

Merleau-Ponty and the 'Syntax in Depth':
Semiotics and Language as 'Another Less Heavy, More
Transparent Body'¹

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Le philosophe est un étranger dans cette
mée fraternelle. Même s'il n'a jamais
trahi, on sent, à sa manière d'être fidèle,
qu'il pourrait trahir, il ne prend pas part
comme les autres, il manque à son assen-
timent quelque chose de massif et de char-
nel.... Il n'est pas tout à fait un être réel.
(1953: 69)

Merleau-Ponty was a phenomenologist who undermined the presuppositions of phenomenology, wrote as if he were preserving the insights of Husserl while he was radically revising them, drew upon the early Gestalt psychologists in order to extract implications that transformed their presuppositions, remained true to his Marxist reading of alienation yet could not assent to those claiming to be carrying out Marxist politics, and was ever inspired by the work of semiotics only to reject its direction.

Merleau-Ponty embodied his ideal of the philosopher who remains alive to ambiguity, and so can never give wholehearted assent to any one perspective. For Merleau-Ponty, philosophy did not end in answers or systems, but continued on to achieve 'hyperdialectic' in which the intensity and depth of question cast forth the articulated sense of experience as ongoing 'interrogation'.

Merleau-Ponty's relationship to semiotics appears to be contradictory: deeply indebted to many key insights of Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, and other semioticians at times in his thinking, and yet entering their problems from his earlier work on the primacy of perception, his work evolved into a position which still incorporates many semiotic principles but is also at odds with them in his later vision of an ontology that finally does justice to his original concerns with perception and embodiment. With Merleau-Ponty, one can only make sense of his evolving

thoughts on any topic by keeping in mind how these ideas relate to his ongoing project of bringing to expression the life of the body. In any assessment that tries to parse out his final stand on an issue before his untimely death, one must reckon upon the impact of his notion of 'the flesh of the world', the notion toward which his work had always aimed, upon that particular issue. Therefore, in considering Merleau-Ponty's relationship to semiotics, it will be helpful to see how his thoughts on the nature of language evolved in regard to his notions of perception and embodiment, and how his notion of 'the flesh of the world' brought him to pose several final challenges to semiotics.

Merleau-Ponty was a seeker after depth—whether the depth of perceptual sense, of our enmeshment in history, culture and others, or of signs and language. When he seeks to articulate the 'a syntax in depth', he is seeking that which is excluded from most approaches to the relationship between signified and signifier. For Merleau-Ponty, depth was not a derivative dimension, based on prior structures; rather, depth is 'the dimension of dimensions', as he puts it in his last published work, *L'oeil et l'esprit*. We will have to see what this meant for his eventual understanding of language and signification, and how it leads to his parting ways with semiotics.

Merleau-Ponty's conception of language and the role of the sign as structure of communication passes through four distinguishable stages: (1) from highlighting the perceiving body's tendency towards expression, (2) to the moment in which the speaker takes up a spoken language in order to inscribe himself or herself within a system of differences which constitute language, (3) to the appreciation of the way in which the expressive use of a signficatory system is constituted by its 'coherent deformation', its twisting or variance in an accumulative fashion from what had been given, that expresses indirectly, (4) to his final notion of the 'flesh of the world' in which the sign is caught up in an interplay of levels of significance, *qua* cognitive, emotional, imaginative, memorial, perceptual, performative, etc., and an interplay of aspects of the world of the sign, *qua* political, historical, social, interpersonal (e.g., psychoanalytical), etc., in which signified and signifier are in a relatedness of what he called 'reversibility'. The details of these shifts are matters of concern for Merleau-Ponty scholars.² However, it will be helpful here to distinguish these stages insofar as their dominant notions represent different positions *vis-à-vis* varying lines of thought within semiotic studies.

Rather than labor to present his perspective as a whole, I think that it would be more illuminating to present Merleau-Ponty's ideas through a series of specula-

tions about where he both travels with and rebels against the unfolding thought of semiotics. By proceeding in this way, we will allow the overall gestalt of Merleau-Ponty's thought and its relationships to semiotics to emerge from the 'self-rooting coming together' of its constituents into larger significances: in this, we remain faithful both to Merleau-Ponty's sense of the self-organizing depth of experience and its emergent sense, and to how his own style of writing sought to highlight this becoming of meaning.

Systems of Differences and Their Leaks

One of Merleau-Ponty's last references to Saussure is a 'working note' published after his death in *The Visible and the Invisible* from September, 1959. It praises Saussure's seminal notion of language as a system of differences, or of oppositional signs. For Merleau-Ponty, this Saussurean insight freed us from any notion of signification as a positivity, as a simple given, or the result of some 'naturalism' of significance. If 'sens', or the meaning of signification through language, were 'given', language would not become what it is through the speaking act.

The essential moment of speech for Merleau-Ponty was the expressive taking up and highlighting of the relation of the embodied speaker to their perceived world, and to the ways in which the cultural-historical-political world of that language was always coming to renew itself. This renewal was the ongoing life of the language: the speech act is a gesture, a bodying forth of one's directedness (*sens*) toward a world-language-culture. This context was not simply 'there' as significant, but as a play of differences set into motion, into interplay, by the gesture of expression, both within signifying acts or perception:

L'analyse saussurienne des rapports entre signifiants et des rapports de signifiant à signifié et des significations (comme différences de significations) confirme et retrouve l'idée de la perception comme *écart* par rapport à un *niveau*, c'est à dire l'idée de l'Être primordial, de la Convention des conventions, de la parole avant la parole. (Merleau-Ponty 1964a: 255)

This operative level of speech 'takes up' language, because as a series of divergences, it exists as being 'put into play', into its movement of opposition, and

not as a set of positivities to be merely arrayed. This signifying operation echoes Merleau-Ponty's discoveries about the nature of perception as an expressive setting into motion of a field of divergences. Merleau-Ponty remained consistent in his praise of Saussure for 'having taken the step which liberates history from historicism, and makes a new conception of reason possible' (1969: 22), by construing signification as the unfolding of a system of significations which in themselves are not dictated by a brute significance of things, by a determinate *logos*, or a universe of natural meanings. For Merleau-Ponty, this allows us to see that there is a history, an acquired basis for speech—that of the instituted system of differences; but one exists as requiring an ongoing improvisation, the expressiveness of speakers and writers. In that sense language is truly historical, as the sedimentation of the past which exists as calling for further *making*.

