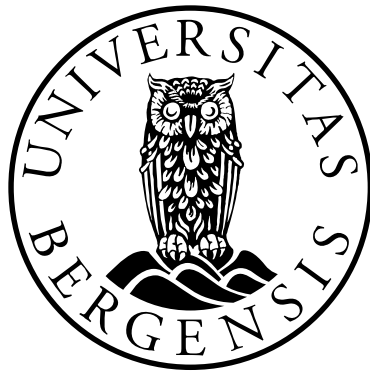


The Labour of the Feminine in Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature

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Abstract

In this thesis I look at the relation between two salient aspects of the work of the French 20th century philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty: on the one hand, the philosophical concern with and approach to the problem of nature running through both his early and late texts; on the other hand, his tendency to sexualize and particularly feminize the terms with which he approaches this problem. The hypothesis I defend is that the relation between these two aspects of Merleau-Ponty's work is not an external relation consisting in an accidental co-variation, but is rather an internal relation. I consider the relation internal in the sense that the role played by sexual and feminine motifs on the non-thematic level of his texts dealing with the problem of nature is a genuinely philosophical role, hence that the operation of these motifs cannot be altogether abstracted from the specific outlook of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical approach to this problem or nexus of problems.

The guiding clue for my exposition, in the first part of the thesis, of the problem of nature as defined by Merleau-Ponty is the triangular nexus of issues consisting of the alterity, immemoriality and generativity of nature respectively. I focus on how the concern with nature as an "other" and as an immemorial "past that has never been present" determines Merleau-Ponty's approach to the problem on the descriptive or phenomenological level, while the concern with nature as generative or productive characterizes the ontological level of that approach. In connection with the latter the published notes from his lectures on the concept of Nature held at the Collège de France during the latter half of the Fifties and his discourse on the flesh as we find it in the manuscripts for *The Visible and the Invisible* are of key importance.

In the second half of the thesis, I provide analyses of how Merleau-Ponty's approach to the alterity, immemoriality and generativity of nature respectively can be seen in connection with the implicit or explicit presence of sexual and particularly feminine motifs in the texts. I try to show, first, how his phenomenological description of natural alterity implicates a connotation of the fantasy of woman as the seductive yet inaccessible object of male desire, partly by pointing to how Merleau-Ponty's descriptions resound with similar approaches in Levinas and Nietzsche, both of whom explicitly associate woman with alterity and truth/nature respectively. Second, I look into the way maternal motifs of fecundity, pregnancy and birth are engaged in Merleau-Ponty's approach to nature as an immemorial

past. Third, largely drawing on Luce Irigaray's reading of Merleau-Ponty in her book *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, I provide an investigation of the logic of generation involved at the level of motif in Merleau-Ponty's attempt to mount an account of the emergence of the (human) subject from natural being or "the flesh" on anti-realist grounds. I argue that what Irigaray explicates as the presence in Merleau-Ponty's text of a "most radical struggle with the maternal" must be seen in connection with the implication of a variant of absolute idealism in his discourse on the flesh and in the philosophy of nature correlative to it.

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List of Abbreviations

I have adopted the convention of referring to primary sources by abbreviations set in parentheses in the main text, reserving footnotes for secondary literature. In referring to both original and translated editions of the primary sources, I first give the page number of the original, followed by the page number of the translation. When citing these sources, I generally use translations when available, occasionally modifying them if needed. The abbreviations I have used for the primary sources are as follows (full bibliographical information is given at the end of the thesis):

Works by Merleau-Ponty

| | |
|------|---|
| CD | <i>Cézanne's Doubt</i> |
| EP | <i>Éloge de la philosophie/In Praise of Philosophy</i> |
| HLP | <i>Husserl at The Limits of Phenomenology</i> |
| IL | <i>Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence</i> |
| N | <i>La nature: Notes, cours du Collège de France/Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France</i> |
| NdC | <i>Notes de cours au Collège de France, 1958-1959 et 1960-1961</i> |
| OE | <i>L'oeil et l'esprit/Eye and Mind</i> |
| PD | <i>Parcours deux, 1951-1961</i> |
| PhP | <i>Phénoménologie de la perception/Phenomenology of Perception</i> |
| PM | <i>La prose du monde/The Prose of the World</i> |
| PNP | <i>Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Hegel</i> |
| PP | <i>Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis: Preface to Hesnard's L'Oeuvre de Freud</i> |
| PriP | <i>Le primat de la perception et ses conséquences philosophiques/The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences</i> |
| RC | <i>Résumés de cours: Collège de France, 1952-1960/Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France, 1952-1960</i> |
| S | <i>Signes/Signs</i> |
| SC | <i>La structure du comportement/The Structure of Behavior</i> |
| SNS | <i>Sens et non-sens/Sense and Non-Sense</i> |

| | |
|----|--|
| TD | <i>Texts and Dialogues</i> |
| UT | <i>An Unpublished Text by Merleau-Ponty</i> |
| VI | <i>Le visible et l'invisible/The Visible and the Invisible</i> |
| WP | <i>The World of Perception</i> |

Introduction

Over the last couple of decades or so, the works of 20th century French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) have gained in currency as a source of philosophical and theoretical inspiration in several fields of research and thought. This seems to be particularly the case in the three fields of feminist philosophy, environmental philosophy and (analytical) philosophy of mind and of cognitive science respectively. What accounts for the appeal of Merleau-Ponty's thought for researchers in all three fields is arguably the promise it holds for a subversion of many of the dichotomies that have traditionally structured our ways of conceiving of the situation of human being in the natural and social world. Environmental philosophers may look to Merleau-Ponty for a non-dualist re-thinking of humanity's relation to its non-human environment, while both feminist philosophers and proponents of an embodied cognitive science and philosophy of mind may be attracted by Merleau-Ponty's unique sensitivity to the irreducibly embodied infrastructure of human subjectivity. In all cases, one might say that what is at issue in current appropriations of Merleau-Ponty in these scholarly fields is the need to reconceptualize nature and our relation and belongingness to it short of traditional dichotomies and reductionisms. At the same time, however, Merleau-Ponty's work also lays at the door of feminist philosophy in particular the task of making sense of his conspicuous and sometimes troubling tendency to deploy sexualized and especially feminized terms and motifs in the elaboration of his otherwise promising concepts and insights with regard to these pressing issues.

In this thesis I will look at the relation between these two salient aspects of the work of the French 20th century philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty: on the one hand, the philosophical concern with and approach to the problem of nature running through both his early and late texts; on the other hand, his tendency to sexualize and particularly feminize the terms with which he approaches this problem. The hypothesis I shall endeavour to defend is that the relation between these two aspects of Merleau-Ponty's work is not an external relation consisting in an accidental co-variation, but is rather an internal relation. I consider the relation internal in the sense that the role played by sexual and feminine motifs on the non-thematic level of his texts dealing with the problem of nature is a genuinely philosophical role, hence that the operation of these motifs cannot be altogether abstracted

from the specific outlook of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical approach to this problem or nexus of problems.

In this introductory chapter, I shall 1) further deepen and explicate the problematic to which the following chapters will apply themselves; 2) introduce and substantiate the selection of primary texts that will form the basis of the analyses to be undertaken; 3) review the scholarly situation and traditions relating to the issues addressed in this project; 4) briefly discuss central methodological priorities; and 5) offer a brief outline of the thesis.

Problems

Philosophy of Nature: The founding gesture of the present thesis, the one that opens the space within which all the following analyses proceed, is the decision to focus on those aspects of Merleau-Ponty's thought that may make it crystallize as a philosophy of nature. My decision to consider Merleau-Ponty's thought as a philosophy of nature does not mean that it is a matter of integrating Merleau-Ponty's thought in the line of thinkers who could be said to make up the tradition of modern philosophy of nature. Indeed, the very term "philosophy of nature" did not seem palatable to Merleau-Ponty himself. This is because it signalled to him either the realist or naturalist notion that all the rest – spirit, history or consciousness – is enveloped in and can be reduced to nature, or the notion that one could oppose a philosophy of nature to a philosophy of spirit, of history or of consciousness: "[We do not seek a] philosophy of Nature as referring to a separate power of being, in which we would envelop the rest, or that at least we would posit separately, against the philosophy of Spirit or of History or of consciousness" (N 265/204).

When I have nevertheless chosen to consider Merleau-Ponty's thought as, at least in part, a philosophy of nature, it is out of an overall impression that the topic of nature constitutes, in both early and late texts, a concern that reverberates in, and infiltrates, his approach to a host of other topics making up his horizon of problems. These include the problems of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, temporality, history, institution, expression, language and the very problem of philosophy itself. I just used the metaphors of reverberation or infiltration to describe the relation between the issue of nature and other salient issues dealt with by Merleau-Ponty. Yet Merleau-Ponty himself expresses a similar thought by suggesting that there is a relation of concentricity between the different problems dealt with in philosophy, hence that philosophical problems distribute themselves like rings in water: "Problems cannot be divided into dominant and subordinate ones, for all problems

are concentric” (PhP 472/433); “The theme of nature is not a numerically distinct theme. – There is a unique theme of philosophy: the *nexus*, the vinculum “Nature” – “Man” – “God”...the problems of philosophy are concentric” (N 265/204); “No problems of priority: All is concentric” (N 349/281). When all problems are concentric, or inserted in a nexus, one cannot pose one problem and without simultaneously raising other problems apparently extraneous to it. In Merleau-Ponty’s division of philosophical labour, apparently, there is no such thing as a first philosophy.

No dominance or subordination among problems, then, according to Merleau-Ponty. Yet, in so far as “the ontology of Nature” shows “the way toward ontology”, and “the concept of Nature is always the expression of an ontology – and its privileged expression” (N 265/204), and ontology was indeed the path on which he believed his thought had entered by the late Fifties (cf. VI 217/165, 219/167, 230-231/179, 234/183), then the very problem of nature claims a certain privilege. The decision to enter his work by way of the problem of nature as a privileged problem is thus invited by Merleau-Ponty’s own statements. For the moment, however, I would like to attend more closely to what, more precisely, seems to be at issue for Merleau-Ponty in his philosophy of nature, i.e., what for him makes of nature a problem to be addressed philosophically. Indeed, the task of retracing these issues across Merleau-Ponty’s work will itself require a meticulous textual work that will constitute a considerable portion of this thesis. By way of a first introduction of what these issues amount to, however, let me quote and comment on the opening paragraph of the published notes for the second course on the concept of nature that Merleau-Ponty held at Collège de France in the academic year of 1957-1958:

The concept of Nature does not evoke only the residue of what had not been constructed by me, but also a productivity which is not ours, although we can use it – that is, an originary productivity that continues [to operate] beneath the artificial creations of man. It both partakes of the most ancient, and is something always new. Nature is, as Lucien Herr said in his article dedicated to Hegel in *La grande encyclopédie*, an untamed thing: “Nature is there from the first day”. Due to the fact that it endures, Nature is not exhausted or used up (*La Nature ne s’use pas du fait qu’elle dure*). (...) But what does philosophy make of this experience of the natural? (N 169/125, translation modified).

On the basis of this passage, it is possible to highlight three items that together make up the horizon of issues – or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, the “experience” – that Merleau-Ponty throughout his works confront under the sign of “the natural”.

First, nature is experienced as “what had not been constructed by me”, as “that which is not ours”, as the excess beneath or beyond “the artificial creations of man”. In the

introduction to the first *Nature* course from the year before, Merleau-Ponty makes the same point by suggesting that nature, while surely different from a “simple thing”, is also “different from man: it is not instituted by him and is opposed to custom, to discourse” (N 19-20/3). In all these “nots”, and especially in the specification that nature is “different from man”, even opposed – ultimately – to the crafty, industrial, social and discursive lives of man, the first issue to be confronted in relation to the problem of nature can be discerned: it is the issue of *alterity*. Hence, for Merleau-Ponty, if philosophy is to apply itself to the “experience of the natural”, it must first of all confront and try to make sense of this experienced coefficient of alterity in the natural.

Second, Merleau-Ponty says that nature “partakes of the most ancient”, it is “there from the first day”. This being “there from the first day”, or “the pre-existence of natural being, always already there”, Merleau-Ponty suggests, is nothing short of “the proper concern of the philosophy of nature” (RC 111/147). Partaking of the most ancient, and having always already irrupted at the dawn of the “first day”, being always already there, natural being retains within its depths or keeps the trace of a past beyond all memory, an *immemorial* past, an immemoriality by which, Merleau-Ponty claims, reflexive thought finds itself disoriented: “Reflexive thought is disoriented by this implication of the immemorial in the present, the appeal from the past to the most recent present” (RC 94/133). In the *Nature* lectures as well as in the working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible*, we see Merleau-Ponty seeking to give expression to this immemoriality of nature in terms that are partly Schellingian and partly Bergsonian, such as when he refers to nature as “[t]his *Erste Natur* [that] is the most ancient element”, as an “abyss of the past’, which always remains present in us and in all things” (N 61-62/38), as the “[e]xistential eternity. The indestructible, the barbaric Principle” (VI 315/267; cf. S 290/178). In a working note to *The Visible and the Invisible* dealing more explicitly with the problem of temporality than with the problem of nature, Merleau-Ponty proposes to overcome “the common idea of time as a ‘series of *Erlebnisse*’” in terms of “[t]he Freudian idea of the unconscious and the past as ‘indestructible’, as ‘intemporal’”, by means of the idea of a past “belong[ing] to a mythical time, to the time before time, to the prior life”, a “vertical” past, “the past as massive Being” (VI 291-292/243-244). However, as is well known, this re-thinking of nature as the depository and ongoing accumulation of a strangely indestructible and intemporal past was already prefigured in *Phenomenology of Perception*, where Merleau-Ponty had famously spoken of “the absolute past of nature” (PhP 171/139), of “an original past, a past that has never been present” (PhP 289/252). And so it

would seem that Merleau-Ponty was already in that early work attending to what he would later, as we have seen, identify as the proper concern of the philosophy of nature, namely, the confrontation with the pre-existence of natural being, its contraction within itself of a past that has never been present, yet which continues to have its effects and is implied in or folded into each present.

Paradoxically, then, the task for a philosophy of nature such as Merleau-Ponty conceives of it is to recall, recuperate that which is, by definition, forgotten, that which by default has passed out of all memory, yet accompanies all present perception, remembrance, thought and action as their own constitutively forgotten past or prehistory. That nature is thus, in our experience, characterized by such a fundamental immemoriality would seem to account for Merleau-Ponty's penchant for characterizing the mode of inquiry appropriate to such an experience as an "archaeology": "[W]e must rediscover the structure of the perceived world through a process similar to that of an archaeologist" (PD 40/UT 285).¹ To the extent that the procedure proper to archaeological research on prehistoric civilizations can tell us something about the approach to be followed by a philosophy of nature true to our experience of the natural, it will be the sense in which the activity proper to the archaeologist is a reading of signs or of traces whose true referents are irrevocably lost, inaccessible for a direct encounter in full presence. However, whereas the immemoriality that protects the genuine truth of prehistoric civilizations from our unrestricted possession of it is caused by us not having *in fact* conclusive evidence for our assumptions with regard to them, Merleau-Ponty wants to suggest that the immemoriality of nature is to be accorded it *by right*. This point is precisely where Merleau-Ponty sees a convergence between his own project for a philosophy of nature and the investigation of the unconscious carried out by psychoanalysis, which Freud, as is well known (not least to Merleau-Ponty, cf. PD 282/PP 71; NdC 389), often conceived of in terms of an archaeology.² Whence Merleau-Ponty's characterization, in

¹ See also S 268/165; N 335, 340/268, 273; HLP 67, 85 n 109; PD 228 n. 68; PD 282/PP 71; and PD 312/TD 142 for other, often slightly more obscure, occurrences of the term "archeology" in Merleau-Ponty's work. For more on the motif of archaeology in Merleau-Ponty, see Gary Brent Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981), pp. 138-139, 192-193; Burkhard Liebsch, "Archaeological Questioning: Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur," in *Merleau-Ponty in Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Patrick Burke and Jan Van der Veken (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993); and Leonard Lawlor, *Thinking Through French Philosophy: The being of the Question*, Studies in Continental thought (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), pp. 24-46. The little I have further to say on this topic is largely based on my reading of these sources.

² See Lawlor, *Thinking Through French Philosophy: The being of the Question*, pp. 26-28 for an instructive reconstruction of the itinerary of Freud's concern with the motif of archaeology as the methodological (and, indeed, ontological) template for psychoanalytic theory and practice. Of course, as neither Liebsch nor Lawlor fail to point out, Merleau-Ponty's recourse to the motif of archaeology in his late works probably owes a debt not only to Freudian psychoanalysis, but also to Husserlian phenomenology, and especially to its exposition by Eugen Fink, Husserl's assistant (cf. Liebsch,

a working note to *The Visible and the Invisible*, of his own project as a “Psychoanalysis of Nature” (VI 315/267).

While I have separated – and will continue to separate, for the sake of exposition – the issue of alterity from the issue of immemoriality as pertaining to the problem of nature as conceived by Merleau-Ponty, this is for Merleau-Ponty more an analytical distinction than an adequate rendering of our experience of nature. In a highly suggestive passage from *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty anticipates what may come of an unprejudiced interrogation of experience, in terms that suggest to us the solidarity of the aspect of alterity with the immemorial aspect of nature:

We are interrogating our experience precisely in order to know how it opens us to what is not ourselves. *This does not even exclude the possibility that we find in our experience a movement toward what could not in any event be present to us in the original (en original) and whose irremediable absence would thus count among our originating experiences (experiences originaires) (VI 209/159; emphasis in the original).*

That which is not ourselves, that which is other than ourselves and onto which our experience opens us, would seem to acquire its coefficient of alterity partly on account of the impossibility of our gaining access to it in the *present*. In so far as we are here concerned with an absence that guards the secret of what is “original” or “originating” with respect to our experience, we should no doubt think of this absence both – inseparably – in the spatial sense of an insurmountable exteriority with respect to the interiority that we are as experiencing subjects (hence in the sense of alterity) *and* in the temporal sense of an insurmountable anteriority with respect to the presence of the present in which find ourselves at any time (hence in the sense of immemoriality). We shall see in due course, however, that Merleau-Ponty makes it difficult for us to rest content with the notion that that in nature which is “not ourselves” is simply external to us.

The third issue that comes to the fore in Merleau-Ponty’s introduction to the second course on the concept of nature is what I shall be referring to as the issue of generativity. Not only does nature partake of the most ancient, it also, says Merleau-Ponty, has a share in the new. To be sure, for Merleau-Ponty, nature’s participation in what is most different from man, and in what is most ancient or immemorial, imbues it – in our experience of it – with an irrecusable sense of eternity (N 20/4), solidity (N 20/4), weight (N 77, 78, 180/50, 51, 134; VI 162/123), inertia (N 78, 90, 252/51, 61, 193), even with permanence (N 158/116).

“Archaeological Questioning: Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur”, pp. 16-17; Lawlor, *Thinking Through French Philosophy: The*

Yet, for Merleau-Ponty, to speak of nature in such terms is not so much to sign in on those conceptions that would like nature to be a static, law-regulated system in which, ultimately, nothing happens but endless repetitions of the same mechanisms. Rather, for him, it is to give heed to the sense of nature as an enduring, inexhaustible reserve of productivity, or as he puts it, an “originary productivity”. Permanence, weight and inertia are not at odds with, but rather consonant with a view of nature as a productive process. In our experience of the natural, continuity and novelty, permanence and change, eternity and time are inseparable. Nature is a perpetual beginning for which no beginning can be assigned: “Nature is something that continues, that is never grasped in its beginnings, although appearing always new to us” (N 160/118). Again, as he puts it in a working note of November 1960, “for me it is no longer a question of origins, nor limits, nor of a series of events going to a first cause, but one sole explosion of Being which is forever” (VI 313/265). However, as I will try to show in the course of the present thesis, the greatest challenge facing Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to understand nature as an originary productivity is to understand how human subjectivity emerges from this productivity, even as it constitutively opens out on it. In other words, the most ultimate question facing Merleau-Ponty would be the question as to how to account for both how human subjectivity constitutes the opening thanks to which nature may manifest itself and, basing ourselves in this opening, also account for how this opening emerges from within nature itself. That he entertained an ambition to take on this challenge is clear already from *Phenomenology of Perception*, where he wrote: “[W]hat is given is experience, or in other words the communication of a finite subject with an opaque being from which the subject emerges, but also in which the subject remains engaged” (PhP 264/228).

From what has been seen thus far, it can be intimated that the issues of alterity, immemoriality and generativity are at the core of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical concern with the problem of nature. However, in order to provide the necessary justification for and further clarification of these guiding assumptions concerning Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature, a considerable portion of the present dissertation will be devoted to the task of retracing the place and importance of these issues across Merleau-Ponty’s works.



The Labour of the feminine: The notion that alterity, immemoriality and generativity were issues that greatly preoccupied Merleau-Ponty (and particularly in his approach to nature) is far from being without anticipations in the commentaries, as I shall attend to shortly. I will venture, however, that the way in which and the extent to which motifs connoting and invoking femininity can be said to inform his approach to these issues has so far remained at best – yet again not without exceptions – a marginal concern among the great majority of his readers. Yet his texts must be seen to invite precisely such an approach, as I shall now only briefly indicate.

The first indication I shall point to that the feminine may be at work in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature is just as explicit as it is famous, and it occurs in the very same working note to *The Visible and the Invisible* I quoted from above where Merleau-Ponty projects a "psychoanalysis of Nature". On the very same line, continuing it, we read: "it's the flesh, the mother" (VI 315/267). Thus, in Merleau-Ponty, nature appears along with femininity *qua* maternity and what he notoriously calls "the flesh" (*la chair*) in an extricable, most classical, most typical and topical nexus ("Mother Nature") that would make each of the terms but a variant of the others. This is clearly not only because the French word for "flesh", *chair*, rhymes with the one for "mother", *mère*. While Merleau-Ponty's peculiar and at times (to me, at least) virtually impenetrable discourse on the flesh will be of great concern in several of the chapters to follow, I might at present point to some further indications that Merleau-Ponty's text draws this term into the most classical nexus of nature and maternity. On the one hand, it is clear that the term "flesh" signifies for Merleau-Ponty a source of generativity of metaphysical proportions, in so far as he on one occasion characterizes it as the "formative medium of the object and the subject" (VI 191/147). In its aspect of being a "formative medium", the flesh converges with nature considered as an "originary productivity". We shall see in due course how difficult – yet necessary – it is for Merleau-Ponty to arrive at such a medium that would render (human) subjectivity derivative and dependent upon something more fundamental than it (given the ambiguous position assumed by subjectivity in all of his works, as we shall see in chapters 3 and 6 in particular).

For the moment, let us recall, second, that Merleau-Ponty also characterizes the flesh, in the famous fourth chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, as an "interiorly worked-over mass" (*masse intérieurement travaillée*) (VI 191/147). As is well known, in a lecture delivered on the subject matter of Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh on occasion of the 1987 annual meeting of the Merleau-Ponty Circle, Claude Lefort – Merleau-Ponty's student,

colleague and posthumous editor – reminded his audience that “this word *travaillée* has a singular connotation in French, for it is employed to indicate the moment when the mother is about to be delivered”.³ Moreover, in the very same chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible* in which Merleau-Ponty uses this term to characterize the flesh, he also repeatedly refers to embryogenesis in his characterization of the flesh, as can be seen, for instance, in this passage: “[I]n our flesh as in the flesh of things, the actual, empirical, ontic visible [exhibits], by a sort of folding back, *invagination* or padding, a visibility, a possibility that is not the shadow of the actual but is its principle” (VI 197/152, my emphasis; cf. VI 191/147). Whatever it is that germinates and develops in the heart of what Merleau-Ponty calls the flesh, it is clear that its situation there and the type of generative conditions it is submitted to was comparable in his eyes to the situation of an embryo in the maternal womb. It is probably – or so I want to argue – in the context of this comparison, furthermore, that we should read Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of the flesh (more precisely, the flesh of the world), in a working note of May 1960, as “a *pregnancy (prégnance)* of possibles, *Weltmöglichkeit*...absolutely not an object...the *blosse Sache* mode of being is but a partial and second expression of it” (VI 298-299/250). To be sure, it will require quite a bit of textual work to substantiate definitely an association of Merleau-Ponty’s use of *prégnance* with pregnancy in the obstetrical sense since, of course, the word for pregnancy in French is not *prégnance* but *grossesse*, the corresponding word for the state of pregnancy being not *prégnant(e)* but *enceinte*.⁴ What can at least be ascertained is that the terms *prégnance* and *prégnant(e)* have enjoyed a glorious career as part of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical lexicon in virtually all of his works, particularly, as we shall see, as a way to evoke the dimensions of immemoriality and generativity pertaining to nature. In any case, let the preceding remarks suffice for now to suggest that the feminine, in terms of maternity, can seem to be at work in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature (in so far as this philosophy is connected with his discourse on the flesh), and that it invites an analysis of what kind of work, more precisely, it does there.

³ Claude Lefort, “Flesh and Otherness,” in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1990), p. 5.

⁴ I was reminded of this during a conversation, on the occasion of a conference devoted to Merleau-Ponty’s work in Dublin 2011, with a native French speaker (who also happened to be a former student of Derrida). As I presented to him the line of my argument concerning the labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, he seemed at first baffled at my suggestion that the French term *prégnance* could possibly have anything to do with maternity. I will return to this issue in great detail in chapter 5.

Apart from Merleau-Ponty's figuration of nature in terms of the fecund and life-giving powers of maternity, we find in his works another – yet no doubt related – most classical, most typical and topical feminizing characterization of nature as *hidden*, as that which by definition remains draped in veils, in discretion, secrecy and mystery. As he puts it in his late essay on Husserl, the true business of philosophy is not “a project to gain intellectual possession of the world”, but rather that of “unveiling (*dévoiler*) a back side (*un envers*) of things that we have not constituted” (S 293/180). Yet, as he puts it in the third chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, the urge to unveil the back side, underside or hidden side of things, of nature, must also be checked by a respect for the hiddenness, dissimulation or reticence that goes into the very definition of nature as such: “if Being is hidden, this is itself a characteristic of Being and no disclosure will make us comprehend it” (VI 160/122). A similar thought is expressed in a working note of May 1960: “[Being] is *Verborgenheit* by principle” (VI 300/251).⁵ Apparently, then, for Merleau-Ponty, if philosophy is to gain access to the truth about nature, if it is to appropriately unveil a hidden side of things that we have not constituted (and which would therefore be the natural – in the sense of non-constituted – side of things), it must learn something from the domain of vision about the wondrous effects produced by the operation of the veil in all visibility: “How does it happen that my look, enveloping [the things], does not hide them, and, finally, that, veiling them, it unveils them?” (VI 171/131)

In the course of this thesis, I shall make the bold claim that, although Merleau-Ponty never explicitly mentions it – except once, but then on the pretext of quoting Nietzsche – the operation of the veil and the stubborn hiddenness of nature it betokens in his texts present us with the implicit motif of woman as the sublime object of a masculine project of sexual

⁵ Of course, the occurrence of the German term *Verborgenheit* here makes it virtually impossible not to think of Heidegger's *Seinsdenken*, expressed, for example, in the essay “Aletheia” (cf. Martin Heidegger, *Early Greek Thinking: The Dawn of Western Philosophy*, trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975), pp. 102-123), devoted to Heraclitus, and in which we find a commentary on the latter's fragment 123, φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ, commonly translated as “Nature loves to hide”. This as, as might be expected, not Heidegger's translation, who rather proposes the following: “Whether the translation ‘the essence of things likes to hide’ even remotely points toward the realm of Heraclitean thinking will not be further discussed here. Perhaps we should not attribute such a commonplace to Heraclitus, even apart from the fact that an ‘essence of things’ first became a matter for thought after Plato. We must heed something else: φύσις and κρύπτεσθαι, rising (self-revealing) and concealing, are named in their closest proximity. (...) Heraclitus is thinking both in closest proximity. Indeed their nearness is explicitly mentioned. Nearness is defined by. Self-revealing loves self-concealing. What is this supposed to mean?” (Heidegger, *Early Greek Thinking: The Dawn of Western Philosophy*, p. 113). However, as Pierre Hadot remarks in his *The Veil of Isis*, although the formula “Nature loves to hide” is in all likelihood a gross misunderstanding of Heraclitus' concatenation of the three Greek words, it is nevertheless in terms of this misunderstanding that this aphorism was passed on to subsequent generations of thinkers as it was cited for the first time in Greek literature some five hundred years after its authorial utterance (Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis : An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 17).

conquest. Moreover, I shall claim that the latent, unspoken presence of this image accounts for much of the force, appeal and possibly also limitations to his approach to the alterity of nature. Besides a basis in by now well-known feminist analyses of the function of the veiled figure of woman in the history of Western thought on nature in general and in the more recent history of French “difference philosophy” specifically, my own analysis of this nexus in Merleau-Ponty will require a meticulous retracing of the operative connections in and across his texts of the motifs of alterity, (sexual) desire, seduction, resistance and veils, to which I have devoted chapter 4 in the present thesis.

Texts

Before proceeding to look at the situation in Merleau-Ponty readership with regard to the problems outlined above, I shall remark briefly on the selection of texts from Merleau-Ponty’s *oeuvre* that form the basis of my approach to these problems.

The most central texts to which any interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature is referred are as follows. Given that my concern is to investigate the philosophical function of feminine motifs in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature, the texts most immediately relevant to focus on will be those in which the problem of nature is at issue and which at the same exhibit that stylistic exuberance through which feminine motifs are written into the approach to that problem. It seems to me that *Phenomenology of Perception* (PhP), the notes and résumés for the *Nature* (N) courses, and *The Visible and the Invisible* (VI) are those texts that most amply display these two qualities, although this will also be part of what, in due course, I will have to show by way of exposition of them. *Phenomenology of Perception* (originally published in 1945 as Merleau-Ponty’s second doctoral dissertation), it is true, is not explicitly presented as a work in the field or tradition of philosophy of nature; rather, it could be considered as an attempt to develop a comprehensive theory of the human condition in the interstices of the *Gestalt* school in the psychology of perception and holistic approaches to neurophysiology and psychiatry, filtered through classical (Husserlian) transcendental-phenomenological philosophy and existential philosophy. Yet the question of nature is very much on the horizon of Merleau-Ponty’s endeavour to think about the human condition in this work, especially in so far as he there emphasizes to such an extent our anchorage in a natural and social milieu through the perceptual facility of the living body as the pre-personal infrastructure of human subjectivity. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, all

three issues pertaining to the problem of nature as defined by Merleau-Ponty are in play to varying degrees, as are several of the feminine motifs also mentioned above.

Besides *Phenomenology of Perception*, the material we have – notes and résumés – from the courses Merleau-Ponty gave on the concept of nature at the Collège de France during the Fifties, and not least the manuscripts, fragments and working notes posthumously edited and published by Claude Lefort under the title *The Visible and the Invisible* (VI), will be of central importance especially with regard to the issue of the generativity of nature. Indeed, the very structure composed by the three courses on the concept of *Nature* (N) would seem to indicate a generative progression: from physical nature (which occupies larger portions of the 1956-1957 course), via animality (1957-1958), to the distinctively human manner of being a body (1959-1969). In *The Visible and the Invisible*, comprising material Merleau-Ponty had been working on since around 1959, some of which we may assume he intended to revise for inclusion in a momentous work he was preparing on ontology, we find Merleau-Ponty's discourse on "the flesh", which will take pride of place in my reading of Merleau-Ponty's approach to the issue of the generativity of nature. Moreover, both in the courses and in *The Visible and the Invisible* especially (as I have already pointed to), we find the feminine textually at work in the production of Merleau-Ponty's vision of the generativity of nature. Finally, as already indicated, *The Visible and the Invisible* also offers a meditation on the operation of the veil as mediator between the visible and the invisible that, I shall claim, also assumes a certain feminine character.

In addition to the material already mentioned, his writings on the visual arts, particularly "Cézanne's Doubt" (SNS/CD), "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" (S/IL) and "Eye and Mind" (OE) also contain relevant reflections on the problems facing a philosophy of nature such as Merleau-Ponty conceives of it. Furthermore, his late essay on Husserl, "The Philosophy and His Shadow", included in *Signs* (S), and which I already have had the occasion to quote from, can be said to present the outlook of Merleau-Ponty's mature approach to the problem of nature in condensed form, especially as concerns the status of phenomenological method in relation to it. Apart from the texts mentioned here, I will also draw on other texts, lectures and course notes where it suits the development of my expositions and discussions.

Readers familiar with *The Structure of Behaviour* (SC) (Merleau-Ponty's first doctoral dissertation, completed in 1938 but not published until 1942) may wonder why this work receives as little attention in the present study as it does, and some remarks in explanation of

this marginal status might be in order. Let it first be admitted that *The Structure of Behaviour* must, unquestionably, be ranked among Merleau-Ponty's contributions to philosophy of nature. In it, he launches a critique of the atomist and mechanist reflexology dominating the science of behaviour of his day, largely in terms of the holistic perspectives advanced by the *Gestalt* school in German experimental psychology. In a critical appropriation of *Gestalt* theory, he also develops a conception of the system of nature as a recursive nesting of ever more complexly integrated "forms" or "structures", where Merleau-Ponty understands the term "structure", following the Gestaltists, in the functional sense of an interdependence of parts within a whole that for its part is nothing but the integration of its parts, or the norm assigning the equilibrium toward which the forces in interaction among its parts are attracted.⁶ Yet, although *The Structure of Behaviour* does indeed present a full-fledged naturephilosophical statement, the work will remain for the most part in the background of the present thesis, and there are several reasons for this.

The first reason is that the problem of nature is approached in this work within an acknowledged presupposition that he would address much more elaborately in all his later works dealing with the problem of nature, beginning with *Phenomenology of Perception*, and this presupposition is a position taken with respect to the ontological status of the structure or *Gestalt*. Merleau-Ponty persistently refuses the realism and naturalism involved in the *Gestalt* theorists' attribution of a real existence to the structures they describe. More precisely, he refuses their habit of reducing psychological organization – such as the figure-background structure always operative in the perceptual field – to the status of a mere causal outcome of an isomorphic structuration already realized on the physiological level, having in

⁶ In the book's third chapter, Merleau-Ponty speaks of the physical domain of inorganic matter as a structure or an ensemble of structures, for which the typical example would be the spontaneous distribution of forces responsible for the formation and sustaining of a soap bubble. However, whereas structures in the physical domain are given through "an equilibrium with respect to certain given external conditions" (SC 157/145), vital structures – which are the recapitulation of physical structure on the level of an organism – are polarized by the norms that are set *a priori* by the mode of functioning proper to the organism. On the level of life, then, structure is established in the interaction between the *a priori* norms of activity and perception imposed by the organism, in terms of which it meets the stimuli from the environment, and the contingently given conditions and restrictions set by the environment in which it projects its activity. While the organism remains, at least to a considerable degree, confined to the norm of activity that defines the species to which it belongs, the structure of mind – being a recursive recapitulation of physical and vital structures – has as its distinguishing feature the status as the structure of structures. This is to say that mind, unlike life, is not consigned to consider its environment from a fixed manner of projecting it, but is rather the opening onto the world as the environment of all possible environments: for a human agent, unlike an animal, a branch adopted as a tool for the manipulation of some other object can still be considered under its aspect as a branch taken from a certain tree etc. Mind is the foregrounding of the transposition of structure from matter to life, and this is what for Merleau-Ponty defines the symbolic function in virtue of which an orientation to the virtual is afforded, just as it is what constitutes the capacity for the crafting of tools (SC 190/175).

its turn its causal counterpart in the physical domain.⁷ Instead, he insists that, “far from the ‘physical form’ being able to be the real foundation of the structure of behaviour and in particular of its perceptual structure, it is itself conceivable only as an object of perception” (SC 156/144). Thus his approach in *The Structure of Behaviour* comes to be premised on the point of view of an “outside spectator” whose imbrication in nature as the system of recursively nested structures remains uncertain, since every attempt to reintegrate it into nature conceived as such a system will refer back to this spectator as the one *for whom* this system can be said to exist in the first place.⁸

It is true that, toward the conclusion of *The Structure of Behaviour*, Merleau-Ponty concedes that his proposed structural account of nature begs the question or “the problem of perception”, which he explains as consisting in the following antinomy (which he would later, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, refer to as the paradox of the “perceptual faith”):

It is true to say that my perception is always a flux of individual events and that what is radically contingent in the lived perspectivism of perception accounts for the realistic appearance. But it is also true to say that my perception accedes to things themselves, for these perspectives are articulated in a way which makes access to inter-individual significations possible; they “present” a world (SC 236/219).

However, it is only in *Phenomenology of Perception* that the problematic status of the perceiving subject with regard to nature begins to take centre stage. It is here subjected to an analysis not only with regard to how it can be said to accede to things themselves, but also with regard to how we may come to know the nature of this very subject, the nature we are as perceivers, and its place in the nature to which it grants us access. It seems to me that it is only with the reformulation of the problem of nature advanced in *Phenomenology of Perception* that the horizon of issues expounded on upon above – alterity, immemoriality and generativity – is truly opened. This, then, would be the first reason why I have extended to *The Structure of Behaviour* only a highly marginal role to play in the readings and analyses to be conducted in the present project.

⁷ See Wolfgang Köhler, *Gestalt Psychology: An Introduction to New Concepts in Modern Psychology* (New York: Liveright, 1947), p. 168: “As a matter of fact, a careful study of visual organization may sooner or later tell us quite specifically what physical processes distribute themselves in the visual cortex”. Kurt Koffka echoes this basic assumption, when he admits that, “in our *ultimate* explanations, we can have but *one* universe of discourse and that it must be the one about which physics has taught us so much”, for example, Kurt Koffka, *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1963), p. 48.

⁸ See, however, Ted Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2009) (especially chapter 1); and Ted Toadvine, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Lifeworldly Naturalism,” in *Husserl's Ideen*, ed. Lester Embree and Thomas Nenon (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013) for a lucid discussion of the enduring significance the accomplishments of *The Structure of Behaviour* had for the development of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical approach to the problem of nature.

The second reason why I have left *The Structure of Behaviour* virtually out of account in the present project is due to the fact that, compared with his later works, it doesn't exhibit that exuberance of style and poetic imagination that distinguishes other of his central works, such as *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*, but is, in a word, much "drier" in its rhetorical texture. This relative dryness of style also makes for far less to work on with regard to the labour of the feminine in the elaboration of his thought than is the case with other texts. And if my contention above can be granted concerning the relative muteness of the issues of alterity, immemoriality and generativity in *The Structure of Behaviour*, this would be symptomatic of the fact that, for Merleau-Ponty, it is precisely when the time has come to think through these issues that it would be convenient to entrust part of the philosophical labour to be invested in their reconquest to feminine motifs and imagery.

Traditions

The present project sets up a new assemblage of issues pertaining to Merleau-Ponty's thought. The assemblage is new, yet the issues taken singly or as forming part of smaller assemblages have already been the focus, to varying degrees, of scholarly attention. My own approach to Merleau-Ponty's work in the present thesis will therefore inevitably enter into relations of consonance and dissonance with different trends in the reception of Merleau-Ponty's work with regard to these issues. In what follows, I shall review the scholarly situation with regard to salient sites of convergence and deviation into which the present project is inscribed, so as to articulate the basic orientation and priorities that define my own approach.

The Scholarly Situation With Regard to the Place and Significance of Nature, Alterity, Immemoriality and Generativity in Merleau-Ponty

Alterity: Many authors who concern themselves with Merleau-Ponty's work from the point of view of an interest in the problem of nature also accord pride of place to the issue of alterity in this concern. This is particularly the case with the reception of Merleau-Ponty's work within the eco-phenomenological strand of environmental philosophy. There has emerged a controversy within this strand of Merleau-Ponty scholarship that bears on basic priorities in my own approach and which it will therefore be fitting to review here.

The stakes in the controversy with which I am concerned are typically expressed in the editors' introduction to the anthology *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*. In this introduction, the editor (Galen A. Johnson) distinguishes between two registers of Merleau-Ponty's thought in which alterity is at issue: his approach to inter-personal communication among humans on the one hand, and his approach to our relation to non-human nature on the other. Here is what he suggests:

In Merleau-Ponty's meditations on the alterity within selfhood and between self and other persons, the challenge was to frame an ontology of identity, communion, and solidarity that would not absorb and nullify the force of self-deception, divergence, difference and strangeness. If we turn to a consideration of the alterity of things and nature, the challenge seems to be reversed, to draw nature toward ourselves (or ourselves toward nature) and restore communion and solidarity where difference and alienation have been assumed.⁹

With regard to the question of our relation to non-human nature, according to Johnson, we are faced with the task of recovering a sense communion and solidarity that has been lost on us – presumably due to a history of technology-driven science that has produced a picture of nature altogether alien to human existence. On the other hand, it would seem that philosophical reflection on relations among human subjects faces the opposite challenge, namely, the challenge to give due acknowledgment of irreducible difference and alterity between self and other, because failure to do so entails a totalizing and imperialistic violence against the other.

What matters in all this, as far as I am here concerned, is not the validity of this judgment, but rather the role Merleau-Ponty is accorded in the eco-phenomenological project so defined. The author of the one eco-phenomenological contribution to the anthology just mentioned, Monika Langer, is convinced that “Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has much to offer in this endeavour”.¹⁰ In this connection, she finds particularly promising Merleau-Ponty's notion of “the paradoxical reversibility of self-sensing flesh that escapes all our categories, dissolves our dichotomies, and installs us beyond ourselves so that we are in kinship and participation with the whole world – and, through it, with Being”, in what she calls a “total contact’ of ‘embrace’ with the world”.¹¹ On this reading of Merleau-Ponty, then, Merleau-Ponty has much to offer environmental ethics because his philosophical

⁹ Galen A. Johnson, "Introduction: Alterity as a Reversibility," in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1990), pp. xxx-xxxii

¹⁰ Monika Langer, "Merleau-Ponty and Deep Ecology," *ibid.*, ed. Galen Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), p. 115.

¹¹ Langer, "Merleau-Ponty and Deep Ecology", p. 129.

perspective on the human-nature relation entails the rejection of a wrongly conceived natural alterity in favour of a sense of embrace with, and participation in, our non-human environment. Several other authors within the eco-phenomenological tradition, such as David Abram and Don Marietta Jr, have approached the relevance of Merleau-Ponty's work for environmental philosophy in terms of a similar emphasis on relations of participation, empathy, communication, and communion between humanity and non-nature that they claim to find in his work.¹² I might also mention in this connection that, in their recent book *Nature and Logos: a Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty's Fundamental Thought*, William S. Hamrick and Jan van der Veken express similar ambitions on behalf of Merleau-Ponty's relevance to environmental thought as the other cited contributions. This is apparent from their remark to the effect that a turn to the nature-logos nexus in Merleau-Ponty may further the development of "an ecological consciousness...an awareness that [people] are not disconnected from their environment", and may show that the "intercorporeal relations" as described by Merleau-Ponty "form a crucial part of our linkage with nature and provide a foundation for a broader than anthropocentric ethic".¹³

As we shall see in chapter 1, there is ample textual evidence to show that Merleau-Ponty often described the human-nature relation in the terms discussed by the authors just cited. However, as has been pointed out in particular by Ted Toadvine in a steady output of publications over the last decade,¹⁴ the dominant trend in eco-phenomenology has worked to

¹² David Abram anticipates, in his *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More than Human World* that "the new 'environmental ethic' toward which so many environmental philosophers aspire" will be forthcoming "through a rejuvenation of our carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land that sustains us" David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), p. 69. Such a rejuvenation is also what he claims to find in Merleau-Ponty's work (as well as in James Gibson's ecological approach to perception), namely, an understanding of "perception not as a cerebral event but as a direct and reciprocal interchange between the organism and its world", an understanding that, moreover, he thinks is "remarkably consonant with the Gaia hypothesis and the implication that perception itself is a communication or communion between an organism and the living biosphere" David Abram, "Perceptual Implications of Gaia," in *Dharma gaia: a Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1990), p. 85.

Don E. Marietta, Jr. argues along similar lines (although not with reference to the Gaia hypothesis), in his article "Back to Earth with Reflection and Ecology", that "[e]nvironmental ethics requires an ontological commitment", and declares that his path to such a commitment has passed through existential phenomenology, especially that of Merleau-Ponty" (cf. Don E. Marietta Jr., "Back to Earth with Reflection and Ecology," in *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, ed. Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 121). What, more precisely, Merleau-Ponty brings to environmental ethics, according to Marietta, is a sort of "concrete reflection" within which "a sharp division between self and environment is not present" Marietta Jr., "Back to Earth with Reflection and Ecology", p. 122.

¹³ William S. Hamrick and Jan Van der Veken, *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty's Fundamental Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), pp. 6-7.

¹⁴ See, for example, Ted Toadvine, "The Primacy of Desire and Its Ecological Consequences," in *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Charles S. Brown (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2003); Ted Toadvine, "Limits of the Flesh: the Role of Reflection in David Abram's Eco-Phenomenology," in *Interrogating Ethics: Embodying the Good in Merleau-Ponty*, ed. James Hatley, Janice McLane, and Christian Diehm (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006); Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*; Ted Toadvine,

produce a one-sided picture of Merleau-Ponty's approach to this issue. Most importantly, he claims, there is in Merleau-Ponty also a sense in which, for constitutive reasons, we encounter nature not only as a congenial other – that is, as an other with whom we empathize, sympathize, reciprocate, have communion etc. – but also, and on strictly phenomenological grounds, as a hostile other, “an alterity, an ‘absolute Other’”,¹⁵ an other who withdraws from the very intimacy or proximity in which it also engages us. In other words, on Toadvine's view, the standard appropriation of Merleau-Ponty's work in eco-phenomenology has tended to cover up the presence in his texts of a more primordial sense of nature's alterity or otherness, and which Toadvine typically refers to as the “resistance of nature”.¹⁶ Crucially, he claims, this resistant alterity of nature is at issue for Merleau-Ponty on both unreflective and reflective levels of experience: on the unreflective level, it occurs as nature's resistance to the perceptual grasp of the living body through which this nature is nevertheless given; on the reflective level, it occurs as the resistance on the part of our body's perceptual engagement with nature to being fully recuperated in language and thought.¹⁷

I am inclined to think that Toadvine's issue with the standard eco-phenomenological interpretation of Merleau-Ponty is justified, not because his approach may be eco-phenomenologically more promising, but because it is more sensitive to the range of tendencies at play in Merleau-Ponty's approach to the problem of nature and of our relation with it. Hence, in chapters 1 and 4, I am going to defend a largely Toadvinian approach to the issue of alterity in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature. However, in chapter 4 in particular, I shall also depart from Toadvine's path of interpretation in so far as I am going to raise a question that has so far not surfaced in his work, namely: What role does (the evocation of) a certain fantasy of feminine ineffability (as far as the masculine project of conquest is concerned) play in making Merleau-Ponty's approach to natural alterity a compelling approach, phenomenologically speaking?

Immemoriality: With regard to the issue of the immemorial “past that has never been present” in relation to Merleau-Ponty's concern with the problem of nature, Toadvine's work is also helpful, in so far as he suggests that, in Merleau-Ponty, the dimension of

"Ecophenomenology and the Resistance of Nature," in *Advancing Phenomenology: Essays in Honor of Lester Embree*, ed. T. Nenon and P. Blosser (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010).

¹⁵ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 71.

¹⁶ Cf. Toadvine, "Ecophenomenology and the Resistance of Nature", pp. 345-350.

¹⁷ Toadvine, "Ecophenomenology and the Resistance of Nature", pp. 350-352.

immemoriality parallels that of alterity on both reflective and unreflective levels of experience.¹⁸ However, he seems to equivocate somewhat on this issue, occasionally provoking doubts as to whether we are to understand the immemorial past of nature as immemorial with respect to both levels of experience, or rather to the reflective level only. Having at one juncture posited that the unreflective consciousness of the body as “natural spirit” as described by Merleau-Ponty “[has] its roots in the absolute past and prehuman space of nature”,¹⁹ he follows up this a few pages later by suggesting that the absolute past of nature is “somehow *correlated* with this impersonal ‘one’ that is my body understood as a ‘natural spirit’”.²⁰ To “have one’s roots in” something and to have this same something “correlated with” oneself does not seem to me to come back to the same thing; to have one’s roots in something suggests an asymmetrical relationship, whereas the “correlation” suggests some kind of symmetry that might include temporal synchronicity or simultaneity.²¹

By thus equivocating on this point, it seems to me that Toadvine resuscitates a controversy in Merleau-Ponty scholarship concerning the status of Merleau-Ponty’s phrase “a past that has never been present”, a controversy it might be illuminating to review although it doesn’t directly concern Merleau-Ponty’s thought as a philosophy of nature. The position to be taken and defended here will be a point of departure for my reading of the labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty’s approach to the immemoriality of nature in chapter 5. The controversy in question turns on whether, in Merleau-Ponty, the immemorial past Merleau-Ponty speaks of toward the end of the “Sensing” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* is traced above all on the level of reflection or is rather inscribed or contracted into the depths of unreflective experience as well. M. C. Dillon has defended the first line of interpretation in an essay entitled “The Unconscious: Language and World”.²² He argues that Merleau-Ponty’s use of the expression “a past that has never been present” must be accorded its proper status on account of the context in which it appears, which is precisely the discussion of the relation between reflection and the “pre-reflective fund it presupposes, upon which it draws, and that constitutes for it, like an original past, a past that has never been present” (PhP 289/252). Since the context in question is a discussion of the relation

¹⁸ See Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 70.

¹⁹ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 100, my emphasis.

²⁰ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 102, my emphasis.

²¹ In chapter 2 I shall argue that this equivocation stems in part from Toadvine’s identification of nature’s immemorial past with what Merleau-Ponty describes as “natural time”.

²² Cf. M. C. Dillon, “The Unconscious: Language and World,” in *Merleau-Ponty in Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Patrick Burke and Jan van der Veken (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993).

between reflection and the unreflective fund on which it draws, then – on Dillon’s reading – Merleau-Ponty’s phrase “a past that has never been present” applies to this relation only:

In context it is clear that the “past that has never been present” has never been present to the *reflective* consciousness which must draw upon that anonymous past in its appropriating reprise: never present to reflective consciousness, but fully present to pre-reflective perceptual consciousness.²³

Confronting Dillon’s reading (and thereby also, indirectly, Toadvine’s equivocation), Leonard Lawlor points out²⁴ that the past in question cannot be truly an *original* past, as Merleau-Ponty suggests it is, if it comes back in the end to an original presence on which it would depend. In order to respect the originality of the past in question, Lawlor argues – and I don’t see how one can avoid this conclusion – one cannot interpret the original past on the basis of the unreflective (as Dillon does), but one would instead have to “interpret the unreflective on the basis of the originary past”.²⁵ Lawlor goes on, however, to refer us to another context that he thinks is more appropriate than the one suggested by Dillon for a proper interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s notorious phrase, and that context is for him the “Temporality” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*. This context is more appropriate, according to Lawlor, due to “the constant privilege Merleau-Ponty gives to temporality throughout *The Phenomenology of Perception*”.²⁶

Yet, as Alia Al-Saji rightly observes, the dominant picture of time that we get from the “Temporality” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* is “one that closely follows Husserl’s theory in his lectures *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, centering on the primordially of the living present”, thus apparently excluding the very idea of an *original* past from “the conceptual map of *Phenomenology of Perception*”.²⁷ Across her various efforts to locate the idea of the immemorial on the larger conceptual map composed by Merleau-Ponty’s *oeuvre* more broadly conceived, Al-Saji seems to be debating somewhat with herself. In her 2007 article “The Temporality of Life: Merleau-Ponty, Bergson and the Immemorial Past”,²⁸ she defends the view that Merleau-Ponty’s thought of the immemorial past belongs chiefly to his later works and especially to the working notes for *The Visible and the Invisible*. In a footnote to this article, she cites the occurrence of the

²³ Dillon, “The Unconscious: Language and World”, p. 72.

²⁴ Cf. Lawlor, *Thinking Through French Philosophy: The being of the Question*, pp. 87-92.

²⁵ Lawlor, *Thinking Through French Philosophy: The being of the Question*, p. 89.

²⁶ Lawlor, *Thinking Through French Philosophy: The being of the Question*, p. 89.

²⁷ Alia Al-Saji, “A Past Which Has Never Been Present: Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of the Prepersonal”, *Research in Phenomenology* 38 (2008), p. 43.

phrase “a past that has never been present” at the close of the “Sensing” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, but concludes that “[a]lthough it foreshadows discussions of the invisible and unconscious in later texts, the prepersonal temporality opened up by this reference remains marginal to the dominant current of bodily life – the primacy of perception and action – that runs through the *Phénoménologie*”.²⁹ By the time (2008) she publishes her next article on the question of the immemorial past in Merleau-Ponty, however, she seems to have changed her mind, arguing that “how one reads this past has consequences for one’s reading of the *Phenomenology* in general and for understanding Merleau-Ponty’s ambiguous concept of the ‘prepersonal’ in particular”, and that “taking seriously Merleau-Ponty’s evocation of the prepersonal as an ‘original past’ leads to a new reading of bodily temporality and its role in perception in the *Phenomenology*”.³⁰

It is this last suggestion that, as far as I am concerned, points to a more comprehensive understanding of the place of the immemorial past in Merleau-Ponty’s work, both early and late. While it is not in and of itself a mistake to approach it, as Dillon does, from the point of view of its inscription in the relation between reflection and the unreflective (indeed, this is in and of itself a major concern for Merleau-Ponty), it is nonetheless just as important to consider the way it infiltrates Merleau-Ponty’s description of the unreflective layer of bodily perception itself. However, whereas Al-Saji restricts herself to a consideration of how the immemorial past informs Merleau-Ponty’s description of sensation in the “Sensing” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, my impression is that it is largely implicated in several others of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological descriptions in *Phenomenology of Perception*, particularly those of light and space. Hence, in chapter 2, I shall mount a defense of the view – shared by Lawlor, Al-Saji, and Toadvine sometimes – that, in Merleau-Ponty, the immemorial past (of nature) inscribes itself on both reflective and unreflective levels of experience by drawing on Al-Saji’s reading of the “Sensing” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* while also showing how such a line of reading can be extended to, and confirmed by, the descriptions we find there of light and space as well.

Generativity: I know of virtually no reader of Merleau-Ponty who has advanced the claim that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy has nothing to do with, or is opposed to, a thought of

²⁸ Cf. Alia Al-Saji, “The Temporality of Life: Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, and the Immemorial Past”, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* XLV (2007)

²⁹ Al-Saji, “The Temporality of Life: Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, and the Immemorial Past”, pp. 200-201 n. 23.

³⁰ Al-Saji, “‘A Past Which Has Never Been Present’: Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of the Prepersonal”, pp. 42-43.

being as becoming or generativity. Quite to the contrary, commentators have persistently – ever since and even prior to the posthumous publication of *The Visible and the Invisible* in 1964 – emphasized the place of generativity and becoming in his thought, whether with or without reference to those of its trajectories which orient it toward a philosophy of nature. Already in 1962, Thomas Langan characterized the legacy of Merleau-Ponty’s thought as “[a] philosophy of becoming”.³¹ In 1973 (and later, in 1981), Gary B. Madison echoes this suggestion in a consideration of the resonances and dissonances between Merleau-Ponty’s and Heraclitus’ thought on the subject of the processual character of nature or – what, for Madison, comes back to the same thing – Being:

[I]f for Merleau-Ponty as for Heraclitus Being is not the foundation or substrate of Nature but Nature itself as process, there is nevertheless in Merleau-Ponty’s dialectic something which is not to be found in Heraclitus – the notion of a “teleology”. Being is not only a process, a differentiation (πόλεμος), but also a becoming – not, as it were, a static becoming as in Heraclitus, a mere, eternal repetition in accordance with a fixed λόγος but a vertical becoming, an opening up in the full sense of the word where something is realized which did not exist before, where it is the Logos of Being itself which becomes.³²

In slightly more prosaic terms, M. C. Dillon suggests, in his book *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology* (first published in 1988), a similar point concerning the view of the constitutively emergent, historical and generated status of meaning (echoing Madison’s *logos*) to be found in Merleau-Ponty: “It is a consequence of Merleau-Ponty’s position that all meanings, both those which are manifest in the flux of the perceptual world and those which are extracted from that world and arrested in language, are subject to historical processes of becoming”.³³ In his contribution to the *Merleau-Ponty and Environmental Philosophy* anthology several decades later, Dillon reiterates his point concerning Merleau-Ponty’s embedding of meaning in a temporality that pervades nature and culture alike, and he now draws from this the conclusion that Merleau-Ponty’s thought must be described as an “ontology of becoming” rather than an “ontology of Being”:

Meaning, as Merleau-Ponty conceives it, is bound up with time, time that is inseparable from space, culture, and nature. Merleau-Ponty’s ontology is an ontology of becoming; it asserts the reality of time, and in doing so denies the atemporality definitive of all ontologies of Being.³⁴

³¹ Thomas Langan, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty: In Memoriam", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 23, no. 2 (1962), p. 205.

³² Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, p. 251.

³³ M. C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 2. ed. (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1997), p. 78.

³⁴ M. C. Dillon, "Merleau-Ponty and the Ontology of Ecology or Apocalypse Later," in *Merleau-Ponty and Environmental Philosophy: Dwelling on the Landscapes of Thought*, ed. Suzanne Laba Cataldi and William S. Hamrick (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 260.

Furthermore, in an article exploring a possible convergence between Merleau-Ponty's thought and chaos theory (particularly as articulated by Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers), Glen A. Mazis considers that, in returning to the body's perceptual dialogue with nature, Merleau-Ponty was concerned to "articulate a truer sense of 'becoming' than Western philosophy had allowed by positing a Being or consciousness or sense of time and/or space outside the interplay of the sensible-sensing dialogical unfolding".³⁵

While the already cited commentators approach the issue of generativity in Merleau-Ponty chiefly from the point of view of the emergence of *meaning* in nature through the sensori-motor exploration through which our body engages with it (and this silent meaning's recapitulation and transfiguration in the symbolic registers of language and institution), some authors have also approached this issue from the point of view of the problem of *our* emergence from nature. Thus, for example, on the very first page of their recent book *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty's Fundamental Thought*, William S. Hamrick and Jan Van der Veken propose that Merleau-Ponty's turn to the concept of nature in the latter half of the Fifties issues from the acknowledgment that "what we *are* somehow *emerges* from nature".³⁶ The book proceeds to retrace a thought of a nature that "is through and through fluid, active, generative, expressive, inter-weaving and inter-corporeal and, indeed, intersensory",³⁷ a thought they claim to discern in the interstices between, on the one hand, Merleau-Ponty's work and, on the other, that of the Stoics, Schelling, Bergson and – particularly, as the book's subtitle suggests – Whitehead, all of which were invoked more or less directly through the development of Merleau-Ponty's last philosophical efforts.

I should also mention in this connection some considerations advanced by Elizabeth Grosz, who, among all the authors I have read who deal with the question of becoming or generativity in Merleau-Ponty, is the one to present her reading in the most explicitly cosmological terms of consciousness, life and matter. In an essay in which she considers the place of Bergsonism in Merleau-Ponty's late thought, she suggests that "Merleau-Ponty and Bergson share...an ontology of becoming".³⁸ Not unlike Hamrick and van der Veken, Grosz emphasizes that such an ontology is about conceiving of nature as "a dynamic and productive

³⁵ Glen A. Mazis, "Chaos Theory and Merleau-Ponty's Ontology," in *Merleau-Ponty, Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World*, ed. Dorothea Olkowski and James Morley (Albany: State University of New York Press: 1999), p. 234.

³⁶ Hamrick and Van der Veken, *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty's Fundamental Thought*, p. 1.

³⁷ Hamrick and Van der Veken, *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty's Fundamental Thought*, p. 5. In a footnote on the same page the authors specify that this phrasing is borrowed from their colleague John Compton, who is reported to have expressed himself in these terms in a private correspondence.

³⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 121.

set of forces”,³⁹ in which “[a]ctive becoming is an emergent property of matter itself, its virtual development beyond its given properties”.⁴⁰ Significantly, what such an ontology of becoming requires, as Merleau-Ponty’s work testifies according to Grosz, is “to take seriously the immersion of consciousness in life, and the immersion of life in time and materiality that Darwinism has left as a question, a gift, to philosophy”.⁴¹ In what Grosz also calls the “fundamental ontology of difference” to be had from Merleau-Ponty,

there are not two opposed identities, mind and matter, subject and object, consciousness and world, but a relation of emergence (and thus of debt) from the one to the other, a relation in which one mind, subject, consciousness emerges from and establishes itself through a relation of differentiation from the body, objects and the world. This relation is not a reciprocity of two terms, the mutual embrace of equivalents, but a relation of debt and belonging.⁴²

It seems to me that Grosz, like Hamrick and van der Veken, understands the issue of generativity in Merleau-Ponty to be related, not to the emergence of meaning in the perceived world, but to the emergence of subjectivity from a natural world onto which it remains open yet is also indebted as to its condition of existence.

What transpires in the articulations between the sources I have cited concerning the issue of generativity in Merleau-Ponty is that this issue is distributed along two main axes. On the one hand, there is the question of the emergence of meaning from the sensible and insensible depths of nature as taken up in the perceptual exchange between it and the living body and transfigured in linguistic gesticulation. On the other hand, there is the question of the emergence of subjectivity, mind or consciousness – the nature that we are – from the nature we are *in* and to which we belong, yet on which we remain perceptually open. To my mind, both of these axes of the issue are central to Merleau-Ponty’s concern with the problem of nature, yet I would claim that the second axis – that of the emergence of mind from matter, of subjectivity from within the nature onto which it opens in perception and thought – is the incomparably most difficult issue for Merleau-Ponty to handle. This is because it is the one that pushes him to the limits of what can be legitimately said from within the discursive space of phenomenology which he is, ultimately, reluctant to leave totally behind. Therefore I have devoted a whole chapter (chapter 3) to the exposition of how this problematic is developed across Merleau-Ponty’s work, and a second chapter (chapter 6) to the way its elaboration produces and is produced by the scenario of what Claude Lefort

³⁹ Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*, p. 118.

⁴⁰ Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*, p. 121.

⁴¹ Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*, p. 116.

has called a “bizarre begetting”⁴³ in which the maternal body finds itself caught up in a most baffling economy of reproduction.

The Scholarly Situation With Regard to The Labour of the Feminine in Merleau-Ponty

To the best of my knowledge, there have been, with few exceptions, no substantial attempts to inquire into the philosophical role of feminine motifs in Merleau-Ponty’s thought neither before nor after Luce Irigaray made her contribution in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, originally published in 1984. My review of the scholarly situation with regard to this aspect will therefore naturally be focused on this contribution and the tradition it has inaugurated. Toward the end of the section, however, I shall also briefly comment on the suggestion, made by several commentators, that Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “the flesh” should be understood in connection with the concept of *chora* invoked in Plato’s *Timaeus*, which might indirectly also be a suggestion to the effect that feminine motifs are crucial to our understanding of the outlook of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature.

Luce Irigaray’s essay “The Invisible of the Flesh: A Reading of Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ‘The Intertwining – The Chiasm’”, included in her book *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, originally published in 1984,⁴⁴ stands out from the bulk of feminist engagements with Merleau-Ponty in being the, to date, most concerted effort to bring to light what I have chosen to term the labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty’s thought. Focusing, as its title indicates, on the elaboration of the notion of the flesh found in the fourth chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible* – even restricting itself, perhaps impiously, to only a few paragraphs of the original text – the essay sets out to “bring the maternal-feminine into language: at the level of theme, motif, subject, articulation, syntax, and so on”.⁴⁵ Now, as any reader familiar with Irigaray’s work will know, the concern to “bring the maternal-feminine into language” – although being named as such only beginning with *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* – is one that orients virtually all of her readings of canonical (male) figures within the Western philosophical tradition going back to Plato. By Irigaray’s own admission, the

⁴² Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*, p. 118.

⁴³ Cf. Lefort, “Flesh and Otherness”, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993).

⁴⁵ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 152.

term “maternal-feminine” is to be understood as “what exists necessarily (...) as an a priori condition (as Kant might say) for the space-time of the masculine subject”,⁴⁶

that which constitutes the tissue of and in ontology (...) matter, flux, interstices, blanks...all still available, in stock, already forgotten (...) womblike and maternal (...) [that] which has been assimilated before any perception of difference. The red blood, the lymph, for every body, every discourse, every creation, every making of a world (...) still undifferentiated maternal-feminine, substrate for any possible determination of identity.⁴⁷

Comparing the maternal-feminine in Irigaray to Heidegger’s notion of “gift” and Derrida’s notions of “différance” and “espacement”, Margareth Whitford suggests that it names that which “has been left out of the ideal and intelligible realm while continuing to nourish it and supply its sensible, material conditions”.⁴⁸ Skipping the Heideggerian and Derridean references, Rebecca Hill explains that we are to understand it as “the unacknowledged substratum upon which philosophy depends in order to be posited (...) [functioning] as the place of philosophy, without ever constituting a place for herself”.⁴⁹ Hence, to the extent that Whitford’s and Hill’s suggestions are adequate, what we gather from all this is that, for Irigaray, the maternal-feminine is the place-less place for the elaboration of philosophical conceptuality, the source of material sustenance and nourishment from which philosophical discourse is unable to detach itself yet which it remains unable all the same to acknowledge and accommodate as such. It is a maternal, womb-like materiality that is at once both evicted from philosophy’s discursive premises yet surreptitiously appropriated as a prop that supports its systematicity and intelligibility.

Now, in so far as my project is concerned to bring out the labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature, it is clear that I cannot avoid a confrontation with Irigaray’s reading of Merleau-Ponty, just as it must be admitted that my very idea of approaching his work from this angle has found its impetus largely from my encounter with Irigaray’s work. Hence, her essay on Merleau-Ponty will have to give me pause in those chapters that deal especially with the place and function of the maternal body in the elaboration of Merleau-Ponty’s approach to the issues of nature’s immemoriality and generativity respectively. By thus returning to Irigaray’s reading of Merleau-Ponty, however, I also enter a discursive territory already densely populated by a growing number of commentators. In order to review this literature and to articulate the positioning of my

⁴⁶ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, pp. 84-85.

