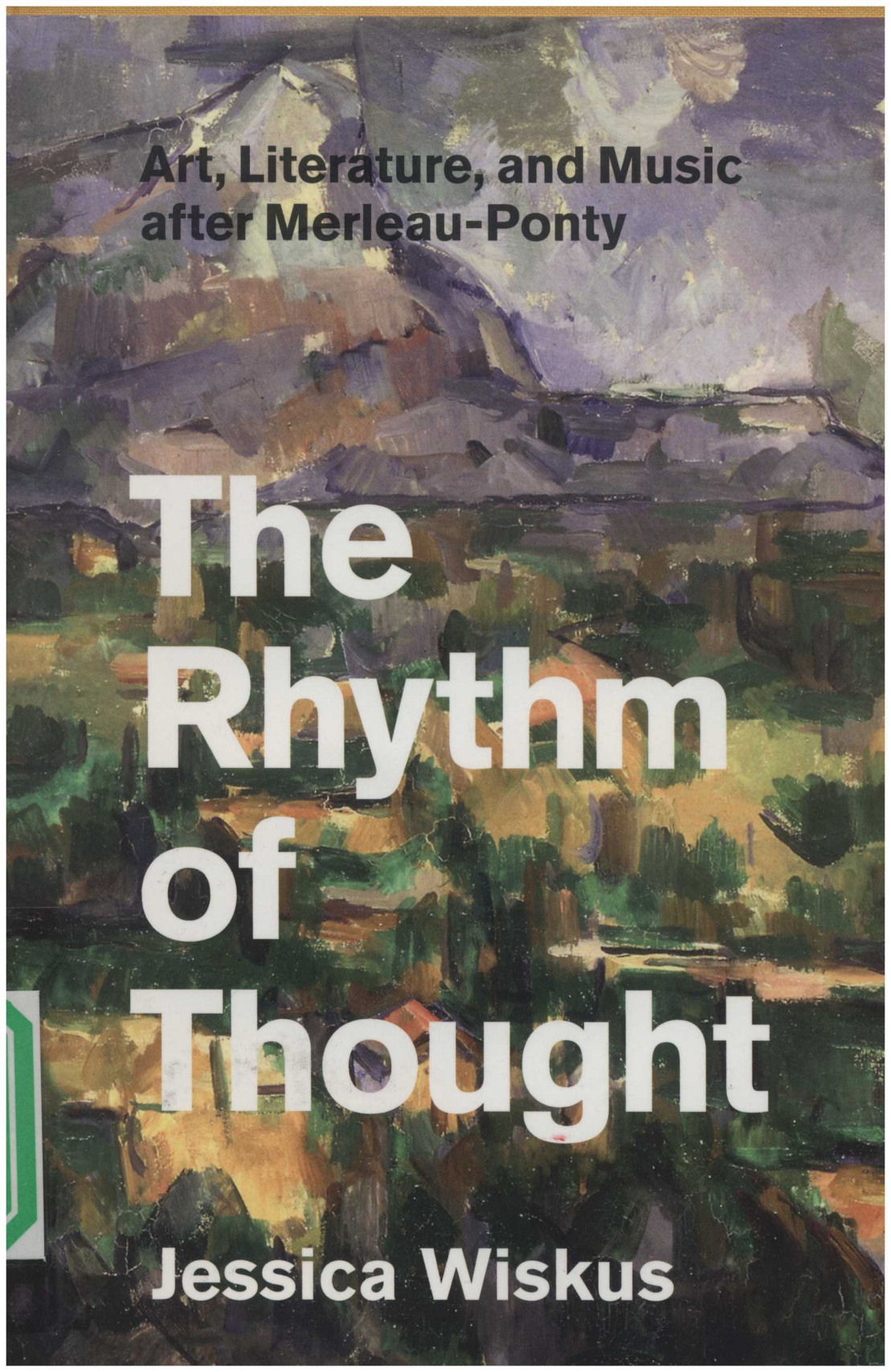
Art, Literature, and Music after Merleau-Ponty
The Rhythm of Thought
Jessica Wiskus

