

## Preface:

# Merleau-Ponty and Postmodernity

Almost three decades have passed since Maurice Merleau-Ponty's untimely death at age 53 on 3 May 1961. One wonders where he would have taken the line of thought that was beginning to emerge when his death interrupted the project of *The Visible and the Invisible*, how he would have responded to the chaotic geopolitics of the decade that had just begun, and what posture he would have assumed *vis-à-vis* his colleagues, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, et al. as they led continental thought into the era of postmodernity. To some extent, this wonder can satisfy itself only with speculation; nonetheless, some things are known. The demise of the transcendental subject as the guiding premise of the phenomenological tradition had already been heralded in several ways, among them Merleau-Ponty's own doctrines of the lived body and the incarnation of monadological consciousness in the generality of Flesh. The critique of Husserlian phenomenology was well underway in 1961, and Merleau-Ponty was among the intellectual leaders working at the task of shaping its sequel.

At the time Merleau-Ponty died, the focus of continental thought had shifted toward language. The influence of such seminal thinkers as Saussure, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger is as apparent in Merleau-Ponty's later works as it was in the writings of others of his generation to whom fortune granted longer lives. As the transcendental subject receded, language flooded in to take its place. And, as it is with tides, the shape of the hollows left by the ebbing thought shaped the ideas that surged in to fill them.

From Kant through Hegel to Husserl, the meaning to be found in the world was held to be deposited there by the transcendental activities of consciousness. The material given to consciousness from sources residing forever beyond its ken was held to be plastic and accommodating rather than structured and demanding. This thought was modified in the early writings of Heidegger and Sartre as transcendental consciousness was existentialized, reconfigured in

the shapes of *Dasein* and Being-for-itself, and transformed from reflective spectation to engaged free agency. But the function, the hollow to be filled, remained relatively constant: the world given to us lacked meaning — significance, order, structure, organization — and the function of providing that meaning, of accounting for the superficial patterns of ordinary lives, was assigned to the second generation of transcendental subjectivity.

Lurking in the dark recesses beneath the foundations of churches, states, and other mundane edifices was the suspicion of absence, void, abyss implanted by Nietzsche's prophecies of the death throes of a divinity whose own authority of truth marked the expiration of its warrant. This suspicion, aggravated by the Great War and all the lesser ones, hot and cold, overt and covert, seemed to be confirmed by the inability of mundane authority to find a source of guidance, a ground on the basis of which to formulate and defend the decisions and policies that would shape the course of human events. Lacking the absolute ground of divine revelation, finite minds could not be bound to consensus. Heidegger left us with a lonely poet listening at the brink of madness to a silence not yet broken by the directing word of the gods to come. And his politically oriented followers groped in the sacristy of humanism for values to guide us through times when the superabundance of human bodies threatens the welfare of each one of them.

Now, as we enter the last decade of the twentieth century and survey the field of continental thought for ideas that might augur the destiny of the twenty-first, we find the familiar figure of philosophical Narcissus still absorbed in his own reflection, but the reflecting surface has changed. The surface is now the signifying text, and beneath it is abyssal darkness. Narcissus has always sought his reflection outside himself. He has always sought what he lacks to be himself in the Other that is beyond himself: Narcissus has always been decentered. The innate a priori of pure transcendental subjectivity grounds me because it eludes me; it contains the truth I lack: the structures that constitute my being and the being of the world in which I live. So it was, also, with the fundamental ontological structures of *Dasein*: the structures of my ownmost being, the structures of temporality constitutive of Being-in-the-world, necessarily elude my grasp in their intrinsic self-concealment.

The elusive structures are grounding structures by virtue of the function of transcendental constitution they fulfill, but beyond that they ground by virtue of being elusive: insofar as it is a nonarbitrary project to understand what and where I am, then my being is grounded in this necessary quest that is exactly as endless as the ground is elusive. *Dasein* is a being-in-question exactly to the extent that Narcissus cannot see his reflection clearly.

It is the same — and different — when the surface becomes the signifying text. It is the same because the signifying text performs the modern function of transcendental constitution of meaning. We read ourselves, as we read world and others, thus all we know and what we know is what we read. Because *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*. Or if there is, our only access to it is through the mediation of signifiers: the only meaning we can find in self-world-other is significance imparted — or mediated — by signifiers. Because I must read self-world-other, these things themselves elude me: effectively, they are transformed into texts.

It is different because, contrary to Bacon, there is no Book of Nature, any more than there is a definitive psychology, any more than there is a Book of the Self. There is no Book of Nature exactly because there is a *Physics*, a *De Rerum Natura*, a *Novum Organon*, and so on. There is no Book, no Bible; there are only texts. There is no Call of Conscience because there are many appealing voices.

