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Jim Palermo

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ARTICLE

For Maxine Greene: The Teacher's Responsibility, the Flesh, and Aesthetic Meaning

James Palermo

To me, Maxine Greene is a friend, a muse, and the flesh-and-blood embodiment of the moral teacher. My tribute to her shows a convergence with the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's construct of the flesh. Specifically, Mme. Greene's work emphasizes the teacher's moral responsibility to the student. A recurring imperative is that the student be caught up in a heightened consciousness, engaged with others, and wide awake to personal possibilities. But she also argues that the student may see the teacher as *The Other*. Sartre (1948) defined *The Other* as one who is dominated and subservient to another. De Beauvoir (1949) saw *Otherness* as women's lot in sexist culture. For the student, ethnic, religious, and cultural differences may ignite the tension of *Otherness* in the classroom.

Mme. Greene argues that the teacher's ethical responsibility is to reverse this perspective and see through the students' eyes. The first step is to place the students' consciousness of everyday life in suspension by having them enter an aesthetic space. What is required is a dialogue between the artist, the work, and the students. This insight into how the artist works yields an altered consciousness, a place where the students realize their own sense making.

Like Dante's Beatrice, the teacher's responsibility is to guide. Here the reversal of consciousness is one in which the teacher tries to vicariously experience the feelings and thoughts of the student. It is this reversal of consciousness where I find the convergence between Mme. Greene and Merleau-Ponty. My specific concern is with the reversals that ground moral life. To begin, Merleau-Ponty (1968) wants to overcome Ryle's (1949) perception of the Cartesian duality (1641) as the "ghost in the machine" by positing the lived-body or body-subject. Never an object at a remove from me, the body-subject is my invariant perspective upon the world, or what he calls the *I can*. I can move my body. Crucially, the *I can* brings with it the possibility of situations. Moreover, the body-subject originates meaning generation in the act of perception. Neither the predicative meaning of S is P nor the reflex of the knee jerk, perceptual meanings occupy the mean between the two. Catching a ball or easily finding my way down my darkened steps are two examples of this. And embodiment brings a point of view; vision opens up things in the world even as they are concealed.

That is, just as I cannot see my body as others see it, objects in my field are inexhaustible in their perceptual richness. This means the things I see are revealed as profiles—sides revealed as I move. And the work of the body is one of synaesthesia—the interpretation of the sense modalities. Vision and touch are intermingled. Focusing on a thing—fixing it—reveals a colored, tactile object that is rough or sleek, metallic or porous. And this previews the flesh: the intertwining of vision and touch, individual and universal, actual and possible experience. That is, the flesh is the origin of reversibility.

As my skin feels the vibration of things seen, the textures touched and felt by one hand, my other hand is a tangible *thing* both to myself and others. Merleau-Ponty calls this criss-cross, this intersection of lines of force, the *chiasm* within the flesh. Putting on a pair of gloves is illustrative: As I put on the glove on my left hand with my right, the left hand appears to be the object of my right hand. But, the subject-object dialectic is never complete. Even as I feel the right hand grasping the left, the movements are felt from within. And there is always a gap existing between the *thingness* of the body and the synaesthesia of body consciousness. But the flesh is something more, if every visible is double-crossed, encroached upon by the tangible, and if every single vision is incomplete, then "[h]e who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it" (Merleau-Ponty, p. 134). The body-subject that sees belongs to the same order as things capable of being, seen, and touched by others. The flesh then is the inter-corporeal universal—the hinge between the here and now, empirical fact and an idea.

Merleau-Ponty clarifies this with a description of a dialogue between himself and another as they together view the landscape. He says, there is "a concordance in my body and the other's . . . what I see passes to him, the green of the meadows invades his [perception]" (p. 142). Merleau-Ponty says both the possibility and reality of this common experience, this incarnate reversal of experience with *The Other*, is the foundation of morality.

But the argument presented has claimed that the proper aesthetic experience can deliver the reversibilities of the flesh. To make the case, I have chosen Richard Serra's own words about his sculpture. Serra's core concern is to expose the aesthetic potential of human movement. His work often uses massive, horizontal-steel assemblages that the viewer walks around in and through. As a result, the viewer's conditions of perception change. Serra says: "You, [the viewer] go where you want to go. You feel the coiling of steel as you move. You, yourself, are a part of the force-field" (2007, as seen on *Charlie Rose*).

That is, as the viewers brush against and walks around the assemblage, they are wide awake to a new sense making and a heightened consciousness of intersubjective space. And it is this *maieutics* of the flesh that foreshadows moral responsibility. This is the convergence that I find between Mme. Greene and Merleau-Ponty.

Most important, Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of the flesh move to one conclusion, especially pertinent to this celebration. He says:

If we do not seek communication with others except on the level of disembodied reason, then there is not much to hope for. In its place is a love which promises beyond what it knows . . . At the moment of this promise . . . love extends beyond qualities, beyond the body, beyond time . . . just as I grasp time, through my present and my being present, . . . in a tension of an experience which transcends itself. (p. 152) That transcendence is my love for Maxine Greene.

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