# *The Rhythm of Thought*

## Art, Literature, and Music after Merleau-Ponty

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# The Rhythm of Thought

# *Preface*

In engaging with the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I take as inspiration the work of Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Cézanne, Marcel Proust, and Claude Debussy. Chapters 1–4 explore the notion of noncoincidence (as silence, depth, mythical time, and rhythm), chapters 5–7 investigate the dynamic process of institution (through style, essence, and harmony), chapters 8–9 discuss the idea (as the "musical idea" and as form), and chapter 10 attends to the notion of transcendence.

The material informing chapters 1–3 will be familiar to Merleau-Ponty scholars, but chapter 4 (on Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*) explores new territory. Yet we see also that chapter 4 resonates with chapter 1 (through Mallarmé's poem), and that this resonance therefore inaugurates a certain depth: chapters 5, 6, and 7 relate, respectively, to chapters 2, 3, and 4 (through their focus upon the figures of Cézanne, Proust, and Debussy). These middle chapters serve as noncoincident layers, opening up an additional fold within the structure of the work. Chapters 8 and 9 (on Proust and Debussy) likewise intensify the explorations of chapters 3 and 6 and chapters 4 and 7, respectively. In chapter 10, prevalent themes of color, sound, movement, and emotion cohere (through synesthesia), finally returning to the question of dynamic expression from chapter 1.

Thus, the book has cast itself in a kind of musical form, where the individual chapters proceed not only linearly but through depth.

# *Acknowledgments*

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This book could not have been written without the inspiration and encouragement that so many colleagues have shared with me over the years. I am particularly indebted to Leonard Lawlor and Galen Johnson, who graciously commented on an early manuscript version of the book, as well as Mauro Carbone, William Hamrick, Richard Kearney, Dennis Schmidt, Steve Watson, Jason Wirth, David Wood, and the wonderful members of the Merleau-Ponty Circle. I savor their conversations and treasure their work.

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Finally, for the years of love, laughter and discovery that nourished me while writing this book, my heart is thankful to Larry Collins.

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> The definition of philosophy would involve an elucidation of philosophical expression itself (therefore a becoming conscious of the procedure used in what precedes "naïvely," as though philosophy confined itself to reflecting what is) as the science of pre-science, as the expression of what is before expression *and sustains it from behind.*
>
> MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY, *The Visible and the Invisible*

In reading the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, one must navigate both the opacity of his language and the incompleteness of his work. His penchant for holding in tension the relationship between oppositional pairs—visible and invisible, activity and passivity, sensible and ideal—as well as his development of a unique vocabulary nevertheless replete with traditional Christian terms—"chiasm," "advent," "flesh," "Word"—has led to more than one characterization of his work as something close to that of the mystic's vision.[1] Indeed, anyone who reads the final completed chapter, "The Intertwining: The Chiasm," of *The Visible and the Invisible* cannot help but note the changed tone of Merleau-Ponty's discourse.[2] His writing seems charged with philosophical revelation, and the unexpected tragedy of his death following so closely upon a claim of "ultimate truth" can tempt one to question fate.[3] Why should this philosophical voice have been wrested away so immediately after it had declared its aims? But better than succumb to such speculation, we might ask what has been left for us, now, to gather from his travail. For we have only this: a few books, a few essays. The greater portion of his work was never brought to complete expression; rather, it lies within pages upon pages of fragmentary notes.[4]

Yet it is perhaps appropriate that much of Merleau-Ponty's late work comes down to us not in the form of narrative, but in rough outline. For instead of offering us the sedimentation of a philosophy spoken from the *end* of thinking, his work promises an opening—an initiation to a philosophical discourse that by its very nature could be nothing other than ongoing and incomplete. In this sense, the course notes and working notes contribute to our understanding of his philosophy precisely in the degree to which they

illustrate that philosophy in practice. When we read the notes, we participate in a movement of thought.

