

A COMMENTARY:

Opening the Cave

Or

the French Articulation of the Temporality of Becoming and the Worldliness of Consciousness . . . as Undermining Nostalgia, the Tension between Painting and Photography, the ground of Heroic existentialism and Happy Metaphysics"

Gail Weiss and Galen Johnson have given us ways to think about the line in French thought that develops the import of Husserl's notion of indeterminacy that culminates in the work of Merleau-Ponty, described by Weiss and Johnson as "wild-flowering," "pagan" and "without father"--terms I'll return to at the conclusion of my comments. Weiss and Johnson, instead of retreating to the obscure reaches of metaphysics or epistemology, or to poetic or abstract pronouncements, give us specific issues in ethics and aesthetics with which to measure the power of their interpretations. I heartily agree with both their positions and seek only to further the line they've drawn and to draw their positions together by delineating how both their discussions at bottom center of Merleau-Ponty's notion of temporality as radical becoming and the correlative decentering of what formerly had been isolated as "consciousness" towards a sense of understanding the world in and through the body--and the body taken to be an "open straits" upon the flow of the world, or to use a different metaphor, as part of the fabric of the world.

Weiss begins by discussing Husserl's notions of indeterminacy, and rightly suggests that the always incomplete nature of various modes of apprehension, as outstanding possibilities to be realized, does not do justice to a deeper sense of indeterminacy, which cannot be resolved by no matter how many acts of apprehension, and then goes on to explore the Husserlian notion of "fringe presentations" which are the context of any

thematic presentation. However, by the end of her paper, Weiss again rightly suggests that this indeterminacy is not on just on the fringe, is not a merely horizontal phenomenon, but is at the depth of experience, at its heart. She believes that these French philosophers have opened up another side of givenness, a dimension of latency, which is different in the analysis of De Beauvoir, Camus and Merleau-Ponty. Weiss warns us that the notions of ambiguity, absurdity and reversibility "cannot be reduced to one another as different names for the phenomenon of indeterminacy" (p. 20). However, I would like to suggest that all three notions can be seen to be aspects of taking perception, embodiment and enmeshment within the world as a temporal ongoing becoming. It is this temporality of an expanded notion of the body that always announces itself in choice, in action, in apprehension and--as Johnson discusses--in expression as indeterminate. Since indeterminacy is at the heart of time and of our being in the world, each of these thinkers calls for a *taking up* of that indeterminacy, a creative working with it, in and through it, in choice, in action, in articulation and in art.

De Beauvoir's "ethics of ambiguity" advocates an embrace of the tension between the determinacy of a "choice" and it's "goal" and between equally ethically "justifiable alternatives," because it seeks to live in a place between these categories. These categories are tokens of a rationalist perspective of human being, rather than one that does justice to a materially situated, that is, embodied being, always in the process of becoming what it is. To return to the dilemma of the young man choosing between his duty to his mother and his duty to his country on behalf of humanity, the point is that the fact that both courses of action can be "ethically defended" shows that there is no such "choice"--not between principles to be imposed upon his situation. To choose existentially is to leave the plane of reflection which deals with constant mentalistic identities and generalities in order to enter the specific, unique "working through" of the complex interrelations of material beings who feel, perceive, find nuance, connect with the changing imaginary and are constantly transformed in their identity by what they encounter in their embodied being. The young man does not choose between two preexisting possibilities: he makes one possible *by painstakingly becoming what he chooses* by working on what the choice is about *in the world*. He makes a different love

come into being between he and his mother, he becomes a different kind of son, or his mother becomes a different mother who has seen her son's mission in a larger world and altered her neediness, but the past will become something other than it was as it presented itself as a basis for decision. One doesn't choose a possible future, one enters a present in a new way that may bring about a transformation of present and past, which gives a future that could have followed from such a past. A pure consciousness is not caught in a past and could "choose a future." A human being commits to a future, to becoming something else, to having made the choice on a basis that will be gradually transformed into a rightness and only on this basis becomes a future. The commitment is to transform the world as a making right for who one becomes gradually, and is only possible for an embodied being with this "thickness" to it's being: a being that can be shaped, molded, worked with, through the power of interrelation of commitment and passion. This being exists in a time that has weight and thickness because it exists equally "out there" in things, which also gives it redemptive powers of transformation.

For Camus, he realized that each moment, lived in its sensual fullness has a perfection to it, a sense which speaks to each person. Yet, it is the demand that over time, over a lifetime, that there be a perfect order, an answer, a foundation for meaning, that the demand midwives the absurd. It is the confrontation of human with world, of human with other humans, of human with its own reflections and questions that gives this existential drama. Like the existential project just discussed, a confrontation takes place during a span of time, it is a temporal phenomenon. However, no narrative offered in response to a situation can give a closure of this sort, because the telling has changed what was related as well as whoever told the tale. It is not the dilemma of Sartre's Roquentin, to live or to tell, for no one is carried in a "stream of time" beyond a certain spot which he or she can now no longer recapture, but rather we can't help but both live and tell inextricably in such a way that each little detail of the world to which we are related has become something other in the process and tells different tales to each inquiry made by the protagonist becoming other to him or herself. Camus, like the other thinkers we're discussing today didn't see a way to transcend this inherence in the world and time and remain a human being, who is of the rocks and shores and the

events of history, so Sisyphus or the stranger or the doctor fighting a plague can only fashion a story, an evolving meaning, an interpretive act, and why Camus tells one who would wish to be a philosopher to "write in images" not concepts.