This is a time in which many voices are heard speaking in a cacophony of tongues. If modernity was a time in which the disguise of secularity was torn from the body of the Transcendental Subject to reveal the self-dissembling phallic author, still intoning his own name even as he expired, his truth being crossed out by understanding, then the time after modernity is a time when authority establishes itself as such by the tearing of vestments. All devastated by this devastating divestiture, we are leveled out on a plane above those still adorning themselves with the Emperor's clothes. Freed to pick our own metaphors, we are comforted by the reassurance that our signifiers are secure from attack by an epistemological superior. We deploy our discourses in marginal spaces strategically crafted to keep the space of the main text blank: we know what is not true.

We know, for example, that science itself is metaphor only

dimly aware of itself as such — except of course when it vindicates its truth with technological prowess that hastens the death of *physis*, ourselves included.

We know, also, that metaphysics is a terminal case that has reached its proper fulfillment. We know this because we know that the question of the meaning of Being is finally answered by the nonbeing of the godhead. His theo-logical incarnation was crossed out in the recognition that his birth sign was *ressentiment*. His ontological inscription was deconstructed in the dismemberment of the transcendental phallus. We know this exactly because we know that that was all that Being ever meant: resentment of the phallus, the eternal absence.

And, ultimately, we, like Socrates, know that we do not know, but, unlike Socrates, we are aware, too, of the ultimate futility of trying to find our way out of this ignorance. How comforting it is to have the sanction of the enigmatic figure at the dawn of metaphysics, here at dusk, in the clearer light of the darkening of Being. We know that no progress has taken place — or can — because the metaphysical groundwork for the concept has been carefully dismantled.

Philosophical Narcissus is our metaphor, one among many possible metaphors, therefore insisting on no special privilege. We find him, as ever, bent over, gazing downward, but now seeking his reflection in a text. What does this signify?

Herman Hesse inscribes himself as Harry Haller in *Steppenwolf*. In the novel, Harry Haller finds himself inscribed in another text, “The Treatise on the Steppenwolf.” Philosophical Narcissus reads the text, *Steppenwolf*, in search of himself, in search of a self Herman Hesse could never have known. And finds this self revealed, at least in part. What does this signify? How does this signify? How did Narcissus find himself in Hesse’s fictional self-inscription in this Treatise?

In attempting to answer these questions, we must not cheat, but remain within the precept: *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*.

There must be another text. Given the precept, there can be no other answer. Actually, there must be three texts. There is one text, “Treatise on the Steppenwolf,” constructed around the metonymy: Harry Haller = Steppenwolf. There is a second text, *Steppenwolf*,

constructed around the metonymy: Herman Hesse = Harry Haller = Steppenwolf. Then there is the third text constructed around the metonymy: Philosophical Narcissus = Herman Hesse = Harry Haller = Steppenwolf. Who is the author of these texts?

It would be naïve to say that Hesse wrote the first two. Who, after all, is Herman Hesse? What does that signifier signify? We may know Hesse as the author of *Steppenwolf*, but, under our hypothesis, Hesse knew himself only after he wrote *Steppenwolf* to find himself. And then, even after he wrote *Steppenwolf* – which ends in the aporia of Harry Haller's failure to find himself – Hesse knew himself only in the failure to find himself. Herman Hesse wrote the first two texts, but 'Herman Hesse' signifies to us an aporia at the end of the quest of self-knowledge. And that aporia is inscribed in a text.

Still, what of the third text, the one constructed around the metonymy: Philosophical Narcissus = Herman Hesse = Harry Haller = Steppenwolf? Perhaps the author of that text is M. C. Dillon, the author of this text, the one in which the metonymy is made explicit. But I, that shiftless shifter, did not construct that metonymy, I found it. If I had constructed that metonymy, if I were its author, then the relevance of fiction to life would have come into being twenty minutes ago. That not being the case, there must be a third text that is not this text.

The third text is the one in which the relevance of fiction to life is inscribed. Where is that text and who is its author? Several answers are possible. But one of them is not: every work of fiction that is relevant to life. Because there is no text that is every text of a given genus. Perhaps the author of that text is one of the authors who wrote about the relevance of fiction to life. Sartre, perhaps, in *What is Literature?* Or Plato, in the *Republic*. Or one of the myriad left unnamed. But none of them wrote about the metonymy that now concerns us.

Of course – as has been apparent for some time now to the philosophical reader bent over this text (for whose patience I am grateful) – I, that shifter, am being characteristically shiftless. The answer to the question about the third text is the world or, perhaps, the world of culture. It is in this world that the general relevance of fiction to life is inscribed, as well as the particular displacement

that allows the reader of *Steppenwolf* to identify with its author and his alter egos.

Now, where is this text and who is its author?

