

what I said before, but, on the contrary, to make it more serious.

In this way I think I rejoin Doctor Hesnard's own conceptions. He who understands illness as the constitution of a world on the borders of the other certainly thinks that man could not thus pass over the true world if it were positively given, or recognizable according to "criteria." Thus these pages only bring new motives for subscribing to the *rapprochement* which Doctor Hesnard proposes, and I would like in writing them to have merited a little better the very courteous invitation which he addressed to me.

NOTES

- 1 DeVolabrega, and also in this volume i.e., in Hesnard's book (Trans.)
- 2 E. Husserl, *Ideas I*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983).
- 3 E. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 *La psychanalyse*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956), p. 44.
- 6 E. Husserl, *The Crisis*, *op. cit.*

Merleau-Ponty: In Memoriam*

JACQUES LACAN

Translated by Wilfried Ver Eecke and Dirk de Schutter

1. One can exhale the cry that denies that friendship might stop living. To speak of death having come is almost to kill a second time. I have tried to carry my respects beyond this simple statement, but I forgo doing so in spite of myself. Yet I wish to meditate on a memory of what I sensed of the man in a moment that required of him a kind of bitter patience.

2. What else can I do but examine the abrupt ending of a discourse in which we all entered?

And his last article, which is reproduced here, is entitled, "Eye and Mind."¹ We will talk about it in order to see from where the ideas emerge and whether we can agree with them, but most of all with the purpose of understanding the message, (obviously) from our point of view.

3. Surely, the dominant and the sensible note of the entire work are preponderant. If it is taken for what it is—the work of a philosopher who at sixteen (according to his own testimony) caught sight of his future and devoted himself to a lifelong task—this means that the original intention behind an academic vocation maintains itself through a whole oeuvre, even if that intention did not always remain the dominant motive, even if it got involved in a public debate.

4. This is not, however, the reason why this article fits in with a feeling of change—stressed twice, once in the epigram and once at the end—that is becoming manifest in science. Maurice Merleau-Ponty evokes a number of themes about the domain of communication that are quite fashionable. Thus, he complacently accepts the importance of operational possibilities.² However, he is only capable of drawing attention to this as a phenomenon which is now waiting for a rational foundation.

It is exactly this rational foundation to which we attempt to contribute from the field that is ours (Freudian psychoanalysis) and that is privileged to reveal it: the reason why the signifier proves to be first in the whole constitution of a subject.

5. The eye that has been taken here as the center for a revision of the status of the mind, nevertheless, includes all the possible resonances of the tradition to which thought remains committed.

* This is the first English translation of this article, which originally appeared in a special Merleau-Ponty Issue of *Les Temps Modernes*, Vol. 17 (1961), nos. 185-86, pp. 245-54, and is translated with the kind permission of *Les Temps Modernes* and Dr. Jacques-Alain Miller. Wilfried Ver Eecke is Professor of Philosophy at Georgetown University; Dirk de Schutter is a doctoral candidate in Philosophy at Georgetown University.

So it is that Maurice Merleau-Ponty, like anybody else on this route, cannot but appeal once more to the abstract eye that is assumed by the Cartesian concept of extension with its correlative of a subject, the divine module of a universal perception.

To write a proper phenomenological criticism of the aesthetics that results from this rarefied faith in the eye is not to lead us back to the asceticism of the *nous* and the virtues of a knowledge of contemplation that was offered by the ancient theory.

Neither is it to linger on the problem of optic illusions and of knowing whether or not the stick, broken by the surface of the water in the basin, or the moon, bigger in its verging on the horizon, show us reality: a reference to Alain in his cloud of chalk should suffice.

Let us say this because even Maurice Merleau-Ponty does not seem to take this step: why not confirm the fact that the theory of perception no longer elucidates the structure of the reality to which physical science makes us accede. There is nothing more questionable, both in the history of science and in its final product, than this motive he seizes upon to authorize his research that takes its departure from perception—his motive being that scientific construction should always have to come back to perception. On the contrary, everything shows us that it is by refusing the perceived intuitions of weight and impetus that the Galilean dynamics annexed the heavens to earth, at the heavy cost, though, of introducing what we nowadays feel in the experience of the astronaut: a body that can open and close itself weighing nothing and bearing on nothing.

6. The *Phenomenology of Perception* is thus very different from a codicil to a theory of knowledge of which the remnants form the outfit of a precarious psychology.

Neither can it be situated in the striving towards an absolute knowledge, that nowadays only lives in logicism.

It is what it is, i.e., a collection of experiences and one has to read the inaugural work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty³ to appreciate the positive researches it contains and their stimulating effect on thought, if not the derision in which they let appear the secular “bestifications” concerning Aristotle’s illusion, let alone the average clinical exam of the ophthalmologist.

