

# MERLEAU-PONTY AND THE MODERN NOVEL

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**M**erleau-Ponty's contribution to the theory of painting has been widely acknowledged both by art historians and critics and by philosophers. What is not generally recognised however is that Merleau-Ponty had some important things to say about literature, and more particularly, about the modern novel. In his essay, *Le Roman et la Métaphysique*, first published in the *Cahiers du Sud* in 1945, Merleau-Ponty sets forth a phenomenology of the modern novel which both compliments contemporary phenomenologies of literature and distinguishes itself from these descriptions. This paper will attempt to come to terms with Merleau-Ponty's phenome-

nology of the modern novel as well as to describe some of the more original and interesting features of it.

In *The Act of Reading*, Iser points out that modern art challenges the prevailing social structures, the world and literature itself as a body of written works. Yet it also, according to Iser, does something more, for in the twentieth century art has even called existing theories of interpretation into question. He remarks, "*It would appear that modern art and literature are themselves beginning to react against the traditional form of interpretation. . .*"<sup>1</sup>, and he cites Susan Sontag's description

of Pop Art in *Against Interpretation* as an example of art revolting against the idea of there being a hidden meaning which one could abstract from it.

Certainly modern art and literature do challenge this nineteenth century ideal of a single "deep" meaning to be discovered and displayed to the public by literary critics and interpreters. But, as Merleau-Ponty would seem to indicate in his earlier work, modern art and literature are not primarily challenges to literary criticism—and it is not clear that Iser suggests this either—but reactions against the dominant ideology of the nineteenth century, reactions against a certain way of approaching the world in language. For Merleau-Ponty, the dilemma of modern art and indeed of modern thought in general is to "*communiquer sans le secours d'une Nature préétablie et sur laquelle nous sens à tous survivraient, le problème de savoir comment nous sommes entés sur l'universel par ce que nous avons de plus propre.*"<sup>2</sup> Modern man refuses the traditional ideology which demands scientific explanations and theories of objective truth. His is a response to a situation in which these explanations and theories have been undermined or rejected. Henceforth, the modern novelist "*n'a pas pour rôle d'exposer des idées ou même d'analyser des caractères, mais de présenter un événement interhumain, de le faire mûrir et éclater sans commentaire idéologique.*"<sup>3</sup>

One of the responses to this problem of communication in modern literature can, according to Merleau-Ponty, be seen in the direction taken by the modern novel away from ideology and towards metaphysics. For Merleau-Ponty, a metaphysical literature is one that looks beyond linguistic and reflective levels of experience in order to describe our pre-personal or perceptual experience of the world, things and others. Perceptual experience is the original realm of consciousness and freedom, the realm of the co-existence of subject and object in which, by means of a dialectical exchange, meaning (*sense*) first arises. This exchange between subject and object in which they cannot be distinguished from each other, occurs on that level of experience where knowledge is first founded or inaugurated. But perceptual experience is not just an implicit "*connaissance d'existences*"<sup>4</sup> it is that dimension of existence in which the world, things and others are originally given and primordially revealed to us in the meaning which lines our contact with them. Perceptual experience is the realm of the ambiguous and the paradoxical, of the wonder-

ful and the strange. It is the realm of the meta-physical in the full sense of the term.

Perception is a bodily act, at once spatial, temporal and sexual, by means of which the world is made manifest to the subject. It is "*une expérience non-thétique, préobjective et préconsciente*"<sup>5</sup> in which the subject as an incarnate consciousness first establishes contact with the world. In our perceptual experience we live, as it were, in a flux of succeeding perceptions which are unified temporally but which we do not synthesize intellectually. Perceptual experience is the act of a subject silently questioning the world as he moves around in it. Transcendence, in the sense of moving outside or beyond oneself, characterises this act and to be in the world as a body-subject or incarnate consciousness is, in its very nature, to transcend oneself and to relate to the world of things and other people. "*Ce que je découvre et reconnais par le Cogito. . . c'est le mouvement profond de transcendance qui est mon être même, le contact simultané avec mon être et l'être du monde.*"<sup>6</sup>

The subject of perceptual experience is the *je anonyme*. The *je anonyme* is a nascent self, that is, it will serve as the foundation for the essentially historical or personal self but is not itself one. It is an incarnate subject; its being is the being of the body, and as such, it is often confused with "*la vie de mes yeux, de mes mains, de mes oreilles qui sont autant de Moi naturels.*"<sup>7</sup> The *je anonyme* is thus not a transcendental or reflective ego which could survey the world in its thought. It is a being whose existence consists primarily in seeing, feeling, touching, smelling and hearing, or in perceptual activity in general. Pre-personal being inheres in the world as a body subject and the limits of its experience are effectively determined by the possibilities it has for bodily movement or activity.