Granting, for the sake of argument (and only for that sake and with that proviso), (1) that there is no authority behind any text, and (2) that most texts are dispersed in different worldly locations, there is still a peculiar difficulty with these questions about the text of the world, even the text of the cultural world. This text is everywhere and nowhere. And its shifting authority comes to pause in no name or discrete set of names. The text of the world is an unusual text. What language would one need to know in order to read it?

In what language is the text of the world written? Or the text of the self and its others? How do signifiers work or play in these texts?

There is another metonymy operating here. It is constructed around the equation: world = text. But this is a metonymic equation and not the assertion of a literal identity. The questions assume, in a contrary fashion, that the metonymic equation is a literal identity. And that assumption is inappropriate.

And, because that was the point, this marks the end of this phase of questioning. In this text, the one in your hands.

Unless, of course, one wants to challenge the distinction between metonymic equations and assertions of literal identity. If one wants to do that, one must go back to the paragraph that begins "Philosophical Narcissus is our metaphor," substitute the signifiers 'world,' and 'text' for their correlates in the equations offered and run through the loop again. One can do this as many times as needed to prove that *il n'a pas de hors-texte*. This can be done. That is the point.

That is the point at which we find ourselves. The next series of questions is the first series of questions: how did Merleau-Ponty respond to the founding ideas of postmodern thought? And how might his thoughts be brought to bear on contemporary debate?

It is a half-truth, become commonplace, that Merleau-Ponty replaced the transcendental subject with the lived body. The half that is true is that Merleau-Ponty did stress the embodiment of the subject and attribute to the body-subject a transcendental function: in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the structure of the human body —

its upright posture, its opposed thumb, its modes of perception, its motility, its sexuality, and so forth — was described as a ground of the constitution of the human world. The colors of the visible world, for example, are revealed and obscured by the physiology of our vision: if we could see beyond the limits of infrared and ultraviolet, the world would look different to us. The half that is not true is that the body-subject functioned for Merleau-Ponty as the transcendental subject functioned for Kant and Husserl. The most important difference between the transcendental subject and the body-subject is that the former was conceived as sheer immanence and the latter was acknowledged as transcendent as well as immanent: the body is also an object, a worldly object, and its thingly character was seen by Merleau-Ponty as a condition for its subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> To touch the world we have to be touched by the world; We have to be the sort of thing that can be touched. To be living flesh is a condition for being conscious, but that living flesh transcends consciousness: it comes into being and passes away without the consent of conscious intent being necessary. It misses the ball, stumbles, falls, and scrapes its knees; it cannot read the fine print without glasses; it acquires secondary sexual characteristics that are burdensome and embarrassing; it trembles and breaks out in sweat when it is appropriate to be cool; it wants a cigarette; and, alas, it ages, loses its grasp, and dies. The body contributes to the constitution of the world we live in, but the reverse is also true: the world contributes to the constitution of our body.

It is an extrapolation from Merleau-Ponty's thought — but not without textual support<sup>2</sup> — to suggest that our very physiology is a response to worldly demands, that the world demanded that we learn to walk on our back legs, that we develop portions of our body to be sensitive to light and attune them to a certain range of frequencies in the continuum of electromagnetic radiation, that our hands and arms evolve an ability to articulate in the plane of the body facing front; that is, in the direction our eyes have learned to look and our toes have learned to point. "Everything in man is a necessity. . . . It is no mere coincidence that the rational being is also the one who holds himself upright or has a thumb which can be brought opposite to the fingers; the same manner of existence manifests itself in the one instance as in the other" [PP 170]. If the

world conforms to our perceptual abilities, it is equally true that our perceptual abilities conform to the world. And if evolution does not work fast enough, we make up the difference with prostheses: microscopes and telescopes, parabolic dishes, radar, sonar, and all the instruments designed to tune in the world.

There is, as Merleau-Ponty says, a “circular process” by which “the organism itself measures the action of things upon it and itself delimits its milieu” [SB 148].<sup>3</sup> In *The Structure of Behavior*, this circular process is conceived under the heading of “dialectical relations”; later, in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, this is refined and generalized as the asymmetrical “*Fundierung*” relation,<sup>4</sup> and, finally, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, it becomes the thesis of the reversibility of the Flesh. In all three works, there is the central idea of an interested, questioning attunement to the world by which the body learns to come to terms with its environment – and then returns to the world through its acquisition, now a sedimented form that structures the world with a *habitus* derived from it.

