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AN ORGANISM OF WORDS: RUMINATIONS ON THE PHILOSOPHICAL-POETICS
OF MERLEAU-PONTY *

I. Introduction: Ruminations and Rapprochement

The title of this paper is a phrase found in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception.¹ It is used there to indicate the originary element of authentic language. It also suggests, however, a way of entering into the philosophical writing in which it is found: Merleau-Ponty's body of work is itself an "organism of words." This biolinguistic expression is consonant with another one found in the writing of Friedrich Nietzsche--which brings us to the subtitle.

Commenting on his Zarathustra in the Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche says that "no one should claim to understand it who has not been, by turns, deeply wounded and deeply delighted by what it says." Based on this demand for an inter-subjective relationship with the text, Nietzsche calls for "a whole science of hermeneutics" which he characterizes as ruminations. "One skill is needed--lost today, unfortunately--for the practice of reading as an art: the skill to ruminate, which cows possess but modern man lacks."² A brief reflection on the implications of Nietzsche's hermeneutical ruminations will provide an orientation and approach to Merleau-Ponty's organism of words.

What does it mean to ruminate? First of all, there is a sensuousness about the term "ruminations" that assigns a positive value to immediate experience. The cow chewing its cud is content and does not need to make something out of this in order to have its delight. In fact, and secondly, there is a certain mindlessness to the process, an integration of the cow and the chewing, a kind of interpenetration where the one becomes the other and the other becomes the one. Ruminations not only calls for a return to experience, but to a non-dualistic or primordial experience. Thirdly, the sensuousness and mindlessness of ruminations suggest a certain patience. One must learn to wait for what Merleau-

Ponty calls "this irrational power which creates meanings and conveys them."³ The Logos has its own timetable. Rumination implies a receptivity, an active passivity that is capable of wonder. Finally, the ultimate purpose of rumination is ingestion. If the cow chews and chews until the tangled blades of grass are masticated into a more essential cud, it is to take this essence in, to appropriate it as nourishment for sustenance and growth, to transcend what one is in order to become what one can be. Thus, Nietzsche's rich hermeneutical image points toward a kind of philosophy for which David C. Hoy has offered the term "philosophical poetics."⁴

In The Critical Circle Hoy examines hermeneutical theory, especially the philosophy of Heidegger and Gadamer, in order to illuminate various dilemmas in current literary criticism, and to suggest a direction for a theory of poetry which, in good circular fashion, will itself have something to say to both hermeneutics and philosophy. Unfortunately, Hoy set as his task the delineation of the possibility of such a theory, giving a working sketch for it but leaving it for the most part undeveloped. He does point out, however, that the need for a "hermeneutical poetics" remains his primary motivation.

What I want to do in this paper is to develop the notion of philosophical poetics, grounded in hermeneutical theory, as a way of entering into the work of Merleau-Ponty. I want to argue that it is necessary to approach Merleau-Ponty's philosophy through the recognition of its poetic element. The overestimation of abstract thinking, and the technological revolution this thinking has given rise to, indicate the need for a rapprochement between philosophy and poetry for which hermeneutical theory has paved the way. Such a conjunction will provide a revitalization of both philosophy and poetry in a manner that organically overcomes the traditional distinction between theory (theoria) and practice (praxis). As Hoy suggests: "If poetics is considered as poiesis in the larger sense of 'making' in general, then it is not so remote from practice, and from . . . practical philosophy."⁵ Philosophy is thus liberated from the narrow confines of empirical and intellectual dualism by a theoria that unites with praxis

in poiesis, which is not only reflective but generative, not only a repository of abstract explanation but a truly creative knowing that outstrips itself into the possible.

This is the kind of philosophy Merleau-Ponty was creating. To try to "explain" it would be to kill it; a will-to-power in the nihilistic sense. As Merleau-Ponty says, we need to learn how to "sing the world."⁶ We need to learn how to let the lived body dance and celebrate life. More than that, however, and in response to this profound singing and dancing, we need to learn how to say "this is true and that is true" for "the opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth." It is exactly this ability to see, affirm and celebrate ordinary experience, the poetic dimension of thought, that was lacking in Schneider--the patient whose case Merleau-Ponty discusses in the Phenomenology of Perception. Schneider is trapped in "the concrete attitude." What does this mean?

II. Schneider: A Philosophical-Poetic Investigation of a Head Trauma Case.

The patient suffering from a perceptual-motor disorder, who cannot sort according to basic colors, may not lack the "categorical attitude" but may simply have an unequivocal determination of it. He "never adopts any . . . principle of classification" that would allow for a connection outside of his self-referential field of experience.⁸ Merleau-Ponty suggests that it is possible for anyone to discover "something similar by taking up, before a pile of samples, an attitude of passive perception. . . ." ⁹ Categories here become more vague and limited. Every element within the perceptual field in the extreme of this attitude is subsumed under a category defined by itself. From this wholly concrete point of view, for instance, every snowflake must be understood as a unique manifestation of the world, a category unto itself. The cold inhering in one snowflake is not the same as the cold of any other snowflake. The abstract notion of coldness under which we subsume individual coldness, in fact, does not exist. To

postulate "coldness," therefore, as inhering at one and the same time in two different "snowflakes" is, in fact, to lie: first about the nature of coldness and secondly about the snowflake itself.

The person who has "regressed" to the concrete attitude differs from the poet-philosopher only by virtue of lacking the longing or need which demands creative verbalization on the part of the poet-philosopher.¹⁰ What must be remembered is that every authentic poem is also inauthentic, every reading is a misreading, every categorical truth is inextricably bound to a falsehood.¹¹ The word "snowflake" is an inadequate category for describing any of the individuals subsumed under it. In this sense, the patient trapped in the concrete attitude, like the young child and the speechless lover is unable (or unwilling) to build bridges of communication on words which never say exactly what they mean and always mean a little more and a little less than what they say.