⁴⁷ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, pp. 98-99.

⁴⁸ Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 102-103.

concern with Irigaray's reading of Merleau-Ponty with respect to it, I would like to consider a further observation by Rebecca Hill concerning the status of the term "sexual difference" in Irigaray's work:

Sexual difference [in Irigaray] has at least two senses. First, "sexual difference" is a critical description of the violent sexed hierarchy that covertly inaugurates metaphysics as phallocentrism. Second, "sexual difference" is the opening to thought and to life, which figures man and woman in a non-hierarchical relationship.⁵⁰

Now, it is to the description of sexual difference in the first, hierarchical sense that Hill goes on to relate Irigaray's concern with the "maternal-feminine". As a result, we immediately catch sight of an ambiguity with regard to how we are to understand the "hierarchy" in question. On the one hand, the sexual difference thematized by Irigaray on the level of critical description is hierarchical in the sense that it concerns the subordination of the feminine by the masculine in so far as the feminine is made to *serve* the libidinal, discursive, and economical interests of the masculine. Yet, on the other hand, this very subordination entails a hierarchical distribution of the positioning of the feminine and the masculine respectively in the reversed order, in so far as the masculine *depends* on the feminine in a way that is not symmetrical. While Irigaray is without doubt concerned to overthrow sexual hierarchy in the first sense, i.e., the sense in which the feminine is positioned exclusively as that which is subordinated to the libidinal, discursive, and economical interests of the masculine quest for autarchy, I think her position with regard to sexual hierarchy in the second sense must be considered to be quite the opposite. It is, for Irigaray, precisely the failure to acknowledge and even rejuvenate the necessarily hierarchical – in the sense of asymmetrical – relation between the dominant term (the masculine subject, identity, philosophical discourse) and the subordinate term (its necessarily forgotten and obliterated source of emergence and nourishment in the maternal-feminine) that partly accounts for what Hill refers to as "the violent sexed hierarchy that covertly inaugurates metaphysics as phallocentrism".

In Irigaray's reading of Merleau-Ponty, we can see her at work in overthrowing sexual hierarchy in the first sense partly by means of the strategy of affirming sexual hierarchy in the second sense, that is, in the sense of trying to show how the maternal body is tacitly at work as a constitutive condition for his theoretical elaborations while nevertheless exceeding the thematic compass of these elaborations. This trajectory in Irigaray's reading of Merleau-

⁴⁹ Rebecca Hill, "Interval, Sexual Difference: Luce Irigaray and Henri Bergson", *Hypatia* 23, no. 1 (2008), p. 123.

Ponty is expertly summed up by Elizabeth Grosz: “[A] notion of maternity and material debt underlies and conditions the notion of the flesh – precisely that which is disavowed in his manifest pronouncements is the unspoken condition of his theoretical system”.⁵¹ To be sure, as already indicated, one cannot say without qualification that Merleau-Ponty himself failed utterly to recognize the likeness of flesh with both maternity and nature at the level of his manifest pronouncements. Nevertheless, I think the point to be taken here is that what remains (for constitutive reasons) absent from the level of his manifest pronouncements is the *philosophical function* or labour served by maternity and the maternal body as that in which Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the flesh – and, by extension, his notion of nature – finds its likeness. And I think Irigaray is to be credited not only with having offered a provoking attempt at an analysis of this aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s work, but also for having broached the question in the first place. Hence, my approach to the issue of the conditioning function of maternity and the maternal body in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature will be inscribed partly as a critical appropriation of Irigaray’s reading of Merleau-Ponty along these lines, and partly as an attempt to apply her strategy to passages and texts in Merleau-Ponty that she has as yet not considered. In the terms proposed by Hill, my own analysis of the labour of the feminine (in its maternal aspect) in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature – and the use I will make of Irigaray in this endeavour – will be situated squarely on the level of a critical description of how what Irigaray calls the maternal-feminine is both inscribed into and evicted from his text.

As anticipated above, however, there is more to Irigaray’s reading of Merleau-Ponty than a concern to bring the maternal-feminine into language. In Hill’s words, “Irigaray’s project goes beyond *describing* the sexed hierarchy that secretly underwrites metaphysics, to posit a new formulation of sexual difference. Her radical proposal situates man and woman in a horizontal relation that is irreducible”.⁵² With regard to the project of such a *new* formulation of non-hierarchical, horizontal sexual difference, Irigaray does not, as is well known, seem to consider Merleau-Ponty’s work to be of much help. Quite to the contrary:

Merleau-Ponty’s analysis is marked by [a] labyrinthine solipsism. Without the other, and above all the other of sexual difference, isn’t it impossible to find a way out of this description of the visible, doubled with that of the tactile of the touching hands? (...) The phenomenology of the flesh that Merleau-Ponty attempts is without

⁵⁰ Hill, "Interval, Sexual Difference: Luce Irigaray and Henri Bergson", p. 119.

⁵¹ Elizabeth Grosz, "Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray in the Flesh," in *Merleau-Ponty, Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World*, ed. Dorothea Olkowski and James Morley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 156.

⁵² Hill, "Interval, Sexual Difference: Luce Irigaray and Henri Bergson", p. 120.

question(s). It has no spacing or interval for the freedom of questioning between two.
No other or Other to keep the world open.⁵³

It seems to me that it is within the space of the question of the possible or impossible role that Merleau-Ponty might assume in Irigaray's quest for a new formulation of non-hierarchical sexual difference that most readers of Irigaray's essay on Merleau-Ponty in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* have inscribed their responses. For example, although she does focus on the issue of the maternal-feminine in Irigaray's reading of Merleau-Ponty, Alison Ainley opens her essay on that text by declaring that she reads it as a set of "reflections on the pitfalls and potentials of phenomenology for developing feminist perspectives in philosophy", perspectives that involve "questions and claims about not only the sexual specificity of women, but also the ethical demand that this question count for something".⁵⁴ The issue for Ainley would thereby seem to be more that of assessing the value and relevance of Merleau-Ponty's work for the goals of feminism as defined by Irigaray, taking into account Irigaray's criticisms of him, than that of assessing what we might learn about Merleau-Ponty's thought from reading Irigaray's analysis of him. In a related fashion, Cecilia Sjöholm wants to "look into [Irigaray's] explicit criticisms [of Merleau-Ponty]", but the overall issue for her seems to be that of showing that "Irigaray fails to give explicit credit to Merleau-Ponty's own notion of alterity as flesh, which clearly seems to have helped her write and develop her fluid, sexuated bodies", indeed that "Irigaray is, ultimately, an inventive disciple of Merleau-Ponty".⁵⁵ Similarly, Tina Chanter wonders how Irigaray could justifiably "insist on the closure and 'solipsism' (...) of his system, on its lack of questioning, and its failure to preserve others", and she speculates whether Merleau-Ponty might not after all "break new ground with his notion of the flesh" in an "attempt more radical than Irigaray is willing to acknowledge".⁵⁶ Suzanna Laba Cataldi wonders whether "[there is] room in Merleau-Ponty's ontology for a subjectively and sexually differentiated other or is this possibility precluded, as Irigaray suggests, by his positing a structure of reversibility?"⁵⁷

While all the authors cited above seem to be out, in part, to rescue Merleau-Ponty's from the harshness of Irigaray's criticism of him, Dorothea Olkowski seems to take the

⁵³ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, pp. 157, 183.

⁵⁴ Alison Ainley, "The Invisible of the Flesh!: Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray", *Journal for the British Society for Phenomenology* 28, no. 1 (1997), p. 20.

⁵⁵ Cecilia Sjöholm, "Crossing Lovers: Luce Irigaray's *Elemental Passions*", *Hypatia* 15, no. 3 (2000), p. 96.

⁵⁶ Tina Chanter, "Wild Meaning: Luce Irigaray's Reading of Merleau-Ponty," in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh*, ed. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 220.

⁵⁷ Suzanna Laba Cataldi, "The Philosopher and Her Shadow. Irigaray's Reading of Merleau-Ponty", *Philosophy Today* 48, no. 4 (2004), p. 343.

opposite approach, considering the gap between Merleau-Ponty's and Irigaray's respective projects to be unsurpassable. She concedes that much of Irigaray's essay on Merleau-Ponty in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* must be said to explore the effaced maternal-feminine that is nevertheless inscribed in the silences of Merleau-Ponty's text, but she insists that "there is something more profound taking place as well".⁵⁸ This more profound concern that Olkowski supposes to be at play in Irigaray's essay on Merleau-Ponty is nothing short of the project of "changing the foundations of language",⁵⁹ which is precisely what Irigaray in that essay takes to be necessary for the opening of a spacing or interval for the freedom of questioning between two.⁶⁰ With regard to the project of changing the foundations of language, however, Olkowski denies (along with Irigaray) that Merleau-Ponty's thought can be of any help whatsoever, in so far as he argues that all the possibilities of language are given in the auto-affective, reversible structure of the flesh of the body (cf. VI 200/155).⁶¹

In the present project, however, I shall not be concerned with the question as to whether or not Merleau-Ponty's thought is congenial to Irigaray's project of changing the foundations of knowledge, whether or not Merleau-Ponty's thought matches the level of radicality with regard to the conception of alterity that we find in Irigaray, whether or not his thought may further the ambition of a new formulation of sexual difference that situates man and woman in a horizontal relation that is irreducible etc. Instead, I will be concerned with Irigaray's essay on Merleau-Ponty in so far as it throws light on the philosophical labour of the feminine in his thought, conceived as a philosophy of nature. In short, I shall be concerned with her analysis more with a view to what it may teach us about Merleau-Ponty's thought than the other way around. I should add, however, that Irigaray deals with the surreptitious appropriation of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty's text only in terms of the maternal body. In my reading of Merleau-Ponty, I will connect this motif to the issues of nature's immemoriality and generativity respectively. With regard to the issue of nature's resistant alterity, however, I will try to show – although largely in keeping with general lines of Irigaray's approach – that the feminine is surreptitiously invoked by Merleau-Ponty through a different motif, namely, that of woman as the notoriously ineffable, dissimulated object of (male) desire.

⁵⁸ Dorothea Olkowski, "The End of Phenomenology: Bergson's Interval in Irigaray", *Hypatia* 15, no. 3 (2000), p. 76.

⁵⁹ Olkowski, "The End of Phenomenology: Bergson's Interval in Irigaray", p. 77.

⁶⁰ See Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, pp. 183-184.

⁶¹ Cf. Olkowski, "The End of Phenomenology: Bergson's Interval in Irigaray", p. 77.

Apart from the more or less explicitly feminist explorations of the contested (non)place of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty's work, I should also mention that several commentators have, in greater or lesser degrees of elaboration, pointed to salient resonances between certain of Merleau-Ponty's notions and the Platonic *chora* appearing in the *Timaeus*. In so far as *Timaeus* here designate as *chora* the maternal instance that comes (in the "fresh start" interrupting the first cosmogonical account) to supplement the paternally connoted *eidos* in the parental couple bringing forth the child cosmos,⁶² a comparison of another author's concepts to the *chora* will also indirectly be a suggestion of a commonality between them with respect to their feminine codification. Some commentators content themselves with fleeting allusions. Ed Casey, for example, sees in the Platonic *chora* a predecessor of what Merleau-Ponty describes, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, as "primordial depth".⁶³ Similarly, in a consideration of possible ancestors in the philosophical tradition of Merleau-Ponty's notion of "flesh", Marc Richir proposes that the most obvious candidate "would be found in Plato's *Timaeus* with the *chora*" which, like Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh, "is a sort of 'bastard concept', 'half-way between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea', to the very extent that it is the element of intersection, of chiasm, or to speak like the Greeks, of the *composite*".⁶⁴ Such a parallel, according to Richir, also imbues Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh with "a *cosmological* dimension".⁶⁵ In an article on Merleau-Ponty's late engagement with Proust's description of the musical idea or "little phrase" in the "Swann in love" section of *The Way by Swann's*, however, Jessica Wiskus develops a parallel (while also emphasizing the deviation) between Merleau-Ponty's approach to Proust's musical idea and the Platonic *chora* at some length.⁶⁶ The parallel consists, on her view, in the singularly generative role they both assume as the hinge or jointure between the intelligible and the sensible realms respectively.⁶⁷ They are different, on her view, however, in their temporal

⁶² See Plato, *Timaeus; Critias; Cleitophon; Menexenus; Epistles*, trans. R. G. Bury, vol. 7, The Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1929), 48e-53

⁶³ "Instead of being the kind of thing that yields to measurement, [primordial depth] is like an aura or atmosphere that resists precise specification. Yet it is not simply vaporous; it has sufficient structure to underlie and make possible objectified depth itself. (...) In this capacity, primordial depth reminds us more of Platonic *chōra* – that matrix of cosmic spatiality – than of *bathos*, which is a characteristic of already formed material things. Like *chōra*, primordial depth "does not yet operate between [determinate] objects" (Edward S. Casey, "'The Element of Voluminousness': Depth and Place Reexamined," in *Merleau-Ponty Vivant*, ed. M. C. Dillon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 10-11).

⁶⁴ Marc Richir, "The Meaning of Phenomenology in *The Visible and the Invisible*", *Thesis Eleven* 36 (1993), p. 77.

⁶⁵ Richir, "The Meaning of Phenomenology in *The Visible and the Invisible*", p. 77.

⁶⁶ Cf. Jessica Wiskus, "The Universality of the Sensible: On Plato and the Musical Idea according to Merleau-Ponty", *Epoché* 13, no. 1 (2008)

⁶⁷ "[A]s likewise for Merleau-Ponty's notion of the musical idea, [the Platonic *chora*] is this 'receptacle'...that opens a dimension between the intelligible and the sensible realms, and, as a 'wet nurse', institutes a generative relationship...that serves a hinge between two contraries" (Wiskus, "The Universality of the Sensible: On Plato and the Musical Idea according to Merleau-Ponty", p. 125)

structures: Whereas the *chora* realizes a progression from the eternal past to the ephemeral present, Merleau-Ponty's approach to Proust's musical idea signals a temporal multidirectionality through which the (intelligible) past is constantly submitted to derangement and deformation in the (sensible) present.⁶⁸

In contrast to the authors already cited, Robert Vallier is, to the best of my knowledge, the only one to have broached the question of the sexual and feminine aspects resonating in the parallel between Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh and the Platonic *chora*. In his article "The Elemental Flesh: Nature, Life, and Difference in Merleau-Ponty and Plato's *Timaeus*",⁶⁹ Vallier pertinently suggests that Merleau-Ponty's apposition of "the mother" to "the flesh" in the working note in which he projects a "psychoanalysis of Nature" should make us think of the Platonic *chora*, especially in so far as *chora* is named there the *mother* of all becoming.⁷⁰ The second reason to interrogate the space between Merleau-Ponty's notion of "flesh" and the Platonic *chora*, Vallier argues, is Merleau-Ponty's famous association of the flesh with "the old term 'element', in the sense in which it was used to speak of water, air, earth and fire" (VI 182/139), which doubly connects the flesh to the maternal *chora* in *Timaeus* in so far as the latter concerns the situating of "that which is fundamentally unsituable, namely, the elements".⁷¹ In sum, then, according to Vallier, "[t]he reference to the mother in the working note, and the appeal to the elements in chapter 4 of *The Visible and the Invisible* thus constitute an invitation to situate Merleau-Ponty's thinking of the flesh as a choric thinking".⁷² Yet, for Vallier, this situating of Merleau-Ponty's thinking of the flesh as a choric thinking, as a resumption of the thought of *chora* to be found in the *Timaeus*, is, in its turn, to be situated within an attempt to "read the *Timaeus* as an exercise in the style of hermeneutics practiced by Merleau-Ponty".⁷³ What, more precisely, this second situating entails is that the discourse on the *chora* in the *Timaeus* is to be read in light of Merleau-Ponty's distinction (in the *Nature* lectures) between two ontological traditions, namely, that of the object and that of the existent (cf. N 26-39, 169-173/9-20, 125-129), the latter of which Vallier proposes to rename "the ontology of the

⁶⁸ Cf. Wiskus, "The Universality of the Sensible: On Plato and the Musical Idea according to Merleau-Ponty", pp. 129-130.

⁶⁹ Robert Vallier, "The Elemental Flesh. Nature, Life and Difference in Merleau-Ponty and Plato's *Timaeus*," in *Merleau-Ponty and the Possibilities of Philosophy: Transforming the Tradition*, ed. Bernard Flynn, Wayne J. Froman, and Robert Vallier (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).

⁷⁰ Cf. Vallier, "The Elemental Flesh. Nature, Life and Difference in Merleau-Ponty and Plato's *Timaeus*", p. 130.

⁷¹ Vallier, "The Elemental Flesh. Nature, Life and Difference in Merleau-Ponty and Plato's *Timaeus*", p. 133.

⁷² Vallier, "The Elemental Flesh. Nature, Life and Difference in Merleau-Ponty and Plato's *Timaeus*", p. 131.

⁷³ Vallier, "The Elemental Flesh. Nature, Life and Difference in Merleau-Ponty and Plato's *Timaeus*", pp. 132-133.

element”.⁷⁴ In order, then, to “think the flesh as both element and mother” it is necessary, according to Vallier, to consider how, “[w]ithin the text of the *Timaeus*, there irrupts a tension between the ontology of the object and the ontology of the element”, especially as the discourse on the *chora* is launched in the middle of the dialogue.⁷⁵

It must be said, however, that – apart from a few indications – the apposition of “mother” with flesh/nature (in Merleau-Ponty) and with the *chora* in Plato remains for Vallier more part of the pretext for a comparison of the two than a motif to be analysed as such. The aspects of the flesh he thinks become salient through the comparison with the Platonic *chora* – the characterization of flesh *cum* nature as “a continual movement of differentiation, an on-going inscription of difference that enables and favors the world and living beings, indeed all things, lets them show themselves, makes them be in a manner appropriate to them”, as an “in-difference prior to and making possible difference”,⁷⁶ indeed the notion that flesh designates nature as “*living being*”⁷⁷ – could well have been arrived at (and has indeed been arrived at) without taking the laborious detour through the “choric investigation of the mother” found in the *Timaeus*.⁷⁸ In fact, the philosophical role or function served by the maternal motif in Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on the flesh remains largely unthematized throughout Vallier’s comparison between Merleau-Pontian flesh and Platonic *chora*. Along these lines, Vallier also neglects, in my view, a certain point in relation to which Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on the flesh might indeed be compared to the description of the *chora* and its role in the birth of the cosmos, and this is the extent to which Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on the flesh might be said, like the choric discourse in the *Timaeus*, to work for the effacement of the traces of the maternal genealogy just as it also inscribes it.

This double movement of inscription and effacement, incorporation and repudiation of the maternal genealogy is precisely what Irigaray considers Plato’s concept of the *chora* to be about,⁷⁹ and it is also what she again finds in operation in Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on the

⁷⁴ Vallier, “The Elemental Flesh. Nature, Life and Difference in Merleau-Ponty and Plato’s *Timaeus*”, p. 132.

⁷⁵ Vallier, “The Elemental Flesh. Nature, Life and Difference in Merleau-Ponty and Plato’s *Timaeus*”, p. 137.

⁷⁶ Vallier, “The Elemental Flesh. Nature, Life and Difference in Merleau-Ponty and Plato’s *Timaeus*”, p. 147.

⁷⁷ Vallier, “The Elemental Flesh. Nature, Life and Difference in Merleau-Ponty and Plato’s *Timaeus*”, p. 149.

⁷⁸ Vallier, “The Elemental Flesh. Nature, Life and Difference in Merleau-Ponty and Plato’s *Timaeus*”, p. 149.

⁷⁹ See, in particular, the chapter “*Une mère de glace*” in Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985) as well as Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 151. The Platonic *chora* is also at issue at several junctures in her essay on the myth of the cave in *Speculum* (cf. Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, pp. 241-364), and it is clear that Irigaray sees a parallel between the role played by (the back of) the cave in Plato’s myth of the cave and by the *chora* in *Timaeus*. See, in this connection, Kristin Sampson, *Ontogony: Conceptions of Being and Metaphors of Birth in the Timaeus and the Parmenides* (Doctoral Thesis, Department of Philosophy, University of Bergen, Bergen, 2005), pp. 147-152, for a

flesh. Hence, it will suffice for my purposes in this thesis to subject Irigaray's reading of Merleau-Ponty to close scrutiny, assess the validity of her arguments and their relevance for my investigation of the labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature, thus leaving the choric connection in Merleau-Ponty for an explicit treatment on a later occasion.

Strategies

Up to this point, I have spoken rather loosely of what I have chosen to call the "labour of the feminine" in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature. I shall continue to refer loosely to the labour of the feminine throughout this thesis, but before I bring this introductory chapter to a close by giving an outline of the thesis, I would like to try to make more precise what I am getting at with these terms.

It may come as a surprise to many readers that I have chosen speak in this thesis of the place and function of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty's thought in terms of a motif or a complex of motifs, and not in terms of a metaphor or set of metaphors. To begin with, such surprise might be forthcoming particularly if one adopts – as I am myself generally inclined to do – the so-called interaction view of the function of metaphor, advocated by Max Black and others. On this view of metaphor, as presented by Black in his essay "Metaphor", the metaphorical process involves an interaction or exchange between a "principal" and "subsidiary" subject – among which, in the case of a sentence like "Man is a wolf", "man" would be the principal and "wolf" the subsidiary subjects respectively – that he compares to the operation of a filter intervening in and structuring the field of vision in a certain way:

Suppose I look at the night sky through a piece of heavily smoked glass on which certain lines have been left clear. Then I shall see only the stars that can be made to lie on the lines previously prepared upon the screen, and the stars I do see will be seen as organized by the screen's structure. We can think of a metaphor as such a screen, and the system of "associated commonplaces" of the focal word, as the network of lines upon the screen.⁸⁰

discussion of salient intertextual connections between the femininity of the cave in the *Republic*, the earth *Gē* in the *Phaedo*, and mother *chora* in the *Timaeus*.

⁸⁰ Max Black, "Metaphor," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*, ed. Mark Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), p. 75. In the subsequent section, Black offers, in a more systematic vein, a list of seven items that together define the interaction view of metaphor as he conceives of it: "(1) A Metaphorical statement has *two* distinct subjects – a 'principal' subject and a 'subsidiary' one. (2) The subjects are often best regarded as '*systems* of things' rather than 'things'. (3) The metaphor works by applying to the principal subject a system of 'associated implications' characteristic of the subsidiary subject. (4) These implications usually consist of 'commonplaces' about the subsidiary subject, but may, in suitable cases, consist of deviant implications established *ad hoc* by the writer. (5) The metaphor selects, emphasizes, suppresses, and organizes features of the principal subject by *implying* statements about it that normally apply to the subsidiary subject. (6) This involves shifts in meaning of words belonging to the same family or system as the metaphorical expression; and some of these shifts, though not all, may be metaphorical transfers. (The

If what we understand by a metaphorical expression is the result of an interaction between subsidiary and principal subjects – just as what we see is the result of an interaction between the specificities of the visual apparatus we use and that toward which we direct it – then there is no occasion to consider the metaphorical expression a merely figurative supplement to an allegedly literal meaning. On this view, then, one has to accord to metaphor a genuinely and irreducibly cognitive or epistemic role to play in the process by which conceptual insight – philosophical or otherwise – is produced. Significantly, judging from the few hints concerning metaphor that we find in *The Visible and the Invisible*, I think that Merleau-Ponty himself can be seen to subscribe to something like an interaction view of the role and function of metaphor in philosophical discourse. In the “Interrogation and Intuition” chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, to take but one example, Merleau-Ponty declares that genuine philosophical thought cannot get off the ground unless the philosopher abandons himself to 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” (VI 164/125).

I do not in the least wish to deny that Merleau-Ponty’s work is open to, indeed calls for an investigation from the point of view of both his theory and philosophical use of the metaphorical mode of expression, an investigation that is already well underway in the commentaries.⁸¹ Moreover, given an interaction approach to the function of metaphor, and given as well the fact that many of Merleau-Ponty’s invocations of the feminine occur in the metaphorical mode, the path would appear to be cleared for an exploration of the philosophical function of metaphorical invocations of femininity in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature. Nevertheless, what I do wish to indicate by opting for motif rather than metaphor in describing the labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is that it becomes hard to accommodate the range of registers in which the feminine operates in Merleau-Ponty’s work if one restricts oneself to elaborating it in terms a particular topological genre. Perhaps even “topology” might be an unduly restrictive way to characterize the nature of the operation(s) through which feminine motifs are set to work in

subordinate metaphors are, however, to be read less ‘emphatically’). (7) There is, in general, no simple ‘ground’ for the necessary shifts of meaning – no blanket reason why some metaphors work and others fail” (Black, “Metaphor”, pp. 77-78).

⁸¹ See in this connection, for example, Jerry H. Gill, *Merleau-Ponty and Metaphor* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1991); Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor, Studies in Continental thought (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 194-198; Clive Cazeaux, “Metaphor and the Categorization of the Senses”, *Metaphor and Symbol* 17, no. 1 (2002); Luca Vanzago,

Merleau-Ponty's texts. I might point out in this connection that the interaction view of the function of metaphor also inclines toward a specific conception of the nature of metaphor as analogical structure, in so far as we are hereby concerned with an associative connection between "systems of things".⁸² Although one might no doubt find instances in which Merleau-Ponty invokes the labour of the feminine in terms of structural analogies, there certainly are several instances that do not fit this model. So, if the more general term motif appears in this thesis in the place where one would normally have expected to find the more specific term metaphor, it is because I have felt the need for a term that is flexible enough to accommodate a greater range of ways through which the feminine can be said to be involved in the elaboration of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature.

In order to articulate, however provisionally and tentatively, a way to conceptualize the sense in which I intend to speak of the labour of feminine motifs in Merleau-Ponty's thought, I shall briefly consider a suggestion advanced by Louise Burchill in an article entitled "Re-Situating *the Feminine* in Contemporary French Philosophy".⁸³ As the title of her article indicates, Burchill is out to put back into question a tendency already subjected to scrutiny by feminist theoreticians since the middle-Seventies,⁸⁴ namely, the tendency in contemporary French thought (particularly among its male representatives) to resort to "tropologies of the feminine"⁸⁵ in order to get access to a domain of thought that has always remained marginal and repressed in Western metaphysical discourse: difference, non-linear time, amorphous or polymorphous spaces, the death of Man the Subject, the end of History etc. It might be added here that Merleau-Ponty is often cited as the figure who – thanks to his early appropriation of Saussurian structural linguistics and Lévi-Straussian structural anthropology – most decisively prefigured this development in French thought, despite his unflinching allegiance

"Presenting the Unpresentable: The Metaphor in Merleau-Ponty's Last Writings", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* XLIII (2005).

⁸² The view that Black's talk of relations between "systems of things" should be understood as relations of structural analogy is proposed by Kristin Sampson in her doctoral thesis: "The transference occurring in metaphor is between "systems of things" rather than things'. This system is of a structural character. Or put into slightly different words, in metaphor there is a suggestion of *analogical structures* between the principal and the subsidiary subjects" (Sampson, *Ontogeny: Conceptions of Being and Metaphors of Birth in the Timaeus and the Parmenides*, p. 34). Black himself seems to recognize that the notion of an associative connection between "systems of things" evokes the notion of analogy, although with a certain reserve: "It is easy enough to mutter 'analogy', but closer examination soon shows all kinds of 'grounds' for shifts of meaning with context – and even no ground at all, sometimes" (Black, "Metaphor", p. 76).

⁸³ Louise Burchill, "Re-Situating *the Feminine* in Contemporary French Philosophy," in *Belief, Bodies and Being: Feminist Reflections on Embodiment*, ed. D. Orr (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

⁸⁴ See, in particular, Alice A. Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985); Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 98-146; Kelly Oliver, *Womanizing Nietzsche: Philosophy's Relation to the "Feminine"* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁸⁵ Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*, p. 39; the phrase is cited in Burchill, "Re-Situating *the Feminine* in Contemporary French Philosophy", p. 82.

to several of the strands of thought – dialectical philosophy and Husserlian phenomenology – that would be cast by the subsequent generation of thinkers as the main enemies to be combatted in the quest for difference, death of Man, end of History etc.⁸⁶ In any case, the heightened concern with these issues in French thought since the Sixties has solicited, as Alice Jardine puts it, “a valorization of the feminine, woman, and her obligatory, that is, historical connotations, as somehow intrinsic to new and necessary modes of thinking, writing, speaking”.⁸⁷

What Louise Burchill brings to this analysis, it seems to me, is a new twist on Jardine’s notion of the “topology of the feminine” embraced by the anti-humanist turn in French thought in the Sixties, and this is her suggestion that we consider the function of the “feminine” in this context in terms of the notion of a “conceptual persona” or “schema” – a notion she draws partly from Kant and partly from Deleuze & Guattari. As a conceptual persona or schema, Burchill argues, the “feminine”

transforms psycho-social attributes of “women” into thought-events...[by] the “extraction” of spatio-temporal relations that are inherent to the attributes in question. Such spatio-temporal relations are, in this sense, to be understood as so many coordinates implied in the “images of women” that French philosophy borrows from literature..., mythology..., history...or psychoanalysis..., as well as from politics and the history of philosophy itself. Conversely, this means that we can only understand the philosophical function performed by “the feminine” in contemporary French texts by grasping that this persona presents, or one might say “personifies”, complexes of space and time that correspond to the concepts operative within these texts. (...) [T]he philosophical operation of “the feminine” can be qualified as that of a *schema* in the sense that Kant gives to this term in the *Critique of Pure Reason* as a (pure) spatio-temporal determination that corresponds to a concept.⁸⁸

I should like to emphasize two main points that can be seen to emerge from Burchill’s suggestion. First, a conceptual persona or schema brings to a philosophical concept – whether of time, of space, of difference, of generativity, of nature or whatever – a spatio-temporal determination that corresponds to it. This is to say, as Burchill goes on to specify, that the concepts in question find in their persona or schema a “transposition or ‘intuitive presentation’”.⁸⁹ As we know from Kant’s first *Critique*, such a transposition or presentation is necessary in order that concepts or categories may fulfil their role as that which structures

⁸⁶ See, for example, Vincent Descombes, *Modern French philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 55-74; Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 181-212; Leonard Lawlor, *Early Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), pp. 141-173.

⁸⁷ Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*, p. 25.

⁸⁸ Burchill, “Re-Situating the Feminine in Contemporary French Philosophy”, p. 84.

⁸⁹ Burchill, “Re-Situating the Feminine in Contemporary French Philosophy”, p. 84.

and orders the experiential material procured by sensibility; there must be, in Kant's own terms, something that "makes possible the application of the category to the appearance", a "mediating presentation" that is pure (i.e., non-empirical), yet is "both *intellectual*, on the one hand, and *sensible*, on the other hand", and which he proposes to call the "transcendental schema".⁹⁰ Burchill appropriates Deleuze & Guattari's notion of a conceptual persona along similar lines, that is, as an agency or instance of mediation between the pre-philosophical plane of immanence and the concepts that come to populate it:

The conceptual persona fills a role of intermediary between this prephilosophical plane and the features of the concepts that populate it, going from one to the other in such a way as to constitute the conditions under which this plane finds itself filled with concepts of the same group.⁹¹

The second point is that, in the texts of contemporary (male) French thought – such as that of, e.g., Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze (& Félix Guattari), Jean-Francois Lyotard, Michel Serres⁹² – the role of such a conceptual persona or schema is typically performed by "the feminine". The feminine here is not, of course, to be understood as an essence pertaining to a real, natural entity, but as an assemblage of certain more or less compatible – in fact, often incompatible – features that have become deposited through the work of mythology, literature, history, politics, and certain sciences or bodies of knowledge (such as psychoanalysis and philosophy) as pertaining to the psycho-social, socio-historical entity designated as "woman". This is to say that the relation between "the feminine" (however valorized) as conceptual schema and women in flesh and blood is of a rather loose kind, if it exists at all. As Alice Jardine put it in 1985, struggling with the problem of how a feminist might responsibly harness this body of writing that seemed timely in its theoretical concerns yet highly untimely in its rhetorical priorities, "[i]t is always a bit of a shock to the feminist theorist when she recognizes that the repeated and infinitely expanded 'feminine' in these theoretical systems often has very little, if anything, to do with women".⁹³ In other words, Jardine continues, the speculation on and valorization of "the feminine" taking place in the contemporary French quest for difference, death of Man, end of History etc. runs the risk of affirming the very basic framework it seeks to demote, in so far as it is nourished on the very same imaginary projection of "the feminine" – and expulsion of woman as subject – that has

⁹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), p. 210-211.

⁹¹ Burchill, "Re-Situating *the Feminine* in Contemporary French Philosophy", p. 83.

⁹² These are all authors whose use of the feminine as conceptual persona is taken up and discussed in the course of Burchill, "Re-Situating *the Feminine* in Contemporary French Philosophy".

⁹³ Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*, p. 35.

always accompanied (whether tacitly or expressly) the discursive operations of the Western philosophical tradition,⁹⁴ only now with an inverted distribution of values: “While struggling to find new configurations of desire outside of the logic of substitution, do we not run the danger of (belatedly) developing nothing but the negative of the Great Western photograph? What philosophical discourse today explores, it has also produced”.⁹⁵

When referring in this thesis to the labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty’s thought, then, the labour in question might be thought of as akin to the constitutive function performed by a conceptual persona or schema as explained by Louise Burchill, although this notion does not ultimately cover the whole range of operations that the feminine can be said to perform in his texts. It might be added here that Merleau-Ponty himself even invites such an approach to his texts, given the privileged role that the very term “schema” plays throughout *Phenomenology of Perception* in his account of bodily intentionality as the operation of the “body schema” (to which I will return in chapter 1). And, although the link to Kant’s schematism in Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the body schema is surely debatable,⁹⁶ we may ascertain that he refers obliquely to it on several occasions in *Phenomenology of Perception*, such as toward the end of the “Temporality” chapter, when he speaks of bodily intentionality as a “hidden art in the depths of the human soul...that, like every art, only knows itself in its results” (PhP 492/453). The phrase “hidden art in the depths of the human soul” evokes Kant’s own description of the schematism of our understanding, found in A 141/B 180-181 of the first *Critique*: “This schematism of our understanding, i.e., its schematism regarding appearances and their mere form, is a secret art residing in the depths of the human soul, an art whose true stratagems we shall hardly ever divine from nature and lay bare before ourselves”.⁹⁷

Moreover, the feminine in question should be understood along the lines suggested by Alice Jardine, that is, as a set of features that have historically, ideologically and socially been associated with woman and have become deposited as the more or less well-defined assemblage of properties culturally recognized as “feminine” – in particular as seen from a

⁹⁴ With regard to the issue of the elaboration – whether overtly or tacitly – of key concepts in terms of the values of “masculine” and “feminine” throughout the history of Western philosophy since antiquity, see, for example, Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*; Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, pp. 68-85, 148-155; Michèle Le Doeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary*, trans. Colin Gordon (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 100-128; Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: “Male” and “Female” in Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁹⁵ Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*, p. 39.

⁹⁶ See Shaun Gallagher, “Body Schema and Intentionality,” in *The Body and the Self*, ed. José Luis Bermúdez, Anthony Marcel, and Naomi Eilan (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995); Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, Routledge philosophers (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 102-111.

male point of view, in its turn positioned by a no less historically and culturally contingent system of values and features inscribed as “masculine”.

Before I proceed to give an outline of the thesis, I need to stress a point with regard to the general posture of reading I am adopting vis-à-vis Merleau-Ponty’s work in this thesis. Although it might have emerged from the way in which I have stated the problems to be dealt with, reviewed interpretative traditions and articulated (however approximately) the reading strategy to be followed, I must emphasize that I am approaching Merleau-Ponty’s work here entirely without any concern for either promotion, defence or rejection of the philosophical theories and perspectives contained therein. Having thus saved my own assessment of the value of Merleau-Ponty’s work for contemporary concerns for another occasion or other occasions, I have restricted myself in the present project to what I would at least like to think of as a largely immanent consideration of the specific way(s) in which problems and issues are posed and textually elaborated in that work. At the same time as I would like to think of my approach to Merleau-Ponty’s work as approximating the ideal of an immanent critique, its point of departure is also extraneous to this work. This is because it makes relevant to the understanding of his work an issue that was not on the horizon of his own philosophical concerns, namely the place and function of sexual difference and especially of the feminine in the elaboration of philosophical thinking.

In order to articulate in more explicit terms how one might conceive of this double positioning through which I situate myself in this manner both within and without Merleau-Ponty’s texts, I might refer to the ambiguous constellation of disinterest and partiality. By the term disinterest, I do not intend to reinvigorate that much-bemoaned tradition in modern, post-Cartesian epistemology, so heavily and untiringly criticized by Merleau-Ponty himself throughout his career, and for which the ideal of knowledge and thought is that of the completely detached, disembodied, non-situated, neutral and dispassionate observer and organizer of brute facts in themselves. Instead, what I attempt to capture with the no doubt problematic term disinterest as a description of my stance with regard to Merleau-Ponty’s work in this project is rather something resembling what Merleau-Ponty himself understands as the phenomenological reduction. In the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, he formulates it this way, in a passage to which I will return in chapter 1:

Because we are through and through related to the world, the only way for us to catch sight of ourselves is by suspending this movement, by refusing to be complicit with it

⁹⁷ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 214.

(or as Husserl often says, to see it *ohne mitzumachen* [without taking part]), or again, to put it out play. (...) [W]e must abstain from [the certainties of common sense and of the natural attitude] in order to awaken them and to make them appear. (...) [The reduction] steps back in order to see transcendences spring forth and it loosens the intentional threads that connect us to the world in order to make them appear (PhP 13-14/lxxvii).

In a later passage from “The Thing and the Natural World” chapter (to which I shall also return extensively in chapter 1), Merleau-Ponty appears to take up again the question of the reduction, when he all of a sudden declares that he is going to “pay a metaphysical and disinterested attention (*une attention métaphysique et désintéressée*)” to the natural thing (PhP 378/336). These passages might illuminate what is at stake in my claim to disinterest if we consider what it would mean to be related to a philosophical text in the way that philosophy, according to Merleau-Ponty (following Husserl and Fink), acquires its proper stance vis à vis the thing and the world by suspending the complicity we maintain with them through the natural attitude. To approach a philosophical text from a posture that corresponds with the phenomenological reduction would thus be to refuse complicity with it. To refuse complicity with a philosophical text amounts to acting as if, in one’s study of it, one had no stake in the problems dealt with in that text. To act as if one had no stake in the problems dealt with in a text is to refuse oneself any position outside the text from which to judge whether the responses and solutions advanced by the text to the problems it formulates are sound and desirable ones. To place oneself in a relation to the text from within which the question of the extra-textual veracity or goodness of the claims articulated in the text never arises is, for me at least, effectively to adopt a posture of disinterest with regard to the text.

At the same time, this disinterest is consonant with partiality, yet not in the sense of the well-known configuration of a partiality disguised as disinterest, so compellingly unmasked as such by, in Paul Ricoeur’s famous expression, the great “masters of suspicion” (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud)⁹⁸ and the traditions of thought following in their wake. The unquestionable partiality of my approach to Merleau-Ponty’s work lies in the deliberate decision to diffract his thought through the double prism of the problem of nature and the question of the labour of the feminine performed in his approach to this problem. This is very far from claiming to offer an exhaustive representation of Merleau-Ponty’s work, let alone to suppose that such a

⁹⁸ In *Freud and Philosophy: an Essay on Interpretation*, Ricoeur proposes to distinguish between two principal schools or traditions of hermeneutics, which he calls “the school of reminiscence” and “the school of suspicion” respectively. The school of suspicion is dominated, according to Ricoeur, by three masters: “Three masters, seemingly mutually exclusive, dominate the school of suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud” (Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: an Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 32).

representation is available at all. Nor is it to assume, as one might have argued along the lines of standpoint theory epistemology, that the partial position through which I approach Merleau-Ponty's work is somehow, for historical reasons, a privileged position. Rather, it amounts to an attempt to reveal a pattern of philosophical imagination constellating in his texts that would otherwise have remained invisible.⁹⁹ It is my belief, however, that such a disinterested and partial opening unto, and intervention in, a textual corpus of philosophy might be of aid in the more serious and perhaps ultimately interminable task of assessing the more general worth of that corpus.

Outlines

In order to facilitate my investigation of Merleau-Ponty's work along the lines presented in this introduction, I have structured the main part of the thesis into two subsections, "Part I: Alterity, Immemoriality and Generativity as Fundamental Issues Pertaining to Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature" and "Part II: The Feminine at Work in Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature".

In the first part, as the title indicates, I provide an exposition, chapter by chapter, of what I have identified as the major issues making up the horizon of problems pertaining to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature. In chapter 1, I investigate how alterity emerges as a problem to be dealt with in the context of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, by showing how the issue asserts itself on both sides of the subject-world relation, from the point of view of perception and reflection respectively.

In chapter 2, the same procedure is applied in order to disclose a similar importance of the issue of immemoriality, which is equally emphasized by showing up both in the place of the world as given in perception and in the place of the subject given in reflection.

Chapter 3, being by far the most extensive chapter of this thesis, broaches the difficult issue of generativity in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature, the point of departure for this investigation being the problem of subjectivity as both "indeclinable" and "dependent". I use Merleau-Ponty's exposition of the problem of subjectivity in these terms in *Phenomenology of Perception* as a key to read the meaning and significance of his later explorations of "the

⁹⁹ In this aspect, my suggested approach straddles the terrain of Donna Haraway's "situated knowledges": "[N]ot so perversely, objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment, and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision. This is an objective vision that initiates, rather than closes off, the problem of responsibility for the generativity of

flesh” as “formative medium of the object and the subject” and of nature as “originary productivity”.

The second part of the thesis contains three relatively independent studies of the feminine at work in Merleau-Ponty’s approach to the problem of nature, such as it has been defined in the first part of the thesis. The first of these studies (“Chapter 4: Nature à l’écart”) explores the feminine at work in Merleau-Ponty’s approach to the alterity of nature, by developing and articulating the interconnections between the motifs of desire, resistance, invisibility and the veil across Merleau-Ponty’s works. In this connection, I shall avail myself of latent connections between Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions and the treatment of the motif of the feminine in Levinas and Nietzsche respectively in order to bring out what I claim to be the fantasmatic woman-figure underlying Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of nature’s alterity.

In the second of these studies (“Chapter 5: Pregnant Nature”), I explore a range of ways in which the motif of maternity infiltrates Merleau-Ponty’s approach to the issue of the immemoriality of nature, both as it is encountered in perception and as it is attested to in reflection. I focus in particular on, first, how Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical use of the terms *prégnance/pregnant(e)* responds to the task of thinking the immemoriality of nature as perceived by evoking a mythical scenario of maternal autogenesis; second, what we are to make of Merleau-Ponty’s suggestion that the subject’s lack of a complete grasp of itself in reflection is the symptom of “the fate of a being who is born”; and third, how to make sense of Merleau-Ponty’s suggestion that intra-uterine life contains the imperceptible and immemorial “sketch of a natural self and a natural time”. This last of the trajectories making up chapter 5 is also the occasion of my first extended encounter, in the main part of the thesis, with Irigaray’s reading of Merleau-Ponty in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*.

In the final main chapter of this thesis (“Chapter 6: Intergenerated Nature”), I use Merleau-Ponty’s remark in the *Nature* course to the effect that “we are the parents of a nature of which we are also the children” as the key to an exploration of how the motif of maternity can be said to operate in Merleau-Ponty’s approach to the problem of the emergence of subjectivity in nature/the flesh. Here I will also draw and extend on Irigaray’s reading of Merleau-Ponty in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*.

all visual practices. Partial perspective can be held responsible for both its promising and its destructive monsters” (Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), p. 190).

The thesis is concluded (“Conclusion”) by a brief recapitulation of the major concerns and findings that have constituted the horizon of this project, shouldered by the formulation of some critical issues for future projects carried out in the vicinity of Merleau-Ponty’s thought.

**Part I: Alterity, Immemoriality and
Generativity as Fundamental Issues
Pertaining to Merleau-Ponty's
Philosophy of Nature**

Chapter 1: Alterity

This thesis is concerned with bringing to light the labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty's thought in so far as this thought inscribes itself as a philosophy of nature. One basic assumption that provides a trajectory for this reading of Merleau-Ponty's work is that nature is, for Merleau-Ponty, phenomenally given with a coefficient of alterity. Accordingly, a reading of the feminine labour in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature will, in part, have to concern itself with how Merleau-Ponty inscribes alterity in a feminine register.

As a precondition for such an analysis (to be undertaken in the second main section of the present thesis), however, the present chapter will offer substantiation for my guiding assumption that alterity must, for Merleau-Ponty, be considered a constituent phenomenal dimension of nature. In order to show that this is so, I shall focus only marginally on Merleau-Ponty's explicit and thematic considerations of the dimension of alterity as an aspect of our interpersonal relations, and instead closely follow the trajectories of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of nature as perceived and of the nature of the perceiving subject. Following Ted Toadvine's analysis in *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature* (cf. my introductory chapter), my strategy will be to show how alterity shows up on both sides of the perceptual relation: both in terms of the thingliness or "core of reality" of the perceived thing with regard to the perceiving subject, and in terms of the pre-personal or anonymous infrastructure of the perceiving subject with regard to reflection. However, since the alterity of nature perceived as well as of that of the perceiving subject can be articulated only against the background of Merleau-Ponty's fundamental understanding of the perceptual process as a dialogue between the body as the "natural subject" of perception and the nature perceived, I shall begin by reconstructing Merleau-Ponty's elaboration of this understanding.

Perception as "Dialogue" Between The Body as Natural Subject of Perception and Nature as the World Perceived

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach to the perceived world is entirely condensed in the lines with which he opens the second part of *Phenomenology of Perception*: "One's own body is in the world just as the heart is in the organism: it continuously breathes life into the visible spectacle, animates it and nourishes it from within, and forms a system with it" (PhP

245/209). Although he fails to make it explicit in this very passage, the organic metaphor of the heart in the organism signifies not only that one's own body inwardly animates and nourishes the perceived world; it also indicates that the perceived world animates and nourishes one's own body as a perceptual facility. A heart would not beat for long in isolation from the circulatory system of which it is a part.

What Merleau-Ponty is getting at by comparing the body-world relation with the relation of the heart to the organism is, in slightly more explicit terms, the notion that the body is "a natural myself and, as it were, the subject of perception" (PhP 249/213, translation modified). To say that the body is the natural subject of perception means, for Merleau-Ponty, that the world's ways of appearing are organized around what he calls the "the best hold (*meilleure prise*)" the body can take on the world (PhP 317/279). He defines this "best hold" as follows:

My body is geared into the world when my perception provides me with the most varied and most clearly articulated spectacle possible, and when my motor intentions, as they unfold, receive the responses they anticipate from the world. This maximum of clarity in perception and action specifies a perceptual *ground*, a background of my life, a general milieu for the coexistence of my body and the world (PhP 298/261).

Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "best hold" thus signifies that there is a normativity and a teleology immanent to the perceptual process itself that stipulates, for every stimulus, how it may be unfolded, by a slight adjustment of bodily position, posture and attitude, into as richly and clearly articulated a quality, figure, object or spectacle as possible. In this way, the constitution of all facets of the perceived world comes to be defined in terms of "the situation of the object with regard to the power of our hold on it" (311/273). Thus, the body-world system – what Merleau-Ponty also refers to alternatively as the "body schema" (*le schéma corporel*) (PhP 127-132, 184-191/100-105, 149-155)¹⁰⁰ and the "Logos of the aesthetic world" (PhP 492/453)¹⁰¹ – is composed of internal correspondences between the world's ways of appearing and the body's to a large extent habitual ways of addressing the world through its postures, gestures and movements, prior to any explicit act of thematization.

To begin with, the "best hold" stipulates preferential values with respect to which the spatial properties of objects are presented in perception. For example, perception does not explicitly posit and measure the distance at which the object is positioned in relation to

¹⁰⁰ Merleau-Ponty specifies, in a footnote, Paul Schilder's *Das Körperschema* as one of his sources for this term (cf. PhP 128 n. 1/516 n. 4).

¹⁰¹ As Merleau-Ponty specifies in a footnote, he has taken the phrase from Husserl's *Formal and Transcendental Logic* (cf. Edmund Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), p. 292).

where I stand. Rather, I perceive the object's distance or proximity in terms of the weakening or strengthening of the hold that my perceiving body has on it:

When we say that an object is enormous or tiny, or that it is far or near, this is often without any comparison, not even an implicit one, with any other object or even with the objective size and position of one's own body, but rather through a certain "scope" of our gestures, a certain "hold" of the phenomenal body upon its surroundings (PhP 316/278).

Similarly, the bodily logic of the world described by Merleau-Ponty comprises preferential values with respect to the object's spatial orientation. Perception does not register obliqueness of the object indifferently by measuring the angle it forms with the plane of my face; it is rather felt as "a disequilibrium, as an unequal distribution of its influences upon me" (PhP 356/316). Thus, for example, a circular plate presented obliquely is at no time registered as elliptical (a determination I come by only reflectively), but as a circular form I would have a better view of were I to have it presented frontally. Similarly, I do not perceive the three-dimensional shape of things by conceiving their geometrical formulas on the basis of the indices provided by their perspectival deformations. Rather, I immediately perceive such deformations as deviations from what I would have a better hold on or "see better" were I to move around the object or turn it around in my hand or, conversely, as the movement I "sense" I *would* have to engage in in order to have it unfolded. The shape of things, and the presence of those of their sides or aspects that are currently hidden from view, are given not through a synthesis of the understanding but, Merleau-Ponty suggests, through a "practical synthesis" (PriP 45-46/91). In general, as is expressly experienced when walking from one picture to the next in an art gallery, there is for each object "an optimal distance from which it asks to be seen – an orientation through which it presents more of itself – beneath or beyond which we merely have a confused perception due to excess or lack" (PhP 355/316).

The notion of the "best hold" or the body schema can also be seen to determine Merleau-Ponty's approach to the perception of the qualitative dimensions of the world, an account that also showcases the expressive or stylistic dimensions that Merleau-Ponty accords to the body schema. For example, Merleau-Ponty tells us, colours are not *quales* that I note down one after the other, but appear in terms of a certain synergy or synchronicity between what is foreshadowed in the spectacle and a particular style of movement and bodily comportment: "Blue is what solicits a certain way of looking from me, it is what allows itself to palpated by a specific movement of my gaze. It is a certain field or a certain atmosphere offered to the power of my gaze" (PhP 255/218). Similarly, the textural quality of a surface is

not the aggregate of isolated contacts or pressures in which I have discovered a common law, but rather the style or rhythm of movement it solicits from my hand as it feels it: “Smoothness is not a sum of similar pressures, but rather the manner in which a surface makes use of the time of our tactile exploration or modulates the movement of our hand” (PhP 371/329). Before seeing or feeling a certain colour or a certain texture as a determinate quality (e.g. blue or smooth), my sensing body is beckoned by “the proposition of a certain existential rhythm” (PhP 258/221) vaguely issuing from the depths of the sensible. This proposition poses to my body a sort of “confused problem”:

[A] sensible datum that is about to be sensed poses to my body a sort of confused problem. I must find the attitude that *will* provide it with the means to become determinate and become blue; I must find the response to a poorly formulated question. And yet, I only do this in response to its solicitation. My attitude is never sufficient to make me truly see blue or touch a hard surface. The sensible gives back to me what I had lent to it, but I received it from the sensible in the first place (PhP 259/222).

From these descriptions, we can discern how, for Merleau-Ponty, the body-world synergies sought through perception in virtue of the body schema or the norm of the “best hold” is not only embedded in practical horizons that require a certain degree of stability and balance, but also incorporates expressive and affective dimensions. As he famously puts it in the essay “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”, “perception already stylizes” (S 87/IL 91). For Merleau-Ponty, then, bodily perception is not only induced by and geared toward action, but is just as much expressive of a “living signification” (PhP 254/217) endogenous to the world itself.

It is with reference to the expressive and stylistic unfolding of perception in virtue of the body schema that Merleau-Ponty also approaches the question of the thing as an intersensory unity. In other words, the body schema lays down directions not only with regard to how objects and properties may link up with the body within each of its sensory modalities, but is also what dictates that “synaesthetic perception is the rule” (PhP 275/238):

If a phenomenon – such as a reflection or light breeze – only presents itself to one of my senses, then it is a phantom, and it will only approach real existence if, by luck, it becomes capable of speaking to my other senses, as when the wind, for example, is violent and makes itself visible in the disturbances of the landscape. (...) [T]he arrangement of color upon the thing (and in the work of art if it fully captures the thing) by itself signifies all of the responses that it would give to the interrogation of my other senses... a thing would not have that color if it did not have this form, these tactile properties, that sonority, or that odor (PhP 374/332-333).

Before the possibility of a synthesis of identification is suspected by a reflecting consciousness, before one even suspects the possibility of reflectively analyzing an

experienced thing as a manifold of appearances and perspectives, the thing must already exist as an inter-sensory unity for my body. In effect, this unity is not in the mode of a self-identical concept or category under which particular samples may be subsumed. Rather, Merleau-Ponty suggests, the thing presents to us the existential unity of a style or a mode of behaviour: “We understand the thing as we understand a new behavior, that is, not through an intellectual operation of subsumption, but rather by taking up for ourselves the mode of existence that the observable signs sketch out before us” (PhP 375/333).

It is remarkable that nearly all of Merleau-Ponty’s examples of how we synaesthetically take up for ourselves the “mode of existence” that sensible signs adumbrate before us do not so much relate to “things”, but rather to natural *elements*, such as wind, the sky, glow and fire, wood, brooks, pools and oceans of water etc. For example, the shifts and turns of the weather emit behavioural particles on the basis of which my body prepares me, for example, for the onset of an imminent storm “whose signs I could not even list and that I do not even foresee, but for which I am ‘equipped’ and prepared” (PhP 377/335). In the same way, my body immediately understands the visual appearance of heat in virtue of “a sort of vibration of the thing”, so that, for my body, it is “*a priori* necessary that an extremely hot object turns red, for the excess of its vibration causes it to shine” (PhP 375/333). Further still, the way a piece of wood affects my body is not reducible to any collection of sensory data, visual, tactile etc., nor even, Merleau-Ponty says, to its total *Gestalt*, but is rather the “woody essence” emanating from it: “[T]hese ‘sensible givens’ modulate a certain theme or illustrate a certain style that wood is, and that establishes an horizon of sense around this piece of wood and around the perception I have of it” (PhP 214/476). Finally, Merleau-Ponty suggests, it is the liquid element’s general style of time-spatial inhabitation and materialization that accounts for Renoir’s decision to sit by the sea at Cassis while he was painting women bathing in some fresh-water brook elsewhere. This is because “he only asks the sea – which alone can teach what he asks – for its way of interpreting the liquid element, of exhibiting it, and of making it interact with itself” (S 90/IL 93). It is, then, as if, in his intended description of the “thing” in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty were already prefiguring the conclusion he would arrive at in *The Visible and the Invisible*, as expressed in a working note of November 1959: “Perception is not first a perception of *things*, but a perception of *elements* (water, air...) (VI 267/218). I shall return to the issue of elementality in Merleau-Ponty in chapter 3, in connection with my exposition of his notion of the flesh as “formative medium of the object and the subject”.

The decisive point for Merleau-Ponty is that I do not get at the correspondences that compose the body schema as if I were inspecting my moving body and the appearing thing from a detached outlook above them. Instead, I experience these correspondences inwardly as the counterpart to the “living connection” that draws the parts of my body into a comprehensive project:

I have no need of taking an objective view of my own movement and of bringing it into account in order to reconstitute the true form of the object behind its appearance. The account is already settled, the new appearance has already entered into composition with the lived movement and is offered as the appearance of a cube. The thing and the world are given with the parts of my body, not through a “natural geometry”, but in a living connection comparable, or rather identical, to the living connection that exists among the parts of my body itself (PhP 247/211).

Perception is, then, at once the experience of the evidentness of the thing and of the concordance of the body’s sensori-motor powers in its effort to alight on the thing, and these two sides of the phenomenon cannot really be separated: “[E]very attitude of my body is immediately for me a power for a certain spectacle...each spectacle is for me what it is within a certain kinesthetic situation” (PhP 356/316). To say that the body is the natural subject of perception is thus, for Merleau-Ponty, equivalent to saying, on the one hand, that the body is “the common texture of all objects” (PhP 282/244) and therefore that the world merges with the body or is its “correlate” (PhP 376/334); on the other hand, the body is the natural subject of perception in the sense that “there is a logic of the world that my entire body merges with” (PhP 383/341), such that the body somehow seems destined for and conditioned by the world it perceives.

In effect, the body schema or the “best hold” signal to Merleau-Ponty that a “pact” (PhP 298/261), “symbiosis” (PhP 373/331) or “dialogue” (PhP 376/334) is established between the perceiving body and the perceived world, such that my sensory fields become “my primitive complicities with the world” (PhP 487/448). Such terms would alone suffice to indicate that one could not have abstracted the experience of the other person from Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception. As has been pointed out by Renaud Barbaras, for Merleau-Ponty,

the perceived world is first what responds to the possibility of the other, the place where others are liable to appear. (...) [T]hroughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, the description of the sensible and of the object borrows its vocabulary from the experience of the other, as if the characteristics of every experience were crystallized in this one.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, p. 19.

But just as accord, resonance, complicity and agreement do not exhaust the experience of the other person, so the bodily experience of the world in perception incorporates an alterity that belies the fantasy of an undisturbed harmony that would otherwise seem to lurk in the notion of perception as dialogue. In other words, as I am going to show next, the dimension of alterity in terms of which the full concretion of the other person is always more and something other than what we make of him or her is going to have its analogue in Merleau-Ponty's description of the dialogue between the natural subject and the natural world.

The Thing as “A Resolutely Silent Other”

As anticipated in my introductory chapter, and with especial reference to the work of Ted Toadvine, there are also important passages where Merleau-Ponty addresses the limits of the notion of perception as discussed thus far. As he puts it in the very same section on the “Thing” in *Phenomenology of Perception* from which I have been quoting, a description of perceptual experience that overemphasizes the dialogical and resonating, synergic relation between body and thing is not sufficient because it “reduce[s] the thing to the experiences in which we encounter it” (PhP 379/337). If we reduce the thing to the experiences in which we encounter it, we content ourselves with a definition of it that is both anthropomorphic and psychological, and which therefore does not give us the “full sense of the thing defined”, that is, the ontological sense of the thing, the thingliness of the thing. As he would repeat in the fourth chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, he is not content “to do anthropology, to describe a world covered over with all our projections, leaving aside what it can be under the human mask” (VI 177/136). In other words, we forget to take account of the fact that, in order for the thing to be truly a thing and belong to a nature not constructed by us, a nature that persists beneath all human artifice, it must not merely be for-us and must be such that it “poses the problem of a genuine in-itself-for-us” (PhP 378/336). And for Merleau-Ponty, to pose the problem of the thing's character as in-itself-for-us is to broach the issue of alterity, in so far as it is to acknowledge that the thing is not only an interlocutor but also “a resolutely silent Other” (PhP 378/336), rooted in “a background of non-human nature” in which we cannot recognize ourselves (PhP 380/338); the “core of reality” in the thing (PhP 379/337) is thus given phenomenally to us in terms of an irreducible alterity. Hence, as Toadvine has suggested on several occasions, the thing of nature is described by Merleau-

Ponty “in an oddly Janus-faced fashion”.¹⁰³ on the one hand, as our interlocutor in a sort of dialogue, bequeathing its sense to us “like a familiar face whose expression is immediately understood” (PhP 378/336); on the other hand, as the silent and ever-present testimony of a world of nature vastly in excess of anything that will ever be accommodated within the parameters of human sense modalities, industry and symbolic activity.

However, as Toadvine further remarks,¹⁰⁴ Merleau-Ponty is not content merely to note down the tension or conflict (at least as far as our experience of it is concerned) between these two faces of the natural thing, he also wants to *understand* it: “How might we simultaneously understand that the thing is the correlate of my knowing body and that the thing denies this body?” (PhP 381-382/339) Now, Merleau-Ponty’s response to this question also draws along with it problems concerning the relation between different stances or attitudes toward nature, such as the metaphysical and the ordinary, the transcendental and the natural, the artistic and the profane or prosaic. Thus, although he on one occasion concedes that “the thing is presented as a thing in itself even to the person who perceives it” (PhP 378/336), he immediately proceeds to say – in the very next sentence – that we normally do not catch sight of this thingliness of the thing. The reason why we do not normally catch sight of it, despite the fact that it is part of the perceptual givenness of the thing, is that the normal flow of perception follows the directions and rhythms of the practical needs and everyday concerns of the one perceiving and thus “bears upon the thing just enough to find in them their familial presence, and not enough to rediscover what of the non-human is hidden within them” (PhP 378/336). In order that we may become aware of “the core of reality” or alterity residing in things, it is necessary to suspend our everyday dealings with them and instead “bring a metaphysical and disinterested attention to bear upon them” (PhP 378/336). We must note that it is precisely a “metaphysical and disinterested” attention that Merleau-Ponty commends in order to get at the thingliness of the thing. This means that we are not to pay a physical, which is to say, scientific attention to it, which – for a phenomenologist like Merleau-Ponty – is far from being disinterested or removed from everyday dealings, but is rather a way of prolonging the latter. Instead, the metaphysical and disinterested attention in question is what Merleau-Ponty identifies, in the “Preface” to *Phenomenology of Perception*, as the accomplishment of Husserl’s phenomenological reduction. As is well known, in

¹⁰³ Cf. Toadvine, “Ecophenomenology and the Resistance of Nature”, pp. 345-350; see also Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, pp. 40, 123-126.

¹⁰⁴ Toadvine, “Ecophenomenology and the Resistance of Nature”, p. 347.

expounding on the phenomenological reduction here, Merleau-Ponty relies on Eugen Fink's remarks (in his famous *Kantstudien* article on Husserl's thought in relation to the Neo-Kantian tradition – defended by Rickert, Zocker, Kreis and others)¹⁰⁵ concerning the phenomenological reduction, saying that it amounts to a “wonder” before the world:

Perhaps the best formulation of the reduction is the one offered by Husserl's assistant Eugen Fink when he spoke of a “wonder” before the world. Reflection does not withdraw from the world toward the unity of consciousness as the foundation of the world; rather, it steps back in order to see transcendences spring forth and it loosens the intentional threads that connect us to the world in order to make them appear; it alone is consciousness of the world because it reveals the world as strange and paradoxical (PhP 14/lxxvii).¹⁰⁶

As is well known, for Merleau-Ponty there are none who know better how to stand in wonder before the world in order to let transcendences spring forth than do the modern painters. As he writes in “Eye and Mind”, “The painter lives in fascination” (OE 48/141-142). The singular virtue of the painter's vocation comes from the fact that the painter is –

¹⁰⁵ Eugen Fink, “The Phenomenological Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Contemporary Criticism,” in *The Phenomenology of Husserl*, ed. R. O. Elveton (Seattle: Noesis Press, Ltd., 1970).

¹⁰⁶ For an investigation of the Finkian motif of “wonder” and its connection with Descartes' *The Passions of the Soul* as the key to Merleau-Ponty's reading of the phenomenological reduction, see Sara Heinämaa, “From Decisions to Passions: Merleau-Ponty's Interpretation of Husserl's Reduction,” in *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Lester E. Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002). The status of the phenomenological reduction in Merleau-Ponty's thought has been a source of contestation in the reception of his work, with some partisans of Merleau-Ponty claiming that Merleau-Ponty rejected the reduction altogether as an approach to philosophical inquiry (cf. particularly Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, p. 87). My impression is, however, that consensus is gradually settling with the notion that a certain reading – especially as filtered through Eugen Fink – of Husserl's reduction on Merleau-Ponty's part must be seen to have played a positive role in the outlook of Merleau-Ponty's own thought, in both early and late phases. One of the most recent statements on the issue – Lawlor's in *Early Twentieth Century Continental Philosophy* – even suggests that the phenomenological reduction is important not only to Merleau-Ponty throughout his career, but is indispensable for *all* continental thought from Husserl and onwards (Heidegger included), continuing up through what Lawlor calls the French philosophy of the Sixties (Derrida, Deleuze and Foucault). According to Lawlor, it is the phenomenological reduction that marks the ambition in this historical epoch to break with Platonism and to move thought to a plane of immanence. What happens in the French philosophy of the Sixties, according to Lawlor, is that the reduction to immanence effectuated in the phenomenological reduction is given yet another turn, when the “lived experience” (which is a more palatable term for “consciousness” in both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty) that remains the ground of immanence in phenomenology is itself reduced to immanence. Put another way, immanence is no longer thought on the basis of lived experience or consciousness, but the other way around, as Lawlor suggests by saying that the immanence of lived experience now becomes immanent to immanence: “Through the epoché, immanence is no longer immanent to consciousness; consciousness is immanent to immanence; a ‘strange’ transcendental experience. We must say that no investigation placed under the category of continental philosophy can take place without undergoing the epoché” (Lawlor, *Early Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy*, p. 84). The definition of immanence in terms of immanence to consciousness is the last vestige of transcendence that will be overcome in the Sixties, and most explicitly by Deleuze.

