

The Rhetoric of Ecocriticism: Chiasmic Reversibility in Merleau-Ponty*

Park, Woo-soo

Contents

- I. Interanimation of the World
- II. Ecological Bioethics in later Merleau-Ponty
- III. Chiasmic Ontology

I.

Claudius: Now Hamlet, where's Polonius?

Hamlet: At supper.

Claudius: At supper? Where?

Hamlet: Not where he eats, but where he is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are ev'n at him. Your worm is your emperor for diet; we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes, but to one table; that's the end. [4.3.16-23]

To the king's question where Polonius's body is hidden, Hamlet replies that the worms of maggots are feasting over it. Here Hamlet's cynicism is typical of his last-moment meditation on the problem of eventual death. Only at the twilight of his short life does the interrelationship of life and

* This paper was assisted by the 2012 HUFs research grant.

death enflame into bright. There's an Ovidian influence reflected here: death's moment becomes metamorphic moment and it becomes enhanced moment for self-realization. The significance of life is characterized only by the natural limit of death: life is a cousin of death, and the womb of life is the tomb of death, and vice versa. If "a man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm" (4.3.25-26), there is no difference between king and beggar in the natural food cycle. Death reminds us of our often forgotten, rather willfully forgotten, fact that we bodily beings are a part of nature. Hamlet thinks, on the brink of his death, of metempsychosis and transmogrification of man into a being of his biosphere. The Tibetan wind and bird burial of a dead body embodies Hamlet's meditation of death as a point in the sequence of life cycle. As Hamlet blurs the difference between king and beggar, he likewise makes no distinction between man and animals, and his deep thinking is expressed by the rhetorical trope of chiasmus: "Not where he eats, but where he is eaten." If chiasmus situates life in death, it also discovers of death in life. Chiastic interrelated patterns abound: especially in this context. It is interesting that the body in question was made such through a veil or curtain—another subtle link-barrier in this death-life dynamic. It was as if Polonius was already dead, and Hamlet reached through the veil only to touch that universal (or, equally, individual) truth. Dead-in-life and alive-in-death is breakdown/fusing of distinctions everywhere in tandem with this—between (imagined/hoped-for) royalty and non-royalty, between complicit and ignorant, "knowing" and unknowing. We even have an animal-human confusion, with chiastic tensions brought up again in the multivalent form of a rat. And of course Claudius should have been that rat (worm-emperor?) behind the arras.

The western humanistic tradition has emphasized the difference between man and animals in terms of logos and culture. Man's incessant efforts to

make nature tamed into culture reflect this western metaphysics of presence and difference, though these have failed every time because of the innate nature of man irretrievably immersed in the flesh of the world. If the early modernity of expanding nationalism has emphasized the importance of wit and judgment which find difference and distance in apparent similarities, this age of globalization retrieves the repressed role of symbiotic imagination which tries to find out the significance of inter-connection and inter-animation among the seemingly different. We are now living in the age of fusion and re-fusion, not of refusal. However, before the onset of the global age of co-existential simultaneity in temporal and spatial contraction, we took pride in the virtues of categorical differences. As Roberto Exposito properly points out, the notion and category of person helps to make a gaping hole between rights and humanity because “no one is born a person. Some may become a person, but precisely by pushing those who surround him into the dimension of the thing.”¹⁾ In this procedure of selective exclusion in personalism there is no place for slaves, let alone animals. In the long-held definition of the human being as the “rational animal,” the tradition of personalism subjects animality to the domination of rationality and into oblivion. Hence “every attribution of the personal always implicitly contains an operation of reification with respect to the impersonal biological layer from which it distances itself” (Exposito 128). The bioethics of Roberto Exposito’s impersonal intends to negate this initial distinction between person and non-person through the intermediate stages of the quasi-person, the semi-person and the temporal person. Exposito further explains of the impersonal rather in terms of the personal: “Rather the impersonal is that which, from within the person, blocks the mechanism of distinction and separation with respect to those who are not yet persons, who are no longer persons, or who have never

1) Robert Exposito, “For a Philosophy of the Impersonal.” *New Centennial Review* 10.2 (2010): 121-134, 126 .

been declared to be persons” (Exposito 131). Timothy Campbell argues, “Exposito will assemble a notion of rationality among all living phenomena that will become central to his declination of the impersonal.”²⁾ By erasing the distinction between person and non-person, “the impersonal with its becoming-animal” puts in relationship completely heterogeneous terms like human, animal, and microorganism” (Campbell 145). We can safely characterize the liberal bioethics of the impersonal as an alternative relationality to the living world.

