# PART III

# CONVERSATIONS

## 9

## 'THE INCOMPARABLE MONSTER OF SOLIPSISM': BAKHTIN AND MERLEAU-PONTY

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> Not only do we have a right to assert that others exist, but I should be inclined to contend that existence can be attributed only to others, and in virtue of their otherness, and that I cannot think of myself as existing except in so far as I conceive of myself as not being the others: and so as other than them. I would go so far as to say that it is of the essence of the Other that he exists. I cannot think of him as other without thinking of him as existing. Doubt only arises when his otherness is, so to say, expunged from my mind. (Marcel, 1949: 104)

The respective intellectual projects of Mikhail Bakhtin and the French existential phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty display a number of remarkable affinities, in terms of their basic assumptions, overarching thematic preoccupations, and critical strategies, as has been noted in brief elsewhere (Holquist, 1990: xxxv; Jung, 1990: 95). What I wish to argue in this chapter is that, considered together, these two figures have much to offer to post-Cartesian human sciences, particularly with respect to overcoming the solipsistic tendencies of modernist accounts of selfhood, identity, knowledge, and so forth. Such theories, it will be argued here, are irrevocably tainted by what David Michael Levin calls a 'deep narcissism'. By succumbing to the fantasy of 'total self-determination, total self-grounding', the monadistic subject of modernity refuses to recognize otherness, and interprets the world as a projection of its own cognitive faculties. This situation has, Levin remarks, precipitated 'an affective and epistemological abyss between self and others. No sense of community can join together what has been separated by this abyss' (Levin, 1991: 56, 59). In contesting such an egocentric subjectivism and the threat to genuine sociality that it entails, Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty seek to reverse this alienation between self and other, and between body and world, in order to uphold the Utopian

possibility of an 'ideal community of embodied subjects' (Merleau-Ponty, 1970: 82). As such, they argue that it is only by jettisoning the stubborn residue of Cartesianism that remains mired in Western thought and adopting a more 'dialogical' world-view that we can grasp the intrinsically open, interactive nature of bodies and selves as they co-exist within a shared life-world. Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty therefore endeavour to dislodge the egological, narcissistic subject from the pinnacle of Western metaphysics. Yet there is no deconstruction of the subject as such in their writings: the self remains an active, engaged agent, the initiator of a series of ongoing projects, and not simply an *effect* of external power-relations or modes of signification, as many postmodernists have suggested (Burkitt, 1994; Gardiner, 1996a). In what follows, I shall concentrate on two major questions. First, precisely how do Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty characterize the challenge of solipsism, and why do they view the Cartesian self (the archetypal subject of modernity) as such a serious threat to the dialogical values they espouse? Secondly, what concrete alternative to this egocentric hyper-rationalism do they advance? By juxtaposing the writings of Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty in this manner, I seek to reveal a striking convergence of themes and problematics that will, it is hoped, serve as an impetus to further inquiry and discussion.

## The Challenge of Solipsism

The enigmatic title of this chapter – the 'incomparable monster of solipsism' – is chosen from a lecture on the philosophy of nature delivered by Merleau-Ponty during his tenure at the Collège de France in the 1950s. In referring to solipsism as an 'incomparable monster', he was not indulging in empty phrase-mongering or rhetorical hyperbole. Throughout his career, Merleau-Ponty railed against what he variously called 'high-altitude thinking', Cartesian dualism, and objectivism. This 'philosophy of reflection' is rooted in the belief that the production of knowledge involves a solitary subject contemplating an external world consisting of discrete facts, which is then 'possessed' in thought via a sovereign act of cognition. The capacity for abstract, rational thought is considered to be the highest and most admirable human faculty, a view Merleau-Ponty refers to as 'psychism'. In the philosophy of reflection, the subject that grasps the world in a purely cognitive manner is, in effect, a disembodied observer. Since the epistemic truths generated by this transcendental ego are timeless and universal, the actual situation within which any given thinker is located is inconsequential. The egological self 'makes itself "indifferent", pure "knower", in order to grasp all things without remainder – to spread all things out before itself – and to "objectify" and gain intellectual possession of them' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 162). Accordingly, the world lies prostrate before this omniscient subject's purview, like the captured booty and slaves paraded triumphantly before a victorious warrior-potentate. What this philosophy

