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**LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ
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MERLEAU-PONTY ON CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

BY

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Presented to the School of Graduate
Studies and Research as a partial
fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Masters of Arts.

Résumé

The thesis examined here involves Merleau-Ponty's claim that, in the twentieth century, the novel will cease to be moral and will instead become metaphysical in a philosophically significant sense. Merleau-Ponty asserts this thesis in his article, "Le Roman et la Métaphysique," where a new and anti-traditionalist account of the notion of the metaphysical as well as the idea of a rapprochement between philosophy and literature are also implicated.

The examination and description of Merleau-Ponty's claim about contemporary literature is here treated in three chapters which correspond to three major questions. The first question, discussed under the heading "The Metaphysical," concerns the field of metaphysical speculation. In it, the attempt is made to come to terms with Merleau-Ponty's notion of the metaphysical as the ground or foundation of being, of others and of the self. Here the central idea that is explicated is the concept of experience, and more precisely, of pre-personal experience.

The second question deals with the notion of metaphysics. In Merleau-Ponty's work, metaphysics corresponds to what both philosophy and literature are becoming. The second chapter, entitled "Metaphysics," describes what Merleau-Ponty means by the term and discusses both the similarities and differences between a metaphysical philosophy and a metaphysical literature. Concepts such as "expression," "language," and "history" receive treatment here.

The third chapter addresses the problem of whether or not there is a metaphysical literature in Merleau-Ponty's sense of the term "metaphysical". In the first part of this chapter, some of the general features of a metaphysical literature are described. Subsequent to this description, three modern novels, viz., Saul Bellow's Herzog, Gunter Grass' Die Blechtrommel, and Nathalie Sarraute's Le Planétarium, are analysed and interpreted with a view to discovering their metaphysical character. The final concluding section of this chapter attempts to assess the value of Merleau-Ponty's claim and its relevance for the study of contemporary literature.

Oh, but even now I am lying! I am lying because I know myself that it is not underground that is better, but something different, for which I am thirsting, but which I cannot find! Damn underground!

Dostoevsky

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INTRODUCTION

Si la phénoménologie a été un mouvement avant d'être une doctrine ou un système, ce n'est ni hasard, ni imposture. Elle est laborieuse comme l'oeuvre de Balzac, celle de Proust, celle de Valéry ou celle de Cézanne, - par le même genre d'attention et d'étonnement, par la même exigence de conscience, par la même volonté de saisir le sens du monde ou de l'histoire à l'état naissant. Elle se confond sous ce rapport avec l'effort de la pensée moderne. ¹

In "Le Roman et la Métaphysique," Merleau-Ponty asserts that the novel in the latter half of the twentieth century is becoming metaphysical. According to him, it will no longer explicitly or implicitly try to make sense of the world by informing itself with dogmatic theories or conceptual models. Instead, the novelist will leave aside all judgements and objectifying theories about the world in order to express the ambiguous and paradoxical realm of perceptual experience. After 1945, the novel will increasingly focus on a description of our pre-personal experience, an experience which pre-exists language and thought and which is defined primarily by our perceptual contact with the world. And this is where metaphysics begins.

It is this claim, namely that literature is becoming metaphysical, that we shall examine here, taking as primary sources "Le Roman et la Métaphysique" and Merleau-Ponty's earlier work in general. We set ourselves the tasks, therefore,

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phénoménologie de la Perception, (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1945.) p. xvi. Henceforth, we shall refer to this work as PP.

of determining what the metaphysical is, in what sense we are to understand the phrase "metaphysical literature" and whether or not, given what has been written by novelists since 1945, Merleau-Ponty's claims as to the character of the contemporary novel are correct.

These tasks are not simple for Merleau-Ponty's views on the metaphysical and metaphysics must be sharply distinguished from the traditional ones. Further, Merleau-Ponty's references to literature are often scattered and obscure and must be rooted out from his more general works, brought together and compared if we are to understand what Merleau-Ponty's ideas on contemporary literature are. But perhaps the most difficult problem will be to ascertain if there is a metaphysical literature for, given the diversity and novelty of contemporary literature, is it possible to see in modern novels any common features which would lead us to the conclusion that the novel is indeed becoming metaphysical?

The value of such a study lies not only in setting out Merleau-Ponty's thought on the modern novel - a study which has not as yet been systematically undertaken - but in placing his ideas in the context of his phenomenology as a whole. Thus, we shall be concerned with a description of Merleau-Ponty's views on language, reflection, history and, perhaps more importantly, with his views on philosophy. All of these different aspects of his phenomenology must be understood if one is to understand what contemporary literature is.

One hopes, therefore, that by presenting Merleau-Ponty's ideas on these other subjects in the context of a discussion on literature, that new light will be shed on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy tout court.

Another important role that a discussion of Merleau-Ponty's thought on contemporary literature will play is to call into question traditional ideas concerning philosophy and to make clear Merleau-Ponty's conception of it. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the contemporary novel is more than just a description of the novel in the latter half of the twentieth century; it is also a description of contemporary philosophy. In Merleau-Ponty's writing, references to literature are often intertwined with references to philosophy so that it is important not only to discuss what literature is but also what philosophy is. For Merleau-Ponty, it makes little sense to speak of a philosophic literature or of a prosaic philosophy since philosophy and literature, while still different forms of expressive activity, are no longer radically distinguishable.

But perhaps the most important value of Merleau-Ponty's thesis on literature lies in its relation to other work written on literature or literary theory in the twentieth century. With this thesis, we have hopefully prepared the ground for a comparative critique of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the contemporary novel. Merleau-Ponty's views do compare favourably with other modern attempts to come to terms with



literature and can often be harmoniously combined with these other theories. It is, for instance, fair to claim that Merleau-Ponty's thought on contemporary literature would call for a hermeneutics and would definitely support Gadamer's view that literature must be understood in terms of the question or concern which lies at its base and which motivated the writing of it.

Further, given the current work of such theorists on literature as Jauss and Iser, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is important as well. His thought on contemporary literature represents a "synchronic" perspective of it, that is, Merleau-Ponty deals with literature in the light of the history of its production or of the particular literary-historical context in which it was written. In this sense, it complements Jauss' theory in Literaturgeschichte als Provokation which puts forward the claim that literature must be understood in the context of three different historicities: synchronic history - the history of its production, diachronic history - the history of its reception, and in light of the more general historical context in which it is placed. Merleau-Ponty's discussion of literature which focusses on literature as expressive activity would support and flesh out Jauss' ideas on the synchronic history of literature.

More generally, Merleau-Ponty's thesis concerning the contemporary novel is not just a confirmation or clarification of these other theories. It makes a positive and enlightening



contribution to our understanding of the novel in this century. The conclusions that Merleau-Ponty drew about the modern novel are still true today; they characterise much of the literature we call contemporary. It is for this reason that close attention should be paid to his phenomenology of the modern novel for, not only does this phenomenology fit well into the mainstream of modern thought on literature in general and on the contemporary novel in particular but it lays the framework for an understanding of the novels that are still being written today.

Chapter I: The Metaphysical

Introduction

In the twentieth century, an attempt has been made to reduce metaphysics to a body of superstitious beliefs or grammatical hypostatizations. To call a work metaphysical is often to denigrate it. Yet although today, and especially in Anglo-American philosophy, metaphysics suffers from a tarnished reputation and can sometimes only be seen in the implicit presuppositions of a philosophy, its survival in the twentieth century has been ensured by the work of certain contemporary French and German philosophers who have not lost sight of the task and importance of metaphysics. Their writings attest to the value of metaphysical thought while at the same time modifying the idea of metaphysics and redefining its field of inquiry. This is particularly true of the work of Merleau-Ponty. Denouncing the scope and value of the more traditional metaphysical systems, Merleau-Ponty takes up the work of metaphysical speculation and gives it a new significance and a new orientation. For him, metaphysics will no longer be an explanatory system of concepts designed to turn what is ambiguous and paradoxical in our experience into something straightforward and unequivocal. The metaphysical does not admit of such systematisation. Instead, metaphysics will come to terms with the ambiguity of our experience in description and make manifest its wonderful and strange character. For Merleau-Ponty, metaphysics both begins and ends with the surprise man

feels when confronted with the paradoxical nature of existence.

In this chapter, we shall inquire into Merleau-Ponty's notion of metaphysics. We shall be primarily concerned with examining what Merleau-Ponty considered to be the field of metaphysical investigation or, put more generally, with the metaphysical as opposed to metaphysics - that activity which treats of the metaphysical. Our analysis of the metaphysical as what is intended by metaphysical activity will be further developed in the next chapter which deals with philosophy and literature as metaphysical activities or as modes of metaphysical expression. Here it is rather a question of the object of metaphysics than of metaphysics proper.

At first reading, the work of Merleau-Ponty seems to have little to do with metaphysics. The only works that deal explicitly with this subject are two articles, "Le Métaphysique dans l'Homme" and "Le Roman et la Métaphysique."² And yet, if it is true that there are few texts that deal explicitly with this subject, it is also true that Merleau-Ponty himself attributed metaphysical significance to most of his work. For him, metaphysics begins when one ceases to confront the world as an absolute spectator and when one realises that many things are "incompréhensibles si l'on traite l'homme comme une machine gouvernée par des lois naturelles, ou même comme

2 Both articles appear in Merleau-Ponty's Sens et Non-Sense, (Paris: Les Editions Nagel, 1948.)

un 'faisceau d'instincts'." Metaphysics begins when one treats man "comme conscience et comme liberté."³ Much of the work of Merleau-Ponty takes this view of man as its starting point and, for this reason, metaphysics can be seen almost everywhere in his writing.

Metaphysics, in this interpretation, is characterised as an orientation or a way of seeing man and the world. In this chapter, we shall discuss what such a viewpoint entails in terms of the object of metaphysical thought. We shall confine ourselves to using the earlier work of Merleau-Ponty in this discussion.⁴ An account of what constitutes the realm of metaphysics, as Merleau-Ponty conceived it in his earlier work, will serve as an introduction to an examination of what Merleau-Ponty calls metaphysical literature and philosophy.

Merleau-Ponty's Discoveries.

For Merleau-Ponty, man is not an object among other objects, he is "ce par quoi il y a des objets."⁵ But if man is not solely a physical object which could be explained causally, neither is he primarily a transcendental or reflective ego, and in order to understand him, we are obliged to

3 PP, p. 194.

4 We shall, following Gary Madison in his La Phénoménologie de Merleau-Ponty: Une Recherche des Limites de la Conscience, (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1973.), consider Merleau-Ponty's earlier work as comprising all that Merleau-Ponty wrote up to and including 1952. The restriction to Merleau-Ponty's earlier work is seen as necessary owing to the debate between Théodore Geraets and Gary Madison concerning the continuity of Merleau-Ponty's thought. To assume that there is continuity would not, in our opinion, do justice to the seriousness of this debate.

5 PP, p. 108.

study him from the point of view of his experience of the world, an experience which is, above all, corporeal. Man's experience is mediated by his body. The body is what situates man within the world. "Le corps est le véhicule de l'être au monde, et avoir un corps c'est pour un vivant se joindre à un milieu défini, se confondre avec certains projets et s'y engager continuellement."⁶ This is one of Merleau-Ponty's more important discoveries. Man is fundamentally a corporeal being and as such is a being in the world. Having a body is thus essential for a being in the world. The body is what allows the subject to participate in the world in the sense of being a part of it and of acting on it.

The subject of being in the world is an incarnate subject. I am my body and consciousness is primordially the preconceptual grasp or understanding that my body has of the world. "[M]on existence comme subjectivité ne fait qu'un avec mon existence comme corps et avec l'existence du monde et... finalement le sujet que je suis, concrètement pris, est inséparable de ce corps-ci et de ce monde-ci."⁷ Merleau-Ponty claims here that consciousness is not something over and above the body. For him, it exists only in and through the body. Thus, what he is arguing is not only that the body is not solely physical, but also that consciousness is not only "mental". Consciousness is incarnate and it can no longer be distinguished from the body just as the body can no longer be distinguished from it.

6 Ibid., p. 97.

7 Ibid., p. 497.

To be in the world as an incarnate subject or consciousness, is, in its very nature, to transcend one's own being and to relate to something other than oneself. "Ce que je découvre et reconnais par le Cogito... c'est le mouvement profond de transcendance qui est mon être même, le contact simultané avec mon être et l'être du monde."⁸ Merleau-Ponty often describes this transcendence as communion or coexistence. As beings in the world, we are defined by this constant movement or activity towards things and other people. Our existence as conscious subjects is just this involvement or interrelation between the being of the world and my own being as a body-subject. Thus,

Dès qu'il y a conscience, et pour qu'il y a conscience, il faut qu'il y ait un quelque chose dont elle soit conscience, un objet intentionnel, et elle ne peut se porter vers cet objet qu'autant qu'elle s'"irréalise" et se jette en lui, que si elle est tout entière dans cette référence à... quelque chose, que si elle est un pur acte de signification. ⁹

In the Phénoménologie de la Perception, Merleau-Ponty is concerned with discovering the fundamental features of the incarnate subject in order to characterise its experience. Being in the world comprises, as we shall show, spatial, temporal, sexual and perceptual modalities. These modalities of being in the world characterise the pre-personal dimension of the subject's existence. Pre-personal existence is that primordial level of the subject's experience which pre-exists

8 Ibid., p. 432.

9 Ibid., p. 141.

the linguistic and reflective dimensions of existence. But pre-personal being in the world, while primordial, is not the only dimension of existence for the subject. Merleau-Ponty also discusses the physical level of existence, the biological level which is "une opération primordiale à partir de laquelle il devient possible de 'vivre' (erleben)"¹⁰ and the linguistic and reflective levels of existence which include scientific thinking and theorising activity in general. Just as the body, conceived as a pre-personal existent, permits one to coexist with things and other people, it also gives us access to these other dimensions of existence.

Pre-personal existence is such that it founds all other dimensions of existence, as it grounds our relation with things and other people. As such, it is the most fundamental level of existence and the realm of metaphysics proper. Metaphysical thought must study this level of experience, the original realm of consciousness and freedom,¹¹ both in-itself and as the ground for all other dimensions and types of existence.

The field of investigation for metaphysics, or the metaphysical, is just our pre-linguistic and pre-reflective experience as body-subjects. Metaphysics brings to light the pre-conceptual foundation of the world, the other and

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 186.

¹¹ "Si je me prends dans mon absolue concrétion et tel que la réflexion me donne à moi-même, je suis un flux anonyme et préhumain qui n'est pas encore qualifié... je suis une conscience qui se valorise librement." Ibid., p. 505.

the self. It makes manifest that realm of experience of the free and conscious subject which serves as ground for all others. It is the study of the world of perception as access to and communication with being and as the foundation for the linguistic and the reflective worlds. The metaphysician "n'a pas d'autres objets que l'expérience quotidienne: ce monde, les autres, l'histoire humaine, la vérité, la culture."¹² A study of everyday experience reveals the ground of all experience to be pre-personal existence and metaphysics must study pre-personal being both in itself and as the foundation for all other dimensions of existence and for all other beings. Here Merleau-Ponty reworks the old notion of metaphysics as a study of first principles. In his philosophy, the metaphysical, as the pre-personal level of existence is foundational. It is not the first cause in the sense that all other beings and dimensions of existence are, as it were, its effects. Rather, it founds all other beings and dimensions of existence which presuppose it. Pre-personal existence is always implicated in any discussion of

12 "Le Métaphysique dans l'Homme," p. 188.

the world, others, reflection and language.¹³

At this point, one might well question Merleau-Ponty's view of metaphysics. For if the pre-personal level of existence is foundational in the sense that it is constitutive of all other levels of existence and is that being without which things and other people would not exist as such, the existence of God as the possible foundation for this level of existence seems to be neglected or perhaps, ruled out entirely. It is, however, important to understand that, at least in his earlier work, Merleau-Ponty neither affirmed nor denied the existence of God or of some sort of supreme being. What he denied was the existence of a God as conceived by the ra-

13 Metaphysics, as we have described it here, that is, as a study of the pre-personal world, is actually what could be called secondary metaphysics. Primary metaphysics is the pre-conceptual grasp we have of the world in perception. As William Luijpen remarks:

The metaphysical question, in the strict sense of the term, has not been invented by metaphysics as a system but lies contained in the existent subject-as-COGITO, or rather, it is an aspect of this subject as a mode of being man. The subject-as-COGITO himself is a "metaphysical awareness," "metaphysical experience".... The metaphysical awareness, the metaphysical experience, is a certain "knowing" of what it means that of everything of which it is said, was said or will be said that it IS belongs to the order of being. In metaphysics this awareness is critically and systematically taken up, explicated and developed. Phenomenology and Metaphysics, trans., Henry J. Koren, (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1965.) pp. 23-4.

tionalists.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty felt that founding pre-personal existence on the existence of God would not contribute to an understanding of pre-personal existence. Because all explanations presuppose a subject who explains, it is the subject and his experience that one must first attempt to comprehend. As Madison writes:

La subjectivité est au contraire le présupposé de toutes les explications; elle est un point de départ nécessaire parce que si nous concevons la subjectivité comme un effet secondaire ou un produit..., c'est encore nous qui le faisons, ce qui prouve que la subjectivité est bien un fait irréductible et toujours présupposé. 15

We cannot, at first, look beyond the subject to find an explanation or foundation for its existence since any explanation will presuppose what it sets out to explain, namely, the subject.

