

Light and Signs of Listening

Michele Lomuto

This essay has been published in *Semiotica*, Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies, 136–1/4 (2001), Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin · New York. In square brackets are page numbers of the original edition.

Essay produced with free software: L^AT_EX+Emacs on a GNU/Linux system.

The horizons of language

The Platonic utopia of a world without shadows, in which a violent and aggressive light has conquered all resistance, material opacity and the irreducible nature of otherness, time and death, is based upon the primacy of vision, but does not invent it *ex nihilo*. This primacy has already been produced by the evolution of species, which is likewise the evolution of animal semiosis into articulated language. It is through language that the world is modelled upon the tectonics of sight; or rather, language itself should be considered as a transformation of the primacy of sight into the totalitarianism of vision: [513]

‘Do hearing and voice stand in need of another medium so that the one may hear and the other be heard, in the absence of which third element the one will not hear and the other not be heard?’ ‘They need nothing,’ he said. ‘Neither, I fancy,’ said I, ‘do many others, not to say that none require anything of the sort. Or do you know of any?’ ‘Not I,’ he said. ‘But do you not observe that vision and the visible do have this further need?’ ‘How?’ ‘Though vision may be in the eyes and its possessor may try to use it, and though color be present, yet without the presence of a third thing specifically and naturally adapted to this purpose, you are aware that vision will see nothing and the colors will remain invisible.’ ‘What is this thing of which you speak?’ he said. ‘The thing,’ I said, ‘that you call light.’ (*Republic* 507d, e)

If there was ever the need to demonstrate that our thought continues to move within the horizons opened up by Plato, then here is the enduring indication of the primacy of vision. The Platonic horizon, from now on the horizon of philosophy, is opened up by an illumination. The primacy of vision is based

on its indissoluble bond with the divine nature of light: there can be no vision without a horizon opened up by an illumination. The self-sufficiency of the other senses resides in their belonging to the transient world of all that is born and dies, while the insufficiency of vision reveals its paradoxical ability to espouse the mutable with the immutable, the becoming with the eternal. Only sight can be extended by the sun in that it is the only sense that extends sensibility. The *genos triton*, or third element with respect to the seeing and the seen, allows a thing, reduced to mere form, to be grasped, held, yet not consumed; this is the essence of the theory. [514]

Following the logical pattern of this section of the *Republic*, we realise how close the connection is between the unification of the multiple and the intelligibility of being. In this context, metaphysics appears as a grandiose scheme of mediation. After the above-quoted passage in which this mediating function is identified with light, its divine origin is underlined. The ‘god of the sky’, who grants vision, is the sun. Thus mediated, the opposition seeing/seen, or rather vision/visible is a matter of facing the more fundamental opposition sensible/supersensible.

This, then, you must understand that I meant by the offspring of the good which the good begot to stand in a proportion with itself: as the good is in the intelligible region to reason and the objects of reason, so is this in the visible world to vision and the objects of vision. (*Republic* 508c)

Here the mediation assumes the form of an *analogia proportionalitatis*. Vision stands to visible things as the intellect to intelligible things: *ratio quae pluribus convenit propter similitudinem proportionum*, as the medieval treatises say. But that’s not all. At the basis of this *similitudo proportionum* is the fact that the two suns are linked: a genetic heritage is common to both father and son and its transmission engenders a structural analogy, here reproduced, both in heaven and on earth, as a horizon.

In these passages not only is there a recognition of the supremacy of sight, but it is also accorded an ontological status. Not only is sight the most elevated, the most powerful and keenest of all the senses; it belongs to a different order. The gaze alone is able to open up horizons, in that, being divinely favoured, it alone can separate form from matter, the single from the multiple. Thus there can be no pre-comprehension or predetermination of an object without an opening up of the gaze in a blaze of light—and herein lies the essence of horizon. There cannot even be language, unless we can think the unthinkable of a language without nouns, a language of verbs only, since a becoming in which no form has had the time to be shaped and preserved would be the Bergsonian dream of a becoming in which nothing becomes since nothing can be named.

The writing of genesis, the genesis of writing

The supremacy of vision brings together being and light, visibility and presence; [515]

it is the existential determination of a space into which we are thrown at birth as into a linguistic space. The fact that a thing is eminently a visible thing does not depend on human will or knowledge in Vico's sense of *scire per causas*; it belongs to that deeper level of the constitution of a thing which is dominated by a passive synthesis; to that level of pre-categorical language in which a thing is not yet an object. Evidently, this is a process which cannot be described through language in that the latter represents one of its fundamental constituent elements. Indeed, before becoming an instrument of communication, language is a primary modelling process—that is why we can conceive of the pre-categorical as a language—which is formed with man, or more precisely, which man as *sapiens sapiens* forms in an evolutionary process that cannot be conceived of as either 'before' or 'after' with regard to the supremacy of vision.

