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Language and Tradition in Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl and Saussure

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Abstract: In this paper, I examine how Merleau-Ponty develops Husserl's genetic phenomenology through an elaboration of language, which is largely influenced by Saussure's linguistics. Specifically, my focus will be on the unpublished notes to the course *Sur le problème de la parole* (*On the Problem of Speech*). I show how Merleau-Ponty recasts Husserl's notion of the historicity of truth by means of an inquiry into the relation between truth and its linguistic expression. The account that Merleau-Ponty offers differs from Husserl's in two important respects. Firstly, whereas Husserl describes a regressive inquiry of truth, Merleau-Ponty describes a regressive movement of truth, where every acquired truth seizes the tradition that precedes it. Secondly, this new notion of truth, and its dependency on its proper expression, opens up a new understanding of literature.

Keywords: genetic phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty, Husserl, Saussure, language.

In Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty finds a philosophy that roots our philosophical ideas in the experience from which they originated. He emphasizes the significant impact Husserl had on an emerging generation of philosophers in France during the inter-war period: Husserl's thinking was radically new to them because of its return to the things in their "flesh and bone."[1] However, although Merleau-Ponty acknowledges Husserl's influence, he has a double relation to Husserlian phenomenology. While Merleau-Ponty is critical of the earlier texts of Husserl, Husserl's later writings are more openly embraced. The earlier period allegedly signifies a return to a

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[1] Merleau-Ponty 2000: 254.

constituting consciousness, in contrast to his later writings, which open up a way to understand our experience in its originality. Although Merleau-Ponty often opposes the "early" to the "late" Husserl, he rarely uses the terms static and genetic phenomenology in order to differentiate between these two periods. On those occasions when he does make recourse to these designators, the distinction is analogous to that between the early and late Husserl:

> Thus it was that, having started with a "static phenomenology," he ended with a "genetic phenomenology" and a theory of "intentional history"—in other words, a logic of history. In this way he, more than anyone else, contributed to describing consciousness incarnate in an environment of human objects and in a linguistic tradition.[2]

In genetic phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty finds a philosophy that emphasizes the incarnation of consciousness in a concrete situation and in an actual language.[3] However, according to Merleau-Ponty, language remains an enigmatic theme in Husserlian phenomenology: although Husserl puts language in a "central position," it remains to a large extent unexplored.[4] Thus, language provides us "with our best basis for questioning phenomenology and recommencing Husserl's efforts instead of simply repeating what he said."[5] Furthermore, by means of this examination, he sets out to elucidate the philosophical consequences of the phenomenological investigations. The latter run the risk of being understood as merely a propaedeutic to a real philosophy, and in order to clarify their status, Merleau-Ponty initiates a phenomenology of language:[6]

> This is particularly clear in the case of the phenomenology of language. More clearly than any other, this problem requires us to make a decision concerning the relationships between phenomenology and philosophy or metaphysics.

[2] Merleau-Ponty 1964d/1948b: 135/274: "C'est ainsi que, parti d'une 'phénoménologie statique', il aboutit à une 'phénoménologie de la genèse' et à une théorie de 'l'histoire intentionnelle', en d'autres termes à une logique de l'histoire. C'est ainsi qu'il contribue plus que personne à décrire la conscience incarnée dans un milieu d'objets humains, dans une tradition linguistique."

[3] For the distinction between Husserl's earlier and later thinking as a movement toward a genetic phenomenology, see also the introduction to *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 2012/1945: xx/i). Merleau-Ponty reads the *Crisis*-project as a part of genetic phenomenology, and in this Merleau-Ponty's reading is in accordance with, for example, Christian Ferencz-Flatz and Dermot Moran (see Ferencz-Flatz 2017 and Moran 2012: 50).

[4] "On the Phenomenology of Language," a presentation that Merleau-Ponty made at the first *Colloque International de Phénoménologie*, Brussels, 1951. It was later published in *Signs* (henceforth referred to as *Signs*), Merleau-Ponty 1964a/1960a. See *Signs*: 84/105: "position centrale."

[5] *Signs*: 84/105: "Ce problème permet donc mieux qu'un autre d'interroger la phénoménologie et, non seulement de répéter Husserl, mais de recommencer son effort."

[6] *Signs*: 92/115–116.

For more clearly than any other it takes the form of both a special problem and a problem which contains all the others, including the problem of philosophy.[7]

Merleau-Ponty refers to an appendix to *Crisis (XXVI)*, where Husserl asks if the phenomenological descriptions ought to be understood as a propaedeutic to a real philosophy that should follow them.[8] Merleau-Ponty argues that in order to avoid a dualistic thinking, which would separate experience from ideas, setting apart the phenomenological descriptions from a real philosophy, we need to understand the idealization of experience in language. How do our philosophical reflections relate to our concrete experience? It is this particular question that organizes Merleau-Ponty's reading of Saussure in the unpublished course notes to *Sur le problème de la parole* (*On the Problem of Speech*, henceforth *PbP*), a course held at Collège de France 1953–1954.[9]

Through an investigation of speech (*parole*), Merleau-Ponty accounts for the original idealization of our experience. To this end, the linguistics of Saussure is interpreted through a Husserlian framework. More specifically, Merleau-Ponty revisits some of the terms employed by Saussure, allowing them to intersect and interact with Husserl's use of the same words. Thus, he understands the emergence of linguistic meaning in speech as a *coupling*. The term coupling (*accouplement)* is derived from both Saussure's description of the emergence of linguistic meaning and from Husserl's description of the perception of the other through a *Paarung* in *Cartesian Meditations*. Thus Merleau-Ponty gives a phenomenological inflection to Saussure's description, and, on the other hand, ascribes to Husserl's concept a Saussurean meaning.

The question of preservation of linguistic meaning is approached through an equally ambiguous heritage and crystallized in the term tradition. Although the notion of tradition only plays a marginal role in Saussure's text, Merleau-Ponty gives to it a decisive significance, indelibly marked by his own readings of Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*.[10] Merleau-Ponty discovered *The Origin of Geometry* at his first visit in the Husserl-archives in Leuven in the 30s and he devotes his last course at Collège de France to it, *Husserl at the Limits*

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[7] *Signs*: 93/116: "Cela est particulièrement clair quand il s'agit de la phénoménologie du langage. Ce problème, plus évidemment qu'aucun autre, nous oblige à prendre une décision en ce qui concerne les rapports de la phénoménologie et de la philosophie ou de la métaphysique. Car, plus clairement qu'aucun autre, il apparaît à la fois comme un problème spécial et comme un problème qui contient tous les autres, y compris celui de la philosophie."