Yet, in this praise of Saussure, as in the many similar references to Saussure, there is an echo of a dissenting voice which also came to resound in many of Merleau-Ponty's citations. There is that strange assent which is missing something, which hints at betrayal or at least parting of the ways. What is this 'primordial Being' (*l'Être primordial*) to which Merleau-Ponty refers? In the part of this work Merleau-Ponty had written before his sudden death in 1961, a passage states:

Loin qu'il détiennne le secret de l'être du monde le langage est lui-même un monde, lui-même un être,—un monde et un être à la seconde puissance, puisqu'il ne parle pas à vide, qu'il parle de l'être et du monde, et redouble donc leur énigme au lieu de faire disparaître. L'interrogation philosophique sur le monde ne consiste donc pas à se reporter du monde même à ce que nous en disons, puisqu'elle se réière à l'intérieur du langage. Philosophier, ce n'est pas révoquer en doute les choses au nom des mots, comme si le monde effectif était un canton du langage.... (Merleau-Ponty 1964a: 132)

Language only redoubles an 'enigma' of the world and its sense. Signification is not 'contained' in the territory of language; language partakes of a larger circulation of *sens*. Merleau-Ponty goes on to clarify this statement by saying that any attempt to find meaning as the function of sign systems overlooks the inalienable rootedness of sense in a world of 'brute' being: 'elle atteint toute tentative pour chercher la source du sens dans les pures significations, même quand aucune mention n'est faite du langage' (Merleau-Ponty 1964a: 132). Sign systems are

oppositional, are the play of differences among themselves, and as such are one way or style among other possible plays of signs within which the world comes to meaning, to signification. Merleau-Ponty understands that the truth of seeing language in this way focuses on its power as speaking (*parlant*), highlighting its essential activity, its free play, and its birthing power rather than reducing it to a mistaken, passive 'reading off' of the 'book of nature'. He appreciates this as it parallels the structure of perception he had uncovered in his earliest research: the body is a taking up of perceptual *sens* within an interplay of divergences, where each has a value in light of the whole, the current engagement, and the tensions within the rhythms of exploration and expression.³ There is a parallel of the play of *sens* among divergences within perception and language.⁴ However, for Merleau-Ponty this semiotic characterization of language can become too inclusive, neglecting its ground in the mute sense of the perceptual world.

For Merleau-Ponty, both within the play of linguistic signifiers and within the play of the givens of perception, differences do not just refer to one another, to the signifying 'space' between themselves: they are a weave, a fabric, or an interplay that not only initiates the speaker into their round or circulation, but also signifies by leakage or by a play of difference within which we can never be fully held 'in' or held 'back' within the circulatory play within difference and opposition. In the lack of the positivity of an underlying essence, the incompleteness of sense cannot be contained by the interplay, but leaves gaps which are not absences of *sens* but rather its openness, which are its depth. The French '*sens*' has the admirable ambiguity of suggesting not only meaning, but the directionality within the world of an embodied being, a being within sensual, perceptible depths, enmeshed in a signifying material world. There is a creativity in signification of various sorts because there is a 'working through' of a thick world of which the embodied subject is a part: a 'fold' in 'the flesh of the world'. Although language forms a 'second body', it is a thinner body, a *sucubus* of sorts.

The openness in the gaps between the play of differences of signs of various sorts signifies a 'hunger', as Merleau-Ponty calls it: the lack which is a further taking in of the world of an embodied being. This openness is a laying out of 'voices' which in following the play of signifiers draws us out from them at the same time to the world, the world of 'less chosen brutes'. This is not a mere voraciousness, but a 'shaped' hunger, a specific pull, set up by each particular way of signifying and each act of true expression, rather than the rote use of signs. It is not mere negation of sense, but its prolongation into mystery, into inexhaustible-

ity. For Merleau-Ponty, both perception, as the ground of communication, and all modes of signification are incomplete and inexhaustible—not as a defect or a flaw, but as the power of meaning and as its depth, which is the depth of the world. As 'full of sense' they would degenerate into non-sense. It is because of the gaps, the *defiscences*, that there is the play, the jostling in particular rhythms or melodies and the enjambment of meanings, which then come to have a depth of *sens* in this particular moment of weaving.

Merleau-Ponty must part ways with Saussure at the point where it can appear to Saussure and semioticians that 'la langue est un système dont tous les termes sont solidaires et où la valeur de l'un ne résulte que de la présence simultanée des autres' (Saussure 1960: 159). Put even more boldly by Saussure, this amounts to 'dans la langue il n'y a que des différences' (1960: 166). For Merleau-Ponty, the vision of language or sign systems as self-defining in the internal economy of their interplaying terms is another chimera of totalization and unfolding temporality, and ultimately the signification of a disembodied consciousness that would lapse into another kind of positivity which, although not the straightforward positivism of a 'natural language', is nevertheless still the death of signification. It would be a kind of positivity of 'contained interplay' within the divergent signifiers.