And so the difficulties that one encounters when engaging with these notes invite us to develop a sensitivity to his writing that would take into account not only the fixed meaning of each word or phrase, but also the process through which the word or phrase arrives at an original sense. We must turn to the viscous link that binds the words into meaning, for beneath the conceptual content of each word—beyond our everyday employment of language as representation—lies a dynamic and creative realm of expression. Thus Merleau-Ponty can write, "The words most charged with philosophy are not necessarily those that contain what they say, but rather those that most energetically open upon Being, because they more closely convey the life of the whole and make our habitual evidences vibrate until they disjoin."[5] It is the play of ideas across disjuncture that inspires the philosopher. Thus we begin to understand Merleau-Ponty's work toward crafting a specific language of oppositional pairs; the tension inherent to these oppositions allows them to "open upon Being" and offers a sort of philosophical energy not entirely unlike the aesthetic vibration of a green that calls for a red in Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe.*[6] Here, the power of the words or colors emerges from the space that is cleared between a contrast of elements. Yet even considered not in pairs but individually, terms like "chiasm," "advent," "flesh," and "Word" work in much the same way, insofar as Merleau-Ponty implicitly draws upon their own charged history as counterpoint to his realization of them. His use of these terms does not so much make ambiguous a vocabulary that would otherwise appear as transparent to our minds, but calls upon us to recognize a dimensional meaning. Only then might we see that "language in forming itself"—or, we might say, language in performing itself—expresses "an ontogenesis of which it is a part."[7]

It is in this sense that Merleau-Ponty's writing is poetic—poetic in the etymological sense—for it consistently works to disclose the creative generation of philosophical thinking as emerging from the depth between (or beneath, behind, or before) articulated words. In this way, it might seem that the thinking that remains for us, through Merleau-Ponty's late sketches of notes, stands close to the tradition of poetry. Indeed, the notes are significant not only with respect to their content but also in the way that they expose lacunae upon the printed page. It is as if the later Merleau-Ponty deliberately employs words in such a way that they work not so much to convey an explicit meaning as to articulate the empty space upon the page: as space—as an opening—for a continuous reinitiation to philosophical thought.

Thus the status of his written work as unfinished is in harmony with the nature of the work itself. Though we feel his death to be the tragic cause of its incompleteness, how, even if he had lived for many more decades, could we ever have called his work complete? Would not that work, from a Merleau-Ponty of 1971 or 1981, also have left us with more questions, more openings, if it were truly philosophical work? Philosophy lives precisely through its incompleteness, offering its richness according to the demand that it be taken up again.

As we grapple with the distinct difficulties (and, it should be noted, pleasures) of engaging with a dynamic work of this sort, it is not altogether unexpected that we should find ourselves in good company. Many of the challenges that confront us in taking up the "incomplete" work of Merleau-Ponty are similar to those that he himself encountered in his engagement with the writings of Edmund Husserl. Indeed, what better guide could we find, in facing these challenges, than Merleau-Ponty? With respect to Husserl's philosophy, Merleau-Ponty asks: "What if its conclusions are merely the results of a progression which was transformed into a 'work' by the interruption—an interruption which is always premature—of a life's work? Then we could not define a philosopher's thought solely in terms of what he had achieved; we would have to take account of what until the very end his thought was trying to think."[8]