Kant and Husserl generated an apodictic grounding for knowledge at the price of reducing the phenomenal world to the correlate of an understanding that had no capacity for growth, modification, learning, accommodation. It had no such capacity because its categories were conceived as a priori, as universal, timeless, and necessary. But, for Merleau-Ponty, “there is in human existence no unconditioned possession, and yet no fortuitous attribute.” He goes on to say that “human existence will force us to revise our usual notion of necessity and contingency, because it is the transformation of contingency into necessity by the act of renewed grasp.”<sup>5</sup> The point of the passage is that the contingency of worldly emergence motivates us to transform the categories of transcendental projection: Merleau-Ponty’s a priori is not timeless and oblivious to the transcendence of our situation; its necessity is provisional, its pro-vision is open to modification in the light of what shows itself.<sup>6</sup>

In Merleau-Ponty’s critique of the transcendental subject, both the subject and its transcendental function are preserved, but transfigured to be responsive to worldly conditions. Inasmuch as only I dwell on the hither side of my skin, my body individualizes me to a unique and concrete existence. But inasmuch as I lose myself in the generality of prereflective communality from which I



emerged as ego, I participate in a world without center. And my reflection on this ambiguous mode of existence deprives me of any stronger privilege than that which I have earned through the effort of a cognition I know ahead of time is destined to be surpassed. There is no possibility of confusing this finite embodied subject with the Transcendental Subject that finally divulged itself as God.

The transcendence of the phenomenal world as it is described by Merleau-Ponty might well be summarized in the transcendence of worldly time. For Hegel, the incarnation of the Absolute subject becomes finally unthinkable because its descent into time is both necessary and impossible: the final synthesis has to be the identification of self-sufficient Being and the essential incompleteness of becoming. Becoming simply cannot reach self-coincidence without ceasing to be becoming, without reducing time to an illusion generated by self-consciousness alienating and deceiving itself into thinking that it is, for the present, finite. For Merleau-Ponty, the incarnation of the body-subject is also finally unthinkable, but for different reasons. That is, I can certainly think my embodiment, my physical presence in the world I have inhabited since birth and in which I will linger till I die; I can think this thought hyper-reflectively<sup>7</sup> by neutralizing the reflective alienation that would posit itself above and beyond the foreclosure of death. But I cannot think my totality concretely, as Hegel's Absolute must, simply because I cannot be present at my birth and my death. I can think of my birth and death through the abstract medium of language, and through that medium attempt to assimilate the events to which others have been and will be unproblematically present, but, for me, my concrete absence from these situations makes the fulfillment of the witnessing intention an absolute impossibility. That is part of what it means to be a finite embodied subject subject finally to the inexorable process of becoming: all eternal being is a fantasy that cannot exist for me. That — exactly that — is the meaning of eternity for me. I am finally transcended by time.

The problem of time is that it, like all worldly phenomena, must be both immanent and transcendent: it must be revealed, but transcend its revelation.

Time must *constitute itself* — be always seen from the point of view of someone who *is of it*.

But this seems to be contradictory, and would lead back to one of the two terms of the preceding alternative.

The contradiction is lifted only if the new present is itself a transcendent: one knows it is not there, that it was just there, one never coincides with it — (VI 184)

The key to understanding the transcendence of time for Merleau-Ponty is in the last phrase quoted: one never coincides with the present. For Hegel, time is for-itself, self-constituting: the alienation from itself (or self-externalization)<sup>8</sup> that is finally overcome in eternal self-presence or self-coincidence.<sup>9</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, the self-coincidence is a reduction to immanence, a denial of temporality, a denial that one is of time. If the self-conscious subject is fully for-itself in Hegel's sense, it cannot be temporal in the manner of a living body destined to die from the moment of its conception.

Merleau-Ponty unself-consciously appropriates much of Husserl's teaching on the subject of time, even reproduces Husserl's diagram in his chapter on temporality in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. But he definitively distances himself from Husserl's reduction of time to an immanent form of synthesis. "[Husserl] is right to say that it is not I who constitute time, that it constitutes itself, that it is a *Selbsterscheinung* — . . . A *Selbsterscheinung*, an autoapparition, an apparition that is pure apparition. . . . But all this presupposes the idea of the for itself and in the end cannot explain transcendence —" (VI 190-91). What, then, can explain transcendence?

The crucial term for Merleau-Ponty is *écart*: separation, dehiscence, fission. Taking up the issue of the "primal impression" that Husserl held to be the "source point" of an enduring temporal object (such as a melody),<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty asks an ontological question: "what is the impressional consciousness, the *Urerlebnis*?" His answer to this question constitutes a clear break from Husserl's conception of time consciousness as immanent, as internal: Merleau-Ponty says that the *Urerlebnis* is a "transcendent," "an *etwas*," and that "the 'to be conscious' of this *Urerlebnis* is not coincidence, fusion with . . . it is separation (*écart*) . . . which is the foundation of space and time" (VI 191). To think the temporality of the for-itself (consciousness or subjectivity) with Merleau-Ponty, one must think of a separation from itself that is not *aufgehoben*, but remains always at a

distance from itself, always present to a transcendent other. The transcendence, the otherness, is expressed as *écart*, as separation.