To understand a poetic work it is necessary to go beyond the metaphorical lie by entering into the world opened up by the poem, feeling your way into it, vibrating with the intent of it and intending your vibrating toward it, until the lie, the metaphor itself, dissolves, leaving you washed over by the ordinary experience out of which the poem was born. Schneider could not do this. For the verbal artist does not work with the said of the poem but with the unsaid. The said withdraws before the openness of the authentic listener and he is sucked out beyond the crashing of the words by a strong undertow of longing, into the speaking of that deep silence which is present at the end and the beginning of every poetic utterance.

III. From Schneider to Speaking the Unspeakable.

Living in the concrete attitude is marked by an inability to generalize. It is the incapacity to extract some common essence from two or more particulars. This common essence never represents either of the two things but it can bring to light something in one of the things that was not visible before, as, for example, in the phrase "blue moon." Something has been extracted from the color blue and applied to the moon

--a sense of sadness, nostalgia, unrequited love--which remains at the level of pre-reflective experience in its concrete presentation. The first move out of the concrete attitude is the recognition that words themselves have what Merleau-Ponty calls a "gestural sense": ". . . vowels and phonemes are so many ways of singing the world. . . because they extract, and literally express, their emotional essence."¹²

It was necessary at some point for a poet to bring this quality to light for the first time, but once having been seen it appears as a natural "association." Everyone knows what it means to be "blue", or to "sing the blues." These metaphorical usages, once originative, have become sedimented. But it is not that we associate the color blue with some sad experience which first causes this. There is a melancholy feeling which inheres in the color blue itself, a kind of emotional resonance inhabiting it with a certain rhythmical or sensual spectrum all its own which, once recognized, allows us to bring out the sadness in other situations.

Language can be understood as a system of enculturated approximations to which we give our assent in order to be able to say something, however inaccurate it must be, about something to another person. Language seems to have an intrinsic tendency to explode the concrete, trying to say that which is impossible to say. This tendency of language is the opening out of it into the unspeakable and the longing of it to speak this unspeakable. It is this irrational (instinctual) and unachievable project which gives rise to poetry; an attempt to return linguistically to the pre-conceptual, concrete immediateness of the unspeakable ground of things without becoming stuck in it. If language is able to accomplish this it does so not in sedimented speech (parole parlée), but in the "speaking word" (parole parlante) whose nature is Becoming. In other words, poetry is spoken more in the unsaid than the said. But how is the poetic-thinker to accomplish this originative thinking when he is always already conditioned by his being in the world?

If it is true that we always carry our personal history with us, it is also true that we do so in a manner of per-

petual overcoming and reconstituting of that history. Personal history is not static baggage, it is a point of departure, a transcending incorporation of the past and future into the present. We need to learn how to enter into the transcendence of our being in this world. This voluntary "entering into," prompted by an involuntary longing, is a kind of dwelling in and enduring of the incomprehensible or the unspeakable; a waiting at the doorstep of the ordinary until the door opens and meaning overflows. This procedure takes a bit of madness on the part of him who would attempt it as Plato knew; a daring, a willingness to risk not coming back to the sedimented, cultural, familiar world of shared existence within a grammatical community.¹³ It necessitates madness because it is an entering into the very heart of madness from which many venturers have not returned--and those who have are never the same. The poet-thinker must learn to navigate the waters of insanity. Yet the poet, if he is to be a poet and not a complete madman, must make the return trip, must bring back the poem alive and kicking. There must never be a complete immersion into the unsaid of language for that would preclude the possibility of the poem and the continuation of language. It would be of no value to anyone unless the poet is intent on "proving" some idealistic point through complete dissolution into "truth"--an alternative, which, given the high rate of suicide and psychosis among artists, remains, it would seem, an open question.

If primordial experience as the root of creative expression is not an absolute dissolution into the unspeakable, from which there is no return, then what is it? Don Ihde addresses this question in an analysis of Merleau-Ponty's conception and use of language in his essay "Singing the World."

IV. An Organism of Words: Necessity, Longing, Corpus and Wonder.

"This sense of wonder is the mark of the philosopher. Philosophy indeed has no other origin. . . ."

Plato
Theaetetus (155d)

Ihde's basic premise is that a reversal of the position of language in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy--viewing it as the "field" rather than a particular focus--shows perception to be essentially enigmatic.¹⁴ He views the radical development of Merleau-Ponty's language as a result of his 'phenomenological turn' which requires a "new language" to speak its anti-Cartesian way of perceiving. Merleau-Ponty developed this new language through increasingly metaphorical transitions toward a "pure" poetic expression of pre-reflective experience. For Merleau-Ponty this is not a question of having an "out-of-the-body" experience, but of penetrating to the ontogenetic nexus of language.¹⁵ Ihde argues correctly that an absolute reduction to pure perception is never possible since the concretization of perception in speech always runs up against the situatedness of the word. It is exactly this insufficiency of language that keeps it open to new possibilities.