Metaphysical inquiry proper will thus restrict itself to the pre-personal level of existence. It will be concerned with this level both in itself and as the foundation for all other levels of existence, and for the world, others and myself. Metaphysics will attempt to describe what is only lived, a world of experience which pre-exists language and

14 For an interesting discussion of this subject, see Frans Vandebussche's article, "The Problem of God in the Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty," in International Philosophical Quarterly VII, no. 1, (March, 1967) pp. 45-76. Vandebussche's contention, which he convincingly supports, is summarised in his statement that "in the writing of the first period there can be nowhere found a clear rejection of the living God." (p. 61)

15 Madison, p. 244.

reflection. Claude Lefort concurs:

Revenir à l'expérience muette, égaler la réflexion à la vie irréfléchie, ce programme, nous devons juger qu'il détache du cartésianisme ou du kantianisme, mais non pas qu'il reconduit vers un en-deçà de la métaphysique, puisque porter à l'expression l'expérience muette, la vie irréfléchie, serait les délivrer du poids de la représentation sous lequel elles sont dissimulées et que la métaphysique commence en assumant cette tâche. 16

The Modalities of the Metaphysical

Introduction

Merleau-Ponty made the most complete analysis of the pre-personal subject in the Phénoménologie de la Perception where he describes the most fundamental aspects or modalities of its existence. Spatiality, temporality, sexuality and perceptivity as the "projet du monde,"¹⁷ constitute man as an incarnate subject. But these are not mutually exclusive constituents of the subject's existence on the pre-personal level. The subject unifies all of these modalities of its existence by means of what Merleau-Ponty, following Husserl, called intentionnalité opérante (fungierende Intentionalität).

Operant intentionality is what makes possible the organisation of all of the aspects and dimensions of the

16 Claude Lefort, Sur une Colonne Absente: Ecrits autour de Merleau-Ponty, (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1978.) p. 121.

17 PP, p. xiii.

body. It is just the activity or praxis of the body and it ensures the lived unity or cohesion of all of the constituents of a being in the world.

Disons donc... que la vie de la conscience - vie connaissante, vie du désir ou vie perceptive - est sous-tendue par un "arc intentionnel" qui projette autour de nous notre passé, notre avenir, notre milieu humain, notre situation physique, notre situation idéologique, notre situation morale, ou plutôt qui fait que nous sommes situés sous tous ces rapports. C'est cet arc intentionnel qui fait l'unité des sens, celle des sens et de l'intelligence, celle de la sensibilité et de la motricité. 18

Operant intentionality is thus that single visée or active projection which makes it possible for the subject to consolidate the various aspects and levels of its existence. It is what unifies all of the different modalities and dimensions of existence by synthesizing these in activity. Thus, operant intentionality is not a kind of transcendental synthesizing principle. It functions through or by means of the body's own movement and activity. It is that single synergic intention which guarantees the meaningfulness of all our endeavours since it directs bodily activity or is just that directed activity.

Each modality of existence, considered separately, represents the subject completely and essentially, though not exhaustively. An analysis of temporality, for example, will reveal not just a contingent aspect of subjectivity but will make manifest what subjectivity is in its very nature.

...l'existence ne peut avoir d'attribut extérieur ou contingent. Elle ne peut être quoi que ce soit-spatiale, sexuelle, temporelle- sans l'être toute entière, sans reprendre et assumer ses "attributs" et faire d'eux des dimensions de son être, de sorte qu'une analyse un peu précise de chacun d'eux concerne en réalité la subjectivité elle-même. 19

Thus, no one of the modalities of existence takes precedence over the others, each qualifies subjectivity completely, though subjectivity is always more than any of its modalities. Each belongs to the subject "en vertu d'une nécessité intérieure"²⁰ which makes these modalities not just mere aspects or contingent characteristics of its existence but essential constituents of the subject or, if you will, existentielle.

A study of spatiality, temporality and sexuality will serve as an introduction to a study of perceptivity. Perception is an act of the body. Bodily acts can primordially be characterised as spatial, temporal and sexual. Perceptivity incorporates all of these features of existence. Thus, an analysis of perceptivity as a bodily act will follow upon an analysis of these other existentiale.

Our discussion of the modalities of the pre-personal existent will only be a cursory one. We merely intend to provide a general sketch of what Merleau-Ponty meant by the metaphysical. Since all of the aforementioned modalities

19 Ibid., p. 469.

20 Ibid., p. 469.

belong to the body as the subject of pre-personal experience, a short examination of each of them will serve as a general introduction to the metaphysical dimension of our existence.

Spatiality

Our involvement in the world is effected by means of the body which assumes space as it orients itself in the world. Corporeal space (espace corporel), or the natural space of bodily movement, is neither objective space nor a space constituted by a pure subject. It is the space of the pre-personal subject in its dealings with things, in its tasks and projects. Corporeal space

is created when a pact is made between my body as the potentiality for certain movements, or as that which demands certain privileged planes, and the observed scene as an invitation to those movements, or eventually as a stage for these actions. This pact constitutes space for me and gives things a direct power over my body. 21

Corporeal space is "une spatialité de situation."²²

In situating himself within the world, man assumes and creates space as the context for his activity. Motility is the means by which corporeal space is created and assumed. When I begin to act and move within the world, the interaction of my body and the world is creative of my spatial situation and gives rise to further movement and activity. Corporeal space is

21 Joseph J. Kockelmans, "Merleau-Ponty on Space Perception and Space," in Phenomenology and the Natural Sciences: Essays and Translations, Joseph Kockelmans and Theodore Kisiel eds., (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970.) p. 287.

22 PP, p. 116.

that positing, through the activity of the body-subject, of my situation within the world. It is realised in a "POSTURE que, dans le monde, nous prenons en vue d'une tâche déterminée."²³ It is the result of the dialectical interchange between my body as it explores the world in its activity and the world as the context within which that activity takes place. It arises as the subject makes present to himself the arrangement of things within the world relative to his intentions.

Corporeal space is not only assumed and created in actual movement, it is also constituted by our body as a system of possible movements. Corporeal space thus not only includes actual lived space but also what Merleau-Ponty calls l'espace virtuel or virtual space. Virtual space is a function of projection "par lequel le sujet du mouvement ménage devant lui un espace libre où ce qui n'existe pas puisse prendre un semblant d'existence."²⁴ Virtual space is given with real space as one of its possibilities. By means of projection from the actual space of his bodily movement, the subject anticipates a possible space to be given in future activity as well as the movements which he will have to assume

²³ Alphonse de Waelhens, Une Philosophie de l'Abigüité: L'Existentialisme de Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 4th ed., (Paris: Béatrice Nauwelaerts, 1970.) p. 121.

²⁴ PP, p. 129.

in this space. The power of anticipation which is made possible as soon as we take possession of the world in our activity, expands our grasp of our spatial situation by projecting a possible space thus permitting our activity to take place in a larger spatial context.

Corporeal space is thus the actual and virtual possession of the world by the subject in its activity. It is not, as we have mentioned, something pre-given to the subject as objective and absolute, nor is it solely the result of an act of constitution by a transcendental ego. It is founded in the pre-personal subject's relation to the world as the context for his actual and possible movement and is thus relative to that relation.

Sexuality

With sexuality, according to Merleau-Ponty, "nous avons affaire non pas à un automatisme périphérique, mais à une intentionnalité qui suit le mouvement général de l'existence."²⁵ Sexuality is not simply a contingent aspect of man's existence, rather, it discloses a fundamental way of being for the body. Thus,

... sexuality is an original form of intentionality, an openness of the ego-subject to the other and to the world, an intentionality irreducible to corporeal automatism or to mental representations and which operates according to a dialectical exchange. It is clear that for Merleau-Ponty sexuality

25 Ibid., p. 183.

is not a mere phase of man's relation to others, an occasional type of behavior arising from certain situations; man is a sexed being through and through; his sexuality is his very being as man, and as he says in various ways, sexuality permeates the whole of man's existence. 26

But if sexuality is not just a contingent feature of our existence, neither can it be explained by an appeal to biology. For Merleau-Ponty, this is the most important lesson to be learned from a reading of Freud. While Freud constantly sought a biological basis for sexuality, his writings attest to the non-biological origins of this phenomenon. Sexuality is diffused in all of the activity of the body-subject. It is at once an attitude of consciousness towards others and a fundamental way in which man comports himself. In sexuality, "l'homme projette sa manière d'être à l'égard du monde."²⁷ Sexuality is the atmosphere within which man lives his life. To be a man means to have a body and to have a body means to be a sexual existent.

Sexual activity is a dialectical exchange between two bodies. It is characterised by an intentionality which projects itself towards another body, sometimes as subject, sometimes as object. As in Sartre's l'Être et le Néant, a dialectic of master and slave may be involved in the sexual act. As a subject, man may be fascinated by the other, as

26 Mary Rose Barral, Merleau-Ponty: The Role of the Body-Subject in Interpersonal Relations, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1965.) p. 147.

27 PP, p. 185.

an object, he may be a fascination for the other. Thus, "Dire que j'ai un corps est donc une manière de dire que je peux être vu comme un objet et que je cherche à être vu comme un sujet, qu'autrui peut être mon maître ou mon esclave, de sorte que la pudeur et l'impudeur expriment la dialectique de la pluralité des consciences et qu'elles ont bien une signification métaphysique."²⁸

The experience of sexuality reveals that the body can be both an object for others and a subject. Its significance for our understanding of ourselves and of others is thus primordial. Through the experience of sexuality, man not only gains a pre-conceptual understanding of his own body but also of the body of the other. To be involved in sexually-oriented activity is to realise one of the fundamental ways of being for a body-subject, and this, for Merleau-Ponty, is both to understand oneself as an object and to grasp one's being as a body-subject. The experience of the other in sexual activity gives me access to him as consciousness and as an object for my consciousness. In short, sexuality makes manifest my ambiguous relations with the other and in so doing, reveals the other to me as he is in his very nature.

28 Ibid., p. 195.

Temporality

For Merleau-Ponty as for Heidegger and Husserl, time presupposes a view of time, that is, a subject who exists in time. "Il y a un style temporel du monde... parce qu'il y a au coeur du temps un regard, ou comme dit Heidegger, un Augenblick...."²⁹ Time is thus not to be understood as objective time but, primarily, as subjective or lived time. In his analysis of the temporal aspect of our existence, Merleau-Ponty looks to Husserl and his Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des Inneren Zeitbewusstseins for a description of this phenomenon. His account of the temporality of pre-personal being is not essentially different from Husserl's description of the temporality of consciousness, except that, for Merleau-Ponty, temporality acquires a metaphysical significance as one among other primary modalities of pre-personal existence.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the past and future are given to the pre-personal subject in his experience of the present. In the present, "j'ai... un sens du passé" and "le sens de l'avenir."³⁰ Past and future are thus originally given to me in the present, in my actual relations with things and the world. Again, time in this interpretation is not just a simple fact of conscious life. Temporality is an essential feature of consciousness. Consciousness "est le mou-

²⁹ Ibid., p. 482.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 472-3 passim.

vement même de temporalisation."³¹ The subject lives time; time is never something exterior to him.

To aid in the understanding of this existentielle, Merleau-Ponty introduces Husserl's schema representing retention. In this schema, one can see that the past is preserved in the present by means of a retentive process in which each succeeding moment contains a modified trace of what was once present. Each present is thus profiled on the horizon of its past moments, and also on the horizon of future anticipations - although this aspect of temporality is not included in the schema. Merleau-Ponty writes, "Chaque présent réaffirme la présence de tout le passé qu'il chasse et anticipe celle de tout l'à-venir et... par définition le présent n'est pas enfermé en lui-même et se transcende vers un avenir et un passé."³²

Time characterises consciousness as a moving horizon which continually gives a temporal meaning to each moment by framing it against all of the other temporal ecstases. Our past is continually modifying our present and our present is constantly anticipating a future. All three ecstases are joined in the present which is the primary ecstasis. The present has a privileged position in time because it is the region where my being and the being of things coincide.

31 Ibid., p. 485.

32 Ibid., p. 481.

Moreover, the present is the place where past and future have meaning for me. It is also from the present as the foundation for meaning that the subject orients itself. Thus, "c'est toujours dans le présent que nous sommes centrés, c'est de lui que partent nos décisions...."³³

Consciousness itself is the movement of temporalisation. It is "un moment qui s'anticipe, un flux qui ne se quitte pas."³⁴ Subjectivity is thus never something fixed in the present, it evades any definitions since the present is perpetually moving towards what it is not and moving back into the past as what has been. For Merleau-Ponty, "J'ai bien, grâce au temps, un emboîtement et une reprise des expériences antérieures dans les expériences ultérieures, mais nulle part une possession absolue de moi par moi, puisque le creux de l'avenir se remplit toujours d'un nouveau présent."³⁵

Perceptivity

Having considered the three basic constituents or existentielle of pre-personal being, we can now discuss perceptivity. For Merleau-Ponty, "La théorie du corps est déjà une théorie de la perception."³⁶ It is only through the body

³³ Ibid., p. 489.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 486.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 278.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 529.

that we have perceptual access to the world. The description of the fundamental modalities of the body is thus a description of the pre-conditions of this access to the world by means of perception.

As we have already remarked, the body-subject can be characterised as transcending itself towards the world of things and other people. It is perception which, according to Merleau-Ponty, is the most primary act of transcendence. By making contact with the world in perception, the world is originally and primordially revealed to us. This explains in part what Merleau-Ponty means by the primacy of perception. But we can also attribute another complementary role to perception which accounts for its primacy. As the fundamental way in which the body transcends itself, perception is the foundation for knowledge. It is a kind of pre-knowledge (présavoir). The phenomenal field constituted by perception is the origin of all truth to which we might aspire and the source of all evidence. Perception is a "connaissance des existences"³⁷ which remains tacit or unexpressed; it both discovers meaning in the world and acts as the possibility for the world's meaning. But it does this "silently," that is, without expressly formulating judgments about the world. Perception is thus a "jugement,... qui ignore ses raisons."³⁸

37 Ibid., p. 50.

38 Ibid., p. 52.

Perception is a bodily act by means of which the world is made manifest to the subject. It is "une expérience non-thétique, préobjective et préconsciente."³⁹ In our perceptual experience, we live, as it were, in a flux of succeeding perceptions which are unified temporally but which we do not synthesize intellectually. Perceptual experience is the act of a subject silently questioning the world as he moves around in it.

Inasmuch as I am a being in the world dealing with things and other people; things and others, which are situated on the horizon of the world, both condition and are conditioned by my perception of them. My intentions and the things that I intend exert a reciprocal influence on what I see. In my active dealings with things, the things themselves create their own unity, a unity of meaning (sens), while at the same time being created as unique objects by the intentional activity which reveals them to me. It is thus the perceiving subject as intentionally-directed who acts in part as the condition for the meaning of things. We shall return to this characteristic of perception later in our discussion of what things are.