Merleau-Ponty suggests that we would miss the import of the philosopher's work if we were to regard it as complete and finished. Above all, it is the very nature of Husserl's philosophy as irreducible to "a system of neatly defined concepts" that necessitates a dynamic and creative approach.[9] One can "take account of what until the very end his thought was trying to think" not by fleshing out a more thorough analysis of conclusions or concepts (as if Husserl's work offered a closed system that had only to be clarified), but by attending to the generative movement of that thought—by attending to what Merleau-Ponty describes as "the expression of what is before expression *and sustains it from behind.*"[10] For genuine philosophical inquiry does not complete itself first within the mind (fully formed and even clothed in an accessible style), only then to spring forth, Athenalike, into the world through language. Rather, it is through the process of expression that truly philosophical thought comes to be known. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "Speaking and writing is [*sic*] not a codification of an *available* piece of evidence. Speaking and writing make it exist."[11]

And herein lies the crux of our own difficulty in engaging with the work of Merleau-Ponty. We cannot presume to complete a life's work whose

creative quality resonates with its incompleteness; we would be foolish, indeed, to think that our own "speaking and writing" could bring the unfinished manuscripts and course notes into a codified version of the whole of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. "What until the very end his thought was trying to think" is not available to one who would analyze that thought through the language of concept; in aiming to coincide exactly with his conclusions, we would consistently miss the mark. What we seek, therefore, is not to think about the content of his thought, but to think according to the movement of his thought; we seek "participation in an operative thought."[12] Rather than codifying or completing his work, we recognize that the "miss"—the gap between a work and the engagement it inspires—in fact confirms the generative capacity of expression. And thus our very endeavor serves as an exemplar of a principle that, according to Merleau-Ponty, characterizes all philosophical reflection: that of noncoincidence.

*

Ordinarily, we may think of consciousness as the seat of a certain command center, as that power of organized mental and perceptual faculties which enables us to reflect upon the objects of the world absolutely, in their own place. We think that we meet the objects as they actually are, or as they would be if they were unobserved. But this notion of reflection as a hold upon the things of the world does not take into account the temporal dimension of perception.[13] Merleau-Ponty asks us to attend to this process as a kind of uncertainty principle of reflective thought: even at the moment that consciousness feels it has grasped the object, the original or "brute" perception of that object has already suffered a temporal dislocation. What consciousness grasps, therefore, is not the thing itself but the reflection—the image—of the initial perception of the thing. There exists always a lacuna, a gap, between reflection and the thing; consciousness does not obtain to the world directly but only, as it were, through a "cycle of duration that separates the brute perception from the reflective examination."[14] Thus, in describing this cycle, Merleau-Ponty characterizes our perception of the thing as consisting of a "thing-perceived-within-a-perception-reflected-on."[15] What we thought we could grasp—the thing itself—is not at all available to us. But how is it that we fail to notice this dislocation? How is it that we miss the lacuna? Reflection would propose to offer us the very thing—the very world; reflection would set itself up as a bulwark against discontinuity. Yet, according to Merleau-Ponty, in order to achieve this—in order to sustain the perception of the thing across a cycle of duration—reflection "presume[s] upon what it finds and condemn[s] itself to putting into the things what it will then pretend to

find in them."[16] It constructs a sustained sense of the thing by retroactively identifying the reflection with the initial perception. In so doing, however, it operates according to a deception: it conflates the distinction between brute perception of the thing and reflection upon the perceived thing. And while that conflation enables consciousness to claim that it has grasped the thing and not a momentary image, it nevertheless exposes a limitation inherent to the structure of reflective consciousness: reflection is incapable of opening upon the world at the level of brute perception.

> But it is just as sure that the relation between a thought and its object, between the *cogito* and the *cogitatum*, contains neither the whole nor even the essential of our commerce with the world and that we have to situate that relation back within a more muted relationship with the world, within an initiation into the world upon which it rests and which is always already accomplished when the reflective return intervenes. We will miss that relationship—which we shall here call the openness upon the world (*ouverture au monde*)—the moment that the reflective effort tries to capture it, and we will then be able to catch sight of the reasons that prevent it from succeeding, and of the way through which we would reach it.[17]