It can never be a question of achieving verbalization of pure essence since language, as was pointed out above, is always a falsification. That is, language considered only as the said without its connection to the unsaid is merely a mark or sign. No pure essence could ever be found in the said of language alone. But if language is understood as the symbiotic conjunction of the said/unsaid, and if the idea of eidetic reduction is transformed into an eidetic penetration or interpenetration, then perhaps it might be possible to experientially penetrate the essential meaning of the unsaid, not by some "act of intellectual interpretation" or reduction, but through an "irreducible" act by which "I lend myself to

the spectacle," a "kind of blind recognition which precedes the intellectual working out and clarification of the meaning." For example, we are able to "'understand' and perform sexual gestures, such as the caress before the philosopher makes its intellectual significance clear. . . ."16 Thus we do not first learn about the caress and then impose it on a particular situation; the reality of the caress becomes meaningful in the act itself. This involves first, an openness to the possibility of the "caress experience"--a kind of generalized longing for it, and secondly, a risk in actualizing that longing by performing or experiencing the caress itself; that is, a penetration into the experience of the actual caress which involves both a loss of self and a discovery of a new self.

In one sense it is possible to define an individual as the sedimentation of experience, but this passive, atomistic reckoning must always be understood in conjunction with the individual's potential to transcend and transform the sedimented. It is our transcendent capacity which allowed the first word to be uttered and which continues to allow the "first" word to be uttered. Merleau-Ponty moves away from the Husserlian notion of eidetic reduction to what can be called eidetic penetration. This is what differentiates man from animals. "Only a human being is capable of such vision which penetrates right to the root of things beneath the imposed order of humanity."17 Ihde's focus on explaining the development of Merleau-Ponty's language--the way that it reflects his philosophy of embodiment--underestimates Merleau-Ponty's concern with the reawakening of "primordial experience anterior to all traditions." If the phenomenon of language is the proper field of the focus of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as Ihde suggests, then that primordial experience which alone is "identical with thought" is the proper field for the focus of "the body as expression and speech."18

Because of his developmental slant, there is a lack of clarity in Ihde's essay concerning Merleau-Ponty's distinction between authentic and second-order speech. Only authentic speech is true thinking. Second-order speech functions within a world already sedimented into familiar meaning; it no longer

has the power to move us, to excite our vision toward the invisible. It is necessary to follow out the implications of this distinction.

What I want to suggest is that originary speech, following Heidegger, is found only in poetry in the broader sense where even prose may be considered poetic.¹⁹ I want to look at two aspects of the poem: the experiential and the linguistic. It is necessary to broaden the notion of linguisticity so that it can incorporate the expression of ineffable experience within a non-rational or poetic grammar. In other words, it is not a question of trying to describe a pre-linguistic experience absolutely, which would be absurd, but of finding a language which gathers meaning into a form and simultaneously opens out beyond itself into the not yet formed. Heidegger's thesis is that this is exactly the nature of authentic poetic language. The originary poem offers an experience of a new world. It is a world that cannot be penetrated or expressed with a grammar based on the principle of identity and non-contradiction. You are pulled into this originary experience as if by a vacuum in the wake of the words. You are washed over by the unsaid of poetic language. In the originary poem this experience, or rhythm, or style is always unique. It is through the bridge of this experience that we first contact the world opened up by the poem. The configuration of words that we call the poem is a door to the realm of originary experience and is the embodiment of that originary experience itself. It is first necessary to learn how to enter into this experience.

We do not happen to experience, it happens to us: a certain passivity is required on our part, as Merleau-Ponty suggested in connection with the normal subject's experience of the concrete attitude pointed out above. A longing which patiently waits, an openness, an ability to listen born out of a desire to hear, as deeply as possible, within the unsaid what wants to be said: ". . . the intention to speak can reside only in an open experience," Merleau-Ponty says.²⁰ We listen or feel our way into the experience of the poem. Beyond the words of the poem, but never fully disconnected from them,

it is possible to contact the originary meaning which is the source and substance of the poem. No spoken word can adequately represent this pure meaning, yet no origivative word can be without it either. It is the conjunction of the ultimately meaningful and the completely meaningless, a penetration to the unspeakable in what has been spoken. Although there may be no words for adequately expressing this, at the experiential level it is unmistakable. Nor does this lack of complete comprehension seem to daunt the indefatigable desire to speak this unspeakable. On the contrary, the experience of pure meaning/meaninglessness seems to excite expression, as can be seen in the lover who is so moved by his beloved that he must write, or in the longing of the child to find words for the oceanic world about him, or in the incessant writing of poets and philosophers. The unspeakable seems to be unspeakably attractive to speakers.

The experiential aspect of the origivative poetic work becomes clearer if we think of it as the linguistic embodiment of the meaning which the poet experienced. Our experience is not something separate from us which we "have" in an objective or quantitative sense. The poet is the poem he writes; it is an extension of his body which has grown out of an experience motivated by a mysterious yet unmistakable need. It is an aspect of his bodily position in the world, a part of his being. "The phonetic 'gesture' brings about, both for the speaking subject and for his hearers, a certain structural co-ordination of experience"²¹ exactly as my body structures my world for myself and others. The poem itself is a body that has a life of its own, apart but never wholly severed from the life of the poet. From an organic perspective the relationship between the poet and the poem is like the relationship between the parent and the child, although the helpfulness of this familial simile is restricted by our current need to come to a clearer understanding of the inter-subjectivity of this relationship. Nevertheless, it can be helpful to think of the poem as a scion, an "other" with whom a relationship of transcendent intersubjectivity is possible. It is not only a "body" in the sense of a literary corpus but something that is

truly alive. "It brings the meaning into existence as a thing at the very heart of the text, it brings it to life in an organism of words, establishing it in the writer or reader as a new sense organ, opening a new field or a new dimension to our experience."²² It is like the stick of the blind man through which it is possible to "view" the world. The stick is a "bodily extension" of the hand--a sensitive, probing, expressive, "living" appendage. But the life of the genuine poem goes beyond the life embodied in the blind man's stick. It is possible to fall in love with a poem, to desire to bring it into your life in a special way even as you desire to enter into the life of the poem: a mutual seeking of interpenetration. Merleau-Ponty says, that "I become involved in things with my body, they co-exist with me as an incarnate subject. . . ." ²³ The desire to memorize a beloved poem reflects this incorporative desire to take the poem into my body as I penetrate into the body of the poem. The relationship between person and poem involves a kind of falling in love.