The impossibility of conceiving of light except in opposition to darkness means that the system of opposites is prior to opposition itself and to the latter's terms. Yet the system of opposites, as a condition of viability in the practice of spacing and differing is none other than language itself in its essence as 'archescripture'.

The account of the Creation that we find in any cosmogony may be considered as a *mythos* of original writing, if we acknowledge the paradox of an absolute beginning for writing.

In *Genesis* in the beginning God created Heaven and Earth: the first created thing is therefore a pair of oppositions: *šamaym* vs. *'aretz*, high vs. low. We are not here concerned with the character of necessity (as in Plotinian emanation) nor with the Creator's freedom in the act of creation (as in Aquinas). Rather, it is impossible to think of the creation of the first thing outside a space *already created* to receive it; a space which, in turn, cannot be a thing. The impossibility of the first thing's being first is also the impossibility of the first thing's being a thing. If the Creation is the creation of a multiplicity of things, it can only be recounted as the creation-institution of that difference which allows the multiple to unsold itself.

Yet, if language had not already informed us of the significance of positional/oppositional value in general—that is, of the differing of difference—we would have no terms of reference with which to understand Heaven and Earth as a binary predicate symbol.

In formal terms, in order to grasp the discourse's logical structure, one could say that before creating light there has to be at least one pair of opposites, yet in order for this pair of opposites to be inscribed, a binary predicate symbol must be pre-scribed. In order for the differing to appear as difference, a space of inscription must already be available, a space capable of sustaining the violation of its own indeterminacy. This is why we use the term 'writing' for what would otherwise be called either 'syntax' or 'primary modelling process'.

Yet, considering the Creation of Heaven and Earth as the establishment of an original difference, or 'archescripture', in the sense of origination, leads us directly to the irremediable contradiction in which the origin is already derivative. Creation is original separation (*barà*, which today we translate as 'create', may initially have meant 'separate'), yet it presupposes an order which only exists

[516]

through an internal articulation. This contradiction does not perturb either the Hebrew language or Hebrew exegesis, only western metaphysics which reduces language to a technical instrument of communication at man's disposal. The exegetic tradition is divided over the sense of *berē'šit*: absolute or derivative state? Absolute beginning in the first case, limitation of the beginning's absoluteness in the second, which might be just *one* beginning, that in which God created Heaven and Earth.¹ Yet, if both interpretations are grammatically correct, and if the beginning can only take place within a horizon already opened up by writing, which in its turn cannot be original, then it is obvious that each interpretation implies the other: the absolute beginning can only be derivative.

The account, as a history of writing, now proceeds with what seems an un-failing pace: once granted a space of inscription, where the difference is inscribed and hence preserved, the verb associated with the creative activity can unleash its full potential. *Yabdel* means 'divide' in the Greek sense of *diistemi*.² *Istemi* means 'locate' or 'place', also in the sense of 'establish'. *Dia* means 'separation', not simply in terms of distance, but above all as 'violation of a unity'. The inscribed difference, however, is not yet established, preserved for everyone, except as language, that is as naming: *wa-ikrā* "and called" the light Day and the darkness Night. The name stabilises and preserves the phenomenon of difference at the very moment of its inscription, since man is born a social animal and the use of language is a social activity. The space within which the Biblical 'and God divided the light from the darkness'—*wa-yabdel 'elohim ben ha-'or uben ha-hošekh*—is expressed is henceforth a space articulated by the primary opposition light-cosmos, darkness-chaos. The bias in favour of light-cosmos cannot be denied by the very language of which it is a constituent part, whereas in darkness-chaos we find the traces of that attempt to secularise the universe which the first monotheistic religion rendered necessary in its fight against idolatry. In *Genesis* the chaos upon which the light does not act with its power of the word is simply *tehom*, or 'abyss'. It has lost the divine nature of the Babylonian chaos *Ti'amat*—which it almost certainly echoes, however, in name and function—in order to become invisible, not in the sense of that which is not conceded to sight or that which the gaze cannot contemplate, but in the sense of the inchoate as the absolutely undetermined. Bringing to light—even in Freudian hermeneutics—means bringing to language, narrating. Yet even the Cosmos, no longer syntax on a divine writing surface, has conceded its divine nature to a single God.³ These are the premises of contemporary philosophical

[517]

¹The second interpretation is affirmed by a famous Rabbinical tradition, but it is with the medieval Hebrew exegetes Rasi di Troyes (c. 1040-1105) and Abraham b Me'ir Ibn Ezra' (C. 1092-1167) that the problem is faced in a more systematic way. The respective traditions thus propose: 'In the beginning, when God created..., God said...' and 'In the beginning, when God created..., then God said...'.

