

## PERCEPTION AND LITERARY STYLE

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Starting from *Phenomenology of Perception* and proceeding through other studies to the *The Visible and the Invisible*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes speaking as being rooted in corporeality. He does not confine the connection between language and the body to the process of articulation, but reveals language as one of the modalities of embodiment. Such an observation of Merleau-Ponty's cannot be separated from his constant attention to the act of speaking. But here speech appears as descending from a body that is turned to the world. Speaking itself originates from the body's intentionality.

Language, as well as gestures, reveals itself as a mode of the body's reaction and expression that has the power to transform both the situation and the body's capabilities. Speech, hence, appears as "a means of action and feeling".<sup>1</sup>

While describing embodied speaking-understanding, Merleau-Ponty reveals its various nuances and always concentrates on the moment of speaking or understanding, on the graspless boundary between the intentional body and speech, marking out speech as a text which the body streams into. Does the situation of speaking not leave traces or marks in speech itself? The description of understanding in the reading process carried out by the same author shows that it does. In this sense fiction can give support to and prolong the descriptions of embodied speaking.

The main goal of this investigation is to describe a case where corporal experience, the perception of the situation in particular, can be transferred into a text. The thesis of this paper is that discourse saves the *existential* meanings "intermingled with the structure of the world"<sup>2</sup> of the act of speaking. What follows will be a discussion of the sense experience that is implicated into literature not as a matter or theme but as *organising the expression of poetry*. It is this which forms the basis of the structure of a narration or metaphor. Style and all its figures of speech can be examined not only as an independent poetic and rhetorical tradition, but also as a matter that arises from and is raised by perception.

Merleau-Ponty establishes the guidelines for such a description by speaking about style of perception. The word "style", which is usual in the field of art, connects perception and art. Merleau-Ponty draws a direct connection between perception and style describing how a new style of fine art forms a new perception, and a new perception of the

world initiates a new style of visual art. The style of art is based on the style of perception.<sup>3</sup> The task of this paper is to show how this observation can be true not only of fine art but also of fiction.

If someone starts to speak about perception in the style of literature, the understanding of literature itself is modified. Perception cannot be self-dependent. It is always a perception of a corporal being. From this point of view literary works cannot be isolated from a writer. Thus, literature is a kind of speech that is based on a speaking person's intentionality towards the world. He speaks from his life to the other, for a man always looks for the approval of another person.

The concept of the phenomenal body emphasizes the body's possibilities to originate language, to be in a mode of language and to be transformed by language. By speaking about style in terms of perception, it is possible to think about the phenomenal body of the speaker. This concept includes the corporal experience of a writer and language with its power of transformation. It connects the author, a real biographical person who, according to Roland Barthes, is dead, and the speaker whom we find inside the text. The concept of the phenomenal body neither identifies with nor delimits the interaction between the author and the speaker, but finds a way to establish a link between the two.

My paper presents the results of an investigation of the poetry and diary<sup>4</sup> of a Lithuanian poet Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas who since 1947 was residing in the USA.<sup>5</sup>

There are two principles of perception investigated in this paper: the first one examines the influence of the past on the present process of perception; the second one deals with the influence of the surrounding space on a perceived object. They are both active in the process of perception as well as in the style of a text. The first principle will be described as a previous experience or a principle of retention.

There are a lot of cases in the diary of Nyka-Niliūnas when the narration of the present is changed by the narration of the past. Earlier experience imperceptibly invades into present experience. I shall present one diary inscription out of hundreds.