[8] "Stufen der Geschichtlichkeit. Erste Geschichtlichkeit," (1934), appendix XXVI in *Crisis*, see Hua VI: 502–503.

[9] Both Merleau-Ponty and Bibliothèque Nationale have numbered the sheets and their numberings will be indicated as follows: [1](1), in brackets is the pagination of Bibliothèque Nationale and between parentheses is Merleau-Ponty's pagination. The underlining made by Merleau-Ponty is kept in the original citation in the footnote, but not in the translation.

[10] Husserl 2002/Hua VI: 93–116/365–386.

of Phenomenology. In Husserl's text, Merleau-Ponty finds a notion of truth, where its conjunction with a contingent condition does not undermine it, but on the contrary, provides it with its full meaning. He reconstrues Husserl's thought through the linguistic comprehension acquired in the reading of Saussure.

Due to the fact that Merleau-Ponty introduced phenomenology to many readers in France, the originality of his reading tends to be underestimated.[11] He is often read as a commentator of Husserl when, in reality, he frames his own philosophy in a vocabulary borrowed from Husserl. The impression is further enhanced by the way in which Merleau-Ponty writes; he incorporates other thinkers through a projection of his own thinking. The alleged commentary turns out, on closer inspection, to be a deviation of terms toward a new argument. Rudolf Bernet describes how, to his generation, it is difficult to ascertain where Merleau-Ponty's reading begins and ends: "It is true, that for many of us, it is difficult to say what we owe to Merleau-Ponty: our reading of Husserl, of Sartre and even of Heidegger and Derrida was influenced by him."[12]

One of the most important differences between Husserl's *The Origin of Geometry* and Merleau-Ponty's interpretation thereof surrounds how each understands the problem of historic origin. While Husserl investigates the relation between universal ideality and concrete experience by tracing the origin of geometry, Merleau-Ponty examines the original idealization of experience in language. Moreover, whereas Husserl states that he does not search for the actual origin but for its necessary conditions, Merleau-Ponty explores the interplay between contingency and rationality in an originary act of meaning creation.[13]

Another important difference is Merleau-Ponty's understanding of literature: even though Husserl clearly separated out scientific truth from the claims made by literature, Merleau-Ponty conjoins them.[14] The original idealization that Merleau-Ponty discusses in Husserl's text is also discussed in Proust's literary writing. Drawing on Proust, he describes the literary expression as a quasi-scientific conquering of experience: "A need to fix, to conquer through the words the mute contact. A very precise idea of a quasi-scientific work of this kind: to make the mute accessible to others."[15]

Merleau-Ponty's investigation into language is a development of his earlier research on expression, which I will outline in the first section of this study. In the second section, I introduce Merleau-Ponty's reading of Saussure and

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[11] See Saint Aubert 2004: 28.

[12] Bernet 2008: 58: "Il est vrai que pour beaucoup d'entre nous, il est difficile de dire ce que nous devons à Merleau-Ponty: tant notre lecture de Husserl, de Sartre et même de Heidegger et de Derrida fut influencée par lui."

[13] See Husserl 2002/Hua VI: 107/378.

[14] See Husserl 2002/Hua VI: 93–98/365–370.

[15] *PbP* [94]v(5): "Besoin de *fixer*, conquérir par les mots le contact muet. Idée très précise d'un travail quasi scientifique de ce genre: rendre accessible aux autres cela même qui est muet."

in the third part, I examine how Merleau-Ponty understands the emergence of linguistic meaning through the double heritage of Husserl and Saussure. Equipped with a new understanding of the development of language, found in Saussure's linguistics, Merleau-Ponty reinterprets Husserl's notion of tradition and truth. He rethinks Husserl's notion of tradition via an understanding of language acquired through Saussure. While Husserl displays a historicity in the tradition of our scientific truth in particular, Merleau-Ponty enlarges the question in order to encompass literature. The new notion of truth is elaborated in the fourth and final section.

1. *Expression and the Paradoxes of Truth*

In the investigations of literature, Merleau-Ponty further develops his earlier examination of expression. His description of expression is marked by paradoxes, in particular the paradox of creative expression.[16] Merleau-Ponty describes how an expression both has to resemble and distinguish itself from earlier instantiations: if too similar to previous expressions, it becomes a simple repetition, which empties itself of meaning the more it is repeated; and yet if too distinct and unique, it remains incomprehensible:

> To express oneself is, therefore, a paradoxical enterprise, since it presupposes that there is a fund of kindred expressions, already established and thoroughly evident, and that from this fund the form used should detach itself and remain new enough to arouse attention. It is an operation which tends toward its own destruction, since it suppresses itself to the extent that it ingratiates itself and annuls itself if it fails to do so. For this reason, one cannot conceive of an expression that could be definitive, since the very virtues that would make it general would simultaneously make it inadequate.[17]

Those earlier expressions resemble a ground against which new ones appear, and in order for them to appear they can neither be confused with the ground, nor can they be completely liberated from it. Every language is "subject at each moment to the twin but contrary demands of expressivity and uniformity."[18] In order for us to understand the expression, it must have "its

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[16] For a more thoroughly investigation of expression in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, see Landes 2013, Slatman 2003 and Fóti 2013.

[17] *PM*: 35–36/51: "S'exprimer, c'est donc une entreprise paradoxale, puisqu'elle suppose un fond d'expressions apparentées, déjà établies, incontestées, et que sur ce fond la forme employée se détache, demeure assez neuve pour réveiller l'attention. C'est une opération qui tend à sa propre destruction puisqu'elle se supprime à mesure qu'elle s'accrédite, et s'annule si elle ne s'accrédite pas. C'est ainsi qu'on ne saurait concevoir d'expression qui soit définitive puisque les vertus mêmes qui la rendent générale la rendent du même coup insuffisante."

