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Truth's veil: language and meaning in Merleau-Ponty and Derrida

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TRUTH'S VEIL:
LANGUAGE AND MEANING IN MERLEAU-PONTY AND DERRIDA

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies

by
Helen Troy Mellon
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To Bobby,
in gratitude

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ABSTRACT

The linguistic structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) attracted the attention of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, prompting what is thought to be Merleau-Ponty's "linguistic turn" of 1947. Saussure's theory of the self-referential structure of linguistic signs as constitutive of value, was tied by Merleau-Ponty to his conception of the structure of intercommunication as constitutive of human value and meaning. Jacques Derrida, in the 1960s, also appealed to Saussure's theory in formulating his thesis of a deferring and differing relationship between linguistic signs as constitutive of meaning, but rejected what he saw as the privileging of a metaphysics of presence-to-meaning in Saussure.

One set of questions raised here concerns the relationship between thought and perception and calls for a reevaluation of Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the primacy of perception in light of his final, posthumously published work. The possibility of a full philosophical dialectic between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida was rendered impossible by Merleau-Ponty's sudden death. In the interest of such a dialogue, this study addresses the similarities and dissimilarities in their positions regarding language and meaning within a central theme of: truth. An area of concern is how their views come to bear upon the ongoing debate between subjectivist and objectivist theories of meaning. Can we arrive at an authentic understanding and expression of truth and meaning? Getting there entails an

understanding of the formal structure of language and its role in the genesis of linguistic meaning.

This study treats the subject of the origins of language and meaning in terms of a phenomenological approach which places all origin squarely in the lived-world of experience. If we agree that our very being is constituted by and in an immersion and interaction in the world, this will suggest that meaning is posited by consciousness in a process of repetition in which thought serves to confirm an initial pre-reflective perception. Merleau-Ponty's interwoven flesh of the world and Derrida's interwoven textuality are proposed as alternatives to tradition's reliance upon external referents in intellectualism and internal intuitions of empiricism for validation of what we name "truth".

INTRODUCTION

The general topic to be explored in this study is the role of language in the formation and expression of our thoughts and meanings. Its focus will be to articulate Merleau-Ponty's emphasis upon pre-reflective human perception as the origin of language and meaning, and then Derrida's view that language and meaning have their origin in a dynamic which is prior to representation. The approach to the questioning of the relationship between words and truth will remain within the *givenness* of language and meaning, continuing Edmund Husserl's project which seeks the articulation of "a universal conformity to laws of structure on the part of conscious life, a regularity by virtue of which alone *truth* and *actuality* have, and are able to have, sense for us".

We encounter the world perspectivally and so we rightly assess claims of knowledge on the basis of the adequacy of the givenness of phenomena. Our senses reveal the world to us but since we are perceiving from within the midst of the phenomenal world we understand that our pre-reflective perspective is narrow. The world is indeterminate for us. The phenomenological approach is to acknowledge our perspectival limitation and avoid the impulse to a "high altitude" style of thinking while continuing our project of describing the manner in which we genuinely engage the world. All experience becomes known to us in language. To Merleau-Ponty, 'things *are said* and *are thought* by a Speech and a Thought which we do not have but which has us'.¹

We use language to construct and reveal our thoughts for self-reflection in the inner dialogue, and for communication with others. Classics scholar Walter Burkert has

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* trans. Richard G. McCleary, Northwestern Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 19.

hypothesized that language use (vocal sound, sign, symbol) is not what gives humans the status of higher animal; but rather it is our story-telling ability, narrative and discourse, hard-wired in human mind, that moved us from mute gestures and calls to the complex and layered narratives that articulate our experience of the lived-world, a complexity not given in the simple animal act of perception which registers only the positive or negative reaction as a product of a changing environment. Husserl's conviction that an exploration of the structures of consciousness developed from within the experiential context would discover a certain reliability, assumes mechanistic qualities for cognition just such as Burkert's hard-wired theory for human illustrative and explicatory abilities.

In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle's view was that men have a natural capacity sufficient for truth and in most cases attain it. So if our mechanism is working properly (we have normal brain function), then our thoughts should be reliable in representing the givenness of the world; and if our sensory mechanisms are intact, we generally grasp the world in which we find ourselves as a mutually agreed upon intelligible unity. Equally important in Aristotle's thought was the role of shared or public discourse and man's ability to thus acquire an understanding of universals from the experience of particulars. Michael H. Wedin writes that Aristotle is committed to the thesis that only things that can communicate have the capacity for logos in his strong linkage of reason, logos, and communication.² He claims that Aristotle believed that it is not solely through the public or cultural use of a word that meaning attaches to human articulations; rather, words are given to us as already laden with meaning. The force of Wedin's argument rests upon

2. Michael H. Wedin, *Mind and Imagination in Aristotle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 149.

Aristotle's belief that humans are bearers of the 'linguistic intention'. This means that human reason can form the intention to utter a word (or string of words) to express particulars and that the formulation of such intentions would make no sense apart from the ability to express something symbolically.

Is there a role for language in acquiring *genuine* rather than inferential or conventional understanding? Husserl's view in *Lecture V, The Idea of Phenomenology* is that 'acts of knowing, more broadly apprehended as acts of thoughts in general, are not free-floating particularities, coming and going in the stream of consciousness.' Rather they display teleological forms of interconnection; e.g., fulfillment, corroboration, confirmation and their counterparts. Meaning, as intelligible unity, depends upon such interconnectedness and where it is lacking, there is no "sense" to be made of things. It is only in these connections that 'real spatial-temporal actuality constitutes itself – not in one blow, but in a gradually ascending process.'³ To Husserl the task that remains, if we are to grasp an authentic meaning from the givenness of the life-world, is to determine the sense of any and all of those correlations that we might explicate.

We are now a century away from the beginnings of Husserlian phenomenology when its emphasis on concrete human experience was first taken up by philosophers who then pushed Husserl's initial emphasis on the structures of interconnectedness and correlations in human consciousness into diverse areas of thought. This study focuses on two such philosophers: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose contribution was to offer a rich description of the most fundamental human phenomenon, our embodied existence in a world which

3. Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, ed. Rudolf Bernet, trans. Lee Hardy (The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 55.

seems always-already structured in a way that grounds our meaning-intending acts; and Jacques Derrida, whose deconstructive readings have overturned the phenomenological landscape with particular attention to what he sees as phenomenology's logocentric error. Within the general thesis of 'language and meaning', this study will focus upon the similarities and dissimilarities between Merleau-Ponty's and Derrida's views of the interconnectedness and the differentiations in language.

One set of questions raised here concerns silence, a silence there before language emerges in thought, speech or writing. The first chapter will address issues of temporality, spatiality, and the a priori from the standpoint of phenomenology. Both Merleau-Ponty and Derrida take the linguistic structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure as a departure point for the arguments they want to make. Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, in thinking about origins, took Saussure's semiological structuralism, his general theory of signs and symbols, and his analysis of the nature and relationship of signs in language, as an isomorphism for the structure that brings human thought into being and which produces meaning. This common ground supports the relevance of a discussion of linguistics in the second chapter. The third chapter is devoted to the ideas of Merleau-Ponty within the framework of language and meaning. Merleau-Ponty had held the view that meanings expressed in language have their origin in the body's perceptions of phenomena. In his final text, he moved decisively out of the structuralist sphere in his denial of the structuralist thesis that syntax (form) is prior to originating, expressive speech. Derrida's deconstruction of western logocentrism is the subject of the fourth chapter, with an emphasis upon his formulation of the precept of original repetition as a deconstruction of

what he sees as phenomenology's privileging of speech as a presence-to-meaning. Chapter five pulls together the oppositions of three and four in order to assess the views of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida in their scrutiny of language and meaning. This final chapter will convey what I believe are the implications that can be taken from the task of thinking about language within the context of our embodied existence in the lived-world that is our home. Merleau-Ponty's interwoven flesh of the world and Derrida's interwoven textuality are proposed as compatible alternatives to tradition's reliance upon external referents in intellectualism and internal intuitions of empiricism for validation of what we name "truth". It was Merleau-Ponty's hope that his work would 'show how communication with others, and thought, take up and go beyond the realm of perception which initiated us into truth.'⁴

4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. and ed. James M. Edie (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 3.

CHAPTER 1 THE PASSAGE OF THE A PRIORI FROM SILENCE TO LANGUAGE

Prefiguring the early Husserl's emphasis on structures of interconnectedness and correlation in human consciousness was Immanuel Kant's conception of a priori structures of the mind. In accounting for our human ability to make sense of our world, Kant held that time and space are a priori constructs of mind, the form taken by the inner sense with which we structure experience. From the standpoint of phenomenology, a problem in Kant's concept would be the derivative status of phenomena in his formulation. 'The matter of appearances, [however], through which **things** in space and time are given to us, can be represented only in perception, thus a posteriori.'⁵ All experience is experience of something; yet Kant's formulation privileges an antecedent split prior to perception which becomes unified in a meaning-giving synthesis that is the work of mind. Kant's a priori/a posteriori dualism requires that mind provide structure to the givenness of phenomena – to our experience of the world – as though our world were not always already there structured as the ground of experience itself. At the same time, it posits conditions prior to experience as the basis for the very logic it seeks to articulate.

For Merleau-Ponty, structures of time and space are not given in reflection upon phenomena on the part of mind, but rather are a part of the givenness of worldly phenomena as perceived in pre-reflective consciousness. For him there is a chasm between pre-reflection and reflection where our perception of phenomena is ordered, as a synopsis, in a way that is meaningful. But the gap is not the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy nor is it

5. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 634.

a gap of noumenal/phenomenal dimensions because what can be known and what there is to know is structured from the standpoint of our embodied existence in its direct contact with the world. Merleau-Ponty would say that we organize experience in the midst of experience, from ‘the mute and operational language of perception’.⁶ What originally shows itself, makes itself known, is not the a priori concept but, rather, it is the phenomenon. In a chasm of silence, the bits and pieces of a real and genuine phenomenal world wait to be noticed.

In *Husserl and the Problem of Language*⁷, Merleau-Ponty writes that the problem of language had not been considered to be a proper subject for ‘first philosophy’. Husserl, however, addressed the subject and what Merleau-Ponty wants is to resume what he calls ‘the very movement’ of Husserl’s thought, instead of a particular Husserlian thesis. Merleau-Ponty interprets the early Husserl as positing language as an object before thought, an object constituted by consciousness, and actual languages as very special cases of a possible language to which consciousness holds the key.⁸ Husserl’s later writings on language are interpreted by Merleau-Ponty as expressing the view that language provides the means by which thought becomes other than a private phenomena thereby acquiring intersubjective value and, ultimately, ideal existence.⁹ But to Merleau-Ponty, human reflection recognizes ideal existence as neither local nor temporal and, conversely, is aware of a locality and temporality of speech that is neither ideal nor objective.

6. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. John O’Neill, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 97.

7. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 84 – 97.

8. *Ibid.*, 84.

9. *Ibid.*, 85.

