Merleau-Ponty was reading all the texts by Heidegger that were available during the late fifties; he was truly making an attempt to absorb Heidegger’s thought. There are three “convergences” that Merleau-Ponty sees between Husserl’s phenomenology and Heidegger’s ontology, more precisely, what remains “unthought” in Husserl and Heidegger’s explicit thinking.⁷ The first and most general is that Husserl’s idea of the genesis of sense (*Stiftung*) converges with Heidegger’s idea of the *Ereignis* of Being. We can see this same convergence in the course “la philosophie aujourd’hui”; at the end of his discussion of Heidegger there, Merleau-Ponty says that the philosophical sense of his course on nature consists in “the advent of being”, and adds between parentheses “cf. Husserl *Ineinander* and *Einfühlung*.”⁸

⁶ Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris: Gallimard, 1945, p. x; English translation by Colin Smith and revised by Forrest Williams as *Phenomenology of Perception*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962, p. xv.

⁷ Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, edited by Leonard Lawlor with Bettina Bergo, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002, pp. 13 and 53. Hereafter HL.

⁸ Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY, *Notes de cours, 1959-61*, Paris: Gallimard, 1996, p. 148. Hereafter NC.

Husserl's idea of the genesis of sense converges with Heidegger's idea of the advent of Being because Husserl does not define the genesis of sense as what Merleau-Ponty calls a "horizontal history", meaning a succession of causal events (NC 86). Thus Merleau-Ponty can say that the relation between the origin and its sedimentation in Husserl is "vertical", "vertical history" (VI 276/223). It is, of course, Heidegger who provides Merleau-Ponty with the idea of vertical Being, when he speaks of the ground as an *Abgrund*, an abyss, in the essay "Language" (HL 41). Verticality brings us to the second convergence between Husserl and Heidegger. For Merleau-Ponty, we must understand the Husserlian genesis of sense as "universal dimensionality"; Merleau-Ponty also, of course, takes the idea of dimensionality from Heidegger, in particular, from his essay "...Poetically Man Dwells..." (NC 112 cf. VI 280/227, VI 319/265). But, "universal dimensionality", for Merleau-Ponty, must be understood as "simultaneity" or as "the Being of the present", or even as the being of the living present. In other words, even though universal dimensionality comes from Heidegger, it must be understood through Husserl. In fact, in the course on "The Origin of Geometry", Merleau-Ponty's favorite Husserlian quote is surprisingly not the one from paragraph 16 of *Cartesian Meditations* — "the beginning [...] is [...] mute experience which must be brought to the pure expression of its own sense" — but this quote from "The Origin of Geometry": "from a historical perspective, what is in itself the first thing is our present." Despite appearances, Merleau-Ponty's attempt to make universal dimensionality converge with the present does not imply that he is relapsing into some sort of "metaphysics of presence"; this present "designates a presence that is richer than what is visible of it" (HL 27), a "deep present", a present that includes the past, and therefore that includes, simultaneously, what is *not* present, that is, the present includes simultaneously some sort of negation or lack (HL 14). The deep present is not therefore a positive foundation; as Merleau-Ponty says in the Course Notes, again, this non-presence is not the past of causal events, it is not horizontal history; rather it is what Merleau-Ponty calls a "past in general" (HL 20). The past in general for Merleau-Ponty, the depth of the present, is an *Abgrund*. The *Abgrund* brings us to the third and last convergence that Merleau-Ponty sees between Husserl and Heidegger. This convergence is the most important for determining Merleau-Ponty's final philosophy: for the later Husserl, the Husserl of "The Origin of Geometry", according to Merleau-Ponty, "language is inaugurating" (HL 50). For Merleau-Ponty, when Husserl sees that language is simultaneous with ideality

(HL 54), this simultaneity means that “speech speaks” (HL 48). Language is the *Abgrund*. This idea of originary language allows Merleau-Ponty to overthrow consciousness (VI 292/238).⁹