Certainly, the semiotic insight that there is no given within the system of differences, that it is synchronic as well as diachronic, are meant to address such concerns and to avoid a positivism of signification. Yet, for Merleau-Ponty, there is a further radicality in the depth of *sens* that can only be registered in the way in which the reader, the writer, or the speaker is always, as embodied, a being of ambiguity in which temporality is ensnaring and concealing *as the heart of the expressive* laying forth of meaning. There is neither a self-contained diachronic array, nor a progressive synchronic laying of meaning, but rather only 'une expérience qui se souvient d'un passé impossible, anticipe un avenir impossible' (Merleau-Ponty 1964a: 163-64). As Merleau-Ponty states:

C'est l'erreur des philosophies sémantiques de fermer le langage comme s'il ne parlait que de soi: il vit que du silence; tout ce que nous jetons aux autres à germe dans ce grand pays muet qui ne nous quitte pas. (1964a: 167)

Language does not speak of itself nor live upon its own internal circulation; its vitality stems from that silent world that pervades, that emerges *within* language, but is not *of* language. Merleau-Ponty does not cast forth the vision of some

'naive' experience to which one may return as 'prior to' language or sign systems; rather, he says 'le philosophe sait mieux que personne que le vécu est du vécu-parlé' (1964a: 167). It is not a matter of questioning the semiotic insight that all experience is an experience structured by sign systems such that it is given as if it were of the structure of language. Rather, the issue is the very nature of that signification: what is the signifying power within the signifying phenomenon? The way signification takes place, that which gives it its signifying power, is its inability to hold one within its play:

S'il y a une idéalité, une pensée qui a un avenir en moi, qui même perce mon espace de conscience et a un avenir chez les autres, et enfin, devenue écrit, un avenir en tout lecteur possible, ce ne peut être que cette pensée qui me laisse sur ma faim et les laisse sur leur faim, qui indique un gauchissement général du mon paysage et qui l'ouvre à l'universel, justement parce qu'elle est plutôt un impensé. Les idées trop possédées ne sont pas des idées, je ne pense plus rien quand j'en parle.... (Merleau-Ponty 1964a: 158-59)

The 'ideality', the *sens* which is intersubjective and opens horizons, is the *impensé*, the 'unthought' which rends the landscape, allows it to buckle, not that which squares it within the category. We live within linguistic and semiotic interplays which arise from our perceptual life and redouble its wonder, its lived sense, because both leave us rent, torn, and therefore capable of being taken up in various directions and senses.

For Merleau-Ponty, when one communicates, 'chaacun est pris dans le tourbillon' (1964a: 159). This vortex, however, is not just the absence of solid signification, is not the swirling among divergent speakers and signs; rather, it is about the leakage toward that silent world at the heart of signification: 'l'essence... est toujours un certain point de fuite indiqué par l'arrangement des paroles, leur "autre côté", inaccessible' (1964a: 159). The words in their interplay indicate the inaccessible, the vanished, the mute. In Merleau-Ponty's thinking, the perceptual world does not function as a 'ground' as it had for previous philosophers, as the effulgent presence standing there is its positivity. Rather, the object of perception as powerfully mysterious, as not being fully given or 'lit', is what gives it the depth of *sens* which remains the source of signification, even while being transformed by it.

Gesture and Depth

Merleau-Ponty's first notions about language, signs, expression, and communication are all couched in terms of the body's 'gesture' (*le geste*), since he sees that 'le corps doit en dernière analyse devenir la pensée ou l'intention qu'il nous signifie. C'est lui qui montre, lui qui parle' (1945: 230). It is the body that speaks, that inscribes, because thought *is* body, perception is expression, and in coming to significative intention, there is a coming to body. In expression one comes to embodied language, because language is embodiment extended into expression. The body shows in its gesture the world as a showing of itself (*le corps*) beyond itself in the world: 'c'est au-delà de l'être qu'elle cherche à se rejoindre et c'est pourquoi elle crée la parole comme appui empirique de son propre non-être' (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 229). The body seeks to catch up to its own non-being, not as the Sartrean negation of being, which is in opposition to what confronts it, but as its ongoing unfolding, which never gathers itself into the density, the totalization, of achieved being, or crystallization. Such an ingathering, a being, would be its death, the cessation of that inexhaustible movement. This body is sought in the world: the *lived body*, as Merleau-Ponty calls it, is inscribed in its landscape, and this surrounding world announces itself in the embodied bringing forth of the *sens* called for by 'the field' (which is body-world) as the maximal resolution of the *sens* of that environment.

However, the *sens* of any perceptual situation is inexhaustible. One achieves a closure of a maximal resolution of *sens* and its signification for a particular purpose, but that situation can be reconfigured within innumerable other projects, which elicit other perceptions and expressions. Each percept is an opening of a dimension never to be exhausted of its sense. Each act of expression—each taking up of language, for example—is such an opening too: 'l'intention de parler ne peut se retrouver que dans une expérience ouverte, elle apparaît, comme l'ébullition dans un liquide, lorsque, dans l'épaisseur de l'être, des zones de vide se constituent et se déplacent vers le dehors' (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 229). This power of language to boil, to cast others forth into a shared groping, which is the ultimate force of gesture, is the power Merleau-Ponty sees in language to redouble the enigma of perception. This opening of the enigmatic is the key to the depth of language's expressed *sens*, as we will explore in a moment.

However, I want to emphasize that Merleau-Ponty's initial emphasis on gesture and on the body as locus of signification in the *Phenomenology of Perception* in

1945 remains central to his notion of the signifying power of language, even though it recedes from view during his more structuralist 'middle' period in the late 1940s and in the 1950s, and is not readily apparent in his final pronouncements about language as part of the 'flesh of the world'. The force of 'gesture' is not *apparent* in the later formulations, because the earlier terminology of 'body' was bound up with the signification of a 'consciousness-object' distinction, and this surrounding vocabulary had to be jettisoned in order to articulate a non-dualistic ontology (Merleau-Ponty 1964a: 253). The vocabulary changes, the ideas evolve, but the early themes remain, although enriched and transformed. The fact that terms like 'gesture' necessarily disappear from Merleau-Ponty's analyses have led some of his readers to dismiss his earliest descriptions of language and thereby miss its continued development.