Thus, the self is never something fixed or determinate. It is "*un moment qui s'anticipe, un flux qui ne se quitte pas.*"<sup>8</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, therefore,

*J'ai bien, grâce au temps, un emboîtement et une reprise des expériences antérieures dans les expériences ultérieures, mais nulle part une possession absolue de moi par moi, puisque le creux de l'avenir se remplit toujours d'un nouveau présent.*<sup>9</sup>

The task of the modern novelist has, according to Merleau-Ponty, become one of describing

this world or experience of meaning (*sens*). And one of the responses to the twentieth century question of how to express things without falling back on ideologies purporting to be objective, is to describe experience as it is given, and more specifically, to describe the metaphysical dimension of experience. For the modern novelist, writing is now a question of making present in language what lies in the obscure realm of perceptual experience. It is not up to him to judge or manipulate this experience in order to explain it. He must guide the reader to an understanding of the *LEBENSWELT*, not by making moral judgments or by fitting this experience into an explanatory schema, but by depicting and describing it as faithfully as possible. With Heidegger, literature becomes thought of being, with Merleau-Ponty, it becomes an expression of being in the world.

One of Merleau-Ponty's most interesting discussions of literature appears in those essays and articles where he describes literature as being, in some sense, an historically conditioned use of language. Metaphysics, for Merleau-Ponty, is primarily an activity, the activity of describing the pre-personal world, and it must be seen in light of its history or of its use of language in response to that history. Here the word "history" refers both to the general historical context as the background or milieu in which the question to which literature responds is formulated, and the context of literary history both past and present.

In terms of the general historical context, one can see the novel as the project of a finite subject situated within a particular historical epoch. With the modern novel, this context is one in which absolute principles have been rejected. For the modern novelist who chooses metaphysics as a response to this problem, our experience of the world which he or she attempts to describe is such that neither the subject of that experience nor the world in it can be taken as objects. No conceptual models or theoretical constructs are sufficient for an understanding of it since these models and constructs invariably objectify the world and the subject and turn what is ambiguous in our experience into something straightforward and univocal. There is no absolute standpoint on the world that the novelist could take with respect to the experience he or she describes. Thus there can be no absolute certainty or truth because there is no standpoint which is not rooted in history. All meaning is relative to the historical context in which it first

occurs as meaning. "*L'écrit. . . ne nous livre son sens le plus durable qu'à travers une histoire précise dont il nous faut avoir quelque connaissance.*"<sup>10</sup> The writer always brings meaning to light at a particular time and from a particular point of view as a response to a particular problem posed within the historical context.

Thus literature is essentially historical because the subject-writer is situated with a particular historical context and responds to it. Any significance we give to a novel should take into account this historical dimension by referring back to the historical context of the writer whose activity is, in some measure, defined by that context. Thus, if we seek to understand literature, we must first see it as the activity of a particular subject who responded to the problems posed by the historical and environing world in which he or she was situated. To come to terms with the historical context is to provide an important framework for the understanding of the works produced in it since the novelist could not have meant anything outside of that framework. Each written work has a historical dimension which we take up in our reading of it and to which we can only do justice by buttressing our reading with some knowledge of the historical context in which the text was written.

Literature not only responds to the general historical context, it also responds to its own history. In his earlier work, Merleau-Ponty insisted on this relation of literature to its own past as a feature peculiar to linguistic expression. Literature can be a response to its own past and present because, unlike extralinguistic expression, literature is sedimented. "*Ce qui est vrai seulement— et justifie la situation particulière que l'on fait d'ordinaire au langage— c'est que seule de toutes les expressions expressives, la parole est capable de se sédimentier et de constituer un acquis intersubjectif.*"<sup>11</sup> What is written is sedimented in history and each novelist tries to come to terms with this history, responding to what has been written as to an intersubjective acquisition to which the attempts to add or which he rejects or tries to overcome. The sedimented work is a meaningful endeavour related to other works in the attempt of each writer to go beyond or to surpass them. The body of sedimented works, as an intersubjective acquisition, is continually being renewed and expanded by the activity of each succeeding novelist who contains the history of literature in his work and who assumes it by attempting to go beyond it.