The transcendence of which Merleau-Ponty speaks can be explicated through the triad: world, subjectivity, time. Through the doctrine of reversibility, we learn that phenomenal self-manifestation is the flesh of the world folding over upon itself and becoming aware of itself. The conscious subject is itself flesh, that part of the flesh of the world that is sentient-reflective, that senses the world in sensing itself: I touch things by feeling myself being touched by things. Reversibility is, thus, the flesh of the world as it is present to itself.<sup>11</sup> But this presence to itself is not coincidence with itself – that would be the culmination of the Hegelian Absolute finally returned to itself, a culmination ruled out by Merleau-Ponty because it would be a denial of otherness, a denial of transcendence. In Merleau-Ponty's doctrine, the folding over upon itself of flesh is a separation from itself, *écart*; likewise, the reflective subject, unique and individualized, and the prereflective subject, decentered and generalized, both function through a reflexivity essentially characterized by a lack of self-coincidence: the I thought in the cogito is not coincidental with the I that thinks, and the finger that touches the table is not coincidental with the finger that is touched by the table. There is reversibility between the two, the possibility of a shift – a change of aspect, a reconfiguration of the gestalt – but this reversibility of subject-role and object-role is possible only because the roles are not coincidental. The signifier 'I' can be a shifter only because the body is ambiguously subject and object, and because whenever it intones its own name, the I is not absolute self-coincidence, but ek-static, displaced from itself in space-time and community.

Perhaps this will be clearer if we take up the third term in the world-subjectivity-time triad, and the meaning that presence or the present has for Merleau-Ponty. "The for-itself itself [is] an incontestable, but derived characteristic: it is the culmination of separation (*écart*) in *differentiation* – Self-presence is presence to a differentiated world – (VI 191).<sup>12</sup> The identity asserted in the last sentence makes the point misconstrued by Derrida and all those who piously incant his mantras abominating the metaphysics of

presence: presence to itself is ek-stasis, *écart*; it is not self-coincidence. It is true that Husserl was mistaken on this point, but, as demonstrated here, Derrida was not the first to point this out.

Nor does it follow by any other logic than Hegel's that the phenomenon of presence must necessarily culminate in the self-coincidence of transcendental subjectivity. Heidegger entertained that thought as a hypothesis; Derrida espouses it as a foundational truth. I am willing to grant that antecedents for the Hegelian culmination can be traced to Aristotle.<sup>13</sup> But it is equally the case that presence as the moment of noncoincidence, as ek-static opening to transcendence — in a word, as perception — had roots that pass through Aristotle<sup>14</sup> as they extend into prehistory. And nowhere has that thought been stated more clearly than in the words Merleau-Ponty wrote on 20 May 1959: "the present itself is not an absolute coincidence without transcendence" (VI 195).<sup>15</sup>

When Husserl, as Derrida is fond of reminding us, took the self-coincidence of transcendental subjectivity as the principle of principles for phenomenology, he spoke for himself and of phenomenology as he conceived it.<sup>16</sup> He did not, could not, speak for the others who transformed phenomenology into a philosophy of existence. Nor should Husserl's pronouncement be read as an iteration which betrays the repetition of metaphysics that, having reached its end, can only say the same thing over and over again. Husserl's principle does betray the longing of a long-standing philosophical dream: if the world can be successfully bracketed and perception neutralized into fantasy, then nothing can contest the validity of the philosopher's dream. That is the meaning of the retreat to immanence: whether it is a retreat to the immanence of consciousness or a retreat to the immanence of language, it is a retreat, that is, a negative response to the transcendence of the world. As such, it is betrayed by the fact that it is a *response*.

This betrayal betrays *différance*. As Derrida presents the term to us, *différance* differentiates in space and time:<sup>17</sup> *différer* is "to be not identical, to be other, discernible," and it is also temporization, to delay or defer in a self-dissembling way.<sup>18</sup>

The functions assigned to *différance* betray a close resemblance to the dialectical process through which Hegel's absolute *Begriff* differentiates itself and all finite things in the descent into becom-

ing that generates space and time.<sup>19</sup> Derrida may be read as betraying an awareness of this similarity. “In a conceptuality adhering to classical strictures *différance* would be said to designate a constitutive, productive, and originary causality, the process of scission and division which would produce or constitute different things or differences.”<sup>20</sup> Derrida purports to displace this conceptuality and thereby erase responsibility for this remarkable similarity, but — we may ask — what differentiates *différance* from the agencies of transcendental constitution that classically function to generate space and time?