To Merleau-Ponty, the entity which finds itself thrown into the midst of phenomena and aware of its own existence as the being to whom Being matters must construct its own understandings on the basis of the experience in and of the world. The ordering of phenomena is itself the phenomenon that is ownmost to man as the being thrown into the world in a way of being that is naturally constituted to perceive the world, to feel, touch, listen and hear, and to reflect upon and articulate the surrounding phenomena. Even seemingly independent structures of categorical thought are ultimately founded in perception. Human existence has no external or contingent attributes. Man is an event of Being in a sense that is not that of a category in the objective world. An objective event assumes the existence of a witness tied to a certain spot in the world and having successive views. For Merleau-Ponty, Husserl's statement, "Transcendental subjectivity is intersubjectivity", entails that 'To the extent that what I say has meaning, I am a different "other" for myself when I am speaking; and to the extent that I understand, I no longer know who is speaking and who is listening'.¹⁰

The transformation from the reality of experience to representation of experience in language is accomplished when a perspective, a standpoint, is taken by an embodied understanding instantiated in the phenomenal world. Husserl opposed a psychological theory which would claim that we intuit truth through subjective feelings of conviction 'experienced in the presence of certain judgments.'¹¹ Appearances often deceive us, and not only in exemplar cases of illusion such as *trompe l'oeil* and *façade*, but also in the most concrete judgments about our own embodied experience. Gail Soffer notes an example

10. Ibid., 97.

11. Gail Soffer, *Husserl and the Question of Relativism* (The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991) 66.

intended to illustrate the failure of the phenomenological approach in distinguishing between truth and illusion: the objection of Gunther Patzig. Patzig has argued that a person sitting in a train at rest and seeing another train moving out of the station, experiences that it is his train that is moving. Patzig argues that, for Husserl, that person's train *really* is moving, since he *sees* that it is moving. Soffer counters that if the person's train were actually moving, he would begin to see through the window a rush of landscape go by. Instead he sees only the train station at rest with the other train gone. 'The initial phenomena ("my train is moving") breaks up, and is replaced by a new one ("my train is at rest, the other train was moving"). Thus it is not the case that, phenomenologically considered, the person's train is *really* moving simply because it is perceived to be moving in a single, isolated moment.'¹² Perception of phenomena relies upon a series of partial, perspectival views as given to consciousness. If what presents itself as real is real, there is a synthesis of fulfillment. Otherwise, the perception 'breaks up'. Soffer asserts that for Husserl the primary sense of truth is that 'the essential correspondence is of meaning-intention to meaning-fulfillment.', both elements of which are internal to experience.¹³

The a priori for Husserl is contained in meaning formations given in the chasm between our apprehension of givenness and that which gives, the already constituted lived-world. What structures our experience is not rooted in mind; rather, paradoxically, the universal features of mind are structured in experience, grounded in the external world. We are always already immersed in a pre-given world which we can perceive only partially, according to our perspective within that world; but certain structural elements

12. Ibid. 98, n.38.

13. Ibid. 79.

stand out that are the conditions for the existence of the life-world. These elemental aspects are the meaning-giving structures that pre-figure any of our perceptions in the phenomenal world. Our perception is the meaning-bestower in a two-way relationship that is the foundational concept of *Fundierung*.¹⁴ Peter Hadreas explains that for Merleau-Ponty ‘bodily involvements and language are “moments” of each other. Speech is not meaningful without its interpenetration into human projects; and, on the other hand, human projects are shaped and questioned –in general take their place –in language’.¹⁵

We are perceivers, always already thrown into a world. In becoming aware of our own experience, we can say that we have had a “perception”. This is what Heidegger has called a “harking back” to something else to which a perception points that lets something be seen *as* something. Implicit in the description of perception as a “harking back” is a repudiation of a “purely present” moment wherein consciousness and being coincide. Merleau-Ponty’s “primacy” of perception refers to the fact that we *first* experience, *perceive*, the givenness of the world; our existence as perceivers is primary. Language has a presence for us, it exists, because bodily gestures can convey meaning. An already available structure of gesture is part of our embodied existence in the phenomenal world. In inner dialogue or in communication with others, we make sense of our perceptions. There is “meaning” to be had because we are in a world that is always already there. Making-sense of experience is its conceptualization into language. Language is “thought’s

14. Merleau-Ponty applies Husserl’s concept of *Fundierung* in the sense that reflective objectivity and embodied subjectivity are related as the founded and the founding. Husserl defines *Fundierung* as follows: If a law of essence means that an A cannot as such exist except in a more comprehensive unity which it associates with an M, we say that an A *as such requires foundation by an M* or also that *an A as such needs to be supplemented by an M.*, as quoted by Peter J. Hadreas in *In Place of the Flawed Diamond* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 1986), 96.

15. *Ibid.*, 105.

body” and its givenness structures the possibility of what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘*question-knowing* ... “What do I know?” is not only “what is knowing?” and not only “who am I?” but finally: “what is there?” and even: “what is the *there is?*”.’¹⁶

Language provides the means for an ‘uncovering’ in which Dasein can bring its perceptions to understanding. The ‘uncovering’ is in terms of comparing, relating, setting forth, recounting, and so forth which give understanding. The uncovering is enacted by Dasein from the standpoint of a pre-existing horizon of meaning possible in its lived-world, which becomes a virtual second-nature of man. If the ordering does not precede the perception, Dasein’s thrownness would be a fall into a chaos of sensory data from which mind and language would then, in immediacy, have to construct ‘reality’.¹⁷ But this is not to say that the reality that language/discourse constructs is not reality-as-such.

The language of experience is, for Merleau-Ponty, sedimented, in the sense of a conceptual ordering of experience in the phenomenal world wherein a thing appears as a what-it-is. We are thrown into a world structured and ordered in sedimentation, pre-conditioned for the emergence of a being who understands his Being. Human perception, then, should not be thought of as a synthesis of the structures of finite intellect superimposed upon its world; rather, it is an articulation of the intelligibility of the world.¹⁸

16. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible & the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, ed. Claude Lefort (Indiana: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 129.

17. The experiences of ‘the holy’ have been described as “terrible”, which suggests that language cannot mediate such experience perhaps for the reason that the sedimented structures of the lived-world do not apply. Dreams are dream-like in that they lack the points of reference (time, space) of the lived-world. As Merleau-Ponty writes, ‘I do not look at chaos, but at things’. *The Visible & the Invisible*, 133.

18. Stephen Priest, *Merleau-Ponty*, (New York: Routledge Press: 1998), critiques Merleau-Ponty’s view of Kant. ‘If we do not understand transcendental idealism as idealism then we do not have to ascribe to Kant the view that space and time are literally parts of our psychology. We may take him to be saying that it is necessary and a priori that any object of our inner experience will be temporal and any object of our outer experience will be spatio-temporal’, 254.

This view will give rise in the later Merleau-Ponty of *The Visible and the Invisible* to the thesis of autochthonous organization, the concept by which he argues that originary meaningfulness of experience is to be understood.

Paradoxically, the intelligibility of the world that man must articulate in order to understand the meaning of “things” is only given to us as the absence of any meaning. We are always reconstructing the immediate through reflection. Absolute givenness, presence to meaning, is impossible for a being which is itself an *event* of being. As the event of its own becoming unfolds for man it is with a withdrawal of presence that the realization dawns that we are both “present to” and “present as”; that is, man exists as both subject and object. Man wants to come to grips with the problem of recapturing that unmediated present, the event just prior to reflection which he can never capture, the *aha-Erlebnis* which is already past. As both “subject” and “subject to”, man struggles to ‘recapture the elusive unity of the phenomenal world in the finite web of concepts woven by language’.¹⁹

Man’s finite perspective is the basis of his individuality. Human time is constructed through instances of being-present in a sequence of the past-present. But this is not the time that belongs to things. The nature of the time of things is that it is fully constituted, a series of possible relations in terms of before and after that is the ultimate recording of time and the result of its passage. Merleau-Ponty asserts that ‘points in time are bound together, not by any identifying synthesis which would fix them at a point in time, but by a

19. Martin Dillon, “Apriority in Kant and Merleau-Ponty”, *Kant Studien* 78 (1987), 422.

transition synthesis, in so far as they issue one from the other...'.²⁰ A synthesis in terms of a “before” and an “after” must be made in order to understand experience, but for Merleau-Ponty, this synthesis must always be undertaken afresh as a dimension of our being.

‘It is indeed the dream of philosophers to be able to conceive an “eternity of life”, lying beyond permanence and change, in which time’s productivity is pre-eminently contained, and yet a thetic consciousness of time which stands above it and embraces it merely destroys the phenomena of time’.²¹

For Merleau-Ponty, man exists as a ‘duration’ whose questioning begins first with the “look”, the gaze of man at the pre-reflective level of perception prior to any thematization and unavailable to expression-in-language. Experience is initially given to the body in this pre-reflective mode and it is the body which is structured to organize the sensory contents of the experience toward a unity of meaningfulness, providing a direction and intentionality that is the unfolding of experience within time and space. Perception is the transcendence of the present to conscious thought in a consistent and coherent form because perception and thought are about real things in the real world. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger wrote that the ek-stasis of the present is projected authentically as *Augenblick*, a moment at which the ready-to-hand is available to Dasein in a way that reflects Dasein’s freedom. So too for Merleau-Ponty, the ek-stasis is pre-reflective and it must be real. The authentic mode of the ek-stasis of the future, for Heidegger, is a looking forward to possibilities, *Vorlaufen*, in the sense of Dasein’s own being-able-to-be, which is Merleau-Ponty’s “I can”.

20. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 1962), 415.

21. Ibid.

In the immediacy of the pre-reflective present, man's embodiment falls within the spatiality and temporality of the lived-world. Man speaks with the body by virtue of a quantity of air and its vibration, which is conditioned by the vocal cavities. Sound can be said to be material in the sense that its existence as a natural phenomenon relies upon matter. The elasticity of air, ground and water (its compression-rarefaction-compression-rarefaction pattern) allows waves of vibratory compression waves to move away from a source. For sound to exist in a "pure" sense (that is, whether heard by the human ear or not), for there to be a sound, there must be a material medium through which the vibrations travel in their wave pattern. Sound, as such, is not possible in a vacuum; the media in which sounds occur are structures of the lived-world that man pre-reflectively utilizes in producing sound (speech) with the wind-instrument that is the human voice.²² Sound in the human life-world doesn't require a human instrument, most animals have "calls". Man articulates. He produces a speech sound by moving an articulator, the parts of his body that enable speech, and he creates meaning by joining together a string of distinct syllables and words, the parts of speech. Such a cohesion is, ipso facto, available to any embodied worldly being, but it is solely to man that the domain of the space of the narrative is given.

For Merleau-Ponty 'time' is not an infinite series of events. He writes in the working notes to his final (and unfinished) work, *The Visible and the Invisible*:

'The upsurge of time would be incomprehensible as the creation of a supplement of time that would push the whole preceding series back into the past. That passivity is not conceivable. On the other hand every analysis of

22. Merleau-Ponty names man's activities that are neither solely mental nor solely material "human predicates". These are activities ascribed to the whole human being in contrast to objects and other living things. This is essential in Merleau-Ponty's departure from an anthropocentric philosophical tradition.

time that views it from above is insufficient. Time must constitute itself – be always seen from the point of view of someone who is of it'.²³

Merleau-Ponty twice uses a passage from Paul Claudel's *Art poétique* to illustrate man's relationship to time in the lived-world as a 'perpetual taking of our bearings on the things', as follows:

'From time to time, a man lifts his head, sniffs, listens, considers, recognizes his position: he thinks, he sighs, and, drawing his watch from the pocket lodged against his chest, looks at the time. Where am I? and What time is it? –such is the inexhaustible question turning from us to the world. . .'²⁴

'Time is not an absolute series of events, a tempo –not even the tempo of consciousness – it is an institution, a system of equivalences'.²⁵ Meaning and structure are formed where the incarnate subject and the worldly event come together. 'Taking our bearings' is a way for us to mark our present position, as a means of affirming our being-in-the-world as embodied at the present position in time. Merleau-Ponty defined man as 'a duration' whose ego is identical with the act in which it projects itself. The present is a kind of geometrical locus for self and others, an assignable reality, within the lived-world with its sedimented patterns of experience. The conscious, temporal subject influences events and is influenced by them. Merleau-Ponty began *The Visible and the Invisible* saying:

'We see the things themselves, the world is what we see. . . we must match this vision with knowledge, take possession of it, say what we and what seeing are, act therefore as if we knew nothing about it, as if here we still had everything to learn.'²⁶

23. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible & the Invisible*, 184.