*Amazing weather. The sky is blue like the sky seen through the leaves of chestnuts in the churchyard of Utena [the name of his native town]. I am lying in my yard and listening to the soft rustling of the wind among the leaves like in Nemeikšėiai [the name of his native village] in the noon of Sunday. I got a letter. The fields of ryes. Chamomiles. I am getting up and going. I am going down a hill and crossing a river...<sup>6</sup>*

This diary inscription was made in 1971 when living in the USA. It is not difficult to notice that at the beginning he remembers his native town and village. He compares the sky and rustling of leaves in the present and in the past, and they seem to be similar. But at the end of this episode he starts to tell previous events that happened more than twenty years ago as if he was performing them in present. *I got a letter. The fields of ryes. Chamomiles. I am getting up and going. I am going down a hill and crossing the river...* From this place the speaker repeats his previous actions. Only from the context of the diary is it evident that he got this letter twenty years ago and that the surroun-

dings of his house in America is replaced by the surroundings of his native village. Incarnation into the past is expressed in the present tense. That is why it is difficult to notice the change. It is not a kind of reflection of a previous event. The narrator incorporates himself into previous actions. He experiences the same kinaesthetic feelings, the same surroundings once more. The past takes part in present experience with its full value.

Memory, as Henri Bergson writes, is actualised through a kinaesthetic mechanism.<sup>7</sup> The formation of memory is simultaneous with the formation of perception. Perceiving an object in the present, the narrator of the diary immediately remembers an earlier experienced object. For instance, looking at the moon he sees the moon of Baudelaire or Mallarme, the moon of his native village, the moon of Tübingen where he lived. The narrator of the diary notices the retention, “the sinking into the past”, as Husserl writes, and generalises his experience saying that *the present night or morning consists of other nights or mornings*.<sup>8</sup>

The sequence of events in the diary inscriptions is changed not for the sake of an intrigue. Events are told for us in the consecutive order in which they appear in the process of perception. The perceived object in the diary appears together with previous perceptions of the same kind of objects. The corporeality and sensitivity of recurrent memory is evident in the texts. The usage of grammatical forms expresses this presence of the past. I could call this mode of representation of events a perceptive narration.

The same perceptive narration as we found in the diary of Nyka-Niliûnas is obvious in his poetry. The poems depend on the order of poetics, but the construction of experience remains the same as in some of the diary entries. I shall present a few poems to serve as examples. The title of the first is “Morning”<sup>9</sup> and we see that the poem is about a morning. While reading more attentively, it is evident that there are three different mornings in the poem. It is possible to separate them because of three distinctly different surroundings. Though one detail is repeated: a sharp scream of a bird. It is possible to think that it is the scream that gives a chance for the past to return. It is the same principle as in the diary.

The next poem I propose for your attention is about a woman’s perception.<sup>10</sup> There are a lot of women in the text. Some of them could be seen in pictures and others met in life. It is difficult to grasp the relationship among them, but we can find the present point of the speaker. At the outset the speaker is lying in bed with a woman. Detail by detail we find out that all the women take part in the present experience of the woman the speaker is lying besides. This experience is embraced by the memory of Madonna who rises up from childhood religious practice.

This complicated poetry gains clarity when we read it using the perception principle inscribed in the diary. The poet neither draws entire, simultaneous pictures nor presents a sequence of events going from the past to the future. His narration is built by noting the process of perception in which the past takes place in the present as a depth of the present.

Now we come to the analysis of the second principle, which is active in the process of perception as well as in the organisation of text – that of space. I treat space in this investigation as an environment. According to Merleau-

Ponty, it is natural to perceive space not as a medium where things are, but as the universal possibility of relations among things. To be in space means to start relations with others only because of an accidental coexistence in the same space. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari examine this relation using the concept of *rhizome*.<sup>11</sup> A French researcher Eric Landowski examines such a phenomenon using the concept of infection.<sup>12</sup> He describes how one body gets infected by the mode, forms or features of another body in an intersomatic space. Starting with infection through illness or laughter, he comes to cases of formal transformation when clothes, garden or house become adapted to the person living in them, while the body of the person also adapts itself to the things.

The space surrounding the perceived object unavoidably takes part in the perceptive process. In perception, quite differently from rational cognition, there are no possibilities to isolate a perceived object from the *world of its dwelling*. The perceived relation between an object or body and its environment is called here interlacement, seeking to emphasize that the perceived object and its environment interlace, mingle, blend and unite so as to intercross one another by passing alternately over and under one another.<sup>13</sup>

Now let us return to the poetry of Nyka-Niliûnas. According to the different level of intensity of interlacement with the environment, I would single out three kinds of expression of interlacement.