On the other hand, I think that Merleau-Ponty's openness to the idea of the reduction does not entitle us to claim, as Heinämaa does, that “Merleau-Ponty continues and develops further Husserl's basic idea of philosophy as a radical, rigorous science, distinct from the empirical sciences” (Sara Heinämaa, “Merleau-Ponty's Modification of Phenomenology: Cognition, Passion and Philosophy”, *Synthese* 118 (1999), p. 50). Although one may agree that Merleau-Ponty's thought, in so far as it incorporates the idea of the phenomenological reduction, aspires to be both radical and distinct from the empirical sciences, I think it is misleading to say that this would make of it a “rigorous science”. The excessively poetic and experimental style of Merleau-Ponty's prose and his self-proclaimed penchant for the truth of the ambiguous, the allusive and indirect modes of signification would seem to militate against the characterization of it as either “rigorous” or “scientific”. Quite to the contrary, in so far as Husserl's thought can indeed claim to represent a piece of non-empirical, rigorous science (something which, as is well known, Derrida has put into question on several occasions) I think Merleau-Ponty's thought represents, on account of its stylistic outlook, a critique of Husserl's definition of phenomenological philosophy as a rigorous science.

unlike the writer, the scientist or the philosopher – innocent of propositions or theses, and that his or her work is accomplished entirely in the mode of a question that is the reverse of the schoolmaster’s question: “The question comes from one who does not know, and it is addressed to a vision, a seeing, which knows everything and which we do not make, for it makes itself in us” (OE 22/128). This particular mode of fascinated questioning is what accounts for the peculiar air of unfamiliarity and even discomfort surrounding Cézanne’s paintings:

Cézanne’s painting...reveals the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself. This is why Cézanne’s people are strange, as if viewed by a creature of another species. Nature itself is stripped of the attributes which make it ready for animistic communions: there is no wind in the landscape, no movement on the Lac d’Annecy; the frozen objects hesitate as at the beginning of the world. (SNS 22/CD 66).

What the painter realizes in the course of his or her wondering and fascinated questioning is that the particular style, expression or behaviour that constitutes the thing’s unity for our body cannot be accessed by itself, but that the thing, even a human face, “only expresses something through the arrangement of colors and lights that compose it” and that “no matter what it says to us, it says it through the very organization of its sensible appearance” (PhP 378-379/336-337). This is why Merleau-Ponty says that Cézanne’s earlier efforts were ineffective, because he first tried to capture the expression or the style of the thing head-on, only to gradually realize that “expression is the language of the thing itself, and is born of its configuration” (378-379/337). To illustrate this development in Cézanne’s work, Merleau-Ponty on several occasions cites a remark by Cézanne himself, related by Joachim Gasquet:

He reads [from Balzac’s *La Peau de chagrin*]: “...a tablecloth as white as new fallen snow and on which the place settings rise symmetrically, each one crowned by little blonde rolls”. Throughout my youth, I wanted to paint that, this tablecloth of fresh snow. I know now that I must paint only “place settings rise symmetrically” and “little blonde rolls”. If I paint “crowned”, I’m ruined. Do you understand? And if I truly balance and nuance my place settings and my rolls as from nature, you can be sure that the crowns, the snow, and all the flickering will be there too.¹⁰⁷

Cézanne’s discovery was, then, that the style of the tablecloth and the place settings (“as new fallen snow” and “crowned”) is somehow caught within the distribution of its sensible appearances (symmetrically rising place settings and little blonde rolls) and develops itself as if from within the latter. The painter and the philosopher standing in wonder before the world thus discover, and prior to interpersonal communication, that the operation of “the miracle of

expression” (PhP 375/333 cf. also PhP 239/204), which we are otherwise prone to attribute to ourselves only, is already operative in the depths of a nature not of man’s making. Quite miraculously, then, there is an “autochthonous sense of the world” (PhP 504/466), literally, a springing-forth-from-the-land-itself of a sense not of our making but which we take up in our dealings with the world.

Crucially, this notion of an “autochthonous sense of the world” remains valid, with all its Greek and indeed Athenian resonances, for Merleau-Ponty as he more explicitly broaches the question concerning the meaning of the word “nature”, some 10 years later, at the opening of the first *Nature* course:

We are looking for the primordial, nonlexical meaning always intended by people who speak of “nature”. In Greek, the word “nature” comes from the verb φύω-, which alludes to the vegetative; the Latin word comes from *nascor*, “to be born”, “to live”; it is drawn from the first, more fundamental meaning. There is nature wherever there is a life that has meaning, but where, however, there is not thought; hence the kinship with the vegetative. Nature is what has a meaning, without this meaning being posited by thought: it is the autoproduction of a sense (N 19/3, translation modified)

It will be a question to be dealt with later whether the obstetrical nexus of meaning (“to be born”) pertaining to the primordial, nonlexical meaning of the word “nature” is not after all just as “fundamental” for Merleau-Ponty as is the sense of the vegetative.

However, the fact that nature is an auto-production of sense, that there is an autochthonous sense of the world, that expression is the language of things themselves, arising from their sensible configurations, is not to say that the painterly (or philosophical, for that matter) restitution of the style of things is an easy task. Quite to the contrary, Merleau-Ponty claims, “[e]xpressing what *exists* is an endless task” (SNS 21/CD 66), because, ultimately, “[e]ach fragment of a visible spectacle satisfies an infinite number of conditions, and it belongs to the real to contract an infinity of relations into each of its moments” (PhP 379-380/338). This “infinity of relations”, this inexhaustible depth of natural expressivity, which may first grip us with awe and fascination, may easily yield to anguish and discomfort in the face of the task of trying to reconstitute it in the medium of human expression. This is why Cézanne would spend hours pondering over his next brushstroke, for he knew that it would have, were it to be successful, to contain and draw along with it the whole sensible plenitude of his motif (whether landscape, still life, or portrait) which, besides visual, tactile and sonorous values, also comprises a certain odour. For example,

¹⁰⁷ Michael Doran, ed. *Conversations with Cézanne* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 158. Merleau-Ponty cites it on several occasions (cf. PhP 239-240/204; SNS 21/CD 66).

Merleau-Ponty points out, “it is impossible to describe fully the color of a carpet without saying that it is a carpet, or a woolen carpet, and without implying in this color a certain tactile value, a certain weight, and a certain resistance to sound” (PhP 379/337). Indeed, the colour of the carpet will ultimately remain just as undefinable in conceptual terms as its essence is undeniably present, because its definition is indissolubly bound up with the thing it colours, the sense of which is in its turn “indistinguishable from its total appearance” (PhP 379/337).

For Merleau-Ponty, then, to say that nature achieves – prior to the onset of interpersonal communication – that “miracle of expression” by which “an interior is revealed outside” (PhP 375/333), thanks to which it becomes the correlate of my body, and to say that it is “a resolutely silent Other” ultimately come back to the same thing. The expressivity radiating from the things themselves engage our bodily capacity to follow out and draw together – through movement, posture and attitude – “scattered visibility...what is merely sketched out in the spectacle” (PhP 365/323). And yet, precisely in so doing, it reveals to us its irreducible aspect of alterity because the sense that comes to be articulated through this exchange is endemic or autochthonous to nature itself; it emerges from a non-human depth of natural expressivity that we can never fathom. The synergy or synchronicity between body and world conceals an original a-synchronicity between them that both conditions and marks the limits of our body’s effort to come to terms with the indeterminacy of multiple and impossible “lines of force” (PhP 75/50) playing across the surface of nature. With respect to the case of colour perception, Merleau-Ponty cites the *Gestalt* psychologist Heinz Werner on this point: “If a subject attempts to experience a determinate colour, such as blue, while seeking to adopt with his body an attitude that works for red, an inner battle ensues, a sort of spasm, which ceases as soon as he adopts the bodily attitude that corresponds to blue” (PhP 259/222). Hence, for Merleau-Ponty, although the alterity of nature maintains a tension with its aspect as the correlate of our body, it is not at odds with its expressivity or meaningfulness, which is a condition for its openness to being perceived by us. Quite to the contrary, if – on the surface of it – alterity evokes a dimension of non-sense, in the sense of falling short of the horizon of sense projected by the one perceiving, this is precisely because it exudes a *surplus* or *excess* of sense, not because it lacks sense.

In chapter 4, I will expand on the preceding analysis by taking up the issue of the value Merleau-Ponty places on the dimension of *resistance* as a key to understand the alterity of nature, and in this I shall be following a hint proposed, seemingly separately, by Renaud

Barbaras and Ted Toadvine. My treatment of this issue will stray from Barbaras' and Toadvine's path, however, to the extent that I will also be posing the question of a possibly feminine labour at work in this resistance, which I intend to bring out by retracing an operative interaction between the motif of resistance and desire across Merleau-Ponty's texts dealing with the alterity of nature. For the moment, I would like to add more credulity to the very practice of speaking of an "alterity of nature" in Merleau-Ponty by considering how, for Merleau-Ponty, the alterity of the natural thing with respect to our perceiving body is redoubled by the alterity of our body as natural subject of perception, by the nature that we are, with respect to the attempt on the part of our reflective self to thematize it.

The Body as "Another Subject Beneath Me"

Beyond the phenomenology of perception Merleau-Ponty develops in the work of the same title, he also elaborates in the same work what he in one instance calls a "phenomenology of phenomenology" (PhP 424/382), which could perhaps just as well have served as the title of the work. If the phenomenology of perception – which I have expounded on above – is the reflective attempt to step back from the living flow of embodied perception in order to describe its fundamental structures, then the phenomenology of phenomenology is the attempt reflectively to describe and analyze reflection itself. This is to say that, in the phenomenology of phenomenology, reflection is itself considered as an experience with its own phenomenal thickness and with its own constitutive dimensions. When we reflect on an unreflective experience, such as perception, what in fact we are trying to do is to bring to light the subject of perception – just as perception aims to bring to light or to get hold of its object. We try to equalize or assimilate what we are as perceivers to what we are as subjects of discourse or of the symbolic, that is, subjects who say "I" and who join conceptual predicates to grammatical subjects in order to describe our experience of ourselves and of the world around us. The very fact that we are reflecting on perception – that is, trying to describe discursively or symbolically our own perceptual experience of things – announces that we exist as subjects in two modes or at two levels that do not completely overlap, or that have once and for all become decentred with respect to one another: the reflective and the unreflective.

The remarkable thing about Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of phenomenology, "radical reflection" (PhP 21/lxxxv) or "hyper-reflection" (VI 60/38) is, as Ted Toadvine has pointed out, that the very same structure of alterity-in-symbiosis that had determined the

horizontal relation between body and world in perception reappear in the vertical relation between the reflecting self of the phenomenologist and the natural, unreflective self he or she is reflecting on. He writes: “If there is a first transcendence of nature with respect to the body that perceives it, with which it is ‘co-natural’, there is a second transcendence of this prereflective exchange in relation to the reflective subject that describes it”.¹⁰⁸ If such a reading of Merleau-Ponty is appropriate, then a second set of arguments can be developed for my thesis that alterity (what Toadvine here calls transcendence)¹⁰⁹ must be considered an integral constituent of nature as conceived by Merleau-Ponty – in this connection, nature in the sense of the nature that we are. In what follows, I would therefore like to offer an exposition of natural alterity such as it is disclosed through Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of phenomenology, the alterity in question being that of my body as “another subject beneath me” (PhP 302/265).

The Personal and the Anonymous

Above, I suggested that it is through the assumption of the “metaphysical and disinterested” attitude of the phenomenological reduction, from within which one stands in wonder before the world, that Merleau-Ponty claims access to “what of the non-human that is hidden in things”, that is, to that alterity of things that he says secretly and constitutively inhabits all perception although we normally do not notice it. Let us now observe that, for Merleau-Ponty, it is from the same stance of wonder that we may also become aware of that “gift of nature, without any effort required on my part” (PhP 261/224) by which I am given a world to reflect on in the first place. This gift of nature is nothing but my own body as natural self, as the power of a certain world, and a wondrous one at that: “I am, as a sensing subject, full of natural powers of which I am the first to be filled with wonder” (PhP 260/223). We have seen that the wondrous thing about the natural thing is the alterity born of its attestation to an abyssal expressivity that vastly exceeds our bodily capacity to take it up and resonate with it. What, then, is it that accounts for the alterity of my body, such that its perceptual, motor and expressive powers inspire such a wonder in me?

It seems to me that Merleau-Ponty’s answer to this question can be summed up in his famous notion of the *anonymity* of the body as natural self. In other words, what, for

¹⁰⁸ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 69

¹⁰⁹ A few paragraphs further down, however, he uses the term “alterity” to describe the same “relation of excess and withholding” that appear on both unreflective and reflective levels of experience (cf. Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 71).

Merleau-Ponty, is wondrous about my body as the depository of natural powers that offer me a world to live in and to reflect on is that it can both be said that I find these powers in myself, while all the same being unable absolutely to regard these powers as *mine*. Rather, they attest to the life of *one* or *someone* perceiving and acting in and through me, yet who is not exactly myself, who is other than myself as an individual, personal subject:

Every perception takes place within an atmosphere of generality and is presented to us as anonymous. I cannot say that I see the blue of the sky in the sense that I say that I understand a book, or again that I decide to dedicate my life to mathematics. My perception, even seen from within, expresses a given situation: I see blue because I am *sensitive* to colors; whereas personal acts create a situation: I am a mathematician because I decided to be one. As a result, if I wanted to express perceptual experience with precision, I would have to say that *one (on)* perceives in me, and not that I perceive. (...) Each time I experience a sensation, I experience that it does not concern my own being – the one for which I am responsible and upon which I decide – but rather another self that has already sided with the world, that is already open to certain of its aspects and synchronized with them (PhP 260-261/223-224).

It is hence the notion of the anonymity of the body's perceptual facility that conveys the sense of Merleau-Ponty's suggestion, as we have seen above, that the perceived world makes itself within us but without us.

I believe Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body as the anonymous subject of perception, and the sense in which it amounts to a dimension of alterity at the heart of our very being, can be further analyzed, as both Sara Heinämaa and Ted Toadvine have shown, in terms of dependency and autonomy.¹¹⁰ The personal self of the reflective and volitional "I" is dependent on the anonymous, bodily self, which for its part is autonomous with regard to the personal self. Yet the anonymous remains for Merleau-Ponty a limit-concept, in so far as it surrounds the personal self as a margin or horizon into which it grades off, thus making ultimately impossible the assignation of a definite limit between them. In what follows, I shall approach Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of phenomenology – that is, his phenomenology of the alterity of the unreflective, anonymous natural subject of perception with respect to the personal subject of reflection – in terms the autonomy of the natural subject with respect the personal subject, the dependency of the latter on the former, and the indeterminacy of the zone of (in)distinction between them.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Sara Heinämaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), pp. 41-44; cf. Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, pp. 61-63.

The Autonomy of the Anonymous With Respect to the Personal

First, let us consider Merleau-Ponty's claim that the anonymous existence of my body "streams forth through me without my complicity" (PhP 204/168). In thus speaking of a certain autonomy on the part of bodily existence, Merleau-Ponty is far from wanting to suggest that the body is a self-contained or self-sufficient entity in the realist sense of a thing in itself. Rather, he suggests, the anonymous existence of my body pursues its course beneath my existence as a personal self in the way that the functioning or facility of our *habits* escape our conscious or deliberate control. This is at least, as far as I am concerned, what Merleau-Ponty alludes to when he says that "my own body is the primordial habit" (PhP 120/93). Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty appears to distinguish between native habits born of our body's physical and anatomical structure on the one hand and acquired habits on the other hand.

While he no doubt devotes most attention to the study of acquired habits, Merleau-Ponty does seem to allow a place for habits that can only be modified within certain limits imposed by pre-human nature, or by the very lot of having one's potential for action mediated by the possession of "hands, feet, a body" (PhP 504/465). The mere fact of being situated in the world through an upright body, with a certain size and constitution characteristic of our species and a scope for action and movement that cannot in principle be unlimited, affects the way we perceive our surroundings in general ways which we cannot ever hope to drastically alter. At the very least, having one's experience and activity mediated by one's bodily presence in the world means that this experience and this activity will always run up against *some* limits, no matter how successful we will be in manipulating those limits through technology. Wanting to neglect this – as Merleau-Ponty accuses Sartre of doing – is to believe oneself able to definitely detach oneself from the earth as the soil of all human experience and activity. For example, I may conceive a project to climb this mountain, and by embarking on this project I may become aware that they are too large and too vertical for me to scale. But I cannot say that this largeness, this verticality and in general the elemental adversity of the mountain exist only on account of my project to climb it; rather, this adversity is an adversity for my body, in so far as the mountain far surpasses my body's capacity, and not least in so far as it surpasses the scaling powers of *any* human body:

[E]ven if I have just read *Micromégas*, nothing I do can make [these mountains] appear small. Beneath myself as a thinking subject (able to place myself at will either on Sirius or on the earth's surface), there is thus something like a natural self who does not leave behind its terrestrial situation and who continuously sketches out absolute evaluations. (...) Insofar as I have hands, feet, a body, and a world, I sustain

intentions around myself that are not decided upon and that affect my surroundings in ways I do not choose (PhP 503/464-465).

In the innate register of the body's spontaneous evaluations of our surroundings, Merleau-Ponty also includes the *Gestalt* psychologists' principle of spontaneous organization of sensory fields, and which goes into the compass of what he calls the "best hold" (as discussed above). Just as, during the time I enjoy an intact power of sight, I cannot decide one day that I shall no more perceive the sun as "rising" or "setting" on the horizon or, on a hazy day, as "hovering two hundred paces away" (PhP 89/62), so it is not up to me to decide or undo the fact that I always see something as situated in the middle of something else, as forming a constellation or a configuration before me, such as a figure on a background or a thing or quality enveloped in some luminosity or other. Rather, "this is the very definition of the perceptual phenomenon, or that without which a phenomenon cannot be called perception" (PhP 26/4).

Beyond such absolute measures of our surroundings, my body also spontaneously marks out and opens up, on my behalf but without my deliberate complicity, fields of perception and action on account of its being trained or habituated in a certain way. For example, different bodily prostheses, such as a protruding hat, a car, and a blind man's cane, are incorporated into bodily space, such that our bodily sensitivity is extended to the extremities of these prostheses, and we usually make our way around things and through narrow spaces without any explicit calculations of objective positions and distances intervening between obstacles, prostheses and our body: "To habituate oneself to a hat, an automobile, or a cane is to take up a residence in them, or inversely, to make them participate within the voluminosity of one's own body" (PhP 179/144-145). Furthermore, it is her skill and proficiency at playing her instrument that enables an experienced organist, for example, to quickly and deftly adapt, during the brief hour of preparation before a concert, to an organ that she has never played before, with differently sized and arranged keyboards, stops and pedals. The brevity of the rehearsal and its intuitive method militates, Merleau-Ponty claims, against the assumption that the positions of the stops, the distance between the pedals and between the keyboards etc. are learned or memorized one by one and made into representations, or else analyzed and then synthesized into a global mental map of the instrument. Rather, the organist "settles into the organ as one settles into a house", and henceforth

the stops, the pedals, and the keyboards are only presented to him as powers of such and such an emotional or musical value, and their position as those places through which this value appears in the world. Between the musical essence of the piece such as it is indicated in the score and the music that actually resonates around the organ, such a direct relationship is established that the body of the organist and the instrument are nothing other than the place of passage of this relation (PhP 181/146-147).

Finally, it is not only with regard to our spatial milieu that our body, in virtue of its natural and habituated powers, marks out on our behalf, yet beyond our deliberative consent or control, our presence in the world. The same perspective applies, according to Merleau-Ponty, to the dimension of time. While I will deal more extensively in the next chapter with the relation Merleau-Ponty sets up between the living body and what he calls “natural time”, I shall take a preliminary look at the issue now in order further to emphasize the sense in which the anonymous existence of the body as natural self pursues its course independently of the personal self. For Merleau-Ponty, there is a sense in saying that the body “secretes time” (PhP 287/249), yet a certain ambiguity lingers with regard to how we are to understand this. The very sentence in which Merleau-Ponty uses this expression continues by suggesting that the body becomes “that place in nature where for the first time events, rather than pushing each other into being, project a double horizon of the past and future around the present and acquire an historical orientation” (PhP 287/249). This amounts to saying that historical time is instituted in and through the body’s intentional yet anonymous hold on the world. Historical time, however, is articulated by singular events and is therefore discontinuous. Furthermore, historical time is ordered as linear or chronological, whether one says that the future develops from the past or vice versa. But, on closer inspection, for Merleau-Ponty, not only does bodily secreted time furnish the basis for historical time, understood as the order of genuine, unique events, but as such it is also qualitatively heterogeneous with respect to historical time. Being neither discontinuous nor linear, it is rather continuous and cyclical or rhythmical:

[Natural or generalized] time is the perpetual starting over of the series: past, present, future. It is like a disappointment and a repeated failure. This is what we express in saying that time is continuous. (...) This is the time of our bodily functions, which are cyclical like it, and it is the time of nature with which we coexist (PhP 517/479, translation modified).

In so far, then, as I have a body with its respiratory, circulatory, and digestive functions, cycles of sleep and waking, eyes that continually and spontaneously blink in order to maintain the mucous tissue of my eyeballs, a body inserted into a natural world continually

in cycles of day and night, seasons, evaporation and downfall of water, ebb and flow of the sea etc., a sort of anonymous time would be continually thrust up, unified and dissolved through me without my being the cause of it. This consideration allows Merleau-Ponty both to dismiss, without flinching, the notion of “a time of objects without subjectivity” (PhP 517/479), while still claiming that “I am not the author of time any more than I am the author of my own heartbeats” (PhP 490/451). Being neither subjective nor objective absolutely, the cyclicity of “natural time” pursues its own independent course beneath historical, narrative time, making it possible while also posing a continued threat to its integrity (i.e., to its claim to the uniqueness of the events it orders):

Insofar as it includes “sense organs”, bodily existence never rests in itself. It is always tormented by an active nothingness, it continuously offers me some form of living, and natural time, in every instant that arrives, ceaselessly sketches out the empty form of the genuine event (PhP 203/168).

While I will return to Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of “natural time” in the next chapter in connection with my discussion of the issue of nature’s immemoriality, what I wanted to emphasize by these cursory remarks on “natural time” is that the body as anonymous, natural subject is, autonomously, a temporalized and temporalizing subject prior to and beneath the history in which personal acts are deposited.

We have seen that Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of bodily existence as anonymous – which is the notion I have resorted to in order to bring out the alterity of the unreflective with respect to the reflective – implies, to begin with, a certain sense of autonomy on the part of our bodily existence with regard to our existence as personal selves. Yet there is an intimate relation between the two levels of existence; they are not simply opposed as two separate orders of being in any sense of the term. To argue this, Merleau-Ponty posits, second, that our existence and activities as personal selves *depend* on the anonymous existence of our body.

The Dependence of the Personal on the Anonymous

Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the personal, reflective self’s dependency on the body as anonymous self is exemplarily elaborated in his critique, in “The Cogito” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, of Descartes’ retreat from the phenomenal world to the psychological immanence of the cogito. The task Descartes set himself was to locate a source of certainty to which we may refer our particular beliefs about the world in order to arbitrate between the true and the false. But although the existence of a benevolent, almighty and

perfect God turns out in the end to be the ultimate source of this certainty, Descartes' fundamental philosophical decision is taken long before this God comes upon the scene. This decision is to distinguish sharply between the act of perception and the thing perceived, and to regard the former as incomparably more certain than the latter. In Merleau-Ponty's paraphrase of Descartes' point, "I am not certain that there is an ashtray or a pipe over there, but I am certain that I think I see an ashtray or a pipe" (PhP 433/393). Thus, in Descartes, the arrogation of absolute certainty to the I's inspection of its own thoughts (perceptions, imaginings, desires etc.) seems to imply the legitimacy of regarding perception as essentially isomorphic with imagination, that is, as something that by itself occurs unaccompanied by any certainty or doubt whatsoever. But, according to Merleau-Ponty, to withdraw all certainty from perception because it has shown itself not to be unfailingly reliable as a source of knowledge (e.g., we sometimes mistake a mere shade on the ground for a stone) is ultimately to deprive the verb "to perceive" of all its claims to have any meaning. The verb "to see" is irreducibly transitive, and it can only bear meaning if by seeing one implies in it a reference to "something": "To see is to see something" (PhP 433/393). Indeed, all of Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of perceptual experience – of quality, of lighting, of space, of thinghood or objectivity – are bent on showing precisely how this reality index is woven into the slightest of perceptions:

Vision can only be reduced to the simple presumption of seeing if we imagine it as the contemplation of a drifting and anchorless *quale*. But if, as we said above, the quality itself in its specific texture is the suggestion made to us (and to which we respond insofar as we have sensory fields) of a certain manner of existing, and if the perception of a color endowed with a definite structure – a surface color or a colored area – in a place, or at a precise or vague distance, presupposes our opening onto a real or onto a world, then how could we dissociate the certainty of our perceiving existence and that of its external counterpart? (PhP 433/393).

The sphere of immanence that Descartes tries to provide for himself on account of a vision or perception supposedly reduced to a purely psychic state is therefore never pure, in so far as the certainty of the "thought that one is seeing" that it is supposed to circumscribe borrows surreptitiously from the certainty of the thing and the world, deprived of which vision would not be vision.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Merleau-Ponty also considers, along similar lines, the attempts (in Kant and Husserl) to circumscribe a realm of transcendental immanence, that is, a "belonging of all phenomena to a constituting consciousness, or the self-possession of clear thought" (PhP 436/396). But these attempts at making contact with a transcendental ego – either by deduction (Kant) or by intuition (Husserl) – fare no better in Merleau-Ponty's eyes than Descartes' attempt to withdraw into psychological immanence, and presuppose no less than does the latter the fact of actually, bodily having seen as its indispensable source: "But if this constituting power is not a myth, and if perception is truly the simple prolongation of an inner dynamism with which I can coincide, then the certitude that I have of the transcendental premises about the world must also be extended to

What, according to Merleau-Ponty, ultimately breaks open this sphere of psychological immanence the moment one believes to have closed it in on itself is the fundamental action-character of perception. We recall that perception always occurs in the context of bodily efforts of movement, gesture and posture and is inseparable from these movements. Because of this act-character, perception is perpetually carried away from itself in time. Accordingly, there would be no other way of assuring myself that I am seeing than by actually seeing, that is, by looking at something, by summoning my bodily power of focusing on and attuning itself to the requirements of what is foreshadowed in the spectacle: “Vision is an action, that is...an operation that holds more than it promised, that always goes beyond its premises. (...) Vision must grasp itself in a sort of ambiguity and a sort of obscurity, since it does not possess itself and rather escapes itself into the thing that is seen” (PhP 435-436/395-396). Starting from perceptual experience, then, “there is no sphere of immanence or no domain where my consciousness would be at home and assured against all risk of error”, because there is no halting the ecstatic movement through which perception hurls itself toward things, leaving behind no “private sphere of consciousness” (PhP 435/396). The “thought that one is seeing” is hence just as certain and just as obscure as the presumed thing from which no seeing could detach itself. The *Cogito* that Descartes establishes on the basis of a seeing reduced to its purely mental aspect is indeclinable, in so far as the certainty of the thing intended through that seeing is indeclinable; but it is also dependent, in so far as its certainty of itself is vouchsafed it by the vision it tries in vain to reduce to its purely mental aspect. Descartes’ *Cogito*, in so far as it expresses the certainty of “the thought that one is seeing”, attests thereby *a fortiori* to the perpetual contribution of the subject’s corporeity, a “communication with the world more ancient than thought” (PhP 302/265). In effect, the “thought that one is seeing”, like vision itself, has to presume more than can be intuited

the world itself, and, given that my vision is through and through the ‘thought that I am seeing’, then the thing I see is in itself what I think about it, and transcendental idealism is an absolute realism. [As the translator’s endnote suggests (cf. PhP 554 n. 17), this equation of transcendental idealism with absolute realism is an oblique quote from Kant’s *Opus Postumum* (mediated through Lachière-Rey’s *L’idealisme kantien*, from which Merleau-Ponty quotes extensively in this chapter), and so the preceding would seem to bear on Kant’s brand of transcendental reduction] It would be contradictory to maintain simultaneously that the world is constituted by me and that I can only grasp the outline and the essential structures of this constitutive operation; I must see the existing world appear – and not merely the idea of the world – upon the completion of the constitutive work, otherwise I would only have an abstract construction and not a concrete consciousness of the world. [An endnote (cf. PhP 434 n. 1/555 n. 18) in the course of this sentence makes clear that Merleau-Ponty is commenting on Husserl’s concession that every transcendental reduction is simultaneously an eidetic reduction] Thus, in which ever way we understand the ‘thought that one is seeing’, it is only certain if actual vision is certain as well” (PhP 434/394). In so far as Merleau-Ponty in this chapter concentrates for the most part on Descartes’ assumption of psychological immanence, it seems that the arguments that may be adduced against this assumption will suffice in his eyes to disqualify as well Kant’s and Husserl’s belief in transcendental immanence.

clearly and distinctly, it “always goes beyond its premises” and “holds more than it promised” (PhP 435/395).

One therefore has to give up, on Merleau-Ponty’s analysis, the Cartesian project of constituting, starting from perceptual experience, a sphere of immanence where the subject would be completely at home with itself and regain a pure self-presence with no trace of our corporeal ties to the world. A similar claim would have to be made, he adds, with regard to so-called “inner perceptions”, i.e., affections and emotions, such as anger, grief, love and hate. Such perceptions, Merleau-Ponty claims, are no more intimate or closer to the subject than is external perception. Besides true or authentic emotions, “there are imaginary emotions in which we are engaged enough for them to be lived, but not enough for them to be authentic” (PhP 441/401). We distinguish between true and illusory feelings just as much as we distinguish between true and illusory object-perceptions, and their truth-conditions are no less to be found in the subject’s actual engagements in the world than is the case with external perceptions. Hence, just as I can be sure of perceiving only by actually perceiving something, I can be sure of loving only by first actually loving someone; and just as I may fall prey to illusions about some material thing, so I may be mistaken about my feelings for someone; and just as optical illusions are only dispelled *post facto*, so I might have to live through a period of intimacy with a person in order to discover that my dealings with this person have not penetrated to the depths of my life and have thus left important sectors of this life unaffected and, as it were, reserved for another future.

The Marginality of the Anonymous

In a third line of argument concerning the relation between the reflective and the unreflective, the personal and the anonymous, Merleau-Ponty advances the consideration that, although the anonymous life of my body as natural self may be set off (on account of its autonomy) from the reflective and volitional self of the “I” and must be said to exceed the latter’s grasp just as it makes it possible, the two still cannot, in the final analysis, be separated but are instead intimately interwoven. We have seen how, for Merleau-Ponty, the personal self is dependent on and sustains itself by the grace of its anonymous incarnation. And yet, for Merleau-Ponty, the autonomous life of the “one” (*on*) is never absolute, it never achieves the character and closure of a self-contained substance (as traditionally understood) that I may inspect and analyze as if under a microscope. The anonymous “one” withholds itself from total appropriation by the personal “I” and exceeds it infinitely precisely because

the anonymous can never be said to be *utterly* anonymous or general, just as the personal “I” is never utterly personal or individual. Ultimately, the anonymous “one” surrounds the personal “I” as a horizon or margin of “almost impersonal” existence, which it may try to approach or from which it may try to stand back in order to make it into an object, but with which it can never totally coincide or fuse, nor yet encompass with either gaze or symbol:

[M]y life is made up of rhythms that do not have their *reason* in what I have chosen to be, but rather have their *condition* in the banal milieu that surrounds me. A margin of *almost* impersonal existence thus appears around our personal existence, which, so to speak, is taken for granted, and to which I entrust the care of keeping me alive (PhP 113/86).

If the anonymous “one” is a margin, then the personal “I” is so as well. The anonymous and the personal, the general and the individual are, for Merleau-Ponty, limit-concepts; they do not denote entities or substances that are externally related, but rather two orientations or tendencies of one single current of existence. The anonymous life of the body, society, language and culture in general constitutes, at the core of the personal self, “that internal weakness that forever prevents us from achieving the density of an absolute individual” (PhP 491/452). Conversely, personal or individual existence is virtually present in the anonymous as an outline that is continually and cyclically sketched, undone and re-sketched: “My organism is not like some inert thing, it itself sketches out the movement of existence. It can even happen that, when I am in danger, my human situation erases my biological one and that my body completely merges with action” (PhP 113/86). The personal and the anonymous cannot be distributed between, for example, the psychic and the physiological as if between two orders of reality or two causal orders. Rather, as Merleau-Ponty famously argues with reference to the case of a phantom limb (cf. PhP 104-118/78-91), the psychic and the physiological are provisional expressions of a single and continuous to-and-fro movement of existence in its personal and anonymous phases respectively. And between these two phases, only an “imperceptible shift” or “insensible turn”:

[T]here is no single movement in a living body that is an absolute accident with regard to psychical intentions and no single psychical act that has not found at least its germ or its general outline in physiological dispositions. (...) [T]rough an imperceptible shift (*un tournant insensible*), an organic process opens up into a human behavior, an instinctive act turns back upon itself and becomes an emotion, or, inversely, a human act becomes dormant and is continued absentmindedly as a reflex (PhP 117-118/90).

Interestingly, this mention of an “insensible turn” between the body qua organic process and the soul qua personal project in *Phenomenology of Perception* prefigures his preoccupation

with the reversibility or chiasm of the flesh in his later work, to which I will return in chapter 3. For the moment, what I would like to emphasize is that what accounts for the alterity of the body *qua* anonymous subject of perception and action in Merleau-Ponty's descriptions is that I cannot fully constitute in reflection this anonymous life as an object precisely because it is part of what I am even as I try to reflect on it. It is, so to speak, what is in me more than me. It is precisely because I cannot utterly detach myself from the anonymous bodily life that nevertheless autonomously subtends the personal life of my deliberately chosen projects that it confronts me as an ineradicable, awe-inspiring alterity, at the heart of my own existence.

This experience of the alterity of my own body on account of my inseparability from it is most acutely in evidence, Merleau-Ponty suggests, in the phenomenon of bodily permanence, which he mentions in *Phenomenology of Perception* yet which he would exploit much more substantially in *The Visible and the Invisible*. There is, he observes, a crucial difference in the way I experience my own body and the way in which external objects are given to me. Whereas external objects can be explored by indefinitely varying my perspective on them (allowing my gaze to wander across them, turning them around in my hand, walking around them etc.), I am, by contrast, "always on the same side of my body; it presents itself to me in one invariable perspective" (VI 192/148). I cannot vary my perspective on my own body in the same way as I may walk around an object or turn it around in my hand, for in that case I should need a second body to be able to perform these operations, and then a third one from which to inspect and touch the second, and so on indefinitely. I cannot reduce my body to an object, because it is the possibility of there being objects for me in the first place: "What prevents it from ever being an object or from ever being 'completely constituted' is that my body is that by which there are objects" (PhP 121/94).

Let us briefly consider how Merleau-Ponty makes this case with reference to vision and touch respectively. The phenomenon of bodily permanence is perhaps experienced most vividly in the case of the visual aspect of my body. My visual body is, from my own point of view, enveloped in a phantom-like atmosphere or haze that hides from me, for example, my back, and the region of my head which becomes absolute darkness beyond the borders marked by the tip of my nose and the contours of my eye sockets. And, although I may observe those parts of my body that are furthest from my eyes, I can hardly ever be said to obtain an image, not even in the mirror, of my own eyes in the living exercise of their

function as my gaze. Merleau-Ponty describes this experience thus in *Phenomenology of Perception*:

My body, as seen in the mirror, continues to follow my intentions as if they were its shadow, and if observation involves varying the point of view by holding the object fixed, then my body escapes observation and presents itself as a simulacrum of my tactile body, since it mimics the tactile body's initiatives rather than responding to them through a free unfolding of perspectives (PhP 120-121/94).

This haze through which my own visible aspect is presented to me and in virtue of which it also ultimately escapes me, by which, in short, “what I see of myself is never exactly the seer, in any case not the seer of the moment” (VI 309/260-261), does not, however, count as nothing in my own eyes. Rather – and at the risk of anticipating the discussion of Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversible flesh that I have saved for chapter 3 – it hollows out or is the trace of that dimension of general visibility in terms of which the appearance of another seer will be able to complete, in my own eyes, my visible body, render it eminently visible in my own eyes: “Through other eyes, we are for ourselves fully visible; that lacuna where our eyes, our back, lie is filled, filled still by the visible, of which we are not the titulars” (VI 186/143). Merleau-Ponty's point is that the appearance of another seer is not by definition (although historical and political circumstances may of course reduce it to) an “ontological catastrophe” (VI 113/83)¹¹² by which I am – beyond everything I was able to suspect in the element of my givenness to myself – completely turned inside out, glued to my facticity and robbed of all my initiatives. Rather, my specular image accompanies and adheres to all my visual experiences (including my impression of myself in the mirror) as a phantom or a “halo of *visibility* (...) a presence of the imminent, latent, or hidden” (VI 293/245), into which my visible aspect evaporates before me without being totally annulled. This phantom or halo, which of course acquires an incomparable level of density or objectivity in the presence of others, is already evoked by the thing we see, that “look without a pupil” feebly reflecting back to us our own visibility “by designating a place among themselves whence we see them” (186/143). This “open circuit *between* the seeing and the visible body”, as Merleau-Ponty puts it in “Eye and Mind”, is the basis for the mirror as a technique of reflection, and not the reverse, in so far as the mirror is but an “illustrat[ion] and amplif[ication] [of] the metaphysical structure of our flesh” (OE 24/129).

¹¹² Merleau-Ponty refers, of course, to Sartre, as is also evident from the context of the discussion in this section of *The Visible and the Invisible*.

In the case of touch, I sense a similar impossibility of superposing exactly on my own perception of things a perception of myself perceiving the things, just as I cannot abolish absolutely the temporal separation between “one moment of my tactile life and the following one” (VI 192/148). During the time one of my hands is feeling the texture of an external object, I cannot exactly overlay this experience with the exterior aspect of this hand that my other hand would be able to feel on it. To the extent that I touch with one of my hands that “intersecting of bones, muscles and flesh compressed into a point of space” (PhP 121/94) which is the “outer covering” of my other hand, I do not touch this other hand as itself a touching hand: “coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization” (VI 191/147). Similarly, the sonority of my own voice is not available for my own ears in the way that other people’s voices are: “[T]he sonorous existence of my voice is for me as it were poorly exhibited; I have rather an echo of its articulated existence, it vibrates through my head rather than outside”(VI 192/148).

As already anticipated, I will return in chapter 3 to the issue of the relation of the seeing and the visible and the touching and the tangible in connection with my discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh in the sense of reversibility. For the moment, let me emphasize that there is, for Merleau-Ponty, in my bodily givenness to myself, a slippage or non-coincidence by which I never exactly grasp myself seeing, never exactly touch myself touching, by which my voice as heard by myself never exactly corresponds to the same voice as others hear it (or as monitored by amplification or recording). This non-coincidence or slippage, which Merleau-Ponty alternatively names “shift” (*bougé*) (VI 192/148), “divergence”, “gap”, “interval”, “lapse” or “spread” (*écart*) (VI 192/148), “hinge” or “joint” (*charnière*) (VI 192/148) and “dehiscence” (VI 189/146), is that in virtue of which I am made present to the world and to myself alike, yet which itself remains “irremediably hidden from me” (VI 192/148). In so far, then, as my corporeity is glued to the margin of all my experiences, my own incarnation – whether one understands this as the becoming-sensible of the sensing or the becoming-sensing of the sensible, the becoming-thought of my speech or the becoming-word of my thought – institutes an ineradicable alterity in the depths of my own being that ensures that, even before I encounter others, I am already for myself another.

Intercorporeity

Before leaving off this treatment of the significance of the dimension of alterity in Merleau-Ponty’s conception of nature, I should like to consider a final aspect of his notion of the

anonymity of the perceptual, affective and motor life of the body that more literally evokes the inscription of alterity in the heart of subjectivity. This aspect concerns the sense in which my body as an anonymous subject is not utterly an individualized, singular subject but is rather a node or a thread in a more comprehensive “intercorporeity”, a term Merleau-Ponty would introduce only late in his career (cf. N 109, 272/76, 210; S 281/173; VI 183/141), but the meaning of which was already well underway in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Just as, as we have seen, bodily existence streams forth through without my complicity and roots me in a natural world by marking out spatial and temporal axes and vectors of perception and action, so, according to Merleau-Ponty, I am not the author of the social world into which my body inserts me before I suspect the possibility of opposing my own individual projects, values or preferences to another’s. This aspect of the body as anonymous self foregrounds the sense in which the anonymous subjectivity of my body cannot be encased in the body considered as a physical entity occupying a certain definite spatial locality at a certain moment in time, and indeed the sense in which the body as I live it from within escapes such a determination. The anonymous existence of my body as a “natural myself” is not centred in my body; rather, my body and that of the other together comprise a system:

[J]ust as the parts of my body together form a system, the other’s body and my own are a single whole, two sides of a single phenomenon, and the anonymous existence, of which my body is the continuously renewed trace, henceforth inhabits these two bodies simultaneously (PhP 411/370).

This single system of anonymous existence, in which, through our bodies, my own and the other’s existence are woven into one another like threads or sinews in a tissue, is what Merleau-Ponty later came to call “intercorporeity”, and it brings to his notion of the anonymous and prepersonal a fundamentally collective and social dimension. The important thing here, however, is that this intercorporeity is less a commonality of bodily feeling than it is a system of shared modes or styles of behaviour. Or rather, it is a commonality of bodily feeling precisely on account of being first and foremost a shared field of behavior, into which one’s own body is geared along with the other’s. As such it is particularly in evidence in early infancy, in the phenomenon of infantile imitation:

A fifteen-month-old baby opens his mouth when I playfully take one of his fingers in my mouth and pretend to bite it. And yet, he has hardly even seen his face in a mirror and his teeth do not resemble mine. His own mouth and teeth such as he senses them from within are immediately for him the instruments for biting, and my jaw such as he sees it from the outside is for him immediately capable of the same intentions. “Biting” immediately has an intersubjective signification for him (PhP 409/368).

As Merleau-Ponty would put it in his lecture course “The Child’s Relations With Others” at the Sorbonne in the academic year 1950-1951, what takes place in the interaction between the child and the adult is an “intentional transgression” (CWO 148), a transfer or exchange of “corporeal schemes” among bodies inhabiting a common field of behaviour (CWO 147-148).

From out of the immersion in what Merleau-Ponty calls an “anonymous collectivity, an undifferentiated group life”, individual personal selves are made to appear through a process of segregation born of “the objectification of one’s own body and the constitution of the other in his difference”, a process which, moreover, is “never completely finished” (CWO 149). The socially syncretic or incontinent world of childhood persists, moreover, beneath the articulations of the adult world marked by the “battle between consciousnesses” and continues to nourish the latter: “For this battle to even begin, for each consciousness to even suspect the external presences that it negates, they must have a common ground and they must remember their peaceful coexistence in the world of childhood” (PhP 413/372). Merleau-Ponty is, in his account of the phenomenon of intersubjectivity (being primordially, as we have seen, an intercorporeity), constantly aware of the persistence of infantile sociality in adult relations. It holds for the adult no less than for the child that, primordially, “I borrow myself from others; I create others from my own thoughts” (S 259/159). One may no doubt find this introjection-projection reproachable from the point of view of an ethics of alterity and the imperative that one respect and keep vigilance over the infinite alterity of the other,¹¹³ but in Merleau-Ponty’s eyes, “this is no failure to perceive others; it is the perception of others” (S 259/159). It is the element of inter-personal difference itself, the same and the other appearing at the (adult) level of constituted subjects as “‘other’ and ‘other’”, in a sympathy that “does not assume that the differences between myself and the other are ever abolished” (CWO 149).

Merleau-Ponty’s notion of intercorporeity thus adds to the sense in which the anonymous perceptual, affective and motor life of my own body amounts to an inscription of alterity at the heart of my own innermost being. This pre-personal life of my body to which I entrust the care of keeping open the field of action into which I advance my personal concerns is anonymous in the sense of being the common, proto-social stuff out of which are formed more genuinely social relations appearing among individual persons recognizing one

¹¹³ Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, “Intersubjectivity: Notes on Merleau-Ponty,” in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1990); Levinas, “Sensibility”;

another as such. I should like to add as well that it is arguably with reference to anonymity understood as intercorporeity that Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that subjectivity is an emergent fold in the surface of being makes most intuitive sense: "I am not, to recall Hegel's phrase, a 'hole in being', but rather a hollow, or a fold that was made and that can be unmade" (PhP 260/223). In so far as, in Merleau-Ponty, the surface of being (i.e., nature) is multiply folded – after all, he characterizes the primordial world as "baroque" (S 295/181) – this is largely due to the significance he accords to the intercorporeal distribution of subjectivity across, as he famously puts it in the working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible*, "differentiations of one sole and massive, massive adhesion to Being which is the flesh" (VI 318/270). Ted Toadvine aptly captures this sense of a manifold of personal selves articulating a common field of intercorporeal, anonymous being in Merleau-Ponty: "Since intersubjective communication is made possible precisely by this anonymous corporeal level, we might say that each individual is a unique determination or expression of the 'same' general or prepersonal self".¹¹⁴ I will return in more detail in chapter 3 to the motif of the fold in connection with my discussion of Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh as "formative medium of the object and the subject".

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have elaborated and defended the thesis that Merleau-Ponty accords a prominent role to the issue alterity in his approach to the problem of nature in both early and late works, to such a degree that we must acknowledge alterity as such as part of the definition of the natural. This transpires with evidentness, I have argued, whether one considers his phenomenology of the perceived world or his phenomenology of phenomenology, that is, his descriptions of the reflective, personal self's emergence from, dependence on and limited access to the anonymous life of one's own body subtending it. Just as our bodily symbiosis with nature in perception conceals a core of ineradicable, non-human alterity contracted into the things we perceive, so the anonymity of the bodily "natural self" that involves us in this symbiosis represents, at the core of our own being as subjects of reflection and volition, an ineradicable alterity that both conditions yet also compromises our aspirations to full individuality and autonomy. Whether it is considered from without as the

Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, pp. 151-184; Jacques Derrida, *On touching*, Jean-Luc Nancy, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 183-215

¹¹⁴ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 63.

pre-human nature appearing in things, or from within as the pre-human nature that we are as percipient subjects geared into certain qualitative and spatial configurations, nature remains for Merleau-Ponty – at least on the level of phenomenological description – an “absolute Other” (PhP 382/340) that exceeds our grasp even as it conditions us in our humanized, personal existence.

It remains to be seen whether this absolute alterity of nature with respect to our human existence can be retained as the discussion proceeds from the strictly phenomenological to the more ontological level of Merleau-Ponty’s discourse. I shall turn to this question in chapters 3 and 6. But first I will turn, in the following chapter, to the issue of immemoriality in Merleau-Ponty’s approach to the problem of nature, and consider it from a point of view that largely parallels the one that has framed the analyses of the chapter that is now brought to a close.

Chapter 2: Immemoriality

In this chapter, I will endeavour to provide justification for the second basic assumption that guides my project of reading the labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature. This is the assumption that, as cited in the introduction, "the proper concern of the philosophy of nature" is "the pre-existence of natural being" (RC 111/147), and that this pre-existence translates into the immemorial, indestructible, intemporal, vertical, abyssal "absolute past of nature" (PhP 171/139), an "original past, a past that has never been present" (PhP 289/252). Both of them being phenomenal aspects of nature, alterity and immemoriality are closely associated across Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological descriptions of the nature we perceive outside us as well as within us; it would even seem that they are almost interchangeable expressions for the same basic phenomenal character of the natural. Thus, as Ted Toadvine has shown in his *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, "[l]ike the reflective opening unto the unreflective, the perceptual opening onto any perceived is thus a relation with the immemorial, a never-present past".¹¹⁵ The issue of immemoriality nevertheless lays claim to an utmost importance in the total outlook of Merleau-Ponty's approach to the problem of nature, both the nature around us and the nature we are, and thus vouches for a separate treatment. Thus, in the present chapter, I want to show, through close readings of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological descriptions of experience – both reflective and unreflective – the significance Merleau-Ponty accords to this dimension of natural immemoriality.

Following, as I did in the previous chapter, Toadvine's diagram of how the issue is distributed along different axes of Merleau-Ponty's approach, I will show both how, for Merleau-Ponty, reflection encounters the unreflective as its own immemorial pre-history and, conversely, how unreflective experience is already a relation, through perception, with the immemorial past of nature as perceived. The redoubling of immemoriality on the sides of the natural world as perceived and of the natural subject of perception respectively finally throws open the more general question of the relation between nature and time and thus solicits a reconsideration of Merleau-Ponty's repeated reference to "natural time". By so doing, I will also be able to take a closer look at the motivation Ted Toadvine might have for suggesting – unjustifiably so, as I aim to show – that the "absolute past of nature" descriptively invoked

by Merleau-Ponty is “correlated” with, and therefore in some sense temporally congruous with, the anonymous life of the body as natural subject of perception.¹¹⁶

The Immemoriality of the Natural Subject with Respect to Reflection

Merleau-Ponty’s only mention of a “past that has never been present” occurs in the conclusion to a discussion of “a new genre of reflection” (PhP 288/250) that closes the “Sensing” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, a genre of reflection that I identified in the previous chapter as that of “radical reflection”, “hyper-reflection” or “phenomenology of phenomenology”. It is from the standpoint of such a genre or mode of reflection that the pre-reflective or unreflective comes to be determined as an immemorial, “original past” with respect to every reflective attempt to recuperate it: “Thus, reflection only fully grasps itself if it refers to the pre-reflective fund it presupposes, upon which it draws, and that constitutes for it, like an original past, a past that has never been present” (PhP 289/252). In the previous chapter I explained (with reference to his critique of Descartes’ cogito) how, for Merleau-Ponty, reflection can be said to draw on and depend on the pre-reflective fund which it presupposes. In what follows, I investigate in what sense, for Merleau-Ponty, the pre-reflective fund on which reflection draws can be said to constitute for it an original, immemorial past.

In order to open this question, it is necessary to attend to Merleau-Ponty’s notion of reflection as a creative act. In fact, Merleau-Ponty never stopped comparing the *modus operandi* of philosophy *qua* reflection to the efforts undertaken by artists and poets: “Philosophy is not the reflection of a prior truth, but rather, like art, the actualization of a truth” (PhP 21/lxxxiv); it is a “creative event, that is, a reconstitution of the past thought that was not pre-formed in that thought and that nevertheless legitimately determines that thought” (PhP 70/46); it is “a creation that is at the same time an adequation, the only way to obtain an adequation”, in so far as “Being is *what requires creation of us* for us to experience it” (VI 248/197). It is precisely in reflection’s acknowledgment of its own status as a creative act that the unreflective fund of experience on which it reflects (and on which it draws) can begin to appear to it as an original past with which it can never hope to coincide, a non-coinciding that would henceforth mark the very meaning of what it attempts to capture. It is

¹¹⁵ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 70

¹¹⁶ Cf. Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 102.

on account of the creative effort that constitutively mediates it that a structural delay, a fold in the temporal fabric comes to be inscribed in reflection's movement toward the pre-reflective life that it aims to recuperate. This is why, for Merleau-Ponty, a phenomenology of phenomenology, a radical reflection or hyper-reflection cannot overlook the role played by language in every effort at reflectively returning "to the things themselves": "It is by considering language that we would best see how we are to and how we are not to return to the things themselves" (VI 164/125).

Although (as is well known) Merleau-Ponty would, in the working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible*, criticize his earlier perspective in *Phenomenology of Perception* for naivety with regard to the constitutive role of language in the reflective operation,¹¹⁷ this criticism seems to me to gloss over sections of the "Cogito" chapter in the early work where we do find attempts to forestall such a naivety. Against the common belief – still apparent in our philosophical times – that language is a "mere clothing for thought", that expression is "the translation of a signification, already clear of itself, into an arbitrary system of signs", and that "our consciousness can only find in language what it has put there", Merleau-Ponty enlists what he calls "the experience of language" (PhP 448/408). The experience of language, or rather, the experience of the truth of thought in and through language, is not without analogy to the experience of the thing in perception. Just as the alterity of the perceived thing asserts itself as a certain deviation from the immanent normativity of perception, or as the trace or surface of an abyssal expressivity of nature in excess of our ability to resonate with it, so thought makes its appearance in the disfiguration that we impose on sedimented language in order to regain a certain equilibrium in our cognitive field:

[T]he act of expression must allow even the subject himself to transcend what he had previously thought, and he must find in his own words more than he thought he had put there, otherwise we would never see thought, even when isolated, seek out expression with such perseverance. Thus, speech is this paradoxical operation in which – by means of words whose sense is given and by means of already available significations – we attempt to catch up with an intention that in principle goes beyond them and modifies them in the final analysis, itself establishing the sense of the words by which it expresses itself (PhP 449/408-409).

¹¹⁷ "What I call [in *Phenomenology of Perception*] the tacit cogito is impossible. (...) It is by the combination of words (with their charge of sedimented significations, which are in principle capable of entering into other relations than the relations that have served to form them) that I *form* the transcendental attitude, that I *constitute* the constitutive consciousness. The words do not refer to positive significations and finally to the flux of the *Erlebnisse* as *Selbstgegeben*. Mythology of a self-consciousness to which the word 'consciousness' would refer" (VI 222-223/171).

This notion of a thought that, paradoxically, itself establishes the sense of the words by which it expresses itself is perhaps most readily illustratable in the case of literary use of language, which Merleau-Ponty speaks to in particular in the drafts for the seemingly abandoned project that has been published posthumously as *The Prose of the World*. The prose of an inspired and skilled novelist, he suggests there, has the power to reorganize or transfigure the sedimented language that brings him and his reader together in the first place, but then only by working on the acquired significations of that already constituted language. In the hands of a writer such as Stendhal, the particular characters, landscapes or events of his fictional universe may become, after we have read him, the indispensable emblems through which we perceive characters, landscapes and events in the real world: “Before I read Stendhal, I know what a rogue is. Thus I can understand what he means when he says that Rossi the revenue man is a rogue. But when Rossi the rogue begins to live, it is no longer he who is a rogue: it is a rogue who is the revenue man Rossi” (PM 19/12).

Now, Merleau-Ponty suggests, what holds for literary or artistic expression – the fundamental reliance of meaning on the event of expression – holds equally for all modes of expression. It thus includes even those modes of expression that have traditionally arrogated to themselves the honor of dealing with truths in themselves, that is, truths that claim exemption from the condition of having to be expressed, once and for all, in order to acquire their self-evidence as truths.¹¹⁸ While an idea, once expressed, may appear to us as splendidly autonomous, clear and self-identical, it is, Merleau-Ponty insists, “necessarily linked to an act of expression and owes its appearance of autonomy to this act” (PhP 450/410). There is a curious notion of an interplay of clarity and obscurity that organizes Merleau-Ponty’s description of the experience of language, from which the experience of truth cannot be separated. Before I come to (successfully) express the thought I am struggling to think, it is fundamentally obscure to me, it is immersed in the perpetual movement of the “fleeting life within ourselves” (PhP 450/409). To the extent that I manage to extract a singular moment of this fleeting life within me and make it survive as this very moment, that is, make it into a transparent signification that will henceforth be an acquisition that may guide further thought, this is only thanks to the “fundamentally obscure operation” (PhP 450/409) that is the act of expression. If I retrospectively try to reconstitute my act of expression in order to reveal the consciousness that I presume must have been responsible

for it, thus trying to separate what in it was the expression, what the expressed, and what the link between them (i.e., the presumed constituting consciousness), I will find myself perpetually referred to still more expressions. Trying thus to cut the ties that bind my thought to its expression, I will find myself all the more tightly enmeshed in it: “These secondary and tertiary acts of expression certainly have, like the others, in each case their convincing clarity, but without my ever being able to dissolve the fundamental obscurity of the expressed or to reduce to zero the distance between my thought and itself” (PhP 452/412). What this amounts to is a downright rejection of the idea of a meta-language, a universal grammar that would absorb into itself and without remainder all the signifying possibilities of any particular language:

No analysis can clarify language and lay it in front of us like an object. The act of speech is only clear for the person who is actually speaking or listening, and it becomes obscure the moment we attempt to make explicit the reasons that lead us to understand a certain speech in this way and not otherwise (PhP 451/411).

On Merleau-Ponty’s account of the experience of language, then, thought and speech, expressed and expression cannot appear with clarity at the same time; the disclosure of one is inescapably also the occlusion of the other. They are, in the terms that he would resort to in his final writings, reversible, which is to say, the obverse and reverse of the same cloth.¹¹⁹ Like the weaver, Merleau-Ponty suggests in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”, the speaker or writer “works on the wrong side of his material. He has to do only with language, and it is thus that he suddenly finds himself surrounded by meaning” (S 72/IL 82). Or, as *The Prose of the World* has it, at the very moment I appropriate my thought in expression, I no more think – could not possibly think – of the means of this expression than I think of flesh and bone when I sense the immediate presence of another person through the handshake:

Language has, therefore, a peculiar signification which is the more evident the more we surrender ourselves to it, and the less equivocal the less we think of it. This signification resists any direct seizure but is docile to the incantation of language. It is always there when one starts to evoke it but always a bit beyond the point where we think we discern it (PM 162/116).

The peculiarly intimate relation between expression and that which is expressed through it is, then, precisely what accounts for the insurmountable lagging of the act of expression behind that which it attempts to bring to expression, thus making impossible any temporal

¹¹⁸ “[T]here is no fundamental difference between the modes of expression, and no privilege can be granted to one of them on the assumption that it expresses a truth in itself” (PhP 451/411).

coincidence between the act of reflective expression and the act of unreflective living that it tries to recuperate. There is therefore an ineradicably unreflective moment of every reflective endeavour, and which is the moment at which it abandons itself to the “fundamentally obscure” operation of expression, to the inexplicable movement of language. In *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, Ted Toadvine identifies the “unreflective history at the core of reflection” with the “the co-natural bond between the anonymous body and the world”:

Reflection becomes radical when it opens, within its own practice, the abyss that undoes any claim to complete recuperation, when it folds within itself its own secret and opaque past. This unreflective history at the core of reflection is precisely the co-natural bond between the anonymous body and the world.¹²⁰

I think, however, we must – as the preceding analysis shows – acknowledge as well, on Merleau-Ponty’s admission, the role that language itself as the medium of expression plays in this unreflective history. Yet, as we shall see in the next chapter, language becomes, in Merleau-Ponty’s last writings, not only the “reverse side” of thought but, in the final analysis, of nature itself.

By means of the preceding discussion it has become clearer why, according to Merleau-Ponty, reflection confronts the unreflected, the meaning of which it wants to recover, not only as a fund on which it draws but also as a past that has never been present. In other words, because of the mediating role of language in all reflection, reflection is irreducibly a *retrospective* undertaking. It signifies the unreflective just “as a footprint signifies the movement and effort of a body” (S 72/IL 82). Significantly, for Merleau-Ponty, the irreducibly retrospective – yet also irreducibly creative – nature of the attempt at reflective recovery of the unreflective implies precisely that reflection cannot lay claim to retrace in inverse direction a path of world-constitution that we have already travelled unreflectively. To believe that such a reconstitution is possible is precisely the naivety to which philosophies of reflection have traditionally committed themselves to:

It is therefore essential to the philosophy of reflection that it bring us back, this side of our *de facto* situation, to a center of things from which we were decentered, that it retravel this time starting from us a route already traced out from that center to us. (...) [T]hese operations of reconstitution or of re-establishment which come second cannot by principle be the mirror image of its internal constitution and its establishment, as the route from the Etoile to the Notre-Dame is the inverse of the route from the Notre-Dame to the Etoile: the reflection recuperates everything except itself as an effort at recuperation, it clarifies everything except its own role (VI 53-54/33).

¹¹⁹ “[T]here is a reversibility of the speech and what it signifies” (VI 199/154).

¹²⁰ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, p. 65.

If the access of reflection to the unreflective is not simply like the access one has back to Notre-Dame from the Etoile once one has walked one's way from the Notre-Dame to the Etoile, it is because reflection inscribes a slight modification in the very structure of the unreflective experience it purports to reconstitute:

We come to think that to reflect on perception is, *the perceived thing and the perception remaining what they were*, to disclose the true subject that inhabits and has always inhabited them. But in fact I should say that there was there a thing perceived and an openness upon this thing which the reflection has neutralized and transformed into perception-reflected-on and thing-perceived-within-a-perception-reflected-on (VI 59/38).

The assumption – on which the philosophy of reflection nourishes itself, yet which is a retrospective illusion – that the perception-reflected-on is identical to the perceptual openness upon things, is borrowed, Merleau-Ponty suggests, from the perceptual openness itself. This debt, which reflection can never possibly repay, is what carries it across the temporal hiatus that makes every reflective search for the conditions of the possibility of experience – i.e., its form, its noesis and noema etc. – by definition posterior to the production of the actual experience:

The functioning of reflection, like the functioning of the exploring body, makes use of powers obscure to me, spans the cycle of duration that separates the brute perception from the reflective examination, and during this time maintains the permanence of the perceived and the permanence of the perception under the gaze of the mind only because my mental inspection and my attitude of mind prolong the "I can" of my sensorial and corporeal exploration (VI 59/38).

We would have to say, then, that if the reflective recuperation of the unreflective submits itself to a retrospective illusion which it is the business of hyper-reflection to criticize, this retrospective illusion would nevertheless, in a sense, be a *founded* illusion. Reflection disfigures the unreflective, and yet the unreflective is precisely what sustains and makes possible its own reflective disfiguration. This is why we always see Merleau-Ponty taking onboard Bergson's critique of the "retrograde movement of the true" only with certain reservations.¹²¹ For Bergson, as we know, our intellect is *unconditionally* wrong to believe that a truth or judgment pre-exists – no matter how inchoately – its own production or formulation at the hands of our cognitive powers. Thus our intellect disposes us always to look out upon duration retrospectively, just as a traveler looking out on the itinerary of his

¹²¹ The following discussion of the place of Bergson's "retrograde movement of the true" in Merleau-Ponty is indebted to insights drawn particularly from Al-Saji, "A Past Which Has Never Been Present": Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty's Theory of the Prepersonal", pp. 67, and Leonard Lawlor, *The Implications of Immanence: Toward a New Concept of Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), p. 117.

journey from the rear of the train would be unable fully to grasp his actual position, since only places already passed by would be visible:

We discover the change, or more generally the substitution, as a traveller would see the course of his carriage if he looked out behind, and only knew at each moment the point at which he had ceased to be; he could never determine his actual position except by relation to that which he had just quitted, instead of grasping it in itself.¹²²

For Bergson, the task of philosophy is – by developing the method of intuition – to shift us from the position of this traveler so as to make us see real duration.

For Merleau-Ponty, however, the discovery that hyper-reflection makes of the retrospective illusion involved in all reflection is the discovery of the essence of truth, and ultimately of being or nature, itself. In *In Praise of Philosophy*, Merleau-Ponty responds to Bergson's image of the traveler at the rear of the train with the rhetorical question: "Are we not always in the position of this traveler? Are we ever at the point of objective space which our body occupies?" (EP 27/20) To think oneself capable of getting beyond the retrospective illusion of the traveler in virtue of intuition is in Merleau-Ponty's eyes, then, to commit oneself to the error opposite that of the philosophies of reflection, namely, that of objectivism. The middle position, which Merleau-Ponty accepts yet incorrectly attributes to Bergson (the "better" Bergson), is that the "retrograde movement of the true" spoken of in the first introduction to *The Creative Mind*¹²³ is "a fundamental property of truth":

The experience of the true cannot keep from projecting itself back into the time which preceded it. Frequently this is only an anachronism and an *illusion*. But in *Thought and Movement* Bergson suggests, in speaking of a *retrograde movement of the true*, that it is a question of a fundamental property of truth (EP 35/29).

¹²² Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 1998), p. 294.

¹²³ Cf. Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: an Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, Inc., 2007), pp. 1-17. I think Merleau-Ponty is wrong to see in this text an acceptance of the retrograde movement of the true as a "fundamental property of truth". For Bergson, truth as a retroactive effect is not a matter of metaphysics, but of *habits* or customs of the mind, and bad ones at that, since they make us turn a blind eye to true novelty: "If this logic we are accustomed to pushes the reality that springs forth in the present back into the past in the form of a possible, it is precisely because it will not admit that anything does spring up, that something is created and that time is efficacious. It sees in a new form or quality only a rearrangement of the old – nothing absolutely new" (Bergson, *The Creative Mind: an Introduction to Metaphysics*, pp. 14-15). The fundamentality of this intellectual habit consists in its tenacity only. Bergson considers it to be out of the question to give up or revolt against this habit, yet it is necessary to "extend it, make it more supple, adapt it to a duration in which novelty is constantly springing forth and evolution is creative" (Bergson, *The Creative Mind: an Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 15).

In *The Implications of Immanence*, Lawlor shows, with reference to the *Nature* lectures, that Merleau-Ponty refuses to take on board Bergson's unqualified critique of the retrospective illusions of the intellect because he thinks that this critique entails a reduction of Being to the purely actual, whereas Merleau-Ponty thinks it is necessary to retain a philosophical sense of the possible (cf. Lawlor, *The Implications of Immanence: Toward a New Concept of Life*, p. 117). Here is the quote Lawlor refers to: "Does this critique of the bad retrospective always liquidate the idea of the possible? If we take away the fictive possible, must we reduce Being to the actual?" (N 100/69). Such rhetorical questions betray Merleau-Ponty's lack of appreciation for Bergson's substitution of the virtual-actual pair for the possible-real distinction assumed in classical realism. But given Merleau-Ponty's unflinching denouncement of every kind of realism, it is only to be expected that he would have no time for Bergson's proposal to dispense with the concept of the possible in favour of a conception of the real that comprises both virtual tendencies and actual states and effects.

And so, in the final analysis, just as reflective truth falsifies or disfigures the unreflective to the very extent it claims to be its unadulterated truth, so the erroneousness of the error it thus commits itself to – at least when this error is reflected in hyper-reflection – carries within it a certain truth: “What is given, then, is not...the past itself such as it was in its own time, but rather...the past such as it was one day *plus* an inexplicable alteration, a strange distance. (...) What there is is...something like a ‘good error’” (VI 163-164/124-125).

Thus, reflection graduates to the right to speak on behalf of the unreflective experience in so far as it acknowledges that this experience, “still mute, which we are concerned with leading to the pure expression of its own meaning” (VI 169/129), is a past that has never been, and never will be, reflectively present. On this condition, we may “arrogate to ourselves the right of recovering the past”: “the signification...antedates itself by a retrograde movement which is never completely belied” (VI 200/154).

