



detachment as we ordinarily think of it is impossible, for we are never merely conscious, but always *conscious* of something: the split between the world out there and my perception of it in here, that is, the split between subject and object, is as untenable as the split between mind and body. For Merleau-Ponty, these dualisms are a mistake of post-Cartesian philosophy. They are to be challenged and corrected.

Here, the phenomenological concept of intentionality is basic: I, as a human being, am an intentional being in a world that I was given, a world that preexists me, «una masa pegajosa que se proclama mundo,» as Cortázar will say in a momento. The world is only meaningful to me as a function of my intention, that is, my perception and my understanding of it, which includes my desires and illusions and fantasies and whatever else I may wish to imagine or invent, as well as what my cultural community tells me is «real,» «true,» «valuable,» «natural»-the whole set of inherited cultural givens that phenomenologists call «the natural world attitude.» In order that I arrive at something like my own world attitude, I must exercise what phenomenologists call a reduction whereby I examine, to the extent possible, what I *know*, and what has been imposed upon me *as knowledge* by my culture. So I suspend the «natural world attitude» in order to constitute my own. You will recognize the indebtedness of deconstructionism to phenomenology, and begin to think of Cortázar's narrative processes, as well.

So, then, Merleau-Ponty's magnum opus is *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1945; his final work, left unfinished by his early death in 1961 at the age of 53, was published posthumously under the title *The Visible and the Invisible*. In between, he wrote several books, comprised largely of essays on what he termed the *primacy of perception*, that is, on the act of perceiving as a reciprocal relation between self and world by which both are constituted. Merleau-Ponty's elegant essays, «Eye and Mind,» «The Body as Expression and Speech,» and «Cézanne's Doubt,» are particularly relevant to our reading of Cortázar.

We do know that Cortázar read Merleau-Ponty. However, I don't want to make an argument for influence but rather for affinity, because influence would narrow too much my sense of the overarching similarities of these two thinkers. Nonetheless, it will be useful to begin with Cortázar's reference to Merleau-Ponty-the only one I know of, though I don't pretend to have read all of Cortázar's interviews and essays—this is the reference in his essay on his novel *62: modelo para armar*, «La muñeca rota,» in *Último round*, volume I. Cortázar cites a passage from Merleau-Ponty's essay on structural anthropology, «From Mauss to Claude Lévi-Strauss,» published in *Signs* (1960, 114-25). In this essay, Merleau-Ponty describes, among other things, his theory of symbolic language. Cortázar comments on Merleau-Ponty's theory and his own reaction to it:

una frase de Maurice Merleau-Ponty vino a justificar en mi propio terreno, el de la significación, la forma meramente receptiva y abierta a cualquier sorpresa en que yo seguía escribiendo un libro del que no sabía casi nada. *«El número y la riqueza de las significaciones de que dispone el hombre,» dice Merleau-Ponty a propósito de Mauss y de Lévi-Strauss, «exceden siempre el círculo de los objetos definidos que merecen el nombre de significado.» Y continuación, como si me ofreciera un cigarrillo: «La función simbólica debe adelantarse siempre a su objeto y sólo encuentra lo real cuando se le adelanta en lo imaginario ... »Cosas así, claro, las hubiera incorporado inmediatamente al libro en los tiempos de Rayuela.»* (1969, 109)

The irreducibility of human experience to language, and yet the utter openness of language to that irreducible experience, would, of course, have appealed immediately to Cortázar. It appears to have done so almost viscerally; thus, his simile of the cigarette. Here, again, is Merleau-Ponty's phrase, quoted by Cortázar: «The number and richness of significations man has at his disposal always exceed the circle of definite objects which warrant the name 'signified'» (1960, 122). I understand this phrase to mean that the world always exceeds our rationally constituted systems of naming and describing: the world is mysterious, marvellous, magical-never fully sayable. And yet, if one accepts Merleau-Ponty's assertion that significations inevitably exceed the circle of possible signifieds-as Cortázar most enthusiastically does-then language itself is liberated from the duty of description and may engage this excessive meaning. For Merleau-Ponty-I repeat the second phrase quoted by Cortázar-«the symbolic function must always be ahead of its object and finds reality only by anticipating it in imagination» (1960, 122).

Merleau-Ponty follows these statements with another that Cortázar does not quote, but that I will: «Thus our task is to broaden our reasoning to make it capable of grasping what, in ourselves and in others, precedes and exceeds reason» (1960, 122). Reason is not discarded but reconstituted, enlarged to include that which «precedes and exceeds» it. Surely Cortázar was drawn to Merleau-Ponty because he, too, recognized the limitations of modernity's definition of reason.