[18] *PM*: 35/50: "est soumise à chaque moment aux besoins jumeaux et contraires de l'expressivité et de l'uniformité."

analogue in other forms of speech based on the same pattern."[19] But if it is too similar to former expressions, it is shorn of its expressive powers and thus becomes but an empty phrase. Due to this movement toward exhaustion, literary language-use becomes central; it signifies for Merleau-Ponty a creative use of language that infuses established linguistic conventions with new meanings. The power of literature is that it can once more make meaningful a language, which otherwise petrifies into increasingly fixed phrases.[20]

The paradox of creative expression is closely linked to a further paradox: expression is ascribed a paradoxical temporality, according to which new expressions reclaim and recover old ones. Bernard Waldenfels displays how, through an *après coup,* the expressed antedates its expression: "The paradox of expression means that the event of expression precedes *itself*, that it is younger and older than itself. *Present and past* do not follow one another but are entangled within one another."[21] I will show how these paradoxes, ascribable to expression, also adhere to the notion of truth that Merleau-Ponty elaborates: how are we to understand a truth, which has to be expressed through a language that requires constant change? Does this imply we cannot express anything which claims to have validity over time, since its expressiveness will exhaust itself, and its sense will be forever lost? Would this therefore mean that we must choose between either universal validity or expressiveness; that is to say, veracity or creativity? Through Husserl's notion of tradition as well as in light of Saussure's linguistics, Merleau-Ponty elaborates a new notion of truth, which preserves itself despite the changes it passes through. In the following sections, I will develop these questions as they are explored in the unpublished course *Sur le problème de la parole*.

2. *Merleau-Ponty and Saussure*

It is remarkable that Merleau-Ponty dedicated a course at Collège de France to Saussure already in 1953–1954.[22] He undertook the first philosophical reading of Saussure in France, but his interpretation has, nonetheless, been

[19] *PM*: 35/50: "son analogue dans d'autres tournures formées sur le même patron."

[20] *Signs*: 77/97.

[21] Waldenfels 2000: 96.

[22] Already in earlier texts, such as "On the Phenomenology of Language" and "The Sciences of Man and Phenomenology," Merleau-Ponty describes a convergence between Husserl and Saussure. He also refers to Saussure in the course "Language and Communication" from 1947–1948, as well as in the article "Metaphysics in Man," 1947, and the course at the Sorbonne, "Consciousness and Language Acquisition." It is also conjectured that he may have given a course entitled "Saussure" at the École Normale Supérieure 1948–1949 (see Tilliette 1970: 179). In *PM* Merleau-Ponty outlines a new way to conceive the historicity of meaning, with the help of Saussure. See Merleau-Ponty 1964b/1960b; 2010c/2001b; 1964c/1948a; 2010b/2001a; 1973/1969.

profoundly criticized and held to be erroneous.[23] However, as I will argue, this is mainly due to its deviation from the Structuralist interpretation of the *Course in General Linguistics* (henceforth the *Course*), rather than to a misconception of Saussure.[24] Merleau-Ponty's reading challenges the one that later became predominant with the emergence of structuralism, and, in particular, he challenges an alleged opposition between phenomenology and structuralism. Ricoeur, for example, invokes the opposition in the following way:[25]

> In other words, the system of signs no longer has any outside, it has only an inside; the last postulate, which can be termed the postulate of the closed system of signs, summarizes and commands all the others. It constitutes the major challenge for phenomenology. For the latter, language is not an object but a mediation through which and by means of which we are directed toward reality (whatever it may be); language consists in saying something about something; by this it loses itself as it moves toward what it says, going beyond itself and establishing itself in an intentional movement of reference. For structural linguists, language is self-sufficient: all its differences are immanent in it, and it is a system which precedes the speaking subject.[26]

However, Merleau-Ponty defies this alleged opposition. Instead of opposing the systematic side of language to the speaking subject, he sees in Saussure's linguistics an occasion to understand their relation. In recent years, with the publication of more complete manuscript sources, the reception of Saussure has been transformed. Indeed, not only does the new material challenge the Structuralist reading, it also corroborates several aspects of Merleau-Ponty's

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[23] One of the severest criticisms is formulated by Schmidt 1985: 107. He claims that: "There is thus little in the *Course* to support Merleau-Ponty's reading of Saussure. To be sure, there are passages which, if pulled from context and read against the main thrust of the lectures, would support parts of his interpretation."

[24] Saussure 1964/1972.

[25] Although Ricœur describes an alleged opposition between phenomenology and structuralism, he stresses the need for a phenomenology of language that reconciles them. This phenomenology of language must take into consideration the science of language, something he criticizes in particular Merleau-Ponty for neglecting (Ricœur 1967: 13–14). In the unpublished course notes to *PbP*, we see how important the science of language was for Merleau-Ponty's conception, and in particular how thorough his reading of Saussure actually was.

[26] Ricœur 2004/1969: 245/247: "Autrement dit, le système de signes n'a plus de dehors, il a seulement un dedans; ce dernier postulat, que l'on peut nommer le postulat de la clôture des signes, résume et commande tous les autres. C'est bien lui qui constitue le défi majeur pour la phénoménologie. Pour celle-ci, le langage n'est pas un objet, mais une médiation, c'est-à-dire ce par quoi et à travers quoi nous nous dirigeons vers la réalité (quelle qu'elle soit); il consiste à dire quelque chose sur quelque chose; par là, il s'échappe vers ce qu'il dit, il se dépasse et s'établit dans un mouvement intentionnel de référence. Pour la linguistique structurale, la langue se suffit à elle-même: toutes ses différences lui sont immanentes; et c'est un système qui précède le sujet parlant."

interpretation. A thorough investigation of this new material has recently been undertaken by Beata Stawarska, who speaks of a paradigm shift in the study of Saussure: the first paradigm, based on the course notes published in the *Course*, has changed for a second paradigm, informed by the newer, more authentic sources. The alleged "errors" of which Merleau-Ponty was once accused, might, in fact, be rectified in light of the source material: "Upon closer view, Merleau-Ponty's 'error' contains, albeit in an embryonic form, a more faithful response to Saussure's project than the received Structuralist one."[27] Although Merleau-Ponty's reading is based on just the course notes, it might be an interpretation that comes closest to Saussure's *Nachlass*.[28]

I propose to show that this might be even more true of the more thorough account, presented by Merleau-Ponty in the unpublished course *PbP*. On the basis of a "convergence" between Husserl and Saussure, Merleau-Ponty attempts to answer two different but related questions: first, the question of the *creation* of linguistic meaning and second the question of the *institution* of linguistic meaning. The first of these questions is posed with regard to the way in which language begins to signify, i.e. how do the words become significant? The second question concerns the preservation of meaning in a language i.e. how can the linguistic expression assert itself over time? In the next section, I explore how Merleau-Ponty develops these questions through an elaboration of a phenomenology of speech.