Derrida’s answer is recorded under the heading of “the problematic of the sign.” Signs defer presence.<sup>21</sup> And they do so indefinitely. One never reaches the referent, the transcendental signified, be it meaning or thing, because signification is the deferral of presence. One never gets beyond the signifiers because signifiers refer always and only to other signifiers in the chain of substitutions.

The signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself. Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences. Such a play, *différance*, is thus no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, *différance* is that which accounts for the differentiation of the signs themselves (which, in turn, account for the differentiation of everything else). “What is written as *différance* . . . will be the playing movement that ‘produces’ — by means of something that is not an activity — these differences, these effects of difference.”<sup>23</sup> It would seem, then, that *différance* differs from the classical agencies of transcendental constitution because

1. Being the ‘producer’ of differences, it cannot be differentiated;
2. It cannot appear in the system of signs it makes possible;
3. Being the sheer possibility of “differences *without positive terms*,”<sup>24</sup> *différance* is not a possible presence or absent presence; and,
4. Finally, the *différance* that allows us to distinguish things

disallows those things from ever presenting themselves to us except by way of re-presentation.

“There never was any ‘perception’; and ‘presentation’ is a representation of the representation that yearns for itself therein as for its own birth or its death.”<sup>25</sup>

In sum, the theoretical posture constructed around the notion of *différance* effectively amounts to a retreat to linguistic immanence. *Effectively* amounts to such a retreat, the qualification is necessary because it is not necessary for Derrida to assert the non-existence of worldly things. The transcendent thing retains the same ontological status for Derrida as it had for Kant: the thing may *be* in itself, but it cannot manifest itself except by way of representation. Worldly things are inaccessible. “There never was any ‘perception.’”<sup>26</sup>

Insofar as all use of language is ultimately a response to the world, so must the prose of Derrida’s reduction to linguistic immanence be such a response — but it responds to a world to which it cannot allow itself to refer. Thus Derrida fulfills the philosopher’s dream of being free from contestation — as it was in the Husserlian reduction, so it is in the Derridean reduction: if one makes no reference to a transcendent world, one cannot be wrong. But one cannot be right, either.

The debate I have reconstructed between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida may be seen to turn on the difference between *différance* and *écart*. Both notions undermine the self-coincidence definitive of the classical transcendental subject: Derrida and Merleau-Ponty concur in rejecting Husserl’s “principle of principles.” That is, they agree that presence to \_\_\_\_\_ cannot coincide with presence to itself. And the reasoning in both cases centers on the issue of time and the temporal ek-stasis. If the now moment of presence to \_\_\_\_\_ must embody an intrinsic relation to both past and future, and if that presence to \_\_\_\_\_ coincides fully with itself, then time collapses to the present eternal and we are left with Hegel’s Absolute as the final name of the transcendental subject. Derrida is entirely right on this point: if phenomenology rests on the principle of self-coincidence, then it is onto-theo-logical. In light of this, both

Merleau-Ponty and Derrida stress differentiation, separation, difference, fission; that is, *écart* and *différance*.

At this point, however, their paths diverge. Derrida makes all presence to \_\_\_\_\_ dependent upon self-coincidence and rejects the concept of presence for that reason. Merleau-Ponty incorporates the ek-stasis within the field of presence with the doctrine of reversibility: presence to \_\_\_\_\_ is presence to itself mediated through its contact with transcendence. Here, again, there is a similarity. Derrida has a doctrine of mediated self-contact, too. For him, the mediator is the signifier. But the signifier, as conceived by Derrida, cannot mediate in the strong sense of providing contact with the transcendent world. The signifier, for Derrida, can mediate only by indefinitely deferring that contact: it refers always and only to other signifiers. The system of signifiers is transcendent, to be sure: nobody is the master of language as the sedimented vehicle of culture and history. But the transcendence of language is not the transcendence of the world.

The difference is this: contact with the transcendent world gives us knowledge about the world and ourselves as worldly beings, whereas contact with language gives us knowledge about language and ourselves as texts inscribed within language. For Derrida, a heart attack is a signifier; for Merleau-Ponty it was a death sentence. In technical terms, the difference is this: Derrida has reduced transcendence to a relation between signifiers, transcendence is a meaning constituted within language that may refer to the impossibility of perception as a direct relation to things; but, for Merleau-Ponty, 'transcendence' is a signifier that refers to our relationship to the world, each other, and ourselves as worldly beings, and perception is privileged as the mode of relatedness that separates us from ourselves and thereby brings us into contact with the things that teach us about themselves and ourselves.