attempts to achieve is a kind of magical transcription: to substitute a rigorous and irrefutable system of crystalline logic and conceptual rigour in the place of a complex, multi-valent, and ambiguous reality. This transcription is designed to establish absolute lucidity and certainty where there was once obfuscation, to 'take out an insurance against doubt', as Merleau-Ponty puts it, although the premium to be paid for such clarity is 'more onerous than the loss for which it is to indemnify us' (1968: 36). Such an overwhelming desire for epistemological certitude and logical coherence is, for many theorists, the *locus classicus* of modernity (de Certeau, 1984; Ferguson, 1989). The transcription of the world into a pure, 'algorithmic' language and the use of idealized representations and formalist theories of knowledge as surrogates for the concrete world is something that disturbed Merleau-Ponty greatly; at one point, he likened it to 'a nightmare, from which there is no awakening' (1964b: 160). Not only is the body alien to this psychical subject: other selves are equally mysterious entities that can have no authentically dialogical relationship *vis-à-vis* the rational *cogito*. The external world presents itself as a collection of inert facts that is wholly Other, and which becomes a *threat* to my sovereignty unless I can master it and transform it into something I can use. Consequently, in the modern context we tend to relate to others and to the world instrumentally. The logical *terminus* of such an attitude is the rapacious and domineering orientation of modern scientific and technological rationalism, or what Merleau-Ponty calls a 'new prometheanism' (1970: 103).

Mikhail Bakhtin develops a remarkably similar diagnosis of the solipsistic and pathological tendencies of modernity, particularly in his earliest, phenomenological writings. His position here is that although the history of Western thought has been periodically marked by perspectives that have rejected the validity of bodily, lived experience in favour of abstruse theoretical constructions – Platonism being the archetypal example – modern forms of thought have most systematically detached what he terms 'Being-as-event' from abstract cognition, in order to privilege the latter. Hence, 'discursive theoretical thinking' functions to denigrate the sensuous and tangible character of the lived event, perpetrating a 'fundamental split between the content or sense of a given act/activity and the historical actuality of its being' (Bakhtin, 1993: 2). Once alienated from the lifeworld, grand theoretical systems acquire a proxy life and operate according to their own internal laws, which bypass the experiential world of practical consciousness and action. This has palpable sociopolitical consequences: under the regime of modernity, flesh-and-blood individuals have become subordinated to the immutable laws of history, mind, or the unconscious, with the result that we cease to be present in the world as 'individually and answerably active human beings' (1993: 7). Such a necessitarian logic is reflected in the unabashedly utilitarian character of modern science and technology, in which any activity is justified by reference to the internal criterion of the conceptual paradigm and the overriding goal of technical efficacy and control. Parenthetically, this also demonstrates his pronounced

hostility to nomothetic social science and abstract, idealist philosophy. Echoing the Frankfurt School's concept of 'instrumental reason', Bakhtin asserts that technology, 'When divorced from the once-occurrent unity of life and surrendered to the will of the law immanent to its development, is frightening; it may from time to time irrupt into this once-occurrent unity as an irresponsibly destructive and terrifying force' (1993: 7). Hence, the logic of Bakhtin's rejection of the rigid fact/value distinction and mechanistic determinism of modern scientific positivism recapitulates Merleau-Ponty's own position. Both clearly repudiate what Merleau-Ponty calls the 'bad dialectic', as exemplified by Hegel's notion of an immanent rationality in history operating 'behind the backs' of real human subjects, and jointly embrace a 'dialectic without synthesis' that does not terminate in perfection, completion, and so on.

For Bakhtin, the central imperative of modernity is, therefore, its attempt to transcend our situatedness in concrete time/space by recourse to what Heidegger called the 'technological world-picture' (see Simpson, 1995). This yearning for transcendence allows us to abrogate the difficult existential and moral demands that everyday life places upon each of us as incarnate subjects. 'As disembodied spirit, I lose my compellent, ought-to-be relationship to the world, I lose the actuality of the world' (Bakhtin, 1993: 47). The quest to live such a 'non-incarnated fortuitous life' can only result in a ghostly, illusory existence separated from the world, an 'indifferent Being not rooted in anything' (1993: 43). This privileging of the cognitive, disincarnate subject results in a pronounced tendency to equate the self as such with egocentric, subjective mental processes, what Bakhtin calls 'psychic being'.

In his earliest writings, the blanket term he applies to this phenomenon is 'theoretism'. This refers to the rationalist project of subordinating the 'living and in principle non-merging participants of the event' to a formalized, metaphysical system projected by a hypostatized consciousness, which devalues or expunges any experience or viewpoint that it cannot fully assimilate. Such a 'transcendent-logical transcription' inevitably suppresses the 'eventness' of embodied social existence, and encourages a 'blind faith in "technical" systems and laws, unfolding according to their own immanent logic' (Morson and Emerson, 1989: 9). In essence, Bakhtin strongly validates Merleau-Ponty's belief that there is a terrible price to be paid for the epistemic certitude sought by scientific rationalism. The sociocultural conditions of modernity have encouraged us to privilege a purely cognitive relation to the other and our environment (what Bakhtin refers to as 'epistemologism'), which in turn reinforces a strictly utilitarian attitude towards the world. Abstract, dispassionate contemplation from afar supplants our active and incarnated participation in a shared horizon of value and meaning. Bakhtin insists that a properly ethical and 'emotional-volitional' relation to the other and the acceptance of genuine responsibility requires the presence of a 'loving and value-positing consciousness', and not a disinterested, objectifying gaze. Torn out of this living and interactive context

connecting self, other and world, the subject succumbs to the gravitational pull of solipsism; it thereby 'loses the ground of its being and becomes vacuous, arrogant; it degenerates and dies' (Bakhtin, 1990: 274).