The meaning of the early formulation in terms of 'gesture' is the denial of the opposition of body and world: the body is our entry in the world, our insertion into a *sens* embedded in a perceptual 'stuff' of which we will be the speakers, the scribes, or the painters. All modes of signification are means of entering an unfolding and dispersing of *sens* that enfolds us into its course. In these beginning articulations Merleau-Ponty hasn't yet abandoned the terminology of 'body' or 'world', yet the germ of the ideas he will express through such terms as the 'flesh' or 'lacework of the world' in his later writings are already present in the *Phenomenology of Perception*:

Cette révélation d'un sens immanent ou naissant dans le corps vivant, elle s'entend, comme nous verrons, à tout le monde sensible, et notre regard, averti par l'expérience du corps propre, retrouvera dans tous les autres 'objets' le miracle de l'expression. (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 230)

We not only find within our embodiment a nascent movement toward an expression of a sense found within perception; we discover this movement toward expression as already given in a more general movement toward expression found among all the constituents of the perceptual field. The 'miracle of expression' is not our product; it is found by us in the world, as riddling the entire perceptible realm. Each percept is given as in a 'quasi-perceptual' relationship with all else that is perceptible, and we 'break into' the dialogue among things as embodied perceivers. It is not that the things literally perceive one another, but any percept

is given within a web of *sens* consisting of how each 'appears' to all the other members of the field:

Ainsi chaque objet est le miroir de tous les autres. Quand je regarde la lampe posée sur ma table, je lui attribue non seulement les qualités visibles de ma place, mais encore celles que la cheminée, que les murs, que la table que peut 'voir', le dos de ma lampe n'est rien d'autre que la face qu'elle 'montre' à la cheminée. (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 82)

As perceivers, we insert ourselves into this interplay, which is an emergent *sens* which haunts the field, woven among its members, not grasped from any particular vantage, and always inexhaustibly open in all directions and to all levels. Merleau-Ponty is not yet ready to articulate the ontological import of this analysis of embodiment directly, as he will at the end of his life by speaking of a 'Visibility', a 'Tacility', a 'Memory',⁵ which is part of the 'flesh of the world' of which we are part as perceivers, speakers, rememberers, *et al.*, yet the germ of those ideas is already present.

Merleau-Ponty notes this opening up to a larger 'round' of the 'miracle of expression' in the next sentence in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, in his description of Cézanne's attempt to paint the white of a table-cloth 'like a covering of newly fallen snow'. Cézanne strives to bring to expression in his canvases the opening up of the *sens* of such a scene as already expressed by Balzac in his words in *Peau de Chagrin*. However, Cézanne can only do this by forgetting both the power of painting and the power of language in order to rejoin the open power of the perceptual situation to call forth its expression:

'Si je peins: couronnes, je suis foulu, comprenez-vous? Et si vraiment j'équilibre et je nuance mes couverts et mes pains comme sur nature, soyez sur que les couronnes, la neige et tout le tremblement y seront'. Le problème du monde, et pour commencer celui de corps propre, consiste en ceci que tout y demeure. (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 230)

What is to be expressed is already 'there...in the world' in *some sense*, and one seeks in signifying acts to become expressive as a rejoining with an expressiveness already inhabiting the situation. The 'nature' one rejoins is not the romantic construction of a 'pure nature', but is rather thoroughly historical, cultural, and

linguistic, although not exclusively so. Yet this does not exhaust its depth, for this 'nature' is itself an 'open experience', as the previous quote indicates. At this point, it is important to clarify Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'depth', which runs throughout his work from its inception until his last published essay, which declares depth the source of all dimensions and as itself the 'deflagration of Being',⁶ and then to explicate how this very distinctive notion of depth demonstrates this relationship of the cultural world of language and sign systems to the perceptual world or to 'primordial Being'.

As one might expect, Merleau-Ponty introduces his notion of depth in terms of his analysis of the workings of perception, although it provides a paradigm for the depth of all unfolding *sens* expressed in signifying acts, whether found in art, language or history. He says of the distinctive sense of depth as it emerges in the perceptual field:

Cette présence simultanée a des expériences qui pourtant s'excluent, cette implication de l'une en l'autre, cette contraction en une seul acte perceptif de tous un processus possible fond l'originalité de la profondeur, elle est la dimension selon laquelle les choses ou les éléments des choses s'enveloppent l'un l'autre, tandis que largeur et hauteur sont les dimensions selon lesquelles ils se juxtaposent. (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 306)

Depth is not additive nor smoothly progressive: it does not 'build up' by moving into greater distance or by being revealed 'between' objects in our visual or other perceptual fields. It is the way in which experiences that should be logically mutually exclusive, that are impossible, instead 'go together' in an enriched sense of the surroundings in which one finds oneself. Instead of a neat progression in time, there are enjambments; instead of juxtapositions of differences, there are encroachments. Overall, what might be expected in a linear or logical or atomistic scheme as discrete becomes overlapping and transforming in a way that does not compromise or undermine *sens*, but is its depth and its richness. If the plane of the table were not given as an irreducibly oscillating series of impossible planes, it would not have the solid *sens* of a perceived table which emerges within and among all these fluctuations. Cézanne, as the painter who captures this depth, in Merleau-Ponty's opinion, paints these fluctuations. Similarly, the statement, 'My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?' has a greater *depth* of meaning in its expression of conflicting yet inseparable doubt and faith, divinity

and humanity, authority and freedom, defiance and love, resignation and determination, etc., as do any signifying acts that succeed in expressing a depth of significance.

Although Merleau-Ponty articulates this notion of depth as early as 1945 in the *Phénoménologie de la perception*, not only is his terminology inadequate to express the surpassing of subject-object dualism, but his notion of the Gestalt is too restrictive to do justice to his decentering of the perceiver and articulator of Being. In the world of praxis he describes as the realm of perception in the *Phénoménologie*, the world and its *sens* and the person and their self-understanding are analyzed almost exclusively within the tight circle of accomplishing everyday practical tasks, a situation requiring an integration too tightly woven to do justice to the ongoing multifarious becoming he sees at the heart of existence and of signifying acts. We have seen, however, that already he has begun to define both perception and signification in ways which point to a reassessment of the ways in which such an interplay is rent or torn open in a non-integratable way. Merleau-Ponty will work toward a new ontology and a new way of thinking about signification during the 1950s. The Being toward which he worked he calls 'l'Être sauvage' (or 'l'Être brut'), which encompasses both our most tightly woven moments of practical absorption and that space of dreams, emotions, fantasies, depths of memory, and excesses of *sens* that is inextricably interwoven with the everyday world, and both its perception and expression.