Think, in this regard, about the great European modernist writers. This very same apprehension of the excessive meaning of the world, which for Cortázar and Merleau-Ponty signals an opportunity, was a source of profound unease to the great English modernists-recall Virginia Woolf's repeated assertions of the inadequacy of language to express her vision, or E. M. Forster's wistful hope to «only connect,» the «only» ambiguously suggesting both «merely»-«you have only to connect»-and its impossibility-«only we could connect» «Words cannot tell» became a kind of trope by which the European modernists lamented the limitations of their medium: narrative realism. These writers

wrote (ironically, it seems, given their brilliant literary production) *in spite of* the world's excessive meaning; the postmodernist Cortázar, on the other hand, writes *because* of it. As Cortázar was struggling to write *Rayuela*, his «discovery» in 1960 of Merleau-Ponty's statement in *Signs* would have confirmed his own most basic instinct to include that excessive meaning—that mystery—in his verbal structure.

These different positions with respect to the ontological capacity of language—the European modernist and Latin American postmodernist—, may be understood, I think, as follows. Literary realism was the product of, and has been sustained by European empiricism and positivism, which require verification of the world. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, on the other hand, accepts that what the embodied consciousness *knows* is all that can be known; what the embodied consciousness *intends*, is. This does not cancel the world, but puts the language-user in a more flexible relation to the world. And when the language-user is Latin American, this flexibility is particularly welcome, since it allows him to contest European structures of knowledge and encourages him to create more amenable discursive structures. In Merleau-Ponty's account of the world's excessive meaning, mystery may exist without explanation—*must* exist without explanation—precisely because significations will always exceed signifieds. In such a world, fantasies are verifiable on the sole basis that they are known; no further rational system need be invoked as proof. So Cortázar amplifies European modernist conventions of social and psychological realism: for the moment, let's call his amplification «phenomenological realism.»

Cortázar links the writing of *Rayuela* to Merleau-Ponty's statement. We have only to think of the «instructions to the reader» in *Rayuela* to see how Cortázar engages Merleau-Ponty's idea of excessive meaning in his narrative structure: in the second, and multiple orders and endings of *Rayuela*, new sets of possibilities are made actual within the novel, and novelistic form itself is reduced (Le. deconstructed) and reconstituted. Not just *Rayuela* but many of the stories in Cortázar's early collections—I want to say to say *most*, but maybe this is because they tend to be my favorites—well, *many*, anyway, depend upon the author's engagement of this Merleau-Pontian condition of «excessive meaning:» think of «Bestiario,» «Carta a una señora en París,» «El ídolo de las Cíclades,» «El otro cielo,» «Axolotl.»

It may seem to be a contradiction that Merleau-Ponty insists upon excessive meaning while at the same time asserting that meaning is generated by the lived body in the physical world. He constantly contested the Cartesian privileging of autonomous consciousness by reminding us that meaning is not just mental, but also physically constituted. Language is not merely thought externalized, consciousness clothed, as it were, but the result of the physical processes of a

body in the world. Indeed, words are themselves physical presences in the world. So, Merleau-Ponty insists, «the sign ∞ does not only convey its significance, it is filled with it» (1945, 161). Language extends the body's interaction with the world: Merleau-Ponty states: «Organized signs have their immanent meaning, which does not arise from the 'I think' but from the 'I am able to'» (1945, 88).

Indeed, Merleau-Ponty's entire *oeuvre* may be considered a challenge to the very idea of disembodied thought. He consistently investigated what and how the *body* knows, and his work is filled with metaphors for the body as expressive medium, metaphors that attempt to undo the mind/body split. And he often did so metaphorically. Just two examples from *Phenomenology of Perception* will suffice to make my point: «My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my 'comprehension.' It is my body which gives significance not only to the natural object, but also to cultural objects like words» (1945, 235). And again: «A novel, poem, picture or musical work are individuals, that is, beings in which the expression is indistinguishable from the thing expressed, their meaning, accessible only through direct contact, being radiated with no change of their temporal and spatial situation. It is in this sense that our body is comparable to a work of art: It is a nexus of living meanings» (1945, 151).

Beginning in Cortázar's early collection, *Historia de cronopios y famas* (1962), and again in *Un tal Lucas* (1979), Cortázar dramatizes the body's own life, its inscribed knowledge and its will in the world. Recall that in *Cronopios y famas*, Cortázar provides detailed instructions for ordinary physical operations (how to cry, how to sing, how to go up a staircase) in order to show us how much the body knows. And in *Un tal Lucas*, he dramatizes the body's autonomy in the comings and goings of Lucas, a «cronopio» who at times seems to be all body. In the very first sentence of *Cronopios y famas*, the narrator calls attention to the physicality of his surroundings, describing it as «la masa pegajosa que se proclama mundo» (1962, 9) and as «una pasta de cristal congelado» (10).