In order to get the importance, let us choose a small fact from the immense web of covariances of the same style that are commented upon in this work, e.g., the one on page 360 (of the French edition)⁴ of the violent lighting that appears in the form of a whitish cone because of its being supported by a disc, barely visible as being black and above all as being the only object that stops it. It is enough to put a little square white paper in between for the milkish aspect immediately to dissipate and for the black disc to detach itself as distinct by its being lit in contrast. In a phenomenon like lightning, a thousand facts are in a position to impose

on us the question of what regulates the often striking mutations we observe through the addition of a new element in the equilibrium of these factors, which are distinguished in experiments. These factors are: the conditions “background-form” of the object, our knowledge of this fact, and the third element, here the experience, a plurality of gradations which the term color cannot sufficiently designate. For apart from the constancy that tends to reestablish an identity under certain conditions, perceived with the gamut nameable under different wavelengths, there are the combined effects of reflection, radiation, transparency, the correlation of which is not even totally reducible from a serendipity in art to an artifice in the laboratory. As it is proven by the fact that the visual phenomenon of the local color of an object has nothing to do with the visual phenomenon of the colored area in the spectrum.

May it suffice us to indicate in which direction the philosopher tries to articulate these facts, insofar as he is determined to safeguard them, be it at least so that a whole art of human creation commits itself to these facts. The physicist’s reality refutes this act of human creation all the less, the more it distantiates itself from them; the latter, however, is not to say that this art’s only value is charm and that it does not bestow another access to a being, that from now on may be more essential.

7. This required direction to what orders the phenomenologically defined covariances of perception is, as we know, looked for by the philosopher of our time in the notion of presence, or to give a better and more literal translation of the German term *Dasein*, in the notion of There-being to which should be added presence (or There-being)-in-by-through-a-body. This is the so-called position of existence, as it tries to catch hold of the moment before reflection that introduces in its experience the decisive distinction of being with the world in elevating it to self-consciousness.

Though too obviously rendered from the redoubled reflection the phenomenological research constitutes, this position will boast to restore the purity of this presence at the root of the phenomenon, in its moving in the world it can globally anticipate. For, of course, similar complexities are involved, the complexities of movement, of feeling and even of hearing, and surely we should not omit dizziness, complexities that are not in juxtaposition, but form a composition with the phenomenon of sight.

It is this very presupposition—that there be a place of unity somewhere—that makes us delay our assent. Not that it is not clear that this place is set aside from every physiological assignation, and not that we are not satisfied to follow in detail a subjectivity where it constitutes itself and where it weaves itself thread by thread, but that is still not reduced to being its reverse, to what is called here the total objectivity.

What astonishes us is that one does not immediately profit from the structure so manifest in the phenomenon, not to oppose the subject itself

to it, but to bring the subject into accord with it; as far as this is concerned, one must do justice to Maurice Merleau-Ponty for ultimately not having referred more to any naturalist Gestalt.

What prevents us from saying about the example quoted before—where the lighting is obviously homologous to the muscular tone in the experiments on the constancy of perception of weight, but could not mask its locality of Otherness—that the subject, as much as it invests the other with its milkish consistency in a first moment, can only be said to be present as repressed in a second moment. And this, because of the black disc's objectifying contrast to the white square that takes place with the significative entrance of the figure of the latter on the background of the other. But the subject that affirms itself there in lit forms is the rejection of the Other who was incarnated in an opacity of light.

But where is the primordial fact, and why prejudice that it is only a *percipiens*, when it stands out here that it is its elision that gives to the *perceptum* of light its transparency?

Briefly, it seems to us that the "I think" to which one wants to reduce the concept of presence, does not cease to imply—no matter what indetermination one submits it to—all the powers of reflection that help to confuse subject and consciousness. We have in mind here the illusion that psychoanalytic experience puts at the origin of the self-deception (*meconnaissance*) of the subject and that we ourselves have tried to define in the mirror stage. It is in that stage that we have located the origin of all those illusions.

Be that as it may, we claimed elsewhere, namely, in connection with verbal hallucinations,⁵ the privilege which the signifier gives to the *perceptum* in the radical change that comes about in the relation between *percipiens* and subject.

8. As it tries to stick to the notion of presence-by-the-body, the phenomenology of perception avoids this radical change, but condemns itself by stepping outside its field and by at the same time rendering inaccessible to itself an experience that is alien to it. This is illustrated by the two chapters of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's on the body as sexual being⁶ and on the body as expression in speech.⁷

The first chapter is no less seductive than Sartre's existential analysis in which the latter discusses with a fabulous elegance the relation of desire.⁸ There he talks about consciousness ensnared in the flesh in search of a subject in the other, a search which is impossible because grasping the subject in his freedom is destroying him. He also talks about the pathetic jump of the wild animal that dies from pleasure at the moment of the shot that does not even pierce it. In all this Sartre sketches the issue of sadism and shows a kind of double impasse inherent in it and leaving it no other escape than masochism.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, seems to avoid its fatal

deviation by describing in it the process of a direct revelation of body to body. In effect, it only keeps some of the evocation of a situation that was elsewhere thought of as humiliating. The situation is thought with reference to a third which psychoanalysis shows to be inherent in the unconscious aspects of the love-situation.