It is this early emphasis on gesture and its attendant sense of the primacy of the body and depth that Merleau-Ponty brought to his appreciation of Saussurean analysis of language. He found in Saussure's notion of language as play of difference a way to locate his own notion of language as an open situation, as signifying through its gaps. However, even in the early 1950s when he openly embraced Saussure, and wrote sentences such as 'Une langue est moins une somme de signes...qu'un moyen méthodique de discriminer des signes les uns des autres, et de construire ainsi un univers de langage...' (Merleau-Ponty 1969: 45), he also could write in the beginning of the same unfinished work, 'Mais cela même est la vertu du langage: c'est lui qui nous jette à ce qu'il signifie' (Merleau-Ponty 1969: 16). Language is not enclosing. It is open. We are always thrown beyond it. That world, these things toward which we are drawn in the gaping open of perception and in the leakage of language. Merleau-Ponty comes to articulate, are expressed in obscurity, because this is Being: 'si l'Être est caché, cela même est un trait de l'Être' (1964a:162). Although it took him fifteen years to find a way to express

this new 'indirect ontology', it is not a radical departure from the *Phenomenology* and its gestural theory of language, for we should remember that the last line of that chapter on language ends, 'L'obscurité gagne le monde perçu tout entier' (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 232).

'Wild Being' and Reversibility

In considering the import of Merleau-Ponty's final formulations in relation to semiotics, we can note his suggestive formulation in a 'working note' of 1959 that 'L'Être brut ou sauvage' equals the 'monde perçu' (Merleau-Ponty 1964a: 223). 'L'Être sauvage' rightly suggests that we can round out our sense of what Merleau-Ponty comes to say by turning to his affinity with another thinker of semiotics: Lévi-Strauss.⁷ Lévi-Strauss had diverged from the Saussurean notion of sign systems and their temporality in ways which paralleled Merleau-Ponty's own movement of thought. For Merleau-Ponty, the influence of Saussure's diacritical analyses of language had been greatest when the problem of communication within a certain social-political or literary historical situation was at the center of his attention. In the early 1950s, he saw the power of viewing the level of acquired meanings that shaped such situations as an interplay of divergences to be brought to its current historical life by speakers entering that interplay. By 1957, however, when presenting his case to his colleagues at the Collège de France to create a Chair in social anthropology for Lévi-Strauss,⁸ Merleau-Ponty said of Saussure: 'Le temps linguistique n'est plus cette série de simultanéités familière à la pensée classique, et à laquelle Saussure pensait encore quand il isolait clairement les deux perspectives du simultanée et du successif...' (1965: 163-64). Saussure's notion of time is too tightly woven, too coherent, too progressive to do justice to time as encompassing Merleau-Ponty's emergent notion of 'brute being': time must be seen as that which is torn, which cycles back on itself, which contains impossibles within its unfolding, and which is meandering.

This criticism of Saussure's notion of time comes in the midst of a paragraph criticizing the 'semiological sciences' in their Saussurean legacy of drawing too clear a distinction between nature and culture, of failing to see how radically human being is thrown beyond itself into cultural and natural meanings which are impossible, and of underestimating how much the symbolic outstrips the culture it sustains. Merleau-Ponty calls for a vision that not only sees a play of

differences within the linguistic chains, but also envisions each given category as having 'incompatible and inseparable' complements: there are dehiscences, tears, and signification is fissured, 'tuffed'.

By this point, Merleau-Ponty had turned his attention back to the originating depth of sense in the way embodiment is enmeshed in a world of dimensionalities which irreconcilably encroach upon one another, where phantasm and logic, perceptual quality and emotional significance, where social institution and mythological direction, are part of one interstitial openness that is becoming. Merleau-Ponty is working toward his final formulation of 'the flesh of the world' and of a differing sense of thought:

De même qu'il faut résumer le monde vertical, de même il y a une vue verticale de l'esprit, selon laquelle il n'est pas fait d'une multitude de souvenirs, d'images, de jugements, il est un seul mouvement qu'on peut nommer en jugements en souvenirs, mais qui les tient en un seul faisceau comme un mot spontané contient tout un devenir, comme une seule prise de la main contient tout un morceau d'espace. (1964a: 289)

This verticality of mind, its unity as movement and depth, as the going together of differing levels of sense that might otherwise have been thought to be discrete and to constitute a 'multitude', is central to Merleau-Ponty's evolving ability to articulate that original sense of depth he found in perception and now sees in a word or in all operations of mind: a mind that is 'savage' or 'wild'. The imaginary, the affective, the memorial, and the cognitive torsion one another and nest inside and repel each other in each word and in each perception.

It is in the service of articulating this sense of an embodied 'taking in' of 'unities-across-transgression' that Merleau-Ponty is led to a different notion of time and sense than he found in Saussure, and is drawn again toward Lévi-Strauss. The sentence quoted above criticizing Saussure's too tightly laid out analysis of time is followed by this thought in apposition: 'la synchronie, avec Troubetzkoy, enjambe, comme le temps légendaire ou mythique, sur la succession et sur la diachronie' (1965: 164). Time is enjambed, sense emerges where the mythical and the mundane play off one another, where successions double back on themselves, discontinuities are bridged, simultaneities emerge between what logically should not be simultaneous. Merleau-Ponty claims that what is vital in the work of

Lévi-Strauss for the philosopher is 'une nouvelle profondeur' (1965: 161) in which we come to see overlappings in a much more fissured, undecidable fashion:

C'est ce qu'on fait en voyant dans le fonction symbolique la source de toute raison et toute déraison, parce que le nombre et la richesse des significations dont dispose l'homme excèdent toujours le cercle des objets définis qui méritent le nom de signifiés, parce que la fonction symbolique doit toujours être en avance sur son objet et ne trouve le réel qu'en le dévancement dans l'imaginaire. (1965: 163)

The imaginary and the real, reason and unreason are held in a depth of the symbolic, partially spoken by the juxtapositions of both signifiers and signifieds, but always also thrown beyond themselves into a perceptual world in which time circles back upon itself, and modes of sense and regions of the world overlap and clash. Merleau-Ponty continues after his criticism of Saussure's oversimplified notion of time to say: 'Si la fonction symbolique dévance le donne, il y a inévitablement quelque chose de brouille dans tout l'ordre de la culture qu'elle porte. L'antithèse de la nature et de la culture n'est plus nette' (1965: 164). There is confusion in the order of culture, there are irreconcilabilities that are part of how culture is 'la membrure du monde': this frame has gaps or limbs which move in different directions. Merleau-Ponty admires Lévi-Strauss because the anthropologist shares with this 'philosopher of ambiguity' an appreciation of indeterminacy: 'c'est dans ces conditions difficiles que nous cherchons'. Culture does not swallow nature, fully containing it within sign systems, but neither is nature the Other: 'L'homme et la société ne sont pas exactement hors de la nature et du biologique: ils s'en distinguent plutôt en rassemblant les "mises" de la nature et en les risquant toutes ensemble' (1965: 168). Society and culture always retain a root in nature and biology, which play off one another in being played out together in moments of the 'stakes': the gamble of expression/perception.