This bioethics puts into question the person-thing dichotomy and instead foregrounds the animality of man, which goes in tandem with a strand of postmodern anti-humanism. One of the dominant main features of the new bioethics is its strategy of bridging relationality to the world by using the rhetorical figure of chiasmus. Chiasmus, from the Greek letter X called chiasm, is literally the figure of crossing or bridging over between two or more apparently dissimilar domains of thinking or diverse aspects of things. In Richard Lanham’s words, chiasmus as mirror inversion “seems to set up a natural internal dynamic that draws the parts closer together” (33).³⁾ The cross of chiasmus stretches itself into the four directions of the world, making the four elements of air, water, earth, and fire converge at its central meeting point. Through its reversible relationship of criss-crossing, chiasmus makes the seemingly dissimilar into similar: it is a bridge of thoroughfare, with no entrance or exit defined, but open and free for commerce and communication. Though Martin Heidegger is often criticized as playing with the “god trick” of high-altitude thinking, his picturesque image of bridge helps us a great deal in comprehending the

2) Timothy Campbell, “Foucault was not a person”: Idolatry and the Impersonal in Roberto Exposito’s *Third Person*. *New Centennial Review* 10:2 (2010): 135-150, 136.

3) Richard A. Lanham. *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1991.

schematic function of chiasmus:

The bridge swings over the stream “with ease and power.” It does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge designedly causes them to lie across from each other. ... The bridge *gathers* the earth as landscapes around the stream. ... The bridge *gathers* to itself *in its own way* earth and sky, divinities and mortals. ... Thus the bridge does not first come to a location to stand in it; rather, a location comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge.⁴⁾ (Emphasis original)

For Heidegger, the bridge, like a Greek temple, collects the fourfold of the universe; in it dwell the earth, the water, the sky, man and divinities. The two banks, set apart by the waters, come into being by the bridge: it makes the banks as such, not otherwise the banks the bridge.

The bridge places the landscape in its surroundings. Heidegger’s idea of the world as building and dwelling easily conducts us to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, especially to the latter’s idea of chiasm as a kind of bridge. For Merleau-Ponty the body-subject inscribes on and is also inscribed by the objective body as a part of objects in the world. The lived body is the other side of the objective body, and vice versa. Hence the body-subject as a perceiver is also the object of perception at once. The body-subject and the objective body are the obverse and the reverse of each other, and together they form a single indivisible being.⁵⁾ Merleau-Ponty’s body is a thoroughfare and bridge connecting the self and the world, whose

4) Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. D. F. Krell. San Francisco: Harper, 1977. 330-32.

5) Harrison Hall, “Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of mind.” *Contemporary Philosophy: A New Survey*, ed. Guttorm Floistad. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986. 349.

consciousness is always already situated in the world of the fourfold elements.

II.

Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy is a kind of ecological bioethics intertwining man with the flesh of the world. However, we can find its budding in his early philosophy. He agrees with Herder: "Man is a perfect *sensorium commune*, who is affected now from one quarter, now from another," and he goes on stressing that "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.'"⁶⁾ This affectionate mutuality of body and perception and understanding implies the bioethics of inter-subjectivity made possible by his use of reversible relationality of chiasm(commutatio). Significantly Merleau-Ponty entitled his unfinished final chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible* as "The Chiasm." According to David Abram, it is a term "commonly used by neurologists and psychologists to designate the optic "chiasm," that place in the brain where the two focusing eyes intertwine."⁷⁾ Merleau-Ponty explains the on-going negotiation of the self as both the subject of seeing and the object of being seen simultaneously and the flesh of the world individually indwelling in my body in terms of the rhetorical figure of chiasmus. A pure mind can neither touch and see things, nor experience anything at all; only the embodied mind can. To touch the world is also to be touched by the world. My body is the earth where the electric charge of the universe is

6) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith. London: Routledge, 1994. 235.

7) David Abram, "Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth." *Environmental Ethics* 10 (1988): 101-120, 104 .

‘earthened’ to the Earth: the world experiences itself through me.