Here are several examples of the lowest level of interlacement: *the gallery of the spring day, the tree of the yard*. I gave you examples from poetry but there are a lot of examples of the same kind in daily speech. In these cases there are no single words, it is a chain of words oriented to the world. Different words blend to a new unity as different objects do because of their perceptive world.

Situations when one member of interlacement disappears from the usual neighbourhood confirm the connection. We could remember the descriptions of Jean Paul Sartre.<sup>14</sup> When someone is waiting for the appearance of the master in his room, the things of the room tell him about the absent housekeeper. There are not only traces left by the master on the surface of things, but there are things that foresee the orientation and abilities of the housekeeper's body that form his habits. There are a lot of traces left by the other in the poetry of Nyka-Niliûnas, for example *a dent of the head in a pillow, a sign of the elbows on the table*. Such expressions not only enounce the existence of another being, but also detail the actions or positions of his body: in the above-mentioned case we find out that the absent person was sitting and leaning his elbows on a table.

All these simple poetic expressions show the integrity and entity of the perceived world. They reveal objects as if remembering each other and dependent on others. In the expressions presented above, things are connected, but the boundary of their bodies is not crossed.

Now let us come to the second degree of interlacement. In this case, both sides infect each other. The boundary of their bodies is crossed, their autonomy is disturbed. As a result, they obtain new features that come from the surrounding objects. I will call this an effect of coexistence assimilation. Here are several inscriptions from the diary that represent interlacement of the second degree. These inscriptions are made in autumn time.

*In the park. Me, Tany, Henric. Everything is autumnal: not only the trees, but also people, the eyes of Tany and the walk of Henric.*<sup>15</sup>

*Everything was full, ripe, juicy, transparent, even your eyes, hands and trunk.*<sup>16</sup>

Autumn penetrated into the body. Hands and trunk become as fruits in autumn time – ripe and juicy. Researchers of literature often speak about the parallel between nature and the internal world, but in our examples we find the influence of surrounding nature on the surface of the body. As Alphonso Lingis writes: the environment breaks into us and becomes visible on the surface of our bodies.<sup>17</sup>

I will now turn to the third degree of interlacement when coexisting things get from each other not features but parts. For example, a space gets parts of a human body and the human body gets fragments of the landscape. In the cases of slight interlacement presented above the medium of expression was rather conventional. When dealing with cases of a more intensive interlacement we find a special kind of metaphor. These metaphors are based on the substitution of parts between an object and its surrounding. One example in detail:

*Liriodendron tulipifera in the Badenweiler park*

*Remained for us in the hair of the rainy day.*<sup>18</sup>

*The hair of the day*, such a metaphor could seem like a noise without any meaning. The hair of the day in this strophe is the hair of the woman with whom the speaker was spending the day in the Badenweiler park when he saw *Liriodendron tulipifera* – a wonderful tree blooming with blossoms in the form of yellow tulips. The hair of the woman turns into the hair of the day. The woman and the day as environment interlace in the perception of the speaker.

There are some more metaphors of the same kind in this poem: *rain of lips* when it is raining around them; *river of woman's hair*; when the river streams near the standing woman.

I shall give you two more poems. The interlacement between the woman perceived and the surroundings forms the basis of the structure of these two poems. In the first one the woman absorbs the surrounding while in the second, the surroundings absorb the woman.

In the first poem the landscape penetrates into the body so intensively that the surroundings vanish.<sup>19</sup> Instead of the surroundings, we see the body expressed in figures of the landscape. I cite: the valley of her body, the deep place in the stream of the river, the lampreys (a kind of small fish) in her hair and teeth, the marsh marigolds covering her naked breasts (Marsh marigold is a yellow flower that grows in wet places). The above-mentioned details create an integral picture of a Lithuanian river landscape. At the end of the poem, the river is mentioned as separate from the woman. It confirms the hypothesis that the river is a real context for the perceived woman. The parts of the environment not only point to the woman as in the above mentioned description by Sartre, but they stream into her. In this case of perception, the woman is a centre as strong as a vortex. I have to say that the speaker is in love with her. So this poem could give a possibility to describe the perception effected by love.