Merleau-Ponty finds in Lévi-Strauss another thinker 'qui cherche à approfondir notre insertion dans l'être' (1965: 165): a thinker who seeks depth, the not quite going together yet inseparable, that leaves nature and culture, perception and language or sign system, inextricably interwoven yet always dehiscant. This manner of thinking leaves the plane of conception where the interplay of signs could be represented as the totalization of a semiotic system 'above' (and 'dictating') the unfolding natural contingencies of a culture's evolution. Instead

the culture-nature 'chiasmi', as the crossing of strands which are 'one' in the criss-cross,⁹ 'indique un chemin hors de la corrélation sujet-objet qui domine la philosophie de Descartes à Hegel'. Even though the Saussurean project undermines the insularity of an essential self who would be subject and rational agent, its location of sense exclusively within the interplay of difference within language and culture systems threatens to miss the key moments when any sign system is thrown beyond itself, because human being itself as a 'gaping open' is thrown beyond itself and has to recover itself from varying indeterminate depths.

Insofar as culture escapes itself and leaks into the biological and natural there is an inexhaustibility outside the play of difference of signs. Yet the natural and biological are 'avec le monde socio-historique dans une sorte de circuit', and are always found within 'une transformation de la nature, une série de méditations où la structure n'émerge jamais emblée comme pur universel' (1965: 164). Human being can only be faithfully seen as thrown beyond any grasp of the situation in sign systems and returned to itself as nature inextricably culturally reinterpreted, as material, perceptual, sensually affective, in which structure and situation have no graspable origin and no graspable destination. These transformations take place in a time that is 'wild' because it never reaches progressive unfolding or closure of meaning, since it is also retrograde, promiscuous, and confused in the very heart of its sense. This circularity of sense, of nature and culture, of the moments of a wild time, undercut the various subject-object dualisms Merleau-Ponty sees as having plagued Western philosophy. In the work of Lévi-Strauss, Merleau-Ponty sees the appreciation of 'l'homme étant excentrique à lui-même' (1965: 165), of human being that is eccentric as a movement back to itself from its world and never recoverable. As this constant circularity and transformation, human being is thrown outside subject-object dualisms.

Merleau-Ponty ends his presentation of what is most exciting about Lévi-Strauss' work by contrasting the articulation of elementary structures, laws of exchange, with Lévi-Strauss' moving to demonstrate 'l'autre bout du champ de l'anthropologie, dans certains systèmes complexes, les structures éclatent et s'ouvrent'. This point at which structures burst apart and open will be developed by Lévi-Strauss as the capacity of '*bricolage*' of the 'savage' or 'wild' capacity to improvise the totemic coming together of seemingly disparate levels of culture and nature such that they mirror one another. It is a transforming structure which is also structuring, in which mythic and mundane space play off one another, and neither Lévi-Strauss nor Merleau-Ponty sees this as a capacity foreign to their own

culture. Despite the power of structure, there is this other moment: 'Ici l'échange, la fonction symbolique, la société ne jouent plus somme une seconde nature, aussi impérieuse que l'autre, et qui l'efface. Chacun est invité à définir son propre système d'échange' (1965: 168). Although sign systems are human beings' 'second nature', they are not a strait jacket. In finding in the work of this anthropologist the articulation of this moment of 'bursting', Merleau-Ponty sees an allied vision in which the analysis of sign systems does not become so totalized that each system becomes insular and unable to understand others. Merleau-Ponty wants to retain the power of semiotic systems as drawing forth worlds, but also their 'leakage' and crossing as strands in eccentric weavings through tears in their fabrics. Seeing this work of Lévi-Strauss, Merleau-Ponty applauds that in articulating this openness of the moment of improvisation 'les frontières des cultures s'estompent'. Neither in opposition to nature nor in opposition to other cultures can culture remain purely contained within a play of difference, for human being always rediscovers itself and others woven into a perceptual, natural world in excess of signification.

Merleau-Ponty's final articulation of the meaning of perception, language, culture, intersubjectivity, and nature in his unfinished *Le visible et l'invisible*, through his description of the 'flesh of the world', reaches its most cogent point in his description of 'l'entrelacs—le chiasme'. Here, he states, 'Voir, parler, même penser... sont des expériences de ce genre, à la fois irréductibles et énigmatiques' (1964a: 172). To speak and to live within semiotic systems is as undeniable as seeing or thinking, but each is enigmatic because Merleau-Ponty sees each as an index of a mystery, an obscurity. This obscurity stems from the fact that it is 'the flesh' which speaks and sees:

La chair n'est pas matière, n'est pas esprit, n'est pas substance. Il faudrait pour le désigner, le vieux terme d'élément', au sens où on l'emploierait pour parler de l'eau, de l'air, de la terre et du feu, c'est à dire au sens d'une chose générale, à mi-chemin de l'individu spatio-temporal et de l'idée, sorte de principe incarné qui importe un style d'être partout ou il s'en trouve une parcelle. La chair est en ce sens un 'élément' de l'Être. (1964a: 184)