One can say that we perceive the things themselves, that we are the world that thinks itself—or that the world is at the heart of our flesh. In any case once a body-world relationship is recognized, there is a ramification of my body and a ramification of the world and correspondence between its inside and my outside, between my inside and its outside.⁸⁾

As is clearly seen in the chiasmic structure of the last sentence of the above quotation, the interweaving of my body with my biosphere is mutually co-arising and reversible in its temporal priority. Here time is space, and space time, just as there is a body of the mind and a mind of the body. In this reversible world of space-time, there is no essential and pre-existent difference between the interiority of the mind and the exteriority of the body. The nexus of chiasmus clarifies a secret kinship between man and other living ‘things’ in the biosphere. By using a tree image Merleau-Ponty here emphasizes the organic unity of man with his world, just as a tree cannot live only with the trunk without its branches, and as we cannot know the dance from the dancer. Though Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly say of the animal consciousness, he implies its possibility:

Whether we are dealing with organisms or animal societies, we do not find things subject to a law of all or nothing, but rather dynamic, unstable equilibria in which every rearrangement resumes already latent activities and transfigures them by decentering them. As a result, one cannot

8) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Charles Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1968. 136.

conceive of the relations between the species and man in terms of hierarchy. What there is is a difference of quality and for this reason living creatures are not superimposed upon one another, the transcendence of one by another is, so to speak, lateral rather than frontal, and one meets all sorts of anticipation and reminiscences.⁹⁾

Merleau-Ponty seems here to be influenced by the creative evolutionist Henri Bergson in his idea of dialectical relationship between the perceiving and the perceived, the individual and the horizon of the world. Bergson argues that perception is always organized by the principle of attraction. In K. L. Evans's words, "one's perception of the world is entirely dependent on the condition that affects the body—at each of its movements everything changes, like the turn of a kaleidoscope. As Bergson argues, external objects send back to a body, as would a mirror, its eventual influence; they take rank in an order corresponding to the growing or diminishing power of the body. The objects that surround a body reflect its possible action upon them."¹⁰⁾ When we place the following from Merleau-Ponty in the context of Bergson's principle of attraction and natural affinity, its meaning gets clearer:

In short, there is no essence, no idea, that does not adhere to a domain of history and of geography ... We never have before us pure individuals, indivisible glaciers of beings, nor essences without place and without date. Not that they exist elsewhere, beyond our grasp, but because we are experiences, that is, thoughts that feel behind themselves the weight of the

9) Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Themes from the lectures at the College de France 1952-1960*. Trans. John O'Neill. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1970. 97.

10) K. L. Evans. *Whale!* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003. 46.

space, the time, the very Being they think, and which therefore do not hold under their gaze a serial space and time nor the pure idea of series, but have about themselves a time and space that exist by piling up, by proliferation, by encroachment, by promiscuity—a perpetual pregnancy, perpetual parturition, generativity and generality, brute essence and brute existence, which are the nodes and antinodes of the same ontological vibration.¹¹⁾

This sounds very similar to the tenor of the butterfly effect of the chaos theory. I am not sure if in the beginning the homophonic sound effect of the two words, chaos and chiasm, suggested to Merleau-Ponty the interweaving function and significance of chiasmus. However, what matters in the above quotation is that everything in the living world is altogether enmeshed in inter-animation. The new bioethics is a new kind of animism returning from the long suffered repression. The so-called empathetic fallacy denigrated in the New Criticism needs to be re-evaluated as symbiotic imagination which connects all things in the biota. Once, the empathetic fallacy was severely castigated as an obstacle to scientific objectivity and verifiability. However, the power of sympathetic imagination as a means of inter-animation and impersonation turns the fallacy into a virtue for co-existence on the brink of extinction enhanced by the technological and instrumental exploitation of nature.

11) Merleau-Ponty, 1968:115.

III.

Merleau-Ponty's "chiasmic ontology"¹²⁾ suggests the inter-dependence of all living beings in the biosphere: "We live in external symbiosis with all other mammals, the birds, the insects, and with rice, wheat, and corn fields, with berry thickets and vegetable patches."¹³⁾ This chiasmic thinking of Merleau-Ponty opens a new approach to the question of man-animal relationship.¹⁴⁾ The vegetable or zoological understanding of man in the biota is made possible by extending our feelers into four directions along the embodied world, not hierarchically but horizontally. The function of the rhetorical figure of chiasmus makes it possible for us to criss-cross the divergent aspects of our biosphere bearing the cross of sympathy and symbiosis. The ethics of chiasmic bridging would realize Isaiah's vision of co-habiting lions with hares, serpents with doves, and man with 'wild' animals. In that sense it is prophetic of the new Edenic garden. Each is a part of all, and all experiences itself individually through its participation in each. It is chiasmus that bridges over discrimination to friendship.

12) Louise Westling, "Merleau-Ponty's Ecophenomenology," in *Ecocritical Theory*, ed. Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P. 2011. 126(126-138).