3. *Towards a Phenomenology of Speech*

Saussure establishes initially a distinction that builds on the French difference between *langage* and *langue,* both of which correspond to the English word "language". In French, the term *langage* has a broader meaning and can denote an idiom or a way of speaking, whereas the term *langue* more specifically refers to a particular language. For example Merleau-Ponty writes about the *langage* of painting, while the term *langue* is reserved for language in the more rigid sense, i.e. the French or German language. Saussure uses this distinction in order to describe how the *langage* consists of two different sides: *langue* and speech (*parole*). Initially, he claims that the very study of linguistics requires an exclusion of speech from its study. Rather, it must approach the *langage* solely from the side of *langue* in order to undertake a scientific investigation of it. However, in other passages he describes an entanglement between *langue* and speech, displaying an impossibility of separating one from the other. Merleau-Ponty insists on the ambiguity of the Saussurean notions, and finds in his writing not an exclusion of speech, but an interdependence

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[27] Stawarska 2015: 190.
[28] Stawarska 2015: 181.

between individual, expressive acts, on the one hand, and the language system, on the other. In *PbP,* he refers to this separation:

> Some texts subordinate speech understood in a narrow sense = speech = execution, actual, individual, sum of "what people say" as opposed to the *langue* as: principles, habits, and virtual, social institutions. The *langue* is "a whole in itself" (CLG p. 24 *sq.*) "The *langue* is for us the *langage* minus speech" (114): the *langue* appears as completely definable apart from speech.[29]

But he insists on their mutual dependence, established elsewhere in the *Course*:

> However, S[aussure] rectifies elsewhere: the capacity of the *langue* does not signify that its relation to speech is one of cause and effect: "The *langue* is not a entity, and does only exist in the speaking subjects" (p. 19 note) "After all, everything is psychological within the *langue*, even its material and mechanical manifestations" (p. 21) speech is so little an effect that it reacts upon the *langue* "it is speech that makes the *langue* evolve."[30]

Thus, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the separation of speech and *langue* as well as their interplay. Instead of stressing *langue* as a ready-made infrastructure, where the system restricts the speaking subject's possibilities of expression, he asserts that it is speech that establishes, maintains and carries the system. This reading opposes some of the most famous readings of Saussure, for example the one proposed by Derrida in *Différance*.[31] Derrida argues that the subject is "inscribed in the *langue*, that he is a 'function' of the *langue*" and "becomes a *speaking* subject only by conforming his speech—even in the aforesaid 'creation'."[32] Henceforth, even the speaking subjects eloquence in presupposed creations are delusory, because everything that is said can only be

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[29] *PbP*: [22]v(28). Merleau-Ponty refers to Saussure: 9/25; 77/112: "<u>Certains textes subordonnent la parole entendue dans un sens étroit = parole = exécution</u>, actuel, individuel, somme de 'ce que les gens disent' par opposition à langue comme: principes, habitudes, virtuel, institution sociale. La langue est 'un tout en soi' (CLG p. 24 *sq.*) 'La langue est pour nous le langage moins la parole' (114): <u>la langue donc paraît entièrement définissable hors de la parole.</u>"

[30] *PbP*: [22]v(28)-[23](29). Merleau-Ponty refers to Saussure: 5/19, note ; 6/21 ; 19/37: "Cependant ailleurs S[aussure] rectifie: <u>la puissance de la langue ne signifie pas que son rapport à la parole soit celui de cause et effet</u>: 'La langue n'est pas une entité, et n'existe que dans les sujets parlants' (p. 19 note) 'Au fond, tout est psychologique dans la langue, y compris ses manifestations matérielles et mécaniques' (p. 21) la parole est si peu un <u>effet</u> qu'elle réagit sur la langue '<u>c'est la parole qui fait évoluer la langue</u>' (39)."

[31] Derrida 1982/1972. I will primarily use Derrida's reading of Saussure as an example of the Structuralist legacy. Not because Derrida represents structuralism but because, in the examples I use, he formulates some of the most famous claims about Saussure's linguistics, claims that in an exemplary way epitomize the Structuralist legacy of Saussure.

[32] Derrida 1982/1972: 15/16. Modified translation: "est inscrit dans la langue, est 'fonction' de la langue"; "ne devient sujet *parlant* qu'en conformant sa parole, même dans ladite 'création'."

pronounced within the ready-made restrictions posed by the language system. Merleau-Ponty's reading defies this interpretation by insisting on the priority of speech over *langue*.

Speech, writes Merleau-Ponty, preforms an actualization of linguistic meaning, through a "coupling" of the phonetic and the ideal counterparts. The notion of coupling refers to an image used by Saussure to understand the interplay between thought and sound. The thought and the sound meet each other like the breath of a wind meets the sheet of water:

> Visualize the air in contact with a sheet of water; if the atmospheric pressure changes, the surface of the water will be decomposed into a series of divisions, waves; these undulations give an idea of the union, and so to speak of the coupling of thought with the phonic materia[l.33]

This metaphor is repeatedly evoked by Merleau-Ponty, and in the Sorbonne lectures about the child's language acquisition, he summons it once more:

> The "pure thought," says Saussure, is like the breath of air without figure and contour. Language in itself is like the lake's water masses without configuration. It is when these two shapeless realities come into contact, at the surface of the water that the waves are produced, with their geometrical forms and their facets; i.e. the articulated and determined thought. There is "neither materialization of thought, nor spiritualization of language"; thought and language are only two parts of one and same reality.[34]

Only through this act of coupling can the sounds become perceptible and the ideas distinct. The union of thought and sound, according to Saussure, "results necessarily in the reciprocal delimitations of units" and "language elaborates its units while constituting itself between two shapeless masses."[35] There are no "pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language," and thought, "chaotic by nature, is forced to specify itself

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[33] See *PbP*: [39](5); *Course*: 112/156. Modified translation: "Qu'on se représente l'air en contact avec une nappe d'eau: si la pression atmosphérique change, la surface de l'eau se décompose en une série de divisions, c'est-à-dire de vagues; ce sont ces ondulations qui donneront une idée de l'union, et pour ainsi dire de l'accouplement de la pensée avec la matière phonique."