What perception gives us are not objects or cogitata. The thing aimed at in perception "n'est reconnu qu'aveuglément par la familiarité de mon corps avec lui."⁴⁰ We should

39 Ibid., p. 279.

40 Ibid., p. 271.

not, therefore, speak of objects but rather, of co-existents. Perception is a way of living things. As such, it is a communion with things and not a knowledge of objects. The encounter of the subject with things in perception is pre-objective. The epistemological relation of a subject to its object is derived from this more fundamental relation of the subject to his environing world.

Pre-personal existence is fundamentally characterized as perceptual experience or as that experience we have of the world prior to language and reflection. It is that dimension of existence in which the world and the objects and people in it are originally given. Merleau-Ponty's description of our perceptual experience is a description of the metaphysical properly speaking. This experience is not one for which explanations or theories can be made since all explanations and theories presuppose it and thus we must seek first to understand it in description before trying to account for it by means of theories. As Madison remarks:

A travers ses descriptions de l'être au monde la phénoménologie soulève ainsi des problèmes de nature proprement 'métaphysique.' Elle pose les questions de l'homme et du monde et de la relation de l'homme au monde, de la rationalité et de la raison. Mais tout en rejoignant les problèmes classiques de la métaphysique, elle s'écarte avec insistance de tout rationalisme, c'est-à-dire de toute tentative d'expliquer une fois pour toutes ces phénomènes en les subsumant sous une catégorie toute faite telle que la Nature ou la Raison... 41

41 Madison, p. 86.

The Pre-personal World-

From what has been said, we can disengage several characteristics of the pre-personal world. The pre-personal world comprehends the perceptual experience of the body as the intentional subject of experience. It is the world we live in prior to language and reflection. "'Pre-personal world' is used to refer to the original world - the world prior to stabilisation - and to oppose this world of the pure field of consciousness to the other two worlds of language and theorising activity of which it is the foundation."⁴²

The subject of the pre-personal world is the je anonyme. The je anonyme is a nascent self, that is, it will serve as the foundation for a fully constituted self but is not itself one. It is an incarnate subject; its being is the being of the body. As such, it is often confused with "la vie de mes yeux, de mes mains, de mes oreilles qui sont autant de Moi naturels."⁴³ The je anonyme is thus not a transcendental or reflective ego which could survey the world in its thought. It is a being whose life and experience consists primarily in seeing, feeling, touching, smelling and hearing, or in perceptual activity in general. Pre-personal being inheres in the world as a body-subject. As such, the

42 H. L. Dreyfus and S. J. Todes, "The Three Worlds of Merleau-Ponty," in Philosophy and Phenomenological Research XXII, no. 4, (June, 1962) p. 565n.

43 PP, p. 250.

the limits of its world are effectively determined by the possibilities it has for bodily movement or activity.

Merleau-Ponty describes the je anonyme in the following way:

Il y a donc un autre sujet au-dessous de moi, pour qui un monde existe avant que je sois là et qui y marquait ma place. Cet esprit naturel ou captif, c'est mon corps, non pas le corps momentané qui est l'instrument de mes choix personnels et se fixe sur tel ou tel monde, mais le système des 'fonctions' anonymes qui enveloppent toute fixation particulière dans un projet général. 44

Beneath the self, or the subject of reflective life, there is a subject who is not other than the reflective ego but who constitutes it and is more primordial than it. Understanding the pre-personal subject and its experience is the basis for understanding the speaking and reflective subjects, since the pre-personal subject or the je anonyme is the ground for these subjects.

Pre-personal Being as Ground

Things

The pre-personal world acts as ground for the existence of things. To say, however, that there would be no world without a subject who perceives it is not to restate the Berkeleyan formula. For Merleau-Ponty, esse is only eminently percipi.

In his presentation of the idea that the things we perceive are immanent to our perception of them, Merleau-Ponty writes:

... que veut-on dire au juste en disant que le monde a existé avant les consciences humaines? On veut dire par exemple que la terre est issue d'une nébuleuse primitive où les conditions de la vie n'étaient pas réunies. Mais chacun de ces mots... présuppose NOTRE expérience préscientifique du monde et cette référence au monde VECU contribue à en constituer la signification variable. 45

To say that the world exists before us and will exist after us is to give a certain meaning to the world. This meaning presupposes a subject who gives meaning to the world or an experience of the world in which that meaning is created. Yet this description of the world as immanent does not entirely do justice to our experience.

While the world is immanent to our perception of it, it is nonetheless true to say that the world is also something over and above my perception of it. Thus, the existence of the world presupposes an experience of the world but this experience itself also reveals the world to us as something which transcends our perception of it. While one must say that it is I as a conscious subject who perceives the world, one must, at the same time, add that it is the world which I see.

The transcendence of the world is confirmed in my perceptual experience of its presence. In this experience, the world is ~~is~~ there as the guarantor of our perceptions and as a corrective for our judgments. Perceptual experience reveals the world to be something not entirely grasped and something which is beyond that which we can ever grasp. Our experience of the world suggests perspectives which have not been lived and horizons which have not yet been experienced. It therefore reveals the world and the things in it as entities which are both in themselves and for us. Immanence and transcendence are reciprocal notions for Merleau-Ponty. One can not be affirmed without affirming the other since to say that the world is immanent is to refer to our perceptual experience of the world and this experience is already one which confirms the world's transcendence. Thus, the experience which justifies our asserting that the world is immanent to perception also justifies the assertion that it is transcendent to that experience as well.

Our experience of the world is one of immanence in transcendence or of transcendence in immanence. Conscious experience can not be understood without understanding that it is an experience of nature as transcendent. The body-subject is thus related to nature in such a way that its being as conscious experience is inconceivable without positing the being of nature for, as experience itself teaches us, without

an independently existing nature, experience would be empty. Only a reflective subject could doubt the transcendence of nature, but his doubt lacks substance considering the fact that reflection is constituted by pre-personal experience and that, in order to say something true about the world, the reflective subject cannot ignore what is given in this experience.

Thus, while it makes little sense to speak of the existence of things apart from our experience of them, if our experience is the way it is described, we can speculate about the independent existence of things. Our experience is the ground for the existence of things in the sense that to speak of things presupposes an experience of those things but not in the sense that things could not exist independently of our experience. To say that things exist, presupposes their existence FOR ME or for a perceiving subject, but this does not mean that things owe their existence entirely to me. To be a thing means to be a thing for a subject, but this only means that without a subject, things, as we understand them, would not exist and not that, without a subject, there would be no things.

As we have previously noted in our exposition of perceptivity, the thing and the body are intimately related to each other in pre-personal experience as co-existents. For the most part, the thing is just its manner of existing

for intentional subjects and, correlatively, the subject or my body-is just the means of appropriating the thing in activity. Thus, any description of what a thing is will necessarily involve a discussion of the body perceiving it.

For the perceiving subject, a thing is perceived more or less clearly and distinctly in relation to its optimum visibility (maximum de visibilité). A thing as "objective" or constant is not seen according to the law of the correlative variations of its visual appearance and apparent distance. A thing is crystallised in vision and receives its "objectivity" in perception as a result of the lived harmony or accord between what is seen and the body which sees. The body establishes its own norms for the perceiving of objects and, correlatively, each object is perceived according to the norm of its own particular optimum visibility. Constancy of size, shape, colour, etc., is in part "une constance-pour-mon corps, un invariant de son comportement total."⁴⁶

All of the various aspects of the perceived thing are taken up as a unity by means of the activity of the body-subject. The unity of the thing in perception, therefore, presupposes the unity of the intentional movement which lays hold of it. "L'unité et l'identité du phénomène... sont fondées sur l'unité et l'identité du corps comme ensemble synergique."⁴⁷

46 Ibid., p. 366.

47 Ibid., p. 366.

The various aspects of a thing are referred to that single intentional activity which creates for itself a situation within which things are found.

The unity of the perceived object is, as a correlate of our intentional activity, also a function of the thing's own particular meaning (sens). "La chose est ce genre d'être dans lequel la définition complète d'un attribut exige celle du sujet tout entier et où par conséquent le sens ne se distingue pas de l'apparence totale."⁴⁸ A thing's colour implies its shape, its shape implies its texture, etc., and this is because each aspect of the thing has singular appearance which itself refers to "cette unique manière d'exister dont elles sont une expression seconde."⁴⁹ This unique manner of existing is the meaning of the thing. Thus, "le sens même de la chose se construit sous nos yeux, un sens qu'aucune analyse ne peut épuiser et qui se confond avec l'exhibition de la chose dans son évidence."⁵⁰ Each thing exhibits its own meaning or style which is grasped when we take it up in intentional activity.

This description of the thing as a singular meaning or style helps one to understand how the thing can be grasped

48. Ibid., p. 373.

49. Ibid., p. 368.

50. Ibid., p. 373.

as identical to itself within the temporal horizon. Each perspective we have of a thing is followed by another and, as time passes, a transitional synthesis (synthèse de transition) is effected. The subject as temporal thus synthesizes my perceptions into one meaningful experience of the world. He can do this because each perception of a thing is intrinsically meaningful. Each perspective makes manifest a certain style which, when taken with the other perspective I have of the thing, retains this meaning while finding its meaning enlarged.

The world is given in the same way as things are given, that is, in the intentional activity of the body-subject which bestows meaning on them. Neither the world nor the things in it are ever manifested completely. Only a being which was not situated in time and space could ever have a complete grasp of things and, for the je anonyme, such a distantiation from his spatial and temporal situation is effectively impossible. It is essential "à la chose et au monde de se présenter comme 'ouverts,' de nous renvoyer au-delà de leurs manifestations déterminées, de nous promettre toujours 'autre chose à voir'."⁵¹ Things and the world exist only for a situated subject who, as situated, can only see a certain facet or side of them. There is always something more to see, things and the world can never have their meaning completely exhausted.

51 Ibid., p. 384.

Others

In the pre-personal world, the other is primarily given to me in experience as behaviour (comportement).

Merleau-Ponty rejects both the argument that the other is recognised as the result of seeing in him something analogous to myself and the Sartrean analysis of the look where the other is seen as an object. To recognise the other, for Merleau-Ponty, is to recognise that the other is not merely an object but also a subject. Seeing the other in the world is to see an active and moving body and, in this immediate grasping of the other as behaviour, the other is recognised as a subject because the body, as revealed in intentionally-directed behaviour, is an ANIMATED body. If the other body is animated, therefore, it can not just be an object. Thus, "s'ils sont des comportements, la position d'autrui ne me réduit pas à la condition d'objet dans son champ, ma perception d'autrui ne le réduit pas à la condition d'objet dans mon champ."⁵²

Once the other is recognised as a subject, I lose my assurance of having a privileged grasp of the world, "Mon regard tombe sur un corps vivant en train d'agir, aussitôt les objets qui l'entourent reçoivent une nouvelle couche de signification: ils ne sont plus ce que je pourrais en faire moi-même, ils sont ce que ce comportement va en faire."⁵³

⁵² Ibid., p. 405.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 406.

The other, as a subject, is recognised as having a certain grasp of the world which is as legitimate as my own. Things are not simply for me, they are also for others. Paul Ricoeur makes a similar remark in his book, De L'Interprétation.

He writes:

Que la chose perçue soit perceptible par d'autres, cela introduit la référence à l'autrui dans la constitution même de la chose.... Tout sens a finalement des dimensions intersubjectives: toute "objectivité" est intersubjective, en tant que l'implicite est ce qu'un autre peut expliciter. 54

My experience of the other, on the pre-personal level, is not always and unequivocally one of simple co-existence. The projects and intentions of the other are not my projects and intentions. The world of the other is not simply my world but another world which creates its own unique situations and meanings. Between the other and myself there is an intraversable chasm which radically cuts the other off from me. Thus, even on the pre-personal level there is something analogous to the conflict of egos. This conflict is most apparent when "je cherche à vivre l'autrui."⁵⁵ The other is there for me in pre-personal experience as something forever beyond my grasp, not simply as a co-existent but as a radically other alter ego.

54 Paul Ricoeur, De l'Interprétation: Essai sur Freud, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965.) p. 376.

55 PP, p. 409.

When I attempt to think about the other in reflection, my experience of the other is often solipsistic. This experience confirms what Merleau-Ponty calls the permanent truth in solipsism. In thought, I often reduce the other to a representation of myself, to something which exists entirely for myself. Or I turn the other into an object for my thought. But even the reflective subject has to admit that others exist in their own right as subjects. To deny the independent existence of others, even in thought, is to presuppose the existence of that which one denies. So while the experience of solipsism may have some truth for the reflective subject, this truth is constantly called into question by my pre-personal experience of the other.

Our relations with others take place not only on the pre-personal level where the other is first given to me, but also, though not primarily, on the linguistic level of existence in dialogue. "In dialogue, I and the other are in perfect reciprocity, as peaceful collaborators, and our perspectives glide into each other's without break and without opposing polarisation."⁵⁶ The other is thus present to me on many levels of existence. His world and mine sometimes conflict and sometimes interpenetrate but I cannot ignore his perspective and the meaning he gives to the world. Intersubjectivity is thus a primary factor in my understanding

56 Dreyfus and Todes, p. 562.

of the world and in my active dealings with it. It is, as we have stated, first revealed in that primordial contact with the other which pre-exists language.

Reflection

Since we intend to discuss the linguistic level of existence in the next chapter of this paper, we shall conclude our discussion of the pre-personal world as foundational with an examination of the pre-personal world as constitutive for reflective being or the world of reflection.

Merleau-Ponty did not write much about this level of experience. References to it are scattered and fragmentary. Not only is it difficult to form a complete conception of this realm of existence, but Merleau-Ponty's few descriptions of it are often problematic. We shall bring up some of the problems with his view of reflection in this section.

The world of reflection is one for which language is a modus vivendi. Reflection is not something over and above language, but is rather just the realisation of thought in language. Thought is language as presence. Language is the body of form which thought must take. "Il faut que, d'une manière ou de l'autre, le mot et la parole cessent d'être une manière de désigner l'objet ou la pensée, pour devenir la présence de cette pensée dans le monde sensible, et, non

pas son vêtement, mais son emblème ou son corps."⁵⁷ Pure thought, unencumbered by language, exists only as a kind of "vide de la conscience,... un voeu instantané."⁵⁸

Thought or reflection can be characterised generally as theorising activity. In reflection, we aim to thematise, to objectify and to make comprehensible the world, objects, and ourselves. The world of reflective existence is often the world where subject and object are radically distinguished on epistemological and ontological grounds. Consciousness separates itself from the object of reflection in order to study it. It poses the object as something exterior to it. In this way, it views the object as something in itself and, because it does so, often seeks causal explanations for what it studies.

But, a reflective subject who wishes to understand the world must, according to Merleau-Ponty, come to terms with the world as it is given in his pre-reflective experience of it. Reflection has its ground or origin in the pre-personal world. Consequently, the reflective subject cannot pose objects as exterior to it, as things in themselves, without neglecting or tacitly denying its experience in the pre-personal world. All explanations of the world presuppose this experience and must be tested in the light of its evidence.

57 PP, p. 212.

58 Ibid., p. 213.

70
 "La réflexion n'est vraiment réflexion que si elle ne s'em-
 porte pas hors d'elle-même, se connaît comme réflexion-sur-
 un-irréfléchi, et par conséquent comme un changement de
 structure de notre existence."⁵⁹

Merleau-Ponty thus posits a new kind of reflection
 which should characterise philosophical thinking. In this
 kind of reflection, "il... faut,, afin de se saisir comme
 réflexion sur un irréfléchi, passer par un chemin ardu qu'est
 la redécouverte et l'exploration de l'irréfléchi."⁶⁰ Such
 reflection must be preliminary to scientific inquiry and
 investigation. It is that activity which calls itself into
 question as an objectifying consciousness by continually
 referring itself to the original world which constituted it.

Some commentators have remarked that, for Merleau-
 Ponty, this kind of reflection, which finds itself incapable
 of explaining the whole of reality and which must constantly
 return to the lived world for its answers, is a kind of un-
 happy consciousness or disease.