## Embodiment and the 'Jointing of Being'

I have sought to demonstrate that Merleau-Ponty and Bakhtin diagnose the central ethical, epistemological and ontological pitfalls of modernity in strikingly similar terms. To begin with Merleau-Ponty, how does he respond to the challenge of a solipsistic idealism? In *Signs*, he celebrates the demise of 'high-altitude thinking', and declares that 'the philosophy of God-like survey was only an episode' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 14). Its lengthy reign has ended; accordingly, we must develop alternative perspectives that will enable us to 'plunge into the world instead of surveying it[,] descend toward it such as it is instead of working its way back up toward a prior possibility of thinking it – which would impose upon the world in advance the conditions for our control over it' (1968: 38–9). To accomplish this, he adumbrates an 'interrogative' philosophy that jettisons the epistemological fetish of modern thought and re-establishes our perceptual and bodily connection to the world. In *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) and related works of the 1940s, Merleau-Ponty was concerned primarily with mapping the various manifestations of embodiment in terms of the relation between perceiving subject and perceived world, comprising such phenomena as sensory experience and expressivity, spatiality and motility, affect and temporality. Here, the precise character of alterity was not a topic that concerned Merleau-Ponty unduly (Dillon, 1988: 85). However, his growing appreciation of the work of such pioneering structuralists as Lévi-Strauss, Lacan and Saussure, each of whom sought to 'decentre' the Cartesian subject, prompted a 'linguistic turn' in his own thinking and brought in its wake an increasing emphasis on the self/other relation, especially as mediated by language (Schmidt, 1985: 11). In his subsequent writings, such themes as historicity, symbolic and aesthetic expression, intersubjectivity and intercorporeality are foregrounded, culminating in what is arguably his most provocative (though unfinished) work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968).

In *The Visible and the Invisible* and related essays, Merleau-Ponty refuses to see the world as a collection of static, self-contained things, or acquiesce to the notion that our relation to the world is a contemplative and purely cognitive affair. This confuses reified concepts and beliefs with our environment as it actually exists, as it develops in time/space and is experienced and actively transformed by reflexive, incarnated subjects. For Merleau-Ponty, the world is always in a state of Heraclitean flux, birth and death, transformation and 'becoming' – but in an unpredetermined manner lacking any sort of overarching Hegelian *telos*. The lived world, unlike the idealized world projected by a disengaged consciousness, is unfinished, pregnant with new potentialities and vibrant, pulsating energies. This applies equally to

human beings: 'the perceiving subject undergoes continued birth; at each instant it is something new. Every incarnated subject is like an open notebook in which we do not yet know what will be written' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 6). To evoke one of Merleau-Ponty's most provocative notions, we are part of the 'flesh of the world'. Our world is not a tableau of inert objects and things that we apprehend passively, but a living and complexly interacting medium in which we as body-subjects are enmeshed. My body 'is made of the same flesh as the world (it is a perceived), and moreover [this] flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world *reflects* it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world'. World and body therefore exist 'in a relation of transgression or of overlapping' (1968: 248). But they overlap in a most peculiar way. Rather than imperiously survey the world around me from an Olympian height, my senses reach out to the world, respond to it, actively engage with it, shape and configure it – just as the world, at the same time, reaches into the depths of my sensory being. As such, the human perceptual system is not a quasi-mechanical apparatus that exists only to facilitate representational thinking, to produce reified 'concepts' or 'ideas'; rather, it is radically intertwined with the world itself.

Furthermore, my bodily and perceptual introjection into the world makes possible a *self*-perception, a mode of reflexivity that is not merely cognitive but corporeal, what Merleau-Ponty refers to as *reversibility*. As I experience the world around me, I am simultaneously an entity in the world: the seer is also the seen, I can touch myself touching, and hear myself speaking. If this supposition is correct, our traditionally dualistic ways of understanding the relation between self and world must be abandoned, and it compels us to engage in an 'ontological rehabilitation of the sensible'. However, the world is not experienced by me alone, and therefore any project of 'ontological rehabilitation' must also address what Husserl called the 'problem of other people'. My point of view is not the only possible opening on to the sensible milieux that constitutes the flesh of the world. We must supplement our openness on to the world with a 'second openness' – that of other selves. For Merleau-Ponty, the world is presented to me in a 'deformed' manner; that is, my perspective is skewed by the precise situation that we occupy at a particular point in time/space, by the idiosyncrasies of our personal psychosocial development and the broader historical context of my existence. Insofar as we are 'thrown' into a universe lacking intrinsic significance – that is, the world does not consist solely of unalterable 'things-in-themselves' – the task that faces each of us is to make the world meaningful, to realize, in an architectonic sense, coherent patterns out of the flux of the world as it is presented to us in raw experiential form. The world, in short, 'is something to be constructed' (Merleau-Ponty, 1982–83: 39). We are 'condemned' to make continual value-judgements and generate novel meanings, to go beyond the structures and situations we inherit in order to create new ones. Indeed, this is precisely how Merleau-Ponty defines freedom: as the appropriation of a '*de facto* situation by endowing it with a figurative meaning beyond its real one' (1962: 172). Yet the accomplishment