It is, of course, well known that Merleau-Ponty says that he needs to bring the result of the *Phenomenology of Perception* to ontological explicitation (VI 237/183). In order for Merleau-Ponty to do this, that is, to ontologize phenomenology, he must follow Husserl’s phenomenology “all the way up to what is impossible in [phenomenology]” (HL 53-54); he must follow Husserl up to *the limit of phenomenology*. For Merleau-Ponty, what is impossible in phenomenology, what is at the limit of phenomenology, is a certain concept of negativity that is not the mere “counter-concept”, as Heidegger says in “What is Metaphysics?”, to Being¹⁰; this negativity is language as the *Abgrund* (HL 49). We need to add that, in reference to the problem of negation, Merleau-Ponty in these final course notes not only turns to Heidegger but also returns to Bergson. In “La philosophie aujourd’hui”, Merleau-Ponty agrees with Bergson’s critique of the idea of nothingness, as it is found in *Creative Evolution*, but adds that he does not want to see in this critique merely a motif of “positivism” (NC 103). Thus, even while Merleau-Ponty is clearly becoming more and more Heideggerian at the end of his life, he is also becoming more Bergsonian. Equally, he never abandons a certain Husserlianism (HL 53, n. 136).¹¹ In his final philosophy, Merleau-Ponty therefore is following Husserl in the “mutation” of the concept of consciousness (see VI 252/198). Always, the later Merleau-Ponty is aiming at the limit (or the milieu) between Husserlian “rationalism” and Heideggerian “irrationalism” (HL 14).¹² The movement towards the limit between rationalism and irrationalism consists in overthrowing consciousness towards a “speech speaks”, while not going as far as a “mysticism of language” (HL 53). Therefore in order not to fall into this mysticism, in order not to fall into irrationalism, Merleau-Ponty always remains close to

⁹ Paul RICŒUR, *Freud and Philosophy*, English translation by Denis Savage, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 439. The discussion of the Freudian archeology in this book seems to be entirely based on Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of psychoanalysis; see pp. 376, 382, 395, 417-18, 417, n. 99, and 418, n. 100.

¹⁰ Martin HEIDEGGER, “Was ist Metaphysik?”, in *Wegmarken*, Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1967, pp. 105, 115-16; English translation by David F. Krell as “What is Metaphysics?” in *Martin Heidegger Basic Writings*, New York: Harper Collins, 1993, pp. 95, 105.

¹¹ In the marginal note, Merleau-Ponty says, “And one must not say: let’s go straight to Heidegger.”

¹² Here Merleau-Ponty says, “Difficulty of maintaining this position, side-tracked towards rationalism [or] irrationalism.”

the Husserlian concept of transcendental intersubjectivity; he always remains close to the experience of the other.

In his final philosophy, Merleau-Ponty describes the experience of the other in terms of his famous figure of the chiasm. Indeed, as we see it in the opening pages of *The Visible and the Invisible*, the chiasm concerns “perceptual faith”, or more precisely, binocular vision. Vision is binocular because we have two eyes. Thus the perceptual faith refers to what I believe as soon as I open my eyes. According to Merleau-Ponty, when I open my eyes, what “we see [is] the thing itself” (VI 17/11). This comment means that, when I open my eyes, I do not think I have a mental representation but I believe I have the thing out there — at the end of my gaze (*regard*) (VI 21/7). If the thing is at the end of my gaze, then we can see already that vision, for Merleau-Ponty, is chiasmatic: the ends of the two intersecting lines of the chiasm for Merleau-Ponty symbolize two eyes looking out at a thing, like this: >. Clearly, this symbol is only half of the chiasm. We get the second half, when we continue the description of the body in perception. According to Merleau-Ponty, “the body [...] has shattered the illusion of a coincidence between my perception and the things themselves” (VI 24/8). I am certain that my vision is out there in the thing and yet the vision is mine, which makes me uncertain. If the vision is mine, then there are other gazes on the thing which are not mine and which are therefore absent from me. Merleau-Ponty demonstrates this fundamental absence in perception by describing the well-known touching-touched relation (VI 24/9).¹³ What this description shows is that it is impossible to grasp the perceiving of another, even when that other is part of me, even when it is my other hand. Merleau-Ponty allows us to understand this fundamental non-presentability of the other’s perception better when he explicitly describes “others who see as we do” (VI 25/9). The first thing I have to realize is that when I see, I cannot give others access to the vision I have; simply, it is mine. But, similarly, “by a sort of backlash, they also refuse me this access which I deny to them” (VI 25/9). This lack of access means that, while I say of myself that my vision is out there in the thing, I say of the other’s vision that his is behind his body, actually, behind his eyes, in there. And this re-

