

AN ACADEMIC JOURNAL WITH A STRANGE, MULTILINGUAL TITLE: HOW *CHIASMI INTERNATIONAL* WAS BORN

An interview with Mauro Carbone
by Julie Christina Krogh (University of Copenhagen)

JCK: Professor Carbone, thank you very much for this opportunity to interview you about the history of *Chiasmi International* and about your own research starting from Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, on the occasion of their respectively 20th issue and 110th birthday this year. Let me specify that, for both topic and space reasons, just the first part of this interview is published in the present issue of the journal, whereas the other sections will appear in the following one.

Coming to my questions, I would like to start by asking you about the history of the journal and how it got the title *Chiasmi International*.

MC: *Chiasmi International* is a strange title. Indeed, *chiasmi* is an Italian word, whereas one says *chiasme* in French and *chiasm* in English. On the other hand, "*international*" is not an Italian term, but a French and English one. Thus, what is strange is the appearance of the Italian word in the title of an academic journal devoted to a French philosopher and intended for a global readership. I think that such a strange presence is an interesting sign of the peculiarity of our journal. The peculiarity of its history and maybe also the peculiarity of the contributions which it gave and still gives to the studies concerning Merleau-Ponty.

With the other members of the "Italian Merleau-Ponty Society," in 1996 I founded a small academic journal called *Chiasmi*, published by *Mimesis*, which was at that time a small publishing house based in Milan. Of course, this journal was intended only for Italian Merleau-Ponty readership. Two years later, in 1998, at the State University of Milan, where I taught at that time, I organized a big international conference devoted to Merleau-Ponty's heritage in contemporary thought. Many scholars in Merleau-Ponty studies and more generally in phenomenology studies agreed to participate coming from several countries and belonging to three different generations. This conference in some way became the founding event of *Chiasmi International*. Indeed, one year later, in 1999, when the volume of the conference was ready to be printed, I proposed to *Mimesis* to publish it as the first issue of a journal intended for an international readership. My idea was to publish such a journal as a trilingual one, that is to say, including articles in French, Italian, or English, each of them accompanied by an abstract in the other two languages. Surprisingly enough with respect to my expectations, the *Mimesis* director immediately accepted.

JCK: *Where did the idea of a trilingual journal come from? It seems to be an unusual way of conceiving a journal at that time.*

MC: This idea came to me from my experience as a Ph.D. student in Belgium, at the *Institut Supérieur de Philosophie*, situated in Louvain-la-Neuve, Wallonia, the primarily French-speaking region of Belgium. Indeed, not only is Belgium a country traditionally characterized by different linguistic areas, but, more particularly, the Ph.D. students coming from all over the world to study phenomenology were used to go to the *Catholic University of Leuven*, the Flemish city, if they preferably were English-speakers, and to the *Université Catholique* of Louvain-la-Neuve if preferably French-speakers. Hence, the linguistic problem was absolutely central there, whereas it did not exist in Italy, nor in France. As for me, in the second half of the 1980s, I was a Ph.D. student in Louvain-la-Neuve. By the way, my thesis director was Ghislaine Florival, precisely the person who donated to the *Centre d'études phénoménologiques* Merleau-Ponty's letters to the Belgian philosopher Alphonse DeWaelhens which are published in the present volume. In that context, I usually read the *Revue philosophique de Louvain*, where each article had an abstract in English and in French.

On this basis, a decade later, I spontaneously conceived the idea of a trilingual journal devoted to Merleau-Ponty studies where each article was expected to be accompanied by an abstract in the other two official languages of the journal itself. When I recall this idea now, I understand that it was not obvious at all to conceive and to produce a journal like this in that epoch, that is to say, before the effects of the so-called globalization became concrete.

JCK: *How did the "globalization" influence the creation of Chiasmi International?*

MC: What we currently call "globalization" began supposedly after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. Nevertheless, in 1999, when the first issue of *Chiasmi International* was published, the effects of globalization on human relationships and academic exchanges were not very concrete. On the other hand, I remember that, very recently, some of us had begun to use e-mail, and, obviously, a journal like *Chiasmi International* would have been unthinkable without it. Thus, I now understand that this journal has been a very innovative experiment with respect to that period of time, even though, when we see the journal today, it seems obvious that it is a multilingual journal.

JCK: *How did this idea of creating a trilingual journal become realized?*

MC: With my proposal of a trilingual journal in mind and thanks to the mediation of Renaud Barbaras (whom I invited to become the French editor

of the journal), I met Madame Arnaud, the daughter of the founder of the very prestigious philosophical bookshop and publishing house *Joseph Vrin*, in Paris, place de la Sorbonne. The idea that I previously discussed with *Mimesis* was to propose to *Vrin* to co-publish the journal and to distribute it in France. A third publishing house was still to be found in the United States. Later, when Leonard Lawlor accepted to become the American editor of the journal, he proposed the University of Memphis, where he taught in that period of time, as the third publishing house.