of this project is necessarily a partial and unfinished one. Reality presents itself to each body-subject as a world of gaps and invisibilities, lacunae and blind-spots; it is mediated by our concrete particularity, the unique aperture through which we open on to the universe. Although the world constitutes a coherent totality (albeit 'structured in difference'), there is no possibility that a given subject can comprehend this world *qua* totality, insofar as we only have access to the existentially and physically delimited horizon within which we perceive, act and think. We can never 'possess' the totality of the world through a purely intellectual grasp of our environment; thus, our knowledge of the experiential world is always constrained and one-sided. To assume otherwise would be to lapse into the myth of the self-constituting, egological subject, in which, as Horkheimer puts it, 'the sole *raison d'être* of the world lies in affording a field of activity for the transcendental self, [where] the relationship between the ego and nature is one of tyranny' (Horkheimer, 1992: 108).

The conclusion Merleau-Ponty draws is that no two individuals will experience the world in precisely the same way. Perception must be 'understood as a reference to a whole which can be grasped, in principle, only through certain of its parts or aspects. The perceived thing is not an ideal unity in the possession of the intellect, like a geometrical notion' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 16). One might be tempted to conclude that Merleau-Ponty recapitulates Nietzsche's argument regarding perspectivalism. But this would be erroneous. Although both thinkers insist that our access to the world is mediated by our body, and that our situatedness in concrete time/space makes each of our perceptual openings on to the world singular and irreplaceable, the crux of Nietzsche's argument is that the world is qualitatively different for each observer because it is constituted through the interpretative strategies brought to bear on the world by every subject. For Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, the decisive issue is this: although the meaning of the world for each of us is constructed from the vantage-point of our uniquely embodied viewpoint, and hence irreducibly pluralistic, we continue to inhabit the same world – that is, we are *co-participants* in a universe that ultimately transcends any particularistic perspective (McCreary, 1995). As such, the world is best comprehended as 'a totality open to a horizon of an indefinite number of perspectival views which blend with one another [and] which define the object in question' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 16). Such an emphasis on intersubjective 'blending', this intertwining and overlapping through which we participate *collectively* in the apprehension and construction of a shared sociocultural and physical environment, implies that the world has the ontological status of an 'in-itself-for-others', and not simply an 'in-itself-for-us'. Although my placement in the world is not shared identically by another person, this is no barrier to a reciprocal, mutually enriching relationship between self, other and world. The body-subject thereby constitutes the 'vehicle of a relation to Being in which third parties, witnesses can intervene' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 62). In entering into the totality of the world in concert with others, I gain access to a more

complete perspective on the world. I cannot literally see behind my back, but it is 'seen' nonetheless, by the generalized vision of Being that is part of the sensible world. But more than this: in the encounter with another self, I have access to an external viewpoint through which I am able to visualize myself as a meaningful whole, a Gestalt. Relying on an idiosyncratic reading of Lacan, Merleau-Ponty suggests that we can escape the prison-house of solipsism, but only through an apprehension of ourselves in the 'mirror' of the other, a vantage-point that enables us to evaluate our own existence and consummate a coherent self-image. This explains his comment that 'we are never our own light to ourselves' (1968: 47). Equally, however, there is no overarching fusion or coincidence between self and other in such an encounter, no 'arbitrary intrusion of a miraculous power transporting me into the space of another person' (1982–83: 44). Metaphorically, self and other could be said to constitute concentric circles that *nearly* overlap, but that never completely usurp each other's unique situation in concrete time/space, although there always remains the potential for mutual recognition and 'communicative transivity' between a multiplicity of body-subjects.