This difference, as suggested earlier, may be brought to its crux by focusing on the issue of time. Time, for Derrida, is generated by *différance*: as temporization, *différance* "is also temporalization." How does *différance* temporalize, how can it function as the "originary constitution" of time and space" (bearing in mind that "the name 'origin' no longer suits it")? For both Derrida and

Merleau-Ponty, the temporalizing of time is conceived in terms of the ek-stasis of self-differentiation: time temporalizes by dehiscence, fission, *écart* — by not coinciding with itself. But, for Derrida, this differing-from-itself is conceived grammatologically, as writing.

It is because of *différance* that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called 'present' element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element. . . . An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself. . . . This interval is what might be called *spacing*, the becoming-space of time or the becoming-time of space (*temporization*). And it is this constitution of the present . . . that I propose to call *archi-writing*, *archi-trace*, or *différance*. Which (is) (simultaneously) spacing (and) temporization.<sup>27</sup>

This thought is developed two pages later in Derrida's text.

The practice of a language or of a code supposing a play of forms without a determined and invariable substance, and also supposing in the practice of this play a retention and protention of differences, a spacing and a temporization, a play of traces — all this must be a kind of writing before the letter, an *archi-writing* without a present origin, without *archi-*. Whence the regular erasure of the *archi-*, and the transformation of general semiology into grammatology.<sup>28</sup>

Note that more than differentiation is required for temporalization; there has also to be connection. The interval that separates the present from what is not itself must also join or relate the present to "something other than itself." This is the play of traces that constitutes the text as text, as something that can be deciphered. Without the joining or relating, the traces would be disconnected, could not stand in relation to each other. Derrida describes this relating play as "a retention and protention of differences."

Note, also, that this "movement of signification" which temporizes is conceived as a writing. Time is written in traces that differ from each other but relate to each other in the play of deferring presence. This is a semiological model of time.

The question upon which I have been insisting is this: how lit-



erally are we to understand the underlying metonymy, world = text? Where is this text written?

Three answers suggest themselves:

1. Grammatology literally replaces ontology: there is literally nothing outside the text. What exists is the play of signifiers, and beyond that, nothing.

2. The trace is not restricted to the signifier, narrowly conceived. The trace is whatever signifies: stones and birds, temples and priests, earth and world. What exists is what always has existed: things whose significance is revealed-concealed by language.

3. The trace as conceived in 2 erases itself in the text.

Presence, then, far from being, as is commonly thought, what the sign signifies, what a trace refers to, presence, then, is the trace of the trace, the trace of the erasure of the trace.<sup>29</sup>

The trace is not a presence but the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates itself, displaces itself, refers itself, it properly has no site — erasure belongs to its structure.<sup>30</sup>

This interpretation (3) contends that every presentation is already a representation, that the trace as present thing erases itself in the production of the trace as signifier. The erasure of the trace refers to the impossibility of a present origin, the impossibility of perception as original presentation.

These suggestions may be labeled: (1) idealism, (2) realism,<sup>31</sup> (3) semiological reductionism.

Where is Derrida to be situated on the question of the world = text metonymy? Insofar as idealism and realism are inscribed within the text of metaphysics, 1 and 2 must be discounted in the economy of Derridean thought. The world = text metonymy, for Derrida, must be read in a way that exceeds metaphysics. "In order to exceed metaphysics it is necessary that a trace be inscribed within the text of metaphysics, a trace that continues to signal not in the direction of another presence, or another form of presence, but in the direction of an entirely other *text*."<sup>32</sup> Looking beyond metaphysics, all that Derrida can see is another text.

The crux is time, and the crucial question asks about the relation between time and writing. Is time inscribed? Or does inscription take time? Does writing effect the 'production' of time? Or does time surpass all signifying production? Is time finally inscribed in the *gramme*?<sup>33</sup> Or does time transcend delineation?

Here Derrida encounters his own aporia. If temporal differentiation is accomplished by (archi-)writing, then there is no time before inscription and time is confined to history. If the trace of time extends beyond history, then the trace is more than is written.

Homonymy is at work or play in Derrida's trace. There is the trace<sub>1</sub> that signifies by re-presenting the trace<sub>2</sub> that effaces itself in the signification. Derrida trades on the metonymy: trace<sub>1</sub> = trace<sub>2</sub>: "what a trace<sub>1</sub> refers to, presence, then, is the trace<sub>1</sub> of the trace<sub>2</sub>, the trace<sub>1</sub> of the erasure of the trace<sub>2</sub>."<sup>34</sup> Trace<sub>1</sub> is a signifier, referring here to 'presence'. Trace<sub>2</sub> is the thing, conceived in classical metaphysics as a presence or absent presence.

If the metonymy is taken as a literal identity, then the difference between trace<sub>1</sub> and trace<sub>2</sub> is erased. That would leave us in one or the other of the two standpoints labeled (1) idealism and (2) realism earlier.