²This is the term used by Philo in *Heir to Divine Things*. The cosmos is created through successive articulations, just as linguists speak of the double articulation of language, according to the definition of distinctive traits in binary opposition (light/heavy, animate/inanimate, etc.).

³In the Babylonian cosmogonic myth *enuma eliš*, Chaos is identified with the god *Ti'amat* killed by the creator *Marduk* and divided in two, Heaven and Earth.

trends according to which there is no sense without signs.

Abraham's prescription, Plato's supervision

The totalitarian imperialism of Platonic illumination encounters two types of resistance. The first comes from the genius and intellectual honesty of Plato himself that make him acknowledge his system's weak points. The second comes from the Jewish element in our civilisation, above all as found in Sacred Scripture, the direct, though often obscure and obscured, contribution of Jewish thinkers of the Diaspora. With Plato philosophy introduces a cult of suspicion towards phenomenal vision. Phenomena are no longer, as in Anaxagoras and Heraclitus, the simple luminosity of things that impose themselves onto sight, nor the articulation of a divine syntax. Rather, they are the effect, the 'differing' of a presence no longer assured within a horizon opened up by physical light. Appearing becomes degraded to mere appearance. The visible becomes the indistinct trace of a presence which is elsewhere; a full presence placed on a supersensible plane as *idea*, far from the ravages of time. In this sense the metaphysical plan is considered as an ideology which cancels out the sign, a utopia which arrests semiotic movement in the luminosity of full presence. The opposition between down-here, the place of appearance, and up-there, the place of being, is thus reinterpreted in Christianity as the opposition between created and creator. *Physis* becomes nature, *ens creatum*, while the Hebrew opposition *šamaym-'aretz* is reinterpreted in the same way. In the translation from Hebrew into Greek and Latin, the new word does not cancel out the old one completely, yet the gap widens. What this extremely ambivalent light now opens up is not the horizon of an indisputably clear vision, but the space of philosophical debate.

The favourable bias towards light continues, however, even within a devaluation of the physical. If physical light is downgraded, thanks to Plato we may use metaphysical light: even when promoted to *eidōs*, entity can only be thought of in visible terms. The intelligible world is thought of as a modification or amendment of the sensible world in which, nevertheless, it originates: sight, which provisionally arrests the thing in a sense image, arrests and preserves it forever in an eidetic image. In turn, the intellect acts within an illumination, since even the hyperworld, which gives meaning to and illuminates the sensible, needs a light to illuminate *eidōs*. *Eidōs* and *idea* belong to the realm of conceptual knowledge, which can only be thought of as the gaze. The invisible returns to the visible in a new, metaphysical sense. Devaluing physical vision, the west attempts to establish an absolute and limitless vision—though not without some internal resistance—which in the end equates being with representation. Nevertheless, invisibility—which in Hebrew exegesis does not indicate a relational pathology but a relation with all that exceeds both idea and representation—for Greek metaphysics becomes the ultimate defence of an otherness to eradicate. For example, in the Middle Ages, when the dispute over the intellect as agent was taken up again, the temptation in the west to turn to that primigenial light

of *yehy or*, pronounced before the creation of worldly light, was irresistible, particularly for the Averroists. This choice becomes even clearer when seen in relation to the gulf that separates it from the Hebrew status accorded to the voice and the sacredness of the invisible. Even though the world could not survive without light, it could not stand its full brightness, just as it could not stand the full sight of the Torah without its worldly garbs:

It is written ‘And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.’ Rabbi Yosè said: ‘That light was hidden, put aside for the just of a future world, wherein it is written “The light was brought forth for the just.”’ That light was not used for the world except on the first day of creation, after which it was hidden and no longer used. Rabbi Yehudà said: ‘If that light were completely hidden, the world would not have survived for a single moment.’ It was hidden and disseminated, as the seed bears fruit, and through which the world is sustained. There is not a day when the light doesn’t spread throughout the world, thus letting it exist. The blessed Saint feeds the world with it. Wherever people toil to study the Torah, at night a subtle ray issues from that hidden light and reaches them. (*Midrash ha-Ne‘elam II* 148b)