The Immemoriality of the Natural World with Respect to Perception

In my introductory chapter, I reviewed a controversy among interpreters of Merleau-Ponty over the question as to the status of the immemorial past with regard to the unreflective. Against the interpretation defended by M. C. Dillon, and following Leonard Lawlor and Alia Al-Saji (along with Ted Toadvine), I shall now proceed to mount a defence of the view that, in Merleau-Ponty, the relation to the immemorial past that we experience in our attempt at reflective recuperation of the unreflective is redoubled in our unreflective encounter with nature through embodied perception. Against Lawlor, however, and following Al-Saji, I shall argue that we do not find the material for such an interpretation in the “Temporality” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* (which is rather dominated by the privilege accorded to the “field of presence”), but in the margins of his descriptions of unreflective bodily perception. Extending Al-Saji’s line of interpretation, which is confined to the description of sensation found in the “Sensing” chapter, I endeavour to show how a similar temporal structure is inscribed also in Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of light and space.

I would first like to remark that this move is strongly suggested by Merleau-Ponty himself through a string of remarks that relate the alterity of perceived nature to its inherence in a past that is contracted or inscribed into the present. For example, toward the end of the “Sensing” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, he suggests that “there would be no present – namely, the sensible with its thickness and its inexhaustible richness – if perception

did not, to speak like Hegel, preserve a past in its present depth, and did not condense that past into the present” (PhP 287/250). Similarly, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, we are told that the core of reality, which Merleau-Ponty now refers to as the “weight of the natural world”, is also “a weight of the past” that constitutes “a visibility older than my operations or my acts” (VI 162/123). Furthermore, as “Eye and Mind” shows, the resumption in Merleau-Ponty’s late works of *Phenomenology of Perception*’s motif of the core of reality contracted into things is accomplished in terms of an intertwining of the invisible with the immemorial: “[T]he hallmark of the visible is to have a lining of invisibility in the strict sense, which it makes present as a certain absence. (...) In the immemorial depth of the visible, something has moved, caught fire, which engulfs [the painter’s] body” (OE 57-58/147). Finally, as we recall from my introductory chapter, in the *Nature* lectures, Merleau-Ponty characterizes nature as partaking of “the most ancient”, as the perpetual irruption of a “first day”.

All these references to “the most ancient”, to “a weight of the past” in excess of all operations and acts, to an “immemorial depth” co-constituting the “lining of invisibility” woven into every visible seem to me to proceed from a single experience that constitutes, across the span of his career, the impetus to Merleau-Ponty’s concern with the problem of nature. As he puts it in résumé to the first *Nature* course, they are but allusions to “the pre-existence of natural being, always already there”, and this pre-existence of natural being or its character of being always already there amounts to nothing short of “the proper concern of the philosophy of nature” (RC 111/147). To this extent, the proper concern of the philosophy of nature coincides with what seems to be the proper concern of the phenomenology of the perceived world already developed in *Phenomenology of Perception*. As we shall see in what follows, the concrete descriptions of the perceived quality, light and space all gravitate around this fundamental experience of the pre-existence of natural being.

The Sensoriality I Live From Within

We recall from the previous chapter that, according to Merleau-Ponty, sensation is not the passive registering of a determinate *quale* on the sensorium or the mechanically administered excitation by extended matter on an inert body. Rather, he suggests, for my sentient body, the sensible is a vague “proposition of a certain existential rhythm” (PhP 258/221) that calls forth a particular mode of attunement or synchronization, induces the body to dispose its sentient surfaces on it in a certain way in order for it to be optimally perceptible as this or

that quality. Following Al-Saji,¹²⁴ it is now time to emphasize that, for Merleau-Ponty, this very process of synchronization, this “sensoriality I live from within” (PhP 265/228) involves a time of anticipation and waiting during which a certain inchoate state of asynchronicity or arrhythmia obtains between sensor and sensed, and between a multiplicity of interpenetrating rhythms in the sensible: “I offer my ear or my gaze with the anticipation of a sensation, and suddenly the sensible catches my ear or my gaze; I deliver over a part of my body, or even my entire body, to this manner of vibrating and filling space named ‘blue’ or ‘red’” (PhP 256/219). There is therefore a temporal interval, however miniscule, of anticipation and waiting during synchronization between sensor and sensible.¹²⁵ This temporal interval is composed of virtual multiplicities of arrhythmias or rhythmic differences – not only between sensor and sensed, but also playing across the surface of the sensible itself – that remain equipotential until the perceptual moment arrives with the emergence of a focused figure (i.e., a determinate sensory quality) detached from an indeterminate background. As Al-Saji puts it: “What was a multi-dimensional field of rhythms in which differences worked to separate and connect – a web of differential relations that no single perspective or axis of comparison could exhaust – becomes seen as an opposition of figure-ground”.¹²⁶ This multidimensional field of rhythms is inscribed in the perceptual *Gestalt* as a past that has never been present.

Thus there is, on Merleau-Ponty’s analysis, a divergence between sensing (which is composed of interpenetrating rhythmic differences and modalities) and perceiving (which is defined by the separation of figure and ground), a divergence which is also temporal in nature. It is this divergence that allows us to understand Merleau-Ponty’s suggestion that “the act of seeing is indivisibly prospective...and retrospective” (PhP 286/249). The prospective orientation is that of the sensory apparatus as it anticipates and waits for the determinate quality to emerge from its immersion in the multirhythmic interpenetration of the sensible, such that what is seen is “at the end of my focusing movement” (PhP 286/249). The

¹²⁴ See Al-Saji, “A Past Which Has Never Been Present’: Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of the Prepersonal”, pp. 55-63.

¹²⁵ As Al-Saji puts it, “Bodily rhythm is played out in terms of barely conscious, ‘nascent movements’ or kinesthesia; it represents a particular, felt, motor power. But in the sensory encounter, this bodily rhythm modulates itself in an attempt to anticipate the world’s rhythms, in a receptive attitude of waiting” (Al-Saji, “A Past Which Has Never Been Present’: Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of the Prepersonal”, p. 55).

¹²⁶ Al-Saji, “A Past Which Has Never Been Present’: Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of the Prepersonal”, p. 58. It is a great concern for Al-Saji in this essay to stress the openness of what she calls the “sensory ground” to a variety of actualizations in perception, and that the fixity of the figure against its background hides its own historical habitual conditions of emergence and sustenance. She suggests analysing racist and sexist modes of perception along these lines, as the fixation and immobilization of a sensory ground teeming with multiple rhythms.

retrospective orientation is given in the fact that, to perception, the object – i.e., the *Gestalt* – “will be presented as anterior to its appearance” (PhP 286/249). We thus see the retrospective illusion characteristic of reflection reappear on the level of unreflective perception: The thing presents itself to perception as anterior to its phenomenal appearance, despite the fact that it is the outcome of a prospective activity of phenomenalization or bringing to appearance on the part of my sensori-motor apparatus. And once again Merleau-Ponty sees in this retrospective orientation the truth of perception, in the double sense of the nature of perception and the nature disclosed by perception: “I can only see the object by pushing it into the past” (PhP 287/249); “My vision...is...that anteriority of the future with regard to the present, or of the whole with regard to the parts” (PhP 466/427). Thus, as Al-Saji points out, for Merleau-Ponty, the perceived object (and, in general, the perceived world) does not coexist with perception in the same temporal present, but rather occupies with respect to it the future perfect, the time of “what will have been”.¹²⁷

Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of inwardly lived sensoriality thus inscribes immemoriality on multiple levels of the unreflective.¹²⁸ First, there is the anteriority of beckoning and solicitation in the sensible with respect to the sensor, in so far as the synergetic and synchronizing work of my sensory apparatus takes place “only in response to its [the sensible, C.H.] solicitation” (PhP 259/222). This solicitation emerges, as we have seen, on account of an originary asynchronicity between sensor and sensed, which in its turn is immersed in the polyrhythmic pulsations and undulations of which the sensible itself is composed. Second, there is the anteriority of the interval of sensory synchronization with respect to the perceptual *Gestalt* that emerges out of it. And third, there is the experienced anteriority of the object with regard to the perceptual present in which it is intended (which is to say, in which it is retained), an anteriority which is the product of a founded, “natural” retrospective illusion.

Yet how can Merleau-Ponty see in this illusory anteriority of the world – this ruse by which perception hides from itself (and from us) *its* anteriority with respect to the perceived – a sort of “good error” that gives us the principle of “the weight of the world” (cf. above)? He does not provide any answer to this, but I think Al-Saji is probably right to propose the following: “What allows the experience of anteriority to be more than an illusion for

¹²⁷ Al-Saji, “A Past Which Has Never Been Present: Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of the Prepersonal”, p. 66.

Merleau-Ponty is that it relies on, and holds the trace of, a more original delay – that of sensory life as forever past with respect to perception”.¹²⁹ In other words – this is what I take Al-Saji to be getting at – the first two anteriorities mentioned above (i.e., that of the sensible with respect to sensing, and that of sensing with respect to perceiving), are perceptually registered as the anteriority of the object or, in other words, as the pre-existence of natural being.

The Light that, Illuminating the Rest, Remains at its Source in Obscurity

Another example that showcases Merleau-Ponty’s concern with the natural world’s indestructible anteriority (and therefore immemoriality) with regard to its perceptual disclosure is his analysis of the phenomenon of lighting or illumination. Illumination is the function that light assumes when it no longer or not yet counts for itself, is not itself seen but rather makes the object, the spectacle or the landscape visible. Yet light has a certain material consistency that makes it possible to experience it as a thingly presence in its own right. This is what may happen, Merleau-Ponty suggests, in cinema, where the light cast by a lamp carried into a dark room is not seen to call forth objects from the darkness in order to disclose them but is instead solidified into “pools of dazzling brightness that are not localized upon the wall but rather upon the surface of the screen” (PhP 364/323). Furthermore, light may also be objectified when two luminous settings encroach on each other: “Electric lighting, which seems yellow to us when we first leave the daylight, soon ceases to have any definite color for us, and if some remnant of daylight penetrates into the room, it is this ‘objectively neutral’ light that appears to us as tinted blue” (PhP 365-366/324). The fact that light retains the material consistency that allows for such transformations, however, makes its power of illumination all the more fascinating. To capture the peculiarly imperceptible and discrete operation by which light makes things visible and by so doing makes itself invisible, Merleau-Ponty suggests, in “Eye and Mind” – apropos of the captain’s hand in Rembrandt’s *The Nightwatch* – that it “works in us but without us”:

¹²⁸ Cf. Al-Saji, “A Past Which Has Never Been Present’: Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of the Prepersonal”, p. 66.

¹²⁹ Al-Saji, “A Past Which Has Never Been Present’: Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of the Prepersonal”, p. 67

The hand pointing toward us in *The Nightwatch* is truly there only when we see that its shadow on the captain's body presents it simultaneously in profile. The spatiality of the captain lies at the intersection of the two perspectives which are impossible and yet together. Everyone with eyes has at some time or other witnessed this play of shadows, or something like it, and has been made by it to see things and a space. But it worked in them without them; it hid to make the object visible. To see the object, it was necessary *not* to see the play of shadows and light around it (OE 21-22/128).

In so far as light as illumination makes the object visible and by so doing makes itself invisible, Merleau-Ponty suggests, we must say that it directs our gaze instead of arresting it like an object. In following up this metaphor of "directing", Merleau-Ponty launches into a most remarkable description that brings home to us the structural anteriority and immemoriality of the visibility that is "older than my operations or my acts" (cf. above). Indeed, as Jacques-Alain Miller has noted, it contains a "risky philosophy".¹³⁰ Here is Merleau-Ponty's meditation on the notion – which, to all appearance at least, contains in Merleau-Ponty's eyes an irrecusable phenomenological truth – that lighting "leads the gaze":

If I am led through an unfamiliar apartment toward its owner, there is someone who knows on my behalf, someone to whom the unfolding of the visual spectacle offers a sense and moves toward a goal; I entrust myself or lend myself to this knowledge that I do not possess. When I am shown a detail of the landscape that I did not know how to distinguish on my own, there is someone here who has already seen, who already knows where to stand and where one must look to see this detail. The lighting directs my gaze and leads me to see the object, so in one sense it *knows* and *sees* the object. If I imagine an empty theater where the curtain rises upon an illuminated scene, it seems to me that the spectacle is *visible in itself* or ready to be seen, and that the light that explores the foreground and background, forms shadows, and thoroughly penetrates the spectacle accomplishes a sort of vision before us (*réalise avant nous une sorte de vision*) (PhP 364/323, translation modified).

In this passage, Merleau-Ponty invites us to consider the following paradox. On the one hand, one cannot speak coherently about the world being visible and being seen if one does not assume the presence in it of someone equipped with a visual apparatus that may see it. And yet, the seeing undertaken by actual seers, in so far as it is successful, somehow proceeds by the grace of a proto-vision or fore-sight endemic to the visible itself, as if its visibility were already virtually operative prior to the emergence of actual seers on the scene. Thus, on account of the peculiar mode of operation of light as illumination, the visibility that is older than my acts and my operations would amount to a sort of narcissistic auto-scopia on the part of the visible itself.¹³¹ No doubt, we discern here the germs of Merleau-Ponty's later idea of the flesh as the reversibility of seer and seen, to which I will return in the next

¹³⁰ Jacques-Alain Miller, "The Logic of the Perceived", *Psychoanalytical Notebooks of the London Circle* 6 (2001), p. 20.

¹³¹ Cf. Miller, "The Logic of the Perceived", p. 22.

chapter. For the moment, what I would like to emphasize here is the sense of insurmountable anteriority that the function of lighting weaves into the spectacle: there is someone who has *already* seen, who *already* knows where to stand and who realises a sort of vision *before* us – “before” (*avant*) here clearly to be taken in both its spatial and temporal sense. The proto-vision or fore-sight accomplished by illumination in us but without us, and which constitutes the visibility of the visible, cannot be utterly abstracted from the presence of seers in flesh and blood, but it is as if it takes place in a sort of mythical, oneiric past, once again a past that has never been present, yet which is also in a strange manner simultaneous with the present.

Merleau-Ponty’s point in asserting this proto-vision on the part of the visible in virtue of illumination is that it conditions and solicits our vision of it. To argue this point, he suggests an analogy between the interlocking functions of speaker, listener and language in interpersonal communication on the one hand and the interlocking functions of the visual field, lighting and the gaze in perception on the other. In more precise terms, he advances the notion that light provides something like a grammar that orders the transactions between the gaze and the visible ahead of the appearance of either seer or visible, into which the gaze and the visible must have always already been initiated, just as language provides the common setting, always already in place, that sets up the space for communication among interlocutors, even as this communication – in its more creative moments – achieves a re-vamping of the setting. Here is how he presents it:

[O]ur own vision does nothing but take up for itself and follow out the encompassing of the spectacle through the pathways traced out for it by the lighting, just as in hearing a phrase we are surprised to find the trace of an external thought. We perceive according to (*d’après*) light, just as in verbal communication we think according to (*d’après*) others. And just as communication presupposes (even though, in the case of new and authentic speech, it transcends and enriches it) a certain linguistic arrangement by which a sense inhabits words, so too perception presupposes in us a mechanism capable of responding to the solicitations of light according to their sense (*sens*)..., capable of drawing together the scattered visibility, and of achieving what is merely sketched out in the spectacle. This mechanism is the gaze, or in other words the natural correlation between appearances and our kinaesthetic operations (PhP 364-365/323-324).

In the course of this description, it must be acknowledged that Merleau-Ponty messes things up a bit. He allows both the lighting and the gaze (which he locates as a mechanism *in* us) to occupy the position that language occupies in the case of interpersonal communication. Conversely, that in accordance with which we think in verbal communication comes to figure both as personal others and as the anonymous “other” of the linguistic setting that

must be in place prior to the emergence of individual speaking subjects. According to Jacques-Alain Miller, Merleau-Ponty's phrase "we perceive according to light, just as in verbal communication we think according to others" comes across as "more Lacanian than Lacan", implying in this that the place Merleau-Ponty accords to lighting in perception echoes "the preliminary character of the [symbolic] Other for the acts of the subject" that determines Jacques Lacan's theory of the subject.¹³² But when Merleau-Ponty introduces the gaze into the picture, and introduces it on *our* side – all the while defining it as the unfolding of a sensorimotor correlation – he becomes, Miller says, "a lot less Lacanian than Lacan" because, for Lacan, the gaze is "on the side of the *perceptum* and not on that of the *percipiens*".¹³³

Although Miller is probably right to see in Merleau-Ponty's inconsistencies here the symptom of a residual adherence to the perspective of constituting consciousness, one would have to concede to Merleau-Ponty a genuine ambition to interrogate that which must precede any constituting operations on the part of the subject, a "visibility older than my operations or my acts". In short, what the experience of the phenomenon of lighting brings home to him is that the event of our vision of things always lags behind the event of their visibility, even if this pre-subjective visibility of things is but a "scattered visibility" requiring concentration and gathering by someone approaching the scene with a view to the "best hold" on things. In his late works, as we know, Merleau-Ponty will not be content merely to suppose that viewers arrive on the scene one fine day to gather scattered visibility that has been germinating since times immemorial. Instead, he is going to try to trace the emergence of the seer from a flesh common to both seer and visible. Yet this constitutes the topic for the next chapter.

The Level of All Levels

What I have been arguing on the basis of Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of inwardly lived sensoriality and the phenomenon of lighting – namely that, for him, the perceived world occupies, in relation to the unreflective act of perception, an immemorial past that has never been present – can be confirmed, finally, in his analysis of the constitution of what he calls the "spatial level". The spatial level is Merleau-Ponty's term for that frame of reference in relation to which the perceived world acquires spatial coordinates such as "up", "down",

¹³² Miller, "The Logic of the Perceived", p. 22.

¹³³ Miller, "The Logic of the Perceived", pp.22-23.

“left”, “right” etc., in other words, in relation to which it takes on a determinate spatial orientation. Oddly enough, as I want to show, perhaps no other analysis by Merleau-Ponty exhibits the constitutive invocation of the immemorial past more strongly than his analysis of the phenomenon of spatial organization.

I have already pointed out (cf. previous chapter) that, on Merleau-Ponty’s analysis, the “best hold” on the world pursued by the body as natural subject of perception comprises preferential values with regard to the spatial orientation of objects. Thus, for example, a circular plate presented in such a way as to produce an elliptic image on the retina will be spontaneously experienced as a deviation from a norm that assigns to the object its most optimal mode of presentation, such that I perceive it with no further ado, and without any calculation or comparison with earlier experience, as circular. Beyond such everyday examples, Merleau-Ponty also draws on cases of more pervasive disruptions of the orientational axes of the phenomenal field, such as Stratton’s experiments with inversion of the visual field induced by correctional glasses and Wertheimer’s experiments with slanting of the visual field induced by mirrors that reflect light 45 degrees to the horizontal. In these experiments, Merleau-Ponty notes, the self-correcting tendencies of the spatially disrupted field are striking. The subject wearing Stratton’s goggles goes through a seven days’ process of adaption to the new spatial environments, seeing first everything upside down; then the visual field rights itself although the body is felt to be inverted, head appearing where the feet are felt to be; finally the body gears into the new visual environment in a harmonious way; as the goggles are removed, objects do not appear inverted, yet they have an air of unreality about them, while their bodily position has once again been unsettled, the subject reaching out his right hand when a motor response with the left hand would be more appropriate (PhP 291-292/255). The subject made to see the room in which he is located mediated by a mirror that tilts the visual field at a 45 degrees’ angle from the vertical has a pervasive sense of obliqueness: A person walking to and fro is perceived to be leaning to one side, an object falling along the doorframe is perceived to be following a most unnatural trajectory, and everything generally has something queer about; after only a few minutes, however, everything suddenly rights itself (PhP 296/259).

What these data suggest to us, according to Merleau-Ponty, is that we must assume the efficacy of a “spatial level” (*niveau*) (PhP 296/259)¹³⁴ in relation to which a given spectacle appears upright, inverted or tilted. To speak of a spatial level is for Merleau-Ponty a way to avoid, as always, the twin pitfalls of intellectualism and empiricism so as to indicate the intermediate milieu whence meaning originates prior to any subject-object bifurcation. The empiricist solution of supposing absolute directions in space is shown to be faulty, Merleau-Ponty claims, because it entails the supposition that the subject must compare (in the case of Stratton’s experiments) the visual data of the body and the surroundings one by one with the tactile data of the body (which are presumed to be oriented in themselves), something which would make highly improbable the systematic adjustment that in fact takes place (PhP 292-294/255-257). The intellectualist approach could not even begin to consider the problem, because it could not admit from the outset how a subject could truly be disoriented, since it defines the subject as a constituting consciousness who, not allowing itself to be confined within any particular point of view from which it sees, is indifferent to directions in space and for whom the relations between body and its environment thus remain intact even under the influence of the goggles or the mirrors (PhP 295-259). What must be acknowledged is, on the one hand, that sensory contents are not oriented in themselves but require a comprehensive standard in relation to which they are spatially constituted and also, on the other hand, that this standard can be annulled by a sufficiently radical disruption of the spectacle and therefore is substantially related to the extent of our bodily grip on the world.

That it must be so can be appreciated, Merleau-Ponty suggests, if we consider the body not first and foremost as a thing located in space, but rather as a “system of possible actions, a virtual body whose phenomenal ‘place’ is defined by its task and by its situation” (PhP 297/260). If the spatial milieu imposed by Stratton’s goggles or Wertheimer’s mirror is initially disorienting, it is because it as yet offers no support for the practical activities relevant or familiar to the subject, such as walking, opening a cupboard, using a table or merely sitting down. It falls into place the moment the subject’s motor projects and the perceptual givens once again come to terms with one another:

At first, the mirror image presents a differently oriented room, that is, the subject is not geared to the utensils it contains, he does not inhabit the room, he does not live with the man he sees moving about. After several minutes, and provided that he does not reinforce the initial anchorage by glancing away from the mirror, that miracle

¹³⁴ As Merleau-Ponty’s translator points out, “the French term *niveau* translates both as ‘level’ and as ‘standard’, and Merleau-Ponty’s use of the term draws upon both senses of the word” (PhP 540 n. 18)

takes place: the reflected room conjures up a subject capable of living in it. This virtual body displaces the real body, so much so that the subject no longer feels himself to be in the world he is actually in, and that, rather than his genuine legs and arms, he feels the legs and arms required for walking and acting in the reflected room – he inhabits the spectacle. And this is when the spatial level shifts and is established in a new position (PhP 298/260-261).

In order to grasp what is in play in Merleau-Ponty's reference to a "virtual body" here, it is useful, as Toadvine suggests, to consider the parallel cases of locating oneself on a map, negotiating a 3-D maze projected on a computer screen, or the perception of a pictorial landscape. In all cases, it is a matter of taking up one's abode in virtual spaces, and in all cases a bodily effort is required, an effort through which one's body as "the power of certain gestures and the demand for certain privileged planes" gear into an as yet virtual situation of action as "the invitation to these very gestures and as the theater of these very actions" (PhP 298/261).¹³⁵ The experience of disorientation or the destabilization of the spatial level is one with the dislodging of my actual body from "the virtual body that is demanded by the spectacle" (PhP 298/261), and a new spatial level is established when my actual body (the body such as it is presently given to me) comes to coincide with that virtual body.

It is the implication Merleau-Ponty draws from all this that makes for the relevance of the preceding observations for my concern in the present chapter. What, according to him, the discovery of the spatial level at the heart of the phenomenon of spatial orientation brings to light is that there is always a spatial level in relation to which the visual field acquires orientation. Yet, since every level can be destabilized and one level is seen to be supplanted by another, "the constitution of a level always presupposes another given level" such that "space always precedes itself", it is – according to a by now well-known formula – "essentially always 'already constituted'" (PhP 300/262). Merleau-Ponty's point here is particularly well illustrated in the example of the appreciation of a pictorially depicted space, as Toadvine explains: "When I stand in a gallery looking at a painting, exploring the virtual space that it opens for me, this already presumes as its foundation the level adopted by my body in the gallery hall, as it stands upright at the appropriate distance before the painting".¹³⁶ It is as if Merleau-Ponty's refusal to choose sides between the empiricist alternative (which considers space to be oriented in itself) and the intellectualist alternative (which considers space to be constituted by the activities and attitudes of the subject) with regard to the constitution of spatial orientation forced him to absorb the whole problematic of

¹³⁵ Cf. Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, pp. 100-101.

space into a problematic of time. Just as the alterity of the unreflective with respect to reflection, or as the thingliness of the thing and the visibility of the visible with respect to the perceptual act were shown above to coincide with their indestructible anteriority, so the directionality of space resides neither in some ineffable real in itself nor in consciousness, but in an immemorial past. One cannot dissociate being from orientated being, Merleau-Ponty says, and yet this orientation is guaranteed nowhere in the present state of things – neither in the world considered as a self-subsistent reality, nor in the self-presence of consciousness – but rather in the past:

Each level in which we live in turn appears when we drop anchor in some “milieu” that is offered to us. This milieu is itself only defined spatially for a previously given level. Thus, each of our experiences in sequences, back to and including the first, passes forward an already acquired spatiality. Our first perception in turn could only have been spatial by referring itself to an orientation that preceded it (PhP 302/264).

Thus, on the one hand, Merleau-Ponty’s account makes the “level of all levels”, the “primordial level” or the “first level” appear on the horizon of all our experiences (PhP 302/264). And yet, on the other hand, the question concerning the first level or level of all levels cannot ever be posed in proper terms, because the first level is by definition always prior to the first level: “The first spatial level could not find its anchorage points *anywhere*, since these would have needed a level before the first level in order to be determinate in space” (PhP 302/264-265).

Merleau-Ponty’s agnosticism with regard to the ontological status of being as spatially orientated being thus ends up producing in *time* the spatial figure of a fold: priority or anteriority doubles or makes a fold of itself, through a movement of doubled and mutual precession.¹³⁷ The milieu in which we drop anchor precedes and so induces the spatial level that is going to organize the milieu horizontally and vertically, and yet it could only induce this level if it did not pass along an already acquired spatiality.

Let me then proceed to Toadvine’s suggestion that Merleau-Ponty’s reference to the “level of all levels” comes back in the end to what Merleau-Ponty also refers to, later in the chapter on space in *Phenomenology of Perception*, as a pre-human space that underlies the human spaces which we organize according to our specific needs, habits and ways of living and which progressively acquires a historical atmosphere (cf. PhP 346-347/306-307). As

¹³⁶ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 101.

¹³⁷ I owe this expression to Mauro Carbone, who used it in a wholly different context (namely, Merleau-Ponty’s reflections on cinema) in the course of his presentation during the “Nature, Freedom and History: Merleau-Ponty after 50 years” conference, hosted by UCD, Ireland, in June 2011.

such, Toadvine suggests, the level of all levels “plays a role for space analogous to the one that the ‘past which has never been present’ plays for time”;¹³⁸ “to this absolute past of nature”, he continues, “corresponds a prehuman spatiality”;¹³⁹ and this absolute past and this prehuman spatiality are in their turn “somehow correlated with this impersonal ‘one’ that is my body understood as a ‘natural spirit’”.¹⁴⁰ Yet, as the preceding investigations indicate, to speak of analogies, correspondences and correlations here – between space and time and between nature’s space and time and the body as natural self – does not fully accommodate the asymmetries and instabilities that Merleau-Ponty’s account actually entails. Indeed, it appears to me that Toadvine is here making the same mistake for which (as pointed out in my introductory chapter) Lawlor and Al-Saji has rightly criticized Dillon, namely, of making Merleau-Ponty’s immemorial, absolute past of nature somehow coextensive or congruous with the present of the unreflective, natural subject. But, I would retort, rather than setting up a correspondence or an analogy between the problems of space and time, Merleau-Ponty’s account instead produces a temporal recoil or fold in the very problem of space. In other words, what was initially a problem of accounting for the irreducibly orientated character of nature as perceived comes, in the course of Merleau-Ponty’s discussion, to be transformed into the problem of thinking the immemorial past, which for him seems to claim a priority over the problem of space. And so Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of spatial orientation confirms the line of interpretation I have been following throughout this chapter. With respect to all the aspects and dimensions of the unreflective world of perception I have considered – those of quality, thingliness, visibility, and spatiality – we see that Merleau-Ponty at every station reorients the discussion so that it ends up posing the question of the immemorial past.

Natural Time and The Absolute Past of Nature

Before I bring this chapter to a close, I would like to consider a difficulty pertaining to the relation between Merleau-Ponty’s concern with the immemorial past and what he refers to as “natural time”, as briefly discussed in the previous chapter. This is necessary to the extent that both seem to be related to the time-nature nexus, which is where Merleau-Ponty’s concern with nature’s immemoriality enters. I have already remarked that Toadvine’s

¹³⁸ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 101.

¹³⁹ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 102.

¹⁴⁰ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 102.

suggestion that the immemorial past is somehow “correlated” with the anonymous existence of the body as natural self of perception may face some problems, in so far as – as I have tried to show – the immemorial past seems to escape every correlation with any subject, whether reflective or unreflective. To the extent that it is truly an “original past” (PhP 289/252), it cannot be correlated with any present whatsoever, whether that of the reflective, personal self or of the unreflective, anonymous self. As Lawlor rightly points out (as cited in my introduction), one cannot understand the original, immemorial past on the basis of the unreflective; rather, the unreflective (no less than the reflective) must be understood on the basis of the immemorial past. On what grounds, then, could one argue, as Toadvine does, that “[t]he past that has never been present and the space that precedes every possible perception are therefore the time and space of this anonymous body and the nature within which it dwells”?¹⁴¹

It is here that it is necessary to take up the question of the recurrence of the notion of “natural time” in Merleau-Ponty’s description the body as natural self, since it seems that Toadvine bases his correlation view of the relation between the “absolute past of nature” and the body as natural self on an identification between this natural time and the absolute past: “The anonymous body occupies a ‘natural time’ of ‘always similar nows’. (...) The time of the anonymous body is therefore never historical time... (...) [it] is instead a kind of ‘prehistory’ or an ‘absolute past...; it is the time of a ‘past that has never been present’”.¹⁴² Now, let us recall – as discussed in chapter 1 – that Merleau-Ponty relates natural time to the continuous and cyclical operation of bodily functions, such as the beating of the heart, the respiratory reflex, nutrition and digestion, waking and sleep, organic decay and restitution, the blink of the eye, and not least its perceptual and motor life, counting as well the recurrence of its habituated patterns of moving and acting in the world. This would presumably be what Toadvine has in mind when he describes “the distinct temporality of the ‘natural self’” in terms of “repetitive rhythms established by the typicality of its relations with an everyday environment”.¹⁴³ Let us observe as well that Merleau-Ponty himself suggests a link between the “absolute past of nature”, or the “past of all pasts” on the one hand, and the anonymous existence of such bodily functions or “organic stereotypes” on the other:

¹⁴¹ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 103.

¹⁴² Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 61.

¹⁴³ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 61

[Consciousness] can only be consciousness by playing upon significations given in the absolute past of nature or in its personal past, and because every lived form tends toward a certain generality, whether it be the generality of our habitus or rather that of our “bodily functions” (PhP 171/139).

[The present] is in a position to give our past itself its definitive sense and to reintegrate into personal existence even this past of all pasts that the organic stereotypes lead us to notice at the origin of our volitional being. To this extent, even reflexes have a sense, and the style of each individual is still visible in them just as the beating of the heart is felt even at the periphery of the body (PhP 114/87).

It seems to me, however, that Merleau-Ponty is here considering the immemoriality of nature only according to the vertical axis on which the reflective, personal self and the unreflective, anonymous self are distributed. That is, the past in question is absolute or is the past of all pasts only from the point of view of a self who attempts reflectively to elaborate an autobiographical account. But are the bodily functions and organic stereotypes characteristic of *our* body – i.e., the human body – representative of or congruent with nature as such – the nature whence it emerges and in which it lives – in terms of the temporal style or rhythm of their recurrence and repetition? Isn't this rather a recourse to the classical schema of reflecting the macrocosmic in the microcosmic?

It is true, as we also recall from chapter 1, that Merleau-Ponty, in describing natural time toward the end of the “Freedom” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, specifies that natural time, being cyclical and continuous, is the time not only of our bodily functions but also of “nature with which we coexist” (PhP 517/479). But it is also true that this proposition is embedded in an argument in the course of which Merleau-Ponty for the last time in *Phenomenology of Perception* pleads unqualified allegiance to temporal idealism, i.e., the idea that there is no “time of objects without subjectivity”: “[T]here is no such thing as natural time if we understand this to mean a time of objects without subjectivity” (PhP 517/479; see also PhP 288/250, 389-391/347-349; 472-474/433-435; 483-487/444-448). Indeed, one cannot but be baffled at the costs Merleau-Ponty is willing to pay in order to defend this position. Toward the end of the “Temporality” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty considers an objection one might raise to the notion that the natural world is the correlate to the living body as natural subject of perception, or more generally, to the notion that “there is no world without an Existence that bears its structure”: “[O]ne could surely have objected that, nevertheless, the world preceded man, that the earth, according to all evidence, is the only populated planet, and that thus the philosophical views are revealed as incompatible with the most established facts” (PhP 495/456). Yet this

objection causes no worry for Merleau-Ponty, for it is merely the occasion to raise the question as to what is *meant* by the pre-existence of the world:

For what exactly is meant by saying that the world existed prior to human consciousnesses? It might be meant that the earth emerged from a primitive nebula where the conditions for life had not been brought together. But each one of these words, just like each equation in physics, presupposes *our* pre-scientific experience of the world, and this reference to the *lived* world contributes to constituting the valid signification of the statement. Nothing will ever lead me to understand what a nebula, which could not be seen by anyone, might be. (...) Thus, all things considered, what is true is that a nature exists – but this is the nature that perception shows to me, and not the nature of the sciences (PhP 495-496/456).

One could hardly ask for a more vigorous and unabashed defence of temporal idealism – perhaps even of idealism in general (but more in this in chapter 6) – than this. Whatever might validly be said concerning a past of nature without human consciousness or subjectivity, of a natural history that has brought forth the world in which we find ourselves, of the very history that has managed, little by little, to delimit centres or zones of indetermination and hesitation in matter within which subjectivities can be lodged and acquire a spatial and temporal perspective for perception and action – all of this concerns a nature that doesn't really exist, since the discourse that produces statements concerning such a nature is science. And science, according to Merleau-Ponty, cannot but produce abstract and idealized versions of the *really* existing nature, which is the one “lived” in perception, “with regard to which every scientific determination is abstract, signitive, and dependent, just like geography with regard to the landscape in which we first learned what a forest, a meadow, or a river is” (PhP 9/lxxii). This is to say that all spatial and temporal horizons within which scientific research operates are ultimately extracted from the space and time lived in unreflective, anonymous perception. And we have seen that the space and time lived in perception – the coexistence of our perceiving body with the nature perceived – comprises a past that has never been present, which is the milieu within which the world's pre-existence is inserted, not as a scientific or ontological fact but as a structure of our experience of the world.

Nevertheless, with regard to Merleau-Ponty's temporal idealism – which is first and foremost a privileging of time such as it appears for/with an experiencing subject, including the past that has never been present – one should confront it with the same challenge with which he himself confronts the definition of the thing as the correlate to the perceiving body. As we recall from chapter 1, this challenge consisted in the concession that the description of the thing as the correlate to the body as natural subject of perception is ultimately a merely

psychological, and not sufficiently ontological, definition of the thing. The reason why such a description of the thing is merely psychological is that it “reduce[s] the thing to the experiences in which we encounter it” (PhP 379/337). By extension, one might add, one should be wary of the tendency to reduce time to the experiences in which we encounter it. Certainly, the “nature with which we coexist” exhibits many temporal cycles and rhythms with which we might bodily synchronize and which have their counterparts, however vaguely, in the anonymous existence of our body: the cycles of day and night, lunar cycles and the ebb and flow of the oceans, cycles of evaporation and downfall, the change of the seasons etc. Surely Merleau-Ponty could say that such temporal patterns appearing in things acquire their coefficient of reality for us because they are pre-reflectively understood through our bodily existence, and because our own existence – not to mention our subsistence – is woven into them through our utilization of and adaptation to them.

But what about those temporal cycles and rhythms of nature that cannot be said to find any echo in the anonymous existence of our body, such as the astonishingly long life-spans of certain species of trees, the coming into being and extinction of natural species, the immensely slow processes (by our own temporal standards) through which our natural habitats are set up and unmade through retreats of oceanic masses, movements of tectonic segments, sedimentations of mineral, volcanic and fossilized substance in numerous layers, erosion of material by wind, rain, stream, glaciers and gravitation etc., not to speak of the evolution of the universe beyond Earth? At the other end of the scale, what about those processes occurring at incredible speeds, such as particles coming into being only to endure for a billionth of a second before they are extinguished? Is there any sense but a banal one in saying that we “coexist” with a nature undergoing processes on such temporal scales, or does Merleau-Ponty recommend that we find a way to make such infinitely slow and infinitely rapid cycles and durations of nature rest upon the infrastructure of bodily and anonymously lived time? On the one hand, it would seem that the second hypothesis might be vindicated, in so far as, still in the working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty clings to the idea that “the corporeal schema...is the foundation of space *and of time*, makes comprehensible” (VI 241/191). On the other hand, the restriction he himself places on the tendency to psychologize too much seems to require him to lift the ban on allowing “a time of objects without subjectivity” and to extend duration to things just as he had extended “the miracle of expression” (cf. chapter 1) to them. In order to be consistent with his own procedure – which is, as Barbaras has noted (cf. chapter 1) to make the parameters of the

experience of the other relevant to the experience of nature – he would have to concede to “nature with which we coexist” the same privilege with regard to time that he also accords to the other person:

Of course, another will never exist for us as we exist for ourselves: he is always a lesser figure, we are never present at the thrust of temporalization in him as we are in ourselves. (...) Since my living present opens up to a past that I nevertheless no longer live and to a future that I do not yet live, or that I might never live, it can also open up to temporalities that I do not live and can have a social horizon such that my world is enlarged to the extent of the collective history that my private existence takes up and carries forward (PhP 496/457).

If my “living present” can open up to temporalities that I do not live in the case of other *people’s* temporalities – and we must assume that we are here concerned with a veritable plurality of temporalities – then it is at least conceivable that this living present should not preclude us from speaking earnestly and sensibly about temporalities I do not live, that occur in nature prior to and beyond man and are thus not lived by anyone, and that there should in principle be an infinite pluralism of temporal rhythms and durations on an indefinite number of scales.

Along such lines, it should be possible to shift around Merleau-Ponty’s temporal idealism so as to arrive at a less curtailed interpretation of the “absolute past of nature” than his recourse to the “living present” appears to entail. Instead of trying to think the “absolute past of nature” as somehow “correlated” with the present of unreflective, anonymous temporalization and thus as based on what Merleau-Ponty calls the “living present” (or the “field of presence”), one should instead (as suggested by Lawlor) think the “living present” as, according to Merleau-Ponty’s paraphrase of Proust, “perched upon a pyramid of the past” (PhP 454/413). And with this pyramid of the past, we are no longer far from a highly related figuration of the past, namely, Bergson’s cone of memory as presented in the third chapter of *Matter of Memory*. Indeed the Bergsonian resonances in Merleau-Ponty’s terminology – “originary past”, “absolute past of nature” – are striking, as has been pointed out often enough.¹⁴⁴ At the opening of the third chapter of *Matter and Memory*, as is well known, Bergson speaks of the “past in general” in the course of a summary description of how a recollection is recovered from its virtual state in memory:

Whenever we are trying to recover a recollection, to call up some period of our history, we become conscious of an act *sui generis* by which we detach ourselves

¹⁴⁴ See Leonard Lawlor, *The Challenge of Bergsonism: Phenomenology, Ontology, Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 54; Lawlor, *Thinking Through French Philosophy: The being of the Question*, pp. 88-91; Al-Saji, “A Past Which Has Never Been Present’: Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of the Prepersonal”, p. 43

from the present in order to replace ourselves, first, in the past in general, then, in a certain region of the past – a work of adjustment, something like the focusing of a camera. But our recollection still remains virtual; we simply prepare ourselves to receive it by adopting the appropriate attitude. Little by little it comes into view like a condensing cloud; from the virtual state it passes into the actual; and as its outlines become more distinct and its surface takes on color, it tends to imitate perception. But it remains attached to the past by its deepest roots.¹⁴⁵

In reading this passage, one is first struck by how it is echoed in Merleau-Ponty's description of "the sensoriality I live from within", as described above: In both cases, it is a matter of having a figure (the sensory quality in Merleau-Ponty, the recollection in Bergson) emerge from an inchoate, obscure background, a process of actualization that requires the assumption of a certain attitude or posture, a certain reserve of anticipation and waiting.

The difference between them, however, lies in Bergson's reference to an "act *sui generis*" by which we detach ourselves from the present and make the leap into "the past in general". Following Deleuze's by now classical interpretation in his *Bergsonism*,¹⁴⁶ we must understand this invocation of a "past in general" in relation to Bergson's desire to dissolve the traditional problem of accounting for where recollections are preserved. According to Deleuze, Bergsonism is about showing that "recollections do not have to be preserved anywhere other than 'in' duration", about breaking the deeply entrenched intellectual habit of "presupposing a preservation of the past elsewhere than *in itself*, for example, in the brain".¹⁴⁷ If the idea of a past that is preserved *in itself* poses difficulty for us, Deleuze continues, it is because we have accustomed ourselves to "confuse Being with being-present", so that we have prevented ourselves from seeing that

the present *is not*; rather, it is pure becoming, always outside of itself. (...) But [the past] has not ceased to be. Useless and inactive, impassive, it IS, in the full sense of the word: It is identical with being in itself. It should not be said that it "was", since it is the in-itself of being. (...) [T]his first aspect of the Bergsonian theory would lose all sense if its extra-psychological range were not emphasized. (...) Strictly speaking, the psychological is the present. Only the present is "psychological"; but the past is pure ontology; pure recollection has only ontological significance.¹⁴⁸

Immediately we notice how Deleuze makes the same point concerning the "past in general" that Merleau-Ponty makes concerning the thing: it must not be reductively restricted to the merely psychological, which is to say, to the "lived", but must rather be accorded its rightful status as extra-psychological. And, for Deleuze, to characterize the past in general as extra-

¹⁴⁵ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991), pp. 133-134.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1988).

¹⁴⁷ Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, p. 54.

¹⁴⁸ Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, pp. 55-56.

psychological amounts to the same thing as to say that it is *in itself* and *ontological*. But here we also note the difference to Merleau-Ponty's extra-psychological considerations: for Merleau-Ponty, to exceed the merely psychological – the mere being-for-me – is ultimately accomplished within the psychological, in so far as the thing's alterity or being-in-itself is ultimately an "in-itself-for-us"; for Deleuze, by contrast, the "past in general" is simply in itself and has nothing psychological about it whatsoever. He doesn't seem to get done with emphasizing how extra-psychological or ontological the Bergsonian "past in general" is, as if to forestall the temptation to confine it within psychological considerations (as Merleau-Ponty is often prone to do) – a danger that, Deleuze seems to imply, may come of a too narrow focus on the perspective from *Time and Free Will*, and the resultant neglect of the true progression of Bergsonism.¹⁴⁹

In the same way that we do not perceive things in ourselves, but at the place where they are, we only grasp the past at the place where it is in itself, and not in ourselves, in our present. There is therefore a "past in general" that is not the particular past of a particular present but that is like an ontological element, a past that is eternal and for all time, the condition of the "passage" of every particular present. It is the past in general that makes possible all pasts. According to Bergson, we first put ourselves back into the past in general: He describes in this way the *leap into ontology*. We really leap into being, into being-in-itself, into the being in itself of the past. It is a case of leaving psychology altogether. It is a case of an immemorial or ontological Memory.¹⁵⁰

The astonishing implication of a view of the past as such an ontological and hence ontological Memory, Deleuze points out, is that one can no longer strictly speak of the past-present relation in terms of succession, as if the past were constituted as such only *after* having been present; instead, we are presented with "a most profound paradox of memory",¹⁵¹ namely, the notion of a *contemporaneity* or *coexistence* of the past with the present: "The past would never be constituted if it did not coexist with the present whose past it is".¹⁵² Conversely, perception and recollection must be seen to arise together, or else one is at a loss to locate the point at which perception has become so weakened as to amount to a recollection.¹⁵³ This aspect is what Bergson aims to capture with the image of the inverted cone: it depicts the virtual coexistence of the past with itself at indefinite levels of

¹⁴⁹ "*Time and Free Will* already had an analysis of movement. But movement had been primarily posited as a 'fact of consciousness' implying a conscious and enduring subject confused with duration as psychological experience. (...) Psychological duration should be only a clearly determined case, an opening onto an ontological duration. Ontology should, of necessity, be possible" (Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, pp. 48-49).

¹⁵⁰ Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, pp. 56-57.

¹⁵¹ Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, p. 58.

¹⁵² Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, p. 59.

¹⁵³ Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, pp. 125-126 n. 12.

contraction, the present – represented by the apex of the cone – being but the most contracted degree of the past, each of the levels or sections of the cone including “not particular elements of the past, but always the totality of the past”.¹⁵⁴

Now, up to a certain point, Merleau-Ponty’s approach to “natural time” or “absolute past of nature” in relation to historical time can be seen to resonate with the past-present relation here described by Deleuze apropos of Bergson. To begin with, like Bergson’s/Deleuze’s “past in general”, Merleau-Ponty’s “natural time” is a dimension of passage or, more precisely, the dimension by which the present passes. In Merleau-Ponty’s case, natural time constitutes such a dimension of passage on account of the cyclicity and temporal style of the bodily and habitual nature that we are and with which we coexist. The significance of such an observation, for Merleau-Ponty, is, as we saw in chapter 1, that natural time is both what makes possible yet also threatens the integrity of historical time. For example, at the moment when my personal history seems to be monopolized by a singular event (such as a traumatic loss, a monumental achievement, or some other kind of great shift or transformation) around which the whole system of my past and future life comes to organize itself, the insistent flow of natural or anonymous time continues to foreshadow the general possibility of a new event:

When I am overcome with grief and wholly absorbed in my sorrow, my gaze already wanders out before me, it quietly takes interest in some bright object, it resumes its autonomous existence. After this moment, in which we attempted to lock up our entire life, time (or at least pre-personal time) again begins to flow, and it carries with it if not our resolution, then at least the heartfelt emotions that sustained it. Personal existence is intermittent and when this tide recedes, decision can no longer give my life more than a forced signification. (...) [T]ime never actually closes off [the present] and it remains like a wound through which our strength seeps away (PhP 113-114/86-87).

Conversely, this “wound through which our strength seeps away”, and which is natural time, is also that by which our life may recover after having neurotically or obsessively coagulated into and become fixed upon some bodily symptom:

On the one hand, my body is indeed the possibility for my existence to resign from itself, to make itself anonymous and passive, and to settle into a pure formalism. (...) For the patient, nothing ever happens, nothing takes on a sense and form in his life – or, more precisely, nothing comes to pass but always identical “nows”; life flows back upon itself and history is dissolved into natural time. (...) But precisely because it can shut itself off from the world, my body is also what opens me up to the world and puts me into a situation there. (...) [N]atural time, in every instant that arrives, ceaselessly sketches out the empty form of the genuine event (PhP 202-203/167-168).

¹⁵⁴ Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, p. 60.

What gets emphasized here, then, is the sense of natural time as that which perpetually pulls or pushes the present down into the past and, for each present coming on the scene, already begins to sketch the imminence of the present that will soon displace it. It seems to me that the majority of Merleau-Ponty's descriptions and references to natural time throughout *Phenomenology of Perception* are oriented in the same direction as Merleau-Ponty's comparison, in the "Temporality" chapter (where he doesn't mention natural time), of time with the thrust of water through a fountain:

[T]he water changes and the fountain remains, because the form is preserved; the form is preserved because each successive burst takes up the functions of the previous one. (...) [F]rom the source right through to the fountain's jet the bursts of water are not isolated: there is one single thrust, and a single gap in the flow would suffice to break up the jet (PhP 484/445).

Moreover, there is a second point of overlap between Bergson's "past in general" and Merleau-Ponty's "absolute past of nature" of nature considered as the natural time transpiring through the anonymous existence of our body. This is the aspect of contemporaneity between natural time and the historical present that it both makes possible and yet is always in the process of unmaking, along with the sense of eternity with which this natural time is imbued. From the point of view of the historical present, or from the present being installed in the system of my personal history, natural time is for sure a time at which I am never present, a time which I never occupy as a personal, reflective self, yet thanks to which I am given to myself as a temporalized existence. From this point of view, natural time remains an absolute past of nature, in so far as its "present" is always already past; its rhythmical articulations belong to another life which appears never to have existed yet equally appears always to have existed and will continue after I am gone. Natural time, like the fountain, inspires in us the feeling of a permanence of time; we discern its eternal cycling, its oneness with itself, as through a dream:

That which does not pass by in time is the passage of time itself. Time begins itself anew: yesterday, today, tomorrow – this cyclical rhythm, this constant form can certainly give the illusion of possessing the entirety of time all at once, just as the fountain gave us a feeling of eternity. (...) Eternity is the time of dreams (PhP 486/447).

One could add that, besides the oneiric landscapes we visit during sleep, certain movies can also be read as offering us an inkling of the anonymous temporality or "natural time" pulsating in our bodily existence and between it and its natural environment. Such would be the case, for example, in Alain Resnais' *Last Year in Marienbad* and in many of David Lynch's films, with their characteristic portrayals of the undoing of chronology into tableaux

of cyclical, folded and stratified simultaneities. Natural time – along with the being of our body in general, the being of the social world and that of language – escapes us, “runs away from me through the inside” (PhP 203/168), in a way not unlike the way in which the dream of last night, once we wake up, starts to slip between our fingers.

But this is where Merleau-Ponty’s explicit pronouncements concerning the “absolute past of nature” start to part ways with the trajectory of Bergson’s (and Deleuze’s) notion of the “past in general”. For unlike the passing of the present at the apex of Bergson’s virtual “past in general”, for Merleau-Ponty, “[t]he instant of natural time establishes nothing, it must immediately be renewed, and is in fact renewed in another instant” (PhP 203/168). Thus we understand that, for Merleau-Ponty, natural time is not duration; it is not a time of acquisition through which the past is continually reshaped by each passing present – this is what he would rather prefer to reserve for personal and historical time, the time occupied by a reflective, conscious subject. Instead, natural time becomes a medium of pure passage that gives us the impression of an eternity or abyss of past time, of an absolute past of nature. At times, it is even as if Merleau-Ponty is concerned to relegate to a secondary – even illusory – status this sense of an eternity of time, of time as a comprehensive whole that is never given as such – except in oneiric moments – so as to affirm the absolute authority of the present. “The feeling of eternity is hypocritical”, he says, and refers us back to the supposedly common pre-philosophical wisdom that, in the final analysis, it is on waking perception and the field of presence to which it grants us access that we must stake our philosophy, not on airy dreams:

Eternity is the time of dreams, and the dream refers back to the day before, from which it borrows all of its structures. So what is this waking time where eternity takes root? In the broadest sense, it is the field of presence with its double horizon of originary past and originary future, and the open infinity of fields of presence that have gone by or that are possible. (...) Time exists for me because I have a present. It is by coming into the present that a moment of time acquires its ineffaceable individuality, the “once and for all time”, which will allow it later to move across time and will give us the illusion of eternity (PhP 486/447).

One wonders how someone who writes in this manner could possibly have come upon the idea of accusing – in the very same text – Bergson of “build[ing] time out of the preserved presents, and build[ing] evolution out of the evolved” (PhP 477 n. 1/559 n. 9), of opting for a

“psychological preservation” of the past in the face of the deficit of the hypothesis of physiological preservation (PhP 474/435).¹⁵⁵

It would seem, then, that Merleau-Ponty’s concern with natural time is first and foremost a way to speak about the excess of the unreflective over the reflective, of the sense in which the anonymous existence of our body as natural subject of perception and action constitutes for the personal, reflective self a kind of original past that has never been present. Yet, to the extent that, as we have seen above in relation to sensation, light and space, we already encounter nature as an original past at the level of the anonymous life of our perceiving body, shouldn’t this have led Merleau-Ponty to reconsider the value that Bergson’s theory of the “past in general” might have claimed for his own project? Wouldn’t this be particularly so if, as Toadvine aptly puts it, Merleau-Ponty’s description of our perceptual opening to nature through our body implies that “each perceived enfolds the entire history of its temporal relations and, by extension, the history of the universe”?¹⁵⁶ I fail to see how “the history of the universe” – which seems like a good candidate for the title of the “absolute past of nature” – could possibly be “correlated” with the anonymous life of *our* perceiving body. Instead, it seems one would have to find a way to integrate even this life into a kind of past in general, make it plunge its root into it, and not leave it simply face to face with it in the field of presence. As Lawlor puts it, “[w]e must suppose that if Merleau-Ponty rejects the conception that he incorrectly attributes to Bergson [namely, the position that the past is caused by and depends upon the present, and that pure memory is but a ‘weakened perception], then he actually supports Bergson’s position”.¹⁵⁷ We do find signs of an attempt to think through this in the working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible*, where Merleau-Ponty speaks of a “vertical” past (VI 292/243), which suggests to us the Bergsonian (and Deleuzian) idea of a contemporaneity of the past with the present whose past it is; and he speaks of “the past as massive Being” (VI 292/244) and of an “indestructible past” (VI 291/243), which suggests to us the Bergsonian (and Deleuzian) idea of the ontologically in-itself and pure status of the past (which would be correlated with nothing but itself). Yet, in

¹⁵⁵ With regard to Merleau-Ponty’s reading – and misreading – of Bergson throughout his works, see Ted Toadvine, “Nature and Negation: Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Bergson”, *Chiasmi International: Trilingual Studies Concerning Merleau-Ponty’s Thought* 2 (2000); Dorothea Olkowski, “Merleau-Ponty and Bergson: The Character of the Phenomenal Field,” in *Merleau-Ponty: Difference, Materiality, Painting*, ed. Véronique M. Fóti (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2000); Lawlor, *Thinking Through French Philosophy: The being of the Question*, pp. 89-91; Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*, pp. 118-124; Renaud Barbaras, “The Turn of Experience,” in *Merleau-Ponty and the Possibilities of Philosophy*, ed. Bernard Flynn, Wayne J. Froman, and Robert Vallier (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).

¹⁵⁶ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, p. 70.

¹⁵⁷ Lawlor, *Thinking Through French Philosophy: The being of the Question*, p. 90.

the main, the kind of conceptuality of time appealed for by Merleau-Ponty's concrete descriptions in *Phenomenology of Perception* seems not to have been allowed to crystallize in any of his texts in an elaborate manner.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have sought to retrace and reconstruct the trajectory of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature that is oriented by the issue of immemoriality, of the indestructible anteriority of natural being with respect to both reflection and perception, an issue that, as we have seen, Merleau-Ponty identifies as "the proper concern of the philosophy of nature" (RC 111/147). I have tried to emphasize precisely how immemoriality constitutes for Merleau-Ponty an issue or a problem, in so far as it comes into view as the implicitly assumed horizon of many of his phenomenological descriptions of both reflective and unreflective experience, a horizon that nevertheless – precisely – retreats from his attempts to come explicitly to terms with the problem of time. Against Merleau-Ponty's own attempts to ground the sense of an immemorial or absolute past of nature in the "field of presence" or the "living present", and against Ted Toadvine's suggestion that the absolute past of nature in Merleau-Ponty is "correlated" with the anonymous existence of the body as natural subject of perception, I have suggested that Merleau-Ponty's description of the perceptual process and the process of constitution of quality, light and space appeals instead to a Bergsonian conception of a vertical and indestructible past, resting in itself, virtually coexisting with itself as well as with the present whose past it is. I have reached this conclusion in part by trying to sort out the diverse trajectories of thought that partly converge, partly diverge within Merleau-Ponty's notion of "natural time".

The result, then, is that the immemoriality that is consistently invoked across Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of reflective and unreflective experience is left without any consistent conceptual elaboration in his work; at least one would have to admit that his attempt to take hold of it conceptually is marred by conflict. In chapter 5, I am going to argue that a certain set of Merleau-Ponty's various appeals to maternity constitute a trajectory along which he tries to evoke, in an indirect fashion, a philosophical sense of the immemorial. It will hence be an instance of the feminine at work in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature.

Chapter 3: Generativity

In the previous two chapters, I have tried to establish the fact that – and the way in which – alterity and immemoriality impose themselves as fundamental issues on the horizon of Merleau-Ponty's concern with the problem of nature. In the present chapter, I proceed to broach the the third and last of the issues that, I claim, go into the horizon of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature, and this is the issue of generativity.

The singularity of this issue, it seems to me, puts the previous two into perspective. On the one hand, the issues of alterity and immemoriality both come back, in the final analysis, to a description of how nature presents itself *to* a subject – whether reflective or unreflective, personal or anonymous, symbolically or bodily mediated – and thus amount ultimately to *phenomenal* aspects of nature, that is, fundamental ways in which nature presents itself in our experience of it. The issue of generativity, on the other hand, probes a dimension of nature that concerns not only the generation of sense, but also the generation of the very subjectivity – whether reflective or unreflective, personal or anonymous, symbolically or bodily mediated – that is positioned as the dative of nature's self-manifestation as absolute other and as immemorial. In so far as the issue of nature as generativity thus involves a questioning of not only the pre-objective ground of emergence of the object and of sense but also of the pre-subjective ground of emergence of the subject, the approach to this issue will also be a probing of the properly *ontological* aspects of nature. Here I understand “ontological” not as Merleau-Ponty himself understands it – that is, as the “problem of the relation between the subject and the object” (N 182/135) – but rather as that which concerns the presubjective conditions of the subjective, the pre- or transphenomenal conditions of the phenomenal or, following Deleuze, the virtual yet real conditions of the actual,¹⁵⁸ the plane of immanence on which effects of transcendence are produced.¹⁵⁹ We shall see that this issue confronts Merleau-Ponty with immense difficulties, insofar as his projected “descent into the realm of our ‘archaeology’” (S 268/165) is regularly interrupted by a movement that reinstalls subjectivity as the transcendental ground of appearance. In other words, we shall

¹⁵⁸ See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 208-214.

¹⁵⁹ See Miguel de Beistegui, *Immanence - Deleuze and Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 210), p. 193. See also Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor, "Introduction: The Value of Flesh: Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy and the Modernism/Postmodernism Debate," in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh* (Albany, NY: State University of New

see that the very ontology that promises to think – under the sign of flesh – the “formative medium of the object and the subject” (VI 191/147) ends up, as Leonard Lawlor has shown in another context, as a subjectivized ontology,¹⁶⁰ hence an ontology that ends up presupposing and replicating the very thing it was supposed to ground.

My strategy in this endeavour will be as follows. First, I show how the generativity of nature emerges as a problem to be addressed in connection with Merleau-Ponty’s critical appropriation of the notion of subjectivity espoused in transcendental phenomenology. In the next move, which will comprise the bulk of this long chapter, I investigate how and to what extent Merleau-Ponty’s interrelated notions of “the flesh” and of nature from his later texts can meet the requirement for an account of generativity imposed by the recognition of the limits of transcendental phenomenology.

Subjectivity as “Both Indeclinable and Dependent”

As already anticipated, it is above all else the question of subjectivity that makes the issue of the generativity of nature relevant to Merleau-Ponty’s thought from the very beginning. The very first sentence in Merleau-Ponty’s first book, *The Structure of Behavior*, makes a problem of “the relations between consciousness and nature: organic, psychological or even social” (SC 1/3), a problem that is of course stated in a deliberately equivocal fashion: It can be taken to refer to the *access* which an already established subject or consciousness has to nature in those different respects, which would amount to an epistemological question; or it can be taken to refer to the conditions under which subjectivity or consciousness can be said to *emerge from* (and maintain itself in) nature, which would amount to an ontological question. The second interpretation of the question, which makes generativity relevant to the problem of subjectivity, is undoubtedly the one to pose the greatest challenge for Merleau-Ponty, while also being highly relevant to the reading of his works, as I aim to show in this section.

The issue of the generativity of nature becomes inevitable yet highly difficult in the context of Merleau-Ponty’s thought given his notion of subjectivity as ambiguous. The sense in which subjectivity is ambiguous for Merleau-Ponty can be specified in a number of ways, but the sense most relevant to the present concern is the one he offers in no uncertain terms

York Press, 2000), pp. 14-17 for a consideration of the relation between Merleau-Ponty’s later works and Deleuze & Guattari’s return to the plane of immanence.

¹⁶⁰ Lawlor, *Thinking Through French Philosophy: The being of the Question*, pp. 96-97, 102-108.

in the “Cogito” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*. Just before he opens the section in which he will broach the question of a “tacit cogito” in virtue of which I am, “prior to every speech [i.e., prior to Descartes’ spoken cogito]...in contact with my own life” (PhP 463/424), he writes: “We must attempt to understand how subjectivity can be simultaneously dependent and indeclinable (*indéclinable*)” (PhP 461/422). It seems to me that all of Merleau-Ponty’s interrogations concerning subjectivity from *Phenomenology of Perception* and onwards take this way of stating the problem as a basic point of departure. What does he mean, then, by stating the problem of subjectivity in these terms?

Let us first consider what is at stake in Merleau-Ponty’s claim that subjectivity is *indeclinable*. While *indéclinable* is arguably more commonly used to denote the grammatical property of a word that allows of no declination, it is clear that Merleau-Ponty uses it in the sense of “inevitable”, “irrecusable”, or “irreducible”. If subjectivity is indeclinable in the sense of not allowing itself to be written out of the picture, of being something that always has to be reckoned with, then it is necessary, which is to say that it is the condition of possibility of there being a world in any relevant sense of the term, i.e., subjectivity is transcendental.¹⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty’s concession, in the “Preface” to *Phenomenology of Perception*, to the necessity of beginning with the transcendental reduction – the suspension of our habitual belief in a self-subsistent world, and the retreat to subjectivity now posing as the source of the world – leaves no doubt about the matter:

I am the absolute source. My existence does not come from my antecedents, nor from my physical and social surroundings; it moves out toward them and sustains them. For I am the one who brings into being for myself – and thus into being in the only sense that the word could have for me – this tradition that I choose to take up or this horizon whose distance from me would collapse were I not there to sustain it with my gaze (since this distance does not belong to the horizon as one of its properties) (PhP 9/lxxii).

This ban on seeking being in any other sense than being for me, than what may possibly declare itself in (perceptual) experience, seems to remain in force in one way or another throughout Merleau-Ponty’s career, through the *Nature* lectures and into the manuscripts and working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible*. In the *Nature* lectures, of course, Merleau-Ponty is more appreciative than ever of the philosophical relevance of knowledge produced

¹⁶¹ Here I side with Toadvine, who insists – against Abram – that Merleau-Ponty, for all his criticisms of the idealist strain in Husserlian phenomenology, remains himself a full-fledged transcendental philosopher from start to finish (cf. Toadvine, “Limits of the Flesh: the Role of Reflection in David Abram’s Eco-Phenomenology”, p. 352, n. 11). I will return in more depth to Merleau-Ponty’s relation to transcendental idealism in chapter 6.

in the sciences, which normally do not care about the need for grounding in transcendental subjectivity:

How thus not to be interested in science in order to know what Nature is? If Nature is an all-encompassing something we cannot think starting from concepts, let alone deductions, but we must rather think it starting from experience, and in particular, experience in its most regulated form – that is, science (N 122/87).

Nevertheless, no matter how regulated and sophisticated are the methods that make possible scientific experience, whatever is said from the standpoint of science is valid only as an explicitation or explanation of the world such as it has already declared itself to us through our pre-scientific perception of it: “The construction of science is an explanation (*exposé*) of simple perceived things” (N 158/117). In this verdict we can hear the echo of the more notorious formulation of the same principle in the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, in which the perceived world is accorded the privilege of being “this world with regard to which every scientific determination is abstract, signitive, and dependent, just like geography with regard to the landscape where we first learned what a forest, a meadow, or a river is” (PhP 9/lxxii). The introduction to the third *Nature* course follows up on this. Since science can do nothing but provide expositions, explicitations and clarifications of the world with which we have already acquainted ourselves in perception, the only Nature of which there is reason to speak “can obviously be only Nature perceived by us” (N 270/208).

Nothing of this changes as we move to *The Visible and the Invisible*: “It is the perceptual life of my body that...is presupposed in every notion of an object” (VI 59/37); “no form of being can be posited without reference to the subjectivity” (VI 218/167). All these variations on the same basic theme – the imposition of the ban on speaking of being in any other sense than being for me – are summed up in Merleau-Ponty’s purportedly minimalist formulation of “our first truth”, which he considers to be incontestable and innocent of all prejudice, namely, that “‘something’ is there, and that ‘someone’ is there” (VI 210/160). Hence, whatever is said about the “something” – the thing, the world, nature – it is going to be said from within the presupposition that the possibility and even the facticity of a “someone” is already granted.

In virtue of what extraordinary power can subjectivity claim to be exempt from any physical, organic, psychological, social or cultural genealogy, so as to serve as the “absolute source”, the ground of appearance and positing in general, the “someone” necessarily accompanying every “something” as the latter’s very condition? Merleau-Ponty’s solution in

Phenomenology of Perception is to sign in on Sartre's dialectic of being and nothingness, and to conceive of subjectivity as a power of retreat or withdrawal:

If there really is to be consciousness, if something is to appear to someone, then a retreat of non-being (*un réduit de non-être*), or a Self, must be carved out behind all of our particular thoughts. I do not have to reduce myself to a series of "consciousnesses", and each of these consciousnesses, along with the historical sedimentations and the sensible implications with which it is filled, must be presented to a perpetual absence (PhP 461/421, translation modified).

If the "someone" is to be a necessary accompaniment to every appearing "something", then this "someone" cannot be reduced to the assemblage of individual experiences in which the "something" appears. If it is not to be so reduced, it must be conceived as an unassailable power of retreat, withdrawal or nihilation which ensures that whatever I experience, undergo or do at any given moment, I do not coincide with it absolutely, but retain the minimal space of free play with regard to it. In other words, I "maintain with regard to every factual situation a faculty of withdrawal" (PhP 418/377). Thanks to this power of withdrawal by which I am a "retreat of non-being", I remain in contact with myself on the hither side of all circumstances, behind or beneath all particular experiences, acts and expressive efforts. Significantly, as Ted Toadvine has pointed out,¹⁶² this language of enclaves and withdrawal at times even affects Merleau-Ponty's description of bodily intentionality, which is depicted as "the zone of non-being *in front of which* precise beings, figures and points can appear" (PhP 130/103). Given Merleau-Ponty's willingness to consider even the living body in terms of this transcendental power of nihilation that defines subjectivity, it is clear that his persistent qualification of the subject as necessarily embodied changes nothing about its putatively transcendental status in his account. It is as if, at times, the body comes to be understood on the basis of subjectivity already conceived as transcendental, and not the other way around.