13) Ibid. 131

14) Confer Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1994), 169: "Thus there is in human existence a principle of indeterminacy, and this indeterminacy is not only for us, it does not stem from some imperfection of our knowledge, and we must not imagine that any God could sound our hearts and minds and determine what we owe to nature and what to freedom. Existence is indeterminate in itself, by reason of its fundamental structure, and in so far as it is the very process whereby the hitherto meaningless takes on meaning, whereby what had merely a sexual significance assumes a more general one, chance is transformed into reason: in so far as it is the act of taking up a *de facto* situation. We shall give the name 'transcendence' to this act in which existence takes up, to its own account, and transforms such a situation."

WORKS CITED

- Abram, David. "Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth." *Environmental Ethics* 10 (1988): 101-20.
- Campbell, Timothy. "Foucault was not a person: Ideology and the Impersonal in Roberto Exposito's *Third Person*." *New Centennial Review* 10.2 (2010): 135-50.
- Cohen, Richard A. "Merleau-Ponty, the Flesh, and Foucault." *Reading Merleau-Ponty*, eds. Lawrence Hass and Dorothea Olkowski. New York: Humanity Books, 2000. 277-91.
- Edie, James M. *Speaking & Meaning: The Phenomenology of Language*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1978.
- Evans, K. L. *Whale!* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003.
- Exposito, Robert. "For a Philosophy of the Impersonal." *New Centennial Review* 10.2 (2010): 121-34.
- Hall, Harrison. "Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Mind." *Contemporary Philosophy*. Ed. Guttorm Floistad. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986. 343-61.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Basic Writings*. Ed. D. F. Krell. San Francisco: Harper, 1977.
- Langer, Monika. "Merleau-Ponty and Deep Ecology." *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*. Ed. Galen Johnson and Michael Smith. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1990. 115-29.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*. Trans. Silverman. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973.
- . *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Colin Smith. London: Routledge, 1994.
- . *Themes from the Lectures*. Trans. William O'Neill. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1970.

- _____. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Ed. Charles Lefort. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1968.
- Moltmann-Wendel, Elizabeth. *A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey*. New York: Crossroad, 1988.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins. London: Methuen, 1982.
- Watson, Stephen. "Merleau-Ponty, the Ethics of Ambiguity, and the Dialectics of Virtue." *Merleau-Ponty in Contemporary Perspectives*. Ed. Patrick Burke and Jan Van Der Veken. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1993. 147-70.
- Westling, Louise. "Merleau-Ponty's Ecophenomenology." *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*. Ed. Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2011. 126-138.
- _____. "Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty: Eco-poetics and the Problem of Humanism." *Culture, Creativity and Environment*. Ed. Fiona Becket and Terry Gifford. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007. 233-47.

Abstract

The Rhetoric of Ecocriticism: Chiasmic Reversability in Merleau-Ponty

Park, Woo-soo

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was in his last years deeply concerned with the problems of bioethics and the flesh of the world in the biota. Merleau-Ponty expressed his interests in the symbiosis of all the living beings by the rhetorical figure of chiasmus. For him chiasmus is a bridge interconnecting two seemingly dissimilar things or thoughts into interdependence and co-existence. Though Merleau-Ponty does not openly claim consciousness for animals, he denies Darwinian evolutionism which places man at the peak of the life world: for him man is in a horizontal relationship, not a vertical one, with other living things. By emphasizing the mutual inter-dependence of a body-world affecting each other, he deconstructs the traditional Western metaphysics of logocentrism. Merleau-Ponty's "chiasmic ontology" suggests the intertwining of all the living beings in the biosphere. His new bioethics expresses itself by the chiasmic reversibility of the inside into the outside, and vice versa. It is the chiasmic reversibility in Merleau-Ponty that bridges over discrimination and the personal onto integration and the impersonal. For him the rhetorical figure of chiasmus is a sign of analogical imagination and wit that ramifies its branches to the four-folds of the symbiotic world. Even when we exist as a monadic fragment, we are in a dynamic relationship of the living whole with the world. Merleau-Ponty's eco-poetic imagination in terms of reversible chiasmus is the language and thought that transcend

technological modernism to the vegetable and animal biosphere of green ideas and a unified vision. The reversible chiasmus in Merleau-Ponty represents his refusal to admit the priority of man in the biosphere and his strong faith that all the livings exist in interanimation.

Key words: Merleau-Ponty, chiasmus, rhetoric, ecocriticism, reversibility, body

메를로-퐁띠, 교차대구법, 수사학, 생태비평, 가역성, 몸

논문접수일: 2012. 11. 01

심사완료일: 2012. 12. 13

게재확정일: 2012. 12. 15

이름: 박우수

소속: 한국외국어대학교 영어대학 영문학과

주소: (130-791) 서울특별시 동대문구 이문동 270

이메일: wspark@hufs.ac.kr