[34] Merleau-Ponty 2010b/2001a: 64/84. Modified translation: "La 'pensée pure', dit Saussure, est comme le souffle du vent sans figure et sans contour. Le langage en lui-même est comme les masses d'eau du lac sans configuration. C'est au contact de ces deux réalités amorphes, à la surface de l'eau que se produisent les vagues, leurs formes géométriques, leurs facettes; à savoir la pensée articulée et déterminée. Il n'y a 'ni matérialisation de la pensée, ni spiritualisation du langage'; pensée et langage ne sont que deux moments d'une seule et même réalité."

[35] *Course*: 112/156. Modified translation: "leur union aboutit nécessairement à des délimitations réciproques d'unités"; 112/156: "la langue élabore ses unités en se constituant entre deux masses amorphes."

through a decomposition."[36] On the other hand, the phonetic material is like a "continuous ribbon," with no sufficient division for the ear to perceive.[37] The "ribbon" can be decomposed in signifying units until the sounds have significations. It is speech that realizes the coupling and, consequently, it is only with active speech that language begins to signify.

Merleau-Ponty finds in the term "coupling" an affinity with the Husserlian thought of coupling, *Paarung*, in *Cartesian Meditations*.[38] Husserl uses the term in order to account for the perception of the other: I don't perceive the other as a body mannequin but as a living body, because it is my own body that teaches me the meaning of a living body, a meaning from which I contrive a coupling with the other person's body. It is described as "an associatively constitutive component of the experience of the other."[39] The coupling between our bodies signifies an analogy that is not a derivation, but an immediate connection. Because of this act, the behavior of the other makes me transgress his mere appearance and I perceive him as another perceiving subjectivity. Merleau-Ponty refers the "intentional transgression" in the perception of the other to an "intentional transgression" of language that makes me surpass the sounds towards their meaning.[40] In both cases it is the fundamental act of coupling that makes the transgression possible.

The interaction between thought and sound in speech creates and recreates language, thus contriving to the unification of every signification and every sound through the intermediary of the totality of *langue* and the totality of thought:

> Thus "in the *langue*, there is only differences (…) without positive terms" (172) and "everything is negative in the *langue*" (173)
>
> This nature of the signifier and the signified elucidates their relation: it is not a one to one relation, but a relation that is mediated by the totality of the *langue* and the totality of thought. Their "coupling" is the result of the fact that both of them are, not positive realities, "idea" and "thing," but differences, folds in thought or *langue*, and, in their capacity as modalities of a structure, they can even represent differentiation and value.[41]

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[36] *Course*: 111/155. Modified translation: "d'idées préétablies, et rien n'est distinct avant l'apparition de la langue"; 112/156: "chaotique de sa nature, est forcée de se préciser en se décomposant."

[37] *Course*: 103/145: "ruban continu."

[38] See *PM*: 13/21; Margin in *PM*: 19/29, note; Husserl 1982 [1960]/Hua I, §51, 112–113/141–143. The term *Paarung* is translated with "pairing" by Dorian Cairns. I have instead chosen here to translate it with the term coupling, since the term used to translate *Paarung* into French is *accouplement*, which is normally translated with coupling, and my aim is to preserve the accord between the French translation of Husserl and Saussure's use of *accouplement*.

[39] Husserl 1982 [1960]/Hua I, §51, 112/141: "assoziativ konstituierende Komponente der Fremderfahrung." Modified translation.

[40] *Signs*: 94/117–118.

[41] *PbP*: [26]v(36)-[27](37): "Donc 'dans la langue, il n'y a que des différences (…) <u>sans termes positifs</u>' (172) et '<u>tout est négatif dans la langue</u>' (173)

The importance that Merleau-Ponty accords to the coupling between thought and sound has consequences regarding his understanding of the diacritical character of language (*langue*). If the signified is not completely given in any signifier, it is because the signifiers can never be abstracted from the complete language in which they operate. Language constitutes a whole, in which significations *co-exist* and draw their meaning from each other. Here, Merleau-Ponty's reading challenges the allegation that linguistic meaning always escapes us, i.e. the idea advocated by Derrida. In a language there are only differences, writes Derrida, and the first "consequence to be drawn from this is that the signified concept is never present in itself."[42] The linguistic meaning is only present as a trace that withdraws from us: when we try to apprehend it we can only address it through ever-new differences. The diacritical character of language is comprehended differently in Merleau-Ponty's account: meaning is not present in any particular signifier, rather it is something that the signifiers produce together; meaning inhabits the complete expression.

The diacritical character of language is closely linked to the claim that the sign is entirely arbitrary.[43] Although, the latter claim is understood as one of the foundations for Saussure's thinking, it is also one of the ideas to have been subject to the most controversy and critique.[44] Merleau-Ponty recasts the notion of the arbitrariness of the sign by placing emphasis on the concept of relative motivation:[45]

> Thus, arbitrariness means contingency in opposition to physical or natural necessity, but not conventional in the meaning of the result of a contract or a decision. Nothing predetermines in itself that the table represents this, but 1) when we consider the rest of the French language, it happens that the use of a word is motivated. The lexical arbitrariness is limited by the grammatical motivations: *poirier [pear-tree], dix-neuf [nineteen], deuxième [second], portier*

Cette nature du signifiant et du signifié éclaire leur rapport: ils n'ont pas rapport un à un, mais par l'intermédiaire du tout de la langue et de la pensée. <u>Leur 'accouplement' résulte de ce qu'ils sont tous deux, non réalités positives, 'idée' et 'chose', mais différences</u>, plis dans pensée ou langue, et qu'à ce titre, comme modalités d'une structure, ils peuvent représenter même <u>différenciation</u>, même <u>valeur</u>."

[42] Derrida 1982/1972: 11/11. Modified translation: "On en tirera cette première conséquence que le concept signifié n'est jamais présent en lui-même."

[43] Derrida argues that they are inseparable, and that Saussure puts them at "the very foundation of general semiology, particularly linguistics." See Derrida 1982/1972: 10–11/10: "au principe de la sémiologie générale, singulièrement de la linguistique."

[44] Already by 1962, there were over 70 critical articles published on the topic of the "arbitrary nature of the sign." Of particular importance was Benveniste's article "The Nature of the Linguistic Sign," which argues against its arbitrariness. See Kaganoi 1998: 159.