But, as we recall, Merleau-Ponty wants to understand how subjectivity can be not only indeclinable (i.e., as we have just seen, transcendental), but also dependent. If subjectivity – whether understood as subjectivized embodiment or embodied subjectivity – is dependent, then it is also vulnerable. These are precisely the terms in which Merleau-Ponty articulates the difference (which he claims is absolute) between his own return to subjectivity as the absolute source – i.e., to being-for-me as the only sense in which the word "being" can have for me – and the "idealist return to consciousness", for which Descartes and Kant serve as

¹⁶² Cf. Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 99

Merleau-Ponty's exemplary representatives. The latter return amounts to a retreat to "the subject as if toward a condition of possibility distinct from our experience", to "an invulnerable subjectivity, prior to [*en deçà de*] being and time" (PhP 10/lxxiii). Now, an invulnerable subjectivity is one that would not be exposed to the world's powers of corruption or disruption. What cannot suffer corruption or degeneration at the world's hands could not possibly be subject to generation in the first place. Thus, the idealist positing of an invulnerable subjectivity, in denying the possibility that this subjectivity may degenerate, affirms the possibility of a subjectivity that would know no generation or emergence. Merleau-Ponty, however – to all appearances, at least – wants to explore the possibility of a transcendental subject that would also be vulnerable and dependent on conditions beyond the reach of its control, in other words, a transcendental subject vulnerable to the world's hostile powers of corruption and dependent on favourable conditions of emergence. Significantly, this will also require that one abandon the account of the transcendental function of subjectivity in terms of a power of withdrawal, in so far as it is hard to see – as Sartre himself saw with clarity, from which he drew all the infamous implications – how such a power might be compromised or, even more strongly, come to be, once it is granted as the very definition of subjectivity.

To begin with, as is well known, *Phenomenology of Perception* is packed with examples of mutilated subjectivity – descriptions of patients who have had the structure and capacities for experiencing and acting in the world considerably modified – and Merleau-Ponty is always concerned to take the pathological phenomena on their own terms as original modes of being in the world. While the phantom limb syndrome (and its anosognosic counterpart) could hardly be said to affect the life-world of the patient throughout its whole extension, one would have to say that Schneider's condition, for example, penetrates to the very heart of his personality. Not only has Schneider's cerebral lesion – inflicted by shell splinters at the back of his head and affecting the visual centre of his brain – deprived him of the ability to recognize and name simultaneous wholes (sensory and cognitive patterns). He has also lost the ability to engage effortlessly in abstract behaviour (voluntary movement projected into an imaginary or virtual situation, such as merely lifting an arm to order), an ability which, in the normal subject, ensures the minimum flexibility of mind required to improvise or play-act. Merleau-Ponty indicates that Schneider's illness has a metaphysical outlook, in so far as he is "'bound' to the actual" and "lacks the concrete freedom that consists in the general power of placing oneself in a situation" (PhP 169/137); this general

power of placing oneself in a situation, which Merleau-Ponty calls the “intentional arc”, is not given once and for all, prior to being or time, but is at the risk of “going limp” in a disorder like Schneider’s (PhP 170/137). The extent of the contingently inflicted disorder’s reach into the “personal core” of Schneider’s being is attested to, moreover, in the changed affective structure of Schneider’s world:

Schneider can no longer place himself in a sexual situation. Faces are neither pleasant or unpleasant, and people take on these qualities if he has a direct exchange with them, and then only according to the attitude that they adopt toward him, or the attention and the concern that they show him. The sun and the rain are neither joyful or sad; his mood depends upon elementary organic functions; the world is affectively neutral (PhP 194/159-160).

What Schneider’s illness brings home to us, according to Merleau-Ponty, is that “consciousness is vulnerable and that consciousness itself can suffer the illness”. Merleau-Ponty wants, of course, to avoid the empiricist notion that the shell splinter directly affected Schneider’s subjectivity, in the sense that the damage to his visual processing directly caused the dissolution of his life-world into an indifferent, impersonal flow of events in which he feels himself submerged. But he nevertheless wants to claim a structural relation between the damage to his power of vision in the restricted sense and the damage to his powers as a subject in the wider sense:

By attacking the “visual sphere”, the illness is not limited to destroying certain conscious contents, namely, “visual representations” or vision in the literal sense; rather, it attacks vision in a figurative sense, of which the former is but the model or the emblem – the power of “surveying” or “dominating” (*überschauen*) simultaneous multiplicities and a certain manner of positing the object or of being conscious (PhP 170/138).

Hence, it seems to me, the exceptional role Merleau-Ponty accords to the case of Schneider in the first section of *Phenomenology of Perception* works to suggest a notion of subjectivity as vulnerable to harmful contingencies and hence as dependent upon favourable conditions of emergence.

Moreover, in the last section of the “Space” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty considers a range of cases that all exemplify our “experience of the unreal” (PhP 335/296), such as nocturnal space, dream space, mythical space and psychosis. They all seem to have in common that they upset our sense of self-possession and the possession of a world that we unfold before us, and he demands that all these spaces be recognized as “original”, which is to say that “we do not allow ourselves to set up the configurations of adult, normal, and civilized experience in advance within infantile, morbid or primitive

experience” (PhP 344/305). Quite to the contrary, one is led to recognize how adult, normal and civilized experience grades off into infantile, mythical, oneiric and psychotic experience as its own horizons. Or, rather, they are all, as so many “anthropological spaces”, possible determinations of one single “natural world that always shines through from beneath the others – just as the canvas shines through from beneath the painting – and gives the human world an air of fragility” (PhP 346/307). Of course, for Merleau-Ponty, this means that the schizophrenic world is no less premised on the natural world as primordial background than is the well-integrated, organized world of the adult, normal and civilized subject; the natural world supplies the ever-present possibility – however marginal – of communication between the psychotic patient and the normal subject. It remains, however, that psychosis is that repertoire of experience in which humans may most acutely sense the fragility and contingency of the human world. Invoking a case reported by Franz Fischer, Merleau-Ponty writes:

Clear space, that impartial space where all objects have the same importance and the same right to exist, is not merely surrounded by, but also wholly permeated by another spatiality that morbid variations reveal. One schizophrenic stops in the mountains and views the landscape. After a moment, he feels threatened. A particular interest arises in him for everything that surrounds him, as if a question had been posed from the outside to which he can find no answer. Suddenly the landscape is snatched away from him by some alien force. It is as if a second limitless sky were penetrating the blue sky of the evening. This new sky is empty, “subtle, invisible and terrifying”. (...) This results in the schizophrenic questioning: everything is amazing, absurd or unreal because the movement of existence toward things no longer has its energy, because it appears along with its contingency, and because the world is no longer self-evident (PhP 339-340/300).

Let us further observe that Merleau-Ponty identifies the “other” spatiality permeating “clear space” with “our way of projecting the world”, such that “the schizophrenic disorder consists merely in that this perpetual project is dissociated from the objective world such as it is still offered by perception, and it withdraws, so to speak, into itself” (PhP 339/300). Yet the privilege Merleau-Ponty here seems to want to accord to “our way of projecting the world” as the basis for an understanding of psychosis clearly comes at the cost of counterposing it to something that he on the whole does not acknowledge as forming part of our primordial experience, namely, “clear space”. As we have seen, there is a natural space subtending all human spaces, all particular ways of projecting the world, but this space is not a “clear space” where objects are juxtaposed and have equal claims on existence, but rather “the thickness of a medium devoid of things” (PhP 316/278). This thick space appears not when we allow our ways of projecting the world to eclipse the natural world completely, but

rather “when we let ourselves be in the world without actively taking it up, or in an illness that encourages this attitude”; from within such an attitude, “planes are no longer distinguished from each other, colors no longer condense into surface colors, but rather diffuse around objects and become atmospheric colors”. As an illustration of how this space reveals itself in illness, Merleau-Ponty invokes precisely the case of a schizophrenic patient: “For example, one patient who writes on a sheet of paper must pierce with his pen a certain thickness of white prior to reaching the paper” (PhP 316/278). Thus we must say that the space in which the schizophrenic feels himself immersed in psychosis is no more “our way of projecting the world” than it is the clear space of geometrical relations obtaining between constituted things in the objective world. Rather, it is a space underlying or encompassing our human ways of projecting the world, including our geometrization of it in science, a space of which such determinations are composed and whence both things and subjects emerge, and which is therefore no more subjective than it is objective; it is impartial without being clear. Strangely, then, primordial space is at once that thickness from which all human determinations – both pathological and allegedly normal ones – are extracted, and yet some of these determinations – such as psychosis – seem to be more revelatory of their ground of emergence than others (such as the normal, adult, civilized mode of projecting the world). That sense of the unreal with which the schizophrenic patient is struck, which amazes him (yet also oppresses him) would thus seem to be related to that “wonder in face of the world” that characterizes the mode of experience that Merleau-Ponty identifies as the properly philosophical – while also painterly – attitude toward the world (cf. PhP 348/309; see also chapter 1 in the present thesis). The second, limitless sky penetrating the blue sky of the evening in the case of schizophrenia cited above is thus not the subjective, human or imaginary world totally eclipsing the objective, non-human or real world, but is instead the disturbing revelation of the unreality of the real.

On account of the phenomena I have highlighted from Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological descriptions above, one has to conclude, then, that insofar as subjectivity is, at its core, open and vulnerable to demotion and disintegration, it must also be open to generation and emergence and not be its own origin, despite its transcendental function as the “absolute source”. Indeed, as he puts it in the “Sensing” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, a consistent phenomenology of experience will reveal the subject precisely as emergent: “What is given is experience, or in other words the communication of a finite subject with an opaque being from which [it] emerges, but also in which [it] remains

engaged” (PhP 264/228). It seems that this claim goes beyond the more notorious affirmation of the primacy of the body-subject with respect to the subject of clear thought, in so far as the “opaque being” from which the finite subject emerges also occupies – in so far as it is also that with which it *communicates* – the role of the world or nature.

Before proceeding, I would like to briefly digress in order to emphasize my above claim that Merleau-Ponty’s way of posing the problem of subjectivity extends the tradition of transcendental philosophy. More precisely, it echoes Husserl’s arrival, toward the close of part IIIA of the *Crisis*, at what he calls the “paradox of human subjectivity”. This paradox consists, Husserl explains, in “being a subject for the world and at the same time being an object in the world”.¹⁶³ Being a subject for the world and at the same time being an object in the world must amount to a paradox in so far as, according to the protocols of transcendental phenomenology, to be an object in the world is by definition to be correlative to the constituting activity of transcendental subjectivity. If subjectivity is part of that of which it is the constitutive source, how can it fulfill its function of being such a source? Husserl considers this result, which all the preceding inquiries of the 3rd part of *Crisis* lead up to, to be nothing short of an “absurdity”:

How can a component part of the world, its human subjectivity, constitute the whole world, its human subjectivity, constitute the whole world, namely, constitute it as its intentional formation, one which has always already become what it is and continues to develop, formed by the universal interconnection of intentionally accomplishing subjectivity, while the latter, the subjects accomplishing in cooperation, are themselves only a partial formation within a total accomplishment? (...) The subjective part of the world swallows up, so to speak, the whole world and thus itself too. What an absurdity!¹⁶⁴

Now consider, against this background, the remarkable conclusion to the “Cogito” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, which in so many ways prefigures the terms of what is going to take form later as Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on the flesh. Merleau-Ponty proposes a way to think about the subject-world relation that further augments the tension with the model of subjectivity as a “retreat of non-being” with which he occasionally explicates the notion of the “tacit cogito” (as discussed above). What he adds here implies that the notion of subjectivity as the power of withdrawal is at best one-sided. In so far as my power of withdrawal is that by which I comprehend the world and, in a sense, constitute it as an

¹⁶³ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: an Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 178.

¹⁶⁴ Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: an Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, pp. 179-180.

object, this withdrawal is but the other side of my own incarnation in the world, by which I am indeed “comprehended” by the world as an object within it, such that subjectivity as a “hold” on the world becomes, by the mediation of a living body, one of the world’s very own possibilities:

In a famous *pensée*, Pascal shows that from a certain angle I comprehend (*comprends*) the world and from another the world comprehends me (*me comprend*). It must now be said that this is in fact the same angle...I comprehend (*comprends*) the world because I am situated in the world and because the world comprehends me (*me comprend*). (...) The ontological world and body that we uncover at the core of the subject are not the world and the body as ideas; rather, they are the world itself condensed into a comprehensive hold and the body itself as a knowing-body (PhP 469-470/431, translation modified).¹⁶⁵

These claims clearly go further than the invocation of the body-world correlation that forms the steady refrain throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*. Not only is there a fundamental sense in which the subject is corporeal, somehow standing opposed to the world or at grips with the world, but even more strongly is there a sense in which the body-become-subject is indeed an achievement on the part of the world, of nature itself.

Seen in the light of Husserl’s formulation of the problem his transcendental phenomenology must face up to, I think it must be granted that Merleau-Ponty’s stated (and persistently pursued) ambition to understand how subjectivity can be both indeclinable and dependent, both comprehending and comprehended by the world, both a hold on and a being held by the world establishes him firmly on the ground of transcendental phenomenology. By the same token, it becomes apparent that the most fundamental problem to be dealt with in this strand of transcendental philosophy is, as Eugen Fink famously put it in his *Kantstudien* article in defence of Husserl against his Neo-Kantian critics, nothing short of the problem of “*the origin of the world*”.¹⁶⁶ This would no longer be a problem if the putative origin of the world – transcendental subjectivity as the centre of constitutive functioning, or the “absolute source” in Merleau-Ponty’s terms – were somehow withdrawn from the world. But since, for phenomenology, transcendental subjectivity as the world’s ground of manifestation is not the result arrived at through a procedure of deductive inference thus making it itself unknowable, but is on the contrary able to know itself, it must partake in the very dimension for which it serves as the origin, it must have a worldly or objective character. In other words, it must

¹⁶⁵ See Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, p. 106 for a fine discussion of Merleau-Ponty evidently deliberate play on the ambiguity of the French verb *comprendre* in this passage.

¹⁶⁶ Fink, “The Phenomenological Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Contemporary Criticism”, p. 94.

have an exterior and a wake of duration, and thus in its turn be subject to conditions of emergence and generativity.

This circular relation that sings behind Merleau-Ponty's determination of subjectivity as simultaneously indeclinable and dependent is what requires of him an account of nature as generativity. To all appearances at least, such an account is what Merleau-Ponty, in texts such as the *Nature* lectures, "Eye and Mind" and *The Visible and the Invisible*, proposes to offer under the signs of flesh as "formative medium of the object and the subject" and of nature as "leaf of being", to which I therefore need to turn next, beginning with his discourse on the flesh.

The Flesh as "Formative Medium of the Object and the Subject"

In what follows, I shall be concerned with Merleau-Ponty's discourse on the flesh, as inscribed in his late works, in so far as it 1) represents his attempt in those works to handle the problem of subjectivity as discussed above, 2) marks this approach as an attempt to solve the problem in a generative register, and 3) can be said to form part of his late approach to the problem of nature. This means that it will be necessary to inquire into how and in what sense the flesh may deserve the title that Merleau-Ponty confers on it on one occasion, namely, the "formative medium of the object and the subject" (VI 191/147). Before I proceed to this, however, I should say a few words in justification of the assumption that an exposition of Merleau-Ponty's discourse on the flesh as we find it in *The Visible and the Invisible* is relevant to an investigation of his later approach to the problem of nature.

The Flesh and Nature

The basis for the analyses to follow, as far as relevance is concerned, is the assumption that we can consider Merleau-Ponty's discourse on the flesh in *The Visible and the Invisible* a resumption of what he proposes to think, in the *Nature* lectures, under the sign of "nature". Such an assumption must be put to effect within the constraints of caution imposed by the fact that, to the best of my knowledge, Merleau-Ponty only rarely equates nature with the flesh. There are two salient instances of this in the working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible* that I should mention. The first is the famous working note of November 1960, in which Merleau-Ponty anticipates that a "psychoanalysis of Nature" will reveal it – Nature – as "the flesh, the mother" (VI 315/267). While the apposition of both nature and flesh with

maternity will give me pause in later chapters, we can at least establish at this juncture that this note gives a certain basis for exploring possible links between what Merleau-Ponty proposes concerning flesh and what he attempts to think with regard to the problem of nature. The other instance comes in the very last note published along with *The Visible and the Invisible*, dated March 1961, in which Merleau-Ponty signals that he is going to study “Nature as the other side of man (as flesh – nowise as ‘matter’)” (VI 322/274), which goes to say that he is going to think nature – whatever be the details concerning the man-nature relationship – in terms of the flesh.

Yet there is also a salient obstacle to such an interpretation that lies in the fact that, in the third *Nature* course, Merleau-Ponty appears to be developing a “theory of the flesh” in the sense of the “esthesiology” (i.e., a description of the sensorial morphology and functioning) of the human body (cf. N 271/209). Such a use of the term “flesh” would seem to doubly limit its scope with regard to the problem of nature, in so far as it is thereby linked to the issue of the *sensorial* make-up of the *human* body. Along these lines, it might appear problematic, from a more general point of view, to mount an explication of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature in terms of a notion that seems to imply at the outset an unwonted privileging of only a limited part of nature – namely, living nature, perhaps even only that part of living nature known as the human body.

Nevertheless, I have gathered the courage to proceed as if Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on the flesh and his philosophy of nature are connected in significant ways, partly thanks to the hints from the working notes cited above, and partly thanks to a set of conspicuous parallels between the ways in which Merleau-Ponty describes flesh and certain ways in which he characterizes nature in the *Nature* lectures, to which I will return below. A third hint that this trajectory of interpretation is a viable one is given in several of the commentaries, which I will here briefly review in order to document that I am not straying very far from shared opinions among players in the field with regard to this issue.

In his classical study *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness* (originally published in French in 1973), Gary B. Madison provides an elucidation of the relation between the terms “Being”, “world”, “flesh” and “nature” in Merleau-Ponty’s later works, and we shall see that Madison ends up positing them as all identical to one another. In the course of the book’s long, final section entitled “The Field of Being”, Madison insists that “it is important to form a clearer idea of this fundamental notion of Nature” to be found in Merleau-Ponty’s later work. Madison’s efforts

to form a clearer idea of what Merleau-Ponty means by “Nature” in his later works (particularly in the résumés for the courses on nature, which comprised the only material Madison had available from these courses at the time he wrote his study) bear largely on its reverberation in certain other central notions that make up the signature of Merleau-Ponty’s final thought, notably “Being”, “the flesh” and “world”. To begin with, Madison considers “Being” and “the flesh” to be conceptually speaking more or less synonymous terms in Merleau-Ponty: “With the notion of flesh Merleau-Ponty is attempting to think Being as the absolute source of the subject as well as that of the object”.¹⁶⁷ We may note that this identity also holds, on Madison’s reading, when “being” is qualified by Merleau-Ponty – as it often is in his late works – as “brute” or “wild”: “His ontology is, as he says, a philosophy of ‘brute being’, and brute being is the flesh”.¹⁶⁸ Later on, Madison suggests that “Nature” in the late Merleau-Ponty is also practically identical with “the flesh” on exactly the same grounds on which he had also identified “Being” and “the flesh”: “Nature, as [Merleau-Ponty] understands it (...) is in fact the ‘flesh’ of the world, the ultimate source both of the sensible world and the sentient subject”.¹⁶⁹ In the very same sentence, as we should expect, Madison also proposes the identity of “Being” and “Nature” in Merleau-Ponty’s late thought: “Being is therefore Nature”.¹⁷⁰ Finally, “world” is admitted into what now seems to have become a unison and synoptic quartet: “[i]n its deepest meaning the notion of the world in Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy joins up with that of Nature”.¹⁷¹ Hence, both “Being” and “Nature” are identical both with one another and with “the flesh”, while “Nature” is more or less the same as “world” in its deepest meaning. The result of Madison’s clarification of Merleau-Ponty’s late notion of Nature, then, seems to be that whenever either “Being”, “world” (in its deepest sense), or “flesh” (especially the flesh of the world) is at issue in Merleau-Ponty’s late works, “Nature” is so as well, and vice versa.

While one might well conceive an exegetical project that would retrace the numerous ways in which all these four terms are used throughout Merleau-Ponty’s works in order to fully substantiate this thesis of identity, I think Madison’s main point is that, on the whole, they are functionally equivalent in that they all concern the same problem of locating some presubjective and prehuman source of emergence of subjectivity and humanity. If this is not

¹⁶⁷ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, p. 208.

¹⁶⁸ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, p. 168.

¹⁶⁹ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, p. 218.

¹⁷⁰ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, p. 218.

¹⁷¹ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, p. 207.

to misconstrue Madison's point, then I shall be following him in considering Merleau-Ponty's "Being" (sometimes also "being"), "world" (in the deeper sense), "flesh" and "nature" as more or less practically equivalent. Jumping now from 1973 to 2009, we may further note that, in his book *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, Ted Toadvine approaches the nature-flesh nexus in Merleau-Ponty from a slightly different angle than Madison, yet with a similar result. He focuses on Merleau-Ponty's remarks at the opening of the third *Nature* course concerning the place of the study of nature as "an introduction to the definition of being", and suggests that "the ontology of 'flesh', probably the most famous concept in Merleau-Ponty's oeuvre, can be developed only by way of an ontology of nature".¹⁷² In this I take him to imply that we need to refer to Merleau-Ponty's approach to the problem of nature, not least in the *Nature* lectures, in order to make explicit and develop many of the issues that remain undeveloped and implicit in the discourse on flesh found in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Whether or not this is an adequate rendering of Toadvine's point, this seems to me a promising path to take, in so far as the *Nature* lectures do indeed contain much material that may complement the suggestions found in the discourse on the flesh found in *The Visible and the Invisible*. But the inverse is equally true: the discourse on the flesh contains in a more intense, concentrated form the logic – or rather logics, in the plural – that also inform his approach to the problem of nature as we find it in the *Nature* lectures.

One of the most recent resumptions of this way of treating the relation between Merleau-Ponty's discourse on the flesh and his philosophy of nature is found in William S. Hamrick's and Jan van der Veken's book *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty's Fundamental Thought*. There, they write that "[f]lesh as an element of Being corresponds to Nature conceived as ontological matrix or source of minds and bodies, subjects and objects".¹⁷³ It must be admitted that Hamrick and van der Veken equivocate somewhat on this point, in so far as – later in the same chapter – they write that "[t]he reversibility of our flesh makes us belong to 'the world's universal flesh' (VI 137/181), which, as including Nature, is more than things, but not apart from them".¹⁷⁴ To say that flesh *corresponds* to nature and to say that, as universal, it *includes* nature does not seem to come back to the same thing. Yet, their decision to include a 30 pages long chapter on Merleau-

¹⁷² Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 109.

¹⁷³ Hamrick and Van der Veken, *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty's Fundamental Thought*, p. 77.

¹⁷⁴ Hamrick and Van der Veken, *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty's Fundamental Thought*, p. 93.

Ponty's discourse on the flesh in a book whose primary topic is Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature is effectively a strong argument for the supposition that there are important links to be discovered between the two trajectories.

Following the hints and clues from these commentators, then, I have constructed the remainder of this chapter around the idea that Merleau-Ponty's discourse on the flesh in *The Visible and the Invisible* and his considerations of the problem of nature in the *Nature* lectures mutually enlighten, explicate, replicate and complicate one another. I have chosen to step into this problematic by way of the flesh, in so far as it is apropos of the flesh that Merleau-Ponty most explicitly broaches the question of generativity that concerns me – the question of the “formative medium of the object and the subject”.

The Ultimate and Multifarious Notion of Flesh

However, focusing now more restrictedly on Merleau-Ponty's discourse on the flesh, it is necessary to point to certain difficulties that will pertain to every attempt at making sense of just this term, “the flesh”, in Merleau-Ponty's works. Although Merleau-Ponty calls the flesh “an ultimate notion...thinkable by itself” (VI 183/140) and mentions a “philosophy of the flesh” (VI 315/267), it is nevertheless doubtful whether one can, strictly speaking, treat the flesh in Merleau-Ponty as *a notion*. This is so at least if, in order to be able to speak of the flesh as a notion, let alone an *ultimate* one, it should be possible to discern some unifying principle across the multiplicity of ways in which Merleau-Ponty uses the term, without reducing its content to an utterly empty formalism hardly deserving of the name “flesh”.

To begin with, Merleau-Ponty often distinguishes between the flesh of the body, or my flesh, and the flesh of the world, of the things or of the visible: “That the presence of the world is precisely the presence of its flesh to my flesh, that I ‘am of the world’ and that I am not it, this is what is no sooner said than forgotten” (VI 167/127; see also VI 190, 297-299, 309/146, 248-250, 261). It is true that several of the discussions of the flesh found in the working notes deal precisely with the relation between the flesh of the body and that of the world, what they have in common and what sets them apart. Yet the very distinction between a bodily flesh and a worldly flesh would seem to undermine from the beginning any hope of a comprehensive understanding of a *unique* flesh, *the* flesh as such. Adding to this difficulty are the variants that present us with *a* flesh (as in “every thought known to us occurs to a flesh” (VI 189/146); “...the massive flesh [does not come without] a rarefied flesh”

(192/148)), and with *all* flesh (as in "...a ray of natural light that illuminates all flesh and not only my own" (VI 185/142)).

Furthermore, the term flesh is not only that with which I, the body, things, and the world are imbued through a genitive – my flesh, the flesh of the body, the flesh of the world, the flesh of language etc. – but also, on occasions, occupies the place of a predicate: "the world is flesh" (VI 180/138). To the last qualification belongs the further qualification that whatever aspires to the status of flesh has been *made* thus: in making me world, the thickness of the body makes things flesh (cf. VI 176/135); there is a current – rendered probable by all the channels and unemployed circuits composing the sensory apparatus – that is entrusted the task of making "an embryo a newborn infant...a visible a seer...a body a mind, or at least a flesh" (VI 191/147).

One would be hard pressed to offer a definition of the term "flesh" that would accommodate the whole range of uses to which Merleau-Ponty puts it, and I shall not attempt such a thing. What nevertheless is possible is to discern at least three relatively distinct, principal, and recurring meanings between which Merleau-Ponty shifts: flesh as *carnality*, as *elementality*, and as *reversibility* or chiasm respectively.¹⁷⁵ They all occur in the text of "The

¹⁷⁵ This division between three basic senses of flesh in Merleau-Ponty has been proposed by Lawrence Hass and re-appropriated by William S. Hamrick & Jan van der Veken (see Lawrence Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 201-203 and Hamrick and Van der Veken, *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty's Fundamental Thought*, pp. 73-94). Hass understands carnality as "the physicality of ourselves and our relations in the world" and thus as Merleau-Ponty's "intentional, strategic alternative to the age-old notion of 'matter'" (Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, p. 138); flesh understood as elementality or "element of being" is understood by Hass as "the 'element of experience', an element that is at play wherever there are creatures that perceive" (Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, p. 140); while he considers "reversibility" to be a condensation of flesh as distance/proximity, as paradox, and as style (cf. Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, p. 139). Hamrick and van der Veken construe this tripartite division somewhat differently, and substantiate their reading with unpublished notes and manuscripts that are partly reproduced and cited in a work by Emmanuel de Saint-Aubert. With regard to the flesh as carnality, they propose that it concerns "the inescapable 'confusion' between [my own flesh, the flesh of others, and the flesh of the world]" (Hamrick and Van der Veken, *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty's Fundamental Thought*, p. 75). Considering the sense of flesh as elementality, they first suggest that, as already cited in the main text, that it "corresponds to Nature conceived as ontological matrix or source of minds and bodies, subjects and objects" (Hamrick and Van der Veken, *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty's Fundamental Thought*, p. 77), hence as being closely connected to the function of flesh as "formative medium of the object and the subject". A little further on, however, they add a discussion that relates the issues of depth and verticality to the sense of flesh as elementality (cf. Hamrick and Van der Veken, *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty's Fundamental Thought*, pp. 79-86). Finally, the sense of reversibility or chiasm is distinguished by Hamrick & van der Veken as the sense through which "Merleau-Ponty attempts to explain the functionings of flesh – that is, how all that has been discussed thus far actually occurs" (Hamrick and Van der Veken, *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty's Fundamental Thought*, p. 86), and in explaining this functioning they draw on the whole gamut of Merleau-Ponty's relational terms, from "dehiscence", "coiling over" to "envelopment" and "entanglement", providing as well a discussion of the relation between Merleau-Ponty's description of reversibility and his preoccupation with topological space.

While I shall be continuing this convention of distinguishing three basic senses of flesh as carnality, elementality and reversibility respectively (among myriads of other possible ways of charting this labyrinthine territory), I shall be drawing the distinctions somewhat differently than both Hass and Hamrick & van der Veken, as will be seen in what follows. Nevertheless, Hamrick & van der Veken's interest in the connection between reversibility and topology, as well as their more general suggestion that the sense of flesh as reversibility or chiasm gives us, so to speak, the operational mode(s) of flesh in its (possible) capacity as formative medium of object and subject will be reflected in my own exposition. It should be unnecessary to add that I do not intend this investigation to be in any way exhaustive of the range of meanings

Intertwining – the Chiasm”; they all seem to me to cut across the separation between my flesh and that of the world; the first of them applies to flesh in so far as it qualifies a grammatical subject (such as “I”, “the world”, “being”) as “carnal”; the last two of them apply to it insofar as it itself functions as a singular grammatical subject (i.e., “the flesh”). I shall investigate the possibilities for flesh of functioning as the formative medium of the object and the subject by reviewing its three suggested principal meanings in this order.

The Flesh as Carnality

The first sense of flesh is given as carnality, or the property of being carnal. A being qualified as carnal or as “carnal being”, Merleau-Ponty explains, is “a being of depths, of several leaves or several faces, a being in latency, and a presentation of a certain absence” (VI 177/136). Thus understood (as carnality), flesh would seem to be above all a resumption, in the late text, of the themes of alterity and immemoriality that preoccupied him also in the earlier texts (cf. chapters 1 and 2 in the present dissertation). And just as we discovered alterity and immemoriality as constitutive dimensions on both sides of the subject-world relation in Merleau-Ponty’s earlier efforts, so Merleau-Ponty now emphasizes that, with regard to carnal being, we are concerned with “a prototype of Being, of which our body, the sensible sentient, is a very remarkable variant, but whose constitutive paradox already lies in every visible” (VI 177/136). It is true that he now specifies this depth in different terms, namely as a doubling up into “sentient” and “sensible”, “phenomenal body” and “objective body” (VI 177/136), whereas his approach to the anonymous and immemorial depths of the body in *Phenomenology of Perception* maintained itself squarely on the terrain of the sentient, phenomenal body. Indeed, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, the very concept of the anonymous is reprised in a new way in so far as it is now synonymous, not (as in *Phenomenology of Perception*) with sentience, but with the sensible – and synonymous with a sense of flesh to be determined in the following sections: “It is this Visibility, this generality of the Sensible in itself, this anonymity innate to Myself that we have previously called flesh” (VI 181/139).

The point I wanted to make at this juncture, however, is that flesh as carnality seems to be a prototype of Being in the sense that it names, above all else, a certain structural relation between presence and absence, surface and depth, manifestation and latency – a relation that

and connotations that could be said to reverberate in Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on the flesh. I have nevertheless tried as conscientiously as possible to chart this range as accurately as is necessary for my own concerns in the present project.

is instantiated both in the body (as the doubling up in it of the sentient and the sensible) and in the things (as the assemblage of “impossible *visibilia*” within the cube which jointly outline an invisible sense that in turn organize their presentation) (VI 177/136).¹⁷⁶ As such, it does not seem to me to have the character of either a medium or milieu or of something formative, and thus it cannot be in the sense of carnality that the flesh can be the formative medium of the object and the subject that will make it fit for encountering the problem of generativity as outlined above. Rather, it is yet another specification of the alterity (and, by extension, the immemoriality) of nature. This sense of alterity as the presentation of a certain absence, as a reserve of distance in excess of what is immediately accessible, of a depth of sense opening beneath the sensible surface will be taken up in chapter 4 in connection with the issue of alterity as a power of resistance.

The Flesh as Elementality

The second sense of flesh is suggested in quite explicit terms by Merleau-Ponty himself, and applies to the flesh as a singular grammatical subject: it is the sense of flesh as “element of being”. Following immediately upon the consideration that “the flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance”, and accordingly that “there is no name in traditional philosophy to designate it”, Merleau-Ponty announces the possibility that “the old term ‘element’” may be sufficiently innocent of those traditional schemes that it may illuminate what is at stake in the notion of the flesh:

To designate [the flesh], we should need the old term “element”, in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an “element” of Being (VI 181-182/139; see also VI 191/147)

With the sense of flesh as element of being, we are closer to an explication of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the flesh in the sense with which I am concerned, that is, as formative medium of the object and the subject. But just as Merleau-Ponty uses the term “flesh” in a number of different ways, so his use of “element” resists a clear-cut, neat definition. I have managed to discern two different sub-senses, which I will briefly indicate.

¹⁷⁶ In thus emphasizing the structural content of flesh as carnality, my own reading deviates from Lawrence Hass’, who sees in Merleau-Ponty’s “carnal being” an allusion to “the carnality and physicality of ourselves and our relations in the world” (Hass, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy*, p. 138).

Elementality as Style of Being

The first sense in which Merleau-Ponty appears to take the term “element” is the sense of dimension, style, manner or emblem of being. Such an understanding of element is salient in those of his descriptions of the natural elements – water, air, earth and fire – that we encountered in chapter 1 in the present dissertation. In this connection, we heard of, for example, a “woody essence”, which is sensibly adumbrated from within the particular piece of wood that I have in my presence, truly incarnated there yet not reducible to the factual concatenation of organic material that composes the piece. Here the “woody essence” would amount to precisely an “incarnate principle”, reducible to neither an idea represented in thought (since it only presents itself in a sensible ensemble) nor to a spatio-temporal individual, since it is as if emitted by the sensibly present piece of wood as a general atmosphere of “woodiness” through which the piece is given to us.

Merleau-Ponty’s preoccupation with the notion that natural elements exhibit certain typical ways or styles of modulating time and space continues up to his latest texts, as can be seen in the famous description he offers of the water in the pool in “Eye and Mind”. The water – “the aqueous power, the syrupy, shimmering element” – Merleau-Ponty suggests there, brings to the tiling at the bottom of the pool a “flesh” of distortions and ripples of sunlight that draws the geometry of the tiling into presence more than it occludes it, the water itself inhabiting the pool, materializing itself there without being contained there, since it also sends to the screen of cypresses next to the pool its “active, living essence” (OE 48/142). Furthermore, in a working note to *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty suggests that we consider the sensible not from the point of view of *things* but from the point of view of elementality: “Perception is not first a perception of *things*, but a perception of *elements* (water, air...) of *rays of the world*, of things which are dimensions, which are worlds, I slip on these ‘elements’ and here I am in the *world*, I slip from the ‘subjective’ to Being” (VI 267/218). Thus every fragment of the sensible – such as a certain colour, texture or sound – is naturally endowed with the virtue of becoming a dimension of all the sensible, of becoming “the expression of *every possible being*”, such that, for example, “it is precisely within its particularity as yellow and through it that the yellow becomes a universe or an *element*” (VI 267/218). The flesh *qua* elementality – in the sense now under consideration – of the colour would thus be the representative or symbolic power of the universal that operates within the thickness it possess as a particular sensible. Merleau-Ponty’s exposition leaves no doubt that this power residing within it constitutes the appeal or charm of the

sensible in general, that power of seduction that Merleau-Ponty underlines by suggesting that I “slip” on the sensible from the particular to the universal, losing my grip on it so as to be in its grip, a power that is also evoked in his reference to “the talisman of colour” (VI 171/131). In chapter 4 I shall return in much greater detail to the place of (feminine) charm and seduction in Merleau-Ponty’s approach to alterity.

As several commentators have pointed out, there are salient resonances to be explored between Merleau-Ponty’s approach to flesh as elementality and Gaston Bachelard’s work on the imaginary of the elemental.¹⁷⁷ Merleau-Ponty himself draws attention, in passing, to such resonances in several of the working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible* (cf. VI 293, 314/245, 267). The series of radio lectures held by Merleau-Ponty in the fall of 1948 and published in French as *Causeries* includes a brief exposition of his understanding of Bachelard’s sense of the elemental:

He shows how each element is home to a certain kind of individual of a particular kind, how it constitutes the dominant theme in their dreams and forms the privileged medium of the imagination which lends direction to their life; he shows how it is the sacrament of nature which gives them strength and happiness (WP 65).

This exposition is included by Merleau-Ponty as a way to sum up the third *Causeries* lecture, which is concerned above all to restore sensory or material qualities to “[their] place in human experience, the place which gives [them] a certain emotional meaning”, and to show that many qualities we experience “would be almost devoid of meaning if considered separately from the reactions they provoke in our bodies” (WP 60). Thus, on Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Bachelard in 1948, the elementality of the element is given in terms of its place in human experience, which is to say that it is always already a humanized, subjectivized elementality. Twelve years later, in 1960, when Merleau-Ponty has worked the term “element” more tightly into his own philosophical jargon, he is still speaking of the elementality of qualities and things in terms of “an internal equivalent in me; they arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence” (OE 16/126), an internal equivalent or carnal formula

¹⁷⁷ James Steeves, for example, sees in Merleau-Ponty’s call for a “psychoanalysis of Nature” (VI 315/267) the occasion to consider convergences – without mentioning any lineages – between his concern with elementality and Bachelard’s psychoanalysis of “material imagination” (with Sartre’s “existential psychoanalysis” following in the latter’s wake) (cf. James B. Steeves, *Imagining Bodies: Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Imagination* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2004), ch. 7). Likewise, Frank J. Macke proposes to read Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on flesh *qua* elementality as “a reverie upon the poetic interlacings of how the language of nature is brought to bear on the matter of human experience”, a crossing point at which “[the] work of Gaston Bachelard arrives ready-to-hand” (Frank J. Macke, “Body, Liquidity, and Flesh: Bachelard, Merleau-Ponty, and the Elements of Interpersonal Communication”, *Philosophy Today* 51 (2007), p. 405), and suggests “articulating Merleau-Ponty’s concept of flesh in terms of Bachelard’s poetics of elemental being” (Macke, “Body, Liquidity, and Flesh: Bachelard, Merleau-Ponty, and the Elements of Interpersonal Communication”, p. 409).

that in its turn weaves an “imaginary texture of the real” (OE 18/126). To the extent that the acquisition on the part of things of such an internal equivalent *in me* still goes into the definition of elementality in Merleau-Ponty’s later works, it is hard to see how elementality could bring to flesh the virtue of being the formative medium of object and subject, since it evidently presupposes an already formed subject, however incompletely constituted. Hence, the flesh *qua* elementality *qua* style of being does not bring us to the flesh as formative medium of object and subject.

Elementality as The Sensible In Itself

However, Merleau-Ponty seems to weave another sense of flesh as elementality into his late texts – a sense that, like the one just discussed, is not utterly without antecedents in the early work, nor without resonances among contemporaries of Merleau-Ponty’s other than Bachelard. Along the lines of this sense of elementality, flesh designates, simply, the world’s visibility, tangibility, in short, its *sensibility*, its exposure to being touched, seen and in general felt. By the same token, it designates the exposure or the vulnerability of the sensate to the gentle or brutal impact of the sensible.¹⁷⁸ In short, it is the sense of the world as being “up against” (*contre*) my body (VI 162/123), the sense of not being able to “peel the world off my body”,¹⁷⁹ the sense of feeling the world in feeling oneself; the sense of an unassignable yet incontestable limit between myself and the world. As such a limit *between*, it is simultaneously that *in which* I am caught up along with things: “[I]f there is flesh, that is...if I and the cube are together caught up in one same ‘element’...this cohesion, this visibility by principle, prevails over every momentary discordance” (VI 182/140); “things and my body are made of the same stuff” (OE 16/125). As was prefigured in a quotation included above, the flesh in this sense is also Merleau-Ponty’s mature understanding of anonymity, which thus amounts to a departure from his earlier understanding (in *Phenomenology of Perception*) of anonymity as that “other subject beneath me” that is the body: “It is this Visibility, this generality of the Sensible in itself, this anonymity innate to Myself that we have previously called flesh” (VI 181/139). Flesh *qua* elementality *qua* “the

¹⁷⁸ Taylor Carman puts it in these terms, from which I have borrowed a little bit: “What is [the flesh]? The *sensibility* of things, the perceptibility of both the perceptual environment and of ourselves as perceivers – the *visibility* of vision, the *tangibility* of touch, the *exposure* of anything to which the world itself can be exposed in experience, including the bodily sense or experience of motor intentionality” (Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, p. 123).

¹⁷⁹ I owe this expression to Lisa Käll, who used it to speak of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the flesh in her keynote address during the *Environment, Embodiment and Gender* conference held at the University of Bergen in October, on the occasion of the centennial of Merleau-Ponty’s birth.

generality of the Sensible in itself” evokes an anonymity that is no longer tied to subjectivity, but rather names the pre-subjective and pre-objective medium or milieu in which there is exposure without there being anything or anyone in particular exposed to anyone or anything in particular.

In “The Thing and the Natural World” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty evokes an elemental sense of the world’s sensibility that seems to me to prefigure his later references to the flesh as “generality of the Sensible in itself”. “The world is on the margin of the infant’s first perception, like a still unknown though irrecusable presence”, Merleau-Ponty writes, and continues:

[F]rom the very beginning I am in communication with a single being, an immense individual from which my experiences are drawn, and who remains on the horizon of my life, just as the constant hum (*rumeur*) of a large city serves as the background for everything we do there. (...) [S]ounds, once perceived, can only be followed by other sounds or by silence, which is not an auditory nothingness. (...) If I am reflecting, and if during that time I cease listening, the moment I regain contact with sounds they appear to me as already there; I pick up a thread that I had dropped, but that was not broken (PhP 384-385/342-343).

The world is on the margin – not only of the newborn infant but equally to the fully educated and cultured adult’s perception – like an “unknown though irrecusable presence”, an immensity from which all experience is drawn, and which Merleau-Ponty likens to the “constant hum of a large city”. The reference to the hum of the large city here is hardly a mere comparison: If silence is not to amount to an auditory nothingness, if it is instead to be part of an unbroken, uninterrupted thread of sonority, then it seems it must include in itself a constant hum, the sound that goes on ringing in one’s ears in the absence of any particular sound. Significantly, in “Eye and Mind”, Merleau-Ponty describes the anonymous yet irrecusable presence of colour and light in similar terms: “If [Descartes] had examined that other, deeper opening upon things given us by the secondary qualities...[h]e would have been obliged to find out how the uncertain murmur (*murmure*) of colors can present us with things, forests, storms – in short the world” (OE 31-32/133). From out of this continuing murmur of sonority, light, and texture, determinate qualities, forms and things continuously crystallize and return to their source, such that a certain red would be “a momentary crystallization of colored being or of visibility”, this visibility being for its part “the tissue that lines [colours and things], sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a *flesh* of things” (VI 173/132-133).

In order better to grasp what the sense of flesh *qua* humming and murmuring elementality amounts to and how it may pertain to the thought of flesh as formative medium of object and subject, it may be worthwhile to pause at the scattered indications, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, of how subjectivity may be related to it. These indications seem to me to allude to a dimension of the sensible in excess of not only the classical empiricist notion of sensation as a determinate quality of sense, but also of Merleau-Ponty's own notion of sensation as the mutual push-and-pull taking place between sensor and sensed in the effort to achieve synchronicity of rhythms (cf. chapters 1 and 2 in the present dissertation). In order to unravel this dimension, we must take another look at Merleau-Ponty's discussion of sensation in *Phenomenology of Perception*, particularly in the critical first chapter of the introductory section ("Sensation") and in the "Sensing" chapter of the work's second part.

In the "Sensation" chapter, as is well known, Merleau-Ponty is concerned with showing that the traditional attempt to analyze perceptual experience as if it were a fortuitous concatenation of sensory impressions or qualities is refuted by the evidence provided by *Gestalt* theory to the effect that "a figure against a background is the most basic sensible given we can have" (PhP 26/4). Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between three ways in which sensation has been conceptualized in traditional accounts: sensation as pure impression, sensation as pure quality of sense, and sensation as the immediate consequence of a stimulation. Whereas the first two are psychological definitions, the third is formulated from the point of view of mechanistic physiology. All three definitions represent sensation as if it were an atom or building block of experience, yet in different ways. The impressional and the physiological definitions conceive of this atom in a quantitative way, i.e., as "an undifferentiated, instantaneous, and punctual 'jolt'" (PhP 25/3), while the second conceives of it as a qualitatively determinate atom or, as Merleau-Ponty would put it in the fourth chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, "a message at the same time indecipherable and evident, which one has or has not received, but of which, if one has received it, one knows all there is to know, and of which in the end there is nothing to say" (VI 172/131). Whereas the psychological definitions are refuted with reference to their shared inability to accommodate the irreducibility of the figure-background structure, the physiological definition is refuted on account of the lack of correspondence or co-variance between the phenomenally salient character of experience and its allegedly objective conditions in causal stimulus-response relations.

However, as one reads through this in so many ways compelling critique of traditional prejudices relating to the notion of sensation, one risks losing sight of a curious passage occurring very early in the chapter, in which Merleau-Ponty begins to detail what will turn out to be the first erroneous definition of sensation, i.e., the notion of sensation as impression. Here is the passage:

I might first understand sensation to be the manner in which I am affected and the undergoing [*l'épreuve*] of a state of myself. Perhaps the gray that immediately envelops me when I close my eyes or the sounds that vibrate “in my head” when I am half-asleep indicate what pure sensing might be. I would sense precisely insofar as I coincide with the sensed, insofar as this latter ceases to have a place in the objective world, and insofar as it signifies nothing to me. This is to acknowledge that sensation must be sought beneath all qualitative content, since in order to be distinguished as two colors, red and green – even if lacking a precise location – must already form some scene before me and thus cease to be part of myself (PhP 25/3).

The experience Merleau-Ponty here describes, which does not seem to be exactly one of undergoing “an undifferentiated, instantaneous, and punctual ‘jolt’”, violates the norm of perception proper on two interrelated counts. First, since there is no differentiation between figure and ground, between theme and horizon (such as a certain colour articulating itself in its difference from other colours and according to a certain level or norm of lighting), it signifies nothing in particular and doesn’t adumbrate any “scene before me”. In this, it differs from Merleau-Ponty’s definition of sensation as the synchronization of rhythms between sensor and sensed, since this process is always oriented or polarized by a “vital significance” (cf. chapters 1 and 2 in the present dissertation). Yet, like the latter, sensation understood as the manner in which I am affected or the undergoing of a state of myself must be sought beneath the differentiation of qualitative content.

Second, sensation understood as the manner in which I am affected entails that the subject of sensation has not yet been differentiated or can no longer differentiate itself from the sensed; the sensed enters into it or – what seems for Merleau-Ponty to amount to the same thing – it is absorbed or engulfed by the sensed. That such a lack of differentiation makes perception impossible is still insisted upon in no uncertain terms at the opening of the fourth chapter in *The Visible and the Invisible*: “[I]t is not possible that we blend into it, nor that it passes into us, for then the vision would vanish at the moment of formation, by disappearance of the seer or of the visible” (VI 171/131). Hence, while Merleau-Ponty’s portrayal of sensation as the manner in which I am affected or as the undergoing of a state of myself is a pertinent way of stating in a negative, indirect way the conditions necessary for perception – i.e., separation of subject from object and separation of figure from background

– it does not convince us that sensation in this sense does not exist or is secondary in any way. Quite to the contrary, the poetical texture of the description – “the gray that immediately envelops me”, etc. – indicates to us that one can validly mount a phenomenology of a form or level of sensation that is pre-perceptual and sub-perceptual without even being proto-perceptual. Whatever may be the achievements of the *Gestalt* theorists, they certainly have not disproved that there is – beneath the separation of subject from object, of figure from background, of one sensory modality from another – a constant humming or murmur of an atmospheric visibility, sonority, tangibility, of general sensibility.¹⁸⁰ Conversely, Merleau-Ponty’s description of sensation as the manner in which I am affected shows in an indirect fashion not only the extent to which perception is a phenomenon that presupposes detachment of a figure from its ground. It equally brings to our notice the extent to which this first separation is strictly correlated with the differentiation of a subject from its object. In other words, it is an indirect attestation to the fact the the Gestalt and the epistemic subject – whether conceived in an embodied fashion or not – are born together. When no separation of subject from object can be had, no figure-background differentiation and thus no perception is forthcoming. But perhaps perception is not primary.

It seems to me that it must be with reference to the dimension or register of sensation just discussed that Merleau-Ponty suggests, in the “Sensing” chapter, that “Every sensation includes a seed of dream or depersonalization, as we experience through this sort of stupor into which it puts us when we truly live at the level of sensation” (PhP 260/223). What is stupefying about “the level of sensation” is that it upsets the sensory subject’s differentiation from the sensed, along with the separation between figure and background, between surface

¹⁸⁰ Merleau-Ponty himself seems to confirm this later in *Phenomenology of Perception*, where he adds that there is also a level of sensing prior to or beneath the differentiation of the sensory fields. This “sensing ‘prior to’ the senses” (PhP 273/236) varies on a continuum comprising four stages of the experience, depending, or so it seems, on the mode of the subject’s attention. In the first half of the continuum, when the subject either focuses narrowly on an object or lets his or her attention wander more freely about, sensation either sketches out the form and identity of an object which henceforth “speaks directly to all of the senses”, or else becomes an atmospheric presence hovering between the subject and the object. It is what we find in the other half of the continuum that interests me here. The penultimate stage of the sensation of colour is described as something I feel in my eye as “a vibration of the gaze”, before it becomes the imparting of “a single manner of being to my entire body” that “fills me and no longer merits the name ‘colour’”. Correspondingly, in the case of sound, Merleau-Ponty describes the penultimate stage as “a sound that vibrates in me ‘as if I had become the flute or the clock’”, and finally “a last stage where the sonorous element disappears and becomes a highly precise experience of a modification of my entire body”. It seems that the degree of precision with which I experience the colour or the sound as a modification of my entire body varies in inverse proportion to the degree of precision with which I am able to distinguish myself from what I am experiencing. At this extreme of the continuum, then, what I experience is a manner of being affected, the undergoing of a state of myself or of my body. In this aspect, at least, we must say that Merleau-Ponty, in his consideration of a sensing prior to the senses, has taken onboard again the very notion of the sensory impression that he purported to discard in the introductory chapter on the classical notion of sensation.

and depth. To this extent, “the level of sensation”, that is, the murmuring of general sensibility – the meaning of flesh as elementality in the sense now under consideration – is like the night, which Merleau-Ponty describes in precisely such terms, in the course of the “Space” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*:

The night is not an object in front of me; rather, it envelops me, it penetrates me through all of my senses, it suffocates my memories, and it all but effaces my personal identity. I am no longer withdrawn into my observation post in order to see the profiles or objects flowing by in the distance. The night is without profiles, it itself touches me and its unity is the mystical unity of the *mana*. Even cries, or a distant light, only populate it vaguely; it becomes entirely animated; it is a pure depth without planes, without surfaces, and without any distance from it to me (PhP 335/296).

The spatiality of the night, such as Merleau-Ponty describes it here, is clearly not merely a privative phenomenon, the mere absence of a perception. Rather, it has its very own positivity: it “penetrates me through all of my senses”, it affects me, and even “becomes entirely animated”; it is “a spatiality without things”, a pure depth without foreground and background (PhP 335/296). Particularly noticeable is Merleau-Ponty’s remark that the night “all but effaces my personal identity”, and leaves no distance from it to me – I am entirely enveloped by it as in a limitless voluminosity and it fills me entirely. This description once again brings to our notice the extent to which the figure-background separation and the subject-object separation are strictly correlated and are equally essential to the phenomenon of perception.

If the preceding manoeuvres of reading back-and-forth between *Phenomenology of Perception* and Merleau-Ponty’s late texts are methodically sound, it is possible to sum up the character of flesh as elementality in the second sense (distinct from the meaning of elementality as style or emblem of being) by the following items. It is a sub- and pre-perceptual, pre-subjective and pre-objective murmur of general sensibility, pressing up against, enveloping and infiltrating the sensate body, having no surfaces, profiles, or planes, a limitless expanse or voluminosity like the night. It does not lend itself to any perception, but is instead the very latency or reserve out of which perception emerges and into which it is dissolved. It is encountered as such only at the cost of stupefaction or in marginal situations, such as in the haze of half-sleep, during those minutes before I become “that unseeing and nearly unthinking mass, confined to a point in space and no longer in the world except through the anonymous vigilance of the senses” (PhP 202/166-167), a zone of indeterminacy that Merleau-Ponty likens to the moment before the body and the consciousness of the

faithful in Dionysian mysteries “cease to be opposed to their particular opacity and are entirely dissolved into the myth” (PhP 201-202/166).

With the sense of flesh as elementality in the sense investigated in the preceding, which is arguably much closer to Emmanuel Levinas’ notion of the elemental – explicated as the murmuring and rustling of the nocturnal “there is” (*il y a*) in *Existence and Existents* – than to Bachelard’s material imagination,¹⁸¹ we have also made the first positive discovery with regard to the question as to how flesh may function as the formative medium of object and subject. Flesh as elementality in the sense of the generality of the sensible in itself whence both subjects and things emerge and to which they return does seem to yield the formative *medium* of object and subject. However, we still lack an account of the *formativity* or generativity of this medium. In order to open this account, we must proceed to the third and

¹⁸¹ In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas finds in modern art the occasion to interrogate a materiality of the sensible – sounds, colours, words – that is in excess of the indexical or referential function to which it is reduced in the service of the ordering of the world taking place in perception and discourse. It is a materiality that has nothing in common with the assemblage of corpuscles computed by classical mechanistic materialism, but is instead one of “thickness, coarseness, massivity, wretchedness”; it is that which “has consistency, weight, is absurd, is a brute but impassive presence; it is also what is humble, bare and ugly” (Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), p. 51). In order to designate this “brute but impassive presence”, Levinas coins the term “*there is*” (*il y a*). The *there is* designates for Levinas the nakedness or density of a sensible quality unhooked from the perceptual relation to an object, of a word detached from its role in signification, of an action or activity that goes on outside the mastery imposed by intention: “[I]t designates not the uncertainly known author of the action, but the characteristic of this action itself which somehow has no author (...) this impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable “consummation” of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself” (Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 52).

In so far as the murmur or rustling of the *there is* “invades, submerges every subject, person or thing”, it exerts a power or force that is, once again, akin to the thickness of nocturnal space: “We could say that the night is the very experience of the *there is*, if the term experience were not inapplicable to a situation which involves the total exclusion of light” (Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 52). As the nocturnal depth of being which “encompasses things and consciousness” (Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 61), the *there is* “transcends inwardness as well as exteriority” and in fact shows the very distinction between the interior and the exterior to be utterly groundless (Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 52). Indeed, to the ones who would nevertheless prefer to persist in speaking in this connection of an exterior, Levinas responds that one would in that case have to specify the night of the *there is* as an “exterior... uncorrelated with an interior” (Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 53), which is to say, a pure outside, a pure exposure. In *Totality and Infinity*, where Levinas organizes his discussion of sensibility around the term “element” as the “milieu” in which things are formed and dissolved, Levinas explains that “[t]he element extends into the *there is*” (Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 142).

The Levinasian connection has been mentioned in the commentaries at regular intervals, although without ever receiving any extensive analysis. In his classical study *From Phenomenology to Metaphysics*, Remy C. Kwant, for example, suggests that “it is remarkable that the term ‘element’ also plays an important role in the book of Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et Infini*, Martinus Nijhoff, La Haye, 1961. Lévinas, too, emphasizes the essential unity of man and world and calls the world the ‘element’ of our existence” (Remy Kwant, *From Phenomenology to Metaphysics: An Inquiry into the Last Period of Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophical Life* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1966), p. 61 n. 64). Robert Bernasconi remarks that Merleau-Ponty probably appropriated the term “*there is*” (*il y a*) (which occupies the same place in *Existence and Existents* and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* as “element” does in *Totality and Infinity*) from Levinas (or Blanchot) (cf. Robert Bernasconi, “One-Way Traffic: The Ontology of Decolonization and its Effects,” in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), p. 73. Finally, Ted Toadvine has mentioned and utilized this connection on many occasions (see Toadvine, “The Primacy of Desire and Its Ecological Consequences”, pp. 148-150; Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, p. 71; Ted Toadvine, “Ecophenomenology and the Resistance of Nature,” in *Environment, Embodiment and Gender*, ed. Ane F. Aarø and Johannes Servan (Bergen: Hermes Text, 2011), p. 53).

final sense of flesh to be considered in the present chapter, namely, the flesh as reversibility or chiasm.

The Flesh as Reversibility

The third and final sense of flesh I wanted to highlight – and the second to apply to “the flesh” as a grammatical subject – is also explicitly suggested by Merleau-Ponty as a *definition* of the flesh, inasmuch as he speaks, in passing, of “[t]he reversibility that defines the flesh” (VI 187/144). The idea of flesh as reversibility seems to be based on the idea of flesh as elementality in the second sense discussed above, and posits a *relationship by principle* through which the agent of disclosure, e.g., the sensate or speaking subject, is constitutively inscribed in the order of being that is disclosed, e.g., the sensible and the sayable. Given the concern of the present section, which is to find a way to read Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh that shows its entitlement to being described as the formative medium of the object and the subject, it is important to pay attention to the different ways in which Merleau-Ponty interprets his own notion of reversibility. I have discerned at least two such lines of interpretation, each of them suggested by a certain complex of images or figures: one clustering around the image of intertwining, the other evoked by the image of the fold, of which only the latter – as I am going to argue – can possibly support an account of the generative conditions of subjectivity. That Merleau-Ponty shifts almost imperceptibly between the two lines of interpretation without signaling any possible tension between them is just another symptom of the continuing struggle within his thinking, even in the late texts, between allegiance to the transcendentalizing tendencies of phenomenology and the more ontological ambitions to interrogate the generative conditions of subjectivity.

In order to facilitate my discussion of the matter at hand, I shall first consider the basic tenets of Merleau-Ponty’s specification of reversibility as a “relationship by principle”, focusing on the domain of perception, before moving to the different implications Merleau-Ponty draws from it.

Reversibility as a Relationship by Principle

In the fourth paragraph of “The Intertwining – the Chiasm” chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty poses the following question, a propos of tactile perception: “How does it happen that I give to my hands, in particular, that degree, that rate, and that direction of movement that are capable of making me feel the texture of the sleek and the rough?” (VI

173-174/133) This question throws open a field of inquiry left largely uncharted in *Phenomenology of Perception*. In the earlier work, Merleau-Ponty had indeed studied in great detail the manner in which the perceived world appears prior to reflection and science as the ground of both reflection and science. Yet the analyses in this work never really dug beneath the assertion of a “natural correlation between appearances and our kinaesthetic operations” (PhP 365/323), leaving instead the naturalness of this correlation largely unanalysed, sealing it up instead in an ineffable dimension of alterity and immemoriality. To leave that correlation largely unanalysed is also, *eo ipso*, to leave the terms correlated unanalysed with respect to their generative conditions and thus, in the final analysis, to assume subjectivity as a transcendental given (i.e., as the locus of conditions of possibility for experience). In the later text, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that this very correlation may or should be investigated as such with respect to what makes it – and, by extension, the terms correlated – possible: how do my hands acquire, in the first place, that intelligence, that tact or that “feel” that makes them capable of making me sense the sleek and the rough? How is this “inspired exegesis” (VI 173/133) possible in the first place?

Merleau-Ponty’s proposed answer to this question is as well-known, and simple, as it is difficult to grasp. Let me quote it in full, so as to draw out its implications one by one.

Between the exploration and what it will teach me, between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle, some kinship, according to which they are...the initiation to and the opening upon a tactile world. This can happen only if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part. Through this crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate, are recorded on the same map as it; the two systems are applied upon one another, as the two halves of an orange (VI 174/133).

Let us note, first of all, that the relationship described here is not a relationship *in fact* between the exploration and what it will teach me – such as Merleau-Ponty’s earlier assumption of a “natural” correlation between appearances and our kinaesthetic unfoldings tended to imply – but a relationship *by principle*. In other words, whatever be the more precise logic of the relationship, the import of the relationship is to be constitutive of its relata. Second, if the relationship in question between my movements of palpation and what they will teach me – i.e., the inscription of the touching organ in the tangible being to which it grants access – obtains in principle and not only in fact, then we understand that it is not merely an objective or empirical condition that has to be met on the occasion of touch, but

goes instead into the very definition of what it means to be open or sensitive to the tangible. In order to touch effectively, my touching of the things must be simultaneously my being touched by the things, and the sleek and the rough are only forthcoming within this interval between my touching and my being touched, an interval which is “not an ontological void, a non-being...it is the zero of pressure between two solids that make them adhere to one another” (VI 192/148). In the touch, the tangible rebounds upon and retroactively affects, for constitutive reasons, the touching being that reveals it. Whence, third, the “crisscrossing”, or reversibility, between the touching and the tangible, obtaining both *within* the sensate organ as well as *between* it and what it senses. As I touch the table or the cloth, the roles of touching and touched are exchanged, reversed *in* my hand, in so far as my hand is, for constitutive reasons, proprioceptively given to itself along with the surface it touches, failing which it would not know its way about in the tangible world. By the same token, these roles are also exchanged between the hand and the table or cloth, yet in a different sense, in so far as the “touch” of the exterior surface has to intervene in order that my hand may feel itself during its exploratory work – without, for that matter, requiring me thereby to ascribe sentience to the exterior surface.

It is in order to make this reversibility between sentient and sensible – the constitutive inscription of the one in the order of the other – more tangible, so to speak, that Merleau-Ponty has recourse to the phenomenon of the double-touch, which I have already touched upon (cf. chapter 1 in the present dissertation). When I touch with my right hand my left hand, the two hands are reversible with regard to the roles of touching and touched respectively; the touched (left) hand becomes the touching hand and vice versa, indefinitely, such that, as Merleau-Ponty puts it in “The Philosopher and His Shadow”, “I am obliged to say that the sense of touch here is diffused into the body” (S 271/166). In and through this phenomenon, the living (human) body presents us with something that upsets all protocols of modern (Cartesian) thought: a subject that is also, inseparably, an object, an object which is also, inseparably, subject; it presents us with “that identity without superposition, that difference without contradiction, that divergence between the within and the without that constitutes its natal secret” (VI 177/135-136). The body as sentient or subjective and the body as sensible or objective are not merely juxtaposed, as if to be synthesized by an impartial and detached consciousness, but are rather “as the obverse and the reverse, or again, as two segments of one sole circular course which goes above from left to right and

below from right to left, but which is but one sole movement in its two phases” (VI 179-180/138).

Significantly, one who accepts the validity of this relationship by principle – i.e., reversibility – between sensing and sensed, as evinced in the case of touch, is forced to part ways with all vestiges of transcendental idealism, even the quasi-transcendentalism – still operative in *Phenomenology of Perception* – of the body-subject and its unceasing pursuit of the “best hold”. This is because it emphasizes not only that the subject of sensation be embodied, but that it be co-substantial with, be “made of the same stuff” (as we saw above) as the things it senses, that it be *of* the sensible without for that matter *being* it entirely (cf. VI 167, 175, 179/127, 134, 137). While it would make no sense, strictly speaking, to refer to “the sensible” short of the possibility of beings endowed with sentience, it remains that – in the perspective that Merleau-Ponty presses towards here – such beings owe their sentience to their sensible consistency, to their inscription in the sensible.

Merleau-Ponty continues: “It is no different for the vision” (VI 174/133). That no difference obtains between vision and touch on this score is for Merleau-Ponty due to the lack of difference between them with respect to another important feature: the constitutive role of movement. A paralyzed eye is not a seeing eye, just as, for touch, “a pressure without any movement presents nothing but a barely identifiable phenomenon” (PhP 370/371). To look is not to stare, but rather to move one’s eyes and entire body purposively in response to a beckoning coming from “something or other” (*de je ne sais quoi*) (PhP 28/6) and in anticipation of the coming to light of this something or other. Conversely, as Merleau-Ponty puts it in “Eye and Mind”, “[m]y moving body makes a difference in the visible world, being a part of it; that is why I can steer it through the visible” (OE 12/124). I see nothing in particular if I do not move, and I cannot move in a way appropriate to the visible if my movements cannot “figure on principle in a corner of my landscape” or “be carried over onto the map of the visible” (OE 13/124), unless, that is, I am visible. During its seeing activities, the body is, so to speak, “propped up against” the visible,¹⁸² and it could not be so were it not itself *of* the visible. Thanks to the body’s participation in general visibility, the visible can administer, from a distance, its exacting retroactive effects on the act of seeing that discloses it, bereft of which vision would be powerless. Hence: “[S]ince vision is a palpation with the look, it must also be inscribed in the order of being that it discloses to us; he who looks must

not be foreign to what he looks at. (...) he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is of it*" (VI 175/134-135).

Unlike touch, however, vision does not offer a corresponding kind of empirical demonstration of its constitutive inscription in the order of being disclosed by it, something to which Merleau-Ponty draws attention in the third *Nature* course:

The eye cannot see the eye as the hand touches the other hand; it can be seen only in a mirror. The gap is larger between the seeing and the seen than between the touching and the touched – A segment of the invisible is encrusted between the eye and itself as a thing (N 286/223).