[M]an's eternal inclination to explain the whole
 of reality must be a sign of degeneration....
 Is it correct to consider this desire as a kind
 of disease? In this case all religion and almost
 all forms of philosophy are born from a disease
 or at least inflicted with a disease. 61

59 Ibid., p. 76.

60 Madison, p. 80.

61 Rémy Kwant, The Phenomenological Philosophy of Merleau-
 Ponty, (Pittsburgh: Dusquesne University Press, 1963.)
 p. 233.

It is thought that because man cannot explain everything, his desire to seek such explanation must be a kind of sickness. But for Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, philosophy is not a disease. Reflective activity is only "prone to illness" when it seeks to explain without first considering the basis for its explanations and taking this into account in its understanding of them. Philosophy and other theoretical disciplines are products of man's own constitution as a subject. In itself, reflection is not and cannot be made the object of value judgments. What can be judged, however, is an unself-conscious reflection which does not question itself and take into account the origins of its own existence. Thus what is "diseased" is not reflection but only a certain kind of reflection.

Another objection to Merleau-Ponty's description of reflection is again based on the incompleteness in principle of philosophical reflection. Several writers feel that this positing of the incompleteness of philosophical expression points to a weakness in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.

[R]eflective analysis is in principle incapable of coming to terms adequately with the ground for scientific rationality. If Merleau-Ponty is correct, then rationality is shown to be incapable of demonstrating its own origin and basis. 62

If this objection holds, then one might well question whether

62 Ronald Bruzina, "Merleau-Ponty and Husserl: The Idea of Science," in The Horizons of the Flesh: Critical Perspectives on the Thought of Merleau-Ponty, ed., Garth Gillan, (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973.) p. 173.

metaphysics itself, as an expression of the pre-personal world, is possible.

The key term in this critique of Merleau-Ponty is the word "adequately." While it is true to say that the world of immediate experience cannot be grasped adequately in any of the accepted senses of this word, it is nonetheless true that reflective activity can approximately grasp its object in language and this is because lived experience is essentially meaningful though it is tacit experience. It is precisely the meaning (sens) of the object seen or of my experience as intentional which gets taken up in the fabric of language, though it is never entirely laid hold of. The meaning found in experience is never fully exhausted in language.

The real problem with Merleau-Ponty's description of reflection arises when one considers its relation to the world of pre-objective or pre-personal experience.⁶³ Not

63 This objection has also been put in terms of the problem of the nature-culture distinction. In this essay, "Singing the World: Language and Perception," Don Ihde remarks:

There is evidence in Merleau-Ponty of an ambivalence with respect to the tradition of nature versus culture. In his essay, "The Primacy of Perception," he appears to overtly appeal to this distinction; in the Phenomenology of Perception he speaks of speech as the "surplus of our existence over natural being" and links language to "a linguistic world and a cultural world," but increasingly the implication is one which must eventually call the nature-culture dualism into question. From the beginning he admits that human perception is different from animal perception, though without linking this to culture as such. But in The Visible and the Invisible perception becomes enigmatic precisely in relation to "cultural" factors. The Horizons of the Flesh, pp. 75-6.

only is the problem of how reflection is constituted passed over with vague references to thematisation and to the mystery of reflection as an antecedently founded phenomenon, but reflection seems to be epiphenomenal. Founded on language, which is itself problematic with respect to its constitution, the relation of reflection to the pre-personal world is such that reflective activity seems not to influence in the least the activity of the je anonyme. With the notion of operant intentionality, Merleau-Ponty would seem to have at least made possible such a relation. But by making a distinction between the two worlds without discussing how reflection is constituted⁶⁴ and thus how a true INTERaction is possible, one wonders indeed whether and how reflective activity or thought in general can influence the pre-personal subject. And if it is not possible, does Merleau-Ponty's description do justice to our experience? If it is possible, in what sense are we to understand the primacy of being in the world? Merleau-Ponty answers neither of these question and

64 . Indeed, in Le Visible et l'Invisible, Merleau-Ponty states that it is effectively impossible to understand how the linguistic and the reflective levels of existence are constituted. "Le Cogito tacite doit faire comprendre comment le langage n'est pas impossible, mais ne peut pas faire comprendre comment il est possible." Le Visible et l'Invisible, (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1964.) p. 229.

and his description of reflection suffers as a result.⁶⁵

Conclusion

In our exposition of the metaphysical, we have seen that the body-subject inhabits the world primordially as a pre-personal subject. This level of existence acts as a ground for all other dimensions of existence and all other beings. It can be characterised essentially in terms of its spatiality, sexuality, temporality and perceptivity. The metaphysician must come to terms with the pre-personal world in reflection. To do this, he must constantly transcend the reflective realm of existence and aim at this world as the source of meaning.

Metaphysics is thus philosophical activity defined as radical reflection and, as we shall see, it also, according to Merleau-Ponty, characterises the activity of modern novelists. Both philosophy and literature of the twentieth century are, for Merleau-Ponty, modes of metaphysical expression. They both intend the pre-personal world of experience and attempt to bring it to expression in language. Modern philosophy and literature involve the activity of the reflective subject intending a world which is found outside of language.

65 To point out that perceptual experience might not be entirely free of reflection and language is not necessarily to make metaphysics as we describe it here impossible, however. For while our perceptual experience may not be as pure as Merleau-Ponty suggests, we could, with some qualifications, still consider it to be foundational in Merleau-Ponty's sense.

To do metaphysics "n'est pas d'entrer dans un monde de connaissance séparé,... c'est vérifier toujours à nouveau le fonctionnement discordant de l'intersubjectivité humaine, c'est chercher à penser jusqu'au bout les mêmes phénomènes que la science investit, en leur restituant seulement leur transcendance et leur étrangeté originaires."⁶⁶ The philosopher and the novelist must try to lay hold of our original experience with all of its ambiguities. They will not attempt to explain this world but rather to describe it and, in this description, they will endeavour to restore to it its paradoxical character. We shall discuss what is involved in this attempt in the next chapter.

Chapter II: Metaphysics

Introduction

Merleau-Ponty discusses the relationship between philosophy and literature most explicitly in "Le Roman et le Métaphysique," an article first published in the Cahiers du Sud in 1945. In this article, he considers philosophy and literature with a view to explicating their relation to each other in history and in the contemporary context. His aim is to show that philosophy and literature, while different modes of expression,⁶⁷ have become thoroughly metaphysical in that they intend our pre-personal experience of the world as it is lived by the body-subject.

Merleau-Ponty points out that before the twentieth century, the ties between philosophy and literature were one-sided. Novelists have always informed their work with philosophical ideas, theories or conceptual models whereas philosophers, in their attempt to construct indubitable and universally true worlds, did not rely on literature or on literary ideas. Thus, "l'oeuvre d'un grand romancier est toujours portée par deux ou trois idées philosophiques,"⁶⁸ although the novelist himself may not always understand their

67 The meaning of the phrase "different modes of expression" will be clarified in the course of our exposition.

68 "Le Roman et la Métaphysique," p. 51.

implications. Philosophy, on the other hand, "a pu passer pour une spécialité où la littérature n'avait que faire parce qu'elle a fonctionné sur un fond de rationalisme incontesté et qu'elle était persuadée de pouvoir faire comprendre le monde et la vie humaine par un agencement de concepts."⁶⁹

The relationship between these two activities began to change at the end of the nineteenth century when thinkers started to question their most basic assumptions. Our experience of the world is such that neither the subject of that experience nor the world given in it can be taken as objects. No conceptual models or theoretical constructs are sufficient for an understanding of them since these constructs and models invariably objectify the world and the subject and turn what is ambiguous in experience into something straightforward and univocal.

When these new beliefs gained currency, novelists lost the conviction they once had of being able to express a single and objective view of the world. They could no longer rely on a set of beliefs or principles to provide the conceptual background for their depiction of experience. Their dilemma, and the dilemma of modern art and thought in general became that of "communiquer sans le secours d'une Nature pré-établie et sur laquelle nos sens à tous ouvriraient, le problème de savoir comment nous sommes entés sur l'universel

69 Ibid., p. 53.

par ce que nous avons de plus propre."⁷⁰

Commentators on modern literature echo the claims of Merleau-Ponty. In the twentieth century, the novel no longer relies on a set of moral principles or an ideology which it reflects. The novelist now attempts to describe experience without the aid of such theories and without asserting that the experience he depicts has any ultimate value or significance.

"To believe that your impressions hold good for others," Virginia Woolf once wrote (discussing Jane Austin), "is to be released from the cramp and confinement of personality." The modern novelist could no longer believe this: he had to fall back on personality, drawing his criterion of significance in human affairs (and thus his principle of selection) from his own intuitions, so that he needed to find ways of convincing the reader that his own private sense of what was significant in experience was truly valid. A new technical burden was thus imposed on the novelist's prose, for it had now to build up a world of values instead of drawing on an existing world of values. ⁷¹

The modern novelist can never arrive at a final or ultimate meaning or truth in experience because an objective view of the world which would permit him to discover such a meaning, is no longer possible. The novelist is the creator of a meaning that could be other than what he thinks it is.

⁷⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Le Langage Indirect et les Voix de Silence," in Signes, (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1960.) p. 65.

⁷¹ M. H. Abrams, ed., The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Vol. 2, 3d ed., (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1974.) p. 1685.

Modern philosophers have also responded to the dilemma of modern thought. They no longer attempt to systematise experience, to fix it in concepts or to reach some final truth about it. Philosophy is now defined at least in part by its attempt to formulate "une expérience du monde, un contact avec le monde qui précède toute pensée SUR le monde."⁷² The philosopher realises that his tasks and projects, the problems to which he responds, are posed within time and history, from a certain point of view or context. There are no ultimate truths or final meanings which the philosopher could uncover since any description of experience is made by a finite and situated subject who can only grasp certain features of experience. The philosopher, like the novelist, "nous oblige à admettre une vérité qui ne ressemble pas aux choses, qui soit sans modèle extérieur, sans instruments d'expression prédestinés, et qui soit cependant vérité."⁷³

According to Merleau-Ponty, modern philosophers and novelists are both engaged in the task of bringing the world of silent experience to expression. They attempt to "faire parler l'expérience du monde."⁷⁴ Inasmuch as both activities attempt to describe the pre-personal dimension of human life,

72 "Le Roman et la Métaphysique," pp. 54-5.

73 "Le Langage Indirect," p. 72.

74 "Le Roman et la Métaphysique," p. 55.

they are both metaphysical. Thus, "On comprendrait mieux la relation qu'entretient la philosophie moderne avec la littérature... si, au lieu de s'en tenir aux changements survenus dans l'ordre de la théorie, l'on voyait qu'ils sont commandés par l'expérience de l'oeuvre, d'un rapport à l'Etre qui se donne en elle."⁷⁵ They bring to expression that dimension of existence which is the foundation for all other dimensions of existence and all other being. Metaphysics is therefore understood to be, at least in part,⁷⁶ its expression in philosophy and literature.

Philosophy, Literature and Language

Philosophy and literature are the written descriptions of the pre-personal world. As written, philosophic and literary activity take place in the sphere of language. They contribute "à accomplir le voeu de récupération du monde qui s'est prononcé avec l'apparition d'une langue, c'est-à-dire d'un système fini de signes qui se prétendait capable en principe de capter tout être qui se présenterait."⁷⁷

The world of language is one which is founded upon the pre-personal world. The existential position of lan-

75 Lefort, p. xvii.

76 I say "in part" here because, in such works as "L'Oeil et l'Esprit," Merleau-Ponty claims that painting is also becoming more metaphysical.

77 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Sur la Phénoménologie du Langage," in Signes, (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1960.) p. 119.

guage within human life is such that reflection and the pre-personal world meet within it. If we imagine the reflective and pre-personal spheres of existence as two circles which overlap, the place of language is represented by the space where the two circles join. The world of language is the ground for the world of reflection or theorising activity. It makes possible the personal world of the reflective subject while distinguishing itself from it. Linguistic activity thus mediates between reflection, on the one hand, and the silent world of pre-personal experience on the other.

Linguistic activity can be characterised in two ways; there is an empirical and an authentic use of language.

The distinction between empirical and authentic speech is made by the speaker's intentionality in a given situation. When the speaker recalls for his auditors a "pre-established sign" or recurring denotation, he is making use of EMPIRICAL SPEECH. Empirical speech exists as a SEDIMENTATION from which the speaker draws pre-established signs which will have the desired meaning in his auditors. AUTHENTIC SPEECH is that which "signifies," which is to say that the speaker... uses language to formulate and create unique, yet intentional, meaning.... 78

Empirical speech is an uncreative use of language. When we use clichés and standard forms and phrases to communicate, we do not make an effort to truly express the world. Instead we rely on things we have already heard, we inventory language and do not invent new meaning. Authentic speech,

78 Richard L. Lanigan, "Rhetorical Criticism: An Interpretation of Maurice Merleau-Ponty," in Philosophy and Rhetoric II, no. 2, (Spring, 1969) p. 207.

on the other hand, is an effort to say something about ourselves and the world in such a way that the speaker seizes upon a singular meaning or way of expressing things as a direct response to his singular relation to the world. Authentic speech does not pre-suppose the familiarity of the world; it is an attempt to grasp the unique manner of existing which the world has for the speaker.

Philosophy and literature, if they are to achieve their goal of bringing the silent world of experience to expression, must make use of authentic language. Empirical speech cannot express the presence of the world to the speaker since its meanings are conventional and cannot express this unique relation. The novelist and the philosopher must, with every speech-act, renew or re-establish their grasp of the world. Each phrase they use must come to terms with experience and implicate that experience by intending its pre-linguistic meaning. Thus, "the artist or the philosopher never uses the empirical language as given; the use they make of it transforms the words, so that they become creative or authentic words."⁷⁹

Philosophy, Literature and Expression

Merleau-Ponty believed that, as modes of expression, philosophy and literature share several characteristics which must be understood if one is to understand them. We shall

79 Mary Rose Barr²¹, p. 178.

therefore discuss these characteristics with a view to showing what is common to philosophy and literature as metaphysical expression. In this discussion, we shall see that philosophy and literature are no longer radically different activities.

Approximation

Philosophers and novelists never attain the thing itself, experience itself, in language. Philosophy and literature are incomplete expressions of the world which they attempt to grasp. They are approximative expressions of experience and not complete and exhaustive expressions of it. Merleau-Ponty insisted on this characteristic of expression from the Phénoménologie de la Perception on. Reflection, or a reflective grasp of the world "n'a jamais sous son regard le monde entier et la pluralité des monades déployés et objectivés... elle ne dispose jamais que d'une vue partielle et d'une puissance limitée."⁸⁰

Philosophers and novelists can never attain a universal and a priori description of our perceptual experience. Their grasp of the world is never sufficient for a universally valid understanding of it. Philosophy and literature are made by finite and situated subjects. There is no absolute stand-point on the world which would permit them to attain

any ultimate or apodictic certainty about it. There can be no absolute certainty because there is no standpoint which is not rooted in history. All meaning is meaning relative to the historical context in which it is pronounced. Thus, "L'écrit... ne nous livre son sens le plus durable qu'à travers une histoire précise dont il nous faut avoir quelque connaissance."⁸¹ The writer always brings meaning to light at a particular time and from a particular point of view, as a response to a particular problem posed within the historical context. He cannot, as can the Husserlian Ego, divorce himself from history in order to discover universal and a priori meaning in our experience. Writers "are situated within an historical dialogue as beings who construct conceptual universes on the basis of their thought's anchorage within the world."⁸²

Philosophy and literature are therefore open-ended expressions; their claim to retrieve the world in language is never entirely realised since language "ne pourrait livrer la chose même que s'il cessait d'être dans le temps et dans la situation."⁸³ But there is another reason why philosophic and literary expressions are approximative only. Language itself is indirect. We never attain the thing itself in its immediacy in language. What we achieve in language is a

81 "Le Langage Indirect," p. 100.