When I met Madame Arnaud, I was ready to discuss with her the name to be given to the new trilingual journal. But, once again, surprisingly enough with respect to my expectations, Madame Arnaud said: «You already have a journal with a name, *Chiasmi*. So, why not avoid finding a totally new name by just adding *International* to the original one? » We liked that suggestion very much. This is the reason why we have this unusual mixture of Italian, French, or English in the name of the journal, which in a sense is the sign of its origin, but, as I said, also the sign of its uniqueness.

JCK: *With this creation of a journal in the dawning globalization, was the idea also to reach further than the European continent?*

MC: Actually, the journal was expected to be the place of a regular exchange among scholars from all over the world, in an epoch where the possibility of doing that was not easy and therefore not frequent. There was a Merleau-Ponty Circle in Japan, a Merleau-Ponty Circle in the United States, and a Merleau-Ponty Society in Italy. In France too, a Merleau-Ponty Circle was born and quickly died in the mid-nineties (that is, before *Chiasmi International's* birth). But exchanges among the various national Merleau-Ponty Societies were not common. Thus, the idea was to involve on the editorial board of *Chiasmi international* some members of these different national societies in order to develop more opportunities for communication among them through the journal. In this sense, *Chiasmi International* was born based on an idea of globalization in the noblest meaning this term could have. It shaped a space for sharing contributions coming from all over the world. *Chiasmi International* has been and still is a place of mutual enrichment from different cultures.

JCK: *Has this trilingual, multicultural so to say, journal affected the reception of Merleau-Ponty?*

MC: In my opinion, this uniqueness of the journal has become a unique characteristic of the reception of Merleau-Ponty in the world. I am referring to the peculiarity of Merleau-Ponty as a French philosopher whose reception and whose interpretation has been due, not only to French scholars, but to a much larger, international scholarship: this is mostly thanks to *Chiasmi International*. From the very beginning, Renaud Barbaras, Leonard Lawlor and myself, as the three co-editors of that period, have emphasized this

diversity. In a sense I think that the richness of the interpretations and the richness of Merleau-Pontian thought that these interpretations have pointed out are due to the fact that they have benefited from this broader approach.

JCK: *With this variety of approaches, how do you select which contributions are to be published and has it changed during these 20 years?*

MC: At the beginning, the majority of the contributions were composed of invited papers. Each year one of the co-editors acted as the main editor of the next issue. The main editor conferred with his two editorial colleagues in order to choose the scholars to invite to publish in the following issue of the journal. These scholars were invited based on the topic that the three co-editors had chosen together for that issue. This was in the initial phase of the journal, but gradually we began to receive papers submitted for publication in the journal, and we began to feel that we had to make the focus of the journal larger.

JCK: *In which way did you broaden the focus of the journal?*

MC: We began to broaden the focus of the journal by devoting special sections to other thinkers whose philosophy seemed to us to be in some sort of dialogue with Merleau-Ponty's thought. This is the case of the special section devoted to Patočka in our fourth issue, or the one devoted to the relationship between Merleau-Ponty and Simondon in our seventh issue. Later, we tried to stress the idea suggested by the word "*autour*" appearing in the French subtitle of the journal. Thus, in our eleventh issue we began to occasionally publish a section titled "Around Merleau-Ponty," in order to invite our possible contributors to explore the "surroundings" of Merleau-Ponty's thought and not only Merleau-Ponty's thought as such.

Through this evolution, the journal slowly became an unavoidable point of reference for Merleau-Ponty scholars in all the world, the place where they publish their articles in order to be read by the other Merleau-Ponty scholars across the world. The result is that we receive more and more proposals for publishing not only submitted papers, but also entire sets of conference contributions, for instance. Consequently, this has obliged us to manage a system of double-blind peer-reviewing in order to evaluate all these proposals.

JCK: *What was the underlying thought behind opening the journal up not only for contributions strictly devoted to Merleau-Ponty's thought but a broader Merleau-Pontian "surroundings"?*

MC: The reason why I think that it is very important to enlarge our focus is actually very Merleau-Pontian. Merleau-Ponty was a philosopher who was very interested in fields different from that of philosophy: what he called "non-philosophy" evoked in the title of his last course. He theorized, practiced and taught a way of conceiving philosophy not only as a field expected to

interrogate other domains of human experience and culture, but also a field *to be interrogated* by these domains. I think that to be opened to the continuous cross-pollination with such domains makes a philosopher vital. And a philosophy journal too.

JCK: Almost a chiasm with other fields.

MC: It's better in the plural: chiasms, that is *Chiasmi*.