24. Ibid., 108, 121.

25. Ibid., 3 – 4.

26. Ibid., 3.

Merleau-Ponty's only 'ideality' is his concept of sedimentation; his only apriori is in the sedimented patterns of experience, such as perception, understanding, and the overarching enworlding condition of the embodiment of man.

Merleau-Ponty thought that linguistics, and particularly language under the structural model of Ferdinand de Saussure, taught that, although life's questions are asked and answered in words, a language tells us nothing except about itself. 'Far from harboring the secret of the being of the world, language is itself a world...'²⁷ The locus of truth and meaning, in Merleau-Ponty's view, is then no longer to be sought in mind with its phenomenal limitation or in a coincidence of mind and object; its site is, rather, in a sedimented system of language which relies on the bodily gesture.

Derrida challenges the idea that there is a retrievable domain of primordial experience upon which an authentic understanding of experience can be founded. He argues that the primacy of speech held since Husserl is ultimately a primacy of presence. For Derrida there can be no 'pure presence', no 'pure meaning'. The force of his argument lies in his assertion that once thought is taken up into understanding, the world has intervened. There can be no immediate self-present thought since thought is always mediated by the agency of signs. Nonpresence and otherness are internal to presence. As Derrida asserts,

'Signs represent the present in its absence; they take the place of the present....when the present does not present itself, then we signify, we go through the detour of signs.... The substitution of the sign for the thing itself is both secondary and provisional: it is second in order after an original and lost presence, a presence from which the sign would be derived.'²⁸

27. Ibid., 96.

28. Jacques Derrida, "Difference" in *Phenomena and Speech*, trans. David Allison (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 136.

For Derrida, the detour of the present into representation is temporalizing; the past present is deferred to representation in the actuality of the living present. The representation occurs within a system of signifiers, a system of intervals, spacing, and of difference in the sense of not being identical. Differance as temporalizing and differance as spacing are the concepts Derrida employs to overcome the privileging of presence he sees as an error in philosophical thought that continued through Husserl and the phenomenological school of thought. Derrida does not contest the founding validity of presence as there can be no foundation without presence. But the conditions of experience are not Kantian abstractions for Derrida; the conditions necessary for experience are concretely lived. It is re-presentation, a calling back of the “sense” of experience, that marks the difference of the “then” and the “now” and establishes for man the vulgar sense of time. And it is in the joining and disjoining of signs and symbols that language articulates space. The only ideality for Derrida (that is, in our context here, and under the proviso that concepts such as “ideality” are always-already ‘under erasure’ in Derrida’s thought) is that of the recognition in experience by individual consciousness of “the same” and in the sense of “sameness” prior to the immediate experience which consciousness is presently reflecting upon.

‘A signifier is from the very beginning the possibility of its own repetition, of its own image or resemblance. It is the condition of its ideality, what identifies it as a signifier, and makes it function as such, relating it to a signified which, for the same reasons, could never be a “unique and singular reality”.’²⁹

Derrida’s critique moves further than Merleau-Ponty’s displacement of the tradition’s view

29. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 91.

of the a priori. Merleau-Ponty asserts the primacy of perception:

‘Fact and essence can no longer be distinguished, not because, mixed up in our experience, they in their purity would be inaccessible and would subsist as limit-ideas beyond our experience, but because –Being no longer being *before me*, but surrounding me and in a sense transversing me, and my vision of Being not forming itself from elsewhere, but from the midst of Being –the alleged facts, the spatial-temporal individuals, are from the first mounted on the axes, the pivots, the dimensions, the generality of my body, and the ideas are therefore already encrusted in its joints.’³⁰

Derrida includes “perception” in his critique of the operative concepts of Western philosophy:

‘Now I don’t know what perception is and I don’t believe anything like perception exists. Perception is precisely a concept, a concept of an intuition or of a given originating from the thing itself, present itself in its meaning, independently from language, from the system of reference. And I believe that perception is interdependent with the concept of origin and of center and consequently whatever strikes at the metaphysics of which I have spoken strikes also at the very concept of perception. I don’t believe that there is any perception.’³¹

Merleau-Ponty and Derrida concur in their rejection of a metaphysics of presence to meaning. For Merleau-Ponty, presence is mediated by the body’s experience in the life-world, which is itself a sedimented system structured like language. For Derrida, presence is mediated by language, which is, itself, a system of references.

30. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 114.

31. Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in Human Discourses,” in *The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. R. Macksey and E. Donato, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 272.

CHAPTER 2 THE STRUCTURAL MODEL IN LINGUISTICS

Merleau-Ponty began to draw upon the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure in the late 1940s in a desire to rejoin the general philosophical problem of expression and institution. John O'Neill, in his 'Translator's Introduction' to *The Prose of the World*, distinguishes between the 'institution of language as an objective structure studied by linguistics, and speech, which is the use-value language acquires when turned toward expression and the institution of new meanings'(xxxiv). Merleau-Ponty's view was that,

'We may say that there are two languages. First there is the language after the fact, or language as an institution, which effaces itself in order to yield the meaning which it conveys. Second, there is the language which creates itself in its expressive acts, which sweeps me on from the signs toward meaning – sedimented language and speech.'³²

To Merleau-Ponty, the philosophical tradition had erred in its treatment of language as an exclusively technical question. He sought, within a phenomenological reflection, 'a new conception of the being of language, which is now logic in contingency -an oriented system which nevertheless always elaborates random factors, taking what was fortuitous up again into a meaningful whole – incarnate logic'.³³

Saussurean linguistics would later draw the attention of Derrida, coming first in *Of Grammatology* in 1967. Derrida's purpose was to relate Saussure's distinction between sign and signified to the expression/indication dynamic, and for the linguistics to serve as a

32. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Science and the Experience of Expression' in *Signs*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 10.

33. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'On the Phenomenology of Language' in *Signs*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 88.

point of departure for Derrida's deconstruction of what he saw as a priority traditionally accorded to the language of speech over the language of writing. He argues that Saussure's analysis demonstrates, through his concept of diachronic linguistics, that language cannot be reduced to subjective meaning. Derrida interprets (or deconstructs) Saussure in a way that conforms to Derrida's movement away from a metaphysics of "presence to meaning". "Hearing-oneself-speak is identified as the unique experience of the signified producing itself spontaneously within the self, and nevertheless, as signified concept, in the element of ideality or universality".³⁴ It was in opposition to the traditional view of speech as unmediated intuition of self-presence, in the sense of "hearing oneself speak", that prompted Derrida's deconstruction of Saussure.

Saussure's genius was that he first marked out the holistic character of language, as a system whose parts are always coming under the influence of one another, changing, acquiring values and shaping further change within an interwoven whole. The particular concepts of Saussure's that concern us here are: the relationship between sign and signifier; and the diachronic and synchronic perspectives. Saussure's thesis of sign and signifier will become important in advancing Derrida's concept of differance. Saussure's diachronic law will provide Merleau-Ponty with an isomorphism for his own concepts of sedimentation and autochthonous origin.

In the section entitled *Nature of the Linguistic Sign*,³⁵ Saussure clarifies the nature of the most elemental function of language. Tradition had held that at its most basic level language was a naming-process. To Saussure, this was wrong on two counts: first, it

34. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 20.

35. Ferdinand de Saussure *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966), 65.

assumes the existence of ‘ready-made ideas’ prior to words; and secondly, it assumes that the linking of a name and a thing is a simple operation. For Saussure, ‘The linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image’.³⁶ The sound-image is non-material, it is an impression made by our sensory experience in the lived-world. In reflection, almost instantaneously, a concept and certain syllables deemed legitimate in the thinker’s language unite into the linguistic sign. Seeking exactitude, Saussure designates the meanings and the words thusly:

sign – means the united whole;
signified – means the concept; and
signifier – means the sound-image.

The union between signified and signifier is not based upon an inner necessity in terms of the way certain syllables of a language sound. This is made self-evident by the existence of the numerous languages of man. The link between thought and sound is purely arbitrary, as can be seen in the example of signs for “horse” which in German is *Pferd*, Turkish *at*, French *cheval*, and Latin *equus*. Saussure’s view is that nothing enters language without having been tested in speaking and that every innovation in language has its roots in the individual.

Two forces are always at work in language: individualism (or provincialism) on the one hand, and social intercourse (or communication) on the other. This is most starkly revealed by observing the evolution of language in childhood. Without social intercourse, peculiar individual childhood language patterns would take hold and remain with the language-user. And conversely, social groups inspire the innovations that we see in the vernacular of technologies, in rapper or valley girl slang, and any such idiosyncrasies that

36. Ibid., 66.

mark language-users as members of a particular set. It is generally held that if a particular language system is not learned in early childhood, there will always be a “foreign accent”. Once the vocal apparatus (the glottis, vocal folds, lips, tongue, the soft palate and the uvula) becomes proficient in making sounds a certain way (within the patterns of the mother-tongue; i.e., the *th* sound in English, the dorsal *r* and tongue-tip *r* trill in French), oral articulations necessary for other languages become difficult if not impossible to the speaker. The effort required in articulating languages learned in adulthood reveals a distinction in: (a) language competence (the subconscious control of a linguistic system), and (b) language performance (the speaker’s actual use of language). The bond then between signifier and signified differs in intensity within an individual depending upon whether the language is given in writing or in speech, whether he is given a space of time to reflect and translate, and how agile he is in “thinking” and “speaking” from within a language system “foreign” to him.

Important in terms of the study that engages us here is the nature of the bond between signified and signifier in Saussure’s linguistic system. Saussure asserts that our thought is only a shapeless and indistinct mass apart from its expression in words. The lived-world gives an indefinite plane of jumbled ideas and an equally vague plane of sounds. Their combination produces a form and not a substance. ‘The important thing in the word is not the sound alone but the phonic differences that make it possible to distinguish this word from all others, for differences carry signification’.³⁷ For Saussure, implicit in difference is a comparison, and so he adds that they are not different; they are

37. Ibid., 118.

only distinct. Between words there is only opposition and whatever distinguishes one sign from the others constitutes it.

Saussure asserts that there is an isomorphism in the structure for speech and the structure of writing. He clarifies this position by noting the standard form in writing:

- 1) The signs used in writing are arbitrary; there is no connection, for example, between the letter *t* and the sound that it designates.
- 2) The value of letters is purely negative and differential.
- 3) Values in writing function only through reciprocal opposition within a fixed system that consists of a set number of letters. This third characteristic, though not identical to the second, is closely related to it, for both depend on the first.
- 4) The means by which the sign is produced is completely unimportant.³⁸

Signs - written, spoken, or thought - function not through their intrinsic value but through their relative position within a sentence or thought, and within the language system to which they belong. Signs mutually condition each other and what distinguishes one sign from another constitutes it. What is not arbitrary is the way in which words within a given language system are linked in order for strings of words to make sense. The distinction between one sign and another naturally includes their spacing, in speech and in writing. Saussure's thinking regarding the structure of written language will later play a part in Derrida's critique of the priority the structuralist movement accords spoken over written language.