«Masa pegajosa;» «pasta de cristal congelado:» these are metaphors that suggest not only the volume and texture and weight of the world, but also its sometimes comforting, sometimes deadening familiarity. Cortázar's narrator addresses this issue of the habitual nature of our perceptions in this same introduction to *Cronopios y famas*. His narrator says: «Cómo duele negar una cucharita, negar una puerta, negar todo lo que el hábito lame hasta darle suavidad satisfactoria ∞.» (9). It may hurt to refuse a spoon, but habit may also «transform everything:» «Negarse a que el acto delicado de girar el picaporte, ese acto por el cual todo podría transformarse, se cumpla con la fría eficacia de un reflejo cotidiano» (1962, 9, my italics). Here, the point is not to eschew habit--«el reflejo cotidiano»--as deadening, but rather to *undeaden* the very

concept of habit, because to do so is to reconstitute the body, and the physical world, as ontological instruments. So Cortázar exercises the phenomenological reduction to revitalize habit itself: recall Morelli's comment in *Rayuela*, «Basta mirar un momento con los ojos de todos los días ... » (620). In the context of Merleau-Ponty's concept of the lived body, Cortázar's repeated insistence on the coincidence of *lo fantástico y lo cotidiano* acquires philosophical resonance.

I will mention just one more wonderful piece from *Cronopios y famas*, «Acefalía» (translated by Paul Blackburn rather flatly as «Headlessness»). This story seems almost designed to dramatize Merleau-Ponty's statement that meaning arises not from «I think» but from «I am able to.» Recall that «Acefalía» begins with the report of a condemned man whose head has been cut off, but who cannot be buried because of a strike of gravediggers. He has time, then, to notice that without his head, he is left with only one of his five senses, his sense of touch. The story—which is only three paragraphs long—describes the process whereby the headless man, through adaptive behavior and the decision to be happy, regains all of his senses. The last to reappear is his sense of hearing. This is the last sentence of the story: «Sólo le faltaba oír y justamente entonces oyó, y fue como un recuerdo, porque lo que oía era otra vez las palabras üeléapellán de la cárcel, palabras de consuelo y esperanza muy hermosas en sí, lástima que con cierto aire de usadas, de dichas muchas veces, de gastadas a fuerza de sonar y sonar» (1962, 71). Here, it is not physical activities or daily reflexes that have become habitual, but linguistic and cultural forms. The character's headless body is the site of radical renewal, and the symbol, I would propose, of Cortázar's own project of literary embodiment. Like Merleau-Ponty, Cortázar rejects the Cartesian privileging of the consciousness, dramatizing instead the fantastical resources of the lived body.

If *Cronopios y famas* engages Merleau-Ponty's lived body comically, Cortázar's late political fictions do so tragically. The lived body is at the heart of his stories about political torture—stories like «Apocalipsis en Solentiname,» «Recortes de prensa,» «Grafitti,» and several of the stories in his final collection, *Deshoras*. In these stories meaning narrows horrifically until it focuses upon nothing *but* the body, until flesh and blood have no referent other than their own pain. In my essay, «Descifrando las heridas,» I propose that these, too, are phenomenological fictions rather than psychological fictions, for they, too, are concerned with the body's reciprocal relations with its surroundings, and the meaning generated—or destroyed—by those relations.

I have pointed to the merest tip of this iceberg of affinity between Merleau-Ponty and Cortázar, and I conclude by suggesting other facets of this iceberg. One is their shared vision of history, haunted, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, by «myth and legendary time» (1960, 123); another is their shared concern for the «other,» and how to know the other. Think of «Axolotl» in terms of this

statement by Merleau-Ponty: «Vision alone makes us learn that beings that are different, 'exterior,' foreign to one another, are yet absolutely *together*, are 'simultaneity': this is a mystery that psychologists handle the way a child handles explosives» (1961, 282-283). Merleau-Ponty and Cortázar also shared a lifelong interest in the nature and limits of aesthetic expression, and investigated them brilliantly in their different disciplines. When these overlapping ontological concerns are fully explored, with their implicit critique of Cartesian consciousness and their concomitant reconstitution of reason, I suspect that we will have the basis for a theory of Latin American postmodernism.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Critical note has been taken of Cortázar's early reference to Merleau-Ponty's theory of language: see Sara Castro-Klarén (1976, 140-150); Steven Boldy (1980, 101-102; 117-18); Jaime Alazraki (1983, 48,51).

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