[45] This is also one of the aspects where Merleau-Ponty allegedly misunderstands Saussure, see Schmidt 1985: 115. However, the course notes to *PbP* show clearly how rooted Merleau-Ponty's interpretation is in the *Course*, and, furthermore, indicates that the alleged errors are due to a deviation from the Structuralist legacy rather than to a misunderstanding of Saussure.

[doorman] are motivated, even if *frêne [ash tree], vingt [twenty], second [second], concierge [janitor]* are not. "[…] the whole language system rests on the irrational principle of the arbitrariness of the sign, which, if applied without restriction, would result in severe difficulties; but the mind succeeds in introducing a principle of order and of regularity in certain parts of the mass of signs, and here we see the role of the relative motivation." (189)[46]

Language creates an internal order where the different parts are inextricably united with the totality. Words that resemble one another, or oppose one another, affect, reflect and motivate each other: for example *ash* [*frêne*] affects both the other names for trees and the other words with the same ending. Thus, every change affects the totality and every contiguous change, as soon as it is incorporated in language becomes a part of the system. Saussure distinguishes between a diachronic linguistics on the one hand, and a synchronic linguistics, on the other. The former studies the development of language whereas the latter studies the language system during one phase.[47] Although the arbitrariness of the sign is a foundation for the latter, it is denounced by the former, and replaced by the notion of relative motivation. Merleau-Ponty's account differs from the Structuralist legacy, in terms of the different emphasis placed on the development of language, and, therefore, he can challenge the arbitrariness of the sign. In the next section, I will discuss how Merleau-Ponty revisits Saussure's account of the development of language through Husserl's understanding of tradition.

4. *Language and Tradition*

In this section, I will show how Merleau-Ponty develops Husserl's notion of tradition, as it is presented in *The Origin of Geometry,* through an understanding of language acquired in the reading of Saussure. He refers Husserl's notion of the

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[46] *PbP*: [47](3)-[48](4): "Donc arbitraire veut dire contingent par opposition à nécessité physique ou naturelle, mais non conventionnel comme résultat d'un contrat, d'une décision. Rien en soi ne prédestine le mot table à représenter ceci, mais

1) à considérer le reste du français, il arrive que l'emploi d'un mot soit motivé.

L'arbitraire lexical est limité par motivations grammaticales : *poirier, dix-neuf, deuxième, portier* sont motivés, – si *frêne, vingt, second, concierge* ne le sont pas. '[…] tout le système de la langue repose sur le principe irrationnel de l'arbitraire du signe qui, appliqué sans restriction, aboutirait à la complication suprême; mais l'esprit réussit à introduire un principe d'ordre et de régularité dans certaines parties de la masse des signes et c'est là le rôle du relativement motivé' (189)."

[47] In "On the Phenomenology of Language" Merleau-Ponty makes a distinction between a synchronic linguistics of speech and a diachronic linguistics of language (*langue*) (*Signs*: 86/107). Ricœur 1967:12 claims that this is "obviously an error" whereas Kaganoi 1998: 156 argues that Merleau-Ponty makes a deliberate erroneous reading. However, in *PbP,* where Merleau-Ponty makes a more thorough reading of Saussure, this distinction is never expressed. In the new material, Merleau-Ponty follows more carefully the descriptions provided by Saussure.

tradition of geometry to Saussure's description of the development of language. However, Merleau-Ponty's account differs in two important respects from how tradition is described by Husserl. Firstly, whereas Husserl describes a regressive inquiry into the meaning of our present truth, Merleau-Ponty describes a retroactive movement of a truth that in any moment seizes the past. Secondly, whereas Husserl separates the claims made by natural sciences from the claims made by literature or art, Merleau-Ponty brings the two together.[48]

In *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty discusses Saussure's description of how French, based on prepositions, has replaced Latin, which is built on inflexions and declinations. And while French places the accent on the last syllable (with the exception of words that end with a mute *e*), in Latin the accent is on the penultimate syllable, when it is long, and on the preceding syllable if the penultimate is short. However, the Latin system can only be preserved on condition that the last characters are distinguishable; when they are indistinguishable, the system itself is weakened. In the beginning of the transformation of Latin into French, the former system tried to repair itself, by adding Latin inflexions to French words (such as, for example, the two first plural pronouns "ons" and "ez"). Nevertheless, the decline of Latin was irreversible, until which point Latin submitted itself entirely to a new principle. This moment signifies a break: one means of speaking becomes obsolete and makes way for a new one. This obsolescence itself preserves the old system by converting it into something else. Even though the speaking subjects have not caused the linguistic changes intentionally, the changes they have caused are nonetheless integral to the maintenance of the system.

In *PbP*, Merleau-Ponty returns to this very same example, in order to conclude that it is the speaking subjects who transform the system. First, while such changes may, in the beginning, only concern individual elements, soon they have consequences for the system as a whole. Thus, the actual speakers of a language change the system and lay the groundwork for a new system for future speakers. Henceforth, it appears as if the words already contained the meaning they have come to signify. And if language appears arbitrary, it is because of the forgetting of the speech acts from which meanings have resulted.

> In other words, arbitrary ≠ not only a choice that could have been different, but a choice that, when it is capable of it, presents itself *après coup,* as unavoidable

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[48] Merleau-Ponty's reading shares several important similarities with the one performed by Derrida in *Edmund Husserl's The Origin of Geometry*. In particular, their mutual attempts to use Husserl's text to account for a new notion of truth pervaded by a paradoxical historicity. Although Derrida criticizes some of Merleau-Ponty's comments on Husserl in earlier texts, his reading displays an affinity to Merleau-Ponty's. Derrida's text was written in 1956–57 but it was not published until after the death of Merleau-Ponty. Thus, they elaborate similar accounts of Husserl's text, almost simultaneously and almost independently of one another (see Derrida 1978/2011 [1962]: 77/71; 111–116/116–122).

or at least as inclined to future decisions. Arbitrariness = tradition, i.e. oblivion of the origins = something that is taken for granted. "It is because the sign is arbitrary that it does not know any other law than tradition, and it is because it grounds itself on the tradition that it can be arbitrary"[49]

Language forms a tradition, writes Saussure, because it is arbitrary, and it is arbitrary because it grounds itself on tradition. Merleau-Ponty interprets this idea through the lens of the Husserlian notion of tradition as a "forgetfulness of the origins":