Saussure distinguishes between the study of a language system's historical changes in time, and the relationships within a system of language at a particular time. Synchronic linguistics refers to the static side of language, or language states; and diachronic linguistics to the study of the evolutionary aspect in language, changes over time. The synchronic law reports a state of affairs, a principle of regularity. The diachronic law

38. Ibid., 119 – 20.

supposes a dynamic force, an effect produced, a change in language over time. Diachronic changes are the subject of anthropologists and historians – and require an objective analysis. Synchronic changes involve subjective analyses on the part of speakers. It is only by virtue of speaking that any diachronic change in language occurs. A certain number of speakers, individuals, initiate a change before it becomes accepted in general use. A diachronic fact is preceded by another fact: the synchronic fact in the sphere of speaking. Diachronic linguistics notes causes, such as geographic diversity, and temporal diversity, the innovating waves of change over time. Diachronics is a field of study that examines direct evidence, historical documents, and employs textual criticism in a reconstructive effort supported by comparison and observation of the chain of events that initiated the innovations. For Merleau-Ponty, diachronic linguistics will serve as an isomorphism for the principle of ‘sedimentation’ in man’s embodied experience of the world. The geological metaphor Saussure applies to language systems applies also to man’s enworlding and the grounding of meaning that Merleau-Ponty wants to assign to the givenness of worldly phenomena.

Saussure’s principal interest lies in synchronic linguistics, ‘the linguistics that penetrates values and co-existing relationships’³⁹ in order to describe a static language state. Unlike a symbol, a linguistic sign cannot exist in space without being rendered meaningless. The linear span of the word chain must be divided for meaning to emerge. When a conversation in a foreign language with which one has a certain familiarity is overheard, it makes no sense because, unlike the written text, there is no way to recognize where the breaks or divisions in the linear span occur. Saussure asserts the priority of

39. Ibid., 102.

‘linguistic value’ into this circumstance. Although the bond between signifier and signified is arbitrary, once formed as a united whole (a word-unit) and successfully launched into general use it acquires value. The value of the word, its property of standing for an idea, owes its existence solely to usage, general acceptance, and the difference in its value from that of other words in the language system. Values emerge from the signifying power of speech for Saussure.

For Saussure, language is not controlled directly by the intentions of speakers. Languages evolve. Saussure attributes to sheer luck the fact that any language persists over time and announces the *mystery*, namely, that thought and sound become conceptualized in the form of language.

‘The characteristic role of language with respect to thought is not to create a material phonic means for expressing ideas but to serve as a link between thought and sound, under conditions that of necessity bring about the reciprocal delimitations of units. Thought, chaotic by nature, has to become ordered in the process of its decomposition. Neither are thoughts given material form nor are sounds transformed into mental entities; the somewhat mysterious fact is rather that “thought-sound” implies division, and that language works out its units while taking shape between two shapeless masses.’⁴⁰

40. Ibid., 112

CHAPTER 3 MERLEAU-PONTY

Perception is primary, meaning originates in perception for Merleau-Ponty. ‘To seek the essence of a perception is to declare that perception is, not presumed true, but defined as access to truth.’⁴¹ For Merleau-Ponty our perception of the world is fundamental. A primordial perception must occur before even a subject-object distinction is made. We are always already in-the-world and, because we are, we are ‘condemned to meaning’. Every act, every intention acquires a “name”. Each encounter necessarily reveals a relationship between world, ground and figure. A perceptual “something” is always in the middle of something more; it always exists as part of a field. With-in a field, perception occurs from a standpoint, a perspective taken by a some-one, in an attentiveness framed within the field of a sensory horizon. Merleau-Ponty asserts that the

‘first operation of attention is to create for itself a *field*, either perceptual or mental, which can be “surveyed” (*uberschauen*), in which movement of the exploratory organ or elaboration of thought are possible, but in which consciousness does not correspondingly lose what it has gained and, moreover, lose itself in the changes it brings about’.⁴²

Every new experience is a change to consciousness in terms of the establishment of a new dimension of experience. We are an ever-present absentmindedness and bewilderment in the shape of the body. As a human being

‘I know where I am and see myself among things, it is because I am a consciousness, a strange creature which resides nowhere and can be everywhere present in intention. Everything that exists exists as a thing or as a consciousness. And there is no half-way house. The thing is in a place but

41. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 1962), xvi.

42. *Ibid.*, 29.

perception is nowhere, for if it were situated in a place it could not make other things *exist for itself*, since it would repose in itself as things do. Perception is thus thought about perceiving. Its incarnation furnishes no characteristic which has to be accounted for, and its thisness (ecceity) is simply its own ignorance of itself.⁴³

The body and consciousness are the visible and the invisible of man. Within what Merleau-Ponty calls “perceptual faith”, the body ‘makes itself its own natural light’⁴⁴ and, in perceiving, segregates the “within” from the “without”. Perception, thought this way, is interrogative thought which lets the perceived world be rather than posits it.⁴⁵ From within (from the invisible), we correlate our evidence (the visible) with that of others, perspectives blend, perceptions confirm one another, a meaning emerges and this is the praxis of embodied rationality, the recognition of the fundamental facts of our existence. In practice, consciousness doesn’t have to intervene at each stage to recognize and name what is given. Perception occurs within a living system of meanings, an immanent logic at work in the sensible field, and, spontaneously, we recognize the visible by its style. We access the visible between the aspects of it, through texture, the surface of a depth, a cross section. The invisible is what is hidden, the existentials of the visible, its dimensions, its non-figurative inner framework. Any object of perception is partially-given to consciousness and what is phenomenologically visible is founded upon the invisible, and conversely, the invisible is founded upon the visible.

43. Ibid., 37-38.

44. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 118.

45. Ibid., 102.

Human vision, ‘the questing eye’,⁴⁶ is our prereflective relationship to the world. For Merleau-Ponty, perception opens to a visual field that is a Gestalt, an open system of shifting patterns that is given to humans as an organized, coherent whole. It is at the nexus of the active lived-through body and the patterned structures of the world that meaning is formed. The visible and the invisible constitute the whole. In *Signs*, Merleau-Ponty writes:

‘...with our first oriented gesture, *someone’s* infinite relationships to his situation has invaded our mediocre planet and opened an inexhaustible field to our behavior. All perception, all action which presupposes it, and in short every human use of the body is already primordial expression. Not that derivative labor which substitutes for what is expressed signs which are given elsewhere with their meaning and rule of usage, but the primary operation which first constitutes signs as signs, makes that which is expressed dwell in them through the eloquence of their arrangement and configuration alone, implants a meaning in that which did not have one, and thus- far from exhausting itself in the instant at which it occurs –inaugurates an order or founds an institution or a tradition’.⁴⁷

The bits and pieces of the world-in-itself wait to be noticed, to be given names. Martin Dillon writes that the question this raises is the how and why of accounting for ‘the subsumption of a given perceptual experience under a given concept or sign’,⁴⁸ given Saussure’s thesis of the arbitrariness of signs. On the surface it would seem that either signs are applied arbitrarily or that a particular precept demands a particular sign. Merleau-Ponty’s ‘doctrine of autochthonous organization maintains that there is a fundamental organization to the world as perceived that is not constituted by the act of

46. Martin Dillon, *Semiological Reductionism: a critique of the deconstruction movement in postmodern thought*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 111.

47. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 67.

48. Dillon, *Semiological Reductionism*, 50.

perception'.⁴⁹ He conceives perception as a pre-reflective openness on to the world which gives a cognition of the world at the level of perception, gives the world a meaning-for-us. We open upon a world of which we are a part in a primordial intertwining of the visible and the invisible of man and world. The style, the mode of self-presentation, of what is given makes the demand on us to perceive something as what-it-is, as a lake and not a house, etc. Cognition is at the primordial level for Merleau-Ponty, and not on the level of language systems. Fundamental to Merleau-Ponty's vision is his concept of sedimentation.

Sedimentation, the living system of meaning, is an essential feature of Merleau-Ponty's vision. There is a world of thought, or a sediment, left by our mental processes which enables us to rely on our concepts and acquired judgments as we might on things there in front of us, presented globally, without there being any need for us to resynthesize them.⁵⁰ While the visible counts so much for us and has an absolute prestige, the past, the future, and the elsewhere are features of:

'a whole architecture, a whole complex of phenomena "in tiers," a whole series of "levels of being"... there is no individual that would not be representative of a species or of a family of beings, would not have, would not be a certain style, a certain manner of managing the domain of space and time over which it has competency, of pronouncing, of articulating that domain, of radiating about a wholly virtual center –in short, a certain manner of being, in the active sense...'⁵¹

The concept of sedimentation means the settling of culture into things.

The world of meanings is not before us in a static sense. Just as, when in and among the world of things, we can move across a room avoiding people and chairs either deliberately or spontaneously, so too sedimented meanings, the "mental panorama", may

49. Ibid., 51.

50. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 130.

51. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible & the Invisible*, 114 -15.

be given clearly or vaguely. Time alters the force of the immediate perception and our thin autonomy retains perceptions as temporal strata within our mental panorama, our private world of thought. However consciousness is not a private summing up; it is an ek-stasic field of experience, a lived-relationship to the spatial and temporal field that is the world. To see some-thing, for Merleau-Ponty, is to have at a distance from a human vantage point in space, the space that geometry explains. We see the world from within it and we can never regain the immediate, for if it were possible to do so, we would have changed it in the process. Unlike Kant, to whom the cogito is an empty form of thought, ‘We are restoring to the cogito a temporal thickness. If there is not endless doubt, and if “I think”, it is because I plunge on into provisional thoughts and, by deeds, overcome time’s discontinuity.’⁵² Available to the intentionality of the present thought, sedimented meanings are not a final gain. The present thought augments the meaning of the past present thought and is in return revised and updated. We are always separated from the immediate ‘by the whole thickness of [my] present’.⁵³ Sedimented meanings enrich present consciousness and are primary in the formation of human rationality as opposed to instinctual or obsessive thinking.⁵⁴

Consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body in Merleau-Ponty’s thinking. The body is an expressive space and our embodiment forces us to acknowledge meanings which are particular, rather than universal. We belong to time

52. Ibid., 398.

53. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible & the Invisible*, 122.

54. There is a down-side, of course, to acquired ideas in terms of power and prejudice, dualisms, etc. Merleau-Ponty addresses this issue many times. In “Man and Adversity” in *Signs*, he writes: ‘Whatever our responses have been, there should be a way to circumscribe perceptible zones of our experience and formulate, if not ideas about man that we hold in common, at least a new experience of our condition’ (225).

and space; the body combines with them and includes them. Sedimented beneath our idea of objective space is the experience of our own body in inhabiting space. ‘Experience discloses... a primitive spatiality of which experience is merely the outer covering and which merges with the body’s very being’.⁵⁵ The appropriation of space takes place in the body, in its understanding of itself as a space. Our perception gives a sensory image, for example, “a tight space” or “big-sky openness”, that is not formed by us as an operation of the intellect. Without our bodily experience as a-space-in-and-of-space, our concept of space would be a dimensionless flatness. We are a space in both the visible and invisible sense in Merleau-Ponty’s model. We visibly take up room and we are a series of invisible spaces held together by our visible body. We are in space in the sense of our standpoint from within the space of a visible lived-world, yet that world is invisible to us by virtue of the unnumbered vantage points, either available or unavailable to us, an unknown larger space unavailable either subjectively or objectively. This is why Merleau-Ponty asserts that the relationship between the embodied subject and the lived-world is not to be understood on the basis of an intellectual operation between epistemological subject and objects.

‘Indeed, the natural world presents itself as existing in itself over and above its existence for me; the act of transcendence whereby the subject is thrown open to the world runs away with itself and we find ourselves in the presence of a nature which has no need to be perceived in order to exist.’⁵⁶

We see the world, that is, perceive the world, straightforwardly, as it is to us. It is only in reflection that we intellectualize our own stance into a point of view that is relative to any and every other point of view. Within the “perceptual faith” mode, we accept what is

55. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 148.

56. *Ibid.*, 330.

given as “true” without any consideration of the ubiquitous underlay of scientific formulations set up as objective truth. In perceptual faith, we recognize associations and resemblances, things reappear without reason, sensations and unbidden images develop and what we perceive is true, but only in the sense that it is real to us. Intellectual reflection reveals to us a perspective taken, that the body has operated to reveal a series of one-sided perceptions in a partially-given, never totally-given, reality.