Falling in love brings about a unique transformation of the individual. As with the fundamental experience underlying the creation of the poem, there is contact with pre-reflective and unspeakable meaning/meaninglessness, although, once again, we cannot speak here of coincidence without raising the question of that absolute self-transparency which would preclude communication. It is impossible to "know" this experience without experiencing it, if by "knowing" we mean something other than "knowing about." This is what Merleau-Ponty seems to be saying when he speaks of the irreducible act of subjective interpenetration by which my intentions are able to "inhabit" another person's body and their's mine. "The act by which I lend myself to the spectacle must be recognized as irreducible to anything else."²⁴ He calls it a "blind recognition" which seems comparable to Gadamer's notion of "openness" as the sine qua non for entering into the circularity of hermeneutical understanding. To "know" in this manner has "nothing in common with the elaboration of scientifically conceived objects,"²⁵ but requires, as Plato knew, a change of heart.

The verb "to know" in the Hebrew of the Old Testament, for

example, meant carnal knowledge. Fully cognizant of this it is used by biblical writers as a metaphor to depict man's unknown relationship to God through the known experience of the sexual act, a passionate and poetic example of which can be found in the biblical Song of Songs. "To know" still carries overtones of meaning bodily intimacy today, although two millenia of being under the influence of Socratic and then Cartesian dualism has covered the truly generative power of this verb with a rationalistic fig leaf.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment calls for the development of a "naked" epistemology if we are to understand how significance is "secreted" by the body or thought is present in speech. "The word and speech must somehow cease to be a way of designating things or thoughts, and become the presence of that thought in the phenomenal world, and, moreover, not its clothing but its token or its body."²⁶ It is not a reduction to a static and sterile objectivity that is needed but an opening up to the subjective interpenetration of the process of knowing.

V. Eidetic Interpenetration.

Eidetic interpenetration can be distinguished both from the subject-object dualism underlying empirical or intellectual understanding as well as from a pure transcendental subjectivity detached from the lived body. Ordinary experience allows no absolute standing over and against the perceptual object in order to grasp it. We never know exactly what we are going to do before we do it, and after we have done it we will never be completely sure about what we have done. There is no poem before the writing of a poem, yet the inscription of the poem does not come from nowhere, it is not created ex nihilo. Rather, it is born out of a percolation which is not yet, "a primordial experience anterior to all tradition,"²⁷ which is "nothing but a vague fever before the act of artistic expression."²⁸ It is into this unspeakable primordiality, this presence conspicuous by its absence, that the poet-thinker must penetrate.

Such a person is motivated by an inexplicable hunger for meaning which does not reside in the body but is the body in its most unfettered condition. This person is a longing for the "always-something-more" of life which urges him and compels him beyond the safe precincts of the cosmos into the chaos that precedes it, supports it, permeates it, and is never exhausted by it. Life is always overflowing into itself. The contentment of the truly creative individual is found in never being fully content. There will always be on-going expeditions into the jungle of "wild meaning," not for the purpose of imposing some cultural order on this "natural" world or capturing brute Logos for civilization's zoo, but rather for the inexplicable wonder and delight of having imposed upon oneself the experience of the primordial.

Gary Madison seems to have missed the crucial importance of this "two-way relationship" that functions as a "founding term" (Fundeirung) in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Madison's stated intention in his insightful analysis of the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty is to "speak out the quasi-silent meaning which inhabits it. . . a meaning which is nowhere fully expressed, but which is present everywhere."²⁹ This task of lending the support of his voice to "the unsaid behind the said." is a task which is consistent with the development of Merleau-Ponty's thought, but which is consistent only up to a certain point. Madison's language, or what could be considered the unsaid behind his said, reveals an objectifying predilection which distorts Merleau-Ponty's fundamental philosophical project of "always starting over," and which wants to overcome the dynamic fusion of clarity/unclarity that is the ambiguous hallmark of Merleau-Ponty's living thought. Madison's suggestion that "the work forever ceases to be a living instrument of a life in search of itself and definitively becomes a kind of thing" in regard to Merleau-Ponty's body of writing,⁴¹ belies an intention of arriving at an ultimate synthesis that will finally say the unsaid of Merleau-Ponty's said. "Our only aim is to disengage and lead to its fully expression the deep meaning, the invisible life, the inner movement of the work itself. . . ." ⁴² If Merleau-Ponty's philosophy says

anything, it says that it is exactly this that cannot be done. It is not a matter of disengaging, conquering or capturing the meaning of Merleau-Ponty's poetic philosophy, but of finding the right way of entering into a meaning-full relationship with it. The rationalistic predisposition which haunts Madison's analysis precludes the possibility of any such intersubjectivity with the work. It is ironic that he uses the following statement from the Phenomenology of Perception concerning dead authors and their work to justify his objectifying pretensions: "The only memory which respects them is the one which maintains the actual use they have made of themselves and of their world, the account of their freedom in the incompleteness of their lives."³⁰ This cannot support a call for the completion of what Merleau-Ponty showed to be essentially incompletionable. It justifies the opposite view. It is entirely appropriate that Merleau-Ponty died leaving his philosophy undone. If he had lived another hundred years his philosophy still would have remained undone. That speaks the nature of his work more clearly than anything he said. It is an act of hubris, therefore, to think that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy can be finished for him.