Merleau-Ponty's reversibility is an accomplishment in the course of time, in history of a sentient being, who gains its sense of reality and identity from the indirect voices of perception. At any particular instant in the relationship of the touching-touched hand, one hand may indeed appear as an object, and one hand as the subject. What can't happen is for this Cartesian clarity and distinctness to withstand temporal becoming. Cartesian certainties and dualities and the determinacy that ensues from them are phenomena of the instant. Over the course of time, the fact that one hand is touch, then the other, then at other moment more or less ambiguously, become a history in which the boundaries in their differing material relations have blurred, have crosshatched the space in such a way that its sense is fluctuating, is comprised of levels and vectors, of discontinuities and gaps, which nevertheless form a thickness, a depth, in which things impossible find a tone, a chord, a rhythm, an overall sense of complex parts in relation which signifies reversibility. At some moments of watching Mt. St Victoire Cezanne felt in control, as if he were stealing its secret, or imposing its order, at other times, he was helpless before it, feeling his mind filled with stone or swayed by wind, burned out by heat, and other moments were of differing modalities: in the life of this perceiver or any perceiver of any dimension of the world, there becomes within the passing of time that blurring of boundaries, that uncertainty of who or what gave what to vision or hearing or each sense and then one lives the reversibility with the world. As Merleau-Ponty told us, before he himself had articulated these insights, "time is the subject of perception" and there is no inner man, since man is only in the world. In the world, there is no return home, the two hands are always uneasy in their relation; this is not a happy philosophy of harmony, but rather a dynamically tense one.

Now to see the charges made against Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of art against this temporal background is to further what Johnson claims. Nostalgia is a double attempt to forestall the becoming of time. It seeks to relive emotionally, a time that was

itself only a moment of process, as if it had been more perfect, more of a chunk of time and thus of idealized being, a solid core, a particle without wavelike properties. It also emotionally seeks to hide from the fact that this past is a constantly new past in the present becoming of time and is always changing, never perfectly recaptured in nostalgia. In this sense it seeks to flatten time, to make it existentially a correlate of the traditional rationalist notion of time as line of sequential moments which have occurred and are to occur and to whose past moments we could naively return in memory and try to retain. In some sense, most of Western art, like most of Western culture has been nostalgic and far from Merleau-Ponty hearkening back to this tradition, he seeks to break it open. The depth that Johnson describes is not only the depth of different themes that are impossible but set into a whole that never forms as a unified one but only a lived one in perceptual, emotional, intellectual, imaginative sense, but it is also an enjambment of temporal dimensions. It is only through time that the discontinuities, the gaps, the juxtapositions come into one sense, one that is fraught with interplays of forces, to use a Nietzschean turn of phrase. Art has come more and more to reveal this process of the coming together through encroachment of the clear and distinct, that of the opposed in sense, time and space, through the process of being wrought, of being interpreted, that is not only the artist's calling but that of all humans in intercourse with the world. Merleau-Ponty, far from hearkening back to some more nostalgic sense of the artist's calling has perhaps found a greater interlocutor in today's postmodern artist.

I believe that Merleau-Ponty's focus on sight in *Eye and Mind* and other writings on art has to do with the situation of art, of Western culture, and of the perceptual style of our modern era. Vision offers itself to Western culture as that far-ranging ability to dominate and order a landscape. As such, it has gained a prominence in a history of philosophy, science and arts, that seek to capture the world as spectacle and master it, and sees understanding as some kind of possession by sight. If Merleau-Ponty saw the task of the artist to set the spark of deflagration of being, this fire-filled perception and expression is a destruction of what is most static and self-contained, aloof from the pull of the interchanging, temporally dynamic material world, a destruction of

that idealization of experience, whether rendered figural or abstract or photographic.

For Merleau-Ponty, meaning itself is not preexistent: it emerges in the dialogue with the world, with others, with oneself. If science becomes so self-contained that it merely manipulates the world, instead of encountering it in perplexity and being transformed by the dialogue, it loses its own sense. If art, loses this sense of being foundationless in the becoming of time, transforming its past and that of the world it seeks to express, then it too loses its own sense. Merleau-Ponty, like Susan Sontag, saw that photography gave itself out to the public as that mechanized non-human access to a static reality, although what is most apparent is that this is its particular *illusion*, that actually what is given most palpably by the photo is the fact that the larger context in space, in culture, in the setting of the photographer, is cut out, is framed, is manipulated. Sontag, in her book on photography, saw this double-edged sword to the photo: taken as evidence by the public in newspapers, in courts of law, as revealing "the facts," the photo as proliferating endlessly would eventually announce the opposite, that it is the most manipulated art medium of all, and thus undermine the equation of the idealized appearance of objectivity with the real. The more recent computer-manipulated dimension of photography and other technical breakthroughs only hastens and heightens this process. Merleau-Ponty abhorred the use of photography or any medium to disguise the inexorability of temporal becoming and the inevitable indeterminacy it leaves us as its gift, not its curse. This is not the happy place of the soporific symbol of the nourishing Mother. Neither is it the cruelty of terrifying totem of the ever marching forward Father, laying down the law and the law of time as endlessly dividing ourselves from our past, from ourselves. Sometimes, it is hard to see these flowers are "wild," implosive and explosive. Yes, it is pagan. For Merleau-Ponty one returns always to that first moment, but not as origin, as nostalgia, but as ever new, always transforming of itself and of all time, which means devouring in flame, losing substance while gaining a flickering illumination--an uneasy place and time.

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