Upon reflection, we recognize that, in addition to our own perspective, there are indefinite numbers of other perspectives available both to us and to others. We can vary our perspective indefinitely, take a different standpoint, merely by taking a step, and then another in a never-ending series. The ‘visible present... stops up my view, that is, time and space extend beyond the visible present, and at the same time they are behind it, in depth, in hiding. The visible can fill me and occupy me only because I who see it do not see it from the depths of nothingness, but from the midst of itself’.⁵⁷ The richness of our experience of the world is structured, for Merleau-Ponty, in the sedimented layers existent in the world over and above its existence “for me”. The natural world is an ordered totality and each encounter within that totality alters, enriches and modifies, what was assumed in the “perceptual faith” mode. We are continually surprised by the “new”, a turn of phrase, a fresh curve. From within the space of ourselves, we create meaning from the foundation of sedimented understandings both in ourselves and in the organization of our lived-world.

Our partial perspectives constitute our experience within the overall structures of the lived-world of our perceptions. The experience is not in terms of ‘ready-made ideas’ but there are conditions for the possibility of experience that structure what that experience can

57. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible & the Invisible*, 113.

be. Merleau-Ponty's sense of the *Fundierung* concept (the institution/expression dynamic) is amended in his assertion that we recognize things that have been "named", while 'the most familiar thing remains indeterminate so long as we have not recalled its name'.⁵⁸ We have a kind of ignorance of our thoughts until we have formulated them for ourselves: we begin to speak without knowing what we will say; writers begin projects without knowing exactly what they are going to put into them. We perceive an object and know it by its name. When our eyes fall upon a tree, we do not represent to ourselves the concept of tree. Words have meaning and it is through language that we reach objects. 'Speech, in the speaker, does not translate ready-made thought, but accomplishes it',⁵⁹ prior to any thematization or mental synthesis.

It was in *On the Phenomenology of Language*⁶⁰ that Merleau-Ponty connected his theory of language with the linguistics of Saussure. Merleau-Ponty held that Saussure's distinction between synchrony and diachrony in language was a distinction between speech and language.⁶¹ Synchrony was held by Merleau-Ponty to refer to the "originality" of present speech while diachrony would refer to the past, the history, of a language. He maintained that while all developments in language can be observed in a retrospective view that looks forward to change, all change in language has had its beginning in speech. When enough people at a given time adopt a new sign in speech, it becomes established as a part of the whole of a language. These synchronic aspects of change can be seen as slices of time cutting into the diachronic stream of the language system.

58. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 177.

59. *Ibid.*, 178.

60. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 86 – 97.

61. The conventional wisdom among linguists is that Merleau-Ponty misrepresented Saussure's theory.

‘At first the “subjective” point of view envelops the “objective” point of view; synchrony envelops diachrony. The past of language began by being present.... In another connection, diachrony envelops synchrony. If language allows random elements when it is considered according to a longitudinal section, the system of synchrony must at every moment allow fissures where brute events can insert themselves.’⁶²

Merleau-Ponty is committed to a subjective view of language and meaning, but he denies a purely subjective account of the generation of meaning in language just as strongly as he distances himself from language as an object, an inert thing. In his consideration of sign and signified relationship in language, the object is not replaced for him by the word. His thesis of the visible and the invisible is applicable here in terms of the sign (the word) as visible, and the signified (the concept) as invisible. For Merleau-Ponty, there will not be meaning as “Ideal Truth”. Our perceptions clothe “presence” and what is phenomenologically given to us is received veiled by our perceptions themselves. ‘He who looks must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at.’⁶³

Language has the dynamism of a natural thing, known through its exercise as it opens upon things. ‘Certain elements of the world take on the value of dimensions to which from then on we relate all the others and in whose *language* we express them.’⁶⁴ Our own perceptions communicated in speech stylize us to others from the own-ness of the body’s perceptual foundation. In relation to others, we perceive the world a certain way and implicit in our perception is a demand made upon others within a certain perceptual situation. The demand is a claim for a confirmation, an objective validation of the truth-value of our own perceptions. ‘For the speaking subject, to express is to become aware of;

62. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 86.

63. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible & the Invisible*, 134.

64. *Ibid.*, 54.

he does not express just for others, but also to know himself what he intends.’⁶⁵ For Merleau-Ponty, there is not a one-to-one correspondence of sign and signified, of thought and object. It is when the sign has become sedimented into a culture’s language that it comes to have an experience-related meaning. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, behavior creates meaning, but ‘alone of all expressive processes, speaking is able to settle into a sediment and constitute an acquisition for inter-subjective use’.⁶⁶

The human linguistic intention undertakes the translation of experience into “lived-reality”. The relationship between thought, as language-using consciousness, and perception, the pre-linguistic objectification of the world, is the study of the nexus of these structures of experience (which Husserl termed *Fundierung*).⁶⁷ James Edie writes that this study took a special form in Merleau-Ponty’s thought, that ‘of a special investigation of the relationship of apriori truth to factual or empirical truth’.⁶⁸ Merleau-Ponty maintained that what we know as “real” is what is perceived from a given standpoint. It is not more real if it is true for every intellect:

‘Before our undivided existence, the world is true: it exists. The unity, the articulations of both are intermingled. We experience in it a truth which shows through and envelops us rather than being held and circumscribed by our mind.’⁶⁹

We perceive the lived-world and articulate it. We perceive in a pre-reflective silence and objectify the world in reflection. But to found the meaning of the lived-world in mind would be to fail to acknowledge that a priori structures are solely structures of this

65. Ibid., 90.

66. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 190.

67. James M. Edie, *Speaking and Meaning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 94.

68. Ibid.

69. Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 6.

perceptual space, which is not the only space there is. It is not, for instance, the space of “outer” space. If man perceives and experiences the space of outer space as being the same as the space of the Earth - but with a difference, it is because human reflection necessarily refers back to the structures of the lived-world experience of planet Earth. In reflection, space-walkers compare the space-walk experience to the Earth-experience, to concepts sedimented over time from within the givenness of Earth. The light-weightedness experienced in the space of zero gravity is named in terms of the absence of an earthly feature rather than as a what-it-is of a space alien to man. We have the language, meanings, math, and science only of our particular and inter-subjectively lived-world. ‘Thus every truth of fact is a truth of reason, and vice versa. ...It is therefore of the essence of certainty to be established only with reservations...’⁷⁰ Merleau-Ponty’s view that geometric truths are relative values (that is, they can only have a truth-value in the space of our particular life-world) is extended by him to possible worlds. He writes that ‘there is no other world possible in the sense in which mine is... because any other world that I might try to conceive would set limits to this one, would be found on its boundaries, and would consequently merely fuse with it.’⁷¹

Subjectivity for Merleau-Ponty is inherence in a world. Objectivity is a perspective taken, a standpoint from which we perceive. A priori truth and empirical truth are then two facets of the same experience, each founded upon and yet founding the other and neither one exclusively “primary” nor “derived”, ‘since it is through the originated that the

70. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 396.

71. *Ibid.*, 398.

originator is made manifest'.⁷² Merleau-Ponty's interest in linguistics centers around Saussure's move away from an indexical, instrumental view of language in traditional linguistics and toward a structural linguistics that Merleau-Ponty adopted in his questioning of the genesis of language from within a phenomenological point of view.

In grounding all meaning in our perception of the lived-world, Merleau-Ponty eschews a transcendental sphere of meaning. He rejects 'the precept that meaning presupposes identification, which, in turn, presupposes subsumption under a concept or sign'.⁷³ For him, not all perception is mediated by signs. Being-in-the-world is our truth. 'We can possess a truth, but this experience of truth would be absolute knowledge only if we could thematize every motive, that is, if we could cease being in a situation.'⁷⁴ Instead, our perceptions are organized pre-reflectively in the immediacy of the givenness of situation. We perceive phenomena, objects or events, and apply a name to a given phenomenon as the accomplishment of thought. Even the absence of "givenness" is given to us in this way. To imagine 'Pierre who is not there', is neither a process of imagining Pierre somewhere else nor a reflection of a particular space without Pierre. The lived-world is comprehended by us subjunctively, in a mode of possibility open to verification by a reality which is independent of the mind. The contingency of the world and the limiting of truth and meaning to the givenness of the lived world delivers to our "thin autonomy" a layer of creative autonomy. Man plunges into provisional thought, checks his perceptions against what is held to be "real". Man works synchronically, in terms of the state of the things at the moment, and diachronically, within culture, history, and the

72. Ibid., 394.

73. Ibid., 50.

74. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 395.

physics of the Earth, to confirm, to doubt, to assent, debate and/or deny. Human consciousness projects around man his past, future, the human setting, his physical, ideological and moral situation. Creative autonomy is the invisible core of our humanity where, within the din of life, silent choices are ceaselessly made.

Humans are inseparable from an immersion in the lived-world's autochthonous structure. We survive and prosper because, as a natural life form, humanity is primordially nurtured in this earthly space. The invisible aspect of man, that which is neither clearly mental nor clearly physical, are aspects ascribed to the whole human being through Merleau-Ponty's concept of human predicates. That a distinction can be drawn between the mental and the physical presupposes the capacity to use these human predicates. Neither purely material nor purely mental, human senses are already "smart" and the body moves through, situates and orients itself in the world and gives meaning to that world of its own experience. The body is autochthonously structured in a way which is not merely to survive but to organize sensory contents of experience toward a unity of meaningfulness. Edie points out that 'each child invents for himself the whole structure of his maternal tongue on the basis of his own perspectival, restricted experience of it, and miraculously, this is just the language which his whole world understands and speaks'.⁷⁵

In *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty states that language developed without an explicit grasp of rules according to which sound and meaning were to be paired. Primordially man is able to make use of the body to mean, to express and to understand, purposes that transcend the body. For him, we don't use words to translate clear and distinct interior thought into an external representation of it. Rather, when we speak we

75. Edie, *Speaking and Meaning*, 84.

specify our divergence from other views, and those who hear note not simply our “ideas” but also our obsessions, our secret history, which is laid bare in the formulation into language. ‘Each is led on by what he said and the response he received, led on by his own thoughts of which he is no longer the sole thinker.’⁷⁶ Language takes form in the lived-through perceptual contact with the world in which we take up the mute perceptual gesture and its visible field in order to articulate experience. The visual is primary for Merleau-Ponty, a gestalt-like experience, and language is structured in the way that it is because visual experience is structured the way that it is.

Merleau-Ponty says that the vision and the body are “tangled up in one another”. His revision of the reversibility thesis (one hand touching another hand) asserts that there is a necessary de-centering that occurs, a standpoint taken, which is essential to perception. I see and am seen; I touch and am touched; I can see what I touch and touch what I see. And that the world consists of a numberless potential of standpoints from which I am “the seen”. Martin Dillon sees the purpose of Merleau-Ponty’s thought, the section he was thinking through at the time of his death, as his ‘continuing effort to free phenomenology from its historical confinement within the sphere of immanence by restoring to phenomena the transcendence they manifest in the perceptual domain’.⁷⁷ What we perceive is never fully perceived in its entirety whether the object of perception is animate or inanimate. As Dillon says, ‘the phenomenon is the thing we perceive, but we perceive that we do not perceive the entirety of its being’.⁷⁸ Reversibility is conceived by Merleau-Ponty as an

76. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 119.