If Merleau-Ponty's writing became increasingly poetic-- as Ihde has shown, in the Heideggerian sense but not in the negative way Madison construes this--it is because it stood (and stands) foursquare against reification or reduction to analytic comprehension.³¹ If the philosophic-poetic text is truly an "organism of words" it is because it has taken on a life of its own which supercedes the author, not as a tombstone with meaning etched in granite, but as a linguistic subjectivity, an opening out into the unmanifest that resists sedimentation even as it secretes significance. This resistance, however, can only be carried out in an intersubjective relationship with the reader. If readers have the capacity to "kill" a text, they also have the capacity to allow it to live, to bring it to life anew. The alternative to philosophy in Heidegger is not "an eloquent silence" (which, at any rate, is still expression, as Lawrence Hatab points out below) or "oracular poetry" in the sense of Madison's disparaging

reference, although genuine philosophy, including the work of Merleau-Ponty, contains elements of these.³²

Madison has a firm theoretical grasp of the immutable connection/distinction between the said and the unsaid in Merleau-Ponty's work, but he reveals a vestige of Husserlean scientism in his practical relation to this paradoxical nexus. "It is necessary to step out of immediate or natural experience," Madison claims, "suspend the attitude of the outside spectator, and turn natural experience into the very object of reflection precisely in order to become conscious of it." Madison seems to harbor the prejudice that it is possible to become fully aware of the object, and his analysis of Merleau-Ponty's dialectical teleology as a "vicious circle"³³ reveals a kind of Hegelian idealism that wants to figure out, resolve the ambiguity and solve the problem of a poetry for which the word "solution" is tantamount to death.³⁴

As long as we continue to think that "the meaning of the world and of our existence. . . is a conquest on the part of reflection," as Madison asserts,³⁵ we remain imprisoned in a philosophy where thinking dominates meaning, rationality is presumed superior to ambiguity, the known is better than the unknown, and my insight must be more "correct" than yours. As a consequence, we destroy, in philosophy, the serendipitous and awesome delight of its living truth. The accuracy and clarity with which Madison tracks Merleau-Ponty's movement from phenomenology to ontology in a vertical pursuit of the "Being" of Being underestimates the passionate and celebrative penetration of ever-elusive truth, where, as Merleau-Ponty says, "I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery."³⁶ Philosophy, therefore, if it makes a claim to authenticity, will never be completely understood; on the contrary, its very incompleteness will incite others to seek the primordial mystery from which it arises and toward which it points. To seek to conquer or resolve this is to end philosophy rather than begin it again. In his essay on Cezanne, Merleau-Ponty makes this point succinctly and forcefully clear: "Expressing what exists is an endless task."³⁷ Madison's diligence in capturing the letter of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as it pushes

toward the ontological ground of being-in-the-world, misses the spirit that inhabits the text in the space between the lines.

VI. Eclectic Grammar, Pluralism, Truth and Openness to the Plentitude of Being.

As an "organism of words" the poem can be approached as a living body. A kind of passionate interpenetration between the poem and the person is possible. Of course the "flesh" of the poem is made up of words. But the language-flesh of the genuine poem is a peculiar type of language: it is never finished saying what it has to say. In this light, Harold Bloom claims that a "misreading" of the poem is necessary in order to experience the poem in a genuine or creative (re-creative) way.³⁸ A creative reading of the poem writes a new poem. Every genuine poem is the first, last and only poem of its kind.

At first glance this might seem to make communication impossible. In the strictest sense, and especially in regard to genuine poetry, this is true. Communication is always approximate, and is possible at all only because a particular community shares a grammar, that is, a set of commonly accepted linguistic sedimentations or rules directed toward determining what will be called, more or less, meaningful and true. Without such agreement communication would be impossible. If I want to be understood by a certain group, I must utilize the grammar of that group. This is what Lawrence Hatab is getting at in his essay on Mysticism and Language³⁹ when he says that there is a "mystical grammar" by which it is possible for mystics to communicate among themselves, but which will make what they say appear as gibberish to the community of, for instance, logical positivists. "We must simply recognize that there is no one form of grammar that is appropriate to all forms of experience," Hatab states.⁴⁰

One way of understanding the difficulty of reading Merleau-Ponty for the first time is not so much that his language was becoming "increasingly radical" as Ihde suggests-- which is true--but because he was dabbling in the use of

various grammars to find a means of overcoming the philosophical and linguistic limitations of positivist, empiricist, and intellectualist grammars. In contra-distinction to these "hard and fast" grammars Merleau-Ponty sought out the more fluid and rhythmical grammars of Gestalt psychology, psychopathology, painting, mysticism, classical analysis, bodily physiognomy and, above all, the grammar of the poetic. His writing slides in and out of these grammars in good phenomenological style as if he were trying to see an object from various perspectives. In a single chapter of his Phenomenology, for instance, he approaches his subject matter through a discussion of "alexia," "anarthria," "motor aphasia," "literal paraphasia," "figure and background," "primordial experience," "modulations on the keyboard of acquired meaning," "poetry," "singing the world," "Darwin," "Cezanne," "Proust," "Freud," and "God." In the final analysis, this network of grammars brings to life in the form of his writing a kind of demonstration of the content under investigation. The traditional linguistic distinction between form and content is transcended by a philosophical-poetic style grounded in what might be called an eclectic grammar. Merleau-Ponty's grammar is not any of the grammars that he employs. Similarly an authentic poem both utilizes and transcends the sedimented meanings of individual words by constituting them in an originative manner, according to a unique style, and this brings to birth an experience of meaning which did not exist before and will not exist again. This then becomes a new "precedent" for the sedimented grammar.⁴¹