What permits the world to survive is thus a ‘subtle ray’: neither starlight, that is physical light, nor the full light of *eidos*, without shadow or opacity, but a light which illuminates writing without revealing it. Abraham’s life unfolds in the immediacy of pre-scription, or rather, in the immediacy of a mediation, of writing. The perspective within which the immediate is mediation is clearly a hermeneutic perspective, which does not have recourse to a utopia of full illumination and full presence, since the created order is recognized from the beginning as a linguistic order. The ‘subtle ray’ which allows the world to survive is not the light that illuminates the Greek *aletheia*, nor the medieval *ens creatum*, nor Galileo’s Book of Nature. It illuminates writing, while leaving it in obscurity; a writing which comments on itself in an infinite drifting movement.⁴ The Talmud—which collects Rabbinical comments and discussions on the Mishnah, which in its turn comments on the Torah—places side by side with reverence and respect the most discordant interpretations of the various masters. From its hermeneutic perspective, meaning or sense in Messianic eschatology can never be complete and so can only be presented in a fragmented and apparently contradictory form. The fragments of truth which each interpretation attains cannot be reconciled, since truth is infinite and its connections are invisible. A hidden coherence thus underlies the interpretations generated by Scripture. This coherence is distanced once the Hebrew word is translated into Greek, where the infinite is enclosed in a totality. The light that illuminates the sign is not unreliable, as physical light is for metaphysics, nor is it the

[519]

⁴In Hebrew exegesis the drifting movement of writing is seen as a pathology of the pre-Messianic era. In contemporary hermeneutics, an unlimited semiosis is seen as the infinite power of signification.

full light which reveals essence. It is a dim light, a ‘subtle ray’ which reveals in order not to unveil and dazzle. A element of suspicion towards phenomena, which is fundamental in Greek philosophy starting with Plato, is unthinkable in pre-Hellenic Hebrew thought. Light illuminates a writing of the created which in its turn has been created by Scripture. Not one word, not one letter of Scripture announces a *hic et nunc*—that is, the elsewhere of a full presence—which can be betrayed by the sign’s unreliability, since God is not conceived of as a presence within the totalising horizon of metaphysics, but as a temporal narrative opening, the temporal rupture of prophetic eschatology. For metaphysics only eternity is real in that only eternity guarantees the identity of presence, whereas for Hebrew thought only a ‘becoming’ according to a divine decree is real. Unlike in Augustine, God is not outside time, but is its master. ‘*Ehye ’asher ehye* could perhaps be translated ‘I am who will be’. This is not to say that the Creator wants to argue with Aristotle’s *to ti en eimai*, that atemporal *id quod erat esse* which reduces God to a *Summum Ens*. Rather, it is to map out a new direction, different from the one indicated by Philo and subsequently formalised in Neo-Platonic and Christian theology, which absorbed the Greek interpretation of being and so identified God with Being. The sacred languages, such as Biblical Hebrew and the Arabic of the Koran, do not have two distinct tenses for present and future. They do not have a present which is not already permeated by the future, whereas Greek and Latin liturgical languages do, as do those of philosophy and theology, for which the privilege of light is the privilege of the present.

If a full presence is unthinkable, then a full light that cancels the epiphanic sign of presence and equates being and representation is also unthinkable. Metaphysical light, like the light of being, is opposed to physical light as the light of appearance and becoming. Biblical light, beginning with the primigenial light of *yehy or*, is contextualised in narration and decontextualised in prophesy. The Biblical God is the protagonist of a liberation story which He himself has written. He is both author and hero—but not, we might be tempted to say, ‘at the same time’—and this dual rôle violates the Greek identity of immobile mover. As the Kabbalists maintain, in the act of creation God withdrew to leave space [520] for an otherness. In terms of the literary nature of world writing: the author withdraws from his text; man’s freedom as the work’s drifting. Contrary to Greek thought, writing is not the inadequate and unreliable tool of full and totalising meaning. The Torah is a living organism, every single letter of which is a full presence in itself as well as the infinite recall of something else. There is no contradiction here, since Biblical theology is substantially allied to the temporalisation of *Heilsgeschichte*. The Christian west, the Greek and Latin of Scripture, is fraught by the impossibility of translating Biblical theology into Greek ontology: the paradox of an ‘immobile mover’ caught up in a plan, not exempt from the covenant with Abraham on the number of just needed to save Sodom, and so making a pact with Abraham in Abraham’s time, while remaining time’s master.