As we recall from chapter 1, Merleau-Ponty pointed to the lacunae in my visible body already in *Phenomenology of Perception* in connection with his account of the phenomenon of the permanence of one's own body. My look does not have access, not even through the mediation of the mirror, to my visible body in the way I may touch myself: the eyes I see moving in my mirror image are not really my own, but rather "the eyes of someone who is observing"; the body I see in the mirror is the "phantom" of my motor intentions, a "simulacrum" of my tactile body, "since it mimics the tactile body's initiatives rather than responding to them through a free unfolding of perspectives" (PhP 120-121/94). Nevertheless, if the encounter with another living gaze is not an "ontological catastrophe", if we are not shocked to death to discover, through others' look upon us, that we are visible, it is because we find in "the plate glass" of all visible objects a "feeble reflection" or "phantom of ourselves" that they "evoke by designating a place among themselves whence we see them" (VI 186/143). Thanks to this feeble reflection, through which the visibility of the things we see contains a reference to the place whence they are seen, and from which we can be seen, we are in our own eyes *virtually* – although not actually – visible through the exercise of seeing.¹⁸³

The peculiar type of exchange that Merleau-Ponty has discovered between the touching being and the being touched, the seeing and the seen, is for him reiterated in multiple other registers. One such register is the relation between the movements of phonation produced in the throat and their sonorous effects, in which reversibility as a conditioning factor is perhaps more acutely experienced than in the cases considered thus far:

¹⁸² Thanks are due to prof. Ståle R. S. Finke at NUST for putting the matter in such lucid terms during a private conversation in Bergen in spring, 2012.

¹⁸³ For an instructive discussion of the points of overlapping and divergence between Merleau-Ponty's approach to the reversibility of touch and vision and Husserl's approach to the reflexivity of sensation in *Ideas II*, see Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, pp. 127-132.

Like crystal, like metal and many other substances, I am a sonorous being, but I hear my own vibration from within. (...) As there is a reflexivity of the touch, of sight, and of the touch-vision system, there is a reflexivity of the movements of phonation and of hearing; they have their sonorous inscription (VI 187-188/144).

Like the touching and seeing gestures, the body's phonatory movements are propped up against the order of being in which they produce their effects, and it is through this exchange between my vocalizing body and my body heard that effective articulation becomes possible. My own sonority is inseparable from the control I exercise over my voice throughout the activity of speaking, such that it is as if, as Merleau-Ponty cites Malraux, "I hear myself with my own throat" (VI 187/144); my voice heard nourishes and supports my voice uttered as if from within, and does not merely reverberate outside as a factual occurrence alongside the fact that I am vocalizing. Similarly, the tangible and the visible "enter into [the body's] enclosure, they are within it, they line its looks and its hands inside and outside" (VI 179/137). And, of course, the same relationship by principle, the same reversibility, also obtains on the level of signification and discourse, between sign and signified, between the verbal gesture and the perceptual gesture, prompting Merleau-Ponty to speak of a flesh of language.¹⁸⁴

Let us continue. Merleau-Ponty writes: "[E]verything said about the sensed body pertains to the whole of the sensible of which it is a part, and to the world" (VI 180/138); "it results in an ontological rehabilitation of the sensible" (S 271/166-167). The question that we must put to this suggestion is the following: does the ontological rehabilitation of the sensible mean merely that the sensible is to be rehabilitated from the state of subordination to the intelligible to which Cartesian and Kantian thought had consigned it, or does it mean that the sensible is to regain its privilege *vis à vis* the sentient, that the sensible is to be accorded its rightful constitutive status with respect to the sentient? Whereas the first option leaves the door open to transcendental arguments – that is, to the notion that the only sense in which one can rightfully speak of being is being-for-me (even if this sense also contains the in-itself-for me) – the second option would entail the decision to explore how subjectivity is

¹⁸⁴ "As the visible takes hold of the look which has unveiled it and which forms part of it, the signification rebounds upon its own means, it annexes to itself the speech that becomes an object of science, it antedates itself by a retrograde movement which is never completely belied – because already, in opening the horizon of the nameable and the sayable, the speech acknowledged that it has its place in that horizon" (VI 199-200/154); "When the silent vision falls into speech, and when the speech in turn, opening up a field of the nameable and the sayable, inscribes itself in that field, in its place, according to its truth – in short, when it metamorphoses the structures of the visible world and makes itself a gaze of the mind, *intuitus mentis* – this is always in virtue of the same phenomenon of reversibility which sustains both the mute perception and the speech and which manifests itself by an almost carnal existence of the idea, as well as by a sublimation of the flesh" (VI 200/154-155).

generated from the pre-subjective or infra-subjective. It seems to me that Merleau-Ponty commits himself to one or the other option, depending on whether he interprets reversibility as intertwining or as folding respectively.¹⁸⁵

Reversibility as Intertwining; Flesh as Close-Woven Fabric

Consider, first, the specification of reversibility as intertwining. Here is a passage in which Merleau-Ponty deploys this image so as to make more explicit what is involved in the notion of a relationship in principle obtaining between the sensing and the sensed, now considered not only from the point of view of their being related *in* the body, but across the separation of body and world:

A participation in and kinship with the visible, the vision neither envelops it nor is enveloped by it definitely. The superficial pellicle of the visible is only for my vision and for my body. But the depth beneath this surface contains my body and hence contains my vision. My body as a visible thing is contained within the full spectacle. But my seeing body subtends this visible body, and all the visibles with it. There is reciprocal insertion and intertwining (*entrelacs*) of one in the other (VI 180/138).

Thus, there is reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one (my vision, my seeing body) in the other (my visible body, the visible, all the visibles, the full spectacle). Now, the French word *entrelacs* evokes the manner in which a decorative or aesthetic pattern is composed by the overlapping, criss-crossing and interlocking of threads or ribbons, such as can be seen on many Celtic stone crosses, for example, but is also used as an ornamental technique in the making of jewelry, medallions, brooches etc. In Merleau-Ponty's work, the image of intertwining interacts with a closely related image, that of the adhesion obtaining between the

¹⁸⁵ Of course, the list of terms Merleau-Ponty uses to figure the operation of reversibility could be extended indefinitely. In the section bearing the title "The Chiasm" in the chapter on flesh in their book *Nature and Logos*, Hamrick & van der Veken includes an inventory of such terms, divided into two sets. The first set consists of terms such as "reversibility", "dehiscence", "coiling over", "feeling-felt", "the fold", and "intertwining", whereas terms such as "*Ineinander*", "overlapping" (*empiement*), "envelopment", "confusion", "entanglement", "encroachment" and "metamorphosis" are members of a second set (Hamrick and Van der Veken, *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty's Fundamental Thought*, p. 88). Concerning the division into these two sets, Hamrick & van der Veken suggest that the second set is "derivative" in relation to the first set "in the sense that because, say, touching and being touched are reversible, they can overlap or metamorphose into one another" (Hamrick and Van der Veken, *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty's Fundamental Thought*, p. 89). However, they continue, insofar as the two sets are located on the trajectory along which Merleau-Ponty "describes how the unity present in flesh as carnality and as 'element of Being' comes about, and for which Merleau-Ponty's last ontology has to account", a third set of terms will be needed to account for "the complementary principle of difference", and in this third set we find a term – "dehiscence" – that was also part of Hamrick & van der Veken's first set: "However, there are two other terms of signal importance, 'dehiscence' and the *écart*", which will provide much of the complementary principle of difference" (Hamrick and Van der Veken, *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty's Fundamental Thought*, p. 89).

In my exposition of Merleau-Ponty's thought of the reversibility of flesh, I have adopted a terminologically speaking somewhat more economical approach, focusing on only the intertwining image and the image of the fold respectively. Moreover, I fail to see how Hamrick & van der Veken can locate the terms "intertwining" and "the fold" in the same set without addressing their difference from one another in terms of the logics of reversibility they obviously embody. I have

threads of a woven fabric, or between sinews in a living tissue. For example, Merleau-Ponty opposes the “rags of the dream” to the “close-woven fabric (*tissu*) of the true world” (VI 20/5-6); “the red dress...holds with all its fibers onto the fabric of the visible, and thereby onto a fabric of invisible being” (VI 172/132); there is a fabric of “one sole Being” in which my own thoughts and those of others are caught up (VI 146/110), a fabric of experience (VI 148/111) and of our life (VI 155/117). All this is echoed in a passage from “The Philosopher and His Shadow”, where Merleau-Ponty continues his ontological rehabilitation of the sensible by suggesting that the perceived thing “is woven into the same intentional fabric as is my body” (S 272/167). The notion of “intercorporeity” that Merleau-Ponty was in the process of working out in the late texts is also partly inscribed in terms of an intertwining, entanglement or interweaving: “The handshake too is reversible. (...) The landscapes [of different organisms] interweave (*s’enchèvêtrant*), their actions and their passions fit together exactly” (VI 185/142). Finally, although in a slightly different context than the issue of the relation between the seer and the visible, or sentient and sensible, Merleau-Ponty suggests in a working note to *The Visible and the Invisible* that the abstractions perpetuated by “psychology” are clarified once they are conceptualized as “*differentiations* of one sole and massive adhesion to Being which is the flesh (eventually as ‘laceworks’ (*dentelles*))” (VI 318/270). The flesh *is* simply the very adhesion among mutually adhering constituents, such as threads or sinews in a fabric or tissue – sentient and sensible, sign and signified, my thought and that of others, past and present, here and there – an adhesion that composes the fabric or tissue of Being that in its turn makes the constituents adhere to one another.¹⁸⁶

However, as Taylor Carman is right to point out, the vigour and enthusiasm with which Merleau-Ponty deploys the imagery of interwoven fabrics, intertwining, interlacings and entanglements in his late texts may easily make us forget that this terminology does not represent an absolute novelty on the part of those texts, but is already found fully operative in *Phenomenology of Perception*.¹⁸⁷ To begin with, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty is already describing *both* the relation among different segments or aspects of the

chosen to focus on these two terms only because I think they together articulate the tension within Merleau-Ponty’s pursuit of flesh as “formative medium of the object and the subject” that I am concerned with here.

¹⁸⁶ For an excellent analysis of the motif of “adhesion” as suggested in this passage, see Vallier, “The Elemental Flesh. Nature, Life and Difference in Merleau-Ponty and Plato’s *Timaeus*”, pp. 148-149. For all the merit of this analysis, however, I fail to see how the flesh could possibly be, as Vallier suggests, a “pure dynamism” all the time it is understood as a “connective tissue”. The fact that the flesh would be the massive adhesion to Being among differentiations of a comprehensive fabric does not explain how those differentiations *come about* or are generated; rather, it is a description of the phenomenal aspect of an already finished process of generative differentiation. The description is trained on the side of the generated and not on the side of generation or generativity as such.

spectacle or landscape *and* the relation between the spectacle and the one perceiving it in terms of interwoven fabrics:

The problem is to understand these strange relations woven between the parts of the landscape, or from the landscape to me as an embodied subject, relations by which a perceived object can condense within itself an entire scene or become the *imago* of an entire segment of life. The perceived object and the perceiving subject owe their thickness to sensing. It is the intentional fabric that the work of knowledge will seek to decompose (PhP 79/52-53).

Furthermore, as in *The Visible and the Invisible*, in *Phenomenology of Perception* the image of intertwining orchestrates his approach to our incorporation both in the natural world and in the social world: “[N]ature penetrates to the center of my personal life and intertwines (*s’entrelace*) with it” (PhP 404/363), just as, conversely, “[m]y body is the common texture of all objects” (PhP 282/244); “Insofar as I am born and insofar as I have a body and a world, I can find other behaviors in that world that intertwine (*s’entrelace*) with my own” (PhP 415/374). Like in *The Visible and the Invisible*, in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty describes the real (whether natural or social) – as opposed to the imaginary (in the restricted sense) – as a “tightly woven fabric; it does not wait for our judgments in order to incorporate the most surprising of phenomena, nor to reject the most convincing of our imaginings” (PhP 11/lxxiv).

Now, according to Carman, while the image of the intertwining is not new in Merleau-Ponty’s later works, “the terms onto which that image is projected” are so, and these terms are as follows:

[Merleau-Ponty] now wants to make the more radical ontological claim that organisms, conscious or not, just by being alive, are already woven into their environments, not as minds, or even pre-minds or proto-minds, but as flesh, as both sense and sensibility.¹⁸⁸

However, I cannot make this work. After all, the terms “organism” and “environment”, alternatively “sense” (or sentience) and “sensibility” (the sensible in general) are not that new in *The Visible and the Invisible*, nor is the application of the image of the intertwining to their relatedness entirely new, as we have just seen. Let us take note in particular of Merleau-Ponty’s specification, in “The Intertwining – the Chiasm”, as we saw above, that whatever terms are intertwined or interlaced, they are *reciprocally* so. This means not only that the sentient, the organism, the body is woven into the sensible, the environment, the world, but also the reverse: the sensible, the environment, the world is equally woven into the sentient,

¹⁸⁷ Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, p. 125.

the organism, the body. Simply put, they are tangled up in one another, the one does not come without the other. By insisting on this reciprocity still in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty limits the scope of his new notion of a constitutive incorporation of the sentient in the sensible by carrying over from *Phenomenology of Perception* the notion that my body – *my* body – is the common texture of all objects. The image of intertwining must be said to perform the same ambiguous philosophical work in *The Visible and the Invisible* as in *Phenomenology of Perception*, that is, the double gesture of denouncing realism (the transcendental moment) while imbuing the (transcendental) subject with a worldly, corporeal character. In so far as it is a sensible, the body is “caught up in the tissue of things”, is incorporated in the sensible, but lo and behold, in so far as it is also sentient it “draws [the tissue of things] entirely to itself, incorporates it” (VI 176-177/135). The body manages to incorporate the very tissue into which it is incorporated. It is as if the body were engaged in the project of weaving the very fabric into which it will subsequently get caught so as to acquire its consistency as a thing. The sensate subject cannot retreat to an enclave of either psychological or transcendental immanence, it never succeeds in becoming purely for itself, because he is caught up in the tissue of things, he even “feels himself emerge from them” – and yet “[t]he things – here, there, now, then – are no longer in themselves, in their own place, in their own time; they exist only at the end of those rays of spatiality and of temporality emitted in the secrecy of my flesh” (VI 151/114).

One might object to Merleau-Ponty that this constant weaving of threads back and forth between seer and seen, body and world, subject and object hardly makes their interrelations comprehensible. His answer to such an objection would be, as he puts it in a working note critically directed at Husserl, that his idea of reversibility as intertwining is consonant with “the idea that every analysis that *disentangles* [which is what Merleau-Ponty accuses Husserl of here] renders unintelligible. (...) It is a question of creating a new type of intelligibility” (VI 316/268). The new intelligibility would then proceed from the decision to consider entanglement, interlacing, intertwining an irreducible condition. Yet even this idea of a new intelligibility to be had from the recognition of irreducible entanglement is not new – it is already prolific in *Phenomenology of Perception*. “The work of knowledge”, we saw above, seeks to pull apart “the intentional fabric” into which subject and object are interwoven, either by trying to disentangle the threads of subjectivity (idealism) or the threads of

¹⁸⁸ Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, p. 132.

objectivity (realism) from this fabric. An authentic or radical reflection, however, “does not withdraw from the world; rather it steps back in order to see transcendences spring forth and it loosens the intentional threads that connect us to the world in order to make them appear” (PhP 14/lxxvii). This ban on unraveling, undoing or cutting the “threads” that bind us to the world and the world to us seems to suggest the notion, once again, that this entanglement is simply *natural*, a given situation that it is not up to us analyze with regard to what makes it possible. Whether such an unraveling be attempted from the side of things themselves or from our side, it would amount to the hubris of trying *fabricate* that which is essentially natural. Here is how Merleau-Ponty puts this matter with respect to reflective philosophies, which are characterized by the attempt to refashion our “natal bond” with the world starting one-sidedly from our side: “It thinks it can comprehend our natal bond with the world only by *undoing* it in order to *remake* it, only by constituting it, by fabricating it” (VI 53/32). Conversely, the error of (scientific) realism is that it tries to undo and remake our natal bond with things from the side of things, considered as a self-subsistent assemblage of facts and laws in themselves; it thinks – erroneously – that it may one day be able to integrate everything subjective, “all the predicates that come to things from our encounter with them”, so as to make us all become “parts or moments of the Great Object” (cf. VI 31/15). Scientific realism works to make us forget that appearances must be correlated, not with being in itself but with our kinaesthetic unfoldings, while the philosophies of reflection – although acknowledging that there is a constitutive correlation between appearances and our kinaesthetic unfoldings – cannot accept that the correlation is a natural one.

However, it is precisely the naturalness of the intentional fabric that is thrown into question when Merleau-Ponty poses the question as to how my hands, my eyes have acquired the gift of moving across and within the sensible in a way that is already appropriate to it, i.e., that makes it crystallize into certain colours, contours, and textures. To say that there is reciprocal insertion and intertwining between seeing and seen, touching and being touched does not make us understand the relationship in principle between them that makes it the case that the sensing draws its sentience from its incorporation in the sensible, simply because it makes the sensible depend too much on an already functioning sentience. At best, it evokes the vision, or should one rather say phantasm of some generative process through which the sensate body and the sensible are reciprocally engendered from one another. As we shall see in chapter 6, it is especially this phantasm that attracts Irigaray’s attention in her reading of the submerged maternal infrastructure of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh. For the

moment, it suffices to point out that such a process of generation is not the one suggested in the notion of flesh as the formative medium of the object and the subject. In order to understand how the flesh can be the formative medium of the object and the subject, it is necessary to quit the idea of reversibility as an already composed fabric of multiple intertwinings of different threads – subjective and objective – and instead ask the question as to *what* it is that is reversed through reversibility, *how* the reversion occurs, and *why*.

Reversibility as Folding; Flesh as Topological Surface

I have just indicated that Merleau-Ponty's in all respects phenomenologically compelling interpretation of reversibility as intertwining leaves unanswered the question as to how the sensible and particularly the sentient *come to be* in the first place. But Merleau-Ponty clearly indicates that a story must be told of how vision and touch come to be, hence how the correlation between the sentient and the sensible comes to be instituted in the first place: "It is as though our vision were formed in the heart of things (...) The touch is formed in the midst of the world and as it were in the things" (VI 171, 174/130, 134). It seems to me that it is in order to understand how vision and touch are formed, form themselves in the heart of things that Merleau-Ponty proposes to "take topological space as a model of being" (VI 260/210; cf. VI 263, 266, 277/213, 217, 228).¹⁸⁹ Admittedly, Merleau-Ponty's passing yet explicit references to topological space (as preferable to Euclidean space) in the working notes do not by themselves suggest an interest in the problem of how sensation, its subject and its object are generated from the self-folding and deformation of a single, malleable substance. But his recurring use of particular topological figures to describe this process certainly does, although, as we shall see, it hardly ever happens in Merleau-Ponty's texts without certain complications.

One of the most well-known instances of this occurs in the "Sensing" chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, where Merleau-Ponty writes: "I am, as a sensing subject, full of natural powers of which I am the first to be filled with wonder. Thus I am not, to recall Hegel's phrase, a 'hole in being', but rather a hollow, or a fold that was made and that can be

¹⁸⁹ As Manuel DeLanda explains, topology (in mathematics) may be said to be concerned with "the properties of geometric figures which remain invariant under bending, stretching or deforming transformations, that is, transformations which do not create new points or fuse existing ones. (...) Under these transformations many figures which are completely distinct in Euclidean geometry (a triangle, a square and a circle, for example) become one and the same figure, since they can be deformed into one another. In this sense, topology may be said to be the *least differentiated* geometry...the one in which many discontinuous forms have blended into one continuous one" (Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 24).

unmade” (PhP 260/223). While only marginal to the general thrust of *Phenomenology of Perception* – in which, as we have seen, the subject tends in the end to be more transcendental or indeclinable than vulnerable or dependent – the notion of subjectivity as a complication or singularity of the topological surface of being will be frequently invoked in the later texts. On such occasions, the image of the fold mediates a formative interpretation of the notion of flesh as reversibility – yet rarely so without being interrupted by the other line of interpretation, as sketched above. One such juncture is the passage where Merleau-Ponty asks himself what to make of “this strange adhesion of the seer and the visible”, that is, what to make of the relationship by principle according to which the sentient must be inscribed in the order of being disclosed by it. He writes: “There is vision, touch, when a certain visible, a certain tangible, turns back upon the whole of the visible, the whole of the tangible, of which it is a part” (VI 180/139). Merleau-Ponty continues in a related fashion, at regular intervals throughout “The Intertwining – the Chiasm”, to derive the generative dynamics responsible for the formation of subject and object from the relations that the sensible maintains with itself. In the very context in which the flesh is declared to be an ultimate notion, for example, Merleau-Ponty specifies what it would mean for this notion to be ultimate. It would have to refer to “a relation of the visible with itself that traverses me and constitutes me as a seer”, to “this circle which I do not form, which forms me, this coiling over of the visible upon the visible” (VI 183/140). A few pages later, sensibility – in the more colloquial sense of sentience – is defined in related terms, as “the return of the visible upon itself” (VI 185/142); still further on, (my) vision is explicitly characterized as a fold on the surface of the visible: “...this fold, this central cavity of the visible which is my vision” (VI 189/146); it is, finally, in terms of this notion of vision as a fold or hollow on the surface of the visible that Merleau-Ponty proposes, ostensibly on the basis of evidence drawn from morphogenesis, to counter our “substantialist ideas” (which, presumably, relegates seeing and the visible to distinct substances): “In spite of all our substantialist ideas, the seer is being premeditated in counterpoint in embryonic development; through a labour upon itself the visible body provides for the hollow whence a vision will come” (VI 191/147).

I may note two further instances in “The Intertwining – the Chiasm” where Merleau-Ponty can be seen to evoke, albeit more obliquely, the image of a self-enfolded structure so as to account for subjectivity as an emergent complication of the surface of the sensible itself, both of which resume the reference to embryonic development included in the last quote above. Here is the first one:

[I]f finally, in our flesh as in the flesh of things, the actual, empirical, ontic visible, by a sort of folding back, invagination, or padding, exhibits a visibility, a possibility that is not the shadow of the actual is its principle...then...there is to be sure a question as to...by what miracle a created generality, a culture, a knowledge come to add to and recapture and rectify the natural generality of my body and of the world (VI 197/152).

While the reference to the fold is clear enough here, however, the passage poses one difficulty. It lies in its apparent suggestion that it is *the actual, empirical, ontic visible* that folds over itself, and thereby *exhibits* its own principle, this principle being “a visibility, a possibility that is not the shadow of the actual”. No doubt, Merleau-Ponty is alluding here to Bergson’s critique, in *Creative Evolution* and *The Creative Mind*, of the classical distinction between the real and the possible. On Bergson’s famous analysis, the intellect typically (according to its own natural inclination) labours under the illusion that the real is but the mere realization of, or the existential supplement to, a fully worked out possibility already subsisting *as such*, as if the only difference between the real and the possible were the latter’s lack of an existential predicate.¹⁹⁰ Yet Merleau-Ponty seems here to resist Bergson’s alternative notion of the real as the process by which the virtual actualizes itself by differentiation, a real that comprises within it a reserve of the virtual, out of which the actual is generated.¹⁹¹ In Merleau-Ponty’s passage, it is not the virtual – i.e., visibility by principle – that folds over and articulates itself so as to make the actual appear, but the inverse. On the other hand, it is not, after all, a generative relation that is posited, but a relation between what is exhibited and what exhibits, which does not seem to come back to the same thing.

The second instance is the passage where Merleau-Ponty speaks of the “ontogenesis” of the body in terms of the

welding (*soudant*) to one another the two outlines of which it is made, its two lips (*lèvres*): the sensible mass (*la masse sensible*) it is and the mass of the sensible (*la masse du sensible*) wherein it is born by segregation and upon which, as seer, it remains open (VI 177/136; translation modified).

This is no doubt one of the most obscure passages to have issued from Merleau-Ponty’s pen. Although the self-enfolded structure suggested by the previously discussed invocation of invagination is not so apparent in this famous reference to the “two lips”, I think it bears discussion from a related point of view, particularly because it shows another direction in Merleau-Ponty’s envisioning of a self-replicating flesh, namely, the movement of

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, pp. 272-298; Bergson, *The Creative Mind: an Introduction to Metaphysics*, pp. 73-86

¹⁹¹ Deleuze explains Bergson’s position in such terms (cf. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, pp. 208-214), although, of course, he inserts into this conceptuality his idiosyncratic distinction between “differentiation” and “differenciation”.

segregation or opening from within a single tissue or substance. An important key to the passage now under consideration, I believe, is a play upon the ambiguity of the term “sensible”, which in both French and English can mean both the ability to feel, perceive etc. (i.e., what Merleau-Ponty often refers to as sentience) *and* being capable of being felt, perceived etc. (which is also the sense in which Merleau-Ponty mostly takes the term, in so far as he counterposes it to “sentient”). To the extent that the lips invoked here carry a reference to the anatomical structure bearing that name (which is not certain), one could understand how such lips could evoke a “sensible mass” in the sense of a “massive sentience” or a “mass of sentience”, especially if the lips in question are those of a cut or a wound. But this sentient mass is not generated by the application to one another of two lips, or the folding back upon itself of a single surface, but is rather – and this seems to be closer to what Merleau-Ponty is getting at – itself but one of a pair of lips, the other of which would be the mass of the sensible, in the sense of the mass of what is capable of being sensed. This second lip is what gives birth to the sentient mass of the body by segregation or opening up, in the way that two lips are capable of a partial and provisional opening between them, but it is at the same time only one of the lips of which the body is made. So the body, in becoming a body (sentient and sensible), welds to one another the following two lips: 1) the sentient mass it becomes by the segregation of the mass of what is capable of being sensed, and 2) the sensible mass from which the sentient mass issues by segregation. In short, the body makes *itself* by welding *itself* and its own segregated source of emergence *to itself* – all this in order to remain open to its segregated or segregating source of emergence. Later in this dissertation, I shall return – with Irigaray – to the significance of the occurrence of the “two lips” in this passage.

Many of Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions evoking the image of surfaces (the whole of the visible, the tangible, the sensible) that coil up, fold or bend over themselves (at a certain locus in the whole of the visible, the tangible, the sensible, the sayable), are often immediately – within the same sentence – followed by a second description, which suggests a different generative order. Consider, for example, the first passage cited above that treats of the coming to be of vision and touch. Immediately following the suggestion that this happens when a certain sensible returns upon, folds over the whole of the sensible, Merleau-Ponty continues by specifying that it happens when:

suddenly it [a certain visible, a certain tangible?] finds itself *surrounded* by them [the whole of the visible, the whole of the tangible?], or when between it and them, and

through their commerce, is formed a Visibility, a Tangible in itself, which belong properly neither to the body qua fact nor the world qua fact – as upon two mirrors facing one another where two indefinite series of images set in one another arise which belong really to neither of the two surfaces, since each is only the rejoinder of the other, and which therefore form a couple, a couple more real than either of them (VI 180-181/139).

In the course of this description, then, Merleau-Ponty moves from one logic of generation to another. The concern was first, as we saw above, to describe the emergence of the body qua fact from a virtual ground in the whole of the sensible that yields this body as a sensing body by folding over itself. In the second move (the passage just quoted), Merleau-Ponty seems to assume the existence of the body qua fact (and qua sentient) and the world qua fact (and qua sensible) as already established, and now the concern is, on the contrary, to show how the whole of the sensible – Visibility, the Tangible in itself – is generated from *their* interrelations, which is particularly suggested in the comparison with the generation of two indefinite series of mirror images through the reciprocal action of two *already established* mirrors. The two descriptions are inversions of one another: the first describes how the body qua fact and the world qua fact are generated from the self-differentiation or self-complication of a more primordial ground (the whole of the sensible, Visibility, the Tangible in itself); the second describes how what in the first description enjoyed the status of primordial, generative ground is in its turn generated from the commerce – indeed, the reciprocal insertion and intertwining – of body qua fact and world qua fact. There are at least two ways of accounting for this vacillation: either it is simply the symptom of a hesitation on Merleau-Ponty's part, of his inability to commit himself to one of the perspectives, or else – the more plausible hypothesis – it expresses a resolutely adopted dialectical perspective within which the descriptions are complementary and call for one another.

In chapter 6 I will look more closely at how Merleau-Ponty's vacillation between the two perspectives embodied by the logic of intertwining and the fold respectively suggest what Irigaray calls an “astonishing reversal” that involves a “most radical struggle with the maternal”. For the moment, it suffices to emphasize that the ability of flesh to serve as formative medium of the object and especially of the subject seems to be considerably more favoured by its association with a self-enfolding, self-complicating surface than with the close-woven fabric issuing from the intertwining commerce of seeing and seen, body and world, posing as already constituted terms. Reversibility as self-enfolding brings to the elementality of flesh (in the sense emphasized above, i.e., as the primordial undividedness or indifference of the sentient and the sensible) the wherewithal to institute the difference that

forms the sentient and the sensible as terms of its own self-embrace: “The flesh (of the world or my own) is not contingency, chaos, but a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself” (VI 190/146).



In the preceding, I have for the most part only examined the *how* of the reversibility to which flesh must graduate in order to fill the role as the formative medium of the object and the subject. The account of the conditions under which the flesh can be accorded this status will not be complete, however, before two further questions are addressed: *what*, more exactly, is the flesh so conceived, and *why* does it behave that way? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to return first of all to Merleau-Ponty’s *Nature* lectures.

Nature as “Originary Productivity”

Among the diverse meanings of flesh discussed above, I have particularly singled out its sense as a topological surface on which determinate subjects, senses and things are generated as implications, explications and complications. In the course of my exposition of the meaning of flesh as a self-complicating topological surface, the position or role of that surface has been occupied by a number of related terms, such as “the whole of the visible”, “the whole of the tangible”, “Visibility”, the “Tangible in itself”, the “Sensible in itself”, all of which – in so far as they embody the topological surface – return us, in one way or another, to the second sense of flesh as element discussed above. The flesh simply seems to evoke these terms insofar as what they designate is capable of reversing and folding over itself in the ways described. To this extent, the “ontological rehabilitation of the sensible” Merleau-Ponty speaks of in his late essay on Husserl seems to imply the freeing of the sensible from its dependence on a sensate body that would sustain it as its “horizon”. This is also why Merleau-Ponty proposes, in “The Intertwining – the Chiasm”, to reformulate Husserl’s notion of horizon such that it no longer comes back in the end to a “potentiality of consciousness” (not even to the potentiality of bodily consciousness), but designates instead the very potentiality of which consciousness, even consciousness as incarnated in a body, is an actualization: “[H]e before whom the horizon opens is caught up, included within it. His body and the distances participate in one same corporeity in general, which reigns between them and it, and even beyond the horizon, beneath his skin, unto the depths of being” (VI 193/149).

Yet, in the final analysis, the association of the flesh as self-complicating topological surface with the sensible (and its variants) cannot satisfy us, since the sensible cannot strictly speaking help calling up the possibility of a sensate body as the background against which it would make sense to speak of “the sensible”. If the flesh really is to name that which constitutes the formative medium of both subjects and objects, then it cannot be associated with a term that already supposes the possibility of one of the terms of which it is to function as the formative condition. In a word that was not the least palatable to Merleau-Ponty, yet is nevertheless clearly called for by the terms of his own account, the flesh must name something *unconditioned*. In the final analysis, then, the flesh must be neuter with respect both to the sentient and to the sensible. Being the inchoate potentiality of both sentient and sensible, indeed their intimate undividedness in this inchoateness, the flesh itself cannot come back to either sentience or sensibility, but must itself straddle the domain of both the unsensing and the insensible, strictly speaking. Then what is it? As anticipated at the opening of the previous section, we should relate Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on the flesh to the approach to the problem of nature that he carries out throughout the latter half of the Fifties and continuing up to the time of his premature death. What follows, then, will be an attempt at a further concretization of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh as the formative medium of the object and the subject by relating it to Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of the problem of nature in the *Nature* courses.

Let me begin by pointing to a few obvious convergences or points of overlap between the flesh (as explicated above) and nature. To begin with, nature in Merleau-Ponty shares with flesh the feature of being formative, and this is precisely what both philosophy and science since Descartes have tended to leave out of the picture, according to Merleau-Ponty. In founding the modern conception of subjectivity and rationality, Descartes also extended the theological view of nature as a product fashioned by the power and intelligence of a divine creator (cf. N 26-33/9-15), understood as an unlimited productivity, detached from his production:

In accordance with a distinction drawn long before Descartes but reinvigorated by his reflections, what we call nature is a *naturata*, a pure product, composed of absolutely external parts, completely existent and clearly combined – an “empty shell”, as Hegel would say. Everything internal is handed over to God’s side, the pure *naturans* (RC 99/IPP 137).

Moreover, Merleau-Ponty continues, Laplace’s foreswearing of any actual divine guarantee of scientific knowledge of nature does not break with the theological strand of Cartesianism.

This is because Laplace continues to invoke the possibility in principle of an intelligence that might, at a certain moment, have managed to chart all the types of natural constituents, the laws governing their interaction, and their global configuration at a given moment, and that would thereby be able to reconstruct indefinitely the accumulated process of nature as well as predict indefinitely its futural process. “At bottom”, Merleau-Ponty comments, “this conception is a theological affirmation, the affirmation of a view of totality capable of subtending all evolution of the world” (N 124/89). It is theological because its commitment to an unrestricted determinism reduces all natural motion to the kind of mechanical motion found in a machine existing entirely *partes extra partes*; and such an idea of nature, Merleau-Ponty tells us, “blends together a mechanism and an artificialism”, which supposes the operation of an artisan, and is an anthropomorphic and theological idea (N 27/10). According to Merleau-Ponty, moreover, Kant’s transcendental deduction of the categories of the understanding continues this essentially theological projection in a humanist guise: “The Cartesian idea of Nature was not completely exorcised by Kant. To be sure, with Kant, Nature is no longer constructed by God, but by human Reason. The content, however, remains identical” (N 59/36). The task Merleau-Ponty sets himself, by contrast, is to think nature in a manner that breaks with both theological artificialism and its humanist resumption in transcendental idealism, and this requires for him that nature be thought, as I have already emphasized in my introductory chapter, as an “*originary* productivity that continues [to operate] beneath the artificial creations of man” (N 169/125).

How to think the productivity that nature originally is? This question brings us to the second point of nature’s overlap with the notion of flesh. My sketchy answer is that nature, in Merleau-Ponty, produces in the way of flesh, namely, by multiplying itself in folds. After all, Merleau-Ponty does suggest, in the third *Nature* course, that we approach nature as “leaf (*feuille*) of Being” or “ontological leaf” (cf. N 265, 266, 269, 275/204, 205, 208, 212). As explained by Merleau-Ponty’s English translator, while the French word *feuille* can refer to the individual fold(s) created by the folding over itself of a full, uncut folio-leaf (such as are used, for example, for the mass-printing of books), Merleau-Ponty is more likely taking *feuille* in the sense of the folio-leaf itself, so that it becomes “the image of a kind of endlessly productive doubling and redoubling of the basic ‘stuff/powers/structuring of ‘Nature’ into many kinds and orders” (N-E 305 n. 7). The ontological leaf is not only doubled – as in the account above of the sentient and the sensible, described as two sides or “lips” of a continuous, folded surface – but, Merleau-Ponty indicates, potentially multiply

folded: “the thin leaf of nature-essence is divided in folds, doubled, even tripled” (N 275/212).

What are the “pages” that emerge from the double, triple, multiple foldings of the nature-leaf, that is to say, what are the products of natural productivity? Merleau-Ponty’s answer to this question is twofold. On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty answers that nature is “the auto-production of a meaning” (N 19/3). The characterization of nature as the auto-production of meaning means, first, that the product of natural production is *meaning*; second, in so far as we are concerned with an *auto-production* of meaning, this means that “Nature is what has a meaning, without this meaning being posited by thought” (N 19/3). That nature produces a meaning, or rather is the very auto-production of a meaning that is not posited by thought, means, third, that it is “different from man”, “not instituted by him” and “opposed to custom, to discourse” (N 19-20/3). As we recall from chapter 1, this sense of nature as auto-productive of sense, as the place or milieu of an autochthonous emergence of sense, was already underway in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, where he approached this issue by allowing “the miracle of expression” to irrupt at the locus of the thing, “[p]rior to other persons” (PhP 375/333).

Merleau-Ponty’s appropriation of Husserl’s association of nature with the *Earth* follows, in part, the same trajectory. Nature as the Earth is, for Husserl – and, at least apparently, also for Merleau-Ponty – “the soil of our experience”, “the living stock from which the objects are engendered” (N 110/77). As such, nature *qua* Earth is never – at least as far as pre-reflexive experience is concerned – itself an object because, unlike objects, it is prior to or in excess of both rest and motion, neither in rest nor in motion, but the ground or axis with reference to which experienced things can be said to be either at rest or in motion: “In a general way, it is a type of being that contains all the ulterior possibilities and serves as a cradle for them” (N 110/77). This ground can never, moreover, be left totally behind, and we can never truly and without conceit treat the Earth as if it were merely a terrestrial object indifferently inserted in a field of a multitude of terrestrial objects. Not even in the case of settling upon another planet could we be said to be leaving the Earth totally behind, since the Earth would then only be expanded so as to include the new terrestrial abode:

[I]magine a bird capable of flying to another planet: it would not have a double ground. From the sole fact that it is the same bird, it unites the two planets into one single ground. Where I go, I make a ground there and attach the new ground to the old where I lived. To think two Earths is to think one same Earth. (...) Our soil (*sol*) expands, but it is not doubled, and we cannot think without reference to one soil of experience of this type (N 110-111/77).

Taken in the sense of the Earth (in its turn taken as the “soil of experience”), then, nature would be like the flesh in that it is the formative medium of *objects*, and is itself but a “quasi-object” (N 110/77).

By the same token – and this is Merleau-Ponty’s second line of response to the question as to what is produced through the folding of the nature-leaf – nature *qua* earth is also “the root of our history” (N 111/77), it is “the ‘soil’ or ‘stock’ (*souche*) of our thought as it is of our life” (S 293/180). Indeed, in order to stress that nature is precisely not *simply* an object – which is for Merleau-Ponty always equivalent to saying that it is an inert product of either divine creation or human understanding – he posits that it is “an object from which we have arisen, in which our beginnings have been posited little by little until the very moment of tying themselves to an existence which they continue to sustain and aliment” (RC 94/IPP 132). And so it seems that nature, like the flesh, is formative of subjects as well.

It seems to me that it is precisely with respect to this last specification of nature as that from which *we* have arisen as subjects that Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of nature adds another ingredient that remains at best implicit in his discussion of the reversibility of the flesh. This ingredient is the relation between living and non-living matter, the organic and the inorganic, the biological and the physico-chemical. Indeed, one could hardly avoid begging the question of how, in the final analysis, life emerges from inorganic matter when one suggests, as does Merleau-Ponty, that it is as if our vision and our touch were “formed in the things themselves”, even if it be objected that Merleau-Ponty is here taking “formation” only in an indirect, figurative sense. After all, at times, he describes the folding over of the sensible upon itself by which a sentient body comes to be installed in the midst of it, as a process of *animation*: “the physical thing becomes animate” (S 271/166); “there is an animation *of* the body...the vision and the body are tangled up in one another” (VI 197/152). Although without referring specifically to the *Nature* courses, Elizabeth Grosz proposes a Bergsonian rereading of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the flesh in the cosmological register of the relation between the living and the non-living, the organic and the non-organic:

It is possible to indicate the Bergsonism of Merleau-Ponty’s last work, his gesturing toward a conception of the cosmological world in which there is a univocity of being, a single flesh which includes, as its two surfaces or planes, the world of inert objects (matter) and the world of living beings (consciousness). (...) [T]he in-itself and the for-itself are melded into a single, self-enfolded flesh, a single substance with a conscious reverse and a material obverse. (...) Merleau-Ponty suggests a notion of flesh as a designation of the world’s capacity to turn in on itself, to cycle itself

through the living and the non-living as modes of their mutual entwinement and necessary interlinkage.¹⁹²

While one may well wonder if this is not a reading of Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh that is just as much Spinozan as it is Bergsonian,¹⁹³ it nevertheless helps bringing to light a link between Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the flesh in *The Visible and the Invisible* and his discussion of the articulation between the physico-chemical and the biological (and between life and mind) in the *Nature* courses, which I shall briefly explore.

It is possible to read Merleau-Ponty's description, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, of the folded sentient-sensible relation as a resumption of his scattered remarks, in the *Nature* lectures, concerning the *continuity* between the organic and the inorganic, which he also represents in terms of a fold: "the realization of life as a fold or singularity of physicochemistry" (N 269/208). While one could hardly say that this issue receives any extensive treatment from Merleau-Ponty in any of the documents he has left us, it must nevertheless be said to be on the horizon of Merleau-Ponty's concern with natural production. If nature is really to be acknowledged as an originary productivity, it seems that the organized and non-organized registers of matter must, in the final analysis, be considered as expressions or differentiations of the same basic productive process of nature, and in this respect be continuous with one another, without the one being reducible to the other. Thus, in the section on Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* from the first *Nature* course, Merleau-Ponty briefly reviews, apparently with approval, the basic thrust of Schelling's deduction of the dynamical processes of nature across dynamical stages or layers (*Stufenfolgen*), of which the later or superior ones are recapitulations and complications of the earlier or inferior ones:

There is not for [Schelling] an essential difference between organic and inorganic Nature. (...) There is neither a break nor even a common expression. There are two different *Potenzen*, two potencies or powers, of the same Nature. The development of Nature consists in that the higher is lifted up to a higher potency – not by suppression, but by elevation. We pass from physical to living being by an internal development and not by a rupture. If we consider finished products, such as sulfur or

¹⁹² Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*, p. 125.

¹⁹³ Henry Pietersma in fact suggests that Merleau-Ponty was wrong to suggest that what he aimed to think in terms of flesh had as yet received "no name in any philosophy", for Spinoza had already called it "substance", "God" or "nature" – a univocity of being, neuter with respect to any particular category (thought or extension), yet enveloping them as its very own modes of differentiation and articulation (cf. Henry Pietersma, "Merleau-Ponty and Spinoza," in *Spinoza: Critical Assessments, vol. IV: The Reception and Influence of Spinoza's Philosophy*, ed. Genevieve Lloyd (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 315-317). Moreover, in their fairly recent book *Nature and Logos*, William S. Hamrick and Jan Van der Veken at regular intervals return to issue of convergences and divergences between Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh and Spinoza's Substance, yet it seems to me that they emphasize divergences above convergence. For example, while admitting a certain resonance between Merleau-Ponty's flesh and Spinoza's Substance, they compare Merleau-Ponty's sentient-sensible pair with Spinoza's division of attributes (thought and extension), and conclude that the terms in Merleau-Ponty's pair are much less distinct than in Spinoza's case (cf. Hamrick and Van der Veken, *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty's Fundamental Thought*, p. 91).

a dog, there are between them differences in organization that reflection can furnish, but there is above all the same producer raised to two different potencies or powers of organization (N 65/41).

To posit such a non-reductive continuity between the living and the non-living would be to part ways with both eliminative, mechanist materialism (for which life is at best a mere epiphenomenon) and the dualism enforced by vitalism (for which life is a natural principle or impulse supervening on the world of inert matter). The second alternative is precisely what Merleau-Ponty criticizes Bergson for endorsing in the 3rd chapter of *Creative Evolution*, which overpowers the convincing monism of its first chapters. On Merleau-Ponty's reading of *Creative Evolution*, then, we first find a compelling description of the *élan vital* or vital impulse as an operation or process by which "life insinuates itself in mechanism, espouses the contours of it, before transforming them" (N 95-96/65). But, in a second move (chapter 3 of *Creative Evolution*), Bergson obfuscates this insight, and proceeds to treat the *élan vital* as a "reservoir" of pure creativity that could in principle do without a body, "an eminent causality that contains within itself all of evolution in its principle" (N 92/62): "life is conceived here as a transcendent reality" (N 92/63). The adequacy of Merleau-Ponty's reading of Bergson here is not at issue;¹⁹⁴ my concern was merely to illustrate the value Merleau-Ponty places on Schelling's idea of a continuous process of recapitulation and complication from non-living, physical being to biological being as two potencies of a single, comprehensive nature – an insight that Bergson (through Ravaisson), on Merleau-Ponty's reading, both appropriates and obfuscates.

But the relations of continuity implied by the notion of nature as originary productivity do not stop at the level of life, but also comprise mind and human subjectivity as an expressive fold of the same expansive nature-leaf: "There are no substantial differences between physical Nature, life, and mind" (N 275/212); "regarding the human, the concern is to take him at his point of emergence in Nature" (N 269/208). This is not to reduce the human to a mere epiphenomenon of allegedly more fundamental natural causalities, but it does amount to the decision to "grasp humanity first as another manner of being a body" (N 269/208). Thus, like in the emergence of life from matter, in the emergence of humanity from life and animality there is no rupture, but an internal development. In fact, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty succinctly prefigured this emergentist

¹⁹⁴ See Hamrick and Van der Veken, *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty's Fundamental Thought*, pp. 153-160 for a critical consideration of Merleau-Ponty's suggestion of an absolute divide between the second and third chapters of Bergson's *Creative Evolution*.

perspective when he spoke of the articulation of the human with the biological in terms of an “imperceptible shift” through which they are converted into one another:

[T]here is no single movement in a living body that is an absolute accident with regard to psychological intentions and no single psychological act that has not found at least its germ or its general outline in physiological dispositions. (...) [T]rough an imperceptible shift (*un tournant insensible*), an organic process opens up into a human behavior, an instinctive act turns back upon itself and becomes an emotion, or, inversely, a human act becomes dormant and is continued absentmindedly as a reflex (PhP 117-118/90).

There is perhaps a certain irony in the fact that a thinker who has become notorious for his emphatic defence of the primacy of perception and who, in speaking of nature, has absolutely no qualms in confining himself to “Nature perceived by us” should lay such stress on the *imperceptibility* of the point of articulation between the human and the non-human. This emphasis is particularly in evidence in the seventh sketch from the third *Nature* course, where Merleau-Ponty discusses, among other related materials, the phylogenetic account of the human offered by Teilhard de Chardin in *The Phenomenon of Man*. Teilhard de Chardin’s perspective is summed up in his phrase “Man came silently into the world”, which Merleau-Ponty cites and elaborates thus:

[H]e appeared between pre-types...without us being able to fix the point of appearance: there were pre-hominids, and in the Age of the Reindeer there is a human with paintings, tombs, culture, who is suddenly the very kind of human we know. (...) [T]he transition...is morphologically minute. Little morphological novelty: Bipedal so that the hands can free up the jaw, that the maxillary muscles imprisoning the head can be relaxed, that the brain can enlarge, the face diminish, the eyes grow closer together and can fix on what the hands take up. (...) There is a “metamorphosis”, not a beginning from zero (N 339-340/272).¹⁹⁵

Now, Merleau-Ponty proceeds, with Teilhard de Chardin, to examine a possible link between this minuscule morphological transition and the inauguration of reflection: “The organs are transformed in such a way as to make reflection possible” (N 340/272). But to say that the minuscule, imperceptible transformation makes reflection possible must not be taken in the sense that the body is thereby made ready for a reflection or reflexivity that would descend into it from “an illusion which is by definition invisible”, which would once again reduce the body to a pure mechanism, an assemblage or convenient instrument for a mind in principle

¹⁹⁵ In a personal communication during a seminar in Bergen, November 2012, prof. Ronald Bruzina pointed out to me the resonance between Teilhard de Chardin’s account – on which Merleau-Ponty here draws – and that proposed by André Leroi-Gourhan in *Gesture and Speech* (cf. André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, trans. Anna Bostock Berger (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1993)), suggesting that Leroi-Gourhan and de Chardin were probably familiar with one another’s work. At the time of the third *Nature* course, however, Leroi-Gourhan’s dissertation had not yet been published, and to the best of my knowledge, Merleau-Ponty never mentions Leroi-Gourhan in any context, and so we do not know whether he was in fact familiar with Leroi-Gourhan’s work.

distinct from it. Instead, there is a “rigorous simultaneity” between the two – the minuscule morphological transition and the inauguration of reflection – because the human body, insofar as it instantiates a doubling-up or folding back on itself of the sensible, *is* simply reflection “in figural form”:

There is here a rigorous simultaneity (not in any sense a causality) between the body and this reflection. We said: The body touching and seeing what it touches, seeing itself in the midst of touching the things, seeing itself in the midst of touching them and being touched, the sensible and the sensing body is not the stand-in of an already total reflection, it is reflection in figural form, the inner of what is outer (N 340/273).

If, according to Merleau-Ponty, the minuscule morphological transition described by de Chardin *is* simply the inauguration of reflection, its emergence in figural form, then the body is not the supple or docile utensil of a detached power of reflection, and finality or teleology imposed by some illusory entelechy is ruled out.

Yet, as was also clear in the quote above, this insertion of reflection in the circuit of natural production by making it “rigorously simultaneous” with a certain minuscule transition from pre-hominid to hominid morphology proper is not, for Merleau-Ponty, a vindication of causal thinking. The body we call human on account of the reversible relationship by principle it instantiates between the sentient and the sensible, and which allows, for example, its left hand to “turn [the right hand’s] palpation back upon it” (VI 183/141), is not simply an effect produced by some fortuitous assemblage of parts and organs. This point will bring back, on the level of Merleau-Ponty’s interrogation of nature, the uncertainties we saw above in connection with Merleau-Ponty’s vacillation between speaking of the reversibility of flesh as intertwining and as folding respectively. Nowhere does Merleau-Ponty so emphatically deny the reduction of the human body’s constitutive reflexivity to a merely contingent outcome of fortuitous events as he does in “Eye and Mind”. While continuing to accept, in line with his appropriation of Teilhard de Chardin in the third *Nature* course, that one cannot abstract the reflexivity proper to the human from the morphological singularities through which it transpires,¹⁹⁶ he cannot accept that such contingencies should, “by simple summation, bring it about that there *is* a single man. The body’s animation is not the assemblage or juxtaposition of its parts” (OE 15/125). Rather:

¹⁹⁶ “What if our eyes were made in such a way as to prevent our seeing any part of our body, or some diabolical contraption were to let us move our hands over things, while preventing us from touching our own body? Or what if, like certain animals, we had lateral eyes with no cross-blending of visual fields? Such a body would not reflect itself; it would be an almost andamantine body, not really flesh, not really the body of a human being. There would be no humanity” (OE 15/125).

A human body is present when, between the see-er and the visible, between touching and the touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand a kind of crossover occurs, when the spark of the sensing/sensible is lit, when the fire starts to burn that will not cease until some accident befalls the body, undoing what no accident could have sufficed to do (OE 15-16/125).

Thus, the appearance of a human body, of a “single man”, in the turmoil of natural production is no mere accident. It is an event of such extraordinarily metaphysical proportions that it is simply unimaginable how it could just come about without further ado, caught in the dizzying vortex of anonymous events along with the rest of nature. Man’s entrance in the world as the figural form of reflection is not so imperceptible or silent after all: it happens with the lighting of a spark, with the kindling of a fire. But it takes more than a rejection of linear causality and of summative accumulation of assemblages to prove that this is so. If it is no mere accident, then on the strength of what kind of necessity is human subjectivity brought forth in the process of nature?

This question, which brings us back full circle to the problem with which we started – namely, how to understand subjectivity as both indeclinable and dependent, both transcendental and vulnerable – coincides with the question of the motive force of natural production. The most convenient way to approach this problematic in Merleau-Ponty is to enter it through the opening provided by his approach to natural production in the order of life. In general, Merleau-Ponty points out, the neo-Darwinians are wrong to impose adaptivity or utility as the sole principle responsible for the evolution of life into the proliferation of forms, appearances and behavioral patterns we find in the animal world: “[A]daptation is not the canon of life, but a particular realization in the tide of natural production” (N 241/184). Instead, “there is in life a prodigious flourishing of forms, the utility of which is only rarely attested to and that sometimes even constitutes a danger for the animal” (N 243/186). For example, as is vividly illustrated in the case of the peacock’s tail, “certain animals have ornamentation that not only are not useful, but even complicate their existence” (N 240/184). Indeed, sexual display may be excessive not only from the point of view of a single species, but also from the point of view of the variability of modes through which it is presented across the diversity of species:

[I]n the twenty-seven species of crab in the Barnave Islands, there are twenty-seven different types of sexual display. We must not see in this manifestation of sexuality the simple ornamentation of an essential fact, which would be the reconciliation of male and female cells, because we would not then understand the richness of these manifestations. Sexuality, if it aims only at utility, could manifest itself by more economic paths (N 245/188).

Admittedly, the excess of sexuality beyond utility becomes more manifest as one proceeds from lower to higher-order animals, where “it takes on an expressive value, a ‘value of form’” (N 245/188). But this seems in itself sufficient to put into question the general assumption that whatever animals do, they do it for the sake of their own survival, and to consider instead the possibility that life in general is not devoted first of all to the pursuit of utility but of “manifestation” or “presentation”, and that the value of self-preservation is subordinated to the value of expression: “We must criticize the assimilation of the notion of life to the notion of the pursuit of utility, or of an intentional purpose. The form of the animal is not the manifestation of a finality, but rather of an existential value of manifestation, of presentation” (N 246/188). The multifariousness of organismic form, appearance and behaviour that we find in the world of animals cannot be reduced to an inventory of techniques for survival, but express instead “a power to invent the visible” (N 248/190).

If Merleau-Ponty is not willing to consider the appearance of “a single man” in nature a mere accident, it must be because, with man, nature as “a power to invent the visible” is raised to a new level of subtlety, one which may have been foreseen and anticipated in the realm of animality, but which truly gets underway only with man. In and through the reflexivity kindled at the locus and moment where and when a human body appears, Merleau-Ponty sees the “coming-to-self of Being...the *Selbstung* of Being, without a notion of the subject” (N 335/268). With the reflexivity of seeing-seen and touching-being touched through which the sensing (human) body constitutively incorporates itself in the order of being disclosed by it, natural production emerges from the scattered, disseminated murmur in which it was submerged and achieves a self-centering, self-concentration or self-articulation that it has not enjoyed through any other of its products. What takes place in the circle of reflexivity characterizing human self-experience and experience of nature is thus less the coming-to-itself of the human and the objectification of nature than the coming-to-itself of nature itself. As Merleau-Ponty had remarked already in *In Praise of Philosophy*, thanks to the intervention of the human, even such a seemingly lifeless, mineral thing as a pebble may be said to accede to existence for itself, to be revealed to itself, to be promoted to some sort of self-consciousness:

We are not this pebble, but when we look at it, it awakens resonances in our perceptive apparatus; our perception appears to come from it. That is to say our perception of the pebble is a kind of promotion to (conscious) existence for itself; it

is our recovery of this mute thing which, from the moment it enters our life, begins to unfold its implicit being, which is revealed to itself through us (EP 25/17).¹⁹⁷

If the pebble exists for itself, unfolds its implicit being (that is, meaning), is revealed to itself through our experience, does that mean that nature is, already at its most impersonal, a-subjective level of the mineral, devoted not only to its own self-revelation (that is, as we saw in connection with life, to the invention of the visible), but even to its revelation *to itself*? If it is indeed Merleau-Ponty's view that nature as originary productivity narcissistically craves its own revelation to itself, and if it is strictly speaking only in and through the emergence of the human that this becomes possible, then we can understand why he will not accept that the appearance of the human in nature is just an accidental event while still being a natural event. Being thus dependent on the human, nature will quite simply be devoted to the preparation for and cultivation of the emergence of the human. The "single man" will appear not by accident but, strictly speaking, as a matter of natural necessity.

In order to confirm that this is how things stand with Merleau-Ponty's late view of the situation of the human subject with respect to the nature which gives rise to it, however, it is necessary finally to consider how he integrates the phenomena of human expression – particularly those of painting and philosophy – in the scheme of natural production.

Nature as "What Requires Creation Of Us (For Us To Experience It)"¹⁹⁸

In order to open the question of the place of human expression in the scheme of natural production, let us consider once again the working note to *The Visible and the Invisible* in which Merleau-Ponty poses this question in terms of the relation between philosophy and literature:

Philosophy, precisely as "Being speaking within us", expression of the mute experience by itself, is creation. A creation that is at the same time a reintegration of Being. (...) It is hence a creation in a radical sense: a creation that is at the same an adequation, the only way to obtain an adequation. (...) [A]rt and philosophy *together* are...but contact with Being precisely as creations. Being is *what requires creation of us* for us to experience it (VI 247-248/197).

¹⁹⁷ In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty deploys a similar mode of expression with regard to the blue of the sky: "Myself as the one contemplating the blue of the sky is not an acosmic subject *standing before* it, I do not possess it in thought, I do not lay out in front of it an idea of blue that would give me its secret. Rather, I abandon myself to it, I plunge into this mystery, and it 'thinks itself in me'. I am this sky that gathers together, composes itself, and begins to exist for itself" (PhP 259/222).

¹⁹⁸ In the writing of this section, I have drawn much inspiration and guidance from the last section of chapter 5 in Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*.

If being or nature¹⁹⁹ requires creation of us for us to experience it, then to experience nature is not to coincide with it, nor to recover an alleged immediacy of feeling or sentiment allegedly having suffered corruption at the exuberantly expressive work of culture. Paradoxically, then, in so far as the experience of adequation is commonly thought of in terms of the experience of an immediation or coincidence with the experienced, then the coinciding with nature such as Merleau-Ponty conceives of it requires that we do not seek to coincide with it. Our alleged deviation or distantion from nature through our creative efforts, through our efforts at creative expression, is at the same time the only way to approximate it.

To begin with, we learn of this strange coinciding of deviation and coincidence, of creation and adequation already at the level of simple perceptual experience. As we recall from chapters 1 and 2 in the present dissertation, the perceptual process is an *expressive* process, through which the sentient subject must use his or her body as a power of certain gestures or certain attitudes in order to get synchronized with the particular “existential rhythm” with which the sensible pulsates in front of his or her gaze or under his or her hands. Thus, as Merleau-Ponty would famously put it in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”, “[p]erception already stylizes” (S 87/IL 91). If I have perceived successfully, if the sensible settles – if only provisionally – into a completed *Gestalt* of colour, form and texture in front of my eyes and under my hands, then the response I have provided to the beckoning of the sensible has been both creative and adequate, both a deviation from and an approximation of nature.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the art of painting is the quintessential effort at a creation that is at the same an adequation of nature. Thus, for him, the customary opposition between figurative and non-figurative in terms of which paintings are often classified is quite simply a false opposition:

There is no break at all in this circuit; it is impossible to say that here nature ends and the human being or expression begins. (...) [T]he dilemma between figurative and nonfigurative art is wrongly posed; it is at once true and uncontradictory that no grape was ever what it is in the most figurative painting and that no painting, no matter how abstract, can get away from Being, that even Caravaggio’s grape is the grape itself (OE 58/147).

¹⁹⁹ In this section I shall assume, in line with Gary B. Madison’s reading in *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, that “being” (alternatively, “Being”) and “nature” are practically interchangeable terms in Merleau-Ponty’s late thought (cf. Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, pp. 206-219; see my discussion of this issue in the section “The Flesh and Nature” above). It may well be that Merleau-Ponty would have developed a way to distinguish them had he had the time to finish the book project on which he was working at the time of his death, but we have no basis on which to support an extrapolation of how he would eventually have drawn such a distinction.

On the one hand, then, no painting has ever sought to replace or copy what is painted; it takes up its place in the “oneiric universe” (OE 26/130) of painting and marks a difference with respect to all other past and future paintings. It is not in the world in the sense that visible *things* are, although it is not elsewhere either: the gaze does not rest upon or move across the painting as it does with things, but “wanders within it as in the halos of Being” (OE 17/126). Already the wall paintings of Lascaux achieved this ubiquity invested in a locality: “The animals painted on the walls of Lascaux are not there in the same way as are the fissures and limestone formations. Nor are they *elsewhere*. (...) [T]hey radiate about the wall without ever breaking their elusive moorings” (OE 16-17/126).

On the other hand, however, no matter how much a painter may claim to paint not from nature but from the whims and caprices of an unhampered imagination or from airy concepts, “he paints, in any case, because he has seen, because the world has at least once emblazoned in him the ciphers of the visible” (OE 20/128). More strongly, no matter how subtle may be the gestures most proper to the painter, no matter how distinctive may be that unique accent with which he alone is capable of moving the brush across the canvas, “to him they seem to emanate from the things themselves, like figures emanating from the constellations” (OE 23/129). In such a scheme of things, the roles between the painter and nature are switched indefinitely, and one can no longer absolutely tell who paints from what is painted: “There really is inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration in Being, action and passion so slightly discernible that it becomes impossible to distinguish who sees and who is seen, who paints and what is painted” (OE 23/129). In this suggestion of an indivision between who paints and what is painted, I take Merleau-Ponty to indicate not that the painter sits as model for a portrait to be painted by nature, but rather that nature transforms itself into painting and passes to a new level of visibility through the painter. The painter’s vision and gestures are the channels of a nature devoted to its own self-manifestation, a point Merleau-Ponty illustrates by quoting Henri Michaux’s saying that “sometimes Klee’s colors seem to have been born slowly upon the canvas, to have emanated from some primordial ground, ‘exhaled at the right spot’, like a patina or a mold” (OE 48/141-142). Thus the painter seems to be drawn into the same circuit of natural production as is the animal world, understood as the struggle not for survival but for the invention of the visible. It is along these lines, I suppose, that we must understand Merleau-Ponty’s suggestion that “it is the painter to whom the things give birth by a sort of concentration or coming-to-itself of the visible” (OE 47/141).

However, the stakes of the effort at creative adequation or adequate creation of nature that we have seen in perception proper and in the painterly metamorphosis of this perception are, for Merleau-Ponty, nowhere as acute as in the case of *philosophical* expression, for it is only the philosopher who reflectively knows that it is nature that is sought through these efforts. In perceiving, on the other hand, we simply do not give it a thought, and the painter may disavow, as we have seen, the roots that his efforts have in a nature that surpasses him or her. Thus the paradoxical principle of the effort at creative adequation of nature reasserts itself with a renewed intensity at the level of philosophical expression. On the one hand, philosophy cannot content itself with a mode of expression or a language that tries to make itself redundant, as if the meaning were attached to the phrase “like the butter on the bread, like a second layer of ‘psychic reality’ spread over the sound” (VI 201/155). Such a language, believing itself to express what is meant without distortion or alteration, that is, believing itself to express the expressed by *representing* it, cannot serve the philosophical access to nature. Quite to the contrary, it is only on condition that language does not mistake itself for a transparent medium of representation that it can be at its most representative of nature. The philosophical experience of nature requires at once an effort and a letting-be: a creative effort of expression and a letting-be of the expressive life of the medium through which the creative effort of expression is made. The philosophical experience of nature requires a letting-be in so far as the language most disposed to grant it access to nature will be “a language of which [the philosopher] 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” (VI 164/125). Such a language does not corrupt an otherwise perfect or unblemished immediacy or coincidence, it is “not a mask over Being, but – if one knows how to grasp it with all its roots and all its foliation – the most valuable witness to Being” (VI 165/126).

Yet, if the creative efforts of expression through which philosophy attempts to obtain an adequation of nature are indeed to be not only creations but also *adequations* of nature, they cannot be adequate only to the creative initiatives of the individual philosopher or to the idiosyncracies or singularities of the particular language that mediates these initiatives. Rather, some relation between language and pre-language, between speech and the silence it breaks must obtain: “Language lives only from silence; everything we cast to the others has germinated in this great mute land which we never leave” (VI 165/126). Hence, just as, in the processes of successful perception and painting, the sensate body responds creatively yet

adequately to the beckoning of the sensible, so, in the process of successful philosophical expression, speech responds creatively yet adequately to the silent beckoning of nature. What I say of the sensible world, Merleau-Ponty remarks in *In Praise of Philosophy*, “is not in the sensible world, and yet it has no other meaning than to say what the sensible world means” (EP 35/29); in fact, as he puts it in *The Visible and the Invisible*, its meaning is to “make [nature] say...what in its silence *it wants to say (il veut dire)* (VI 60/39); philosophical expression is “called forth by the voices of silence, and continues an effort of articulation that is the Being of every being” (VI 166/126-127).

It is necessary to stress the singular character of the silence with which Merleau-Ponty deals in these passages. On the one hand, the silence in question is distinct from the silence of one who does not feel the need for expression, articulation or signification, who keeps silent because there is no implicit meaning to be unfolded, nothing that needs to be said, because everything is unrestricted plenitude and determinacy. This silence is the one to which, on Merleau-Ponty’s reading, nature is reduced in traditional accounts of perceptual experience, and is emblematically described in the critical remarks that open his momentous description of the red colour of the dress in “The Intertwining – the Chiasm”:

[T]his red under my eyes is not, as is always said, a *quale*, a pellicle of being without thickness, a message at the same time indecipherable and evident, which one has or has not received, but of which, if one has received it, one knows all there is to know, and of which in the end there is nothing to say (VI 172/131).

On the other hand, the silence in which nature is truly enveloped according to Merleau-Ponty seems also to be distinct from the kind of silence he ascribed, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, to the thing appearing in its alterity, “rooted in a background of non-human nature” (PhP 380/338). This silence, as we recall from chapter 1, is the silence of one who *resolutely* keeps silent: its alterity is that of a “resolutely silent Other” (PhP 378/336); it is the silence of someone who may have something to say, some message to convey, some implicit meaning to unfold, but who simply refuses to comply with the request to do so.