If the metonymy is taken metaphorically, we are left with another variant of Derrida's aporia. Either [I] trace<sub>2</sub> is fully erased in trace<sub>1</sub> (thus leaving no trace of itself that anyone could trace), or [II] it is not (thus leaving some traceable residue). But [I] is equivalent to (1) and [II] is equivalent to (2).

The question is how seriously to take the metonymy text = world. When the issue is time, the question is forced. Either time is delimited by writing or writing is delimited by time. If it is indeed the case that time is "but the name of the limits within which the *gramme* is...comprehended," if these limits also delimit "the possibility of the trace in general," and if "nothing other has ever been thought by the name of time"<sup>35</sup> by anyone including Derrida, then writing is delimited by time and not 'produced' by it.

If this is the case, then Derrida joins the company of Kant and Husserl as one forced to advert to a tacit temporal realism to assert an overt thesis of the immanence of time.

To defer is not to produce time. To defer presupposes that there is time to take. I can defer on the analyst's couch as long as I live:

that is true. It is equally true that I can defer on the surgeon's table for the same length of time, and that this is not a matter of the production of signifiers.

Time is differentiation: *différance* or *écart*. Time is also connection: protention, retention, and the intrinsic reference of the differentia to each other. So far, there is agreement between Derrida and Merleau-Ponty. The disagreement between them lies in their accounts of the differentiation and the interconnectedness.

In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty had not yet fully worked through the dialectic of ek-stasis and self-coincidence. Like Heidegger in *Being and Time*, Merleau-Ponty is still working with the equation of temporality and subjectivity.<sup>36</sup> The guiding hypothesis, taken from Husserl in both cases, was that the ek-stasis of temporality could provide a transcendence-within-immanence for subjectivity: time is still preeminently the form of inner sensibility, but, as ek-static, it could accommodate the distance from itself needed to account for the transcendence of outer experience.

The movement beyond this position was, however, already prefigured within it. The present had to be essentially linked to past and future to avoid the atomization of time and the aporias of the isolated now point, but this link could not be so strong as to amount to coincidence because that would collapse duration into eternal presence. These two requirements cannot be met as long as time is conceived as immanent, as the form of subjective experience — because past and future cannot be experienced in the present and still be past and future. The ek-stasis has to be real: past and future have to transcend consciousness, but still be linked to the present. This means that the present has to transcend consciousness as well. The conclusion to which this line of thought is bound to lead is that of the *écart* articulated in *The Visible and the Invisible*. But this does not amount to a reversal in Merleau-Ponty's thinking; it is rather a surfacing of the thought of the transcendence of the phenomenal world already implicit in his doctrine of the primacy of perception: perception is the transcendence of the present to consciousness, the openness to what is genuinely other that takes place in the enduring moment of presence. In this understanding of presence, the relation of the present moment to past and future becomes comprehensible: it is the unfolding of the phe-

nomenon, the appearance of movement and change (with its privative moment of stasis), the style of worldly disclosure.

Time is not constituted by synthesis: *time* is an abstract noun that refers to the manner in which the phenomenal world becomes. It would be more appropriate to think of time as adverbial: it is the manner, the style, the how. Given the open-ended unity of worldly style, the question of synthesis is preempted. The question is not, how do moments get connected with one another? The question is, how did we come to reify the notes in the melody? And the answer here is well-known: by notation. By inscribing the passage of time in signifiers that give the false impression of timelessness — and the equally false impression of the need for an agency of synthesis.

If time is the product of synthesis, then it is composed of parts. But time has no parts: past, present, and future are not discrete units. One way to conceive the present is as a theme emerging from the background of global time. In this model, the *écart* is the foregrounding of the present as this phase of the world's unfolding, this manner of the flesh of the world folding back on itself. *Now*, this moment of the unfolding, is how the world senses itself across the multitudes of its individual sensors in the present phase of its becoming.

The present distinguishes itself from the horizon of global time as a moment of *its* unfolding. No synthesis is required to bring about the connection: the figure-ground relation is “the simplest ‘*Etwas*’” (VI 192), “one cannot go back any further” (VI 191). This is both a transcendent fact and a ground of reason: it is a structure of what Merleau-Ponty calls “autochthonous organization.”<sup>37</sup> It is revealed in perception, not constituted by it: if “to be conscious = to have a figure on a ground” (VI 191), this is because consciousness has evolved a *habitus*<sup>38</sup> demanded by the needs of worldly self-disclosure.

It is not writing that produces time because time is not produced. It is not the play of signifiers that synthesizes time because time is not synthesized. The thesis of the transcendence of time:

- Solves the problem of interpersonal coordination. If it is language that coordinates the running-off of phenomena in the world = text in which you are inscribed with the unfolding going on in mine, then we have to be reading the same text.
- Solves the problem of time before human sensors. Is it