Hatab's formulation of a "mystical grammar" is particularly helpful because it demonstrates that there is not only one way or any "correct" way of experiencing or expressing the world. If it is true that the world and language are coextensive and if the only way we can know the world is through its embodiment in language, then there can never be a final world until there is a final word. But the last thing that poetry wants to do is to speak the final word. When a player plays a game he does not try to play a game so perfectly he will never need to play the game again. We do not seek the dance that will end

all dancing or the song that will end all singing. Neither should we look for the thinking or expressing that will forever exhaust the need to express. Poetic-thinking counteracts the proclivity toward absolutism. As the poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti puts it, we are "perpetually and forever awaiting a rebirth of wonder."⁴² This does not mean that "wonder" is some event which is going to happen at some future time which will eliminate the perpetual waiting. It means that the rebirth of wonder is an on-going process that is intrinsic to the nature of language itself, as well as to the nature of man understood as a languaging creature.

My contention here has been that poetry has a "privileged" position among man's modes of expressing himself because it is a bridge between aesthetic expression and intellectual expression participating in both but limited by neither--a genuine tertium quid. Poetic thinking, as Heidegger understands it, is a form of expression that constitutes man, the creature of language, as a process of creating himself and his world. "What is important is learning to live in the speaking of language."⁴³ Man is a response to language; he lives in language as his natural environment. "Poetry is what first brings man onto the earth, making him belong to it, and thus brings him into dwelling."⁴⁴ Language possesses us as much as we possess language. We are gripped by language. We are pulled by the poetic text out of our narrow conception of ourselves and shown a new world in which we can come to dwell as something more than what we were before.

Poetic thinking thus suggests a need to listen, a certain passivity and receptiveness in order to hear the unsaid of the poem. Hatab says that "a poem does not inform, it evokes a response."⁴⁵ The notion of openness as the attitude necessary for entering into the hermeneutical dialectic, contains within it a willingness to hear what the other has to say. Gadamer captures this sense of active receptivity in his analysis of the art of dialogue. The "hermeneutical priority of the question,"⁴⁶ the exposure of oneself required by genuine dialogue, and the experiential ground of self-understanding, are central to Gadamer's conception of "hermeneutical

consciousness." The focus here is on openness, listening and receptivity as the first step of interpretation. You must be willing "not to talk at cross-purposes. . . or out-argue the other person. . ." because "dialectic consists not in trying to discover the weakness of what is said, but in bringing out its real strength." Therefore, the person who is practicing the art of dialectic is not a person who strives to win every argument. Rather, he is a person who is able "to preserve his orientation toward openness."⁴⁷ This requires a kind of faith in the dialectical process itself, even if one appears to come off the worse in an argument in the judgment of those listening to it. Heidegger puts it this way: "Mortals speak insofar as they listen."⁴⁸ The ear is the forgotten organ of speech, the feminine organ, the instigator of and necessary partner in the dialectic of penetration. But where there is an overvaluation of saying there will also be an inability, as Leo Strauss points out, to read between the lines of the said or to listen into the silence of the unsaid.⁴⁹ "There is thus, either in the man who listens or reads, or in the one who speaks and writes, a thought in speech the existence of which is unsuspected by intellectualism."⁵⁰ If you do not have ears to hear this unsuspected thought in speech you end up wrestling with the arms and legs and torso of language while remaining untouched by its body of truth as a whole.

Merleau-Ponty's trans-grammatical use of language illustrates a pluralistic rather than a monistic conception of truth. Once we let go of the absolutism of a dualistic and reductionistic grammar based on the logic of identity and non-contradiction, it is possible to see that truth, like perception, is a way of being in the world that is not more "right" or "wrong" than any other way of being in the world. A poetic grammar makes no demand for unequivocal truth; truth is not "grasped" or "conquered," it is celebrated. As Hatab points out, the question of truth is always grammar-specific and can make sense only within the community of those who subscribe to that grammar. Therefore, a conception of truth "as some standing essence, which is to be 'matched' by language" must be replaced by "a non-metaphysical, pluralistic

sense of 'truth.'"51 In the context of a philosophical-poetic grammar, truth is more an openness than an essence, an authenticity whose immediate experience is self-authenticating, a knowledge that is knowledge only in the act of knowing. Openness to poetic grammar is not an intellectual act. You cannot sneak into it through the back door of an absolutist grammar. What is required is a kind of conversion, a change of heart that transforms the whole person. It is the whole body of the person and not some abstract mind substance that is the organ of knowledge. The "lived body" Merleau-Ponty has discovered is itself an organism of knowledge. It is the true "body of knowledge" whose wholeness always exceeds being defined by the sum of its parts.

The only person who is capable of understanding a poem is another poet; only the lover truly knows love. The study of philosophy, as Nietzsche claimed, cannot be understood apart from living an authentic philosophical life. This inseparable connection between knowing and doing is reflected in the suitability of the aphorism and the parable for expressing philosophical wisdom. These poetic forms, as Paul Ricoeur has shown, confound rationality in their direct appeal to the imagination. In his analysis of the parables and paradoxical epigrams of Jesus, Ricoeur points out that their first task is to break down or break through dualistic expectations; they disorient before orienting. Once our rational strategies of everyday consciousness have been shattered, we are able to "let their poetic power display itself within us." Ricoeur understands this "poetic power" as a "creative Event" which must happen in the heart of our imagination "before we may convert our heart and tighten our will." Here "poetic" means something more than literary genre. "Poetic means creative."52 It is this poetic power which pulls the open individual into the paradoxical place where truth is made manifest, where knowledge is a self-transforming, transcendent way of life, where Being is a singing, dancing, playful celebration.