The writer is conscious of belonging to a tradition embodied in sedimented works. In his work, he is aware of aiming at an experience which has already found expression in other works. He cannot therefore remain indifferent to what has been written and he sees his work as situated within a larger historical context. Writers attempt to go beyond what has been written in order to reach a more truthful and more original expression of the world. The history of literature is always *"sinon au centre de leur conscience, du moins à l'horizon de leurs efforts."*<sup>12</sup>

In attempting to go beyond what has been written in the body of sedimented works which constitutes the history of his particular mode of expression, the writer endeavours to reach a final truth as an absolute limit directing his work. *"La parole installe en nous l'idée de vérité comme limite présomptive de son effort."*<sup>13</sup> Linguistic activity makes its own history manifest by referring to it in the attempt of the novelist to create something newer and truer than it. While a final truth can never be attained in language since language *"ne pourrait livrer la chose même que s'il cessait d'être dans le temps et dans la situation"*<sup>14</sup>, the goal of attaining one continually directs literary activity.

This description of the novel in terms of its history means that the novel is a response both to the general historical context and to the particular literary-historical context. Understanding a text is, to a certain degree, understanding these two contexts in which the questions to which the novelist responds first arise. Any meaning the text has is in part conditioned by the historical context in which the text first meant something. The meaning one gives to a text is therefore historical in that a reading of the text is recreative of historically-conditioned meanings and inasmuch as one is aware of this historical influence in the sense of taking into account the conditions contributing to the production of the text's first (historical) meanings.

Such an understanding of a text's history does not involve understanding the intention of the author as an idea that exists before the text was written in the realm of consciousness. According to Merleau-Ponty, the intention of the author is nothing but the act of writing itself which brings the work into existence and is nothing apart from it. We must therefore understand what is written not in light of some pre-existing intention of the writer but rather, in light of the act of writing itself, that original and authentic meaning-producing activity

by means of which the subject projected himself into the world. Theories of interpretation such as Hirsch's which speak of the meaning of the text as being in part *"an affair of consciousness"*<sup>15</sup> would thus be rejected by Merleau-Ponty since thought or intentions cannot stand apart from their enverbalised form.

Thus it would be appropriate to search through the text for the author's project as the Geneva School tries to do. As far as Merleau-Ponty is concerned, however, one cannot say with certainty to what extent the author's enverbalised intention matters to the meaning of the text. In the few places where Merleau-Ponty speaks of textual meaning, he does not seem to identify it with the meaning the author gives to the text or indeed with any one single meaning. Thus Iser's thesis that there is no one meaning to be extracted from the text as its only legitimate meaning would hold for Merleau-Ponty as well but for different reasons. As Merleau-Ponty writes, *"Décidément toute vie est ambiguë et il n'y a aucun moyen de savoir le sens vrai de ce qu'on fait, peut-être même n'y a-t-il pas UN sens vrai de nos actions."*<sup>16</sup> Though this comment was made about the meaning of our actions with respect to moral judgement, it would also seem to apply to the meanings of written work as instantiated in the act of writing and of reading. There is no single and unique meaning that one can give to this act of enverbalising intentions and there is no one meaning to be found in reading.

When we say therefore, that meaning is at least in part historical, we mean that the meaning we give to the text is recreative as well as creative. The text first has a meaning, though this meaning is never simple or unique, as the result of the interplay between it and the historical context in which it is produced and which it reproduces. In reading, the meaning one gives to the text is woven with the threads of the history that conditioned it. The reader gives the text its historical texture in his or her recreative reading of the text and in light of the understanding he or she has of the historical context in which the text first meant something. Meaning is always context-dependent and part of the context responsible for the production of the meaning the reader gives to the text must be sought in an understanding of the context responsible for the meanings the text first had. The other must be sought in the reader's own historical context.

## NOTAS

1. ISEER, Wolfgang. **The Act of Reading**. The John Hopkins University Press. Baltimore and London, 1980. P. 11.
2. MERLEAU-PONTY, Maurice. *Le Langage Indirect et les Voix de Silence*. In **Signes**. Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1960. P. 65.
3. \_\_\_\_\_. **Phénoménologie de la Perception**. Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1945. P. 177. (Henceforth this work shall be referred to as **PP.**)
4. **Ibid.** P. 50.
5. **Ibid.** P. 279.
6. **PP.** P. 432.
7. **Ibid.** P. 250.
8. **PP.** P. 486.
9. **Ibid.** P. 278.
10. *Le Langage Indirect et les Voix de Silence*. P. 100.
11. **PP.** P. 221.
12. *Le Langage Indirect et les Voix de Silence*. P. 76.
13. **PP.** P. 221.
14. *The Langage Indirect et les Voix de Silence*. P. 102.
15. HIRSCH, E. D. **Validity in Interpretation**. Yale University Press. New Haven and London, 1967. P. 4.
16. MERLEAU-PONTY, Maurice. *Le Roman et la Métaphysique*. In **Sens et non-sens**. Editions Nagel, Paris, 1948.