By means of proposing a new understanding of the noncoincidence of reflective thought and the thing itself, Merleau-Ponty claims that "we are catching sight of the necessity of another operation besides the conversion to reflection, more fundamental than it, of a sort of *hyper-reflection* (*sur-réflexion*) that would also take itself and the changes it introduces into the spectacle into account."[18] This operation of hyperreflection would set itself up within the dynamic process of thought, attuned to noncoincidence. It would not, that is to say, utilize reflection to effect conflation, as the power of a *kosmotheoros* who looks out over the world and claims to see things "as they are" because, being pure mind, it has no contact with the things. Rather, philosophy would attend to the prereflective by investigating thought as a dynamic system involved in the world.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty initiates this investigation by turning toward dialectic thought. The process of dialectic thought, like that of reflection, manifests a temporal dislocation. The distinction between dialectic thought and reflection, however, hinges upon the way that the two operations meet this dislocation. Reflection works upon brute perception and, as Merleau-Ponty phrased it, "put[s] into the things what it will then pretend to find in them." That is to say, reflection circles around noncoincidence and, thanks to the temporal dislocation, projects backward into perception what it had already formulated. Thus it is that reflection deceives

us into believing that we had grasped the thing, when in fact we are left with a reflective image and no contact with the thing at all. But the dialectic seizes upon the lacuna between brute perception and thought and, in contrast to reflection, operates from within its complex temporal structure. It seeks not to produce a single fixed image, but to return through a continuous cycle of perception and reflection. It owes its authenticity to this return—a return that does not seek only what it wishes to find, but develops according to the other-than-itself that is there: latent difference or possibility that is the expression of the lacuna. It is indeed only because of the lacuna that dialectic thought can be dynamic. As dialectic thought turns back toward the brute perception, it takes the measure of the separation between itself and the past perception now held within the present; rather than to effect a conflation, it can be said to embrace this difference, to reconfigure itself according to this difference, and to find within the difference the potential for movement and transformation. This is why Merleau-Ponty writes, of the dynamic stages of dialectic thought, "Hence there is a question here not of a thought that follows a pre-established route but of a thought that itself traces its own course, that finds itself by advancing, that makes its own way, and thus proves that the way is practicable."[19] *Practicable*: as operative thought—thought that works from within the relationship between our brute perception of the thing and the task of consciousness in arriving at the thing to be thought.

Therefore, this operative thought discloses a specific notion of the dialectic—a dialectic without synthesis. Merleau-Ponty writes: "In particular it does not formulate itself in successive statements which would have to be taken as they stand; each statement, in order to be true, must be referred, throughout the whole movement, to the stage from which it arises and has its full sense only if one takes into account not only what it says expressly but also its place within the whole which constitutes its latent content."[20] That is to say, dialectic thought continually goes back to take account of the noncoincident structure of reflection and advances according to this complex movement. It therefore does not arrive at a complete, fixed statement. "It has never been able to formulate itself into theses without denaturing itself," because to arrive at a fixed thought would be to betray the operative thought that lies at the heart of the dialectic.[21] By its very nature, it makes no claim toward disclosing a realm of the predetermined; rather, it consists in openness—openness to that which has never been formulated or spoken. And so Merleau-Ponty carefully distinguishes between his own understanding of the dialectic and what he terms the ordinary or "bad" dialectic (where "the thought ceases to accompany or to be the dialectical movement, converts it into signification, thesis, or things said").[22] Searching for a means to describe

his dynamic notion of the dialectic, Merleau-Ponty adopts the term "hyperdialectic" as an expression for the "good" dialectic: "What we call hyperdialectic is a thought that on the contrary is capable of reaching truth because it envisages without restriction the plurality of the relationships and what has been called ambiguity. The bad dialectic is that which thinks it recomposes being by a thetic thought, by an assemblage of statements, by thesis, antithesis, and synthesis."[23]