77. Martin C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 162.

78. *Ibid.*, 164.

interweaving of the visible and the invisible that is constitutive of the phenomenal world. He wanted to bridge the span between a subjectivist phenomenology of immanence and a reflective philosophy of transcendence. The transcendence of the world would be restored in the sense that I can not experience the “being-seen of myself”. More importantly, the reversibility of the subject-object roles is Merleau-Ponty’s means of overcoming a potential charge of dualism in his ontology. In his view, relationships between self and world, self and others, are characterized by a crisscrossing which is at the same time a contact and a separation and which he terms chiasm. In the chiasmic dynamic there is no subject/object dichotomy because there is no subjective reflection to objectify the unfolding of the Being of beings or to take a position outside of the phenomena in order to construct a transparency that isn’t there. The chiasm, for Merleau-Ponty, is both a separation and a reversibility,

‘If I cannot touch my own movement, this movement is entirely woven out of contacts with me- -The touching oneself and the touching have to be understood as each the reverse of the other--...the untouchable of the touch, the invisible of vision, the unconscious of consciousness ...is the other side or the reverse (or the other dimensionality) of sensible being...’⁷⁹

The German-born artist, Oliver Herring, to whom “method of making” is central, employed the technique of knitting in his art of the 90’s. The work that first brought him widespread attention, *A Flower for Ethyl Eichelberger*, was a tribute to the performance artist of that name who committed suicide after being diagnosed with AIDS. Herring said that he chose knitting because he wanted a process that ‘would reflect the passage of

79. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible & the Invisible*, 255.

time’.⁸⁰ When the work was shown, ‘Herring sat in the shadowy gallery knitting. His presence emphasized Eichelberger’s absence.’⁸¹ Herring’s later work included an actual figure “knitting himself” because he could seem to be bringing his form into being in a continuous stream. ‘These individual stitches in time can be compared with [the] photographic frames that are the integers of film; both stitches and frames remain distinguishable, even as they build into a larger whole.’⁸² Herring’s work, though unintentionally so, is a visual explication of Merleau-Ponty’s thesis of chiasm: a method of making, the weaving of the visible and the invisible of body, place, and space, which creates meaning.

For Merleau-Ponty, the intersection or crisscrossing between the human body and the world is the making of perceptual meaning. In the system of language, sound, meaning, word and thought are interwoven. There is a chiasm, a separation and a doubling back, between the structures of the embodied self and the structures of the linguistic. In *Prose of the World*, he describes the chiasm as ‘the thread of silence from which the tissue of speech is woven’.⁸³

Merleau-Ponty termed the interrelationship of the visible and the invisible of the world “flesh”, his prototype of Being. For him,

‘the flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it we would need the old term “element”, in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings

80. Janet Koplos, “Stitches in Time,” *Art in America* (New York), Vol. 91, No. 1 (January 2003): 96-99.

81. *Ibid.*, 96.

82. *Ibid.*, 97.

83. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. John O’Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1973), 46.

a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an “element” of Being’.⁸⁴

Flesh denotes everything that may be described phenomenologically, everything that is given, everything that is hidden. The experience of the world is the motivation behind Merleau-Ponty’s innovation here. He argues that we are not “in the world” as though in a box. Where is the seer in the body that is only “shadows stuffed with organs”? The answer for Merleau-Ponty lies in the intertwining of the visible and the invisible, of nature and the human body, the human body and perceptual consciousness, and of the natural and the cultural. It is an intertwining because the flesh of the world is a tangled mix of the visible and the invisible. It is chiasmic because visible and invisible are an isomorphic reversal of one another.

The body, together with the world upon which it opens, sustains a field of stable meanings of lived experience. Language is in a chiasmic relationship with the body and the lived world. Merleau-Ponty held that ‘It is by considering language that we would best see how we are to and how we are not to return to the things themselves’.⁸⁵ It is through the concept of chiasm that Merleau-Ponty escapes traditional dualism, in a unity of the human as perceived and perceiving. By the time of *The Visible & the Invisible*, he had left behind the dualism of a synchronic linguistic of speech and a diachronic linguistics of language from his earlier interest in Saussure’s project. What he continued in until the end was his expression of the becoming in which meaning is generated and structured.

For Merleau-Ponty, the relationship of sign to signified is not in terms of experience or intellectualizing in a strong sense. He sees the relationship of a sign to

84. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible & the Invisible*, 139.

85. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible & the Invisible*, 125.

another sign as joined to the same degree as the sign's relation to other signs, which is the same as is the relation of the object signified by the sign to other objects. The sign is always a sign in use, always contextual. For Merleau-Ponty, the meaning is not in the sign, the meaning is the sign. The sign is the perceived perceiving, speech speaking, thought thinking.

He never discarded the ideas from Saussure that, taken singly, signs do not signify and that each sign marks a divergence of meaning between itself and other signs. The meaning of the sign is simultaneous with the knowledge of its differentiation.

'The absence of a sign can be a sign, and expression is not the adjustment of an element of discourse to each element of meaning, but an operation of language upon language which suddenly is thrown out of focus towards its meaning.'⁸⁶

Meaning emerges from a combination of signs that draw from a real system. But while Saussure speaks about "shapeless masses" of thought and sound, Merleau-Ponty would only speak in terms of existents, the perceiver and a system of signs. Signs are known by relation, designation, absence, substitution, figures of speech and metaphor; but it is a relationship within what is existentially present to the perceiving subject. For Merleau-Ponty, meaning is not given in "sign-present" because meaning is always in the act of becoming. The primordial in man is the event of his enworlding as an opening in a mode of perceptual faith. The event of man is always, for Merleau-Ponty, within the existential world which is characterized by an interweaving of the visible and invisible of both man and world. This primordial structure dwells in the sedimented structure, affirming and/or amending it. The sedimented structure is a collection of the bits and pieces of the

86. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 44.

phenomenal world; but it is nothing other than a sediment without the presence of a speaker. ‘There is no other meaning than carnal, figure and ground.’⁸⁷

87. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible & the Invisible*, 265.

CHAPTER 4 DERRIDA

The focus of this chapter will be to give an account of Derrida's thinking in the areas of perception, Saussurian linguistics, and in the origin and institution of signs. Derrida's critique originated the concept of "differance" as a deconstruction of the concepts of structural linguistics and phenomenology. Derrida uncannily seeks out conceptual oppositions in texts and, inverting the binary pair, shows how the deferred second term is actually indispensable and constitutively prior to the primary term. Among the binary pairs of interest in this study are the following:

'the *gram* is neither a signifier nor a signified, neither a sign nor a thing, neither a presence nor an absence, neither a position nor a negation, etc.; spacing is neither space nor time; the incision is neither the incised integrity of a beginning, or of a simple cutting into, nor simple secondarity'.⁸⁸

Derrida's deconstruction of what he sees as phenomenological philosophy's attachment to a metaphysics of presence-to-meaning and the relationship of that to his view that this tradition's privileges the language of speech over the language of writing will be addressed.

The trouble begins at once for Merleau-Ponty. Perception, man's access to truth for Merleau-Ponty, is a reality for Derrida, but it is a reality as a function and not as an origin or source. What Merleau-Ponty conceives as pre-reflective perception is, for Derrida, the action that registers before there is meaning. The action is, of course, not disembodied, ergo there is a subject, a center, of the function. 'The subject is absolutely indispensable.

88. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 43.

I don't destroy the subject; I situate it.'⁸⁹ The subject is the originator of a movement which is not an intentionality for Derrida. To be the source of an "intention" would implicitly be to seek a certain outcome in terms of a move in the direction of a meaning, and "meaning" is an ideality to Derrida. In what sense does he assert that meaning is an ideality? It is in the sense of permanence, but it is a permanence based upon repetition. In Derrida's view, language doesn't "mean" something: language refers only to itself. When we use language, we work from within a repeatable system. Husserl gives us the motives:

'A sign which would take place but "once" would not be a sign. ...It must remain the *same*, and be able to be repeated as such, despite and across the deformations which the empirical event necessarily makes it undergo. ...But, it can function as a sign, and in general as a language, only if a formal identity enables it to be issued again and to be recognized. This identity is necessarily ideal.'⁹⁰

Derrida will say that what Husserl has called "preexpressive" sounds to him like a layer of pure meaning, or pure signified, that a signifying intentionality could tap, bring to light, and express. For Derrida, the intentionality/perceptual-intuitiveness dynamic leaves the relationship of signified (concept) and signifier (sound-image, word) as one of exteriority. Perception entails exteriority to Derrida. Implicit in the notion of standpoint is a perspective taken within a structured whole which, to him, is the problem of presence as origin within a linear, diachronic view of language unfolding in time. Linearity is 'associated with logocentrism, phonocentrism, semantism, and idealism.'⁹¹, which locates

89. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play," in *The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1970), 271.

90. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 50.

91. Derrida, *Positions*, 50. Allen Bass, in a footnote, refers the reader to a passage in *Of Grammatology* where Derrida describes linearity as 'the suppression of multidimensional symbolic thought', n. 20, 102.

meaning, according to Derrida's critique, in the abiding functions and structures of the external world.

The crux of the error that Derrida assigns to Husserlian phenomenology is in its privileging of "presence to meaning". In his view, Husserl's hypothesis of solitary discourse is a pure ideality, pre-sent as an origin, a living present which, in itself, becomes available for infinite repeatability. This is phenomenology's principle of principles in Derrida's view. He asks:

'What does the value of primordial presence to intuition as source of sense and evidence, as the a priori of aprioris, signify? First of all it signifies the certainty, itself ideal and absolute, that the universal form of all experience (*Erlebnis*), and therefore of all life, has always been and will always be the present. The present alone is and ever will be. Being is presence or the modification of presence'.⁹²

In opposition to this emphasis on a presence to meaning, Derrida holds that there is no meaning conceivable outside and before the operations of differing and deferring (differance) in the process or system of signification. His view is that Husserl wanted a "purity" of expression within a solitary mental life, in an immediacy of self-present consciousness. Central to Derrida's critique of Husserl is the argument that an immediacy of self-present experience or perception would be empty in the absence of any representation or signification of what is non-present. What could be a pre-linguistic, pre-semiotic, pre-expressive thought? This problem prompts Derrida to state that '*In a certain sense, "thought" means nothing.*'⁹³ The signified is always-already signifying and is not

92. Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 53.

93. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 93.

secondary or derivative. Derrida's formulates his concept of arche-writing to overcome what he sees as the priority given to speech as "presence-to-meaning".

Derrida asserts that because the voice as "immediacy" is the sole case to escape the distinction between what is worldly and what is transcendental, making that distinction possible in our understanding, we place a higher value on speech than on writing. 'To speak to someone doubtless is to hear oneself speak, to be heard by oneself; but, at the same time, if one is heard by another, to speak is to make him *repeat immediately* in himself the hearing-oneself-speak in the very form I effectuated it. This immediate repetition is a reproduction of pure auto-affection without the help of anything external'⁹⁴ The experience of a self-proximity is an absolute reduction of space in general to the trace of an exterior in the interior space in which our experience or our image of our own body is spread forth.

The proximity is broken when I see myself write rather than hear myself speak. So in the natural attitude, the "immediacy" of speech is recognized as the privileged medium of human discourse. Derrida's view is that all material substances of speech, both sound and inscription, are secondary to the "immaterial substance" of content. Content lies in the play of differance in expressions of "meaning" in any context, including the inner dialogue, speech, inscription, gesture, art, etc. The content is not an ineffable presence in the noumena, nor is it a self-contained exterior system. It is arche-writing, a very subtle Derridian concept that George Free describes as 'an operation that is constitutive of

94. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 80.

language in its ideality and, at the same time, that is irreducible to the concept of linguistic form'.⁹⁵

Arche-writing appears as a process in the forming of human thought. Saussure's arbitrary connection between sign and meaning occurs in a blank space, a spacing that 'is always the unperceived, the nonpresent, and the nonconscious'⁹⁶, to Derrida. Arche-writing is the dead time at work, in the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space in human consciousness, in the birth of signification. Arche-writing is inscribed as a "sensible" and "spatial" element that is detected as "exterior". Non-presence of what is "other" is then the very possibility of an objective outside which, because it is so intimate to us, leaves only a trace, the arche-memory of differance. Derrida links Saussure's standard form in writing (23) to the point he wants to make: that it is the spacing of words and sounds, the structure of language, that makes language meaningful. As in Saussure's structuralist formulation, the signs used in writing are arbitrary, and the value of letters is purely negative and differential.