The flesh of the world means that we are the same sort of thing as that which we perceive, that about which we speak, that about which we imagine: we can be touched, seen, heard, spoken, felt, and imagined, and so we touch, see, hear, speak,

feel, or imagine. This flesh is not mind or matter: it is the way things come to appear here and there, concretely and palpably, and yet trail with them an interest being among so many other regions of the world. To put it concretely, Merleau-Ponty offers an example of a 'simple' perception, the perception of the color red. As flesh, as the way in which the world folds back onto itself, this red is

Ponctuation dans le champ des choses rouges, qui comprend les tuiles des toits, le drapeau des gardes-barrières et de la Révolution, certains terrains près d'Aix où à la Madagascar, elle l'est aussi dans celui des robes de femmes, des robes de professeurs, d'évêques et d'avocats généraux, et aussi dans celui des parures et celui des uniformes. (1964a: 174)

As flesh, as tissue, the sensibles, imaginables, memorables, *et al.* all play off one another: there are crisscrossing dimensionalities of red in each percept. He goes on to add other interplays within this perception of a color, but adds also how the reds of each appearance are also *incomparable*, as among the red of anger or of lips or of the revolution or an imaginary hell, where each red is also distinctly different. This opening of a 'dimension' through each percept, image, or word is not a matter of association, but is again that kind of spontaneous *bricolage* Lévi-Strauss could see by using Saussure's original insight into the patterings of differences, and even the homologies between systems of difference.

The difference in this final vision of Merleau-Ponty with his semiotic inspirations is his insistence that the body 'n'est pas lui-même chose, matière interstitielle, tissu conjonctif, *mais sensible pour soi*', which means that 'le corps appartient l'ordre des choses comme le monde est chair universelle' (1964a: 135, 137). As sensible for itself by being of the same flesh as the world, the body sees itself in seeing the world—and in seeing itself in the seen, the world 'sees'. This is what Merleau-Ponty called the 'reversibility' of the flesh. It is an asymmetrical reversibility: it is not to say the tree 'sees' in my seeing it in some 'animistic' way; rather, only by being visible can I enter among visible things and see, and only as this power of vision folding back on itself do I see. Therefore, as I enter this dimension of visibility 'my seeing' is in some sense a more general power of visibility I enter, part of which is the tree. For Merleau-Ponty, the flesh means that 'tout ensemble sont un Sentant en général devant un Sensible en général' (1964a: 187). This Sentience and Sensible in general does not indicate some 'hyperbeing' or 'world soul' or underlying 'oneness', but just the opposite: who

we are as speakers or perceivers and that about which we speak or perceive are deliscent; there is no self-identity, no core of substantiality, only an interlacement within time. There is no dualism of either mental or material substance.

In *L'œil et l'esprit*, the essay written during the last summer of his life, Merleau-Ponty spoke of entering the depth of expression as entering into the 'deflagration of Being' (1964b: 65). Neither human being nor the world is self-enclosed; rather, there is a blaze in which all appearance is rent, given up to be fired into a glare with the combustion of all other aspects of experience. To see, to speak, or to imagine is not to take possession of the world; it is in some real sense to lose oneself to the world for an ever renewable instant. This is why Merleau-Ponty says:

On sent peut-être mieux maintenant tout ce que porte ce petit mot: voir. La vision n'est pas un certain mode de la pensée ou présence à soi: c'est le moyen qui m'est donné d'être absent de moi-même, d'assister du dedans à la fission de l'Être, au terme de laquelle seulement je me ferme sur moi. (1964b: 81)

To enter perception or to embark on expression is to enter the fission of becoming, and only be able to regather oneself at the termination of this upset. Reversibility occurs in the leakage of all our perceptions, expressions, and actions. As gone from 'ourselves', and so gone from our systems of exchange and signification for instants of 'bursting', 'slipping', or 'promiscuity', we then return to ourselves from the vortex of a fission.

Truly 'L'Être Sauvage': Beyond Anthropocentrism

Both things and the human are in some sense 'outside themselves'. Semiotics and other consequent writings have certainly explored the ways in which language speaks the speaker and culture interprets itself through its interpreters, and Merleau-Ponty was certainly influenced by this current of thought and helped to further its course. However, the exclusive emphasis on these dimensions of semiosis as historical and cultural constructions would fail to render full justice to this other dimension of Merleau-Ponty's thought: that these formulations remain too human-centered, too anthropocentric; that we never speak only among

ourselves, but are also given other voices for whom we speak as interlocutors with us. Merleau-Ponty never got to develop this line of thought, but he asks a very penetrating question in his last unfinished work:

Pourquoi la synergie n'existerait-elle pas entre différents organismes, si elle est possible à l'intérieur de chacun? Leurs paysages s'enchevêtraient, leurs actions et leurs passions s'ajustent exactement: cela est possible dès qu'on cesse de définir à titre primordial le sentir par l'appartenance à une même 'conscience', et qu'au contraire on comprend comme retour sur soi du visible, adhérence charmelle du sentant au senti et du senti au sentant. Car recouvrement et fission, identité et différence, elle fait naître un rayon de lumière naturelle qui éclaire toute chair et non pas seulement la mienne. (1964a: 187)

Once human being has been found to be at the depths of a fission, of a coming back to itself from the depths of a landscape indeterminately both natural and cultural, part of the interweavings that are the tissue, the enlacement, of the flesh may be with other kinds of organisms. There are other hints that raise this question in Merleau-Ponty's 'working notes', such as the note of February, 1959 in which he speaks of a 'notion d'interanimalité' (1964a: 226). If we are decentered with respect to ourselves within culture and history, are we not decentered with respect to our species too? Merleau-Ponty poses this question (1964a: 226), and his work leads us to start constructing the response.¹⁰

In what Merleau-Ponty called the artist's 'fascination' with the world, there is testimony to how expression is eccentric in respect to the natural world. The artist may be more sensitive to this strand in our enlacing with the flesh of the world, but Merleau-Ponty found such a sensitivity to have wider import for expression. He refers to the testimony of several artists in his writings who report this sense of reversal with the natural world in expression:

Entre lui et le visible, les rôles inévitablement s'inversent. C'est pourquoi tant de peintres ont que les choses les regardent, et André Marchand après Klee: 'Dans une forêt, j'ai senti plusieurs reprises que ce n'était pas moi que regardais le forêt. J'ai senti, certains jours, que c'étaient les arbres que me regardent, que me parlaient.... Moi j'étais là, écoutant.... Je crois que le peintre doit être transpercé par l'univers et non vouloir le transpercer ...