In arguing that, as embodied subjects, we are radically intertwined with the world, Merleau-Ponty also reminds us that we are bound up with the dynamic cycles and processes of growth and change, birth and death, that are characteristic of nature as a whole. In making this claim, he seeks to counter the supposition that nature is mere dead matter, with no connection to our own incarnated lives (Langer, 1990; Russon, 1994). The 'blind productivity' of modern technoscience is indicative of an attitude of absolute detachment from and indifference to nature, which reduces it to the status of what Heidegger called a 'standing-reserve' (1977: 298) – that is, a domain that exists only for the exclusive use of human beings and their abstract technical designs. 'Technology and science range before us energies which are no longer *within* the framework of the world but are capable of destroying it', asserts Merleau-Ponty. 'They provide us with means of exploration which, even before having been used, awaken the old desire and the old fear of meeting the absolute Other' (1970: 103). Insofar as our minds are incarnate and our bodies necessarily partake of the physical and biological processes characteristic of the natural world, there is an overlapping of spirit and matter, subject and object, nature and culture. As Merleau-Ponty suggests in 'Eye and mind', because embodied subjects are in reality 'dense, rent, open beings', we can say that there 'is no break in the circuit; it is impossible to say that nature ends here and that man [*sic*, and *passim*] or expression starts here' (1964b: 188–9). A scientific mode of thinking that imperiously surveys the world and which objectifies and dominates nature must be supplanted by a philosophy that understands the world as a dynamic, living organism 'pregnant' with a myriad of potentialities. By refusing to sever the 'organic bonds' that link us immutably to external nature, we can come to the realization that we are part of an 'eternal body', a generalized flesh that can never expire. Evoking Bergson, Merleau-Ponty

argues that our body reaches out to the stars and is co-extensive with the universe as a whole, thereby constituting a 'primordial *We*'. As he writes: 'There is a kinship between the being of the earth and that of my body. This kinship extends to others, who appear to me as other bodies, to animals whom I understand as variants of my embodiment, and finally even to terrestrial bodies' (Merleau-Ponty, 1970: 122–3).

From his earliest writings, Bakhtin likewise argues that the impoverishing dualism of Cartesian rationalism can only be combated by a repudiation of the abstractions of idealist philosophy, so as to grasp the nature of the concrete deed or 'act' as it constitutes the essential 'value-centre' for human existence. Like Merleau-Ponty, he asserts that the self is a dynamic, embodied and creative entity that strives to attribute meaning and value to the world. Each of us is cast into an external world of brute factuality, consisting of objects and events that confront us and demand a response. In reacting to this pure 'givenness', the inherited meanings and structures of the world, we are impelled to sculpt the discrete elements of this environment into coherent and meaningful wholes (Pechey, 1993). We are forced to make certain choices and value-judgements with respect to our Being-in-the-world, to transform this proffered givenness into a coherent 'world-for-me'. In making the world a meaningful place, the subject actively engages with and alters its lived environment; and, in so doing, continuously transforms itself. This is an ongoing process: the self is continually 'reauthored' as its life and circumstances change, and hence is 'unfinalizable'. What Bakhtin is striving to outline here is a phenomenology of what he terms 'practical doing', one that focuses on our incarnated activities within a lifeworld that exists 'prior' to the more rarefied operations of abstract cognition. If we manage to participate directly in the 'actual eventness of the once occurrent act', we can enter 'into communion with the actual, historical event of Being' (Bakhtin, 1993: 1, 6). Furthermore, only if we think and act in such a 'participative' fashion can we be wholly responsible or 'answerable' for our actions, in the sense that we are reflexively conscious of the existential meaning of our acts and their implications, ethical or otherwise. Being-as-event must therefore be lived through, and not passively comprehended from afar. Hence, the impoverishing and necessitarian mode of thought perpetuated by modernity, which overlooks the inherently value-laden and embodied character of human life, can only be combated by a repudiation of theoretical abstraction pursued as an end to itself, so as to grasp the concrete deed as the axiological centre around which human existence revolves. Answerability demands the presence of an incarnated and participative subject. In challenging the logic of high-altitude thinking, Bakhtin argues, first, that there is no possibility of surmounting our 'unique place in once-occurrent Being'; and secondly, that theoretical cognition is only one aspect of a wider 'practical reason'. Abstract philosophical or aesthetic contemplation *as such* can never gain entry into this universe of lived Being; it requires 'actual communion' with the concrete actions I perform, with the 'reversibility' that is inscribed in my living corporeality. Hence,

both Merleau-Ponty and Bakhtin strongly contest what Emmanuel Levinas characterizes as the 'primacy of intellectual objectivism, which is affirmed in science, taken as the model of all intelligibility, but also in Western philosophy, from which that science emerges' (Levinas, 1994: 22). The penchant for abstract theory and the objectification of the world on the part of the modernist paradigm represents a retreat from lived experience, a symptom of alienation that is registered in a pervasive desire to transcend '*this* world, [which] is seen, heard, touched, and thought' (Bakhtin, 1993: 57). Indeed, for Bakhtin this attempt to escape the ontological rootedness of our lived existence by recourse to abstruse theories or sociopolitical dogmas is tantamount to finding an 'alibi' in Being.