¹³ When my right touches my left hand, I can never grasp with my right hand the work of my left hand as it is touching. As soon as I try to do grasp my left hand touching, it becomes the “touched.” In other words, if I try to grasp the subjective or interior side of my left hand, it becomes the object of my grasp and loses its subjectivity. Of course, this relation is reversible. I can start from my left hand and try to grasp my right in the act of touching, but the result is the same: the right hand becomes the touched and is no longer the touching.

lation is reversible just as the touching-touched relation is: the other too says that his vision is out there in the thing, while my vision, for him, is behind my eyes, forming a mental representation. This reversible relation gives us the second half of the figure of the chiasm. When I say that my vision is out there in the thing, I can symbolize it like this: >. The ends of the lines here are my two eyes looking out and ending up in the thing at the point of intersection. But, when I say that the other's vision is behind his eyes, forming an image in his head, I can symbolize it like this: <. The ends of the lines are his eyes looking out at the world, but the *point of intersection*, which previously symbolized the thing itself at the end of my vision, now symbolizes the representation in his head behind the eyes (cf. VI 24 marginal note/9 marginal note). Now, of course, if we put these two symbols — >< — together, we get an “X”, we get the chiasm. And, notice that the point of intersection, or, we might say, the point of diffraction, is at once objective — I see the thing itself — and subjective — the other has a mental representation of it. In other words, to use Platonic language, the point of intersection is at once the idea — I see the thing itself — and image — the other has a mental representation of it. Thus, we can see that the halfway point in the middle of the X, the *mi-lieu*, is nothing, since it refers back to my vision and to that of the other. It is as if what is halfway in the middle were a question addressed to me by the other, a question lacking an answer since I do not possess the complete presence of the other's interior life, a question, in turn, to which I relate myself by responding. When I answer, I create the presence of the thing, I make it — transforming presence into a verb — “presence”, *west*. Following Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty calls this halfway point a “*Wesen* in the verbal sense.” But this *Wesen* means that what is in the middle, halfway, is not only nothing, but also a “something”, an “*Etwas*.” As Merleau-Ponty says, it is a something “upon which these two sides are articulated”; it is the pivot or the “hinge” (HL 23-27)¹⁴ or the “jointure” (HL 64), that is, it is an invisible through which the visible holds (HL 24). Again, like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty is referring to the image of the fold, and indeed, the chiasm itself implies a fold, a four-fold. We need to make one last comment about this description of Merleau-Ponty's “fourfold.” The “soil” or “sol”, as Merleau-Ponty would say, of the chiasm is nature; hence the importance of Merleau-Ponty's course on nature. But this “soil” is really referring to Husserl's

¹⁴ See also Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY, “Notes de lecture et commentaires sur *Théorie du champ de la conscience* de Aron Gurwitsch”, in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, no. 3 (1997), p. 329, where Merleau-Ponty also defines essence as “charnière.”

earth that does not move. Looking at the final course notes on Husserl, we encounter a difficult question. If we say that Merleau-Ponty thinks that Husserl's fragment on the earth is philosophically more important than his fragment "The Origin of Geometry", then we end up with a Merleau-Ponty for whom language is still derivative, as in the early *Phenomenology of Perception*. If, however, we say that Merleau-Ponty thinks that "The Origin of Geometry" is philosophically more important, then we end up with a Merleau-Ponty for whom language is ordinary. Here I am going to say that Merleau-Ponty favors "The Origin of Geometry"; yet, I am not certain he really does.

