

# I

## Harkening to Silence

### *Merleau-Ponty beyond Postmodernism*

In short, we must consider speech before it is spoken, the background of silence which does not cease to surround it and without which it would say nothing. Or to put the matter another way, we must uncover the threads of silence that speech is mixed together with.

—“Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” (46)

“What is here required is silence,” Merleau-Ponty warns his readers in one of the last sentences of *Phenomenology of Perception* after the many long analyses of how embodied perception gives us another kind of access to the world. The admonition of Merleau-Ponty to his readers tells them what is required as the prelude to a truly meaningful act: to pause, listen, and inhabit the silence that permeates the world. We will use this final clue to Merleau-Ponty’s development of the sense and importance of silence by returning to this moment and then preceding ones in *Phenomenology of Perception*.<sup>1</sup> In the culminating paragraph of the entire work, we find an exhortation to his readers to throw themselves into committed, passionate, ethical action as exemplified by lines excerpted from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *Pilote de guerre*. These lines are those in which the protagonist likens himself to a father who would unthinkingly throw himself against any obstacle to rush into a burning building in which his son is trapped:

Your son is caught in the fire; you are the one who will save him. . . . If there is an obstacle, you would be ready to give your shoulder provided only that you can charge down that obstacle. Your abode is your act itself. Your act *is* you. . . . You give yourself in exchange. . . . Your significance shows itself, effulgent.

It is your duty, your hatred, your love, your steadfastness, your ingenuity. . . . Man is but a network of relations, and these alone matter to him.<sup>2</sup>

The pilot realizes that in throwing himself into his act like a man saving his son that he is responding to the world as it announces an effulgence of sense. The world at such moments gives one the opportunity to respond to its summons and affirm all that one has become through one's heartfelt relations with others and the world. Why Merleau-Ponty seems to feel that a supremely ethical action—a possible sacrifice of one's life for others—should follow as the conclusion of this long, detailed exploration of perception is an important question to be answered. The conclusion that makes the most sense, I think, is that these perceptual insights have a profound ethical import. If we are to see how Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of perception have this sort of import, however, first we must see how silence is the primordial level of perception at the heart of the sense of the world. Then we must see also how silence is the source of ethics. In answering these questions, the important place given to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry at the close of the book can be a vital clue.<sup>3</sup>

In Merleau-Ponty's terse sentence leading up to quoting Saint-Exupéry's expression of ethical sacrifice, there is the highest place given to the importance of silence. The reader of the *Phenomenology*, having traversed the many analyses of this work that re-envision the nature of embodiment in order to recenter its locus within the depths of the world, is suddenly exhorted to stop short—at least for an instant—if one is to act with spontaneous sensitivity to one's situation like the hero of the novel. Merleau-Ponty is emphatic: he does not say that silence is *often* found before one's "significance shows itself, effulgent."<sup>4</sup> Rather, he says that silence is *required* in order for the world to reveal this effulgent meaning. Taking in the silence allows a spontaneous responsiveness to the beckoning of the world—a beckoning that seems to reveal the sense of that person's life at the moment to be expressed in a particular action. This moment in the *Phenomenology of Perception* comes as the culminating moment in the text that has so carefully articulated how the world speaks to us through our body in the depth of perception. It might be that Merleau-Ponty's final pointer in the book to the depths of the world encountered through silence could easily be passed over, since in postmodern culture there seems to be an increasing intolerance for hearkening to silence.

It is also easily overlooked that Merleau-Ponty's project of exploring the depths of embodied meaning through perception *begins* in the *Phenomenology of Perception* with a similar invocation. Listening to silence is named as what is necessary for philosophy, prior to thematizing experience, to open access to "all the living relationships of experience."<sup>5</sup> In order to disclose this nexus

of relationships, Merleau-Ponty claims, “In the silence of primary consciousness can be seen appearing not only what words mean, but also what things mean: the core of primary meaning around which the acts of expression and naming take place.”<sup>6</sup> There is a primary way of being open to the things that surround us: it is found within an equally primary silence. Yet, to harken to silence is an unfamiliar path for Western philosophy; its reflexive response to fathoming the world is, instead, a further imposition of words. The *Phenomenology of Perception* begins and ends with insisting that a depth of sense and action becomes riddled with compelling significance when they emerge from silence—the opening reference speaking of the genesis of theoretical insight and the last reference of the book to the source of ethical action. As Merleau-Ponty stated in the opening pages of his last unfinished work, written two decades later and published as *The Visible and the Invisible*, philosophy “does not seek a verbal substitute for the world we see.”<sup>7</sup> There is an insistence throughout Merleau-Ponty’s work that access to Being and uncovering of an emergent sense of the world within the layers of perception require philosophy to make room for a meaning-laden silence. By implication, Merleau-Ponty is also suggesting that his readers seek the meaning of their lives through silence, accessing the immediate embodied sense of their existence. Whether this is a moment of philosophical inquiry or of personal existence, however, it is a moment that is easily passed by.

