

On place and the atmosphere

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It is a fine summer's day, and as you stretch out in the sun, you find yourself contemplating the blue of the sky. Could anything be more mysterious, you wonder? Remote, un-touchable, seemingly empty, without surface or limit, the sky seems nevertheless to have swamped your visual awareness. You tap your forehead and are reassured to feel its hard surface. Yes, you are still there, and have not yet melted into the ether. Yet in the visual field the tapping finger strikes no surface but looms like a ghostly, intruding presence that casts its shadow in the void. 'Are you there?' you ask of yourself again, perhaps with a hint of anxiety. How can you be at once here, in place and at home in your body, and at the same time inhabit an atmospheric world that returns the body to you as a spectre?

Vision, according to the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'is the means given me for being absent from myself'. To stay in place and open one's eyes upon the sky is not to extend one's being along a continuum, from near at hand to far away, but to find it split between two poles, one emplaced with the body, the other at large in the heavens. And yet these poles are really one, for at the termination of their fission, he writes, 'I come back to myself'. We discover, perhaps to our astonishment, that to see the sky is to see by its own light. Or more precisely, it is to see by sunlight. In the poetic language of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 'if the eye were not sun-like, it could not see the sun'. By 'sun-like', Goethe did not imply a relation of formal resemblance, as if to highlight the spherical form common to both suns and eyeballs. His point was rather that the same sun that shines like a beacon in the sky also shines like a beam from our eyes. It is what we see *with*.¹

This is to understand light in a way quite different from how it is presented in textbooks on the physical science of optics. It is not an energetic impulse that travels in straight lines, or 'rays', from source to recipient. Seeing with sunbeams is more like feeling the wind: it is an affective mingling of our own awareness with the pulsations of the medium in which we are immersed. Wind does not originate from a point source, nor do I register it as a tap on the cheek; rather, coming from a certain direction, it brushes my skin on its way to nowhere. So it is with beams of light. Wherever sensing meets the sensible, as Merleau-Ponty put it, there is ignited a kind of spark.² As an affectation of being, light is such a spark: the outcome of a fission/fusion reaction that unites us with the cosmos in the very moment that it divides us from ourselves. Thus to see the sky—just as to see the sun—is to experience its luminosity from within.

It follows that to contemplate the blue of the sky is not to be set over against it as a cosmic subject to cosmic object, nor is it to grasp it cognitively by assimilating the raw material of sensory experience to some abstract idea of blueness. It is rather to fuse the cosmic with the affective. 'I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified', observes Merleau-Ponty, 'my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue'.³ Or in a word, the blue sky is an *atmosphere*. If, as I have suggested, seeing with sunbeams is like feeling the wind, then, in a certain sense, one breathes the light of the sky as one breathes the air. For when we breathe, it is not just the body that takes air in and lets it out, as though the mind could be left to float in the ether of the imagination. It is with our entire being—indissolubly body and soul—that we breathe. Or as Merleau-Ponty put it, 'there really is inspiration and expiration of Being'.⁴

In Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, to be sentient is to open up to a world, to yield to its embrace, and to resonate in one's inner being to its illuminations and reverberations. To be able to see is to open to the experience of light; to be able to hear is to open to the experience of sound; to be able to touch is to open to the experience of feeling. Bathed in light, submerged in sound and rapt in feeling, the sentient being rides the crest of the world's becoming, ever-present and witness to that moment when the world is about to disclose itself for what it is. To perceive things, then, is simultaneously to be perceived *by* them: to see is to be seen, to hear is to be heard, and so on. This reversibility, most obvious in the exemplary instance of two hands touching, was for Merleau-Ponty fundamental to all perception.

Yet he was clearly troubled by the recognition that the way in which the world penetrates the awareness of perceivers is *not*, in reality, the exact reverse of the way the latter perceive the world. For a self-sensing being, like a human, for one hand to touch another is precisely for the latter to touch the former. But the sky and its sun are not self-sensing.⁵ They do not regard us as we regard them. The difference is akin to that between breathing in and breathing out. The first is an inhalation of being, an invasion of consciousness. But the second is expressed in a movement of perception, launched on the current of exhalation. The one gathers and draws in the medium in which I am immersed, holding it in tension. The other releases the tension in bursting forth like a spark.

The rhythmic alternation entailed here is comparable to that of the breast stroke in swimming, where the backward sweep of the arms and in-folding of the legs is followed by a forward thrust: the first is a movement of gathering or recollection, the second a movement of propulsion. And with this, we can return to what I have called the *fission/fusion reaction* that drives all perception. In fusion, the sky is *with* me: it is in my eyes and ears. But in fission, I have escaped from myself and am abroad in the cosmos, in among the elements. I am *with* them.

So where are we? Are we at home in our bodies or at large in the atmosphere? The relation between place and atmosphere, I suggest, is equivalent to that between breathing out and breathing in. Atmosphere is the way the world is *with* us; place is the way we are *with* the world. And the living, respiring being is the site where atmospheric immersion is transformed into the movements by which we 'take place' in the world, and conversely, where these constitutive movements of everyday life yield to the atmosphere. The magic of this relation is epitomised in the story of Aladdin and the lamp. When Aladdin stroked the lamp, whole worlds were unloosed, of vast horizons and empty skies, of immense possibility. It was just an ordinary lamp, like any other. But all it took was a little gesture, manual or visual, to rekindle the genie and release an atmosphere.

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Notes

- 1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964) 'Eye and mind', trans. C. Dallery. In *The Primacy of Perception, and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, ed. J. M. Edie, 159-90. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, pp.186; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1964) *Poems: introduced and edited by David Luke, with plain prose translations of each poem*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 282.
- 2 Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and mind', pp. 163-4.
- 3 Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by C. Smith. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 214.
- 4 Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and mind', pp. 167.
- 5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968) *The Visible and the Invisible*, edited by C. Lefort, translated by A. Lingis. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, p. 250.