This did not render Sartre's reconstruction any more valuable for a Freudian. His criticism would necessitate a precision of the function of phantasm that was not even fully recognized at that time in psychoanalysis. No imaginary restitution of the effects of cruelty can provide this. And it is not true that the way to the normal satisfaction of desire emerges from the failure inherent to the preparation of a torture.⁹ His description of sadism as an unconscious structure is as inadequate as his description of the "sadianist" myth. For in passing through the reduction of the body of the other to the obscene, he hits upon the paradox of beauty as insensitive to outrage;¹⁰ it is quite different to see this enigmatic paradox at work in Sade, although it is more suggestive in the existential register. So, the "erotological" approach could have been better here, even if one leaves out of consideration all experience of the unconscious.

But it is clear that phenomenology, with its main emphasis on an analysis of perception, insofar as it is articulated within the obscure or lucid drive of the body, can never account for the privilege of the fetish in a secular experience nor for the castration complex in the Freudian discovery. Yet, the two invite us to face the function of signifier of the organ that is always hinted at in a veiled way in the human statue. Moreover, it is important to reflect on the function that the phallus performs for both women and men in the emergence of desire. We cannot overlook that the function of the phallus, though now being vulgarized, deflects what indeed can be called the sexual being of the body.

9. The possibility of the misinterpretation of the signifier of the sexual being in a phenomenological description is due to its double concealment in the phantasm: it only shows itself where it does not act, and it only acts through a lack. Here psychoanalysis must prove to have made progress in the understanding of the signifier; this progress is such that it can have results for phenomenology.

Excuse me for the audacity with which I appeal here to the other chapter by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the one on the body as expression in speech; this chapter also bears witness to what I am saying.

For those who follow me will see how the same theme of the primacy of the signifier in the signifying effect is woven in this text. And I remember the support I found in this text in the first vacation after the war. At that time, there ripened in me the difficult concern of having to revive in a still-scattered group a communication that was up till then reduced to being almost illiterate in Freudian matters. In effect, psychoanalysis had become a kind of habit where alibis were used to cover a lack of self-cer-

tainty and self-awareness.

But those who will be at ease in this discourse on speech (because they link a bit too much novel discourse and full speech) will nevertheless know that I am saying something else, namely:

-that it is not thought, but the subject that I subordinate to the signifier,

-and that it is the unconscious of which I demonstrate the status. I do so by insisting that the subject be conceived as rejected from the signifying chain. This subject by the same token constitutes itself as primordially repressed.

From then on they can no longer agree with the double references to idealities—incompatible among themselves—by which the function of the signifier converges here with name giving and by which its material converges with a gesture in which an essential signification would be specified.

This gesture is not to be found. And the one who would here lift his word to the dignity of paradigm of discourse would also have known to confess that he did not have anything of the sort to offer and show to his audience.

Did he furthermore not know that there is but one gesture known since Saint Augustine that corresponds to the name giving: the gesture of the index that points to something or to somebody. But in itself that gesture does not even suffice to designate what one points to in the indicated object.

And if it were *the gesture* that I would like to mime in order to inaugurate in it the signifier, the gesture of rejection (throwing away), e.g., could I not say the following: to throw, does this not imply the true essence of the signifier in the syntax installing in series the objects to be submitted to the game of throwing.¹¹

For beyond that game, what my gesture by itself articulates is the vanishing I of the subject of the real enunciation. It suffices indeed that the game reiterate itself in order to constitute that I who by that repetition says that I, and who thereby creates itself. But that I does not know that he says it, relegated as he is to the background by the gesture in the being that the throwing substitutes to the object that he rejects. So, I who speak can only be unconscious of what I do, when I do not know what I say when I do something.

But if the signifier is required as syntax before the realization of this subject, not only insofar as he speaks, but also for what he says, effects of metaphor and metonymy are possible, without the subject. On top of that, his very presence constitutes itself through the signifier more than through the body, as after all one could say it does in the discourse of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and this quite literally.

Such effects are, as I have taught, effects of the unconscious. After the fact, we find confirmation of the well-founded extractions of those effects; their being well-founded is based on the rigor of the linguistic

structures themselves.

10. Here my homage rejoins the article on “Eye and Mind” that in its interrogation of painting asks the true question of phenomenology. We have to remember that phenomenology has nothing to say beyond the elements articulated by one’s own experience.