The silence of nature, such as Merleau-Ponty describes it in his late texts, is distinct from both of these modes of silence as ways of *keeping silent*. It is a silence that is not the contrary of speech (cf. VI 230/179), because it is a tormented silence, a wanting-to-say, already gasping for words, hence already a kind of voice, or perhaps a multiplicity of voices or a murmur, since it is “the voice of no one...the very voice of the things, the waves and the forests” (VI 201/155). It is the nondifference or indivision of a murmur that yearns for and is already on its way to become articulate, already “an effort of articulation” (VI 166/127). Yet

the becoming-language of silent, murmuring nature is doubled with an inverse trajectory of becoming, which is the second sense in which we are concerned, in Merleau-Ponty, with a silence that is not the contrary of speech. This is the becoming-nature of language, the envelopment in a new silence of every individual effort of articulation (cf. VI 230/179), its (re-)incorporation in the silent murmur of things: “The whole landscape is overrun with words as with an invasion, it is henceforth a variant of speech before our eyes” (VI 201/155); there is, in short, a “folding over (*l'enroulement*) within [the speaker] of the visible and the lived experience upon language, and of language upon the visible and the lived experience” (VI 165-166/126). For Merleau-Ponty, then, as Ted Toadvine aptly puts it, there must be, coupled with the wanting-to-say in silence on the part of nature, a “concomitant conversion of language back into nature, a fleshiness of language by which it continues to be a φύσις”.²⁰⁰

Let me finally draw the implications that the preceding exposition of Merleau-Ponty’s approach to the question of the relation between the expression and the expressed hold for how things stand in his philosophy concerning the place of the (human) subject within the scheme of natural production. As discussed in the previous section, the appearance of the human body within the anonymous vortex of natural productivity is for Merleau-Ponty not to be regarded as merely a fortuitous coming-together of natural events, but it is nevertheless an event of natural production. It now seems to me that his principal grounds for asserting this is ultimately that the particular reflexivity, “the spark of the sensing/sensible” transpiring in figural form in the morphological singularity that is the human body is already the circuit on which language will also appear in order to continue the “effort at articulation which is the Being of every being”, in order to continue, that is, nature itself precisely by breaking with it as silence. Hence, in Merleau-Ponty, as Toadvine once again remarks,

[T]he very being of nature and language are inextricably intertwined; neither can be defined in positive terms and apart from the essential movement underway by which each crosses into its other. In this case, “nature” is reached only through its expression in language, while at the same time language becomes, not a means of human communication or representation, but a movement of nature itself.²⁰¹

If language and nature are, for Merleau-Ponty, indeed inextricably intertwined this way, and if, for him, “our existence as seers and especially our existence as sonorous beings for others and for ourselves” – which is, once again, what makes the human morphology a singularity

²⁰⁰ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 129.

²⁰¹ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 129.

in relation to other animals – “contain everything required for there to be...speech about the mute world” (VI 200-201/155), then nature is not only what requires creation (in the sense of linguistic invention) of us *for us to experience it*. More crucially, it is also what requires us and our creative efforts of expression or articulation (as speakers especially) *in order for nature to be more intensely what it is*, that is, an effort of articulation. Our creative efforts at expression are both the epistemological requisite for our access to nature and the ontological requisite for nature itself.

It seems to me that it is with reference to such a scheme of things that we can make sense of Merleau-Ponty’s insistence that the human body amounts to an event of nature that “no accident would have sufficed to do”. If the emergence of the human is for Merleau-Ponty no mere accident while all the same a natural event, it must be because nature, such as he effectively describes it in his late texts, is devoted to the cultivation of the human as an expedient to its narcissistic struggle to come to itself, to achieve a revelation of itself to itself. On this highly crucial point, therefore, I need to take issue with Ted Toadvine’s suggestion that Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on the relations of continuity between spirit and life, the human and the animal (and we might add to this the continuity between matter and life) entails that his thought “suggests a new path for phenomenology, one that breaks with its tradition of human exceptionalism”.²⁰² Quite to the contrary: It seems to me that Merleau-Ponty’s reformulation of human subjectivity (which involves the capacity for linguistic expression) as a fold on the surface of a nature – or flesh, or being – that also comprises materiality and animality among its complications is rather a subtle way of extending such exceptionalism and to perpetuate the privilege of the human in the scheme of natural productivity. This is because nature not only happens to produce the human, but seems rather to be *devoted* to the production of the human as what it needs more than anything else for its narcissistic project of self-exhibition and coming-to-itself. Man is the mirror of/for nature, but a mirror that nature has itself created.

Thus I find myself more in agreement with Gary B. Madison’s conclusions in *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, which I shall only briefly review. Madison begins by observing that “the question as to what Being might be without man, or before him, does not seem to have much meaning for Merleau-Ponty”.²⁰³ Of course, Madison does not thereby intend to say that Merleau-Ponty, in his late thought, had nothing new to say beyond the

²⁰² Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, p. 94.

transcendentalism of the subject-world correlationsim he accuses the *Phenomenology of Perception* for perpetuating. In so far as that thought is a thought of Being/Nature, it is at bottom an ontology and not an epistemology – yet it is an indirect ontology because it “conceives of Being in beings and notably in that being which is man”.²⁰⁴ Hence, the fire kindled with the spark of the sentient-sensible characteristic of the human body is for Merleau-Ponty, as Madison puts it, nothing short of “the illumination of Being (Nature) itself”, and he continues:

If man finds himself face to face with the world, this state is not pure contingency nor does it result because he is produced by the world, but rather because both he and the world are together derived from a single Being which englobes and upholds them. (...) The subject is “there” because he is the self-realization of Being itself. (...) It is thus entirely as though in Merleau-Ponty Being needs man in order *truly* to be. (...) [H]uman history then possesses an ontological significance because it is the history of the becoming of Being itself.²⁰⁵

On this reading of Merleau-Ponty’s late thought – which, as already stated, I consider to be confirmed by my own investigations of Merleau-Ponty’s elaboration of generativity in terms of the flesh as “formative medium of the object and the subject” and nature as “originary productivity” – man or human subjectivity is not its own origin. His origin is in a dimension of natural being not of his making. Yet his origin needs him in order to be what it is, in order to be, among other things, the formative medium of his appearance in the world.

At the core of Merleau-Ponty’s late approach to the problem of generativity, then, we find a subtle reapplication of the “relationship by principle” – i.e. reversibility – in terms of which he also conceives the relation of the sentient to the sensible: we find the notion of a reversibility between the producer and the produced. Nowhere does Merleau-Ponty indicate this reversibility as unmistakably as in the section on Schelling in the first *Nature* course. In Schelling, Merleau-Ponty claims to find the notion of nature as “a producer that is not all-powerful” (N 61/38). However, whereas, for Schelling, this impotence on the part of natural production means that it “produces nothing definitive” (N 61/38) and is for him but a way of saying that natural production is excessive and has no term set for it, Merleau-Ponty takes the notion of nature as an impotent (yet originary) productivity in a much more literal sense. For Merleau-Ponty, nature as originary productivity is impotent because it has to give rise to a special product – the human subject – that will henceforth sustain it. He puts this point in

²⁰³ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, p. 221.

²⁰⁴ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, p. 234.

²⁰⁵ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, pp. 232-236.

terms that, once again, bring to the fore the need to investigate the labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty's thought, and at this stage it should be fairly evident, from what we have seen in this chapter, that Merleau-Ponty is here not so much interpreting Schelling as he expounding on his own thought:

We are the parents of a Nature of which we are also the children. It is in human being that things become conscious by themselves; but the relation is reciprocal: human being is also the becoming-consciousness of things. Nature leads, by a series of disequilibria, toward the realization of human being, which in turn becomes the dialectical term of it. (...) [Human being] carries traces of all that Nature has been, it is the recapitulation and the contemporary of creation (N 68-69/43-44, my emphasis).

How what is created can be contemporary with that which creates it and in a certain sense participate in its creation, how, in short, a child can engender his own parents, how a parent and perhaps a mother in particular can be brought forth by the child it/she engenders – this seems to be the mystery around which revolves Merleau-Ponty's approach to nature/flesh/being as “formative medium of the object and the subject”.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have investigated the place and significance of the issue of generativity within Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature. I have shown that the task of approaching nature as generativity imposes itself on account of Merleau-Ponty's decision, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, to conceive of subjectivity as both indeclinable and dependent, which, I have suggested, amounts to a conception of subjectivity as both transcendental and vulnerable. I have investigated how Merleau-Ponty's late thought of “flesh” as “formative medium of the object and the subject” and its parallel in nature conceived as an “originary productivity” that “requires creation of us to for us to experience it” responds to the challenge posed by this conflictual definition of subjectivity. As my investigation has shown, Merleau-Ponty's discourse on formative flesh and natural productivity leaves this definition of subjectivity essentially intact, in so far as the subject still postures as no less indeclinable than dependent, yet the terms of its being indeclinable have been inflected in a significant respect: it is indeclinable not from the point of view of knowledge (and so it is perhaps no longer transcendental in the Kantian sense), but from the point of view of nature. In other words, it is not so much that *we* are unable to renounce our own subjectivity as the indeclinable point of view on nature, but rather that *nature* is unable to renounce the possibility and the realization of the human subject as an indeclinable point of view on itself. As we have seen, this scheme of things is thought by Merleau-Ponty to a

large extent in terms of relations of generativity, relations between the generator and the generated, producer and produced, in ways that make relevant an investigation of the labour of the feminine, and particular maternity, in Merleau-Ponty's thought of nature as generativity, to which I will return in more detail in chapter 6.

Part II: The Feminine at Work in Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature

Chapter 4: Nature à l'écart

The Feminine at Work in Merleau-Ponty's Approach to the Alterity of Nature

What we propose here, and oppose to the search for the essence, is not the return to the immediate, the coincidence, the effective fusion with the existent, the search for an original integrity, for a secret lost and to be rediscovered, which would nullify our questions and even reprehend language. If coincidence is lost, this is no accident; if Being is hidden, this is itself a characteristic of Being and no disclosure will make us comprehend it (VI 160/121-2).

In this chapter, my concern is to unearth the feminine labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty's approach to the alterity of nature. More precisely, the thesis I will try to defend in the course of the chapter is that the alterity of nature in Merleau-Ponty can be said to assume the seductive figure of woman, historically and culturally written into the script of male desire as the notoriously inaccessible object of his conquest, and that this particular figuration of alterity largely determines Merleau-Ponty's philosophical outlook with regard to this aspect of nature. In making this point, I do not intend to criticize Merleau-Ponty for a disavowed chauvinism or misogyny, nor for a philosophically or ethically non-viable account of alterity. What I do want to suggest is that a critical appropriation of Merleau-Ponty's approach to natural alterity will have to take into account the labour performed in this approach by (a certain historically specific configuration of) the feminine.

My strategy in this endeavour will be to make the labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty's elaboration of natural alterity appear in the intersection of two basic motifs that underpin his phenomenological descriptions throughout his work: *desire* and *resistance*. In the first two steps of my discussion, then, I shall retrace the place and function of these two motifs respectively in Merleau-Ponty's work, and then, in the final step, propose a way to read how they combine in Merleau-Ponty's description of what he calls "carnal essences" or "sensible ideas" through the operation of the *veil*. The operation of the veil gives us, I will suggest, the tacitly performed labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty's approach to the alterity of nature.

Desire as Ontological Key

In order to unearth the labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty's approach to the alterity of nature, it is necessary first to consider the place of desire as an ontological key in Merleau-Ponty's work. It is possible to speak of the presence in Merleau-Ponty's work of an operative philosophy of desire and the erotic that forms an infrastructure or plane on which the terms of his descriptions are sexualized, and on which the feminine character of his notion of natural alterity can be made to appear. The clue to this infrastructure is given at the opening of the chapter on sexuality in *Phenomenology of Perception*, where Merleau-Ponty writes: "Let us attempt to see how an object or a being begins to exist for us through desire or love, and we will thereby understand more clearly how objects and beings can exist in general" (PhP 191/156). In other words – and continuing a most classical *topos* – Merleau-Ponty accords to the description of how we relate to beings in desire and love an emblematic or exemplary status with regard to how we are to understand our relations with nature, with being and with the true in general. It seems to me that Merleau-Ponty follows this guideline in all of his work dealing with the alterity of nature. To this extent, desire enjoys the status in Merleau-Ponty's thought as an ontological key in his sense of the term "ontology". And Merleau-Ponty's sense of ontology concerns, as we saw at the opening of chapter 3, the relation between the subject and the object. More precisely, for Merleau-Ponty, ontology concerns how objects accede, in the eyes of the perceiver, to an in-itself status, in other words, how they acquire *for us* the index as *in-itself*, how an "excess of Being over the consciousness of Being" (N 62/38) comes to assert itself in our experience.

However, as is the case with so many other notions in Merleau-Ponty's work, desire assumes different characters throughout his texts. In this case the character of the notion depends in particular on the understanding of the erotic with which it is closely associated. It is therefore necessary to retrace the various ways in which the erotic is invoked and evoked on several levels of his texts in order to arrive at the configuration of desire in virtue of which it can serve the function as an ontological key. Above all, it is important to distinguish between the thematic and the non-thematic registers in which the erotic is inscribed in Merleau-Ponty's texts. On the thematic level, we find Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological descriptions of the erotic as a particular mode of bodily intentionality, whereas its occurrence in the non-thematic register reveal Merleau-Ponty's tendency to describe experience (of nature) generally in eroticized terms. It is important to distinguish between the two because the terms of Merleau-Ponty's non-thematic eroticizing of experience generally are not,

surprisingly perhaps, those he uses to describe erotic intentionality thematically as a more circumscribed phenomenon. Because it is important to see this difference in order to arrive at an understanding of how, and in virtue of what characteristics, desire could possibly be an ontological key in Merleau-Ponty, I shall begin by briefly reviewing Merleau-Ponty's thematic discussion of erotic intentionality and intercorporeity as a libidinal phenomenon, and then proceed to consider the non-thematic terms of Merleau-Ponty's approach to the erotic.

Erotic Perception; *Einfühlung*

To begin with, we find in *Phenomenology of Perception* a discussion of erotic perception, which is to say, of the mode of perceiving that operates when we are in the presence of an object of erotic or sexual desire or arousal. This discussion follows immediately upon Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that desire might be that which teaches us how objects and beings can exist (for experience) in general. What erotic perception brings emblematically into focus is no doubt, for Merleau-Ponty, the affective pull exerted on the percipient body by the surface of the object in virtue of its emotional charge or significance and thus the non-indifference and fundamentally committed nature of the body's relation to the world. While probably being the type of experience where this affective pull is experienced at its most intense and acute, in which one body is "blindly linked" to another body (cf. PhP 194/159), what Merleau-Ponty finds particularly striking about it is that the sexual or erotic meaning with which a body may be charged for a perception that intends it erotically is "strictly individual":

[A] body is not perceived merely as just another object, this objective perception is inhabited by a more secret one: the visible body is underpinned by a strictly individual sexual schema that accentuates erogenous zones, sketches out a sexual physiognomy, and calls forth the gestures of the masculine body, which is itself integrated into this affective totality (PhP 193/158).

Of course, one cannot help noticing the voyeuristic and perhaps misogynist overtones (in so far as we are concerned with gestures of the masculine body "called forth" by the mere sight of a presumably feminine body) of this description. Above all: for *whom* exactly are the bodily zones in question constituted as erogenous – for the onlooker, or for the one whose body is being looked at? We should recall as well that the patient Schneider, whose case is central in Merleau-Ponty's discussion of erotic intentionality here, is said to have suffered a disturbance of his sexual function and of the erotic structure of perception partly on account

of his lack of interest in pornographic images and presentations or in the mere sight of a woman's body: "For Schneider, however, a feminine body has no particular essence. Above all, he says, it is the personality that makes a woman attractive, for, when it comes to their bodies, they are all the same" (PhP 193/158). We may thus wonder, with Judith Butler, if the "more secret" perception that Merleau-Ponty describes as inhabiting the objective one in the case of erotic infatuation is not after all vastly more objectifying than the objective perception, in so far as it works to detach and decontextualize certain presumably erogenous parts of the other's body from the affective totality into which they are integrated for him or her so as to constitute an affective totality for the male onlooker.²⁰⁶ Indeed, it may be hard to see how something like a blind linking of body to body may come about on such terms: neither blindness, nor linkage nor living body seems to be at issue in this erotic structure of perception.

And yet, Merleau-Ponty's point in offering this description of a "more secret" perception is that in the final analysis no object is, for our bodily existence, perceived "merely as just another object" but that every perception of objects is inhabited by a "more secret" perception. For our bodily existence, every object is like the object of sexual desire. It is, as Merleau-Ponty would later quote Proust apropos of the "sensible ideas", "without equivalents" (VI 193/149). Over time we learn to classify objects according to common properties and to see them as samples of general types. In erotic infatuation, however, we are reminded of the affective appeal of that which is "strictly individual", "without equivalent". What characterizes Schneider's sexual inertia is, on Merleau-Ponty's analysis, that all bodies are physically equivalent; female bodies are for him physically speaking neither more nor less appealing than male bodies, and no female body is either more or less appealing than another. For a subject with an intact sexual function, a body appeals most intensely on account of particular features, a particular erotic or sensual accent that distinguishes it from all other bodies, an accent that is just as undeniable as it is inexplicable. Although it concerns something slightly different, something to which I shall return in more detail later on in connection with the "carnal essences", Merleau-Ponty's contemplation of a passing-by woman in "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" may nevertheless help illuminate his notion of a "strictly individual" sexual schema of eroticized bodies:

²⁰⁶ Cf. Judith Butler, "Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: a Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*," in *The Thinking Muse*, ed. Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), esp. pp. 92-97

A woman passing by is not first and foremost a corporeal contour for me, a colored mannequin, or a spectacle; she is “an individual, sentimental, sexual expression”. She is a certain manner of being flesh which is given entirely in her walk or even in the simple shock of her heel on the ground – as the tension of the bow is present in each fiber of wood – a very noticeable variation of the norm of walking, looking, touching, and speaking that I possess in my self-awareness because I am incarnate (S 87/IL 91).

To be sure, Merleau-Ponty’s description here does not seem to have in view the sexual physiognomy that integrates erogenous zones into an affective totality, nor does it concern the woman’s personal character *per se* (that is, the way that personal character appears for someone like Schneider). But it concerns her “manner of being flesh”, and here we must understand “flesh” more in the colloquial sense of that repertoire of our being that concerns desire, voluptuousness, pleasure and suffering than in Merleau-Ponty’s later refined meanings (i.e., as carnality, elementality and reversibility respectively). We are not concerned only with walking, looking and touching understood merely as general animal functions, but as gestures that stylistically express a highly noticeable and particular manner of interpreting human and particularly feminine carnality. We must assume that, on Merleau-Ponty’s analysis, if Schneider takes no sexual interest in any human body, whether it be male or female – in short, if he is not himself incarnate or “carnal” in the sense relevant here – then he would be blind and insensitive to a particular woman’s “individual, sentimental, sexual expression” as well.

In several of the sketches for the third course on the concept of Nature held at the Collège de France, Merleau-Ponty presents what he there calls the “theory of the flesh”, which comprises the “esthesiological body”, the “libidinal body”, and bodily symbolism. This would give us a second sense in which perception is linked to the erotic in Merleau-Ponty. In so far as esthesiology, “the study of this miracle that is a sense organ”, gives us the outline of “the *Einfühlung* of the body with perceived being and with other bodies”, then it is plain for Merleau-Ponty that “the body as the power of *Einfühlung* is already desire, libido, projection-introjection, identification” (N 271-272/209-210). In other words, the phenomenon of projection-introjection, or transfer of corporeal schema that defines the intercorporeity of pre-egological social relations (cf. chapter 1 in this thesis), is here explicitly identified as a libidinal phenomenon, as a matter of desire and Eros.²⁰⁷ There is a link between this understanding of the erotic and the one proposed in *Phenomenology of Perception* in the sense that whether we are concerned with erotic perception in the more

narrow, literal sense or with transfer of corporeal schema, they are both characterized by a “blind linking” of one body to another.²⁰⁸ It is through the disclosure of a libidinal infrastructure of the phenomenon of *Einfühlung*, discovered already on the level of the body’s esthesiology, that one will be able to “show that there is a *natural* rooting of the for-other” (N 272/210).

However, it is doubtful whether desire understood either as erotic intentionality (as articulated in *Phenomenology of Perception*) or as *Einfühlung* (i.e., libidinally mediated transfer of corporeal schemes) qualifies as the expedient for our understanding of the presence in experience of nature in general. We must recall that the being of nature entails for Merleau-Ponty an excess beyond its being-for-me, the hollowing out of its being-for-me with an invisible or insensible reserve of being-in-itself, thus “pos[ing] the problem of a genuine in-itself-for-us” (PhP 378/336); it requires the supplement of alterity in its very givenness for me. In the erotic structure of perception described in *Phenomenology of Perception*, on the contrary, the “gestures of the masculine body” are integrated into the “affective totality” transpiring through the (female) body perceived, and so, in a sense, this body is but the external counterpart or correlate to those gestures kinaesthetically given. Similarly, in the transfer of bodily schemes occurring through the *Einfühlung* specified as libidinal in the third *Nature* course, alterity is not at issue in the sense with which I am concerned now; rather, my body and the body of another are inserted into a more comprehensive system of intercorporeal relations in virtue of which my body and that of the other are but variants of one another. Hence, Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of desire as erotic intentionality and as *Einfühlung* do not provide him with the key to understand how objects and beings or nature can exist for us in general, since, to borrow Merleau-Ponty’s formula from another context, they “reduce [nature] to the experiences in which we encounter [it]” (PhP 379/337).

Eroticized Perception

If desire provides the key to how objects and beings can exist in general, it will be desire in a different sense than the one defined in the course of Merleau-Ponty’s thematic description of desire as a circumscribed phenomenon. In other words, we have to look to the ways in which

²⁰⁷ In the third sketch, he signals that he is drawing on Schiller’s *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body* in presenting this notion of the libidinal dimension of the corporeal schema (cf. N 288/225).

²⁰⁸ I owe this observation to Lisa Käll, commenting on an earlier draft for this chapter.

desire is evoked more indirectly across Merleau-Ponty's texts in order to see how it may serve as an ontological key. I have managed to discern three such varieties: the notion of perception as narcissistic, as copulation perception, and as caress respectively. In all three cases, which I shall deal with in this order, we have more to do with perception conceived of as *generally* eroticized than with the erotic conceived of as a particular mode of perception.

Narcissistic Perception

As is well known, in his late texts, particularly in "Eye and Mind" and *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty speaks of a "narcissism" of perception as well as of language (cf. OE 14/124; VI 156, 181/118, 139). Moreover, in the course of a comparison between perception and language in the "Intuition and Interrogation" chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, he associates the quality of narcissism with the quality of being "eroticized":

Like the flesh of the visible, speech is a total part of the significations, like it, speech is a relation to Being through a being, and, like it, it is narcissistic, eroticized, endowed with a natural magic that attracts the other significations into its web, as the body feels the world in feeling itself (VI 156/118).

While it is not immediately clear how the erotic can thrive in company with narcissism, it is arguably the relationship by principle through reversibility of the sensing-sensed (cf. chapter 3 in the present thesis) that, as far as Merleau-Ponty is concerned, has something both erotic and narcissistic about it. Yet it seems to me that this apposition of narcissism with the quality of being eroticized is just a way to emphasize the affective accompaniment to the structure of experience described through the reversibility of the flesh. In "The Intertwining – the Chiasm" chapter, Merleau-Ponty elaborates on the narcissism of perception and also on its affective accompaniment, which he specifies as seduction, captivation and alienation:

[S]ince the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision. (...) The...more profound sense of the narcissism: not to see in the outside, as the others see it, the contour of a body one inhabits, but especially to be seen by the outside, to exist within it, to emigrate into it, to be seduced, captivated, alienated by the phantom, so that the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen (VI 181/139).

In so far as there is a relationship by principle between the seeing and the seen, in so far as the seer is *of* the visible, the seer experiences this relationship or reversibility in terms of a sense of being seduced, captivated, alienated by "that feeble reflection, that phantom of ourselves" that the things "evoke by designating a place among them whence we see them" (VI 186/143).

It seems to me that it is this sense of being seduced, captivated, alienated by that “feeble reflection” or “phantom” of oneself evoked by the things that Merleau-Ponty wants to suggest to us by associating the narcissistic structure of perception with the quality of being “eroticized”. But does this eroticizing answer the question of how things and beings can exist in-themselves-for-us in general? I do not think so. It might be a description of how the visible, nature, narcissistically comes to itself, of how indeed it becomes for-itself-in-us, in virtue of its folding over itself at the locus of the seer who is caught in its tissue (cf. chapter 3 in the present thesis). Yet, in the course of this coming-to-itself on the part of the visible, the seer himself does not seem to have any sense of an in-itself-for-us or alterity, but is instead narcissistically captivated by his own image shimmering on the surface of things. In certain passages in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty seems to consider the coefficient of alterity in things a mere epiphenomenon of a more primary homogeneity and sameness between the seer and the seen:

What makes the weight, the thickness, the flesh of each colour, of each sound, of each tactile texture, of the present, and of the world is the fact that he who grasps them feels himself emerge from them by a sort of coiling up or redoubling, fundamentally homogeneous with them; he feels that he is the sensible itself coming to itself and that in return the sensible is in his eyes as it were his double or an extension of his own flesh (VI 150-151/113-114).

At the basis of the feeling of the weight, thickness, opacity and alterity of the things, then, is a more fundamental feeling that they are but one’s double or an extension of one’s own flesh. In this scheme of eroticizing, homogeneity or sameness – more precisely, sameness or homogeneity between origin and originated – reigns supreme over alterity. Hence, desire occurring in the form of a narcissistic perception does not seem to be able to make us understand more generally how nature can exist in-itself-for-us.

Coupling Perception

A more spectacular non-thematic inscription of desire in Merleau-Ponty’s work is the one found in his frequent reference to the body-world relation in perception, as well as to the self-other relation in the transfer of corporeal schemes, as a relation of coupling, copulation or coition (*accouplement*). In so far as the term *accouplement* designates the act or process of copulation among mammals, it clearly introduces both sexual specificity as well as a specific sexual orientation (as heterosexual) into the network of terms used by Merleau-Ponty to eroticize our experience of objects and beings in general.

Of course, like the German word *Paarung*, the French word *accouplement* does not unambiguously designate copulation in the sexual, procreative sense; it can also be taken in a more formal or technical sense of constituting or establishing a pair or a paired structure. However, in *The Prose of the World*, in the course of a discussion of the relation between the writer and the reader in the course of the literary experience, Merleau-Ponty leaves little doubt that the philosophical resources contained in the term *accouplement* are for him to be found in its sexual connotation(s). We can see this in his comments on the philosophical legacy of the very term *accouplement*, for which Husserl is credited as the pioneering figure:

[As long as language is functioning authentically, it is] the trick whereby the writer or the orator, touching on...significations already present in us, makes them yield strange sounds. At first these sounds seem false or dissonant. However, because the writer is successful in converting us to his system of harmony, we adopt it henceforth as our own. From then on, between the writer and ourselves there remain only the pure relations of spirit to spirit. Yet all this began through the complicity of speech and its echo, or to use Husserl's lively phrase referring to the perception of others, through the "coupling" (*accouplement*) of language (PM 21/13).

This characterization of Husserl's phrase as "lively" says everything. There is, in and of itself, nothing "lively" about Husserl's use, in the 5th meditation of his *Cartesian Meditations*, of *Paarung* in connection with the constitution of another ego in the sphere of ownness: it seems largely to evoke the sense of a technical construction or fabrication of a paired structure.²⁰⁹ It is in its transition from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty, then, that it assumes its "lively" character – presumably, as the evocation of the act or process of sexual copulation among mammals. I shall take this as sufficient substantiation for my assumption that, whenever Merleau-Ponty uses the term *accouplement* in a philosophical context, he does so on the basis of its sexual connotation.

A second difference between Husserl's *Paarung* and Merleau-Ponty's *accouplement* is that the latter does not, unlike the former, restrict itself to the domain of interpersonal or even intercorporeal relations, but occurs no less frequently in the context of describing the living body's relation with inanimate things. Thus, for example, in the "Sensing" chapter of

²⁰⁹ Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: an Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1988), 5th Meditation, particularly section 51. In this section, Husserl uses the term "pairing" (*Paarung*) to designate the associative synthesis through which an alien ego is constituted within my sphere of ownness. The other subject is constituted as such, Husserl suggests, by a process through which I associate his or her visibly (or otherwise) appearing body and the behaviour apparently proceeding from it with the typical structures I know from within my own body and comportment. Husserl's use of the term "pairing" to designate this synthesis through which two or more data (the other's body and my own) are associated seems to point to the sense in which the pairing constitutes a *pair* in a formal or technical sense. The emphasis is that of something being joined to something else to form a couple or a multitude, through which a sense of intersubjectivity may be constituted. It is true, though, that Husserl occasionally also uses the term *Kopulation* in related contexts, but it is his description of the perception of others in the *Cartesian Meditations* that have become the classical reference for his theory of intersubjectivity.

Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty uses this image to evoke the dynamic and reciprocal process of synchronization of rhythms between sensor and sensed (cf. chapters 1 and 2), thus effectively describing hands and gaze as sexual organs:

My gaze subtends color, the movement of my hand subtends the form of the object, or rather my gaze pairs off (*s'accouple*) with color and my hand with the hard and the soft. In this exchange between the subject of sensation and the sensible, it cannot be said that one acts while the other suffers the action, nor that one gives sense to the other (PhP 258-259/221-222).

The same figure repeats itself on the level of the relation between bodies and things as integrated wholes, or perhaps rather as wholes in the process of integrating themselves through the work of synchronization between bodies and things: “[E]very perception is a communication or a communion, the taking up or the achievement by us of an alien intention or inversely the accomplishment beyond our perceptual powers and as a coupling (*accouplement*) of our body with the things” (PhP 376/334). In “The Intertwining – the Chiasm” chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, furthermore, Merleau-Ponty deploys *accouplement* in a way that clearly emphasizes how the term pertains equally to thing-perception and to the perception of another living body. With the appearance of another living and perceiving body, Merleau-Ponty writes, one’s own body quits its coupling with the flesh of the world for the project of “clasping” (*enlacer*) another body and the “unique occupation of floating in Being with another life”:

[T]hrough the other body, I see that, in its coupling (*accouplement*) with the flesh of the world, the body contributes more than it receives, adding to the world that I see the treasure necessary for what the other body sees. For the first time, the body no longer couples itself up (*s'accouple*) with the world, it clasps another body, applying [itself to it] carefully with its whole extension, forming tirelessly with its hands the strange statue which in turn gives everything it receives (VI 187/144).

Finally, in a sketch from the third course on the concept of Nature, and more specifically in a section bearing the title “The Libidinal Body and Intercorporeity”, Merleau-Ponty also speaks to the parallel structure in the perception of things and in the perception other living, perceiving bodies respectively. Given the above analysis, we can assume that the image of perception as coition in the sexual, “lively” sense is implicitly in function here. In the course of this description, Merleau-Ponty adds a characteristic that clearly indicates the masculine character of the body that engages in these coupulating perceptions, in so far as the body is said to effectuate a “penetration” – albeit at a distance – of the things by my body, a penetration that, paradoxically, opens my body to other bodies: “Body-things, penetration, at

a distance, of the sensible things by my body. Things as what are missing from my body in order to close its circuit” (N 281/218).

On the surface of it, the effect of the figuration of perception as copulation seems to be the evocation of a sense of a complementarity obtaining between the body and things. This impression is amplified in virtue of a couple of mentions of the intersexual relation in the working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible*. In a working note of November 1959, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the I-other relation is to be conceived “like the intersexual relation, with its indefinite substitutions”, “as complementary roles one of which cannot be occupied without the other being also: masculinity implies femininity, etc.” (VI 270/220-221). Another working note written a month later invokes the complementarity of the sexes in terms of morphology: “the male-female relation (the two pieces of wood that children see fitting together of themselves, irresistibly, because each is the *possible of the other*)” (VI 277/228). Bodies clasping one another in copulation would seem to evoke precisely that “couple more real than either of them [body qua fact and the world qua fact]” (VI 181/139) that is one of Merleau-Ponty’s figurations of flesh as reversibility, namely, as intertwining (cf. chapter 3 in the present thesis). Given, of course, a heterosexual horizon – and perhaps an idealized one at that – there occurs in the exchange between bodies that are complementary both in morphology and in gesture a surplus of pleasure (and, of course, possibly a child) that would not occur without their union. Merleau-Ponty no doubt wants to suggest that “a Visibility, a Tangible in itself” (VI 181/139) is formed in the way that pleasure is produced in the complementarity of a copulating couple, in such a way that it is ultimately impossible to draw a line between what is contributed and what is received through the exchange.

However, to the extent that complementarity comes to be emphasized through this figuration of perception (or signification) as copulation, alterity is correspondingly de-emphasized, the “excess of Being over the consciousness of Being” is missed. To this extent, if the evocation of desire as copulation were to be used as the key to an understanding of how objects and beings can exist (for us) in general, we will once again reduce nature to the experiences in which we encounter it and thus abstract from it its rightful alterity.

Still, we must attend to a small detail occurring in several of the passages quoted above in which the perceptual process is figured as copulation. In the very same sentence in “The Thing and the Natural World” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, in which perception is characterized as a “coition of our body with things”, Merleau-Ponty also describes

perception as the “the taking up or the achievement by us of an alien intention (*intention étrangère*)” (PhP 376/334). This “alien intention”, an intention from beyond, outside or beneath ourselves also makes itself felt in connection with the description found in the “Sensing” chapter of sensation as the copulation of the sensory organ with the sensory surface in the process of becoming determinate. Let us consider it again: “[M]y gaze pairs off with color and my hand with the hard and the soft. In this exchange between the subject of sensation and the sensible, it cannot be said that one acts while the other suffers the action, nor that one gives sense to the other” (PhP 259/221-222). So far, complementarity, reciprocity and symmetry are emphasized; the two terms of the relation – gaze and colour, hand and texture – are caught up in a push-and-pull, a sort of rhythmic interplay that will eventually produce the foregrounding of the sensory quality with a certain degree of determinacy. But, as we recall from chapters 1 and 2 of the present thesis, this effort at synchronization is induced by the prior event of the sensate subject’s being solicited by the sensible, however vaguely and indeterminately: “Without the exploration of my gaze or my hand, and prior to my body synchronizing with it, the sensible is nothing but a vague solicitation” (PhP 259/222). Prior to synchronization, the sensible is nothing but a vague solicitation, yet it *is* this vague solicitation all the same, and is not nothing; to this extent, it is the attestation of an “alien intention”, a sense of something or other, of “something I know not what (*de je ne sais quoi*)” (PhP 28/6), placing an inexplicable demand on my bodily powers of expressive gesture. In other words, this “alien intention”, this trace – always effaced by, yet retraced anew beyond, the completed *Gestalt* – of an indeterminate “I know not what” brings us to the coefficient of alterity in virtue of which nature can exist in-itself-for-us.

It seems to me, however, that the taking up of this “alien intention” also takes us out of the context of coupling perception strictly speaking, based as this latter seemingly is for Merleau-Ponty on the premise of reciprocity and complementarity. Hence, although Merleau-Ponty’s approach to the phenomenon he calls coupling – whether of my body with things or with other bodies – may no doubt be seen to represent an important trajectory of his meditation on the issue of desire, it does not, in the final analysis, convey the aspect of desire that makes it into the ontological key he declares it to be at the outset of the chapter on sexuality in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Instead, it seems that the taking up of the “alien intention” which we just encountered refers us to perception conceived under the sign of the *caress*, to which I now turn.

Caressing Perception

Let us finally, then, consider Merleau-Ponty's figuration of perception in terms of the caress, which, of all the ways I have considered thus far in which Merleau-Ponty gestures toward a desirous, eroticized perception, comes the closest to embody desire in such a fashion that it gives us the key understand how objects and beings can exist (for us) in general. In *The Visible and the Invisible* in particular, Merleau-Ponty characterizes our commitment to things through perception as a sort of caressing or espousing by our senses of the sensible surface of the world. More precisely, it is a caress that is carnal in the sense that it does not proceed merely from generosity, but from the inspiration drawn from the affective pull exerted by the things: "The things attract my look, my gaze caresses the things, it espouses their contours and their reliefs, between it and them we catch sight of a complicity" (VI 106/76). In yielding to the attraction exerted by the things, the look becomes an "art of interrogating [the visible] according to its own wishes", an "inspired genesis", which makes it appear that it "[knows] them before knowing them" (VI 173/133). The things ordain a particular manner, a particular style according to which they *want* to be seen, and the look feels itself animated from within and inspired by the *wishes* issuing from the things. The look complies with a certain desire on the part of the things, and in so doing it also complies with its own desire, in so far – as we have seen – it is attracted by those very things. Whence the *complicity* between the look and the things, a complicity, moreover, that does not rule out alterity.

In this power of interrogating the things according to their own wishes, the look shows itself to be "a remarkable variant" of the tactile palpation, whose chief difference from the look seems to consist only in a greater proximity between the questioner and the questioned (cf. VI 173/133). To be sure, the complicity between the sensor and the sensed is more acutely experienced in the case of touch than in the case of the look. But this is only because the gaze hides from us its own complicity with the things and the things' adherence to it, in so far as it, as Merleau-Ponty admits in *Phenomenology of Perception*, "pushes objectification further than tactile experience" and falls prey to "the illusion of being immediately present everywhere and of being situated nowhere" (PhP 371/330). Vision is distinguished from touch on account of its proneness to this illusion, whereas tactile experience constantly recalls to us its adherence to the surface of the body: "[A]s the subject of touch, I cannot flatter myself of being everywhere and nowhere, here I cannot forget that it is through my body that I go toward the world, tactile experience is accomplished 'out in front' of me, and is not centered in me" (PhP 372/330). In tactile experience in the narrow

sense, we experience more acutely than in vision the exigency of *movement* for successful perception. Singular pressures without movement present “nothing but a barely identifiable phenomenon” (PhP 370/329). But movement is not merely an external condition for touch, it enters into the very being of tactile phenomena as such: “Smoothness is not a sum of similar pressures, but rather the manner in which a surface makes use of the time of our tactile exploration or modulates the movement of the hand” (PhP 370/329). The tactile quality of a given surface presents itself as a certain manner in which it “wants” to be touched. Paradoxically, then, although I must approach the surface through the particular speed, force and direction of an actual and effective movement in order to touch effectively, it is as if my body knew the style of this movement before actually executing it. In order to touch effectively, I must run my hand across the surface in a certain way, and yet my body, as Bernard Flynn aptly puts it, doesn’t need any instruction for this movement: “If I wish to feel the cloth of a coat that I am about to purchase, it will not suffice that I pound it with my fists or quickly wisk my hand over it. Rather it must be touched as it wishes to be touched, and for this my body needs no instruction”.²¹⁰ As we have seen in previous chapters, Merleau-Ponty does not distinguish between vision and touch on this score: “Blue is what solicits a certain way of looking from me, it is what allows itself to be palpated by a specific movement of my gaze” (PhP 255/218).

Both touch and vision acquaint us with things, then, by caressing them, by responding to their attraction and solicitation, applying themselves to them according their own wishes, in a relation of possession which is both, indissolubly, a being possessed *by* the things as it is a pre-possession *of* them.

In order to see what is at stake in Merleau-Ponty’s penchant for figuring perception in general – and the look in particular – as a caressing by the body of the things, it may be worthwhile to contrast his approach to Emmanuel Levinas’ account of the caress. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas writes:

The caress is a mode of the subject’s being, where the subject who is in contact with another goes beyond this contact. Contact as sensation is part of the world of light. But what is caressed is not touched, properly speaking. It is not the softness or warmth of the hand given in contact that the caress seeks. The seeking of the caress constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks. This “not knowing”, this fundamental disorder, is the essential. It is like a game with something slipping away, a game absolutely without project or plan, not with what

²¹⁰ Bernard Flynn, “Merleau-Ponty,” *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (Fall 2011 Edition)*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2009/entries/merleau-ponty/>>, accessed on 08.07. 2011

can become ours or us, but with something other, always other, always inaccessible, and always to come [*à venir*]. The caress is the anticipation of this pure future, without content.²¹¹

Levinas distinguishes, then, between two modes of touch. On the one hand, there is touch as contact or sensation, taking part of the world of light, an ordered project or plan of knowledge and assimilation, the reduction of the tangible to the present reflection of the same in an object. On the other hand, there is touch as caress (and not strictly speaking touch), an utterly blind and disoriented seeking in the night of the pure future or *à venir*, a relation with the absolutely wholly other, with the infinite alterity of the Other. Thus there are two “worlds” for Levinas: the diurnal world of light, knowledge, possession, sameness, totality, violence etc. on the one hand, and the nocturnal world of desire, dispossession, alterity, infinity, ethics etc. on the other.

While I will come back further down to the task to which Levinas assigns the feminine as the protector of the nocturnal world or pure future of the wholly or infinitely Other, we may at this juncture specify the main points of tension between Merleau-Ponty’s and Levinas’ respective accounts of the touch. Above all, Merleau-Ponty does not distinguish between different modes of touch in the way Levinas does. For Merleau-Ponty, there is either successful or effective touch when the organ of touch moves in a way appropriate to the texture it tries to feel, or there is scarcely touch at all. At least when we are dealing with textures, there is no such thing as a touch that is given with simple contact. And so touch according to Merleau-Ponty shares with Levinas’ caress the feature of being an interrogative, searching gesture. Moreover, what the interrogative, searching gesture of touch seeks, according to Merleau-Ponty, is only secondarily some objectively describable quality (the sleek or the rough). What is sought by what Merleau-Ponty calls the “knowing touch” (PhP 370/329) is not an assimilation of the touched to the touching, but rather an accord, resonance, synergy and coexistence of rhythms between them. The knowing, illuminating touch does not form an alternative with the occluded touch of the caress. The milieu of the “knowing touch” is neither the dazzling light of a Platonic idea nor the *lumen naturale* of Descartes, but rather a half-light, a sort of penumbra, a space populated by phantoms and virtualities that make what is present and actual vibrate with a certain style or accent. Furthermore, for Merleau-Ponty, Levinas’ talk of a touching that is fundamentally disoriented would make no phenomenological sense, not even when it is the lover’s

²¹¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p.

caressing touch that is in question. Not even when one's touching gestures take aim for what in the other, beneath his or her skin, is fundamentally out of reach would Merleau-Ponty agree that those gestures are only, "like the pseudopods of the amoeba, vague and ephemeral deformations of the corporeal space" (VI 174/133). He would rather insist that the desire to reach the other in his or her "most secret parts" (S 278/171) does not relieve the organ of touch from the requirement of touching the beloved's body in the way that it wants to be touched, thus requiring a pre-possession of that by which one is possessed.

The caress, as described by Merleau-Ponty, is not, then, as it is for Levinas, a "fundamental disorder", aimlessly groping along in utter darkness, not having the slightest clue as to what it seeks. Yet it resembles what it is for Levinas in so far as the latter conceives of it, as we have seen above, as "a game with something slipping away (...) not with what can become ours or us, but with something other, always other, always inaccessible, and always to come [*à venir*]". In order to see this, we must first of all connect Merleau-Ponty's figuration of perception as a caressing gesture with the enigmatic passage, cited in the introductory chapter to the present thesis, in which Merleau-Ponty speaks of a "movement" of experience. Let me quote it again:

We are interrogating our experience precisely in order to know how it opens us to what is not ourselves. *This does not even exclude the possibility that we find in our experience a movement toward what could not in any event be present to us in the original and whose irremediable absence would thus count among our originating experiences* (VI 209/159; emphasis in the original).

When we bring together Merleau-Ponty's description of perception as caress, which, as gesture, is essentially movement, with this invocation of a "movement toward what could not in any event be present to us in the original", we begin to see in what sense desire is an ontological key for Merleau-Ponty. If the caressing gesture of perception is enticed by the things, and if experience is impelled toward things in so far as they partake of "what could not in any event be present to us in the original", then we can say that this gesture is an "inspired exegesis" not only in the sense that it knows things before knowing them, but also in the sense that it *yearns* for precisely that in things which remains "irremediably absent", which remains, by definition, unknowable. An irremediable absence can only appear as such, as *irremediable*, for a movement that desperately, helplessly yearns for the presence of what cannot, by definition, be made present. This yearning, which, Merleau-Ponty says, "remembers an impossible past, anticipates an impossible future" (VI 161/123), would seem

to define the caress no less for Merleau-Ponty than for Levinas, and at the same time gives us the meaning of desire that makes it the key to our understanding how objects and beings can exist in general, in themselves for us, in their alterity for us.

With regard to the character of desire relevant to an understanding of Merleau-Ponty's approach to the alterity of nature, I find myself in agreement with a consideration proposed by Ted Toadvine in an article entitled "The Primacy of Desire and Its Ecological Consequences". Here, Toadvine takes up the issue of the alterity of nature in Merleau-Ponty in terms of the frequent appearance of the term *il y a* across the manuscripts making up *The Visible and the Invisible*. According to Toadvine, what we are to understand by the *il y a* invoked by Merleau-Ponty is "a certain invisibility at the heart of the visible",²¹² "the other side of the perceivable and thinkable", "what cannot strictly speaking be thought or sensed", yet which, in its solicitation of sensation and thought, "gives rise to sense".²¹³ The experience of this constitutive excess beyond the sensible and the intelligible, Toadvine suggests, is "the key to desire", which we can now understand as "a response to the insensible", to this "impossible that withdraws before the opening of the world".²¹⁴

These insights are, however, just a rough starting point, and it is both possible and necessary to elaborate more thoroughly the notion of desire as movement toward, or response to, the impossible in order to get a clearer sense of the alterity of nature as Merleau-Ponty conceives of it, and especially in order to get a clearer sense of the labour of the feminine in this alterity. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to proceed a little further with Toadvine's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature and open the account of the alterity of nature as *resistance*. In the course of so doing, however, I shall also turn Toadvine's interrogation of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature back upon itself, and follow a suggestion proposed by Renaud Barbaras in his book *Desire and Distance*. In this book, in which the author must be said more to draw freely on Merleau-Ponty (among others) than to read him to the letter, Barbaras advances the hypothesis that we should conceive of perception in terms of desire. From the observation that the subject must be essentially a living subject insofar as its perceptual facility is constitutively unfolded as movement, Barbaras hypothesizes that the movement of the perceptual gesture that illuminates the sensible proceeds from a deeper sense of movement and life. This deeper sense of

²¹² Toadvine, "The Primacy of Desire and Its Ecological Consequences", p. 148.

²¹³ Toadvine, "The Primacy of Desire and Its Ecological Consequences", p. 149.

²¹⁴ Toadvine, "The Primacy of Desire and Its Ecological Consequences", pp. 148-149.

movement, he suggests, is that of desire as the function through which the world's constitutive distance is disclosed as such – and the meaning of “distance”, as Barbaras explains in *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, must ultimately also include the psychological sense of “resistance”:²¹⁵

Desire is what relates one to the other, the finite manifestation and the comanifestation of the world that it presupposes. To say that perception is desire is to say that every being appears only as the manifestation of an ultimate appearing that itself never appears. Desire unfolds the constitutive distance of the sensible; by aspiring to the totality, it opens the depth of appearance.²¹⁶

Although Barbaras does not hereby claim to read Merleau-Ponty to the letter,²¹⁷ I think he nevertheless aptly formulates the sense of alterity that I believe is at issue in Merleau-Ponty's approach to the problem of nature, and simultaneously points to the sense in which, in reading Merleau-Ponty, we must understand desire and resistance in terms of one another.

Hence, the question to be pursued in the following section is: What comes of the alterity of nature in Merleau-Ponty when we not only associate it with resistance and consider this resistance the key to desire (as Toadvine is right to do, as already stated), but also consider desire, in its turn, a key to the understanding of this resistance, which would also be the trajectory pointed out by Merleau-Ponty at the outset of the chapter on sexuality in *Phenomenology of Perception*?

The Two Powers of Resistance

At the core of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature, then, we find a concern with nature as a source or power of *resistance*, as suggested by both Toadvine and Barbaras. Merleau-Ponty himself amply and explicitly expresses this concern at several junctures in the *Nature* lectures, such as in this passage, where he faults Descartes for having no appreciation for it: “[The] objective conception of Being leaves a residue. Whatever Descartes' efforts are to think ‘what makes it be such’ (Montesquieu), Nature resists. It cannot be entirely established in front of us” (N 117/83). And in another passage, he credits the thinkers of German romanticism for having taken on the task of thinking through the resistance of nature of which the Cartesian and Kantian traditions had remained ultimately incapable:

²¹⁵ Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, pp. 210-211.

²¹⁶ Renaud Barbaras, *Desire and Distance: Introduction to a Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Paul B. Milan, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 125.

²¹⁷ He does, however, claim to bring out “the true significance of the chiasma by which in the final analysis Merleau-Ponty defined phenomenality” (Barbaras, *Desire and Distance: Introduction to a Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 126).

In this idea [hinted at by Brunschvicg] of the resistance of a Nature that does not want to be left closed up in a preformed matrix, and which is only the nondogmatic affirmation of synchronisms, is it not necessary to discover a new meaning of the word “Nature” as the residue that we cannot eliminate, as e.g., the romantic idea of a savage Nature (*Nature sauvage*)? (N 58/35)

It is, of course, Schelling, through his mature conception (in the *Freedom* essay and in the third draft for *The Ages of the World*) of nature as the “barbaric principle”,²¹⁸ as the “indivisible remainder” or the “incomprehensible,” “anarchic” and “dark” ground of all order, form and illumination,²¹⁹ who more than anyone else brings home to Merleau-Ponty this romantic sense of a resistant nature. This can be seen not only in the largely appreciative commentary he devotes to Schelling’s work in the *Nature* lectures, and which culminates in a condemnation of Marx’ lack of sense of it: “[H]e speaks of a domination of Nature by man. Never does the resistance of Nature appear as an essential fact” (N 77/50). It can also be seen in the fact that, at a crucial juncture in the essay on Husserl written a few years later, he turns to Schelling for assistance in order to express what will be the ultimate vocation of phenomenology if it is to be a philosophy of nature: “What resists phenomenology within us – natural being, the ‘barbaric principle’ Schelling spoke of – cannot remain outside phenomenology and should have its place within it” (S 290/178). As we can gather from the preceding, nature, for Merleau-Ponty, must be thought as something that resists us both from within and from without.

Whereas the quotes assembled above, in which Merleau-Ponty explicitly characterizes nature as “resistant”, leave no doubt concerning the import that the issue of resistance had in his late approach to the problem of nature, the issue is in clearly also present in his earlier work. This has been consistently brought home to us in the series of readings produced over the last decade by Ted Toadvine. Let me in that connection return to his suggestion, discussed in chapter 1, that the natural thing, in Merleau-Ponty, is described “in an oddly

²¹⁸ “These are people [of this idealism that has appeared among us] that, in the good-natured endeavour toward so-called Enlightenment, really arrived at the dissolution of everything in itself into thoughts. But, along with the darkness, they lost all might and that (let the right word stand here) barbaric principle that, when overcome but not annihilated, is the foundation of all greatness and beauty” (F. W. J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World* (c. 1815), trans. Jason M. Wirth (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 106).

²¹⁹ “After the eternal act of self-revelation, everything in the world is, as we see it now, rule, order and form; but anarchy still lies in the ground, as if it could break through once again, and nowhere does it appear as of order and form were what is original but rather as of initial anarchy had been brought to order. This is the incomprehensible base of reality in all things, the indivisible remainder, that which with the greatest exertion cannot be resolved in understanding but rather remains eternally in the ground. The understanding is born in the genuine sense from that which is without understanding. Without this preceding darkness creatures have no reality; darkness is their necessary inheritance” (F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations Into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 29).

Janus-faced fashion”,²²⁰ as both a familiar face with an expression that is immediately understood and as a “resolutely silent Other”, a face that is but the reminder of an unfathomable depth of anti-human nature. Now, that which more precisely characterizes this other, anti-human face of the thing, Toadvine suggests, is that it is, as compared with the face that is congenial to our everyday human concerns, a resistant face: “[T]hings...have another, entirely different ‘face’ from the one that they turn toward our bodies, namely, a face that refuses our advances and resists us, that rejects our anthropomorphizing projections”.²²¹

I totally agree with Toadvine that no sustainable reading of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature can get off the ground unless this tension in him between the congenial and the resistant faces of nature is acknowledged. However, we must not stop here. We must delve deeper into the matter, and get a clearer sense of what exactly the power of resistance is for Merleau-Ponty. The hypothesis I shall now proceed to defend is that, in Merleau-Ponty, *resistance is itself Janus-faced*, even as it forms part of the Janus-face of nature that also comprises a congenial face. In other words, there is not one, but *two* powers of resistance to be gleaned from Merleau-Ponty’s works, and it is in the articulation between these powers that we may learn not only about the nature of resistance, of the resistance of nature in Merleau-Ponty but also, as we shall see eventually, what the feminine may have to do with it.

Resistance As Repulsion

To begin with, Merleau-Ponty evokes a resistance on the part of the thing in terms of *repulsion*. He makes this quite explicit in “The Thing and The Natural World” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, in the section treating of the non-human background of nature in which the thing is rooted: “For our existence, the thing is much less a pole of attraction than a pole of repulsion” (PhP 380/338). But the very term “repulsion” can be understood in at least two different senses, which together make up the two powers of resistance with which I am concerned.

According to the first meaning of repulsion – which is the sense I shall mainly be concerned with in this subsection – it can be understood in the psychological and normative sense of that which inspires disgust, nausea, horror or aversion in the one who is repelled by whatever is repulsive. To the extent that we can regard this as a viable interpretation of “pole

²²⁰ Cf. Toadvine, “Ecophenomenology and the Resistance of Nature”, pp. 345-350; see also Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, pp. 40, 123-126.

²²¹ Toadvine, “Ecophenomenology and the Resistance of Nature”, p. 346.

of repulsion”, we are seeing in Merleau-Ponty a probing of the same dimension that Sartre explored in terms of nausea in the novel bearing that title.

On the other hand, repulsion can be understood in the sense of that which averts, evades or in other ways resists being taken possession of, in the way one says that an army or a political entity repels the assault from an enemy. With respect to this interpretation, the psychological effect imparted to the one who is repelled remains to be specified. We do find both senses of resistance *qua* repulsion in play in Merleau-Ponty’s texts, and I shall retrace their respective inscriptions. For the sake of clarity of exposition, however, I shall reserve the term “repulsion” for the first, psychological sense, while referring to the second, military sense of repulsion as “evasion”, to be treated of in the next subsection.

The basic key to Merleau-Ponty’s sense of resistance as repulsion is given in his opposition of repulsion and attraction to one another: the force of repulsion is the contrary to that of attraction. It seems to me that we are to read this opposition in a psychological or normative sense, such that that which repels is that whose excessive proximity oppresses the subject as something repugnant, nauseating, stifling, perhaps even – in some cases – as traumatic. On the occasions when Merleau-Ponty suggests that non-human nature is, for our human existence, repulsive in this sense, it is often in order to pause at the sense of contingency and fragility pertaining to the human world that appears against the background of a non-constructed, non-human nature vastly in excess of human industry and computation. To make this case, he typically considers how artifacts, such as buildings and artworks, come into the presence of our human and cultural perception and evaluation against a background of non-human materiality out of which they are ultimately composed and into which they may – or will – sometime dissolve. A stroll across the Place de la Concorde may be all it takes to have a sense of this contingency:

As I cross Place de la Concorde and believe myself to be entirely caught up within Paris, I can focus my eyes upon a stone in the wall of the Tuileries garden – the Concorde disappears and all that remains is this stone without any history; again, I can lose my gaze within this coarse and yellowish surface, and then there is no longer even a stone, and all that remains is a play of light upon an indefinite matter. (...) [M]y body, which assures my insertion within the human world through my habitus, only in fact does so by first projecting me into a natural world that always shines through from beneath the others – just as the canvas shines through from beneath the painting – and gives the human world an air of fragility (PhP 346/307; see also PhP 48/26, 380/338).

Largely echoing Sartre’s description of Roquentin’s nausea at the superabundance of the material sensible world beneath the figures it assumes in the spontaneous flow of human

activity and concerns,²²² Merleau-Ponty emphasizes how the air of fragility surrounding the human world and the menace of inhuman nature beneath and beyond it is, for our human existence, a source of unease, horror or nausea. This nauseating sense of our contingency may impose itself, for example, through the lability of the spatial level in reference to which we at any time enjoy a sense of the vertical and the horizontal directions in space (cf. chapter 2 in the present thesis). It is a level that we may sometime have to make an effort to find when the previous one has been disrupted, or when we simply are to find our bearings bodily in the virtual space of a map, a three-dimension maze presented two-dimensionally on a computer screen, a painting or the like.²²³ “The lability of levels gives not merely the intellectual experience of disorder, but also the living experience of vertigo and nausea, which is the consciousness of, and the horror caused by, our contingency” (PhP 302-303/265). Now, although Merleau-Ponty clearly does not draw the same conclusions with regard to radical freedom as does Sartre on the basis of this sense of contingency, one cannot deny the unmistakably existentialist signature of Merleau-Ponty’s interest in the ultimately horrifying and nauseating experience of our contingency that he finds, along with Sartre, mirrored in the inhuman face of things.

We can also discern an emphasis on the encounter with the repulsive or traumatic in a couple of essays devoted to aesthetics that Merleau-Ponty published around the time he completed and published *Phenomenology of Perception*. In particular, he praises Cézanne’s paintings and Sartre’s novels for their unflinching and courageous investigation and thematization of encounters with the unpleasant, the uncomfortable, repugnant and ugly. In his essay on Cézanne, from which I have already had the occasion to quote in connection with my exposition of Merleau-Ponty’s approach to natural alterity in chapter 1, Merleau-Ponty particularly emphasizes how Cézanne’s paintings are not particularly pleasant objects of contemplation:

It is an unfamiliar world in which one is uncomfortable and which forbids all human effusiveness. If one looks at the work of other painters after seeing Cézanne’s

²²² “I did not simply see this black [of the chestnut root]: sight is an abstract invention, a simplified idea, one of man’s ideas. That black, amorphous, weakly presence, far surpassed sight, smell and taste. But this richness was lost in confusion and finally was no more because it was too much. (...) I sank down on the bench, stupefied, stunned by this profusion of beings without origin: everywhere blossomings, hatchings out, my ears buzzed with existence, my very flesh throbbled and opened, abandoned itself to the universal burgeoning. It was repugnant. (...) I hated this ignoble mess. Mounting up, mounting up as high as the sky, spilling over, filling everything with its gelatinous slither, and I could see depths upon depths of it reaching far beyond the limits of the garden, the houses, and Bouville, as far as the eye could reach. (...) I shouted ‘filth! what rotten filth!’ and shook myself to get rid of this sticky filth, but it held fast and there was so much, tons and tons of existence, endless: I stifled at the depths of this immense weariness” (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1964), pp. 130-134).

²²³ Cf. Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, p. 100

paintings, one feels somehow relaxed, just as conversations resumed after a period of mourning mask the absolute change and restore to the survivors their solidity (SNS 22/CD 66).

Through Cézanne's paintings, then, we may sense the weight of the non-human as one feels the gravity of a traumatic event, such as the tragic or premature passing of a dear one. It is probable that Merleau-Ponty is also alluding to the gravity of catastrophic and traumatic events on a larger scale such as WWII, of which he was himself a survivor having lost dear ones during his participation in armed conflict and in the resistance movement.

Furthermore, in the article "A Scandalous Author", written in defence of Sartre's literary production against its hostile critics, Merleau-Ponty is equally concerned to set limits to "human effusiveness", expressed in those critics' intolerance toward and castigation of Sartre's evocation of the horrific in many of his books, including *Nausea*. This article is also one of the rare occasions where we find Merleau-Ponty using the term "sublime", by which he seems to intend more specifically the quality of the uncanny, the horrific, the ugly and the intolerable. Basing himself on Hegel's suggestion in *The Philosophy of Fine Art* that romantic art (as opposed to classical art) is characterized by the experience of disharmony between the mind and appearances, he asserts:

The ugly or horrible is the basic clash of inner and outer. The appearance of the spirit among the things is a scandal among them, and, reciprocally, things in their bare existence are a scandal for the spirit. (...) If inner and outer are reunited, their meaning will not be harmonious or beautiful but will have, rather, the violence of the sublime (SNS 55/43).

If Sartre's prudish critics are unable to appreciate the presence of this "sublimity without eloquence and illusions" in his works, a sublimity that is "an invention of our time", Merleau-Ponty writes, it is because, being "reluctant to mix the angelic and the bestial in man", they "need something above and beyond human disorder, and if they do not find this in religion, they seek it in a religion of the beautiful" (SNS 55/43). Crucially, the complacency of such a religion makes, in becoming a "technique for making things pretty", both art and its audience unable to "mingle intimately with life" (SNS 56/43), and thus unable to face up to the "absolute evil" that the threat of war and the Occupation had made part of lived experience in the years between 1939 and 1945 (SNS 58/46).

So, if we consider Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of nature's – even human nature's – inhuman resistance to "human effusiveness" from the point of view the passages quoted thus far, we must say that nature resists us in the way a trauma resists a too close approach. The trauma resists us on account of our inability to overcome our own resistance to its

proximity. If the unsettling presence of the trauma remains at a distance from us and to this extent evades or escapes us, it is because we refuse to approach it and confront it, preferring instead to interpose between us and it a screen of symptoms, fetishes, phantasms, ideologies or other distortions that may support our “human effusiveness”.

Let us now use the key of desire to put this power of resistance to the test. It can be determined at once that if the resistance of “that which could not be present to us in the original” and “whose irremediable absence would thus count among our originating experiences” is read as the repugnant, horrific, nauseating, and traumatic kernel of non-human reality always lurking beneath the mask of human effusiveness that we cast over things, then the movement that is impelled toward it does not give us desire, but rather something that looks more like the death drive. As a movement toward that which threatens with fragmentation, dissolution, destruction, it would represent the powers of death residing within us, the “bestial” supplement to what is “angelic” in man (cf. the quotations from Merleau-Ponty’s essay “A Scandalous Author” above). To be sure, in certain early texts, as we saw above, Merleau-Ponty advocated an aesthetics that would not shirk from the vocation to explore “the violence of the sublime”, the violence of a “sublimity without eloquence and illusions”, and even considered this a prerequisite for “mingling intimately with life”. Yet it seems to me that Merleau-Ponty’s thought is, in the final analysis, marked by the desire to tame the powers of death, to empty death of its tragic substance so as to force it to “make sense”. This orientation forms a constant pulse in his works. As early as *The Structure of Behaviour*, he had warned that death must not be “deprived of sense” (SC 220/204, cf. 240/223). In a note to his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, Merleau-Ponty cites and comments on Lavelle’s phrase “death is incorporated in our souls” (EP 67 n. 1/64 n. 1). However, this incorporation does not mean for Merleau-Ponty that death gnaws away at life, but rather that “the eternal becomes fluid, and flows back from the end into the heart of life”, that death reassures us that “what is always unfinished, deficient, and cramped in the present is no longer a sign of a lesser reality” – it continues the “active becoming” of sense and “makes us alive, and also gives to what we do a sense that does not wear out” (EP 66 n. 1/IPP 65 n. I). In the *Nature* courses, he assumes that “Freudian Eros and Thanatos rejoin our problem of the flesh with its double sense of opening and narcissism, mediation and involution” (N 288/226), hence that death is still to be accorded a meaning. Finally, in the “Interrogation and Intuition” chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty requires

the school of thought that first theorized the death drive (psychoanalysis) to “transform [the past, the phantasms] from powers of death into poetic productivity” (VI 153/116).²²⁴

In this repeated insistence that death must somehow be meaningful, participate in and contribute to a sense to which it will henceforth be subordinated, we may discern the operation in Merleau-Ponty’s thought of what Leonard Lawlor has rightly characterized as a “principle of tranquility”. Lawlor explains:

For Merleau-Ponty, therefore, death is no different than a mutation; it is merely a metamorphosis that does not cut apart the kinship with what came before and with what will come later. All the ones who have already died, for Merleau-Ponty, all those who are buried in the earth *carry* us and carry all of those who will come in the future.²²⁵

Now, if Lawlor’s line of interpretation is correct (and it seems that there is plenty of textual evidence in support of it), then we cannot assume that “what could not in any event be present to us in the original”, toward which the movement of experience is oriented, could be understood as “a sublimity without eloquence or illusions”, in as much as this sublimity also evokes the powers of death. By implication, the movement of experience is therefore not the death drive. In Merleau-Ponty, therefore, the wildness, brutality or barbarism of being or nature is divested of all the violence, bestiality and evil one might otherwise have associated with such terms; for Merleau-Ponty, in short, wild, brute, barbaric being seems to be also, paradoxically, tranquil or tranquilized being. To this extent, his own “reconquest of brute or wild being” (VI 137/102) – i.e., of nature – and the “religion of the beautiful” for which he had reproached the prudish critics of Sartre’s novels are not *that* far apart, after all.

Hence, when we consider the power of resistance from the point of view of its relation to desire (the mode of which, as I have suggested, must be understood through the caress), it seems like we cannot explicate this power in terms of repulsion, since this would produce an opening onto the powers of death that is not really present in Merleau-Ponty’s thought. We are thus encouraged to consider a different way of explicating the power of resistance operating in the desire I have resolved to consider as fundamental to Merleau-Ponty’s approach to the alterity of nature.

²²⁴ I have assembled the quotes included in this sentence on the basis of Leonard Lawlor’s selection of quotes from Merleau-Ponty dealing with the issue of death; see Lawlor, *The Implications of Immanence: Toward a New Concept of Life*, pp. 119, 182 n. 34.

²²⁵ Lawlor, *The Implications of Immanence: Toward a New Concept of Life*, p. 119.

Resistance as Evasion

From the preceding sense of resistance as repulsion, we must distinguish in Merleau-Ponty's work a second sense of resistance: this is the resistance exerted by the power of evasion, elusion, escape, dispossession etc. We can see this power at work when Merleau-Ponty suggests, for example, that the thing "escapes us as much as the intimacy of an external consciousness does" (PhP 378/336). Thus a clear difference emerges between this sense of resistance and the one treated of above: if, on the one hand, the thing is more a pole of repulsion than a pole of attraction, it resists us on account of *our* refusal of *its* proximity to us; if, on the other hand, the thing resists us in the manner that an external consciousness refuses us its intimacy (or, relatedly, in the way a military unit averts an attack), it resists us on account of *its* refusal of the intimacy that *we* desire to have with it.