82 Richard C. McCleary, "Translator's Preface," in Signs, p. xxiv.

83 "Le Langage Indirect," p. 102.

mediate or ideal description of immediate experience. Language operates in the realm of ideality; what it intends, however is not ideal but facticity itself which is situated outside of language. But to say that language is a mediate description of immediate experience is only to say that we never think the thing itself in language; rather, we always think or speak ABOUT the thing. For this reason too, philosophy and literature are approximations.

Language is, in its very nature, not only the presence of experience to thought, it also marks the distance of this experience from the thought about it.

La présence de la chose "même," le propre, n'est jamais sans distance, sans la profondeur d'où seule elle peut surgir. Le langage n'est que par cette distance, puisque ce qui définit l'expression, c'est d'être inachevable.... Le langage doit toujours regarder derrière lui, toujours il est tributaire de ce dont il est sourd. 84

Philosophy and literature both reveal and hide what they attempt to disclose. They reveal to us the thing in speech but that very revelation is itself a betrayal of experience because it never fully discloses that experience. The meaning philosophers and novelists wrest from experience "inaugure une discussion qui ne finit pas avec lui, suscite lui-même la recherche."⁸⁵

Philosophy and literature are thus approximations of

84 Luce Fontaine-de-Visscher, Phénomène ou Structure? Essai sur le langage chez Merleau-Ponty, (Bruxelles: Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis, 1974.) p. 75.

85 "Le Langage Indirect," p. 96.

experience for two different reasons. The writer is situated within an historical context from which he can never extricate himself. Not only are the questions to which he responds rooted in history, but the answers he gives must be understood in the light of the historical situation in which they were given. But the writer's situation is not simply one with historical boundaries, his situation is also bounded by language which is always insufficient for an expression of the world he intends. The pre-personal world is, in principle, incapable of being adequately expressed. All expressions of the world of perceptual experience are approximate only since this experience transcends the experience of the linguistic and reflective subject.

Creation-Contact.

Philosophers and novelists intend the world of silent experience and, in so doing, create original meanings for it by their use of authentic language. On the one hand, they intend pre-linguistic experience by transcending their own sphere of activity and, on the other hand, they remain within the sphere of the ideality of the word as expressions of that experience. They are therefore both a contact with experience in their intention of it and a creation or transformation of the meaning found there into language. Linguistic activity is not simply a taking up of the meaning of our experience, it is a presentation of this dimension of experience on a

different level. Further, while philosophy and literature must make contact with facticity in order to express it, they give us an original presentation of that experience because they are unique and original ways of relating to it in language. In this sense, the sphere of reflection is not the sphere of immanent consciousness described by Husserl. For Husserl, consciousness has its own intentional objects which are immanent to it. Reflection is possible whether the natural world exists or not. For Merleau-Ponty, however, reflection, as a contact with experience, intends an object which is not solely immanent but also transcendent to it. It, like the natural sciences, is a world-immanent discipline, and it must continually go beyond the sphere of its own activity in order to express the pre-personal world.

In order to describe what Merleau-Ponty means by calling the activity of the philosopher and the novelist creative, it is necessary to refer to another concept used by Merleau-Ponty. As expressions of perceptual experience, philosophy and literature effect what Merleau-Ponty calls a coherent deformation (déformation coh rente)⁸⁶ of that experience. Philosophy and literature intend the pre-linguistic world. In order to grasp or to make manifest that world in language, a kind of transformation or metamorphosis must take place from the meaning (sens) which is found in experience

⁸⁶ For a discussion of this concept see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, La Prose du Monde, (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1969.) pp. 84-6.

to the signs or group of signs which express that meaning. This transformation of experience into language is effected by means of a coherent deformation of that meaning. Coherent deformation refers to the way that the meaning of experience is taken up in language as a transformation or metamorphosis of that meaning. Philosophy and literature are creative expressions by virtue of the fact that they take up the meaning of our experience on a different level and are thus linguistic transformations of the meaning of experience.⁸⁷

Coherent deformation also refers to the fact that what the philosopher and the novelist express is THEIR OWN unique perception of or encounter with the world. Just as in perception we create unique and individual meaning in response to what is given, so too, the philosopher and the novelist use language in such a way that they make experience dwell in signs by means of which they endeavour to capture the unique an original meaning experience has for them. But this is just to say, as we have already mentioned, that the philosopher and the novelist are authentic users of language.

87 But there is an uncreative side to expression as well. For, just as in perception the world imposes its own unique meaning on the perceiving subject, in expression as well, the philosopher and the novelist respond to the exigencies of experience. Thus, expression "n'est pas seulement métamorphose au sens des contes de fées-miracle, magie, création absolue dans une solitude agressive, - elle est aussi réponse à ce que le monde, le passé, les oeuvres faites demandaient." ("Le Langage Indirect," p. 73.)

And indeed, of what else could the philosopher and the novelist speak than of their own encounters with the world?

In the creation of a meaning which is unique and authentic, coherent deformation gives rise to a style. "Un style est une certaine manière de traiter les situations que j'identifie ou que je comprends dans un individu ou chez un écrivain..."⁸⁸ The style of the writer is just his unique and original manner of appropriating experience in language. To go back to our analogy with perception, the thing we see both imposes meaning and has meaning imposed upon it relative to the intentions of the subject. Style in linguistic activity is the result of a similar process. Philosophers and novelists, in their effort to express the silent world of experience, are obliged to come to terms with the meaning which inheres in and which they give to that experience and to formulate that experience anew in language. It is this effort which makes style possible.

As contacts with the world of pre-linguistic experience, philosophy and literature do not waver in their attempt to bring that experience to expression. It is to the things themselves or to experience itself that philosophy and literature must go if they are to say something meaningful. Philosophy and literature are nothing but an attempt to relate to a world of being which transcends their own and which founds

88 PP, p. 378.

their existence. They are both manners of making present a world which surpasses them.

Sedimentation

What distinguishes philosophy and literature from extra-linguistic expression, according to Merleau-Ponty, is that linguistic expression is sedimented. "Ce qui est vrai seulement - et justifie la situation particulière que l'on fait d'ordinaire au langage - c'est que seule de toutes les opérations expressives, la parole est capable de se sédimenter et de constituer un acquis intersubjectif."⁸⁹ What is written is sedimented in history. Each written work can be seen from the point of view of something said and complete which is situated in its history, be it philosophic, literary or other, because it responds to other works in that history. Sedimentation takes place when the writer takes up this history and consciously integrates it into his work. Sedimentation is possible because each writer consciously assumes the history of his mode of expression be it philosophic or literary. The result of this assumption is the sedimented work as a meaningful endeavour which is related to other texts in the attempt of the writer to go beyond them. Sedimentation, as an intersubjective acquisition, is revealed in the activity of the writer who contains the history

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 221.

of philosophy or literature in his work and who assumes it by endeavouring to surpass it.

The writer sees himself as aiming at an experience which has already found expression in other works. He can therefore not remain indifferent to what has been said; he must see his work as situated within a larger historical context. Writers, therefore, attempt to go beyond what has been said in order to reach a more truthful interpretation of experience. The history of the philosopher's and the novelist's particular mode of expression is always, "sinon au centre de leur conscience, du moins à l'horizon de leur travail."⁹⁰

In attempting to surpass the truth sedimented in history, the writer aims at achieving a final truth as the limit of his endeavours. Thus, "la parole installe en nous l'idée de vérité comme limite présomptive de son effort."⁹¹ Linguistic activity makes its own history manifest by referring to it and attempting to create something newer and truer than it. "Sedimentation is the ground for the attempt of the speaker to obtain a truth which would put an end to all

90 "Le Langage Indirect," p. 76.

91 PP, p. 221. The philosopher's goal of attaining a final truth is neither absurd nor self-defeating, however. Truth, not as final but as progressive or approximative, can only be attained in the desire for final truth as the impossible possible. Merleau-Ponty seems to be saying, therefore, that the desire for ultimate or final truth is a pre-condition for any truth whatsoever.

further speaking."⁹² While this truth can never be attained in language, the goal of attaining a final truth is always intended in philosophy and literature.

By referring to past works in his history, the writer contains the past in his work. But the past is there as an acquisition, that is, as something already understood and assimilated. The writer must surpass the truth found in history and to do this, he must find new expressions for experience. Language is the "présomption d'une accumulation totale."⁹³ The philosopher and the novelist try to go beyond the already existing signs to trace out a new meaning which would exhaust the meaning of the things they intend. They do this not by forgetting their past, but by reflecting on it and by pointing to it in their works.

Merleau-Ponty claims that such sedimentation does not take place in expressions which are not linguistic. But his distinction between linguistic activity and other kinds of expressive activity is problematic. For in what sense is the painter, the film-maker or the musician unconscious of his past? Many modern films, for example, make explicit reference to or take quotations from other films. They

92 Ralph Calistro, Toward a Philosophy of Philosophical Language: Language and Philosophy in the Thought of Merleau-Ponty, (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Ottawa, 1978.) p. 120.

93 "Le Langage Indirect," p. 102.

contain these references in their work and attempt to rework what has been done in order to create a new expression of experience. Woody Allen's film, "Manhattan," for example, makes reference to the work of Bergman, integrating the Bergmanian view of the world into the film while making an effort to say something new about contemporary society. The work of Jackson Pollock, Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning would not have been possible without the work of the surrealists whose vision these painters attempted to assimilate and surpass. Artists assume the history of their art in their own way, that is, pictorially and musically. To say this, however, is not to say that they do not assume it at all.

The artist has the sense of being a part of history. His efforts are not made in isolation from what has gone before. Cézanne, for example, consciously rejected the Impressionists' vision of the world as a portrait of movement and change. He drew upon the work of Manet and made explicit reference to him in works such as "Christ in Limbo." Artists are concerned with the history of their own particular art form. Indeed, if they were not, one wonders whether histories of art would be possible.

Against Merleau-Ponty's claims about extra-linguistic expressive activity, we can also say that artists aim at transforming a single and intersubjective world into art.

This world is the world of experience which has already found expression in other works of art. Whether they try to accurately come to terms with this world by means of a theory of proportions of scientific perspective, or reject the idea that the world can be objectified, as Merleau-Ponty believed that modern artists did, their work is nevertheless an attempt to express - or to reject the expression of - that single world which they share with all other subjects. There is no sense in which each artist has "un nouveau monde à délivrer."⁹⁴ Indeed, it is surprising that Merleau-Ponty made such claims for he also claimed that modern art speaks of "une négation ou d'un refus du monde."⁹⁵ Modern artists did not refuse their own individual worlds, they negated or refused that single world which writers and other artists intended before them as an objectifiable world. Artists, like writers, are therefore concerned with coming to terms with an experience which they share with all other artists, and indeed, with all other subjects and which, because they share it with other artists, they must attempt to say something newer and truer about.

The effort of artists to surpass what has been done before them is analogous to the effort of writers to reach a final truth about things. Painting, music and film try to

94 PP, p. 221. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty seems to deny this in subsequent work. See "Le Langage Indirect," p. 76.

95 "Le Langage Indirect," p. 70.

to be as true to their experience of the world as possible. Each art form tries to assimilate its past and move towards a new expression of the world which is either a recognition or a denial of past expressions of it, and to say something newer and truer about it. Cézanne did not only agonise over a presentation of his own individual world, he agonised over a true portrayal of the world of all subjects and he claimed for his paintings an accession to the truth of vision or seeing. While the truth intended in painting, music or film is not conceptual, it is truth in the sense that it attempts to come to terms with the world in a way which is at once original and accurate. Thus, sedimentation in forms of expression other than the linguistic one, while differing from the sedimentation found in linguistic expression in the sense that these other forms of expression have their own histories and their own ways of appropriating those histories in expression, does take place.

Philosophy and Literature as Different Modes of Expression

We have discussed the general features of both philosophy and literature as expression or as linguistic activity. In this analysis, we have seen that the philosopher and the novelist set themselves the task of expressing the same world, the world of pre-personal being, and that this intention is what characterises them as metaphysical. We

have also examined some of the attributes of philosophy and literature as linguistic expression.

Philosophy and literature are no longer radically different activities. Their goals and the means they use to achieve them are virtually the same. Philosophy therefore loses the privileged position it once had with respect to literature. It cannot claim a separate domain of investigation or special advantages because of a distinct method. It and literature are both descriptive, and no one form of description can be said to have priority. Thus,

In all directions, and in art too, philosophy loses its most certain autonomy. Confusion of genres and the emotional vibrato of doctrines supplant the specificity of doctrines and the lucidity of mastery. Everywhere philosophy ceases to be quite free of literature and every literature dedicates itself to a philosophy. 96

Despite this confusion between philosophy and literature, however, Merleau-Ponty believed it was possible to distinguish the two. In "Le Roman et la Métaphysique," for example, he speaks of philosophy and literature as different expressions. In several other works as well, he attempts to differentiate between them, although he does not make these distinctions precise. We shall examine some of the differences between philosophy and literature as

96 Raymond Bayer, "Recent Esthetic Thought in France," in Philosophic Thought in France and the United States: Essays Representing Major Trends in Contemporary French and American Philosophy, 2nd ed., Marvin Farber, ed., (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1968.) p. 268.

suggested by Merleau-Ponty with a view to making these distinctions clearer and to elaborating upon them.

One of the more important distinctions between philosophy and literature involves the radical attempt of philosophy to come to terms with experience.

What is crucial for philosophy... is to reintegrate itself into experience. The way for philosophy to reintegrate itself into experience is either to describe or understand or to disappear altogether. 97

The philosopher cannot remain content with a conceptual description of experience. He must continually leave the ideal world of concepts and return to facticity. It is not simply by seizing on an immanent object that the philosopher can express pre-personal being. Philosophers must go beyond their reflective experience in order to bring pre-reflective experience to expression. This task is not a simple one. It is one in which the reflective subject must also reflect on the possibility of expressing the pre-personal world for, if his goal is to retrieve the world by means of language, the philosopher must call language into question as a means for this retrieval.

The philosopher must consider whether it is possible to come to terms with experience by means of language. In his attempt to express experience, he must realise that a

97 Hugh J. Silverman, "Merleau-Ponty's Human Ambiguity," in Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology 10, no. 1, (January 1979) p. 29.

genuine faithfulness in the form of an adequate rendering of experience is not possible in language, but rather, in a return to that experience as lived. If he returned to lived experience, however, there would be no more philosophy. The philosopher confronts a dilemma in the act of retrieving the world. He can set himself the impossible task of attaining that perfect transparency of language where the sign allows experience, in its fullness, to show through. Or he can return to pre-linguistic experience, thus contributing to the demise of philosophy. This dilemma defines the situation of a philosophy which is truly radical. It therefore characterises metaphysical philosophy.

The philosopher must never forget that reflection is a constituted phenomenon with its roots in the pre-personal world and that, as such, any description he gives of experience is necessarily incomplete. He must realise, in the very act of aiming at truth, that definitive statements about experience are not possible and that his investigation of it is necessarily one-sided and must remain open-ended. In other words, in order to "overcome" the problems connected with philosophic expression, the philosopher must constantly return to the lived world and he must make explicit the incompleteness of philosophic expression. Philosophy "ne doit pas se tenir pour acquise dans ce qu'elle a pu dire de vrai... elle est une expérience renouvelée de son propre

commencement,... elle consiste tout entière à décrire ce commencement... enfin... la réflexion radicale est conscience de son propre dépendance à l'égard d'une vie irréflechie qui est sa situation initiale, constante et finale."⁹⁸

In literature, on the other hand, "l'écrivain ne peut-il avoir le sentiment d'atteindre les choses mêmes que par l'usage du langage et non au-delà du langage."⁹⁹

The novelist considers language as an instrument which is sufficient for coming to terms with the world. He does not reflect upon experience as that which makes language possible and, consequently, does not see himself as involved in a radical project. The philosopher questions the possibility of expressing experience in language. He makes explicit the poverty of philosophic expression with respect to the experience it expresses. The novelist, on the other hand, is content to remain within the sphere of language and does not point to experience as to the completion of his work. Novelists question the possibility of expressing the world only in the context of speaking or of transforming our experience into words. In so doing, they affirm the possibility of expressing experience. Merleau-Ponty makes these points in his introduction to Signes. Philosophy

98 PP, p. ix.

99 "Le Langage Indirect," p. 103.

cherche le contact de l'être brut, et s'instruit aussi bien auprès de ceux qui ne l'ont jamais quitté. Simplement tandis que la littérature, l'art, l'exercice de la vie, se faisant avec les choses mêmes, le sensible même, les êtres mêmes peuvent, sauf à leurs limites extrêmes, avoir et donner l'illusion de demeurer dans l'habituel et le constitué, la philosophie qui peint sans couleurs, en noir et blanc, comme les tailles-douces, ne nous laisse pas ignorer l'étrangeté du monde, que les hommes affrontent aussi bien et mieux qu'elle, mais comme dans un demi-silence. 100

Because the novelist considers words as sufficient for an expression of our experience, the novel can, to a certain extent, be seen as autonomous to the sphere of being it intends. The metaphysical novelist intends experience as the source of meaning and as the object of his descriptions, but his account of it is divorced from our pre-personal experience in that it is established in language and does not attempt to go beyond language. The novel is, in part, a self-sufficient world in the sense that it stands apart from experience as an ideal description of it and does not renew itself in facticity as does philosophy. The novel inhabits an ideal world because the novelist uses words as a verbal substitute for the meaning (sens) of our perceptual experience. The philosopher, on the other hand, cannot do this without misunderstanding his own activity.