> Traditionality: forgetfulness of the origin, which is memory of the results. The acts of expression leave traces—which are only useful to a mind that is capable of a certain "reactivation,"—but which help it to go further without having to reactivate. The sedimentation consists precisely in the fact that you can find meaning without a reactivation. Hence, it is not literally an accumulation of the past, but the past's contraction into its meaning, it is not material accumulated within the past, but a capacity that is constructed along with the institution of dimensions and levels of the mental landscape.[50]

Even though Merleau-Ponty paraphrases Husserl description of how the tradition of geometry achieves progress at the cost of a recollection of its own past (i.e. in order to move forward, every new geometer needs to presuppose the former geometrical discoveries, without continuously reminding himself of their procedure of discovery) his account differs from Husserl's. For Merleau-Ponty, the process of reactivation is not a retrospective act, which provides us with the truth we already expressed. Instead, he describes a tradition where new discoveries reclaim the past, recover it and reshape it. Although the geometrical truths present themselves as standing outside of their time-bound appearance, this is a retrospective illusion.

The year following *PbP,* Merleau-Ponty held the course on *L'Institution dans l'histoire personnelle et publique,* where he continues his discussion of truth and tradition. In this later course, he writes that while the trunk of a

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[49] *PbP*: [28](39). Merleau-Ponty refers to Saussure 74/108: "Autrement dit arbitraire ≠ seulement choix qui aurait pu être autre, <u>mais choix qui, le pouvant, se présente après coup comme inévitable ou du moins incline choix futurs. Arbitraire = tradition *i. e.* oubli des origines</u>, = chose prise comme allant de soi. 'C'est parce que le signe est arbitraire qu'il ne connaît d'autre loi que la tradition, et c'est parce qu'il se fonde sur la tradition qu'il peut être arbitraire.' (110)."

[50] *PbP*: [91](1): "Traditionnalité: <u>oubli des origines qui est mémoire du résultat</u>. Les actes d'expression laissent des traces – <u>qui ne sont utilisables que pour un esprit capable d'une certaine 'réactivation', – mais qui lui servent à aller plus loin sans réactiver. La sédimentation consiste exactement en ceci que l'on peut trouver sens sans réactiver</u>. Ce n'est donc pas à la <u>lettre une accumulation du passé, c'est sa contraction en son sens</u>, ce n'est pas matériaux accumulés en lui, c'est pouvoir qu'il s'est construit, <u>dimensions, niveaux, du paysage mental qui se sont institués</u>."

tree can be said to have the properties of a circle before the circle was known as such, these properties have a sense only afterwards. The cross-section of a tree trunk may be made of circles with equal radii, but the idea of equality as such does not exist absolutely before geometry: "The historicity of geometry [becomes] visible if we apply [it] to the future. Can we say that the properties that will be discovered are already there? No. They will hold retroactively."[51] Thus, there is, a "truly retrograde movement of the true (and not only a retroactive effect of the *discovery* of the true)."[52] Whereas Husserl describes a regressive movement in our understanding of truth, one where we re-discover the truth already guiding us, Merleau-Ponty points to a truth that is in itself a regressive movement.

If one understands geometry as an institution of truth, which did not exist previously, but which subsequently makes universal and general claims, how are we then to understand the geometrical properties of things before the discovery of geometry? Did they contain their properties before they were discovered, or did they emerge with the elaboration of geometry? According to Merleau-Ponty, we do not discover a truth that was always there, ready-made, but in the moment a truth is expressed, it seizes the past and the future and asserts its validity over them. Whereas Husserl's investigation of geometry aims specifically at the truths held by the sciences, Merleau-Ponty uses the example of geometry to understand the relation between any truth and its temporality. Truth is "another name for sedimentation" and can henceforth be understood as a "wedge we drive into the present," which will "never stop if not being true at least signifying and stimulating our thinking apparatus, if need be by drawing from it truths more comprehensive than the present one."[53] Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, the temporality of our truth is bound to the temporality of its expression rather than to the temporality of its discovery. Whereas Husserl searches for the origin of geometry in its first discovery, Merleau-Ponty searches for the first linguistic expression. This new understanding of the relation between truth and its expression opens a new perspective on literature.[54]

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[51] Merleau-Ponty 2010a/2003: 52/91: "L'historicité de la géométrie [devient] visible si nous [l']appliquons à l'avenir: peut-on dire que les propriétés qui seront découvertes sont déjà là? Non: elles vaudront rétroactivement."

[52] Merleau-Ponty 2010a/2003: 52/91: "il y a vraiment mouvement rétrograde du vrai (et non seulement effet rétroactif de la *découverte* du vrai)."

[53] *Signs*: 96/120: "un autre nom de la sédimentation"; "un coin que nous enfonçons dans le présent"; "ne finira jamais, sinon d'être vrai, du moins de signifier et d'exciter notre appareil pensant, au besoin en tirant de lui des vérités plus compréhensives que celle-là."

[54] In the course preceding *PbP*, *Recherches sur l'usage littéraire du langage* (*Researches On the Literary Use of Language*), Merleau-Ponty further elaborates upon the relation between literary language and truth, see Merleau-Ponty 2013.

As described in the beginning of this essay, Merleau-Ponty poses a paradoxical enterprise of expression, namely that expression is exhausted by and through pure repetition. Therefore, in order for an expression to regain its meaning, it must be rephrased. In literary language-use Merleau-Ponty finds the capacity to renew language and to infuse it with new meaning.[55]

A large part of *PbP* consists of a reading of Proust and an investigation of literary expression. In Proust's writing in particular and in literary writing in general, Merleau-Ponty finds an original speech: "The literary speech signifies an original speech and creates an intersubjectivity of a second order, or an over-subjectivity."[56] Literary speech differs from other forms of speech in that it brings us closer to established linguistic conventions: it creates new conventions, which only later become sedimented into new conventions. Merleau-Ponty cites Proust's description of how we have learned to rely on expressions that once seemed remote: "the old forms of speech must also in their time have been images difficult to follow when the listener did not yet know the universe they depicted. But for a long time we have taken this to be the real universe and so we rely confidently on it."[57] Hence, literary speech re-institutes our linguistic conventions: it teaches us expressions through which we then come to grasp our experience. Once such expressions have become sedimented, we no longer see their origin in a creative act but act as if they antedated their first expressions.