The authentic philosophical-poetic life is an open, interrogative dwelling in the conjunction of the unsaid and the said. And the only way to know what that means is to do

it. "That we dwell unpoetically," Heidegger tells us "and in what way, we can in any case learn only if we know the poetic. Whether, and when, we may come to a turning point in our unpoetic dwelling is something we may expect to happen only if we remain heedful of the poetic."⁵³ This heeding predisposition seems to be grounded in a longing which represents man's capacity to transcend his condition; a basic need or desire to go beyond what is to what is possible. Longing is the prerequisite for living an authentic life. Language itself seems motivated by a longing which is reflected in its polysemous and creative resistance to hypostatization.

This becomes conspicuously present through its absence in Schneider, trapped in the "concrete attitude," imprisoned in a grammar which is so uniquely identified with the object that no authentic communication is possible. "Schneider never feels the need to speak; his experience never tends toward speech, it never suggests a question to him, it never ceases to have that kind of self-evidence and self-sufficiency of reality which stifles any interrogation, any reference to the possible, any wonder, any improvisation. . . it is totally lacking in that productivity which is man's deepest essence."⁵⁴ What is missing in such a person is the function of longing and the capacity of wonder. It is exactly longing, Merleau-Ponty tells us, that resists the absolutist pretensions of dualistic rationalism and seeks the "ever-recreated opening in the plenitude of being."⁵⁵

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1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, trans. Colin Smith (originally published London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962; reprint New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1981), p. 182.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 1956), p. 157.
3. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology, p. 189. Commenting on this, Gary B. Madison says: "Man's expressivity is a 'miracle' precisely because it does not merely reflect already existing meanings, but is the place where that which did not have a meaning until then receives one." The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981), p. 126.
4. David C. Hoy, The Critical Circle (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. vii. Hoy suggests that the philosophical hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer, based on the fundamental epistemological priority of the circular relation of part and whole (or reader and text), cannot be a solution to the demand for a more objective and "scientific" kind of interpretation. "Not a new method or 'approach' to practical interpretation, the hermeneutical theory is more generally a prolegomenon to a philosophical poetics" (p. viii; emphasis added). My thesis here is that Merleau-Ponty developed or was developing a language of philosophical poetics to replace the language of an outmoded causal metaphysics. A similar conception can be found in Ricoeur's theory of metaphor, The Rule of Metaphor, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press) and the work of the literary critic, Harold Bloom, especially his The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry (New York: Oxford University, 1973). See also: Benedetto Croce, The Defence of Poetry (Oxford:

Clarendon Press, 1933) where the author suggests, in concert with Shelley and Schiller, that "Poetry is philosophy and philosophy is poetry" (p. 13). Croce does not subscribe entirely to this romantic identification, but claims that it contains "an element of truth--without which they could not have issued from the mind of Shelley--namely that poetry. . . can be discovered in every individual, in every achievement, and in every action of our life." This contention, although on the right track, needs further refinement. For a critique of this perspective as it is found in the work of Bloom, Barthes, Hartmann and Nietzsche see: Karsten Harries, "Meta-Criticism and Meta-Poetry: A Critique of Theoretical Anarchy." Research In Phenomenology IX (1979): 54-73. For a theory of how poetry creates an originaive experience through its unique rhythm, see Max Rieser, Analysis of Poetic Thinking, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969). Another aspect of a philosophical poetics grounded in primordial experience, can be found in the nexus of poetry, philosophy and psychotherapy. Although this will not be investigated fully here, the psychological ramifications of philosophical poetics are inescapable. See, Molly Harrower, The Therapy of Poetry (Springfield Charles C. Thomas, 1972). Also, J.J. Leedy, ed., Poetry Therapy (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1969). The pioneering work that is being done by Peter Koestenbaum within the framework of what he calls "Clinical Philosophy" should also be noted. For a general presentation of his views see: Koestenbaum, The New Image of the Person: The Theory and Practice of Clinical Philosophy (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978); also: Koestenbaum, "The Existential Personality Theory." The Journal of Clinical Philosophy (April 1979): 8-19. There are many questions raised and left unanswered by the notion of a "philosophical poetics" which cannot be addressed here. What is indicated, however, is the need for further clarification between thinkers like Nietzsche, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, and contemporary poets such as Robert Bly, A.R. Ammons and Peter Grove whose interests lie in the same direction.

5. Hoy, Critical Circle, p. 75 ff.

6. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology, p. 187.
7. John Berryman, Delusions, Etc. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), p. 33.
8. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology, op. cit., pp. 191-192. "Such is the disturbance of 'thought' discoverable at the root of amnesia; it can be seen that it concerns not so much the judgment as the setting of experience in which the judgment has its source, not so much spontaneity as the footing which spontaneity has in the perceptible world, and our ability to discern in it any intention whatsoever." Although grounded in an emotional rather than a physiological disturbance, this same linguistic "concreteness" can be found at the root of autism and some forms of madness. See, Bruno Bettelheim, The Empty Fortress (New York: Free Press, 1967)
9. ". . . the identical colors group themselves before our eyes, but these colors which are merely rather alike establish only vague mutual relations, 'the heap seems unstable, shifting, and we observe an incessant alteration of it, a kind of contest between several possible groupings of colors according to different points of view.'" (Phenomenology, p. 191).
10. "The philosopher is the man who wakes up and speaks," Merleau-Ponty says. "And man contains silently within himself the paradoxes of philosophy, because to be completely a man, it is necessary to be a little more and a little less than man." In Praise of Philosophy, trans. John Wild and James M. Edie (Northwestern University Press, 1963), pp. 63-64.
11. Plato speaks to this point in the Sophist when he demonstrates the necessary connection between Being and non-Being. The Collected Dialogues of Plato, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Bollingen Series LXXI (Princeton: Princeton University Press, eleventh printing, 1982), p. 1005 ff.

12. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology, p. 187.

13. ". . . Poetry results from the poet's contact with the gods and his mediation between them and ordinary men. . . . The poetic task is not without danger, for the poet stands unprotected before a vision which may preclude his returning to the world and sharing in the peace brought about by his sacrifice of himself through his song. . . ." Hoy, The Critical Circle, p. 101.

14. "My thesis is that the result of taking language in the way Merleau-Ponty has is to have made the question of perception enigmatic." Don Ihde, "Singing the World" in The Horizons of the Flesh, ed. Garth Gillian (Carbondale: Souther Illinois University Press, 1973), p. 74.

15. Philosophy, Merleau-Ponty says, "asks of our experience of the world what the world is before it is a thing one speaks of and which is taken for granted, before it has been reduced to a set of manageable, disposable significations; it directs this question to our mute life, it addresses itself to that compound of the world and of ourselves that precedes reflection, because the examination of the significations in themselves would give us the world reduced to our idealizations and our syntax. But in addition, what it finds in this returning to the sources, it says. . . . But from this it follows that the words most charged with philosophy are not necessarily those that contain what they say, but rather those that most energetically enter upon Being. . . . Hence it is a question of whether philosophy as reconquest of brute or wild being can be accomplished by the resources of the eloquent language, or whether it would not be necessary for philosophy to use language in a way that takes from it its power of immediate or direct signification in order to equal it with what it wishes all the same to say." The Visible and the Invisible, trans. Alphonso Lingis, ed. Claude Lefort (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968). p. 102.

16. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology, p. 186 ff.
17. Idem, Sense and Non-sense, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 16 (emphasis added).
18. Idem, Phenomenology, pp. 178-179.
19. Martin Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon, 1971), p. 208.
20. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology, p. 196.
21. Ibid., p. 193.
22. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology, p. 182, emphasis added.
23. Ibid., p. 185.
24. Ibid. In another place in the same text Merleau-Ponty says: "This operation must be considered as an ultimate fact. . ." (p. 389).
25. Ibid., p. 185.
26. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology, p. 182.
27. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology, p. 179.
28. Idem, Sense and Non-Sense, p. 19.
29. Gary Madison, The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, pp. xxx-xxxii.
30. Ibid.
31. Madison states that "in the 'mystical' excesses which

abound in the later Heidegger. . . Heidegger appears to reject all concern for method. . . and quite simply gives up all attempts to validate and justify his remarks. . . ." (Ibid. p. 274). This statement reveals a failure to understand Heidegger's non-analytic, poetic "method" of investigation and the experiential validity intrinsic to this method which is also found in Merleau-Ponty's work, especially his later writing. For a more balanced analysis of this question see Joseph Kockelman's, "Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Language," Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry, III, 1 (Feb. 1963): 39-87.

32. Madison, Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, p. 274.

33. Madison, p. 147. 272.

34. In discussing how it is possible to understand another's work, Merleau-Ponty says: "Here there is nothing comparable to the solution of a problem. . . . For the problem can be solved only if it is determinate. . . . In understanding others, the problem is always indeterminate (in regard to originitive speech) because. . . only the central theme of a philosophy, once understood, endows the philosopher's writing with the value of adequate signs." Phenomenology. op. cit., pp. 178-179.

35. Madison, Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, p. 141 (emphasis added).

36. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology, p. 214.

37. Idem, Sense and Non-Sense, p. 15.

38. Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence, "Poetry is the anxiety of influence, is misprison, is a disciplined perverseness. Poetry is misunderstanding, misinterpretation, misalliance. . . . a dialectic of revisionary movement (contraction) and freshening outward-going-ness." (p. 95).

39. Lawrence Hatab, "Mysticism and Language," International Philosophical Quarterly (March 1982): 51-64.
40. Hatab, Mysticism, p. 62.
41. One of the concerns Ricoeur shares with Gadamer in this connection is that the impact of cybernetic technology will be to "flatten" creative language in its own attempt to develop a language of pure sedimentation, pure identity and non-contradiction--the kind of non-language Derrida would seem to prefer. This mathematical megalomania is countered by Merleau-Ponty's organic and synergistic grammar. See: Philip Fried, "Paul Ricoeur: An Interview," The Manhattan Review 2 (1982): 6-22. Also: Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Social Sciences," Cultural Hermeneutics 2 (1957): 307-316, and "The Power of Reason," Man and World 3 (1970): 5-15.
42. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, A Coney Island of the Mind (New York: New Directions, 1958), p. 53.
43. Martin Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, p. 210.
44. Ibid., 218.
45. Hatab, Mysticism, p. 63.
46. Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, trans. edited by Garrett Borden and John Cumming (New York: Crossroad, 1982); originally published as Wahrheit und Methode (Tubingen: Mohr, 1960), pp. 325-331.
47. Ibid., pp. 330-331.
48. Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, p. 209.
49. Leo Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing (Glencoe: Free Press, 1952), pp. 22-37.

50. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology, p. 179 ff.
51. Hatab, Mysticism, p. 62.
52. Paul Ricoeur, The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, ed. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978) p. 245.
53. Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, p. 228.
54. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology, p. 196.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 197.