A second difference between philosophy and literature can be seen in the fact that the philosopher has as

100 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Signes, (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1960.) p. 31.

his goal a total recuperation of the pre-personal world in language.

Philosophy then not only crowns but saves all other enterprises of human expression. The philosopher would fulfill the original voeu of culture itself, which is already latent in the primordial faith that made human perception human and which is brought to full consciousness in language, this is the voeu d'une récupération totale du monde, the effort to have all experience make sense. 101

It is only the philosopher who attempts a total recuperation of perceptual experience in language. The philosopher endeavours to arrive at a comprehensive and complete expression of experience which would put an end to all descriptions of it.¹⁰² He must therefore try to come to terms with our experience as perceptual subjects as a whole. His effort is directed towards attaining that description of experience which would exhaustively qualify it. The philosopher attempts to describe those features of pre-personal existence which are necessary for it and which qualify it essentially.

The novelist, on the other hand, describes only certain features of our pre-personal experience. His recuperation of the world in language is thus only partial. He does not attempt an exhaustive account of experience, nor is he interested in achieving an essential characterisation of it,

101 Thomas Langan, Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Reason, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966.) p. 58.

102 The difference between a récupération totale and an accumulation totale such as is found in sedimentation is that in an accumulation totale what is aimed at is not a total accumulation of the whole field of experience but only of the particular things found in experience.

though he may describe some aspects of experience which are typical or essential to it. The problem of the novelist is to describe "un aspect [emphasis mine] de notre expérience métaphysique qui ne peut se manifester autrement: son caractère subjectif, singulier, dramatique et aussi son ambigüité."¹⁰³ The novelist deals with a particular character's lived experience. Although he may make generalisations about it, he does not attempt to qualify it essentially. The novelist concentrates only on certain features of his character's experience to the exclusion of other aspects which may be equally necessary to the understanding of the character's perceptual experience but which are not necessary for a literary description of that particular character.

In this sense too, the novel stands apart from our experience as an ideal description of it. The novelist is not concerned with the totality of experience, but only with certain features of it. Thus;

The very production of a work of art is possible only through concentrating upon a section of the screen of ordinary perception. The act of framing, of literally surrounding a canvas with sides of wood or metal, is the astonishing sorcery of the art apprentice. To frame a picture is to separate a part of experience from its context.... To create, then, is to separate, to exclude, to deny a whole by intending a fraction of that whole. 104

103 Simone de Beauvoir, L'Existentialisme et la Sagesse des Nations, (Paris: Les Editions Nagel, 1948.) p. 119.

104 Maurice Natanson, Literature, Philosophy and the Social Sciences: Essays in Existentialism and Phenomenology, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962.) p. 81.

The experience which the novel frames is at least formally autonomous with respect to the experience intended by the framer. While the metaphysical novelist always intends pre-personal experience, according to Merleau-Ponty, his description of it is always partial and is contained within a structure, the novel, which has its own formal unity. It has often been noted that the order and unity of a novel do not follow the order and unity of real existence. In a particular literary description, we leap from one day to another, from one context to another, often in the space of only a few sentences. The novelist imposes his own order and unity on the events he describes. This is because his depiction of experience, as a partial description of it, is integrated into a context, that of the novel, which imposes its own structures on that experience.

In the act of writing, the novelist remains content with remaining within the sphere of language and does not attempt a radical conquering of facticity. The autonomy of the novel with respect to experience can be explained by the fact that the novelist does not aim at the totality of our experience, but describes only certain features of experience which he orders and unifies by the use of certain literary devices and places in the context of the novel as a world with its own structures. Because, for the novelist, words are sufficient for an expression of experience, their arrangement can be directed by the novel itself as a linguistic

phenomenon with its own rules and techniques. Unlike the philosopher, whose work must reflect experience as faithfully as possible, the novelist can take experience as a starting point for a description which may be faithful more to literary forms and rules than to the actual structure of experience.

A third distinction between philosophy and literature is revealed in the fact that while metaphysical philosophy and literature both make the pre-personal world the explicit theme of their investigations, the philosopher is concerned with arriving at generalisations or abstractions which, in their universality, will approximate the world he intends. This is not to say that, according to Merleau-Ponty, the philosopher considers concepts to be the end result of his philosophic activity. It is merely to point out that concepts serve an important role in philosophy as the means for intending the pre-linguistic world. The philosopher uses concepts as the necessary instruments for expressing pre-personal experience in language, as a means rather than as an end. Merleau-Ponty writes, "La nécessité de passer par les essences ne signifie pas que la philosophie les prenne pour objet, mais au contraire que notre existence est trop étroitement prise dans le monde pour se connaître comme telle au moment où elle s'y jette, et qu'elle a besoin du champ de l'idéalité pour connaître et conquérir sa facticité."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ PP, p. ix.

In the Phénoménologie de la Perception, Merleau-Ponty uses the concepts of freedom, temporality, spatiality, sexuality and perceptivity as aids to understanding pre-personal experience. The novelist, on the other hand, would eschew such concepts in favour of ideas which are never explicitly expressed. For example, many of Sartre's novel deal with the notion of freedom, yet this notion is never stated as the explicit theme of his novels. Sartre aimed at portraying freedom by means of a description of experiences in which freedom manifests itself. He "speaks" of freedom as the characters reveal it to us in their gestures, speech and actions. Thus, "La fonction du romancier n'est pas de thématiser ces idées, elle est de les faire exister devant nous à la manière des choses. Ce n'est pas le rôle de Stendhal de discourir sur la subjectivité, il lui suffit de la rendre présente."¹⁰⁶

The novelist's ideas are, in this sense, concrete. They are never explicitly stated but are made manifest in a description of the behaviour and personality of the characters, in the events which these characters experience and in dialogue. Merleau-Ponty's comment about the novelist making ideas present is very revealing as a description of this feature of the novel. He means that ideas in literature are found in the description of experience itself. They are not made the explicit theme or subject of the novel, rather, the ex-

106 "Le Roman et la Métaphysique," pp. 51-2.

perience as it is related in the novel, with its particular significations and context becomes, in reading, endowed with another signification or idea. Events and characters disclose ideas as the result of the singular arrangement of words which the author dictates.

Dans un tableau ou dans un morceau de musique, l'idée ne peut pas se communiquer autrement que par le déploiement des couleurs et des sons Il n'en va pas autrement d'un poème ou d'un roman, bien qu'ils soient faits de mots. Il est assez connu qu'un poème, s'il comporte une première signification, traduisible en prose, mène dans l'esprit du lecteur une seconde existence qui le définit comme poème. 107

A metaphysical philosophy also differs from a metaphysical literature in another important respect which Merleau-Ponty did not describe. In his presentation of experience, the novelist often invents or imagines experiences which might take place and characters which might exist. The novel can thus be seen as invention or as an imaginative expression of experience. The novelist's world does not always reflect the actual world of experience as intended by the novelist. The novelist can invent a world of experience which is related to the original one but which is detached from this world in the sense that the novel's world is, in a certain measure, forged by the imagination of the novelist. The plot and characters in a novel are invented by the novelist as a response to his experience of the world, but they are, nonetheless,

invented or imagined. One must therefore consider the novel as an imaginative expression of experience instead of seeing it as Merleau-Ponty seems to do, as a simple expression of that experience.

The novelist invents meanings for experience which may not actually be contained in it. Although he depends on experience as the matter for the creation of meaning, he imagines meanings for experience which are only virtual or possible. The novelist, therefore, intends not only actual experience, but also virtual experience which is contained in actual experience as one of its possibilities. It is this intention of virtual experience which accounts for the imaginative character of the novel. The novelist makes imaginative leaps from intended experience as actual experience to the virtual experience suggested by it. In this way, he describes a world which is not different from the perceptual world but which is not bounded by our actual perceptual experience. He describes the world both in its virtuality and in its actuality, referring both to our actual and our virtual experience of it. He does not restrict himself to describing experience as given, but invents from this experience a world which might exist, which can exist or which could have existed.

The differences between philosophy and literature can be summed up in the statement that philosophy has a better or more faithful grasp of our perceptual experience. This is

because philosophy is more "truthful" in the sense that it recognises itself as a mediate description of immediate experience and attempts to overcome the problems involved in such a description by renewing itself in experience and by making explicit its inadequate grasp of that experience. Philosophy is also more comprehensive than literature in that it attempts a total recuperation of perceptual experience in concepts by means of which it attempts to universalise that experience. Further, the philosopher "sticks to the facts." While he may, in order to understand experience, subject it to "free variations of the imagination," it is our actual perceptual experience alone which he thereby attempts to express. His expression of experience is not imaginative in the sense that he refers all his extensions of experience by means of the imagination back to our actual perceptual experience of the world.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have dealt primarily with philosophy and literature as activities, that is, not with philosophy and literature per se, but with philosophic and literary activity. It must be remembered that, for Merleau-Ponty, the activity of writing (or speaking) is primary. What is written derives its meaning from a subject who, in intentionally-directed linguistic activity, aims at the pre-personal world. Thus, "culture is but the sedimentation and accumula-

tion of man's past acts of signification."¹⁰⁸ If the significance of philosophy and literature is to be fully understood, we must refer back to the particular literary or philosophic context and situation of the writer whose activity was, in some measure, a response to that context and situation.

Thus, if we seek to comprehend philosophy and literature, we must first see them as the activities of particular subjects within the world who responded to the problems posed by the particular context in which they were situated. This is not to suggest, however, that we must come to terms with the intention of the writer. The intention of the writer is not, for Merleau-Ponty, an idea existing in consciousness which stands apart from the act of writing. It is in that very transcendence of the body-subject towards the world which is the writing itself. We must therefore see what is written not in light of some pre-existing intention of the writer but of the act of writing itself or of that original and authentic meaning-producing activity by means of which the subject projected himself into the world.

Metaphysics, as we have described it so far, is found in and must be seen in the light of philosophic and literary activity. In this activity, the philosopher and the novelist intend that pre-linguistic world which both constitutes them as activities and is the object of their investigation. Their

¹⁰⁸ Vernon Gras, ed., European Literary Theory and Practice: From Existential Phenomenology to Structuralism, (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1973.) p. 12.

grasp of this world is limited given the fact that the meaning (sens) in experience is never fully captured in language and that their expression of this experience is, in a certain sense, historically-conditioned. Metaphysics is both a contact with the meaning given in experience and a creation of new meaning in the signs which it uses to describe experience. Metaphysics is the effort made by the situated subject both to come to terms with history as sedimented and to aim at a truth which would put an end to it. Though philosophy, as metaphysical, attempts a total recuperation of experience as opposed to the partial account of experience given in the novel, both seek the truth in experience. Literature does this not only by intending the actual world of experience but also by intending experience in its virtuality. Philosophy and literature can thus no longer be seen as radically separate activities for "if truth is part of existence itself and not the distillation of some complex scientific and logical apparatus, then it is accessible to all of us; it becomes PAR EXCELLENCE the domain of literature."¹⁰⁹

In our next chapter, we shall "test" Merleau-Ponty's thesis about literature becoming more metaphysical in the twentieth century by considering three modern novels. If Merleau-Ponty is correct, his theory would provide a phenomenology of contemporary literature and thus a description of some of the essential features of it.

¹⁰⁹ Everett W. Knight, Literature Considered as Philosophy: The French Example, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957.) p. xiv.

Chapter III: Is there a metaphysical literature?

Introduction

Modern literature can, according to Merleau-Ponty, be seen as a response to the particular problem raised within the context of the modern literary situation. The problem to which it is a response is not different from the problem of modern thought in general, namely, how to come to terms with experience without relying on a prior set of principles or pre-established theories about experience. For the contemporary metaphysical novelist, it is a question of making present through description what lies in the obscure field of perceptual experience. It is not up to him to judge or to manipulate this experience in such a way as to give us an explanation of it. He must guide the reader to an understanding of experience, not by making judgments about it, but by depicting it in description as faithfully as possible. The modern novelist in general, "n'a pas pour rôle d'exposer des idées ou même d'analyser des caractères, mais de présenter un événement interhumain, de le faire mûrir et éclater sans commentaire idéologique."¹¹⁰ All modern literature is, for Merleau-Ponty, an attempt at resolving the problems connected with a non-objective and non-explicative expression of the world and the people in it because it endeavours to respond to the problems posed in the modern literary situation or

110. PP, p. 177.

context. Metaphysical literature is also a response to the problem posed in the contemporary literary context, although not all responses to the problem are metaphysical.

As a response to the problem raised within the contemporary literary context, the metaphysical novelist will not only attempt to solve the problem, he will also attempt to give a newer or more original answer to it; he will attempt to say what has not yet been said. Contemporary literature must therefore be seen in the light of its literary-historical context for two reasons. Firstly, the modern novelist creates meaning in response to the problem posed within that context and secondly, he takes into account the other responses given in that context. Thus both the unity and diversity of modern literature can be explicated. Novelists attempt to solve a problem which is raised within their own particular literary-historical context and they attempt to solve it in a new way.

Metaphysical literature is not only characterised as a response to the problem posed within the contemporary literary context, it is primarily defined as an intending of the world of our perceptual experience in language. Our experience in this world is fundamentally the pre-reflective and pre-linguistic experience of the body-subject. Metaphysical literature will thus present its characters from the point of view of their pre-conceptual and subjective experience of the world since neither the world nor the individuals in it can be seen from an objective stand-point which would make

the subject an object for thought or view things without considering the subject for whom things exist. The metaphysical novelist will thus describe the world from the point of view of the subject who experiences it and, correlatively, portray the subject in relation to the world he inhabits.

The world is given to the subject in his activity or in the intentionally-directed relations of the subject with the world. It is the world seen from a particular perspective and at a particular point in time. For this reason, the experience of the novelist's characters will not be one for which an ultimate meaning can be found. In the metaphysical novel, solutions and resolutions, meanings and truths will never be final. They will always be related to the experience of the character for whom and for whom alone they are meanings. The novelist will therefore no longer claim to have discovered a final truth or meaning in experience, rather, meaning will be seen in relation to the subject who creates it.

The meaning which the character in a novel gives to events will therefore not be presented as an objective meaning but will be related to the context in which that meaning arose. Similarly, the description of the activity of the subject will not be justified or judged by a prior set of moral principles which would objectively qualify his actions. The subject's activity must be understood by relating it to the situation in which it takes place, a situation for which he is not absolutely responsible.

Il n'y a pas d'innocence absolue, et, pour la même raison, pas de culpabilité absolue. Toute action répond à une situation de fait que nous n'avons pas entièrement choisie et dont, en ce sens, nous ne sommes pas absolument responsables. 111

Man is responsible for his actions only to the extent that he creates his own situations within the world. But man does not always entirely create for himself the situations in which he finds himself. Man's actions are therefore not things for which he can be praised or blamed according to pre-established moral principles but things that must be judged in the light of a situation of which he is not the sole creator.