God’s transcendence does not consist in an absence of involvement, but in a mastery over time that begins the moment in which He withdraws to give

space to the otherness of man and the world. Temporality and otherness are thus the conditions of a theology only intelligible in narrative terms. Regarding the translation of Sacred Scripture into the language of Aristotle and Augustine, both the earliest Councils and Patristics seek to translate the accounts of liberation and salvation in terms of Greek metaphysics, yet narrative temporalisation can never be adequate to the outside time of a supersensible eternity. Once inserted into a divine project, the time of pain and hope, of liberation and salvation, is not easily reduced to the time of mere appearing. The time of the sign's appearance remains the time of sacred writing, in which sign of sign and differing of difference are not pathological and cannot be obliterated by the direct vision of God's presence, which has already manifested itself in the temporalisation of a tale and thus of a irreparable diachrony. Augustine's dilemma was how to reconcile Plato's condemnation of writing—the core of metaphysics, not a mere detail—with the sacredness of Sacred Scripture. In other words, how can writing be sacred? The reply is to found in Augustine's lack of interest in Hebrew, certainly not an oversight, but due rather to his conviction of writing's perfect translatability. True writing takes place *in interiore homine*, the true word is thus the *verbum mentis*, writing without sign. This is what totally absorbs the relation with the sacred. The sign is ancillary, provisional and interchangeable, yet necessary in that it is the visible intimation of the invisible, access to the inaccessible, immanence of a transcendence. The unreliability of visible writing is not negated by its sacred nature, since, in reality, the sacred does not belong to the order of the sign, but is completely contained in the *signatum*. The danger foreseen by Plato has never been forgotten: Writing is not free from unruly tendencies, from its inability to distinguish good from evil. It cannot defend itself, for the simple reason that it has been revealed. [521]

And when they [speeches] have been once written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not: and, if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves. (*Phaedrus* 275e)

If the sign's secondary nature means visibility, accessibility and immanence, then revelation as writing needs an earthly mentor to accompany and protect it from the bad company it keeps—a mentor who also restrains its patricidal tendencies. The Father thus ends up in the priests' hands, indispensable guardians of the invisible; at least until the advent of Protestantism. Not even Luther, however, immediately overcomes the fundamental opposition at the basis of metaphysical thought, which here takes the form sign/signified, or visible/invisible, sensible/intelligible. The Reformation's modernity throws man unguarded into the mortal risk of interpretation.

Hebrew hermeneutics has always remained in the background; until today when we discover its often hidden influence on the roots of modernity. Despite periods of Hellenisation, Hebrew culture has never been associated with the condemnation of writing, nor has it ever sought the sense of being in a self-identity

with presence, because it has never acknowledged an intelligible light's power of *reductio ad unum* with regard to the infinitely various. The sign's drifting, that incessant movement we might call, along with Pierce, the interpretant's flight, is not a movement that distances truth, but one that approaches the deepest secrets of creation - without diminishing the latter's infinite distance and inaccessibility. Only a writing that refers endlessly to writing—whether narration, poem or prophecy—can bring man close to the divine without diminishing the distance. The sign's continuous movement is the crossing of this distance's infinitude. The letters of the alphabet are not a tool for communication, the unreliable vehicle of a signified which is revealed at the end of a signification. Rather, they are the tool with which God's will has created the world and keeps it alive, as is written in the *Sefer Yetzirà*. If writing is drifting, its mystery is the mystery of absolute transcendence, which in turn is the Law, the Torah. The light that illuminates the word does not penetrate it, since the word resists with its opacity: the generative power of infinite signification and semiotic materiality. Barthes' definition of literature as intransitive writing and Lévinas' description of a work's movement as a one-way movement towards otherness should be read together with the condemnation of metaphysical violence as full illumination: [522]

To illuminate means to deprive being of its resistance, since light opens up a horizon and empties space—it delivers being, starting from nothing. Mediation, a characteristic of western philosophy, only makes sense if it isn't limited to reducing distance. (Lévinas 1961: 14)

Contemporary semiotics is a continual reevaluation of the dignity of both the sign and writing in exercising their power of resistance against the discrepancy between idea and thing engendered by a full illumination.

The signs of listening

The philosophical prestige accorded to sight is not damaged by the noise of things, which disturbs neither physical sight nor inner vision. The theoretical stance does not allow itself to be distracted by the contingent determination of trembling physical bodies, except in terms of their thematisation. The idea cannot be struck or plucked; it does not vibrate, but remains immobile in a condition of absolute stability. The silence is not even disturbed by the Pythagorean music of the spheres, a perfect and circular movement, timeless and inexhaustible, exercised through a vision of immobility. Everything born within the totality of *logos* remains a silent musicology, extraneous to all musical practice.