The unreal aspects of the art (that he, rather than science, has analyzed for the sense of vision) do not exclude their function of truth, from the moment that the reality of the tables of science no longer needs to assure itself of meteors.

Therefore, the end of illusion, intended by even the most artificial of the arts, does not need to be repudiated, even in the so-called abstract works. It cannot be repudiated in the name of a misunderstanding of ideality that the ethics of antiquity has nourished under this imputation and that it took as its starting point in the sciences.

The illusion here gets its value by joining the function of signifier; this can be discovered by going back to operations performed by the illusion. All the difficulties that the criticism demonstrated not only concerning the how, but also concerning the what of painting, show that it would be useful to connect the unconscious as professional form where the painter seems to subsist in his relation to the what of his art, with the radical structure of the unconscious that we have deduced from its common individuation.

Here the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty embarrasses the psychoanalysts because they have overlooked what seems to be an essential element. And here again the issue is the nature of the signifier. We maintain this because attention must also be drawn to the fact that, if we can talk about progress in the research of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, painting is already a theme in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, in the book I mean, and precisely in that chapter where we have taken up the problem of the function of presence in language.

11. So, we are invited to ask ourselves what in the signifier presses on to articulate itself in the spot, in the “little blues” and “little chestnuts” that enchant Maurice Merleau-Ponty in the brush of Cézanne. He found in them that which the painter thought would make his painting speak.

Without being able to do more than simply commenting, I would like to say that the vacillation between object and being, typical of this text as a whole, and the step taken in the direction of the invisible, show enough that Maurice Merleau-Ponty moves forward here to a field different from that of perception.

12. It is not possible to deny that the domain of art has been able to reach this effect because of its interest in the field of desire. This is in accord with what Freud said about the presence of desire which is maintained in sublimation, something that psychoanalysts themselves more often than not fail to comprehend.

How can we understand the subtle weight of the corporeality of light that the eye of the painter tries to capture with all its eros, but that only results in a product in which the theological meaning of light shines nostalgically.

And what can we say about the eye as organ? Do we have to arm ourselves with the rudeness of a good message that creates parables in order not to be understood, so that we can account for the fact that the eye slides slowly from subject to object? We should nevertheless remember the essential truth of the parable that literally says that the eye is made in order not to see. Do we need a fully automatized robot in the figure of a future Eve to see that desire will become pale, not so much by the fact that it is blind, as some believe, but by the fact that it will not be able to see everything? On the other hand, what the artist gives us access to is the place which should not be seen. But the task remains of naming that place.

With respect to the theme of light, let us remember how Maurice Merleau-Ponty described the delicate aspect of this phenomenon by saying that light guides us to the lit object.¹² We recognize in it the eponymic material which creatively shapes the monument.

If I stress the implicit ethics in this creation, I know that I overlook what it achieves in this oeuvre. But I do so in order to give a final meaning to that sentence, the last one that was published and in which that ethical meaning seems obvious—the sentence actually referring to itself—: “if creations are not a possession, it is not only that, like all things, they pass away; it is also that they have almost all their life still before them.”

That here my mournings be shattered, by means of the veil taken from the Pieta, a veil which is unbearable to whom fate forces me to turn into the cariatide of a mortal. This in turn breaks my talk.

NOTES

As some paragraphs, especially in the beginning and at the end of the article, were full of puns and written in a very idiosyncratic French, we often resorted to a paraphrase in the English translation.

In the notes that follow, we thought it useful to provide the English reader with a bibliography of the translations of the works Lacan refers to.

1 In *Art de France*, 1961, pp. 187-208. “Eye and Mind,” translated by C. Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. by J. M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 159-90. This article was reprinted in the special Merleau-Ponty issue of *Les Temps Modernes* in which Lacan’s article appeared.

2 Ibid.

3 *Phénoménologie de la perception*, XVI, Gallimard, 1945. *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by C. Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), VII-XXI.

4 See p. 312 of the English edition.

5 In *La Psychanalyse*, vol. 4, pp. 1-5, P.U.F. *Écrits: A Selection*, translated by A

Sheridan, (Norton: New York, 1977), pp. 179-184.

6 *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945, pp. 180-202. *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 154-173.

7 *Phénoménologie de la perception*, pp. 202-232. *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 174-199.

8 In J.P. Sartre, *L'Être et le néant*, pp. 451-477. *Being and Nothingness*, translated by H.E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), pp. 379-412.

9 *L'Être et le néant*, p. 475. *Being and Nothingness*, p. 404.

10 Analysed in my seminar *Ethique de la Psychanalyse*, 1959-1960.

11 This paragraph and the next are full of puns. Lacan sees a link between ‘rejeter’ (to reject), ‘rejet’ (rejection), ‘jeter’ (to throw), ‘jet’ (throw), ‘jeu’ (game), ‘je’ (I.).

12 *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 357. *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 309-310.