Another reason why a prior set of moral principles cannot be used to judge man's actions is because these principles presuppose experience and are derived from it. Thus, the ethical norms for experience are in experience itself. The description of the activity of the body-subject will not, therefore, include a moralistic interpretation of the subject's activity since the subject's activity itself is the basis for moral principles. Thus our activity is such that no absolute moral judgments can be made about it since man is not entirely responsible for the situations in which he finds himself and since moral principles are derived from experience and presuppose it.

The novelist will no longer claim to paint a total picture of the world. The characters whose experience he des-

111 "Le Roman et la Métaphysique," p. 75.

cribes will be portrayed as representing a particular point of view on the world as it is experienced by them. The world will be depicted as the world for the subject, just as the subject will be seen in light of his relation to the world. Thus, just as the novel will not give any ultimate meaning or significance to the world, neither will it attempt to portray the world in a way which would lay claim to being objectively comprehensive. The world portrayed in the novel will be A world, that is, it will represent the world as it is given to the characters.

The characters in the metaphysical novel will not be depicted as fully determinate psycho-physical objects. This is because the experience of the subject is always in flux, the subject never has a total possession of himself. His individuality as a unique manner of existing can only be portrayed within the context of his experiences and his ways of living them which is constantly being modified by each new experience. The individuality of the subject as meaning (sens) is revealed as his experience unfolds and is nothing apart from his way of relating to the world in experience.

A l'insurmontable généralité de la conscience, aucune particularité ne peut ... être attachée, à ce pouvoir démesuré d'évasion aucune limite imposée. Pour que quelque chose du dehors pût me déterminer (aux deux sens du mot), il faudrait que je fusse une chose. 112

Thus, the characters in a novel will not be presented as fully determinate or determinable entities but as beings who continually define and redefine themselves in particular situations and whose personalities or characters are never exhausted in any particular situation.

The experience of the subject as described in the novel will not exclude an account of the subject's reflective experience of the world. Pre-personal existence is also foundational and, in the metaphysical novel, it will suffice that it is implicated in a description of the subject's reflective grasp of experience. This is effectively what happens in *L'Invitée*, the novel against which Merleau-Ponty tests his thesis in "Le Roman et la Métaphysique." One of the central characters, Françoise, is portrayed as having "une confiance absolue dans le langage et dans les décisions rationnelles."¹¹³ Her experience on the reflective level comes into conflict with her lived experience of the other and she cannot ignore this latter experience. The conflict which arises between these two dimensions of experience is one of the themes of the book. Simone de Beauvoir shows how the reflective subject cannot neglect the experience of the other as it is lived on the pre-personal level and the evidence which it gives us of the independent existence of the other. The other is not simply for me, nor is he an object; he exists independently as a subject. Reflective

¹¹³ "Le Roman et la Métaphysique," p. 79.

experience can thus be portrayed in metaphysical literature but not in and for itself. It must be shown in relation to pre-personal experience since it is founded on that experience and presupposes it. Thus, "La réflexion ne saisit... son sens plein que si elle mentionne le fonds irréfléchi qu'elle pré-suppose, dont elle profite, et qui constitue pour elle comme un passé original, un passé qui n'a jamais été présent."¹¹⁴

We have already noted that the metaphysical novelist will not attempt to explain our experience of the world since he eschews all theoretical bases for explanation. He will endeavour to describe experience and, in this description, will rediscover its fundamental strangeness. The metaphysical novelist will present experience to us with none of the paradoxes removed. He will reveal the experience we have of these paradoxes "dans toutes les situations de l'histoire personnelle et collective, - et des actions qui, les assumant, les transforment en raison."¹¹⁵ Metaphysical literature will restore to experience its ambiguity. In this attempt lies its metaphysical significance since its description goes beyond a physical or a causal account of experience and treats man as consciousness and freedom. The metaphysical dimension of experience lies beyond the physical and the explicable. The metaphysical novelist intends this experience and attempts to bring it to expression.

¹¹⁴ PP, p. 280.

¹¹⁵ "Le Métaphysique dans l'Homme," p. 191.

Three Modern Novels

To test Merleau-Ponty's thesis as to whether literature has become metaphysical in the twentieth century, we have chosen three novels which we will examine in the light of this thesis. These novels are Die Blechtrommel, by Günter Grass; Le Planétarium by Nathalie Sarraute and Herzog by Saul Bellow. We have chosen them on the basis of their being written by three authors who are considered by critics and commentators to have produced works that are the most representative of the work being done in Germany, France and the United States respectively since 1945. Because they are considered to be the most representative, an analysis of the works of these authors will allow for certain generalisations to be made concerning the metaphysical character of literature in the last half of the twentieth century, though of course, we shall refrain from making sweeping claims about it.

DIE BLECHTROMMEL

Our experience of the world is full of ambiguities and paradoxes. It is not something which can simply be explained; it must first be described and understood with its paradoxes and ambiguities. In his novel, Die Blechtrommel, Günter Grass is concerned with describing precisely this character of our existence. He is interested in those aspects of experience which are ambiguous and, for this reasons, are incapable of being explained. Man's being is not, for Grass, solely physical; it is most fundamentally revealed in an experience which

cannot be accounted for by physical explanations. Grass presents the reader with a view of experience which is mythical, irrational, marvelous and miraculous. In this sense, Grass captures the metaphysical character of experience, an experience which gives evidence of being something more than objectively explicable.

The experience described in this novel is presented entirely as it is lived by the central character, Oskar. Oskar's complaint throughout the novel is that adults are continually searching for an explanation for what happens in experience. His deformities, the stunting of his growth, were explained by adults as the result of a fall from the cellar stairs in which he injured his head. Oskar, however, is sceptical of such physical explanations.

In these explanations we find man's understandable desire to find physical justification for all alleged miracles. Oskar must admit that he too examines all alleged miracles with the utmost care before discarding them as irresponsible hokum. 116

Oskar understands the need of adults to explain and clarify experience. Yet man's experience is not, for him, something for which physical explanations can always be found. Oskar's deformity is not solely the result of physical causes. It was the result of a choice not to grow, and, implicitly, to accept such explanations. His physical stature represents

116 Günter Grass, The Tin Drum, trans., Ralph Manheim, (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1961.) p. 398.

not only "freedom-from moral convention"¹¹⁷ on the part of Grass and artists in general; it also represents a rejection of "scientific" thinking in general. His deformity is a physical reminder that there are things in the world that cannot be explained in the sense that it attests to it. It is a direct response to a world in which adults or reflective subjects seek justification and clarification and is, as such, evidence of the impotency of such explanations. Oskar refused to grow and this refusal is both a rejection of explanation and an affirmation of the inexplicable nature of experience.

In answer to the problem of how to render experience without explaining it, Grass describes the experience of Oskar. His description reveals Oskar's experience to be "childlike, curious, complex and immoral."¹¹⁸ In direct contrast to a world which could be explained, Oskar invents characters and events which defy such description by their very grotesqueness. The exaggeration in the novel can thus be seen as Oskar's and, by extension, Grass' refusal to surrender to reductive explanations or interpretations of experience. In the face of these, Grass presents us with an experience which is exaggerated perhaps, but which exaggeration only points to the fact that experience, any experience is something paradoxical and strange.

117 Michael Hamburger, From Prophecy to Exorcism: The Premises of Modern German Literature. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., Ltd., 1965.) p. 153.

118 The Tin Drum, p. 73.

Oskar's experience is described from Oskar's point of view alone. It is therefore Oskar's lived or subjective experience which is the subject of the novel. This experience is recounted by Oskar from his hospital bed in a mental word. Oskar is thus seen both from the point of view of his experience and from the point of view of remembering this experience in the hospital. Oskar uses his drum to effectuate the passage from his hospital bed to the past. He begins with the story of his grandparents and ends at the moment when he is arrested by the French police. But although his story seems to follow a chronological order, Oskar does not stick to recounting his life from one end to the other. With the aid of his drum, Oskar spends quite a bit of time with his mother and his grandmother before returning to his present in the hospital. His drum responds to his need to return to the past and, from time to time, he stops the chronological order of events to drum out the measure of a time which does not follow the one he has just finished describing. Die Blechtrommel is thus a description of past experience as it is relived in memory.

The past experience of Oskar is coloured by his memory which recreates the past, giving it new meaning or significance in relation to the present from which viewpoint the past is seen. In Oskar's description, one can see that "it

is mainly present or future events that affect a character's retrospective perception and so mobilise memories afresh, endowing them with new significance."¹¹⁹ In the chapter, "Good Friday Fare," for example, where Oskar's mother sees the horse's head crawling with eels, Oskar endows the scene with a new dramatic significance. It was this event which would lead to the death of his mother. Oskar now understands the significance of this event and can give to his description of it the added significant dimension which it later come to have for him.

If Oskar views the past in terms of the significance it has for him in the present, he also shows another aspect of lived experience, and that is the protentive and retentive functioning of consciousness. The experience which Oskar remembers is invested, in his recounting of it, with just these features of temporality. One example can be seen in Oskar's description of his friend Herbert's scars. Here, the protentive functioning of consciousness is most vividly and imaginatively portrayed.

But I might just as well put it the other way around and say that my first contact with those welts on my friend's broad back gave promise even then of acquaintance with, and temporary possession of, those short-lived indurations characteristic of women ready for love. Similarly the symbols on Herbert's back gave early promise of the ring finger, and before

¹¹⁹ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*, (Baltimore-London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1975.) p. 139.

Herbert's scars made promises, it was my drumsticks, from my third birthday on which promised scars, reproductive organs, and finally the ring finger. But I must go back still farther: before Oskar was even called Oskar, my umbilical cord, as I sat playing with it, promised successively drumsticks, Herbert's scars, the occasionally erupting craters of young and not so young women and finally, the ring finger. 120

For Merleau-Ponty, as we have already noted, each present moment reaffirms the presence of the entire past which it follows and anticipates the future which lies ahead of it. This characteristic of lived time is most effectively captured by Grass. Oskar's present both contains his past and promises things for the future. But not only does Grass describe the temporal functioning of consciousness, he also illustrates how memory functions to capture what is now past for us in the light of the significance it has for us in the present.

Oskar's experience, as related by Oskar in the course of remembering that experience, is described without moral judgments or explanations. The experience described reveals the pre-judgmental and pre-conceptual nature of perception. Several critics have commented on the amoral depiction of Oskar's experience. Oskar not only recounts an experience in which no judgments or explanations are made but, in his description of that experience, he does not seek to judge it in

terms of its moral propriety or impropriety.¹²¹ This aspect of Die Blechtrommel is also a feature of metaphysical literature in general. As Merleau-Ponty states, our freedom which is the basis for all morality

fonde en même temps un immoralisme absolu, puisqu'elle reste entière, en moi comme en autrui, après chaque faute, et qu'elle fait de nous des êtres neufs à chaque instant. Quelle conduite, quelles relations pourraient donc être préférables pour des libertés que rien ne peut mettre en danger? Qu'on insiste sur le conditionnement de notre existence ou au contraire sur notre absolue liberté, il n'y a pas de valeur intrinsèque et objective de nos actions... 122

Oskar does not and cannot make moral judgments for he does not belong to the world in which justification and moral principles have a place. Oskar has refused to participate in that reflection which would make the world explicable and judgable. By refusing to grow, Oskar refuses to judge and to explain the world; he refuses to see in the

121 An interpretation of Die Blechtrommel which sees in it a moral condemnation of Nazism can be refuted on the basis of the fact that Oskar's decision not to grow was taken before the rise of Nazism. His refusal not to grow is thus a refusal of the world of rational decision in general, a world of which Nazism is only a part. Oskar refused both worlds on the basis of their being incapable of understanding the human in man. Given our wider historical perspective, it is possible to see in Die Blechtrommel, not a condemnation of a particular society (ie. Nazi society), but of society in-general. Die Blechtrommel is a condemnation of Nazism, but only in the sense that what is condemned in Nazism are those aspects of it which are also features of all other societies.

122. "Le Roman et la Métaphysique," pp. 75-76.

world objectively and absolutely valid meanings.¹²³ He also affirms the existence of an experience which lies outside of judgment, explanation and reflective experience in general, a world about which no absolute moral judgments can be made.

The metaphysical significance of this novel lies in Grass' portrayal of a world for which explanations are impossible. Our experience as pre-reflective subjects takes place in a dimension of existence which cannot be explained by any theory. Grass reveals this experience to be at once marvelous and miraculous, paradoxical and strange. Oskar's world is a world in which perception, or Oskar's perceptive grasp of things is indeterminate in the sense of being pre-judgmental. It is a world in which Oskar is engaged in his activity without reflecting on it.

¹²³ Oskar seems to deny that there is any one meaning or truth to experience as evidenced in the following quote: Carefully weighing and comparing these promises,... I observed and listened to a moth that had flown into the room. Medium-sized and hairy, it darted between the two sixty-watt bulbs, casting shadows out of all proportion to its wing spread, which filled the room and everything in it with quivering motion. What impressed me most ... was ... the sound produced by the dialogue between moth and bulb: the moth chattered away as if in haste to unburden itself of its knowledge, as though it had no time for future colloquies with sources of light, as though this dialogue were its last confession: and as though, after the kind of absolution that light bulbs confer, there would be no further occasion for sin or folly. (*The Tin Drum*, pp. 40-1.) The moth here can be seen as man, and the light bulb as truth. Man is constantly, yet fruitlessly, looking for a final truth or meaning which he could give to experience. He will die trying to find that truth which he cannot attain. I own this insight to Paul Allman, a graduate student at the University of Waterloo, in a discussion I had with him in a Germanistik meeting at the University of Waterloo on March 15, 1980.

One commentator has described Die Blechtrömmel in this way: Grass

... had to adapt not only the broad expanse of his imagination but also his individual techniques... to a set of conditions that would reflect both the inner and outer world. The latter is rendered by a hero who has acted, who has lived in the world of events which he has observed and upon which he now comments in retrospect: as actor and chronicler of history. The former is projected by the perceiving, internalizing eye, which grasps events and objects in all their dimensions, which views, and in viewing deforms, the world it encounters and which renders a world... that exists in the insecure flux, as well as in the perennial present, of immediate perception. 124

Grass presents the reader with the lived experience of Oskar, an experience which is not judged by Oskar either in his living of it or in his reflection upon it. He presents this experience from the point of view of Oskar's own memories of it. Oskar, the perpetual three year old drummer, both lives and drums out the distance which separates his experience as a pre-reflective, amoral, perceiving subject, from the experience of the adults who inhabit a grown-up world which seeks explanation and clarification. Oskar's world is the world of his own pre-reflective ego and his experience is the immediate experience of the je anonyme.

HERZOG

In Saul Bellow's Herzog, we find another example of a description of the temporal functioning of consciousness. In

124 A. Leslie Willson, ed., A Günter Grass Symposium, (Austin-London: The University of Texas Press, 1973.) p. 48.

this case, however, this description is made by the narrator. In this novel, "Bellow has managed to work out a form in which the illusion of the simultaneity of time - a blend of the past with the present-moving-into-the-future - is nicely maintained."¹²⁵ But, this is not the only aspect of lived existence which is featured in this novel. Bellow also captures the sexual dimension of our perceptual experience. In the recounting of Herzog's experience, the narrator continually refers to Herzog's sexuality which is diffused in all of his experience in the way he relates to the other characters.

Yet this description of lived experience, as related by the narrator, comes into conflict with the central character's own views on experience. Herzog is, at the beginning of the novel, primarily a reflective subject who seeks to come to terms with experience in reflection. "Late in Spring Herzog had been overcome by the need to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to clarify, to make amends."¹²⁶ The story of Herzog is the story of a reflective subject who cannot accept his own lived experience as it is given but must constantly question that experience in order to justify it, explain it and have it make sense. In this novel, Herzog's "ideal construction is held not only at the expense of perceiving reality but at the expense of lived ex-

¹²⁵ Irving Howe, ed., Herzog: Text and Criticism, (New York: The Viking Press, 1976.) p. 395.