Yet even concrete natural listening is always mediated. Concrete listening does not lose its way among the other sensations, but aims directly at things, which never coincide with the noise they make. Either one listens abstractly to noise, as John Cage tries unsuccessfully to make us do, or one listens concretely to things. Noise is not silenced, but absorbed by the thing, to which it adheres

as to an accessory determination, not an essential one. It adheres to the visible, since only the visible is necessary, stable and substantial. This is the basis for the notion of a *secondary* quality.

The philosophical primacy of inner vision is deeply rooted in the primacy of natural vision:

I find the world immediately and evidently before me; I experience it. Through the different modes of sense perception—seeing, touching, hearing, etc.—corporeal things, within a certain spatial distribution, are to hand (for me), both literally and figuratively, whether I pay attention to them or not, in my thoughts, reflections, feelings or will. (Husserl 1950: 57)

[523]

Seeing, touching and hearing are the different modes of a single perception, thanks to which a single world is before me. But the immediacy of being-to-hand is assured only through the mediation of light: only the world visibly before me is at the same time immediately before me. What one listens to concretely is not a noise but a thing, not in its immediacy, but in its disclosing itself, in its leaving traces. Both predator and prey seek to move as stealthily as possible, until they are within each other's sight—that is, until they are present to one another. In a world where one needs principally to eat, but where one may also be eaten, listening has an appeal only as the sonorous presence of a visual absence, as a hint or clue.

Why is it so difficult for us to hypothesise about, or even imagine a topsy-turvy world in which there is a sort of *conversio simplex* between substance and accident, necessity and contingency, thing and innate property? Why is the free play of imagination free enough to let the serious Husserl imagine a centaur playing the flute (*Ideen I* §23), but not the sound of a flute become conversely the flute of a sound? Why can we so easily dismantle men, horses, birds and fish in order to reassemble them as centaurs, mermaids and hippogriffs, while it is impossible for us to combine men and smells, horses and noise? It seems that even in imagining fantastic worlds we are faced with paradigmatic axes that restrict and influence our choices: noise in place of noise, material things in place of material things; as if the language in which we allow ourselves the freedom to think were preceded by an archelanguage which is not available to us.

If we consider fantastic worlds, such as those found in literature and fables, as modifications of the real world carried out by a deconstruction and reconstruction of the same elements—in other words, as a syntactical operation—we recognise that this syntax has rules and imposes limits, and that these are not expressive instruments which man may use as he pleases. We must also recognise, however, that the determination of the real world is itself the result of a syntactical operation. For the natural attitude the real world is based on the external horizon of visible things, whereas for metaphysics it is based on the horizon of a super-vision. For both, a predetermined field is already constituted, whether spatially or imaginatively. The primacy of vision is dissimulated in the

primacy of sight, through the senses' functional equivalence, considered as *doors of perception* that allow the consciousness to apprehend the most diverse information from the same source, from a single and identical world. The senses are thus equivalent tools, but the same object is offered to each in a different way. The definition of essence—that which allows things to be what they are, that which identifies them—as *eidos* or *morphè* is the philosophical confirmation of the supremacy of vision: it is the faculty which allows us to apprehend the essential identity of things, that which allows recognition through re-presentation. In the face of essence, hearing is deaf, just as the other senses are ineffectual: the contingent aspects, the accidental qualities of things, are reserved for them; not full reality, but its accessories. [524]

The most obvious way of contesting this conceptual apparatus is for listening to withdraw from its subordinate position in relation to sight, for it to abandon the visual horizon and be collocated in its own sonorous one. Abandoning the horizon in which it has a servile rôle means abandoning an ontology based on the vision of essences and moving towards a different constitution of subject and object, temporality and inter-subjectivity. This abandonment must not be a negation, however, nor a theoretical stance, since such a stance would be based on that neutralisation of the other, time and death in which Plato had already seen the power of the *genos triton*, the third element with respect to the seer and the seen: the power of light. A non-theoretical yet rational stance must be adopted in which experience, which in any case remains the experience of something, does not immediately assume the paradigm subject-predicate, nor is it directed towards the predicative form of judgement: it is neither categorical, nor pre-categorical, but a-categorical in the strict sense of a non-apophantic rationality. But acoustic experience does not have the necessary energy to neutralise the bond between noise and visible things within the horizon of *genos triton*, except by being articulated within a different horizon in order to exercise a different cohesive power. If we recognise that the essence of the modelling process of experience that establishes the world as the totality of visible things is writing, we may call linguistic, or syntactical, both the bonds to be neutralised and those to be established in order to open up a sonorous horizon. In other words, acoustic experience can be established as linguistic experience if it assumes the structure of an independent horizon in which sound is proposed as the substratum of determination.