How, though, is literary language-use to be understood in relation to the philosophical? In *PbP*, Merleau-Ponty limits himself to "evoking speech"[58]: "Proust restricts himself and we restrict ourselves with him this year to evoke speech."[59] Even though Merleau-Ponty never elaborates upon the relation between literature and philosophy any further, his argument does allow us to sketch it. Literature can reach towards a truth precisely because it is creative, but it cannot seize it in the precise way that philosophy can. The difference between literature and philosophy lies henceforth in their different ways of using the established expressions that tradition offers to them. If literature has a primacy it is because it is *a first inscription* of truth. But to the extent that philosophy has a primacy, it is by virtue of the tradition whose outpost it is and that it carries

[55] *PM*: 11–12/18–19.

[56] *PbP*: [102]v(4): "La parole littéraire sera cette parole originaire réveillée et créant une intersubjectivité à la 2nde puissance, ou une surobjectivité."

[57] *PbP* [102](4) f: "avaient été elles aussi autrefois des images difficiles à suivre, quand l'auditeur ne connaissait pas encore l'univers qu'elles peignaient. Mais depuis longtemps on se figure que c'était l'univers réel, on se repose sur lui." Merleau-Ponty cites Proust 1987: 542 (vol. I). For the English translation see Proust 2015: 138.

[58] *PbP*: marginal note, [111]v(11): "à réveiller la parole."

[59] *PbP*: marginal note, [111]v(11): "Proust se borne et nous nous bornons avec lui cette année à réveiller la parole."

within it. Their difference can thus be described as a difference between an expression that reformulates the tradition and one that inquires into it.

This difference between literature and philosophy displays mutual dependence. It is necessary to return continuously to a creative capacity in order for language to maintain its meaning, but this does not imply that all language use has to be creative in order to be meaningful. Each philosopher does not have to start his act of expressions from the beginning: it suffices that he writes within the same language used by literary writers who infuse established expressions with new meanings. Inversely, the literary writer is dependent on the established use of language, sedimented into clear concepts and definitions. Thus, language use can be conceived as a back and forth movement between sedimentation and renewal.

5. *Conclusion*

Merleau-Ponty interprets Saussure from within a phenomenological framework, conferring a Husserlian meaning to the notions of coupling and tradition. In fact, Merleau-Ponty derives the meaning of these notions from both thinkers, using them, at one and the same time, to reinterpret Saussure's notion of language as well as Husserl's notion of tradition. In several important respects, this reading challenges the Structuralist reading of Saussure. First of all, Merleau-Ponty's reading of Saussure is defined by the significant role he ascribes to speech. Language (*langue*) is not a ready-made system applied in speech. On the contrary, the significations that language expresses are realized through speech and are constantly renewed by it. Secondly, he gives a different interpretation of the diacritical character of language: instead of viewing language as a system in which only ever new differences can be found, he construes it as a system where all meaning must be derived from the whole. He develops the later claim by placing emphasis on *coupling,* that is, on the relation between thought and sound in language, a coupling that is preformed by living speech.

Merleau-Ponty reinterprets Husserl's concept of the tradition of truth through an understanding of linguistic development acquired from Saussure's *Course*. However, his notion is in two important respects distinct from Husserl's. First of all, whereas Husserl describes a regressive inquiry into the meaning of our present truth, Merleau-Ponty displays a retrospective movement of truth, according to which the past is entangled in the present and every new acquirement makes itself valid for those times preceding it.

While Husserl clearly separated out scientific truth from the claims made by literature, Merleau-Ponty conjoins them. He shows us how the pursuit for truth is a paradoxical enterprise: we have to constantly reconquer truth anew. By sticking to trusted formulations and the same expressions, the sense

of this truth will be exhausted. Required is a back-and-forth movement between the establishment and the renewal of truth. Truth can be understood as dependent on a tradition of expression, one that however undergoes constant changes—changes that do not undermine, but rather are a benefit to it. This need for constant renewal of expression places literary expression in a privileged position. For it is literature that provides the linguistic conventions with the renewal and reformulation they so strongly need.

If we have to acknowledge both a facticity and an opacity, which are inextricably bound to our linguistic expressions, then how are we henceforth to account for any alleged truth that philosophy expounds? Ultimately, the aim is to answer the question concerning the relation between truth and its linguistic expressions. How is one to understand the relationship between philosophy and its proper language? Can we no longer speak of a truth, when we increasingly recognize the very arbitrariness of the language through which we express ourselves?

Does this imply a skepticism regarding truth? In Merleau-Ponty's account the skeptic is the result of a disappointed rationalist, it is the consequence of a "demand from a disappointed but persistent, absolute rationality."[60] The fact that truth is dependent on language is not a delimitation. Instead, the immanence in language resembles that of our visual field: our proper language is given to the one who speaks, not as a restriction, but as a possibility; "its limits are like those of the visual field: neither here nor there, but finally there is a point where one no longer sees."[61] The limits are not obstacles and language does not close us in, but, on the contrary, opens us towards expressive possibilities that reclaim us. Our adherence to our proper language does not hinder us from surpassing it, even if this surpassing carries within itself its point of departure. It is never complete, and the expressive operations can never install themselves in something expressed beyond language.

This understanding of the relation between language and thought can be understood by way of an analogy with Merleau-Ponty's later investigations into the visible world through our vision, in *The Visible and the Invisible*. The aim is to show how the visible world is affected by our vision: in the same way, the aim of the investigations of language is to show the conditions for our thinking, i.e. how our proper language affects the thoughts that we perform through it.[62] As little as the visible world is jeopardized by an inquiry into our vision, our ideas are not relativized by an inquiry into our language. The ultimate aim is a linguistic self-awareness of philosophy, i.e. a philosophy that acknowledges its proper adherence to its language, but yet persists in

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[60] *PbP*: [32](2): "le scepticisme est une exigence de rationalité absolue déçue, mais persistante."

[61] *PbP*: [13](13): "ses limites sont comme celles du champ visuel: ni ici, ni là, mais enfin il y a un point où l'on n'y voit plus."

[62] Merleau-Ponty 1968/2009 [1964]: 130–131/170–171.

surpassing its linguistic situation without neglecting it. This might be where Merleau-Ponty is most faithful to the Husserlian endeavor: to undertake a radical self-reflection that investigates the conditions of our thinking, and which aims at a self-consciousness that examines the conditions and possibilities of philosophy.

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