For the later Merleau-Ponty, the view of language that Husserl takes in "The Origin of Geometry" is equivalent to that of Heidegger in the "Language" essay: man does not speak; speech speaks. Indeed, in the middle of these notes, Merleau-Ponty reproduces a long passage from Heidegger's essay. But what allows Merleau-Ponty to make this convergence between Husserl and Heidegger, of course, is the problem of writing in the constitution of ideal object or essences. On the basis of "The Origin of Geometry", Merleau-Ponty recognizes that writing is *necessary* in order for an ideal object to be fully constituted, in other words, to be what it is (HL 25). Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, "the written" is not a mere "substitute" for or a "degradation" of the sense (HL 25); it is not merely "congealed speech" (HL 64); it is not mere transmission or communication (HL 25, 64); nor is the writing-down mere "abbreviations", "codification", "signs", or "clothing" (HL 58); it is not a "defect" (HL 58). For Merleau-Ponty, following Husserl, the necessity of writing down comes from a lack in the "ideal structure"; the lack – here is the necessity – *needs* to be filled in. What the sense-structure lacks is omnitemporality; thus writing effects an ontological transformation of it, as Merleau-Ponty says in his course notes. Writing therefore provides the sense structure with persisting existence and objectivity. As Merleau-Ponty says, the sense structure becomes a "monument" (HL 64). When the sense structure becomes a monument, it becomes what Merleau-Ponty calls ready-made language, "spoken speech." It is a book, or to appropriate a phrase from Jean Hyppolyte, it is a "subjectless transcendental field." Indeed, we can describe the book as silence.

But we must see here that this silence is different from the silence of the tacit cogito in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. It is different because it is a silence within language itself. Moreover, we must stress that this "linguisticized" silence is the very "soil" of the chiasm of vision that we just described. The chiasm of vision in fact consists in the

transformation of spoken speech into creative speech. When you and I look at something, at the very intersecting point of the chiasm, it is as if the fact that I cannot have access to your thoughts, this “mutism”, is like a silent book, a piece of writing. In his Course Notes on “The Origin of Geometry”, Merleau-Ponty speaks of writing as a “grimoire”, a book of spells or incantations (HL 57). Writing understood as a *grimoire* is supposed to make us think of the “conjuring up” of spirits; it consists in a “spiritual mutation.” In the chiasm of vision, I am conjuring up a spirit on the basis of my lack of your thoughts – and vice versa. When the essence “essences” or “presences”, “west”, we – you and I – have created the sense or the essence anew. Then the sense has been reactivated; the monument comes to life. Indeed, for Merleau-Ponty, the chiasm of vision consists in a question, which demands an answer. The very necessity, therefore, of the sense structure to become omnitemporal in writing demands, needs as well to be temporal, subjective, and alive. Thus the necessity of writing in Merleau-Ponty is double.

I now come to my concluding remarks. What I have done here is very briefly reconstructed Merleau-Ponty’s final philosophy. In these last courses, Merleau-Ponty places language at a level more fundamental than perception. This is why we can speak of a rupture between the Merleau-Ponty of the *Phenomenology of Perception* and the Merleau-Ponty of *The Visible and the Invisible*. As everyone knows, in a working note to *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty says, “Results of Ph.P [*Phenomenology of Perception*]. – Necessity of bringing them to ontological explicitation” (VI 237/183). The later Merleau-Ponty grounds essence in existence or even facticity, but this facticity is that of language. For the later Merleau-Ponty, what lies between words and things is the very being of language. Thus, Merleau-Ponty is the gateway to the great French philosophy of the sixties. In Merleau-Ponty’s final courses, we can already see Foucault, for whom discourse is what lies between words and things (*entre les mots et les choses*); we can already see Derrida, for whom writing (*l’écriture*) lies between words and things; we can already see Deleuze, for whom what he calls the “loquendum” lies between words and things. We might even say that we see the later Levinas on the horizon in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Levinas for whom interpellation by the other, in a word, “interrogation”, lies between words and things. To say this once more, Merleau-Ponty’s late thought is the gateway to the great French philosophy of the sixties. Perhaps it is the gateway to all future philosophy.