It is not hard to recognise that the modelling process of acoustic experience is the musical writing. Rather, musical experience is the only possible experience of writing sonorous material, and it is brought about by suspending the ontology of light. In this sense, musical practice is a writing practice that establishes an ontology of listening.

Obviously this thesis attributes to music a rationality that metaphysics does not. Indeed, music is a practice that attributes to *legein*—the collecting and combining of *logos*—a power expressed through suspending the visible and its archontic power of absorbing every experience. The musical *logos* makes us aware that vision's privileged relation with truth, *aletheia* (that is, 'unveiling' which safeguards in vision what it unveils and which, as its root indicates, is [525]

the opening of an illumination) is no longer an exclusive one in the totality of *physis*. From Plato to Husserl in *Erfahrung und Urteil* the privileged result of formal ontology is formal apophasis, the constitution of an object is confirmed and established as a predicate in the judgement where it becomes the stable and knowable possession of all. Yet its way of being present (*selbst da*) in flesh and blood (*leibhaft da*) to the consciousness, in which the musical object is offered to listening, makes us reconsider the notions of presence and consciousness, contaminating them with a temporality which is not that of idea or mere appearance. In listening to music, diachrony is not the final form of a consciousness unable to apprehend entity in the eternity of the moment. The musical object is opposed to a consciousness that needs time, that is at the mercy of temporal flux, yet for which the frozen moment would mean suffocation.

The musical object is never contemporary with itself, nor can it be circumscribed as mere presence; on the contrary it has an active function of temporalisation. The musical experience is not reducible to a vision of essences, nor to a theoretical gaze in which the consciousness, threatened by the flux of time, apprehends the eternal *idea*. The musical idea is not a mere tribute to the temporalisation of the sign's differing; it is not carried across the external world in order to be reconstructed in another spiritual realm as a presence in itself. The very *raison d'être* of metaphysics would thus be undermined, as would its mission to cancel out the sign, to cancel out what is different, secondary or accessory; in other words, writing. The dual status of vision, both physical and eidetic, finds no equivalent status in listening, since the musical thing 'in flesh and blood' in no way corresponds to an atemporal eidetic essence. Musical practice takes place neither within nor outside time: together with our experience of death and the other, it is the most eminent moment of temporalisation. Musical practice, both in terms of producing and listening to music, is never the emission into a temporal flux of an atemporal idea, of an identity capable of reabsorbing its own diachrony. Here diachrony, the 'non-contemporary with itself', is not the disintegration of that which was whole and self-enclosed. Rhythm is the order of movement, but it is an order without design, contours, or an external surface that delimits it, since it is never confronted with a space emptied by light and apprehended by the gaze. The order of diachrony is itself diachronic; to follow its rhythm we are obliged to respect its rhythms; if we attempt to appropriate it conceptually we are ourselves appropriated, yet without our will being paralysed. We are completely outside the alternative between comprehension and rapture, knowledge and ecstasy. [526]

This calls in doubt the more commonly held notions of memory, representation and recognition, together with the more strictly semiotic notions of interpretation and execution and the more general notions of the musical sign and meaning. Even the most ordinary musical practice which has recourse to memory, such as execution and recognition, would recoil from the idea that every experience is reducible to a presence or the modification of a presence:

In its typical essence memory is the modification of perception.
[...] That which is characterised as the past offers itself as 'that

which has been present', and so as a modification of the 'present', which, as the unmodified, is also the 'original', present 'in flesh and blood to perception. (Husserl 1950: 251)

If the original is never present in musical experience; in other words, if musical experience is never the experience of a presence, then the *adaequatio* of being and representation, in which conscious life exists, is no longer impossible because of some limitation in the consciousness, but because the very co-sistence of being is undermined. So time is no longer just a problem of the finite nature of human life, but has assailed being itself in order to redefine it.