In the last poem I propose, the speaker remembers his youthful adventures, but instead of the promised exciting experience we see the context of adventure without active persons.<sup>20</sup> In this poem, on the contrary to the previous one, the

woman is absorbed by the surroundings. She disappears in the environment and only parts of her body or clothes are left, for instance, the column is slender (a typical characteristic of the trunk of a woman) or the column has naked shoulders that are covered by knitting. The intimate connection with the body of the woman is expressed as an intercourse with the environment. The air lovingly touches the eyes of the speaker like the velvet of a girl. Descriptions of the surrounding night would be appropriate for those of a touchable naked body: the night is breathing and is prone, it is hot and sticky.

The metaphors presented above come not from the distant corners of a consciousness, but from perceptive nearness. The resemblance these metaphors are based on appears from being near each other.

I have opened up the two principles of perception that take part in the organisation of style: the first, the participation of previous time in the presence of perception, and the second, interlacements in the perceived space. Earlier experiences are like a palimpsest in present perception and in the text of poetry. Previous mornings are transparent in the present morning, women met earlier in the woman of the present. This principle gives an order for narration. In dealing with the influence of surroundings on the object perceived, I analysed a special kind of metaphor. These metaphors are based on the resemblance that comes from contiguity. They get their meaning from the perceived environment.

I discerned two principles and now have to blend them again because, in reality, they are deeply interconnected. They simply act one in another. For example, the speaker heard the scream of a bird, and the screams heard earlier participate in the present scream. The past returns to the present moment. In the next movement of perception, the whole context of the previous scream returns. The sound is interlaced with its environment. The situation I recalled in the poem is identical to the situation of the novel of Proust when, through the same taste of a cup of tea and a little cake, the previous taste returns Marcel to the small town Combray with its houses, streets and church which surround him.

The surroundings and the past take part in perception and give meaning to the perceived world. It is corporeality that stands at the origin of meaning. According to Algis Mickūnas, the past as well as the surroundings is the depth of an object. Depth is connected with surface because it appears through corporeality. We could speak about the stereometry of the surface. The term palimpsest can give more evidence for the notion of the deep surface: all coats of paints are surfaces but one is deeper than another.

My main thesis is: the figures of style I presented above are formed on the basis of the perceptive process. The metaphors and the narrative I spoke about are seen in the world. Proust also treated metaphor as a special kind of seeing. So style is not only a way of expression but also a way of perceiving.