In *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (1993), Bakhtin stresses the nature of the situated and embodied character of lived existence and its consequences for ethics, aesthetics, and ontology. He has relatively little to say at this point about intersubjectivity and intercorporeality. However, in the concluding segment of this work, Bakhtin does suggest that a genuine moral philosophy cannot be formulated outside the 'contraposition' of self and other. Any attempt to answer the solicitation of the world must be sensitized to the fact that I and other commingle in the ongoing event of Being, that we are equal participants in a shared lifeworld, yet remain uniquely incarnated. Although this insight is not sufficiently elucidated here, in the later essay 'Author and hero in aesthetic activity' the I/other relation becomes Bakhtin's central *leitmotiv*. Here, he reminds us that life is always directed towards the 'yet-to-be'; as such, Being is properly understood as an 'open process of axiological accomplishment' (1990: 129). Yet in engaging with the world as embodied beings, our ability to attribute meaning and significance solely through our own thoughts, deeds and perceptions is subject to certain limitations, particularly with respect to the 'authoring' of our own selfhood. As such, he places singular emphasis on the phenomenon of 'transgredience' – that which transcends or lies outside our immediate subjective existence and cognitive activity, and which necessarily partakes of 'otherness'. Bakhtin's central argument is that just as we are impelled to attribute meaning to the object-world around us, we need to envisage *ourselves* as coherent and meaningful entities. But from our own vantage-point (the 'I-for-myself'), we are manifestly incapable of envisioning our outward appearance, and of comprehending our location within the 'plastic-pictorial world' (that is, the lived environment of objects, events, and other selves). To be able to conceptualize ourselves as cohesive meaningful wholes, which is fundamental to the process of individuation and self-understanding, we require an additional, external perspective. Hence, the other exists in a relation of externality or 'exotopy' *vis-à-vis* ourselves, in a manner that transcends, or is 'transgredient' with respect to, our own perceptual and existential horizon. Looking 'through the screen of the other's soul', Bakhtin writes, 'I vivify my exterior and make it part of the plastic-pictorial world' (1990: 30–1).

We can only exist, to evoke a visual metaphor that Merleau-Ponty also uses, through the 'borrowed axiological light of *otherness*' (Bakhtin, 1990:

134). Since each of us occupies a unique time/space, we can see and experience things others cannot, within our sphere of self-activity. The reverse is equally true, in that the other can visualize and apprehend things that we are unable to. Hence, the other has a 'surplus of seeing' with regard to ourselves, and vice versa, a scenario that corresponds directly to what Merleau-Ponty calls the 'reversibility of perspectives'. Bakhtin insists that this co-participation cannot occur solely through the medium of 'cognitive discursive thought' – again, this would be to succumb to the error of epistemologism. Genuinely participative thinking and acting requires an engaged, embodied relation to the other and the world at large. Otherwise, the intrinsically affective and moral character of the self/other encounter is fatally undermined. Our capacity for abstract cognition and representational thinking is incapable of grasping the incarnate linkage between myself and another within the fabric of everyday social life, cannot comprehend our 'organic wovenness' in a shared social and natural world: 'only the other human being is experienced by me as connatural with the outside world and thus can be woven into that world and rendered concordant with it' (Bakhtin, 1990: 40).

This stance starkly reveals the deleterious consequences of a subjectivistic idealism. Solipsism, Bakhtin remarks, might be a compelling argument if I were the only sentient creature in the world. But inasmuch as we always confront and dialogically engage with other persons within the lifeworld, it would be 'incomprehensible to place the entire world (including myself) in the consciousness of *another* human being who is so manifestly himself a mere particle of the macrocosm' (1990: 39). Moreover, insofar as values are present or embodied in all human actions and experiences, moral or ethical considerations must be rooted in the common lifeworld, in tangible, everyday circumstances. Accordingly, both Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty explicitly reject the possibility of an absolutist ethical system along Kantian lines, mainly because such systems rely on overgeneralizing and spuriously universalistic principles. By contrast, for both thinkers the ability to recognize the other's words and gestures as analogous to my own, as part of the same lifeworld and structure of perceptual experience, is ultimately what makes a viable intersubjective ethics possible (see Gardiner, 1996b). 'True morality does not consist in following exterior rules or in respecting objective values', Merleau-Ponty asserts (in terms that are strikingly Bakhtinian), but rather 'of establishing that communication with others and with ourselves' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964c: 40).

Yet, at the same time, Bakhtin is adamant that this commingling of self and other within the lifeworld does not erase their 'radical difference', inasmuch as outsidedness or exotopy must be successfully maintained in any genuinely dialogic encounter. Another's existence can only be enriched by me, and vice versa, 'only insofar as I step outside it, actively clothe it in externally valid bodiliness, and surround it with values that are transgredient' (Bakhtin, 1990: 70). This is an important point that is amplified in Bakhtin's later writings, particularly after his own 'linguistic turn' of the late