Derrida parts with Saussure in the privileging of speech-as-presence over writing-as-derivative and secondary. Where tradition wants a secondary or derivative status for the particularity of "language as writing", Derrida insists that, if applied at all, this "secondarity" can't be ascribed to writing alone; it affects all signifieds in general, affects them always already, the moment they enter the game. There is not a single signified that can escape or that can be independently derived outside of the play of signifying references

95. George Free, "Language, Speech and Writing: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on Saussure" *Human Studies* 13 (1990) 293-06, 303.

96. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 68.

that constitute language. Meaning is the representative structure of repetition, signification itself for Derrida. A formal identity allows itself to be recognized as the same.

Derrida's view is that Saussure saw the "expressive value" of a "signifier" only in the form of the "sound image". Derrida explains, 'Signifier means sound-image. But not taking the "phenomenological" precaution, Saussure makes the sound image, the signifier as "mental impression," into a reality whose sole originality is to be internal...'.⁹⁷ Derrida argues that the sound-image is then held as primary while writing will be "phonetic", the exterior representation of language and of the "thought-sound". Derrida maintains that there is such a thing as an "action that registers before meaning" but it isn't an intuitive knowing that is expressed in speech as an originary self-givenness of a meaning itself instituting a sign. Such a "knowing", to Derrida, would be to 'suppose[s] that prior to signs and outside them, and excluding every trace and difference, something such as consciousness is possible. It supposes, moreover, that, even before the distribution of signs in space and in the world, consciousness can gather itself up in its own presence'.⁹⁸

In Derrida's view, there is a coherent connection between signs in speech and signs in writing as both are founded upon a phonemic basis. The phoneme is the speech sound. But, in itself, the phoneme can't be spoken; rather, it is what makes speech possible. Phonemes are the component parts of the word-unit which, for Derrida, means the aspects of difference within a given sound. Saussure and Derrida would agree that changing a phoneme doesn't change the word, and that the material element, sound alone, does not "belong" to language but is only a substance put to use. But for Derrida, Saussure's

97. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 47.

98. *Ibid.*, 147.

“arbitrariness” in the connection between language as thought and language as speech applies just as unconditionally to the connection between speech and writing. In our earlier discussion of the multiplicity of languages (words for “horse”), we established that the connection between sound and meaning is arbitrary. Derrida’s point here is that the connection between sound and inscription is equally arbitrary and, against Saussure, that writing is not the derivative image and copy of speech.

Saussure places all material substances of linguistic expression (sound, writing) in a “secondary” category, yet spoken speech has special status:

First, the graphic form of words strikes us as being something permanent and stable, better suited than sound to account for the unity of language throughout time. Though it creates a purely fictitious unity, the superficial bond of writing is much easier to grasp than the only true bond, the bond of sound.⁹⁹

Derrida’s view is that Saussure could see but could not understand that a certain model of writing is necessary, provisionally imposed, as an instrument and technique of representation of the concepts of a language system. Rather than understanding writing as that which permits the thinking, within language, of concepts like those of the sign, technique, representation, and language, Saussure wanted to bracket writing away from what he views as a closed, internal sphere of play of phonemes, characterized not by their particular qualities but by their distinctness in relation to the other elements of the system. Derrida writes, ‘it is the theoretician of the arbitrariness of the sign who reminds us...’ that there is a recoverable, simple and original natural order of relationships between speech and writing, that is, between an inside and an outside.¹⁰⁰ In thinking through the relationship between speech and writing, Saussure does so within the context of a

99. Saussure, 25.

100. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 35.

natural/instituted opposition and privileges the allegedly natural relationship (a stable oral tradition) between voice and sense, between the order of phonic signifiers and their content, their signification. The “interior” is natural: the “exterior” instituted. Writing as the exterior presents ‘annoying consequences’ to Saussure. The problem is both that, in his view, language is always evolving, while writing remains stable; and that spelling lags behind pronunciation. The consequence of this is: ‘writing obscures language; it is not a guise for language but a disguise’.¹⁰¹

For Derrida, intersubjectivity, the site of expression and indication, is the openness of the present upon an outside of itself in an unfolding in time. This being outside of itself is a spacing in which the relation of one present to another is a non-derived re-presentation. Presence ‘to another present as such produces the structure of signs in general as “reference,” as being-for-something, and radically precludes their reduction’.¹⁰² Once we move from the “hearing-oneself-speak” of the interior monologue to the openness upon exteriority, of what is not “one’s own”, we have opened upon a spacing.

‘As soon as we admit both spacing as “interval” or difference and as openness upon the outside, there can no longer be any absolute inside... Hearing oneself speak is not the inwardness of an inside that is closed in upon itself; it is the irreducible openness on the inside; it is the eye and the world within speech.... And if indication –for example, writing in the everyday sense –must necessarily be “added” to speech to complete the constitution of the ideal object, if speech must be “added” to the thought identity of the object, it is because the “presence” of sense and speech had already from the start fallen short of itself.’¹⁰³

Derrida holds that the presumed interiority of meaning is already worked upon by its own

101. Saussure, 30.

102. Ibid., 84.

103. Ibid., 86-87.

exteriority. It is always carried outside itself. It already differs (from self) before any act of expression in the concept of arche-writing.

‘Freeplay is the disruption of presence’¹⁰⁴ for Derrida. “Thought means nothing” means thought is the operator within the field of freeplay. Thought does not derive from meaning but operates within a structure of repetition in which a signifier becomes recognizable. For Derrida, the presence-of-the-present is derived from repetition and not the reverse.

‘Freeplay is always as interplay of absence and presence, but if it is to be radically perceived, freeplay must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence; being must be conceived of as presence and absence beginning with the possibility of freeplay and not the other way around.’¹⁰⁵

Differance is never a sensible surplus nor is it a negative value. Differance plays within presence and absence.

To Derrida, it is the meaning, the sense of a thought, that is at issue and his view is that both writing and speech are natural in the same way and instituted in the same way. The units of the system have to be analyzed from within the whole, which means much more than an adding together of word-units and uniting sounds and concepts. The field of freeplay is a field of infinite substitution; infinite within the closure of a finite collectivity.

The field permits infinite substitution because:

‘there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and founds the freeplay of substitution. ...the absence of a center or origin, is the movement of *supplementarity*. One cannot determine the center, the sign which supplements it, which takes its place in its absence- because this sign adds itself, occurs in addition, over and above, comes as a *supplement*. The movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always

104. Derrida, *Structure, Sign and Play*, 263.

105. *Ibid.*, 264-65.

more, but this addition is a floating one because it comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified.’¹⁰⁶

The text is the isomorphism of Derrida’s vision of the field of freeplay. In the text, there is no center, no presence. Composed of visual signifiers, it is external rather than purely formal and internal. For Derrida, once a written image is applied to the spoken word, the identity of the word is altered, ‘the point of origin becomes ungraspable’.¹⁰⁷ The sound plus sign constitutes a new identity which seems original, a what-it-is. The spoken word then loses its power, its primacy as “original” in the sense of a unity prior to sensible representation. According to Derrida, ‘the phonic element, the term, the plentitude that is called sensible, would not appear without the differance or opposition which gives them *form*’. Differance is the formation of form which ‘presupposes an originary synthesis not preceded by any absolute simplicity’.¹⁰⁸ A science of differance would be a science of non-origin, and an impossibility. Derrida has taken the science of linguistics and in a classic deconstructionist inversion appropriated questions of language and meaning and reframed them as philosophical themes in the sense that they are re-posed as “open to question”.

Textuality is not a “new idealism” for Derrida, not “the last word”. The new identity that an originality of expression in a text sets in motion entails a deconstruction to deny a graphocentrism of the word as presence. The case of the “title” is an example Derrida takes: The title,

‘which –like the head or capital, or the oracle –carries its head high, speaks in too high a voice, both because it raises its voice and drowns out the ensuing

106. Derrida, *Structure, Sign, and Play*, 260-61.

107. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 34.

108. *Ibid.*, 62-63.

text, and because it is found high up on the page, the top of the page becoming the eminent center, the beginning, the command station, the chief, the archon.' ...To suspend the title, then is necessary, considering what the title dominates. But the function of the title is not one merely of hierarchy. The title to suspend, is also, by virtue of its place, suspended... Up above the text from which it expects and receives all –or nothing'.¹⁰⁹

Spoken language already belongs to writing, in Derrida's view; but what remains now is to demystify writing, inscription. The play of difference in textual signification carries within it the possibility of its own erasure since writing too is structured by difference. Derrida wants to deconstruct the assumption of "center" in the text, a central meaning which would be another false appearance of a present as presence. He signifies this absence with the use of crossed lines over words to mark the placing of a formal "essence" of meaning under erasure. Inscription, like speech, is open to being thought under erasure because, for Derrida, language in its being is difference.

109. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, (Illinois:University of Chicago Press, 1981), 182-83.

CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Structuralism was a movement of thought that wanted to understand cultural phenomena through an intellectual reconstruction of interconnectedness and relationships, rather than through a study of isolated material things in themselves. While anthropology and linguistics may consider structure as a “real” existent, phenomenological philosophy has employed structuralism as a template to assist in its descriptions of lived experience. An understanding of the internal, invisible structures would not be the same as the breaking down into smaller particles to be isolated and studied as in science. Rather the approach toward structuralism in philosophy was prompted by a conviction that observable patterns can be valuable in informing a sense of the whole.

For both Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, all structuralism is a structuralism of the lived world. It is the patterns of the phenomenal world that are examined. The key sub-headings in this thesis are the status of concepts of time and space, and the role played by particular concepts in the structuralism of Saussurian linguistics. Where do Merleau-Ponty’s and Derrida’s views coalesce and where do they diverge?

Merleau-Ponty saw time as an instituted system of equivalences; that is, time is always seen from the standpoint of one who is in it. Time constitutes itself and yet, paradoxically, time is only time as a perceptual event of man. For Merleau-Ponty, the contradiction is lifted because every new present is itself transcendental. What is distant gives itself and yet man knows that it is not there but that it was just there; we never coincide with the present. Time, in his analysis, and particularly in the pages of *The Visible*

and the Invisible, ‘is a cycle defined by a central and dominant region and with indecisive contours –a swelling or bulb of time.’¹¹⁰

Derrida’s focus regarding the question of time is upon a deconstruction of the concept of “presence-to-meaning”. Derrida situates a subject before any discussion can ensue. While not precisely the same, Merleau-Ponty’s concept of perceptual faith, and Derrida’s “action that registers before there is meaning” share some attributes. The Merleau-Ponty of the 1940s to late 1950s is thought to have endorsed idealism’s notion of presence, as indicated in a passage which Nancy Holland quotes in an article (1992) on the subject: ‘But the present ...nevertheless enjoys a privilege because it is the zone in which being and consciousness coincide.’¹¹¹ However, in Holland’s conversation with Derrida, she reports that he ‘made it clear that... with *The Visible and the Invisible* it is even harder to say.’ that Merleau-Ponty’s work would fall within a metaphysics of presence.¹¹²

This position, that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is not contained within a metaphysics of presence-to-meaning, is what I would argue for here. Crucial to this reading of Merleau-Ponty is a revision in the understanding of just what “perception” is for him. Perception is the role of the body in experience and perception is always pre-reflective for Merleau-Ponty. As Holland argues, there is never a “pure” perception for Merleau-Ponty, ‘but rather an indeterminate, immanent experience’.¹¹³ In *The Visible and the Invisible*,

110. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 184.