¹²⁶ Saul Bellow, Herzog, (Markham, Ont.: Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 1976.) p. 2.

perience."¹²⁷ Herzog's lived experience is not accepted by Herzog himself as a reflective subject.

There is, therefore, contrast and conflict between the points of view, the narrator's and Herzog's, in the novel. Herzog cannot accept his experience and the evidence it gives; he feels the need to explain it in terms of models and principles. He constantly negates the evidence presented in pre-conceptual experience by trying to straighten out the ambiguities and paradoxes which are found in it. Herzog is in the grip of a compulsion to understand and the only way he feels he can do this is by explaining and by turning his experience into an object for thought. But, while Herzog optimistically proclaims the possibility of coming to terms with experience in reflection, his experience will, as the novel progresses, reveal itself to be something that cannot be grasped in this way.

Herzog is a man who has always tried to live according to principles. These principles supposedly guide his conduct and give him something in which to believe. Yet, as the story unfolds, Herzog's principles, his faith in reason, begin to desert him. Herzog begins to see the limits of his understanding and of his reason.

¹²⁷ John Jacob Clayton, Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man. (Bloomington, Ind.; Indiana University Press, 1974.) p. 79.

But can thought wake you from the dream of existence? Not if it becomes a second realm or confusion, another more complicated dream, the dream of the intellect, the delusion of total EXPLANATIONS.. 128

The more Herzog searches for explanations, the more he sees his own activity as the fruitless endeavour of a man "unreasonably" tied to reason and to the optimistic belief in the possibility of total explanation.

Herzog is also the story of a man in the process of searching for himself. One critic remarks, "Bellow attacks the self as strongly as does Sartre in Nausea. Both writers move in their novels towards a new idea of human life without selfhood."¹²⁹ The movement towards this new idea of a self is represented in this novel by Herzog's progressive attempt at self-understanding. Throughout the novel, Bellow "contrasts the concrete man to the ideal constructor and agrees that the ego is a created object defending the person from reality."¹³⁰ The search for the self is one of the central themes of the book. Herzog believes that he can, in the process of explaining, arrive at some form of self-awareness or self-understanding but, at least in the beginning, he does not reach his goal.

128 Herzog, p. 166.

129 Clayton, p. 115.

130 Ibid., p. 120.

As the novel progresses, Herzog's self-searching advances to the point where he can make some comments about what the self is. He realises that while man is "somehow more than his 'characteristics;' all the emotions, strivings, tastes and constructions which it pleases him to call 'My Life,'"¹³¹ he is not something which can ever be fully understood.

Herzog's reflective attempt to come to terms with experience begins as it ends with a description of Herzog's stay in the Berkshires. Herzog has finally seen through his attempt to rationalise and make sense of experience. Indeed, throughout the novel, Herzog describes his search for explanation as a weakness, a sickness or a compulsion. His endless letters, by means of which he tries to understand his experience, reveal both to the reader and, finally, to Herzog himself, a chaotic and confused mind that simply is lost in its own "explanations." Speaking to his friend Asphalter, Herzog remarks,

Take me, for instance. I've been writing letters helter skelter in all directions. More words. I go after reality with language. Perhaps I'd like to change it all into language, to force Madeleine and Gerbach to have a CONSCIENCE... And I've filled the world with letters to prevent their escape. I want them in human form, and so I conjure up a whole environment and catch them in the middle. I put my whole heart into these constructions. But they are constructions. 132

¹³¹ Herzog, p. 266.

¹³² Ibid., p. 272.

Herzog realises that he cannot explain his experience. Explanations are false because "human life is far more subtle than any of its models."¹³³ There are dimensions to experience which simply cannot be understood according to theories and models.

Herzog is searching for a self and for the "real" world or "reality." But what is reality for Herzog? It is something more than what his reality instructors show it to be. It is something more than sexuality conceived as the road to nirvana. Herzog finally discovers reality as "infinite forms of activity."¹³⁴ As he helps his daughter June into the car after his car accident, Herzog reflects, "Is this by chance the reality you've been looking for, Herzog, in your earnest Herzog way? Down in the ranks with other people - ordinary life?"¹³⁵

At this point in the novel, Herzog seems to reach some conclusions about experience. Neither the world nor the self can be constructed according to theoretical models. But where does this conclusion lead Herzog? One critic has described the ending of Herzog in this way: Herzog

starts to reacquaint himself with the ordinary world with deep gladness, learning new humility, new faith.... The curse of pointless thought is lifting and he is on the verge of a new health, stirred by an indefinite music within, 136

133 Ibid., p. 271.

134 Ibid., p. 278.

135 Ibid., p. 287.

136 Howe, p. 458.

Herzog has discovered his selfhood and the world in his own pre-conceptual experience of them. He returns to experience, not to explain it, but to live it. He states:

Luckily for me, I didn't have the means to get too far from our common life. I am glad of that. I mean to share with other human beings as far as possible and not to destroy my remaining years in the same way. Herzog felt a deep, dizzy eagerness to BEGIN. 137.

In the end, Herzog "had no messages for anyone. Nothing. Not a single word."¹³⁸

Herzog is both a description of ordinary human experience, particularly in its temporal and sexual modalities, and a depiction of a subject who lives this experience without being able to accept it reflectively. At the end of the novel, the difference between the narrator's view and that of Herzog dissolves. The narrator has described Herzog's experience as the experience of a subject grappling with the world, others and his self by means of explanation. When Herzog renounces explanation as a means for coming to terms with experience, he is no longer with odds with his pre-conceptual experience of reality. He accept its evidence and is content to live experience without using theories to understand it.

Thus, we see that this novel too has metaphysical significance. The self which Herzog seeks is not the reflective self, a personal self or a self that Herzog can construct

137 Herzog, p. 322.

138 Ibid., p. 341.

out of his explanations. It is the self of ordinary pre-conceptual experience, the self as lived in its relation with the world and others. Similarly, the world and other people cannot be explained. Herzog will attempt to share his life with others, to come to grips with the world in activity, instead of setting himself up against the world and others as a reflective subject. Bellow's answer to the problem of how to understand experience is that one must return to lived experience as a pre-reflective subject, a je anonyme. Experience must be lived before it can be explained or even described. As the novel ends, Herzog returns to experience for the answers to his problems concerning who he is and what the world and other people are.

LE PLANETARIUM

In Nathalie Sarraute's novel, Le Planétarium, we find an exemplary depiction of the pre-personal world in terms of the subject who inhabits it and the problems of intersubjectivity which arise in this world. For Merleau-Ponty, the subject of the pre-personal world is the je anonyme whose identity is part and parcel with its unique manner of existing and relating to the world and others as a corporeal and active subject. For Sarraute also, the subject of the pre-personal world is not a fully constituted self. The experience of this subject is one in which "tout était fluide, immense, sans contours. Tout bougeait à chaque instant.

Impossible de s'y reconnaître, de rien nommer, de rien classer. Impossible de rien juger."¹³⁹

All the characters Sarraute describes are depicted from the point of view of their pre-personal experience of the world and of others. As subjects, their subjectivity is just this "Moi fuyant, obstrué et dissimulé sous les enduits factices dont l'éducation, la vie en société, nos préjugés et nos lieux communs, l'ont à peu près couverts."¹⁴⁰ Nathalie Sarraute is not concerned with describing "le Je moral ou social... mais cet observateur secret, tenace, impitoyable... Ce Je n'a pas de nom."¹⁴¹ In Le Planétarium, several characters have a direct and reflective grasp of this pre-personal subject.. For Alain, it is "un petit quelque chose, quelque part, bien caché, dans un recoin bien fermé."¹⁴² For the other characters as well, the je anonyme is a recognised part of their existence as subjects. Nathalie Sarraute attempts to describe the pre-personal subject by describing its activity or what she calls "tropismes," the movements of the subject which are the incarnation of our feelings and intentions.

139 Nathalie Sarraute, Le Planétarium, (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1959.) p. 58.

140 Pierre de Boisdeffre, Où va le Roman? 2nd ed., (Paris: Editions Mondiales, 1972.) pp. 234-5.

141 Mimica Granaki and Yvon Belaval, Nathalie Sarraute, (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1965.) p. 55.

142 Le Planétarium, p. 35.

It is the body which permits us to recognise the je anonyme. When the body moves, the pre-personal subject expresses itself. The characters in the novel are identified by their behaviour, the way their bodies act and react, comport themselves towards others, speak and deal with objects. This is why Sarraute does not have to identify the characters in her novel by continually using their names. The character's identity is given with the way his body moves in the world.

This feature of Sarraute's novel is best illustrated in the two chapters dealing with the encounter of Bertha and Alain's father. The meeting is first seen from Bertha's point of view and subsequently, in the following chapter, from Alain's father's point of view. Each of these scenes is identifiable as representing a particular point of view not because Sarraute names the character whose point of view it is, but because she describes how the bodies are situated, act, and react. Her description portrays the attitudes of one body in relation to the other and their separate and distinct ways of acting towards each other. The reader must be alert to the peculiarities in each way of acting if he wishes to know who is speaking. On the pre-personal level of existence, we recognise the other as a style, a way of behaving. Sarraute captures this feature of our pre-personal experience well and obliges the reader to recognise it too.

The characters in the novel are described not only as pre-personal subjects, but also in terms of their inter-subjective relations with others. These relations are depicted both on the pre-personal level, as we have just shown, and also in terms of the reflective grasp one subject has of the other. It is in this latter relation where problems and conflicts arise for it is here where one subject attempts to objectify or to sublimate the other. The solitude of the characters, which their experience as reflective subjects imposes, is one of the themes of the book. For both Sarraute and Merleau-Ponty, our relations with others become difficult when we attempt to think about others. As reflective subjects, Sarraute's characters are ensconced in their own subjectivity over and against other subjects. In vain they try to overcome this conflict, but they never realise a harmonious co-existence with others except in their activity which allows them to live with others in a lesser degree of conflict and solitude.

The reflective grasp we have of others is well portrayed in Le Planétarium. Gisèle remarks upon it in her description of how she and her husband characterise other people.

Eux seuls, elle et lui, eux seuls possédaient ce pouvoir d'entrer chez les autres gens comme ils voulaient, de pénétrer sans effort la mince paroi que les autres essayaient de leur opposer, derrière laquelle les autres s'efforçaient de se cacher. 143

Of course it is not only Gisèle and Alain who judge other people, seeing them as fully determinate objects. There is a constant conflict between the characters in this novel because they objectify others in this way.

For example, when Bertha admits the workmen into her apartment to finish their renovations, she is aware of and fights the picture the workmen have of her. Gisèle too, fights this with Alain's father.

Il se penche en arrière, il plisse les paupières et la regarde. Un regard perçant et dur. Elle sait ce qu'il voit: elle sent son propre visage se figer sous ce regard. Une expression rusée, vorace apparaît, elle le sent, sur ses propres traits, dans ses yeux, elle a l'oeil fixe, d'un oiseau de proie, d'un petit vautour, toutes ses serres tendues... elle détourne la tête. 144

Sarraute reveals that aspect of intersubjectivity of which Merleau-Ponty speaks when interpreting L'Invitée.

It is in reflection that

... on surmonte, ou plutôt que l'on sublime, l'expérience de l'Autre. Tant qu'il ne s'agit que des choses, nous nous sauvons facilement de la transcendance. Celle d'autrui est plus résistante. Car si autrui existe, s'il est lui aussi une conscience, je dois consentir à n'être pour lui qu'un objet fini, déterminé, VISIBLE en un certain lieu du monde. S'il est conscience, il faut que je cesse de l'être. Or, comment pourrais-je oublier cette attestation intime de mon existence, ce contact de moi avec moi, plus sûr qu'aucun témoignage extérieur et condition préalable pour tous? Nous essayons donc de mettre en sommeil l'inquiétante existence d'autrui. 145

144 Ibid., p. 115.

145 "Le Roman et la Métaphysique," p. 58.

Sarraute's novel points to this conflict in her description of the intersubjective relations which we have with others on the reflective level of existence.

The metaphysical significance of this book lies in its presenting the reader with a portrayal of the pre-personal subject and of his pre-personal and reflective experience of others. As pre-personal existents, the characters in this novel are shown as corporeal beings whose identity as subjects is given in their way of relating to the world and others.

Le Planétarium also gives the reader a feeling for the way in which subjects in the personal and cultural world of reflection, come to grips with others in judgment, attempt to explain or sublimate the other or to objectively account for him. Nathalie Sarraute comes closer than either Grass or Bellow to showing the metaphysical in man. It is she who explicitly defines the pre-personal subject and she also shows most clearly how the subject relates, on various levels, to the world of things and other people.

Conclusion

All three novelists we have examined here have written metaphysical novels in the sense that Merleau-Ponty intended. Grass reveals the strange and paradoxical character of our experience on the perceptual level. He is most concerned with describing the pre-conceptual and pre-judgmental aspect of perception as features of Oskar's pre-personal existence.

He describes the experience and functioning of consciousness as temporal and he illustrates the way that memory works. Bellow's novel, Herzog, is the description of a reflective subject endeavouring to explain experience. Throughout the novel, Herzog battles with his experience in reflection only to give up his search for explanations and to return to his lived experience as the source of truth. In Le Planétarium, Sarraute focusses more specifically than either Grass or Bellow on the pre-personal subject and his intersubjective relations. For her, as for Bellow and Grass, the subject is not something fully determinate but defines itself in situation. Others are given to this subject in its activity. In reflection or in a reflective grasp of others, the existence of others is problematic since our reflective experience is often not true to our experience of others on the pre-personal level.

It appears, therefore, that Merleau-Ponty's thesis, at least in terms of these novels, is correct. The novel in the twentieth century, judging from these examples, has become metaphysical in the sense that it intends our pre-personal experience of the world and others and attempts to come to terms with it in all of its ambiguity and strangeness. These novelists reject an explanation of experience and try to reveal it to us in description. Their account of experience, as shown from the point of view of the subject who lives experience, is one for which no judgments can be made

and in which no ultimate meanings can be found. Each character in these novels finds his own meaning for experience, his own solutions and resolutions for problems which are peculiarly his own.

The metaphysical novel shows that the subject is constantly changing and redefining himself as his experiences change. Oskar is not described from the point of view of a reflective subject for whom Oskar would be a fully determinate object, but is portrayed as a subject, from the point of view of his ceaselessly changing lived experience of the world. In Herzog, the central character realises that he cannot reach self-understanding by taking himself as an object; he must return to that experience in which all is in flux in order to understand who he is. Sarraute constantly contrasts the reflective subject with the je anonyme who is just his manner of relating to the world on the pre-personal level of experience.

The experience we have of the world and others is recounted from the point of view of the subject whose experience it is, the world is always portrayed as the world revealed to the subject in perception. These authors do not attempt to set out an objective world which lies over and beyond the subject. Rather, the world and the things in it are a world and things for the perceiving subject. The world is just that which reveals itself to the subject in his activity. Events in this world have no objective or final meaning since

"Décidément, toute vie est ambiguë et il n'y a aucun moyen de savoir le sens vrai de ce que l'on fait, peut-être même n'y a-t-il pas UN sens vrai de nos actions."¹⁴⁶

With his thesis in "Le Roman et la Métaphysique," Merleau-Ponty has fashioned a phenomenology of contemporary literature. By means of this phenomenology, he points to characteristics of the novel in the latter half of the twentieth century which cannot be ignored. Metaphysical literature, as Merleau-Ponty described it, is being produced, although it would be a bit hasty to say that all literature written since 1945 is metaphysical. The value of Merleau-Ponty's thesis lies in pointing out the metaphysical character of modern novels and in reinterpreting the activity of the modern novelist in terms of the problem to which he endeavours to respond.

Critics and interpreters of contemporary literature have pointed to many of the characteristics which Merleau-Ponty has ascribed to it in his thesis.. Merleau-Ponty's description of the modern novel can, therefore, be of use to them. His description provides a context for the interpretation of much of what has been written since 1945. It allows the critic to interpret modern literature in the light of a more comprehensive view of it and it permits the critic-reader to more easily penetrate the modern novel and to gain thereby a better understanding of it.

¹⁴⁶ "Le Roman et la Métaphysique," p. 68.

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