1920s. Through the dialogical encounter the integrity of difference is always maintained, but in a manner that does not preclude the possibility of solidarity or consensus. In 'From notes made in 1970–1', he asserts that while rhetoric as mastered by the Sophists was primarily concerned with securing victory over an opponent, genuine dialogue (in the Socratic sense) reaches out to the other, invites the other to engage in the co-pursuit of truth. Through dialogue, 'one can reach solutions to questions that are capable of temporal solutions, but not to ultimate questions' (Bakhtin, 1986: 152). A dogmatic monologism precludes the possibility of authentic dialogue or consensus; yet Bakhtin would equally reject a postmodernist relativism, because it assumes a priori the incommensurability of viewpoints, a position that renders dialogue unnecessary or superfluous. For Bakhtin, *à la* Merleau-Ponty, there is no convincing reason why a 'unified truth' cannot be expressed through a plurality of overlapping perspectives and viewpoints, rather than through the monocular perspective of a disembodied observer. When 'one and the same object is contemplated from different points of a unique space by several different persons', he suggests, it 'occupies different places and is differentially presented within the architectonic whole constituted by the field of vision of these different persons observing it' (1993: 63).

Hence, from his earliest writings it is clear that Bakhtin is concerned with the dialogical character of human embodiment, what Hwa Jol Jung (1990) astutely terms a 'carnal hermeneutics'. For Bakhtin, the architectonic value of my incarnated self can only be affirmed in and through my relation to a concrete other: 'the body is not something self-sufficient: it needs the *other*, needs his recognition and form-giving activity' (1990: 51). Yet his early phenomenological work construes intercarnality primarily in terms of the overlapping of visual fields (the 'surplus of vision'). In much of Bakhtin's subsequent work of the 1920s and early 1930s, the earlier preoccupation with bodily experience and intercarnality tends to recede, and linguistic and auditory metaphors are increasingly foregrounded (Gardiner, 1998). However, in his writings on Rabelais and Renaissance popular culture, he returns once again to the theme of embodiment, most notably in *Rabelais and His World* but also in the essay 'Forms of time and of the chronotope in the novel' and elsewhere. This development is anticipated in a highly compressed discussion contained in 'Author and hero in aesthetic activity' (included in *Art and Answerability*) concerning the succession of different 'body canons' that have appeared during European history. Here, Bakhtin suggests that there has, at periodic intervals, been a strong emphasis placed on an introspective subjectivism at the expense of an embodied dialogism. Some of the more obvious examples of the former include Platonism and medieval theology, wherein the body is construed as an entity isolated from the world and of secondary importance to 'spirit' or 'mind'. Although the main figures of the Renaissance – especially Montaigne and Erasmus – successfully rehabilitated the body, with their stress on passions, feelings, sensuous pleasures, and the inherent value of external nature, this sensibility was overturned by

the seventeenth-century counter-Renaissance and the Enlightenment. With the rise to predominance of a mechanistic cosmology, itself precipitated by the consolidation of capitalism and the rapidly centralizing nation state's need to contain dissent during a period of intense religious conflict, the body was interpreted as analogous to a machine, a mere physiochemical container for the rational *cogito*. Accordingly, there has been a strong tendency since the early modern period to view human beings as primarily cognitive or rational subjects – an ethos that functioned to reduce each actual body to an abstract, universal 'rationality' held to be characteristic of the human race as a species (Toulmin, 1990).

This insight became a central theme of Bakhtin's work of the late 1930s and 1940s. In his essay on the chronotope, for instance, he celebrates Rabelais's novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel* because it epitomizes the epochal transformation that occurred during the Renaissance in terms of how people viewed their bodies and their relationship to the material world. Rabelais managed to portray human events and activities 'under the open sky', in real, interactive contexts. It was precisely this emphasis on the concrete and the sensuous that was rejected by the feudal theocracy, which renounced the body and its pleasures so as to achieve spiritual transcendence in the realm of an imaginary afterlife. Medieval scholasticism, in other words, developed a system of abstract concepts and ideals, and substituted this for the living connections between people, things and organic processes. Rabelais is such an important figure for Bakhtin precisely because he challenged decisively the 'theoretism' of medieval ideology; as such, Rabelais plays roughly the same role of culture hero as does Montaigne in Merleau-Ponty's work. Rabelais's project, writes Bakhtin, represents an attempt to create a 'spatially and temporally adequate world able to provide a new chronotope for a new, whole and harmonious man, and for new forms of human communication' (Bakhtin, 1981: 168). In Rabelais's 'new picture of the world', there is no trace of a mind/body or spirit/matter dualism of the sort promulgated by the 'other-worldly idealism' of feudal theology, and later reflected in the philosophy of Descartes and Leibniz. By integrating the human body into its spatio-temporal and natural milieux, Rabelais was able to confront the medieval tendency to construe the flesh as an inevitably corrupt and polluted substance, an idea that has served to maintain an 'immeasurable abyss' between body and world.