It is difficult to draw a boundary between poetic language and perception. A body transforms into language and this transformation is its way of being. It transforms with its themes and style of experience. Perception streams into language. Thus, using the slang of this presentation, the interlacement between poetic language and perception in the poetry that was proposed to you is of the highest degree.<sup>21</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, ed. by C. Lefort, transl. by J. O'Neill, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, 19.
- <sup>2</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception*, transl. by C. Smith, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1996, 186.
- <sup>3</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 1973, 147–152.
- <sup>4</sup> Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas, *Dienorašėio fragmentai 1937–1970*, Chicago: Algimanto Mackaus knygo leidimo fondas, 1998, Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas, *Dienorašėio fragmentai 1970–1998*, Chicago: Algimanto Mackaus knygo leidimo fondas, 1999 Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas, *Eilėraščiai*, Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 1996; Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas, *The Theology of Rain*, transl. by J. Zdanys, Vilnius: Vaga, 1999; [www.efn.org/~valdas/nyka.html](http://www.efn.org/~valdas/nyka.html).
- <sup>5</sup> Nyka-Niliūnas is a European minded erudite, he draws into his poetry very wide cultural contexts. His poetry was treated as being so intellectual and philosophical as to be hard to deal with and did not get any comprehensive study. But I think these characteristics are paradoxical. Nyka-Niliūnas is really an erudite, but his poetry is perceptual rather than intellectual; in other words, his poetry and all its features are based on perception. That is why it was so difficult to deal with it.  
We find in the diary that Nyka-Niliūnas has a very active and intimate contact with culture and life; literature read by him transforms his daily life experience and on the other hand, understanding of books involves his life perceptions. His attitude seems to be very propitious for the phenomenological approach.  
The everyday perception of Nyka-Niliūnas is influenced by the aesthetic experience caused by novels of Marcel Proust. I would like to point out that the influence is seen not only in the style of Nyka-Niliūnas but, first of all, in his manner of perception. This is very obvious in the diary.  
On the one hand, phenomenology gives possibility to perceive the bases of poetry of Nyka-Niliūnas (as well as it could explain the style of Proust), on the other hand, such fiction helps to detail descriptions of phenomenology. In my text these two directions will constantly substitute each other.
- <sup>6</sup> Nyka-Niliūnas, 1999, 18.
- <sup>7</sup> *Āiðè Āāðāñī, Nī āðāīèā ñī ÷ èīāīèé. Īiūð ï íāīñðāāñðāāīīūð āāīīūð ñī çīāīèý. Ī āðāðèý è ïāīýðü 1, Ī ĩñèāā: Ī ñēī āñèèé èèóá, 1992, 234.*
- <sup>8</sup> Nyka-Niliūnas, 1999, 53.
- <sup>9</sup> Nyka-Niliūnas, 1996, 194–195.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 222–223.
- <sup>11</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, transl. by Brian Massumi, London: Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, 3–25.
- <sup>12</sup> Eric Landowski, *Passions sans nom*, (forthcoming).
- <sup>13</sup> I shall give one example from daily experience to show the effect of the environment on the meaning of a perceived object. Sitting in a café I saw two vagabonds. They were very impressive: a woman and a man twice as young as she calling each other sweet names. Their dressing and behaviour were very unusual in our provincially-oriented town. For the rest of the day I could not forget them. It seemed to me I had seen them before. I tried to remember where, but I could not. Finally, I understood that I was looking for their context. If I could remember the context for the vagabonds (train, Prague or a movie) I would understand them and they would start to be meaningful for me. Thus the environment would affirm that I saw them earlier and would give the meaning for them.
- <sup>14</sup> *Æà í Ī iëü Caððð, Āúðèā è ïè ÷ òī: ĩiūð òāīiū ā í iëiāè ÷ āñēī é ĩ ið iëiāèè, iāð. Ā. È. Èi èyāēī, Ī ñèāā: Ðāñīóáèèèà, 2000, 360.*
- <sup>15</sup> Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas, *Dienorašėio fragmentai 1938-1975*, Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2002, 491.
- <sup>16</sup> Nyka-Niliūnas, 1998, 369.
- <sup>17</sup> Alphonso Lingis, *Pavojingos emocijos*, vertė I. Skarpiškaitė, Vilnius: Poligrafija ir informatika, 2002, 24, 22.
- <sup>18</sup> Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas, *Balandpio vigilija*, Chicago, 1957.

<sup>19</sup> Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas, *The Theology of Rain*, transl. by J. Zdanys, Vilnius: Vaga, 1999, 50–52; [www.efn.org/~valdas/nyka.html](http://www.efn.org/~valdas/nyka.html)

<sup>20</sup> Nyka-Niliūnas, 1996, 294–295.

<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless a sceptical person can say that these metaphors are constructed. I suggest that the speaker saw a woman in the river landscape and his seeing is expressed in his discourse. But a sceptical opponent could insist that an intellectual poet decided to describe a woman in the terms of a river landscape and did it successfully. Interpretations belong to the different points view of interpreters. I think the unity of recurrences of experienced forms consolidates the idea of perception. I shall return for a moment to the poem about the lying woman. The position of all the mentioned women is horizontal because the speaker was looking at his sweetheart lying nearby. I presuppose that the poet himself does not know that they are all lying: his perception simply without a special effort placed them in a horizontal position. He saw lying women as the coats of a palimpsest. I mention one recurrence of this form, but there are a lot of them in every poem and to look for all of them would be a difficult game for this author without much hope of being able to write something coherent. If you plan in all details how to sit on a chair, how to put your legs and how much to bend them you will simply run the risk of falling down. The same outcome is possible for a writer intending to take into account the recurrences of all forms.