The scandalous nature of musical experience does not consist in its inadequacy with regard to the order of logic, but in its exercise of a more general and wide-ranging logic in which the principle of identity and the movement of identification are articulated in terms of temporalisation. In establishing a horizon for listening in which identity is already difference, yet which nevertheless remains a horizon of rationality, musical practice eliminates the notion of the psyche as an inner screen onto which images of what is illuminated are projected; images kept stable by an objectivising consciousness. Or the psyche as a block of wax for receiving the imprint of things as with a seal. These notions do not have a merely explicative rôle in a Scholastic manual, but a crucial one in the very foundation of metaphysical thought. They bear witness to a way of temporalising impressions—Aristotle's *pathema en te psyke*, or Aquinas' *species sensibilis impressa*—which reproduces the form's visibility within the consciousness. A cadence, a progression, the theme of a sonata do not leave traces on a block of wax; unless it is in terms of movement, as with the rollers used for the earliest musical recordings; or to adopt a more technologically up-to-date example, the surface of a magnetic tape. The inscribed surface moves simultaneously with the musical object, thus overturning the Scholastic principle *omne quod concipitur per modum concipientis concipitur*. An ontology of the magnetic tape—perhaps one should say 'of the magnetic tape flow'—is not simply an ontology of things in movement, but of a movement that informs things at the moment of their inception. This movement does not drag with it things that retain their identity, like Aristotle's stones caught in a vortex, but things that carry a becoming in their inmost essence, things made of becoming and thus of otherness, yet without being dissolved in the Bergsonian *durée* and without opposing an irrational vitalism to a formalistic intellectualism. Neither musicology, through its language, nor musical writing, as inscription and mnemotechnics, coagulate a shapeless flux into concepts and categories. On the contrary, if musicology, as predicative discourse, and musical writing, as inscription, are both possible, it is because musical practice *is* writing practice, and because musical production and listening are language activities. [527]

The horizon of listening is not an illuminated one that extends before a consciousness looking out through the windows of the eyes, seeing without being seen, hidden in the darkness of an interior. Musical listening does not offer the possibility of infinite retrogression on which a theoretical stance is based, and in which the 'I' looking at the world may be thrown into the world, objecti-

fied, surprised by the step backward that it may take at any moment. The rhythm on which music is based is neither internal nor external, visible nor invisible, since *Leib* cannot oppose itself to the world by shutting its orifices and cutting off its protuberances, as Bakhtin's vindication of Rabelais' grotesque body demonstrates. So, letting oneself be carried away by the musical rhythm means exercising a will that is recognised as placed; it means letting oneself be permeated, yet not absorbed by gravity, inertia and the world.

The sole opposition to the world in which consciousness is constituted as hypostasis resides in the former's linguistic capacity: the body's weight and resistance are not cancelled but structured. The horizon of listening is a vectorial force field of oriented tensions that create algebraic, topological and ordered structures; an environment which predetermines the object without preceding it and without having recourse to the mediation of a neutral term. The tonal uncertainty of the first bars of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony do not require the intervention of a *genos triton*, of a light that clarifies. They simply require that those descending intervals of empty fifths are immediately filled by a letter from the same alphabet. The F which finally places us unequivocally in the tonality of D-minor determines the horizon the very moment in which it is itself determined: the minor third determines the tonality, the tonality determines the F as a minor third.

So, the musical sign easily and obviously resists being assimilated by a presence, resists being cancelled, since the *signatum* does not make any claim to off load its diachrony in code semiotics. The classical opposition between prototype/copy, created/imitated, primary/secondary—resolved in traditional semiotics by collocating the second term on the plane of significant in the vain hope of cancelling it—is now entirely absorbed by both the *signans* and the *signatum*. Sign and signified in musical experience cannot be constructed along the lines of a double-level semiotic model, in that the musical thing is simultaneously prototype-copy, creation-imitation, primary-secondary; in other words a presence which is already derivative. Yet musical language is not single-level either, as if it were syntax without semantics. The semiotics claimed by music must be able to give a critical reply to the theoretical request of semantics; the object of this request is on the plane of the signified as opposed to that of the significant. Musical experience, more easily and urgently than other experiences, demonstrates that such a theory is the appeal of a metaphysics of presence, origination and authenticity to the sign's subversiveness. The semiotics claimed by music is none other than the broadening of general semiotics towards a semiotics collocated as the critical agent of a movement to deconstruct the metaphysics of identity and full presence: a semiotics of incongruency between interpretant and interpreted, of a work's drifting, and of writing. [528]

References

- [1] Edmund Husserl. *Erfahrung und Urteil*. Klaassen Ferlag, Hamburg, 1948.

- [2] Emmanuel Lévinas. *Totalité et Infini*. Nijhoff, La Haye, 1961.
- [3] Plato. *Collected Dialogues*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1961.
- [4] Plato. Republic. In *Platonis Opera*. Oxford Classical Text, Oxford, 1967.