In *Rabelais and His World* (1984b), Bakhtin continues in this vein, suggesting that the body as depicted in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* is not an autonomous, individuated entity. Rather, it is in a very real sense a collective body, the 'body of the human race as a whole', which is inextricably intertwined with all of the myriad processes of change and development characteristic of the natural world. The 'grotesque body' supersedes its boundaries, particularly those parts of the body which directly interact with the external world: the nose, the mouth, the anus, and the sexual organs (Roderick, 1995). The Rabelaisian body is open, unfinished; its connection with the universe is revealed because it transgresses its own limits by assimilating the material

world and by merging with other beings, objects and animals. Bakhtin argues that the material bodily principle 'is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretence to renunciation of the earthly, or independence from the earth and body' (1984a: 19). Echoing Merleau-Ponty's idea of the 'eternal body', he suggests that death can only threaten the solitary, egocentric individual, not the organic collectivity; as such, the physical demise of a particular organism is only a transitory moment in an overarching cosmic cycle encompassing continuous birth, growth, death and rebirth. Inasmuch as the grotesque body represents a 'collective historical life of the social whole', there are no private, solipsistic worlds in the carnival chronotope. The material bodily principle implies that all individuals co-participate in a shared physical milieux; they eat, drink, procreate, live and die within the same lived space and the 'immanent unity of time'. It was only with the emergence of class society and bourgeois individualism that this organic and immanent unity of time/space was shattered, a development that was encouraged by the philosophical idealism of the post-Renaissance period. 'Consciousness' became synonymous with the radically interiorized *cogito*, an abstract, inward-looking form of intellection that eschewed any contact with everyday, sensuous reality and which severed cognition from the body and nature.

Bakhtin's interpretation of Rabelais and carnival culture implies that a radicalized understanding of our own embodiment and our material connection to the external environment can play an important role in overcoming the mind/world dualism of Western thought (Bell, 1994; Gardiner, 1993). If Cartesianism facilitates an absolute schism between nature and culture, mind and body, self and other, the carnivalesque heals this split, by fostering a new dialogical paradigm that overcomes the solipsistic and anthropocentric tendencies of modernity. Hence, both Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty view the natural world as *processual*, as bound up in a constant, non-teleological mode of 'becoming'. Insofar as mind, body and nature are not separate but overlapping and intertwined, the human being is palpably not an 'acosmic subject' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 441). According to this perspective, nature ceases to be viewed as mere raw material, as pure 'object', but as a partner in this overarching developmental process in which we are inextricably embedded. The 'whole of nature', writes Merleau-Ponty, 'is the setting for our own life, our interlocutor in a sort of dialogue' (1962: 50).


## Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that both Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty characterize the 'monster of solipsism' as a central impediment to the cultivation of dialogical relations between self, other and world, and, *inter alia*, the realization of authentic human sociality and community. The egological subjectivism promoted by Cartesian-inspired philosophies is, to use an

evocative metaphor of Bakhtin's, a poor medium for a 'plurality of unmerged consciousnesses to blossom' (1984a: 26). As such, Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty privilege a philosophy of co-existence over a philosophy of consciousness, one that insists that our selfhood is constituted dialogically and that our relation to others is inherently *ethical*. 'The *cogito* is false only in that it removes itself and shatters our inherence in the world', asserts Merleau-Ponty. 'The only way to do away with it is to fulfill it, to show that it is eminently contained in interpersonal relations' (1964c: 133). *In nuce*, both thinkers underscore and valorize continual transformation, ambiguity and interaction, as opposed to the modernist predilection for order, stasis, symmetry, and predictability (Bauman, 1992), in which the self is under-stood as an unfinalizable 'open notebook'. Such a perspective underscores the centrality of the living connection between our embodied selves and a world of other 'body-subjects', objects, and organic processes. In highlight-ing what Nick Crossley usefully terms a 'corporeal intertwining' (1996: 174), Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty would concur strongly with Husserl's obser-vation that 'Nature, the body, and also, interwoven with the body, the soul are constituted all together with a reciprocal relationship with each other' (cited in Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 177). Yet, at the same time, our particularity is not dissolved into an anonymous social mass: there is no Habermasian *telos* in communicative and bodily interaction necessarily leading to some sort of agreement or harmonization of desires and activities (although, of course, 'local' and pragmatic forms of intersubjective assent are always possible). Rather, this transivity promotes a decentring, a heightened awareness of the presence of the other in ourselves (and vice versa), but in a manner that preserves the 'radical difference' between self and other. 'We should', writes Merleau-Ponty, 'return to this idea of proximity through distance, of intuition as auscultation or palpation in depth, of a view which is a view of self, a torsion of self upon self, and which calls "coincidence" in question' (1968: 128). In striving to think through the ramifications of the cardinal principle of 'unity-in-diversity' – rather than making a fetish of pure 'difference' as such – their approach is in many respects at odds with post-modernist theorists who regard Nietzsche as an iconic precursor. As we stand on the threshold of the *fin-de-millennium*, it would seem that the respective, overlapping projects of Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty provide us with richer soil than do many modernist and postmodernist theories for fostering a new intersubjective paradigm, one that respects the ubiquity of social difference, yet does not circumscribe or negate our 'will to dialogue'.

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