And here, in reading Merleau-Ponty, we might pause. Hyperdialectic? Hyperreflection? What has become clear in Merleau-Ponty's search for a dynamic process of thought is the inadequacy of ordinary language to the task. Merleau-Ponty seems to chafe at the language, stretching it, extending it, and returning to earlier statements as through a maze of difficulty. But this is not a fault of the author; it is a result of the noncoincidence itself. The only way to make this lacuna clear is to enter into it, from the very point at which things *not said* constitute the content. "Philosophy is the reconversion of silence and speech into one another," writes Merleau-Ponty.[24] The language through which one may express this dialectic thus cannot simply resort to words that bear a fully transparent relation to signification. The expression of dynamic thought must itself always take into account the principle of the lacuna, and just as philosophy seeks an operative thought that can work from the inside of noncoincidence, so must it also seek a language with the capacity to express that thought. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty writes that philosophy "must question the world, it must enter into the forest of references that our interrogation arouses in it, it must make it say, finally, what in its silence *it means to say.*"[25] But how might one bring silence to speak without destroying the silence itself?

There would need to be an operative language—a language capable of setting itself up within the gap between sign and signification—a language that would turn back toward this noncoincidence for the movement of its meaning. Merleau-Ponty writes: "It would be a language of which he would not be the organizer, words he would not assemble, that would combine through him by virtue of a natural intertwining of their meaning, through the occult trading of the metaphor—where what counts is no longer the manifest meaning of each word and of each image, but the lateral relations, the kinships that are implicated in their transfers and their exchanges."[26]

This operative language, it would seem, would be the language of poetry, the abode of metaphor.[27] Poetry and metaphoric language work precisely according to the principle of noncoincidence; they aim at "making silence speak, at saying what is not-said, at exploring language beyond its usual destination which lies (Mallarmé) in saying what is obvious, the familiar."[28]

Rather than employing language as a direct formulation of thought, poetry makes use of the clear space between sign and signification in order to allow meaning to be born in a fresh way, by taking into account all that is latent between the relations that words form through their interaction. Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between this poetic language (as that which constantly returns to the prearticulate for the generation of new meaning) and ordinary, empirical language (as that which is used in everyday speech):

> The empirical use of already established language should be distinguished from its creative use. Empirical language can only be the result of creative language. Speech in the sense of empirical language—that is, the opportune recollection of a preestablished sign—is not speech in respect to an authentic language. It is, as Mallarmé said, the worn coin placed silently in my hand. True speech, on the contrary—speech which signifies, which finally renders "l'absente de tous bouquets" present and frees the meaning captive in the thing—is only silence in respect to empirical usage, for it does not go so far as to become a common noun.[29]

Again, Merleau-Ponty points to the poet Mallarmé for the sense of this operative or creative language. It is to Mallarmé's essay "Crisis of Verse" that Merleau-Ponty refers. In this essay, Mallarmé writes:

> I say: a flower! And, out of the oblivion where my voice casts every contour, insofar as it is something other than the known bloom, there arises, musically, the very idea in its mellowness; in other words, what is absent from every bouquet.
>
> As opposed to a denominative and representative function, as the crowd first treats it, speech, which is primarily dream and song, recovers, in the Poet's hands, of necessity in an art devoted to fictions, its virtuality.[30]

The "virtuality" of which Mallarmé speaks—"what is absent from every bouquet"—is the very transcendence that distinguishes the use of language that articulates what is already known from the use of language that approaches depth or noncoincidence. Here lies the realm of creative thought. And the possibility of expressing this realm stands as the proper task of language.[31] Language cannot offer up merely "the material truth" (*matériellement la vérité*),[32] for it does not simply represent the world through a kind of onomatopoetic transference of essence into sound. Mallarmé notes that, if language worked solely through representative means, we would not have so many diverse languages upon the earth—one "absolute" (*suprême*) language would suffice for human expression.[33] But it is this lack of correspondence between the sound and the meaning of language that points to its creative potential, for in language there is always more than a mapping of thought