111. Nancy J. Holland, “Merleau-Ponty on Presence: A Derridean Reading,” *Research in Phenomenology* XVI (1992) 111-20.

112. *Ibid.*, 111.

113. *Ibid.*, 113.

Merleau-Ponty writes:

‘We are interrogating our experience precisely in order to know how it opens us to what is not ourselves. *This does not even exclude the possibility that we find in our experience a movement toward what could not in any event be present to us in the original and whose irremediable absence would thus count among our originating experiences.* But, if only in order to see these margins of presence, to discern these references, to put them to the test, or to interrogate them, we do indeed first have to fix our gaze on what is apparently *given* to us.’¹¹⁴

In much of our experience, we proceed pre-reflectively in a mode of, what Merleau-Ponty calls, non-positing consciousness. In reflection, we can check our watch, catch our bearings and take note of our perspective, the standpoint from which non-positing consciousness is engaged in a world. Merleau-Ponty looks upon reflection as the ordering of a synopsis where experience is digested, a summing-up of what the embodied subject is doing in a recognition of a “here at the moment in the work I am”. For Merleau-Ponty, such a synopsis is not at all the production of a synthesis by a mind and a body. Reflection is not the combining of what has been separate, but a summing up of a past embodied experience. Thought is our embodied experience of the world. As Holland notes, it is exactly the body’s experience of the world that creates the “irremediable absence” because, unlike the ego, the body has a perspective on the world. There is always flesh, ground, figure. Reflection is the way in which, for Merleau-Ponty, the full significance of perceptions is grasped in a dynamic which does not fall into the margins of a theory of presence-to-meaning. Holland’s view is that Derrida’s objection to “perception”¹¹⁵ might be read ‘as a recognition that

114. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 159. As quoted in Holland, 112-13, (italics in original).

115. ‘There never was any “perception”; and “presentation” is a representation of the representation that yearns for itself therein as for its own birth or its death’, Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 103.

perception in the usual sense is an intellectual recreation of what is in fact a bodily consciousness not available to the transcendental ego as such'.¹¹⁶

Both Merleau-Ponty and Derrida want to avoid the traditional dualisms. In Merleau-Ponty we find a “situatedness” through which meaning emerges as the very process of embodiment. Man’s embodiment is not thought in terms of the attributes of an object, a body becoming animate; instead, man’s embodiment is that of a situated non-positing consciousness, present to the irremediable absence of the pre-reflective perception. The truth value of the reflection then becomes secondary to an immediacy of a knowing perception to which he has no access. What is had is the certainty of a past the truth value of which seems greater than an intellectual reflection upon it can reveal. Holland’s argument is that Merleau-Ponty’s non-positing consciousness is a primordial bodily experience underling the non-primordial, intellectually reconstructed perception of positing consciousness. But crucial to aligning Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, as we seek to do here, is to understand that for Merleau-Ponty it is a mere sketch or fragment of meaning within an autochthonously structured whole that calls forth a repetition within man whereby meaning is created. Holland asserts that, ‘[A]ll of these concepts –truth, consciousness, perception – are removed from their usual metaphysical significations in Merleau-Ponty –by his reliance on the necessary absence introduced by our body and our situatedness in the world’.¹¹⁷ It is our situatedness in the world that enables our reflection upon a past present and gives a sense of past and future as parts of a bodily life.

116. Holland, 114.

118. Ibid., 115.

Derrida's view on "time" is revealed by his examination of language's structure. The tense marker and the predicate, the ways in which we construct sentences and speak, reveal our distance from "presence". We don't express experience in terms of "I am being appeared to red-ly", or "red-ing is" because, as Derrida observes in his critique of Phenomenology, '...the thing itself always escapes'.¹¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty concurs because, for him, what is perceived is always seen against a background, and, thus, more is invisible than is visible in any single perspective. As early as the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty wrote,

'Hence reflection does not itself grasp its full significance unless it refers to the unreflective fund of experience which it presupposes, upon which it draws, and which constitutes for it a kind of original past, a past which has never been present.'¹¹⁹

Compare to Derrida:

'The trace is not only the disappearance of origin –within the discourse that we sustain and according to the path that we follow it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin. From then on, ...one must indeed speak of an originary trace or arche-trace.'¹²⁰

The closeness of their positions is further noted in the descriptions each has given of man's experience of time. From Merleau-Ponty:

'But if the for-itself, the revelation of self to self is merely the *hollow* in which time is formed, and if the world "in-itself" is simply the horizon of my present, then the problem is reduced to the form: How is it that a being which is still to come and has passed by, also has a present –which means that the problem is eliminated, since the future, the past, and the present are linked together in the process of temporalization.'¹²¹

118. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 104.

119. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 242. As quoted in Holland, 114.

120. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 61.

121. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 431 [italics mine].

And from Derrida:

‘Spacing as writing is the becoming-absent and the becoming-unconscious of the subject. By the movement of its drift/derivation the emancipation of the sign constitutes in return the desire for presence. ...this becoming is the constitution of subjectivity. ...Within the horizontality of spacing, ...it is not even necessary to say that spacing cuts, drops or causes to drop within the unconscious: the unconscious is nothing without this cadence and before this caesura. This signification is formed only within the *hollow* of differance: of discontinuity and of discreteness, of the diversion and the reserve of what does not appear.’¹²²

All being is a “becoming” in the thought of both Merleau-Ponty and Derrida; and the “becoming of meaning” occurs for both in a hollow, a gentler version of the abyss, that lies nowhere, but that is a “between” of presence and non-presence. This occurs for Merleau-Ponty in the lived interaction between perceiver and world; and for Derrida in the space of differance. In and through language, the ties that bind man and world are constituted in order to illuminate what shows itself as it shows itself.

From the concepts of the linguistic structuralism of Saussure that Merleau-Ponty and Derrida adapted for their own thoughts about language, we will concentrate here on only two. First, the concept of language as a sedimented system; and, secondly, the concept of language as a structure of reference.

Merleau-Ponty viewed all experience as grounded in a sedimented system, beginning with the primal fact that we find ourselves in a world which seems always-already structured to support our projects. The amazing fact that babies learn the language of their mother tongue, with all its complexities, points to the concept of a sedimented world for him. The sedimented structure of the world would be defined as “relational” rather than substantial in his view. The sedimentation is material only in the sense that we are upright with opposed

121. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 69 [italics mine].

thumb, etc., with a mode or style of being that is a questioning attunement to the world. Every encounter is a new sedimentation in the structuring of a world. What follows from this, in my view, is that every subsequent encounter is always on the basis of a sedimented structure as in the sense of “trace” in Derrida. Our subjectivity is founded on our facticity, in that I, alone, see with these eyes, see from this height, and reflect the context of a past, immediate or durational, that is uniquely mine. Only I dwell on the hither side of my skin where my embodied experience remains as a sedimented trace.

Derrida does not take up Saussure’s sedimentation concept and, in fact, he particularly decries against the use of that metaphor in his writing about Husserl’s “noetic-noematic stratum”. He writes,

‘The *interweaving* (*Verwebung*) of language, of what is purely linguistic in language with the other threads of experience, constitutes one fabric. The term *Verwebung* refers to this metaphorical zone. The strata are woven; their intermixing is such that the warp cannot be distinguished from the woof. If the stratum of logos were simply *founded*, one could set it aside so as to let the underlying substratum of nonexpressive acts and contents appear beneath it. But since this superstructure reacts in an essential and decisive way upon the *Unterschicht* [substratum], one is obliged to associate the geological metaphor with a properly *textual* metaphor, for the *fabric* or *textile* means *text*. ...In the spinning-out of language the discursive woof is rendered unrecognizable as a woof and takes the place of a warp; it takes the place of something that has not preceded it.¹²³

For Derrida, an analysis of textuality will never found the “ground” that he believes Husserl wanted. The texture of the text is irreducible to Derrida and the constitution of signification originates as non-origin in the weave of text.

The concept Derrida does appropriate from Saussure is the differential structure in linguistics. Meaning for Derrida is constituted by the operations of differing and deferring.

123. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 111-12.

Content is arche-writing. Meaning is inscribed in a *weave* of interior and exterior, as what is “situated” becomes entwined with what is other, different, differed. The primacy of the text for Derrida should then not be separated from its Latin origins and the “weaving” metaphor. The text is any medium for Derrida: verbal, non-verbal, writing, audio, video; and is held by him always to be physically independent of sender or receiver. Thought operates within a textured whole of repetition without origin from which the only “meaning” there can be derived. George Free asserts that ‘language is understood here as the process of systematization, of idealization –a process that works constantly to separate that which is internal from that which is external’.¹²⁴ That process by which language works to articulate the *hollow* of the irremediable absence which differs and defers is the process of an articulation of the unity of the internal and the external.

In Merleau-Ponty’s final work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, and in Derrida’s thoughts about language in *Of Grammatology* and *Speech and Phenomena*, I find common ground in their conceptions of the founding of time and space in the deferred-present. There is an irremediable absence that reflection marks as a difference setting in motion the passage of the a priori of a silent hollow into language. For both Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, meaning is posited by consciousness in a process of repetition in which thought serves to confirm an initial pre-reflective perception. Derrida’s ‘action that registers before there is a meaning’ and Merleau-Ponty’s pre-reflective perception lay the basis for language to express the unity of experience, not in the making of sounds or marks but in thinking. For Derrida, there is no pre-cognition of a Kantian predicate but of a signifier, the trace as arche-writing. For Merleau-Ponty, meaning is the process of our embodiment in an already

124. Free, *Language, speech and writing: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on Saussure*, 305.

autochthonously ordered world that is structured to permit our perception, and that is not a chaos which our mind must order and unify.

In his later work, Merleau-Ponty's emphasis was directed toward the interwoven interior-exterior in his concept of the "flesh" of the world (an elemental building block such as fire and water) and chiasm (a totalizing of the reflexivity of man and world), and away from the concepts of perception and sedimentation. Glen Mazis expresses the direction that Merleau-Ponty was taking as the idea that, 'the degree of meaning and vitality that something adds to our existence and our understanding might be the more appropriate standard of what is real...'¹²⁵ Derrida wants a concept of writing that is no longer the simple notation of words. A writing to cover the entire range of phonetic writing, speech, hieroglyphics, the visual, pictorial and the plastic - where logic cannot be used to ensure a seemingly "rational transparency" - and where the concepts of logic and objectivity that have been employed to assure the transparency and grounding of thought, are removed and we 'lay bare the flesh of the word'.¹²⁶ Derrida presses man to examine his linguistics concepts and give up living in them blindly. Merleau-Ponty thought that an involved embodiment in the world that looks for meaning not simply in words and concepts but in behavioral and experiential facts as well, would overcome the double error of thinking experience against a ground of nothingness, or thinking nothingness against a ground of experience.

'If I pretend to find, through reflection, in the universal mind the premise that had always backed up my experience, I can do so only by forgetting this non-knowing of a beginning which is not nothing, and which is not the reflective truth either, and which also must be accounted for. I was able to make an appeal from the world and the others to myself and take the route of reflection, only because first I was outside of myself, in the world, among the others, and

125. Mazis, Glen A., *Earthbodies*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 18.

126. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 240.

constantly this experience feeds my reflection. Such is the total situation that a philosophy must account for.¹²⁷

The reliance upon successful problem-solving and successful patterns of behavior for truth-value overlooks the truth we lack, that which constitutes our being and the being of the world in which we live. As always only perspectively given, there is an inherent falsity in meaning for us that cannot be overcome. The solution is not to deny our situatedness but to take into account reflection's proclivity to inevitably distort its subject matter. Our truth is always perspectival; we ourselves are truth's veil.

126. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 49.

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