In our current postmodern existence, it seems that silence is increasingly banished. Walking down the street, or even through the hush of the woods, many people have cell phones pressed to their ears or iPods wired into them. There is not only a continual sonic input, but a bombardment of communicated signs of varied sorts. As Salomé Voegelin states in her insightful exploration of listening to noise and to silence, “Being a critical listener is listening to silence and being able to bare to hear yourself. If I cannot enter silence, I cannot really listen to anything but stuff.”<sup>8</sup> Listening to the continual play of messages that keep us occupied and distracted, we are not “bared”—open in our more authentic selves—to what we might encounter. There is never a chance for a kind of stillness of dwelling in the body’s feelings and perceptions to occur: one that discloses another kind of silence than the mere lack of sound. Postmodern culture in America touts itself as a return to living fully in our bodies in many ways—indeed, many seem obsessed with bodies as being of primary significance, admiring the bodies of celebrities or athletes, “working out” or following health fads, and so on—yet this emphasis on embodiment as “having” bodies that are efficient and attractive objects, or as masterful vehicles of the will, is still to understand the body in a Cartesian way. To discover our truly embodied selves, Merleau-Ponty is suggesting, the silent dimension of the body must be explored as a reverberation of the silence of the world interwoven

with the body in the depths of perception. A more deliberate, rationalized, and objectified program of retrieving the body's sense may itself be a way of blocking access to the silence that opens another sort of exchange with the world and others. The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty leads us to believe that, unless or until we have hearkened to silence, we have not truly encountered our bodies as the pathway to depths of meaning and to liberating ways to be with the world. This is another sort of silence than mere literal silence, one that is more encompassing and involves a greater depth.

The "body" of current cultural obsessions, whether prurient, medical, athletic, or cosmetic, is the same objectified body that may previously have been scorned, or at least undervalued, by religious and philosophical traditions, considered as a mere object to be utilized as a tool or a vessel of the spirit, or even as an impediment to spiritual transcendence. Now, given our dominant materialism, this objectified body is fetishized as the most valued object we "possess." Merleau-Ponty's accomplishment was not to think of the body by redefining the characteristics of this object; it was rather to insist we think in an entirely new way to comprehend the being of the body, and through that new way of thinking, in turn, to understand differently the being of the world. In the notes for his 1954–55 course at the Collège de France on Philosophy and the Phenomenon of Passivity, Merleau-Ponty states: "It is a matter of becoming acquainted, through this lived or perceived, with [the] being that embraces both the perceived in the restricted sense and the being known which is called objective."<sup>9</sup> In other words, through perception, embodiment is open to another kind of being that encompasses what had been taken to be the subjective and the objective.

What he claims in this context is that the perceived is "not as content of my consciousness, not as content of human consciousness . . . not as 'human.' There is something other than all that; the perceived yet mute (the human is precisely that which can see the inhuman). But this pre-human perceived."<sup>10</sup> Perception, too, has to be understood as more than a human access to a world. The interweaving of perceiving and the world perceived—as a "pre-human perceived"—evokes a dimension more primordial than reflection and language, which is more *a process among beings or an unfolding matrix* than an object appearing to a subject. In this regard, it is more fitting to call human being an "embodying being," as part of a matrix with the natural world, other people, culture, and history. In this work, rather than refer to "the body," this spiraling unfolding of the human and nonhuman world will repeatedly be referred to using the gerund "embodying." Referring to the body as "embodying being" emphasizes that it is a distinctive and co-emergent *process* and also that it is an *unfolding* that is equally an *enfolding*. This level of primordial experience, we will find, is a site in which other beings speak in the voices of silence.

The dialogical process of self, others, world, and animality articulated by Merleau-Ponty leads him to a differing point of access as compared with any preceding philosophy: “We have to reject the age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body, or, conversely, the world and the seer as in a box.” Instead, Merleau-Ponty follows the dynamics of perception to reveal how, between the perceiving and perceived, “there is reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other.”<sup>11</sup> For the human person who immerses himself or herself in the vision of the world—say, for example, at Mont Saint-Victoire, as Cézanne did for so many years in painting it repeatedly—there is “a participation in and kinship with the visible, the vision neither envelops it nor is enveloped by it definitively.”<sup>12</sup> This way of intertwining, so that the human and the world are enmeshed in the process of unfolding together, is the “flesh of the world” [*la chair du monde*], or sometimes just the “flesh,” as named by the later Merleau-Ponty—“and one knows there is no name in traditional philosophy to designate it.”<sup>13</sup> This dimension of our being that designates the way our embodying being is carried into the depths of the world by perception will be explored in the course of this book, but what is essential to our purpose here is the way Merleau-Ponty links this to silence. In his later writings Merleau-Ponty locates the experience of being doubled by the other or by the world in being addressed by it, and the means of expressing this back and forth weaving of the flesh, at the point where expression crosses over from within silence: “this new reversibility and the emergence of the flesh as expression are the point to insertion of speaking and thinking in the world of silence.”<sup>14</sup> The term *reversibility* expresses how I can only experience and express the sense of what I perceive *as if* I were perceiving in and through all that surrounds me, to which I am related. This perceiving as of the flesh of the world, whenever we perceive, is the happening of a dialogue with the world that is an encounter with “the world of silence.” We must be cautious, however, to discern what Merleau-Ponty means by silence. Silence must not be understood in terms of the traditional binary opposition of sound and silence.

It is helpful here to turn to Bernard Dauenhauer’s distinction of different sorts of silence. He distinguishes “intervening silence” from “fore-and-after silence” and then “deep silence.”<sup>15</sup> Whereas the first two are silences that occur within speech and are more literal silences, Merleau-Ponty is exploring what Dauenhauer calls “deep silence,” which has various aspects. In its third aspect, which Dauenhauer calls “the to-say,” there is a sense of silence “which grounds all that is said.”<sup>16</sup> This silence that requires a certain openness of encounter with the world on a deeper level is “the silence that pervades all discourse.”<sup>17</sup> By pursuing the nature of this silence in Merleau-Ponty’s work, we will be led to articulate dimensions of sensual, affective, imaginal, memorial, and ideational sense within the depths of perception that are sources for another more rooted,

interconnected, and ultimately ethical relationship to self, others, and world. Yet, without this moment of entering a distinctive silence, the experience of flesh of the world might remain covered over by the monopoly of thought as the problem solving of postmodern culture, about which Merleau-Ponty warned. Without entering silence, we lose access to many further possibilities of renewed sense.