J'attends d'être intérieurement submergé, enseveli. Je peins peut-être pour surgir. (1964b: 31)

The artist experiences the ways in which the trees look and speak, and the expression of the artist voices the indirect voices that have been heard. This is not as some Romantic Other, but as one strand in a weave of perception, emotion, imagination, and memory that is in a circuit of coming back to oneself from a many-faceted world, part of which is structured semiotically, but of which there are always excesses. For Merleau-Ponty, neither as an individual with a 'consciousness' nor as a collectivity with a 'culture' can there be an entrapment within ourselves, because all such senses are found in the world, not as totalizable sign systems, but as having depths which are fissures, through which we escape ourselves, or as Merleau-Ponty cites the words of Klee: 'Je suis insaisissable dans l'immanence' (1964b: 87).

Although Merleau-Ponty took from semiotic thinking a way to understand how perception is always already culturally, historically, and socially coded, his thought ultimately has to part ways with semiotics when this net of sign systems becomes wound too tightly. For Merleau-Ponty, 'nature' would never have become a world that could not be spoken except as a token of 'nostalgia' or *naïveté* about the power of cultural artifacts. Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh and reversibility meant that the natural would always still have a voice to be hearkened to in a larger polyphony. For Merleau-Ponty, there was a 'wildness' to the world, to Being, that called for care, for listening, for its expression through us:

Et en un sens, comme dit Valéry, le langage est tout, puisqu'il n'est la voix de personne, qu'il est la voix même des choses, des ondes et des bois. Et ce qu'il faut comprendre, c'est que, de l'une à les autres de ces vues, il n'y pas les rassembler dans une synthèse: elles sont deux aspects de la reversibilité qui est vérité ultime. (1964a: 204)

Notes

1. 'Syntax in depth' is from Merleau-Ponty 1968: 40; the second quotation given here appears as 'un autre corps moins lourd' in Merleau-Ponty 1964a: 200.

2. For one of the most concise treatments of these various stages and their development see Silverman 1981. Silverman distinguishes '(1) the language of the body (1945), (2) the philosophy and psychology of communication (1946-52), (3) indirect language (1952-57), and (4) the language of visibility (1958-61)'. In another helpful essay in this collection, James Edie (1981) distinguishes four periods of Merleau-Ponty's thinking about the nature of structure which parallel Silverman's distinctions about the stages of characterization of language. Edie says: 'I distinguish four periods in the development of Merleau-Ponty's concept of structure. These can be conveniently labeled: (1) Gestaltist, (2) Dialectical, (3) Structuralist, (4) Post-Structuralist (in a specifically Merleau-Pontean—i.e., pre-Derridean—sense of post-structuralism)'.
3. At the earliest points in Merleau-Ponty's interest in language, his interest is caught up in his project of articulating the way the perceiving body is a motor body and an expressive body. In the realm of *langue/parole*, Merleau-Ponty is exploring the way language as speech (*parole*) appropriates its meaning. The 'spoken language' (*parole parlée*) is taken up in 'speaking speech' (*parole parlant*), which is one of the body's expressive modes of being itself thought. Despite the evolution in Merleau-Ponty's thought, this focus on the activity of language, its motion, its expressiveness does not wane.
4. One can see how Merleau-Ponty's earlier interest in the perceptual 'field' as a surrounding of differences which find equivalences within the whole, within the overall perceptual sense of something, was to dovetail nicely with his increasing interest in the early 1950s in the Saussurean description of language as the oppositional play of signifiers.
5. Although strangely enough this one locution does appear within the *Phenomenology*, but in isolation, without all the accompanying parallel locutions and context provided for it in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Not surprisingly, it appears in the section we have been discussing, a few pages later: 'Mais nous croyons qu'il y a une vérité du passé, nous appuyons notre mémoire à une immense Mémoire du monde' (1945: 84).
6. 'De la profondeur ainsi comprise, on ne peut plus dire qu'elle est "troisième dimension". D'abord, si elle en était une, ce serait plutôt la première: il n'y a de formes, de plans définies que si l'on stipule à quelle distance de moi se trouvent leurs différentes parties. Mais une dimension première et qui contient les autres n'est pas une dimension, du moins au sens ordinaire d'un certain rapport selon lequel on mesure. La profondeur ainsi comprise est plutôt

l'expérience de la reversibilité des dimensions, d'une "localité" globale où tout est à la fois, dont hauteur, largeur et distance sont abstraites, d'une voluminosité qu'un exprimé d'un mot en disant qu'une chose est là. Quand Cézanne cherche la profondeur, c'est cette déflagration de l'Être qu'il cherche, et elle est dans tous les modes de l'espace, dans la forme aussi bien' (Merleau-Ponty 1964b).

7. Lévi-Strauss dedicated his *La pensée sauvage* (1961) 'to the memory of Merleau-Ponty'. They had met around 1930, and became friends in the mid-1940s. Merleau-Ponty worked from 1957 on for the creation of a Chair in social anthropology at the Collège de France, which Lévi-Strauss came to occupy in January, 1960. Merleau-Ponty obviously greatly admired the work of Lévi-Strauss, calling it 'brilliant' in the essay we are about to discuss. See Johnson (1989: 50-59) for a fuller description of their personal and intellectual interconnection.
8. This presentation to his colleagues at the Collège de France was an eight-page communication titled 'Rapport pour la création d'une chaire d'Anthropologie sociale' made on November 30, 1958; it was later published in *Signs* as the essay 'From Mauss to Claude Lévi-Strauss' (Johnson 1989: 65).
9. This is the term Merleau-Ponty used in his last work for articulating the way in which what might seem separable strands are interlaced.
10. At a time when many are concerned about the fate of the biosphere of the planet and wonder how people can begin to 'hear' the natural world, Merleau-Ponty's ideas may be quite pregnant.

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