This second sense of resistance is the sense in which Barbaras and Toadvine, to all appearance at least, take the motif of resistance in Merleau-Ponty. Barbaras writes of it as "an insurmountable *refusal* [of] *my approach*",²²⁶ whereas Toadvine specifies that the "resistant and aloof aspect of the thing" as described by Merleau-Ponty is what in the thing "rejects the body's advances even while remaining, in some sense, correlated with it"; "the depth of nature holds itself in reserve or withdraws before the interrogations of the senses".²²⁷ As far as I am concerned, they are right to do so, in so far as it is the sense of resistance that dominates Merleau-Ponty's approach to the alterity of nature in both early and late texts. For example, in a typical passage in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty explains that alterity (or, as he terms it here, transcendence) is experienced in our encounter with the thing in virtue of that in it which "snatches" or "steals" it from our grasp, and this dispossession is the condition for our possession of it *as a thing*:

Of course, the ipseity [of the thing] is never *attained*. Each appearance of the thing that falls before our perception is still nothing but an invitation to perceive more and a momentary pause in the perceptual process. If the thing itself were attained, it would from then on be stretched out before us without any mystery. It would cease to exist as a thing at the very moment we believed that we possessed it. What makes up the "reality" of the thing is thus precisely what steals (*dérobe*) it from our possession. The aseity of the thing – its irrecusable presence and the perpetual absence into which it withdraws – are two inseparable aspects of transcendence (PhP 280/242).

While, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty for the most part inscribes this line of thought in the register of the body-world relation in unreflective perception, in *The Visible*

²²⁶ Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, p. 211, my emphasis.

²²⁷ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, pp. 58-59.

and the Invisible he proceeds in a similar manner in the context of the relation between philosophy and non-philosophy, between reflection and the unreflective (which he here terms “Being”). In its approach to the problem of nature, philosophy “remembers an impossible past, anticipates an impossible future” which “recedes in the measure that philosophy wishes to approach it and fuse into it”; pursued as quest for a coinciding in immediacy with being itself (which is how Merleau-Ponty understands Bergsonian intuition), philosophy forgets that “it is only by remaining at a distance”, as a horizon, that being “remains itself” (VI 161-162/123). Whether as the thing of nature in relation to the percipient body or as the unreflective nature we are in relation to our reflective selves, the alterity of nature is sustained only on condition of evading the very attempt at capture in virtue of which we come to know it. We can only possess nature – whether of the world or of ourselves – in its alterity on condition of being dispossessed of it in the very moment we believed to have caught up with it and laid our hands on it. Our relation with nature – whether within or without ourselves – is determined by a proximity offered only through a distance (cf. VI 168/128), a distance that is not the contrary of proximity but “deeply consonant with it” or even “synonymous with it” (VI 176/135).

Yet, as we recall from chapter 1, Merleau-Ponty is not content merely to note down this consonance or synonymy between proximity and distance, between consonance and resistance that determines our relation with being – he also wants to *understand* it: “How might we simultaneously understand that the thing is the correlate of my knowing body and that the thing denies this body”? (PhP 381-382/339) In other words, we must not mistake the tension between the thing’s availability to the body and its evasion of the same body, between the consonance of the reflective with the unreflective and the withdrawal of the unreflective from the grasp of our recuperating reflection, as dialectical antitheses passing into one another; instead, we must endeavour to understand their *simultaneity*, the consonance between consonance and resistance. As Ted Toadvine puts it in *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, “we must grasp the proximity and distance of the thing not as two contrary faces, but as a single circuit through the thickness of flesh”.²²⁸

However, whereas Toadvine proceeds to treat this problem by way of a consideration of the relation between expression and expressed in Merleau-Ponty (cf. my discussion of nature as “what requires creation of us for us to experience it” in chapter 3 in the present thesis), I

²²⁸ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, p. 126.

suggest we continue applying to it the key of desire, through which we shall also, in its turn, deepen our understanding of the character of desire in Merleau-Ponty. In other words, I suggest we use desire as a key to understand how the problem of understanding how the thing can be simultaneously a correlate of my body and a refusal of this body – of how possession of the alterity of nature is inseparable from our being dispossessed of it – comes to be negotiated in his work.

For a start, it seems to me that this key unlocks part of the mystery contained in Merleau-Ponty's suggestion (in the passage from *The Visible and the Invisible*, quoted above) that we find in our experience “*a movement toward what could not in any event be present to us in the original*” (VI 209/159). Merleau-Ponty's problem of understanding *simultaneously* that the thing is a correlate of my body while also a refusal of this body is resolved once we understand this body as a desiring body or as a body of desire, at least given a certain configuration of desire. This desire can be distinguished from death drive in so far as it is not directed toward but rather *evades* that which will engulf it or consume it if it draws too close to it. It is directed toward whatever keeps it in circuit by constantly evading its consummation or conquest. This movement with which experience is traced, and which makes it be that experience is incarnated as caress, resembles the movement of desire precisely to the extent that it would come to a halt if the term toward which it is oriented were ever to present itself in the original. Desire – or at least a certain configuration of it – is a key to Merleau-Ponty's approach to the alterity of nature because the impossibility of an original presentation of that toward which he says experience is impelled is the condition without which there can be no desire: desire (as opposed to the death drive) is precisely that which sustains itself on and requires the non-presence of what it seeks, it is sustained only on the condition that its object continually evades or refuses it even as it incurs it, only in so far as its object recedes in the measure it is approached. The object of desire is through and through an imaginary or phantasmatic object: it exists for it only on condition of not existing; it is no sooner encountered in the texture of the real than it is re-invented by, pushed further back into the night of the imaginary – which is yet another occasion to recall Merleau-Ponty's mentioning, in “Eye and Mind”, of an “imaginary texture of the real”. Sliding along the circuit of desire, one is granted protection from the “violence of the sublime”, from the “sublimity without eloquence and illusions” toward which the death drive hurls us, so that we may abandon ourselves to the consoling and tranquilizing benefits of reverie. The experience of natural alterity described by Merleau-Ponty is one that, if you will, dreams on.

Let me be more precise. The resistance that nature opposes to all attempts at capture or conquest, that by which it is “snatched” or “stolen” from the reach of desire, yet which also constitutes its value for desire, would more precisely be the resistance exerted by the *modest*, the *virginal*, and the *mysterious*. The verb used by Merleau-Ponty, in the passage quoted above, to denote the action by which the thing is “snatched” or “stolen” from our grasp is *dérober*. This word can also denote the act of protecting or shielding, with that of hiding or concealing being a third possible denotation (not to mention “disrobe”, but the context in which Merleau-Ponty uses the term seems to exclude this possibility). Thus, on the one hand, nature can be said to wield powers that allow it to protect itself against our attempts to “lay our hands on it”, so to speak, allow it to protect its virginity in face of everything, even as it engages our body in the push-and-pull of copulating perception. On the other hand, the measures of protection deployed by nature in its resistance also make themselves felt in the scopical domain, in so far as *dérober* can also mean to hide or to conceal, to maintain discretion and modesty. The alterity of nature incurs and sustains the movement of desire toward it precisely on account of its participation in such qualities and powers which, once again, are far from amounting to a “sublimity without eloquence and illusions”, but are instead the source of a great deal of indulgent illusions and the inspiration for profuse eloquence.

It is striking – and here my discussion of the powers of resistance in Merleau-Ponty joins up with the discussion of caressing perception above – that Emmanuel Levinas, on several occasions, and quite unabashedly, describes as *feminine* the very traits that I have here discerned in the power of resistance as evasion in Merleau-Ponty. It seems to me – although I am here committing the sin of advancing a claim that, ultimately, allows for neither confirmation nor refutation – that, in so doing, Levinas is just bringing out in the open the sentimental, masculine cult of feminine ineffability that implicitly informs every phenomenology of evasive alterity, and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of resistant nature in particular. Like Merleau-Ponty, Levinas is in *Time and the Other* concerned to oppose both “the unity of being proclaimed by Parmenides” and “the contradiction of being and nothingness” because they “leave no room for distance”.²²⁹ Levinas, as is well known, thinks he has found this distance in a type of difference that shakes up both Parmenidean unity and Sartrean contradiction in an “absolute contrary contrary, whose contrariety is in no way

affected by the relationship that can be established between it and its correlative, the contrariety that permits its terms to remain absolutely other, [and which] is the *feminine*".²³⁰ On account of what qualities does this feminine graduate to such a status? Answer: On account of the modesty, discretion and mystery that is proper to it, faced with the masculine project to conquer it:

What matters to me in this notion of the feminine is not merely the unknowable, but a mode of being that consists in slipping away from the light. The feminine in existence is an event different from that of spatial transcendence or of expression that go toward the light. It is a flight before the light. Hiding is the way of existing of the feminine, and this fact of hiding is precisely modesty. (...) The feminine is not accomplished as a *being* in a transcendence toward light, but in modesty.²³¹

What is the phenomenological basis for asserting these properties of the feminine? This is found in the "phenomenology of the voluptuous" or of the caress that I cited above, which appears to Levinas to confirm his views on "the exceptional role and place of the feminine, and on the absence of any fusion in the erotic", the caress being "made up of this increase of hunger, of ever richer promises, opening new perspectives onto the ungraspable. It feeds on countless hungers".²³²

In a similar (although of course not utterly equivalent) way, as we have seen, for Merleau-Ponty, "each appearance of the thing that falls before our perception is still nothing but an invitation to perceive more". Moreover, this "more" is not a surplus in an empirical but an ontological sense, the index of an insurmountable mystery on the side of the thing and of an insatiable lack, hunger or desire on the side of the subject. Merleau-Ponty's presentation in these terms of the perceptual process directed at *things* reads as a universalization and naturalization of the more particular and arguably historically specific masculine experience of, or infatuation with, the mystery of feminine modesty. The difference between Merleau-Ponty and Levinas is that the latter explicitly acknowledges "the exceptional role and place of the feminine" for his thought of alterity, whereas the former – who is no less concerned to overthrow both Parmenidean unity of being and Sartrean contradiction – only tacitly assumes it, but with all of the pathos invested in it intact. The answer to Merleau-Ponty's question, "How might we simultaneously understand that the thing is the correlate of my knowing body and that the thing denies this body", then, is not to

²²⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 85

²³⁰ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, p. 85

²³¹ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, pp. 87-88

²³² Levinas, *Time and the Other*, p. 89

be found in any synthesis, not even in a hyper-dialectical, inherently unfinished and unstable synthesis,²³³ but in the exceptional role and place that is implicitly accorded the feminine as a power of resistance to masculine conquest in Merleau-Ponty's account of the alterity of nature, as that which evades *par excellence*. The woman-thing is the exact correlate to the knowing/desiring man-body, and is such a correlate precisely on account of nothing but its power of modest and virginal refusal and evasion, a modesty and a mystery that, Levinas assures us, is not abolished even "in the most brutal materiality, in the most shameless or prosaic" of her appearances.²³⁴



To conclude the preceding discussion, let me emphasize how the relation between these two powers of resistance comes to be articulated in Merleau-Ponty's work. As already indicated, in Merleau-Ponty's work (as in Levinas), the sentimental, poetic or effusive movement toward the evasive source of resistance overpowers the traumatic presence of the repugnant, repulsive source of resistance. In other words, the evasive source of resistance, coupled with the poetic, affectionate sentiments it inspires, comes to *cover up* the traumatic core of the repugnant, violent, sublime potencies of nature and the disgust and horror *they* inspire. Hence, the resistance of nature that Merleau-Ponty so intensely wants to foreground is not, as Lawlor rightly argues, the least barbaric or savage in the relevant sense of the terms, i.e., violent, ruthless, brutal etc. Instead, it is a most congenial and tranquilizing resistance that, precisely in so far as it draws experience into its abysmally enticing circuit of ever new displacements, substitutions, and refigurations, works to *protect* experience against the traumatic impact of horrific, violent and repugnant nature that is nevertheless always present on the horizon. If one were to use psychoanalytic jargon to express Merleau-Ponty's ordering of our relation to nature, one might say that it resembles the form of fetishist disavowal: *I know very well* that the true nature of things is unbearable, *but* I would nevertheless like to persist in dreaming of the possibility of a reunion with an unblemished, beautiful, blissful, transcendent integrity at the bottom of everything. Crucially, as Merleau-Ponty also knows very well, such a disavowal cannot sustain itself unless the integrity it dreams of remains forever secret, out of sight, forever withheld in an impossible past, forever put off to an impossible future, in short, unless – in the terms Derrida uses to characterize Nietzsche's

²³³ "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" (VI 127/94).

²³⁴ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, p. 86

aphorism “I have forgotten my umbrella” – it keeps secret or *veils* the fact that it perhaps has no secret.²³⁵

With this last statement, I am getting ahead of myself, or rather, I come finally to the issue concerning the operation of the *veil* in Merleau-Ponty’s approach to the alterity of nature, and to its importance for his understanding of nature’s alterity as resistant. By placing Merleau-Ponty’s late concern with the veil, not in the perhaps more immediate context of Heidegger’s thought of Being’s concealment-in-unconcealment, but rather in the more convoluted context of Merleau-Ponty’s citation of Nietzsche’s preface to the second edition of *The Gay Science*, I hope to show that the philosophical efficacy of this operation owes a debt, in Merleau-Ponty as in Nietzsche, to its association with woman, at least in part.

Carnal Essences: Veiled Matters/Veils that Matter

We saw above that, for Merleau-Ponty, nature’s second power of resistance consists in a power of *evading* our attempts to grasp it, to pin it down or gain possession of it. In this connection, I quoted a passage in *Phenomenology of Perception* in which the core of reality in things (what Merleau-Ponty there named their moment of “transcendence”) is represented as that which “snatches” or “steals” them from our grasp (PhP 280/242). With regard to Merleau-Ponty’s deployment of the verb *dérober* in this context, I remarked that the privative/protective effect of “snatching” or “stealing” indicated by this verb also has its correlate in the visual domain, namely, as hiding and concealment. As Ted Toadvine rightly observes, Merleau-Ponty’s thought must be seen to extend the Pre-Socratic – more precisely, Heraclitean – legacy on this score, i.e., with regard to the motif of a nature that “loves to hide”:

A phenomenology of reflection thus rediscovers the ancient truth that nature loves to hide, but now in such a way that the hidden depths of its withdrawal constitute the very act of philosophy from within. I take it that Merleau-Ponty was aiming to disclose this sense of nature.²³⁶

This theme of the hiddenness, secrecy or modesty intrinsic to nature is present in virtually all of Merleau-Ponty’s discussions of the resistant alterity of nature. It is, however, in his latest works that we see him approach this theme most explicitly in terms pertaining to the visual

²³⁵ “It is quite possible that that unpublished piece, precisely because it is readable as a piece of writing, should remain forever secret. Its secret is rather the possibility that indeed it might have no secret, that it might only be pretending to be simulating some hidden truth within its folds. Its limit is not only stipulated by its structure but is in fact intimately confused with it. The hermeneut [Heidegger? C.H.] cannot but be provoked and disconcerted by its play” (Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 133).

domain of experience, that is, in terms of the relation between visible and invisible, as is indicated by the title of the posthumous publication of what was going to be his *magnum opus*.²³⁷ His concern with the visible-invisible relation constitutes a trajectory that also connects back up with the motif of caress I discussed above in order to make explicit in what sense desire could be said to have an ontological function in Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of the alterity of nature, as is indicated by Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that the look is a "remarkable variant" of touch (cf. VI 173/133).

Merleau-Ponty's heightened accent, in the later works, on the visible-invisible relation provides us with a new point of entry to the problematic of natural alterity *qua* evasive resistance to consumption/consummation in/by desire, and thereby to the feminine labour served in his approach to this problematic. In order to develop this claim, I start by suggesting how Merleau-Ponty's problematic of the alterity of nature is re-mapped onto the problematic of the relation between the visible and the invisible, with the result that the alterity of nature now appears in terms of an *invisibility* maintaining a singular relation to the visible. This appearance of the alterity of nature in terms of invisibility vouches for a reconsideration of this alterity in conjunction with Merleau-Ponty's approach to the problem of ideality, the problem of what he calls a "universe of ideas", a universe populated by, as he calls them in "Eye and Mind", "carnal essences". It seems to me that, for Merleau-Ponty, this universe of ideas poses the exact same problem that the issue of nature had posed in *Phenomenology of Perception*, namely, that of a teleology of experience that both engages us yet also withholds itself from our possession of it and which therefore makes *us* instead into *its* hostages. As I aim to show, Merleau-Ponty's approach here to the alterity *qua* invisibility of nature/universe of ideas is accomplished almost entirely within the medium of a meditation on the operation of the veil, along a path that strays in and out of Nietzsche's suggestion – which is not a unitary suggestion – that we consider the possibility that nature/truth has dressed itself up as/like a woman.

²³⁶ Toadvine, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Lifeworldly Naturalism", p. 376.

²³⁷ This is not, of course, to diminish the importance that the relation between speech and silence unquestionably also had in Merleau-Ponty's late approach to the problem of nature, as we have seen in chapter 3 of the present thesis. To Merleau-Ponty's mind, the visible-invisible relation and the silence-language relation were undoubtedly but complementary ways of stating anew the problem of nature in terms that would be tractable for a phenomenological approach. For more on the issue of the importance of the issue of silence in Merleau-Ponty's late approach to the problem of nature, see, for example, Elizabeth A. Behnke, "The Search for an Invariant of Silence," in *Continental Philosophy in America*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman, John Sallis, and Thomas M. Seebohm (Pittsburgh, PA.: Duquesne University Press, 1983); Ted Toadvine, "The Reconversion of Silence and Speech", *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 70 (2008); and Sean Williams, *Silence and Phenomenology: The Movement Between Nature and Language in Merleau-Ponty, Proust and Schelling* (Doctoral Thesis, Department of Philosophy, University of Oregon, Eugene, 2010)

Vicissitudes of The Invisible: Nature, Style and Sensible Ideas/Carnal Essences

It seems to me that, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, the notion of the invisible oscillates between two senses, both in which it involves a singular mode of excess beyond the visible, and both of which Merleau-Ponty appears to regard as interchangeable. On the one hand, the invisible seems to evoke the resistance of the natural, what of nature withholds itself from sight even as it conditions it. This sense of the invisible seems to be indicated in Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that the colour of a certain dress "holds with all its fibres onto a fabric of the visible, and thereby onto a fabric of invisible being" (VI 172/132). This would seem to echo his description in *Phenomenology of Perception* of natural alterity as an inexhaustible depth or surplus of non-human or pre-human expressivity that ultimately exceeds the human effort to resonate with it, whether in body or language, even as it incurs this effort. It is also indicated in the passage constituting the epigraph to this chapter, where Merleau-Ponty suggests that hiddenness or concealment is "a characteristic of Being" which no disclosure will ever allow us to comprehend. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty speaks of the invisible in the more colloquial sense, that is, in connection with a "universe of ideas" (VI 194/149), the disclosure of which, he says, is "the most difficult point" (VI 193/149).

However, the two invisibles – that of nature as the "backside of things that we have not constituted" (S 293/180) and that of ideas – are intimately connected, in so far as Merleau-Ponty speaks of the disclosure of a universe of ideas in terms that strikingly recall his characterization of the disclosure of the resistant, non-human core nature in *Phenomenology of Perception*. The connection lies in the singular relation between the visible and the invisible that is instantiated in both cases. According to Merleau-Ponty, it holds for the universe of ideas no less than for nature that it is only possible to have relations with it by the mediation of the visible (or, more generally, the sensible), for the ideas he is concerned with are not ideas inspected by a pure intellectual power. To be sure, he allows for a place for the "ideas of the intelligence", yet this latter order of ideality will be derivative upon the more primordial universe of ideas and "come to add to and recapture and rectify the natural generality of my body and that of the world" (VI 197/152). According to Merleau-Ponty, it is Proust who is to be credited with having invented – especially on account of his description of "the little phrase" of Vinteuil's sonata in *In Search for Lost Time* – the terms according to which the being of universe of ideas in the primordial, pre-intellectual sense must be understood:

No one has gone further than Proust in fixing the relations between the visible and the invisible, in describing an idea that is not the contrary of the sensible, that is its lining and its depth. For what he says of musical ideas he says of all cultural beings, such as *The Princess of Clèves* and *René*, and also of the essence of love which “the little phrase” not only makes present to Swann, but communicable to all who hear it, even though it is unbeknown to themselves, and even though they later do not know how to recognize it in the loves they only witness. (...) Literature, music, the passions, *but also the experience of the visible world* are – no less than is the science of Lavoisier and Ampère – the exploration of an invisible and the disclosure of a universe of ideas. The difference is simply that this invisible, these ideas, unlike those of that science, cannot be detached from the sensible appearances and be erected into a second positivity (VI 193-194/149, my emphasis).

Here we can see the duality in the role entrusted to the notion of the invisible in full functioning. If literature and music are engaged in the exploration of a universe of ideas, which we would at first blush recognize as artistic ideas, this universe seems to come back after all to the same universe itemized by our body through sensory exploration, which would be the universe we call nature. The universe of ideas Merleau-Ponty wants to speak of here and the natural universe are ultimately one, while nonetheless allowing for multiple and reciprocally irreducible points of entry – the bodily senses, art, music, literature, science and philosophy – through which it may be explored. Ideas have no subsistence save for their sensible inscription, which is why Merleau-Ponty characterizes them as “sensible ideas” (VI 196/151) or, as he puts it in “Eye and Mind”, “carnal essences” (OE 18/130)²³⁸. Conversely, nature is the distention of the sensible or visible into an insensible or invisible depth of – ultimately – more-than-human sense, a depth of sense or an invisibility that, accordingly, cannot be accessed save through the mediation by the visible, being but “exactly the reverse of the visible” (VI 188 n./145 n. 5).

Now, this convergence between the problem of natural invisibility and the invisibility proper to the universe of ideas comes into its own in Merleau-Ponty’s notion of *style*. As we recall from chapter 1 in the present thesis, his approach to the intersensory unity of the thing and the natural world is largely accomplished in the notion of style, mode of movement or behaviour. Above all, we recall, the elementality of nature – its fluidity, its solidity, its radiance and airiness – declares itself to our bodily senses in terms of styles of being, of diverse ways of modulating time and space. The elementality of nature *qua* style, we also recall, makes *both* for its acquiescence to be our body’s correlate, to be meshed into the texture of our body as the universal schema of all synaesthetic relations *and* for its refusal to

²³⁸ “Essence and existence, imaginary and real, visible and invisible – painting scrambles all our categories, spreading out before us its oneiric universe of carnal essences, actualized resemblances, mute meanings”

accommodate itself entirely to our ways of projecting the world. In so far as the miracle of expression responsible for the stylistic articulations of nature is endemic to nature itself in terms of an “autochthonous significance”, these articulations are ultimately *both* the attestation of a non-human depth of nature in excess of our bodily capacity to grasp and resonate with them *and* nevertheless what incurs and sustains our efforts to grasp and resonate with nature. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, he does not only speak of the elementality of flesh, as we recall from chapter 3, in terms of what “gives a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being”; he also describes ideas as the “style” of experience, and in so doing emphasizes precisely the singular relation between visible and invisible that is my present matter of concern:

As the nervure bears the leaf from within, from the depths of its flesh, the ideas are the texture of experience, its style, first mute, then uttered. Like every style, they are elaborated within the thickness of being and, not only in fact but also by right, could not be detached from it, to be spread out on display under the gaze (VI 157/119).

It seems, then, that the resistant alterity of nature *qua* invisibility and the invisibility proper to the universe of pre-intellectual ideas both amount, for Merleau-Ponty, to a matter of style, to the problem of conceiving of that which remains, according to its very nature, pre-conceptual, that which remains a “cohesion without concept” (VI 196/152).²³⁹

If the preceding considerations can be granted, then the issues of style, of pre-conceptual or carnal ideas/essences and of resistant nature feed into one another in Merleau-Ponty and, in thus mutually clarifying one another, conjointly outline an approach to the relation between the visible and the invisible. Hence, besides using Merleau-Ponty’s appropriation of the “carnal essences” evoked by Proust as another angle upon his approach to the issue of nature’s resistant alterity, I will also take a second look at his notion of style, this time from the point of view of his account of the style of a passing-by woman. The question to be asked, particularly in light of Merleau-Ponty’s curious citation of one of Nietzsche’s figurations of truth/nature as woman, is whether it may be the case not only that, for Merleau-Ponty, the being of a passing-by woman is that of her style, but also that the being of style as such – i.e., of the universe of ideas and of nature – is basically feminine.

²³⁹ See the chapter “Nature: Variations on the Theme” in Mauro Carbone, *An Unprecedented Deformation: Marcel Proust and the Sensible Ideas*, trans. Niall Keane (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010) for alternative ways of developing the convergence between Merleau-Ponty’s late concern with Nature and his concern with the Proustian sensible ideas.

Woman as a/the Matter of Style

Just as the being of nature, for Merleau-Ponty, is that of a style – indeed, as he famously says in *Phenomenology of Perception*, it is the “style of styles” (PhP 387/345) – so he also insists that the being of style is natural. This is a point he presses, in the essay “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”, particularly against André Malraux’s reflections on art in *The Voices of Silence*, who is found to be excessive for Merleau-Ponty’s taste both on the side of artificialism and individualism and on the side of objectivism with regard to the question of artistic style. According to Merleau-Ponty, it is wrong to think – along the lines of thought he attributes to Malraux – that a painter invents his style at his own discretion as if it were within his possession, as if his work consisted in a sort of calculated abuse of the natural for the benefit of a painterly style henceforth reduced to a product on which he proudly stamps his signature:

[W]hen Malraux writes that style is the “means of re-creating the world according to the values of the one who discovers it”...he does not get inside the functioning of style. (...) [The painter] is far too busy expressing his communication with the world to become proud of a style which is born almost as if he were unaware of it. (...) The work is not brought to fulfilment far from things and in some intimate laboratory to which the painter and the painter alone has the key (S 86-88/IL 90-92).

Supplementary to the subjectivism or individualism concerning style that Merleau-Ponty deplores in Malraux, he also laments the presence in the latter of the exact opposite view, namely, the objectivist notion of style as the expression of a “spirit of the age” that some disembodied, eternal spirit of art deposits at the different stations of history. On this point, he gives the following quote from Malraux’ *The Voices of Silence*: “[Style is] the reduction to a fragile human perspective of the eternal world which draws us along according to a mysterious rhythm into a drift of stars” (S 86/90). The resort to artificialism on the part of either the individual artist or on the part of the eternal world of art is for Merleau-Ponty but two ways of missing out on the naturalness of style. Instead, one has to retrace the path that the appearance of style in a work travels from its natural germination in the things themselves: “We must see it developing in the hollows of the painter’s perception as a painter; style is an exigency that has issued from that perception” (S 87/91).

In order to illustrate his point about the fundamentally non-artificial nature of artistic style, and how it emanates from the things themselves, how “perception already stylizes”, Merleau-Ponty considers the example (already cited above) of the perception of a passing-by woman, an example he appears to borrow from Malraux yet which he also elaborates upon in his own distinctive way:

A woman passing by is not first and foremost a corporeal contour for me, a colored mannequin, or a spectacle; she is “an individual, sentimental, sexual expression”. She is a certain manner of being flesh which is given entirely in her walk or even the simple click of her heel on the ground – as the tension of the bow is present in each fibre of wood – a most remarkable variation of the norm of walking, looking, touching and speaking that I possess in my self-awareness because I am body (S 87/IL 91)

Now, as Sara Heinämaa rightly observes, this passage – indeed, the very passing by of the woman – is the antidote to gender essentialism, in so far as it makes of sexual identity a modal concept rather than the expression of a mysterious nature considered as substance. If sexual identity is more a matter of style than of substance, she argues, then femininity exists only through its reiterations, variations and imitations, and is therefore malleable, yet nonetheless exhibiting a certain permanence, a certain weight of sedimentation and acquisition born of habituation through which it is imbued with the appearance of being something natural:

In Merleau-Ponty’s account, being-a-man or being-a-woman is not a question of possessing some fixed property. Sexual identities are not constants in the multitude of behaviours. They develop and change in time, and this holds for all levels of experience, mental and bodily, personal and anonymous. Still, we perceive permanence, not the constancy of a substance or an attribute but the continuity of a mode of acting – comparable to that of a habit, a style, or a tradition.²⁴⁰

However, we might apply Merleau-Ponty’s notion of style or sensible idea to its very own inscription in his text and thus regard this very notion, this very idea – like all ideas, according to Merleau-Ponty – as itself a “cohesion without concept”. Consequently, we might consider it as an idea that coheres only on account of its own textual instantiations, iterations, variations or illustrations, among which we find, as we have just seen, its figuration as woman. If we do so, we must admit that the being of style in its naturalness – and, by extension, sensible idea or nature – in Merleau-Ponty cannot be understood in abstraction from its figuration as woman (or more precisely, the masculine fantasy of woman). We must consider the possibility that, in Merleau-Ponty, the truth or nature of woman is not only a *certain* style of being, “a most remarkable variation of the norm of walking, looking, touching and speaking”, but also that woman goes into the very nature of style as such. In other words, we must consider the possibility that woman, for Merleau-Ponty, is not only *a* matter of style, but also *the* matter of style.

²⁴⁰ Heinämaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir*, p. 68. See also Sara Heinämaa, “Woman - Nature, Product, Style?,” in *Feminism, science, and the philosophy of science*, ed. Lynn Hankinson Nelson and Jack Nelson (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1996).

In order further to substantiate the credibility of this hypothesis, let me then turn to Merleau-Ponty's later reflections on the natural operation of style – whether that of sensible ideas or that of nature – an operation that he now will approach almost entirely through a meditation on the operation of the veil. We may glean a re-capitulation of the very formula that “perception already stylizes” in terms of the operation of the veil from the opening of “The Intertwining – the Chiasm” chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, parts of which I quoted in my Introduction. Here we can see that Merleau-Ponty has now come to conceive of the resistant thingliness of things (correlatively, the ideality of ideas) – which coincides with their stylishness – in terms of the interplay between the visible and the invisible. What is particularly noticeable is that this interplay is intensely figured in terms of an interplay between the processes of veiling (*voiler*), clothing, dressing up or adorning (*habiller*) and that of disrobing or denuding (*dévoiler*), in its turn connected to the relation between eminency and degradation:

What there is then [is]...something to which we could not be closer than by palpating it with the look, things we could not dream of seeing “all naked” (“*toutes nues*”) because the gaze itself envelops them, clothes (*habille*) them with its own flesh. Whence does it happen that in so doing it leaves them in their place, that the vision we acquire of them seems to us to come from them, and that to be seen is for them but a degradation of their eminent being? (...) How does it happen that my look, enveloping them, does not hide them, and, finally, that veiling them, it unveils them (*les voilant, il les dévoile*)? (VI 171/131)

If what Merleau-Ponty refers to (in the paragraph preceding the one just cited from) as the “mystery as familiar as it is unexplained” has any meaning, this mystery must surely be summed up in these very questions. The mystery concerns an eminency that would be degraded by being stripped of all its veils, clothes, adornments, an eminency that can unveil and unfold its “sovereign existence” (VI 171/131), its “authority” or “fascinating, indestructible power” (VI 194/150) only on condition that it remains veiled, keeps veiling itself, veiling its flesh in the flesh of the look. How to approach this mystery in Merleau-Ponty?

Now, as Mauro Carbone has rightly observed, as we read through the passage just quoted we are “bound to connect this statement with an important point of Friedrich Nietzsche’s”.²⁴¹ More precisely, Carbone tells us, Merleau-Ponty’s statements near the opening of “The Intertwining – the Chiasm” can be explicated with reference to a point that

²⁴¹ Mauro Carbone, “Variations of the Sensible: The Truth of Ideas and Idea of Philosophy in the Later Merleau-Ponty,” in *Merleau-Ponty and the Possibilities of Philosophy: Transforming the Tradition*, ed. Bernard Flynn, Wayne J. Froman, and Robert Vallier (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2009), p. 243.

Nietzsche makes in the course of the preface to the second edition of his *The Gay Science*, in the course of a passage that is among the sections from this text that Merleau-Ponty compiles, translates and briefly comments upon at the opening of his “Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Hegel” course, commenced – I might add – at around the same time as he was writing “The Intertwining – the Chiasm”. I will shortly proceed to consider the passage where we find the important point of Nietzsche’s, but it must be pointed out right away that Carbone leaves wanting an answer to the question as to just why Nietzsche’s point is important for our understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s point, besides the fact that it is quoted by Merleau-Ponty at around the same time he was writing those words on veils and nudity near the opening of “The Intertwining – the Chiasm”. He reproduces a portion of Merleau-Ponty’s quote of Nietzsche, and then restricts himself to the following comment: “It is in this light that the sensible idea itself, in relation to its own samples, finds its definition”.²⁴² In what follows, I shall therefore insert my own comments concerning the significance of Merleau-Ponty’s quotation of Nietzsche – and not least of the way he quotes him – in the space left empty and wanting by Carbone’s commentary. As will already have been guessed, the site of the insertion is the question of the woman-truth nexus in Nietzsche.²⁴³

An Important Point of Friedrich Nietzsche’s

Let us turn, then, to the preface Nietzsche wrote for the second edition of *The Gay Science*, and more specifically to the section quoted by Merleau-Ponty that contains the point that

²⁴² Carbone, "Variations of the Sensible: The Truth of Ideas and Idea of Philosophy in the Later Merleau-Ponty", p. 244.

²⁴³ I am not, of course, hereby aiming to propose an exhaustive reading of this highly complex, highly difficult, highly significant and to some highly frustrating nexus in Nietzsche. Among the by now most classical approaches to this topic in Nietzsche, I restrict myself to mentioning the following, among which some are more resolutely feminist in temperament than others: Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*; Sarah Kofman, "Baubô: Theological Perversions and Fetishism," in *Feminist Interpretations of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Kelly Oliver and Marilyn Pearsall (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998); Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); David Farrell Krell, *Postponements: Woman, Sensuality, and Death in Nietzsche* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); and Jean Graybeal, *Language and "The Feminine" in Nietzsche and Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). Among later approaches, some of which work out a combination of two or more of the classical readings, we find Ellen Mortensen, *The Feminine and Nihilism: Luce Irigaray with Nietzsche and Heidegger* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1994) (focusing on Irigaray’s, Derrida’s and Heidegger’s readings of Nietzsche); Oliver, *Womanizing Nietzsche: Philosophy's Relation to the "Feminine"* (drawing on Irigaray’s, Derrida’s, Gaybreal’s and Farrell Krell’s readings of Nietzsche) and Tamsin E. Lorraine, *Irigaray & Deleuze: Experiments in Visceral Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) (focusing on Irigaray’s and Deleuze’s appropriations of Nietzsche respectively, particularly with regard to the Dionysian figuration of woman). Besides, in his fairly recent book *The Veil of Isis*, Pierre Hadot has included a chapter on the motif of veiled nature/truth in Nietzsche in which he also briefly yet concisely treats of Nietzsche’s figuration of nature/truth as woman, cf. Hadot, *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, especially pp. 289-297.

As my motivation for revisiting this densely populated scholarly territory in the history of philosophy is not to propose a fresh interpretation of the woman-truth nexus in Nietzsche, but rather to extract some elements from it that may serve my analysis of the labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty, I have not felt it necessary to review this extensive material for the purpose of this analysis. Suffice it to say that my approach will draw particularly on Hadot’s and Derrida’s respective readings.

may throw some further light on Merleau-Ponty's approach to the problem of style, of the invisibility of sensible ideas and, ultimately, of nature. In order to keep firmly on the horizon that the passage deals with the degradation of European culture into a sickening will to truth (which, of course, is for Nietzsche but another name for nihilism, for the will to nothingness or the will to death) and with how the Greek spirit constitutes for Nietzsche its antidote, I shall quote it more elaborately than does Carbone,²⁴⁴ all the while keeping with Merleau-Ponty's ellipses:

(...) No, we have grown sick of this bad taste, this will to truth, to "truth at any price", this youthful madness in the love of truth: we are too experienced, too serious, too jovial, too burned, too deep for that... We no longer believe that truth remains truth when one pulls off the veil; we have lived too much to believe this. Today we consider it a matter of decency not to wish to see everything naked, to be present everywhere, to understand and "know" everything. (...) One should have more respect for the *bashfulness* with which nature had hidden behind riddles and iridescent uncertainties. Perhaps truth is a woman who has grounds for not showing her grounds? (...) Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to *live*: what is needed for that is to stop bravely at the surface, the fold, the skin; to worship; to worship appearance, to believe in shapes, tones, words – in the whole Olympus of appearance! Those Greeks were superficial – *out of profundity!*²⁴⁵

Following the two pages of quotes from Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty inserts a few brief, highly elliptical comments, among which we find the following, pertaining especially to the section I have singled out: "Truth is only a hidden truth. – Do not seek to 'see' everything 'in its nakedness' (*à tout 'voir nu'*), to 'know' all – to be superficial through profundity (Apollo and Dionysus)" (NdC 278/PNP 12). How does all this throw light on Merleau-Ponty's approach to the problem of style, of the in-visibility of ideas/nature? My hunch is that an answer can be found in 1) the metamorphosis to which Merleau-Ponty submits the dream to see everything naked as it passes from Nietzsche's text to "The Intertwining – the Chiasm", and 2) certain ellipses in Merleau-Ponty's reproduction of Nietzsche's text.

We may note, first of all, the distance separating Merleau-Ponty's stance toward the dream of seeing everything naked from that of Nietzsche's, and here I shall quite unashamedly proceed on the hypothesis that Merleau-Ponty is in fact appropriating Nietzsche when he deals with this dream in "The Intertwining – the Chiasm". The things with which

²⁴⁴ Here is Carbone's reproduction: "We no longer believe that truth still remains truth, if one removes the veils that cover it, we have lived enough to believe in this. Today, for us, it is only a question of decorum to not want to see everything in all its nakedness, to not want to see everything in all its nakedness, to not want to interfere in everything, to understand everything and to 'know' nothing... Perhaps truth is a woman who has reasons for not letting us see her reasons" (Carbone, "Variations of the Sensible: The Truth of Ideas and Idea of Philosophy in the Later Merleau-Ponty", p. 243).

²⁴⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 8-9 [Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke In Drei Bänden*, vol. II (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1955), pp. 14-15]; cited in NdC 277-278/PNP 11-12.

Merleau-Ponty is concerned are “things we *could not* (*ne saurions*) dream of seeing ‘all naked’ (“*toutes nues*”).” In other words, he is concerned with a nakedness of things that is simply impossible, made unavailable in principle, by nature and more precisely by the nature of the look, which, willy-nilly, keeps on veiling, clothing, adorning things in its flesh even as it attempts to unveil them. But, on the other hand, it is precisely when something is made unavailable in principle that there is all the more reason to dream about it, because one will never run the risk of having the beauty of one’s dream corrupted by obtrusive realities. To say that we *could not* dream of seeing things all naked is therefore clearly not sufficient to dispel the allure exerted by the fantasy or dream of seeing things all naked, it quite to the contrary raises it to the *nth* power. Is this perhaps what Merleau-Ponty makes of Nietzsche’s comparison, which he quotes, of truth (or nature) to a “woman who has grounds for not showing her grounds”? It is a little too early to tell.

For the moment, let us recall that Merleau-Ponty speaks, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, of the “perceptual faith” (*la foi perceptive*), “common to the natural man and the philosopher” (VI 17/3).²⁴⁶ The presence of the world, of nature itself is given in the medium of a faith that cannot be converted into a proposition that might possibly be made to rest on surer grounds – it is itself the groundless ground of all grounds. In speaking of it, Merleau-Ponty seems to appeal to some form of religious sensibility. I mean this of course not in the sense that he recommends that we put our trust, in the manner of Descartes, in some divine guarantee of our knowledge, but in the sense of the structure of religious belief as the “substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”.²⁴⁷ Our “naïve certitude of the world, the anticipation of an intelligible world”, Merleau-Ponty suggests, “is as weak when it wishes to convert itself into theses as it is strong in practice” (VI 29/13). The appearance here of the anticipation of an intelligible world in conjunction with our naïve certitude, as if they amounted to the same thing, will not allow us to forget that, for Merleau-Ponty, the anticipation of an intelligible world is precisely the anticipation of an absolute unveiling of the world in front of the (theoretical) gaze. This desire for a total disrobing of things, we are now told, is as strong in practice as it is futile in principle. It seems, then, that the force of Merleau-Ponty’s evaluation of the dream of seeing things all naked as

²⁴⁶ In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty had already begun to invoke Husserl’s motif – Husserl, who typically claimed to have culled it from Hume – of faith or belief as the most basic and irreducible stratum of our rapport with the perceived world, reiterated and rationalized in the computation and analysis of the world wrought by science and reflection. See, for example, PhP 378, 470/336, 431.

²⁴⁷ <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Hebrews-Chapter-11/>.

(ultimately) an empty or futile dream must be understood against the background of his characterization of it, in terms of the perceptual faith, as a dream that is nevertheless instituted by nature, in so far as he considers it to be common to both the natural man and the philosopher. Here again, we see the stubborn movement of our experience toward “what could not in any event be present to us in the original and whose irremediable absence would thus count among our originating experiences”.

For Nietzsche, on the other hand – and here I am referring to what might be said concerning him on the basis of the text quoted by Merleau-Ponty – the dream of seeing everything all naked is neither impossible nor natural. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that, for him, the contemplation of things in their nakedness becomes impossible in proportion as one is repelled, horrified or disgusted at the intolerable, bowel-churning nature of things that reveals itself to, indeed overwhelms, engulfs and devours the one who persists in the will to truth, who pursues the truth “at any price”. One could say that, for Nietzsche, it is not possible to see everything naked because it is a revelation that, ultimately, no living being can survive; it is a denouement with the power of tearing any living being to pieces. This, at least, would be what Nietzsche hints at in one of the passages omitted by Merleau-Ponty as he quotes him, a passage in which he refers with disgust to “those Egyptian youths who make temples unsafe at night, embrace statues, and want by all means to unveil, uncover and put into a bright light whatever is kept concealed for good reasons”, whose paths he admits to having himself thread.²⁴⁸ As stated in the editors’ notes to the text, this passage is probably an invocation of the romantic appropriation (Goethe, Schiller, Novalis) of Plutarch’s report of a veiled statue of the goddess Isis, sited in a temple in the Egyptian city of Saïs, and which bore the inscription “I am everything that is, that was, and that will be, and no mortal has [ever] raised my veil”. As Pierre Hadot points out in the chapter on Nietzsche in *The Veil of Isis*, it is probably above all Friedrich Schiller’s poem “The Veiled Statue at Saïs” (*Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais*) to which Nietzsche makes allusion here.²⁴⁹ The poem portrays “a youth, impelled by a burning thirst for knowledge”, who travels to the Egyptian city of Saïs to explore the priesthood’s secret learning. Arriving there, he is told by one of the priesthood’s representatives that he would learn the truth were he to tear off the veil concealing a statue of the goddess Isis kept within the precincts of a lonely temple in the

²⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, p. 8 [Nietzsche, *Werke In Drei Bänden*, II, p. 14].

²⁴⁹ Hadot, *The Veil of Isis : An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, pp. 289-290.

vicinities, but that it is highly recommended that he refrain from doing so. The hierophant with whom the boy speaks assures him that he himself “never even felt the least desire” to cast off the statue’s veil, knowing full well as he does that “far heavier than thou thinkest is this thin gauze, my son. Light to thy hand it may be – but most weighty to thy conscience”. Disregarding the priest’s warnings, the boy secretly makes his way back to the temple at night so as to satisfy “his burning wish to solve the mystery”; disregarding as well, as he eagerly stands before the statue, the warning cried out by “a faithful voice within his trembling breast” saying “Wouldst thou profanely violate the All-Holy?”, he lifts off the veil of Isis, only to be found by the priests the next morning, “extended senseless, pale as death, before the pedestal of Isis’ statue”, utterly reluctant to report anything of what he had seen, sunken in a “deep sorrow” that “soon conducted him to an untimely grave”.²⁵⁰

Nietzsche’s allusion to Schiller’s poem makes it clear, then, that his disgust at the will to truth “at any price”, at the eagerness to see everything naked, and the concomitant recommendation that we “respect the *bashfulness* with which nature has hidden behind riddles and iridescent uncertainties” is because he now, having himself once been on the path of those Egyptian youths, knows *too well* the reasons for this bashfulness. He knows too well that the reasons behind nature’s bashfulness are ultimately *good* reasons: it is in order to guard the boundaries to the originating yet also devouring interior abysses of all things thanks to which which any living being is certain to get ripped apart in suffering, horror and disgust if it draws too close to them or persists too long in their vicinities. For Nietzsche, then, the will to truth “at any price” is nothing but the will to death. As such, from the point of view of life, there is nothing natural whatsoever about the will to truth, quite to the contrary: it is a sickness, a corruption and a degradation of life, a passionate “no” to life, germinating since the Socratic foreswearing of appearances for the sake of the true nature believed to be hiding behind them, and reaching full fruition in the nihilism gripping modern European thought, science and art.

Hence, for Nietzsche, nothing could be more foreign, more at odds with the natural well-being of the living than the disclosure of nature’s innermost secrets. For Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, there is in experience, in life, a natural movement toward, a natural craving for, a natural faith in what could not in any event be present to us in the original, that is, the

²⁵⁰ I have cited from this edition: Friedrich Schiller, "The Veiled Statue at Sais," *Project Gutenberg*, edited by, http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=114527&pageno=72, accessed on 16.01 2013

splendid nakedness of things, the insurmountable inaccessibility of which keeps life forever in search of it.

This brings us to the second point of tension in Merleau-Ponty's appropriation of Nietzsche's critique of the will to truth. It is located precisely in the ellipsis Merleau-Ponty inserts between Nietzsche's remark concerning truth as "a woman who has grounds for not showing her grounds" and the start of his praise of the Greeks. Let us observe that Merleau-Ponty reproduces roughly 1/3 of Nietzsche's text, which is no small quotation. Yet, the following, brief sentence consisting of eight words – forming as it does the transition from the consideration of the reasons for not coveting the nakedness of nature at any price to the consideration of the great advantage claimed by the Greek way of life, and that suggests some further characteristics of truth/nature *cum* woman – Merleau-Ponty could not find any place for: "Perhaps her name is – to speak Greek – *Baubo*?"²⁵¹ Nietzsche refers to this female figure from Greek literature in order to inquire further into the reasons why truth might be said to be a woman who has grounds for not showing her grounds: Baubo, a crone or sorceress who, upon Hades' abduction of Persephone, invited the grief-struck mother Demeter to her home for a meal and who, upon Demeter's sad refusal to take anything that was offered to her, made the goddess burst out in laughter by abruptly hoisting up her own skirt in exposure of her belly and genitals. With regard to Nietzsche's reference to Baubo here, Pierre Hadot seems perfectly justified in asking the question as to why Nietzsche, "speaking of the modesty of Nature and of Truth, designates Truth by the name of a woman famous for her immodest gesture".²⁵² I should like to consider his proposed answer to this question, as it will bring us closer to the point of tension in Merleau-Ponty's appropriation of Nietzsche.²⁵³

As Hadot points out, the appearance of Baubo here recalls to us the fact that Nietzsche often, when he is speaking of the ferociousness or cruelty of truth/nature, chooses to figure truth in terms of an *old* woman.²⁵⁴ There are several examples, mentioned by Hadot, of this in *The Gay Science* alone. One appears in the poem "In the South", included in the collection

²⁵¹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, p. 8 [Nietzsche, *Werke In Drei Bänden*, II, p. 15].

²⁵² Hadot, *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, p. 295.

²⁵³ For a different reading, see Kofman, "Baubô: Theological Perversions and Fetishism". Kofman particularly specifies that Baubô had the face of Dionysus drawn on her belly, and she uses this trait, largely omitted by Hadot, in her interpretation of the function of Baubo in Nietzsche's figuration of truth as woman.

²⁵⁴ I will be following Hadot's reading here, in acknowledgement of the fact that the figure of the old woman has several functions in Nietzsche's writings than what transpires in Hadot's reading – as the figure of the Socratic seeker of truth, to

of poems making up the “Appendix: Songs of Prince Vogelfrei”. The poem describes how the prince imagines that he flies like a bird of the North toward the South, that is, as Hadot puts it, “escaping from the fog of Romanticism to reach the light and heat of the Mediterranean world”,²⁵⁵ and in the last three lines Nietzsche makes the following concession: “Up north – I say it though I waver (*ich gestehs mit Zaudern*) – I loved a crone so old I shudder (*alt zum Schaudern*): this woman bore the name of ‘truth’”.²⁵⁶ Furthermore, in paragraph 377, entitled “We who are homeless”, truth also shows up in the guise of an old woman, and moreover as the most hideous of all old women, worse even than the old woman named “humanity”: “Humanity! Has there ever been a more hideous old woman (*scheußlicheres altes Weib*) amongst all old women? (Unless it were ‘the truth’: a question for philosophers)”.²⁵⁷ Hadot also cites in this connection the following from the posthumous fragments of Nietzsche: “Truth is ugly: we have art so that the truth may not kill us”.²⁵⁸ When we read these instances of Nietzsche’s characterization of truth as ugly and as the most “hideous” of old women back into the preface to *The Gay Science* through the locus of Baubo’s inscription there, it helps highlight part of the reasons Nietzsche adduces to recommend respect for the bashfulness with which nature has veiled itself in secrecy and iridescent uncertainties. As Hadot puts it:

[I]f the Truth has good reasons not to let her “reasons” be seen, it is because she is a horrible and frightening old sorceress who must be kept hidden under the veil of appearance and art. (...) According to the image to which Nietzsche held fast all his life, the world is nothing other than the eternal game of Dionysus, who pitilessly and ceaselessly creates and destroys a universe of forms and appearances.²⁵⁹

It is in the light of these remarks we may see the effect of Merleau-Ponty’s omission of Nietzsche’s brief reference to Baubo. Merleau-Ponty’s effacement, in his quotation at the opening of his lecture on Hegel, of the crone Baubo from Nietzsche’s figuration of truth as a woman who has grounds for not showing her grounds (which he nevertheless has retained) can be said to evoke *another* among Nietzsche’s figurations of truth as woman than the one

take but one example, a figure that earns Nietzsche’s contempt. Yet I think Hadot’s reading is sufficiently coherent in order to enable me to make the point I want to make with regard to Merleau-Ponty’s appropriation of Nietzsche.

²⁵⁵ Hadot, *The Veil of Isis : An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, pp. 295-296.

²⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, p. 252 [Nietzsche, *Werke In Drei Bänden*, II, p. 264].

²⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, p. 242, translation modified [Nietzsche, *Werke In Drei Bänden*, II, pp. 252-253].

²⁵⁸ Hadot, *The Veil of Isis : An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, p. 296.

²⁵⁹ Hadot, *The Veil of Isis : An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, p. 296.

that seems to be at issue in the preface to *The Gay Science*.²⁶⁰ I am thinking of the numerous instances – both in the main text of *The Gay Science* and elsewhere – in which Nietzsche invokes the figure of woman as a treacherous *seducer* in order to speak of the *untruth* of truth and, by extension, of traditional metaphysicians’ laughable and tasteless impotence in courting it/her. It might be that, when Nietzsche speaks of old women as “hideous” (*scheußlich*), he is referring in part to a vicious propensity (which he thereby ascribes to old women along with the slavish character), born of *ressentiment*, to set up and engage in treacherous schemes aimed at the destruction of individuals who have shown themselves too carelessly and freely affirmative. Nonetheless, his figuration of truth as a *seductive* woman, such as here in the opening lines of *Beyond Good and Evil*, seems rather to be invoking – and mockingly at that – the masculine fantasy of woman as the irresistibly charming, delicate, infatuating yet irremediably evasive, dissimulated, unfathomable, and distant object of male desire and conquest:

Suppose that truth is a woman – and why not? Aren’t there reasons for suspecting that all philosophers, to the extent that they have been dogmatists, have not really understood women? That the grotesque seriousness of their approach towards the truth and the clumsy advances they have made so far are unsuitable ways of pressing their suit with woman? What is certain is that she has spurned them – leaving dogmatism of all types standing sad and discouraged. *If it is even standing!*²⁶¹

Now, for Nietzsche, it seems, the sadness and despondence in which truth is here claimed to have left – ruthlessly, no doubt – its metaphysical suitors up to now is not so much of a tragic sort, as was the case with the Egyptian youth giving in to the temptation to unveil the statue of Isis, but rather of a sort that cannot but provoke laughter, and a Dionysian one at that.

What is it about truth/woman, then, that these dogmatic philosophers/suitors, in all of their “grotesque seriousness” and in the clumsiness of their advances, have failed to take into account? Nietzsche’s response to this is also what brings us to what, to all appearance at least, Merleau-Ponty makes – given his omission of the reference to Baubo – of Nietzsche’s recommendation, in the preface to *The Gay Science*, that we decently respect “the bashfulness with which nature has hidden behind riddles and iridescent uncertainties” and

²⁶⁰ At this point in my discussion of the woman-truth nexus in Nietzsche I leave the track of Hadot’s approach and move into the terrain of Derrida’s reading in *Spurs*, utilizing particularly his assemblage of quotes. The following passage from *Spurs* seems to me to be especially suggestive of Derrida’s approach to the operation of woman in Nietzsche: “There is no such thing as the essence of woman because woman averts, she is averted of herself. Out of the depths, endless and unfathomable, she engulfs and distorts all vestige of essentiality, of identity, of property. And the philosophical discourse, blinded, founders on these shoals and is hurled down these depthless depths to its ruin. There is no such thing as the truth of woman, but it is because of that abyssal divergence of the truth, because that untruth is ‘truth’. Woman is but one name for that untruth of truth” (Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles*, p. 51).

“stop bravely at the surface, the fold, the skin”. According to Nietzsche, the cultivation of some respect and taste for the riddles and iridescent uncertainties with which truth/nature constantly veils and adorns itself, the tactfulness by which one stops courageously at the level of appearance and surface effects means, in practice, that one must keep one’s *distance*. What the laughable dogmatic philosophers do not understand is that truth/nature exerts its most exacting effects of charm and seduction only from a distance. This is precisely the lesson Nietzsche thinks one may draw from the experience of women and which, I surmise, he would have recommended to the metaphysicians as a cure for their laughable dogmatism. If truth/nature is a woman, then one had better maintain a certain reserve of distance toward it/her, lest she loses her fascinating, aesthetic and artistic appeal in the turmoil of too much unpleasant (physiological) singularities and empty chatter:²⁶²

When a man stands in the midst of *his own* noise, in the midst of his own surf of projects and plans, he is also likely to see gliding past him silent, magical creatures whose happiness and seclusion he yearns for – *women*. He almost believes that his better self lives there amongst the women: in these quiet regions even the loudest surf turns into deathly silence, and life itself into a dream about life. Yet! Yet! My noble enthusiast, even on the most beautiful sailing ship there is so much sound and noise, and unfortunately so much small and petty noise! The magic and the most powerful effect of women is, to speak the language of the philosophers, action at a distance, *actio in distans*; but this requires first of all and above all – *distance*.²⁶³

It seems to me that, in his description of the “sensible ideas”, Merleau-Ponty assumes the place of the “noble enthusiast” to whom Nietzsche discloses the importance of keeping one’s distance to that which retains its alluring and inalienable power only in the medium of distance, only from behind the protection of a veil. In other words, it seems to me that Merleau-Ponty’s particular framing – by the omission of the reference to Baubo – of Nietzsche’s figuration of truth/nature as woman in the preface to *The Gay Science* leaves its mark on his description of the sensible ideas. When Merleau-Ponty, in his description of the sensible ideas, tacitly invokes the Nietzschean description of truth as a woman, it will not be in terms of the horrifying presence of an intolerable nature beneath alluring appearances, but

²⁶¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude To a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 3

²⁶² “When we love a woman, we easily come to hate nature because of all the repulsive natural functions to which every woman is subject; we prefer not to think about it at all, but when our soul for once brushes against these matters, it shrugs impatiently and, as just said, casts a contemptuous look at nature: we feel insulted; nature seems to intrude on our property and with the most profane hands at that. In cases like this one refuses to hear anything about physiology and decrees secretly to oneself, ‘I will hear nothing of the idea that the human being is anything other than soul and form!’ ‘The human being under the skin’ is an abomination and unthinkable to all lovers, a blasphemy against God and love” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

²⁶³ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, p. 71 [Nietzsche, *Werke In Drei Bänden*, II, p. 80].

rather in terms of the play-acting, self-dissimulating ways of women who, as Nietzsche also puts it in *The Gay Science*, “try to be ‘taken for something even when they are being taken (Daß sie “sich geben”, selbst noch, wenn sie – sich geben)”.²⁶⁴ Like Nietzsche’s actress, as we shall see, Merleau-Ponty’s sensible idea gives itself airs even as it gives itself, keeps dressing up even as it is being undressed.

In Transparency Behind the Sensible

As already indicated, the signature that figures openly in Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the sensible ideas is not Nietzsche, but Proust, hailed as the one who has gone the farthest in “fixing the relations between the visible and the invisible, in describing an idea that is not the contrary of the sensible, that is its lining and its depth” (VI 193/149). Yet, as we shall see, the terms of his appropriation of this description seem to have been culled just as much from Nietzsche’s critique of the will to truth and more precisely from truth’s figuration as a coquettish, seductive woman as from Proust himself.

At the centre of Merleau-Ponty’s appropriation of Proust’s notion of sensible ideas we find the description of “the little phrase” in the “Swann in Love” section of *The Way by Swann’s*, the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time*. In fact, the description of this recurring musical motif in a fictive sonata by the composer Vinteuil, and more precisely of Swann’s peculiar attachment to it, itself forms a recurring motif throughout this section.²⁶⁵ According to Merleau-Ponty’s paraphrase of Proust,²⁶⁶ during the time since Swann heard this phrase for the first time – on the occasion of which it had “opened his soul so much wider, the way

²⁶⁴ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, p. 226 [Nietzsche, *Werke In Drei Bänden*, II, p. 235].

²⁶⁵ This is how Proust describes the first occasion on which Swann was first struck with passion at a particular phrase, consisting of an arrangement of five notes, in the course of a performance of Vinteuil’s sonata for piano and violin at a soirée he attended: “[A]t a certain moment, without being able to distinguish an outline clearly, or give a name to what was pleasing him, suddenly charmed, he had tried to gather up and hold on to the phrase or harmony – he himself did not know which – that was passing by him and that had opened his soul so much wider, the way the smells of certain roses circulating in the damp evening air have the property of dilating the nostrils. (...) [The second time it returned] he had clearly distinguished one phrase rising for a few moments above the waves of sound. It had immediately proposed to him particular sensual pleasures which he had never imagined before hearing it, which he felt could be introduced to him by nothing else, and he had experienced for it something like an unfamiliar love. With a slow rhythm it led him first here, then there, then elsewhere, towards a happiness that was noble, unintelligible and precise. And then suddenly, having reached a point from he was preparing to follow it, after an instant’s pause, abruptly it changed direction, and with a new movement, quicker, sligher, more melancholy, incessant and sweet, it carried him off with it towards unfamiliar vistas. Then it disappeared. He wished passionately to see it a third time. And it did indeed reappear but without speaking to him more clearly, bringing him, indeed, a sensual pleasure that was less profound. But once he was back at home he heeded it, he was like a man into whose life a woman he has glimpsed for only a moment as she passed by has introduced the image of a new sort of beauty that increases the value of his own sensibility, without his even knowing if he will ever see this woman again who he loves already and of whom he knows nothing, not even her name” (Marcel Proust, *The Way by Swann’s*, trans. Lydia Davis (London: Penguin, 2002), pp. 211-213).

²⁶⁶ He is referring (cf. VI 193-197/149-152) particularly to Proust, *The Way by Swann’s*, pp. 350-355.

the smells of certain roses circulating in the damp evening air have the property of dilating the nostrils²⁶⁷ – it has come to personify or embody for him, in an utterly inexplicably fashion, the particular “dialectic of love” (VI 194/149) that haunts his relationship with Odette, whom he loves with such a ferocious and devouring jealousy. Merleau-Ponty particularly draws attention to Swann’s ultimately futile attempts at analysing and discovering the compositional principle that accounts for “the little phrase’s” power to convey to him that “impression of a frigid and withdrawn sweetness” with which he had been so taken the first time he heard it performed.²⁶⁸ Quite simply, Swann discovers that the little phrase resists analysis and intellectual comprehension: Whatever he rationally makes of the way the notes are combined, of the intervals between them, of the way two of them are constantly repeated, he is not getting at that “mysterious entity” that, “like perfume, like a caress, [had] encircled him, enveloped him”, but only its substitutes.²⁶⁹

Now, according to Merleau-Ponty, what Swann learns from this experience is a lesson of metaphysical proportions, one which would also seem to suit Merleau-Ponty’s intent to think about the resistant alterity of nature. Yet it seems more than anything else to be the lesson Merleau-Ponty draws from Nietzsche’s hypothesis that truth might be a woman who has grounds for not showing her grounds and whose discrete tricks of charm and seduction should be respected and indeed affirmed for what they are. Although we are concerned here with a notion – that of “sensible idea” – that, as far as Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Proust is concerned, finds its emblematic instance in the domain of music, his own appropriation of it is accomplished almost entirely in the register of disguises, masks, veils, screens and other devices; devices, notably, that may be used to obstruct and thereby entice the still apparently natural desire to see things all naked, or at least inspire the natural belief in their splendid nudity and integrity beneath the show of appearances. I quote Merleau-Ponty in full on this point:

²⁶⁷ Proust, *The Way by Swann’s*, p. 211.

²⁶⁸ Here is the passage Merleau-Ponty is commenting upon: “These charms of an intimate sadness – these were what [the little phrase] sought to intimate, to recreate, and their very essence, even though it is to be incommunicable and to seem frivolous to everyone but the one who is experiencing them, had been captured by the little phrase and made visible. (...) Doubtless the form in which it codified them could not be resolved into reasoned arguments. (...) When, after the Verdurin evening, he had had the little phrase played over for him, and had sought to disentangle how it was that, like a perfume, like a caress, it encircled him, enveloped him, he had realized that it was to the closeness of the intervals between the five notes that composed it, and the to the constant repetition of two of them, that was due this impression of a frigid and withdrawn sweetness; but in reality he knew that he was reasoning this way not about the phrase itself but about simple values substituted, for his mind’s convenience, for the mysterious entity he had perceived, before knowing the Verdurins, at that party where he had first heard the sonata played” (Proust, *The Way by Swann’s*, p. 351).

²⁶⁹ Proust, *The Way by Swann’s*, p. 351.

It is as though the secrecy wherein they [i.e., the sensible ideas – C.H.] lie and whence the literary expression draws them were their proper mode of existence. For these truths are not only hidden like a physical reality which we have not been able to discover, invisible in fact but which we will one day be able to see facing us, which others, better situated, could already see, provided that the screen that masks it is lifted. Here, on the contrary, there is no vision without the screen: the ideas we are speaking of would not be better known to us if we had no body and no sensibility; it is then that they would be inaccessible to us. The “little phrase”, the notion of the light, are not exhausted by their manifestations, any more than is an “idea of the intelligence”; they could not be given to us *as ideas* except in a carnal experience. It is not only that we would find in that carnal experience the *occasion* to think them; it is that they owe their authority, their fascinating, indestructible power, precisely to the fact that they are in transparency behind the sensible, or in its heart. Each time we want to get at it [i.e., the idea – C.L.] immediately, or lay hands on it, or circumscribe it, or see it unveiled, we do in fact feel that the attempt is misconceived, that it retreats in the measure that we approach (VI 194/149-150).

If it were not the universe of ideas and, correlatively, of nature that were in question, one might have believed that Merleau-Ponty is here struggling to articulate the function of fantasy in social relations generally and in the one between male and female in particular, at the same time as he remains in the grip of this very function. If the terms “vision” and “knowledge” in the quote above are substituted with “enjoyment” – a substitution, moreover, that Merleau-Ponty also encourages – the operation of the screen described by Merleau-Ponty would closely resemble that of social fantasy: it at once ensures that interaction among subjects takes place in an utterly imaginary universe while also allowing both real effects (of enjoyment) to take place. As was in the process of being theorized by the psychoanalysis that was contemporaneous with Merleau-Ponty and with which he was familiar and on which he drew, as is well known, social interaction is based on both imaginary and symbolic misrecognition among subjects, on the intervention of both phantasm and signifier, and it is only on condition of this intervention – of the screen, of the veil – that the relation to enjoyment (i.e., to the real) can be sustained.²⁷⁰ It is as if Merleau-Ponty were aiming to turn the screw of the standard transcendental notion that the real is only *accessible* through the mediation of the structures of finite experience in order to say instead that the real is an *effect* of its own simulacra, a spectre evoked by them, and an alluring one at that: the ideas “owe

²⁷⁰ As Slavoj Žižek points out with regard to the Nazi fantasy of “the Jew” and the male fantasy of the “Woman-Thing”: “[W]e should abandon the standard metaphors of the Real as the terrifying Thing that is impossible to confront face to face, as the ultimate Real conceal beneath layers of imaginary and/or symbolic Veils: the very idea that, beneath the deceptive appearances, there lies hidden some ultimate Real Thing too horrible for us to look at directly is the ultimate appearance – this Real Thing is a fantasmatic spectre whose presence guarantees the consistency of our symbolic edifice, thus enabling us to avoid confronting its constitutive inconsistency (‘antagonism’). Take Nazi ideology: the Jew as its Real is a spectre evoked in order to conceal social antagonism – that is, the figure of the Jew enables us to perceive social totality as an organic Whole. And does not the same go for the figure of Woman-Thing inaccessible to the male grasp? Is she also

their authority, their fascinating, indestructible power” – that is, their inalienable reality – “precisely to the fact that they are in transparency behind the sensible, or in its heart”. It is as we hear the echo here of Nietzsche’s suggestion (quoted above) that “the magic and the most powerful effect of women is...*action at a distance*”, requiring first of all – distance, dissimulation, veils, conceit etc.

Yet it may be questioned whether Merleau-Ponty is really content to stop bravely at the surface, at a certain distance, and whether he is not, after all, probing some “genuine” depth beneath this surface, a depth in which is kept the secret that the intervention of the surface, of the veil, constantly betrays to him by constantly concealing it. In the “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” essay, we recall, the woman passing by is in all earnestness believed to give herself, to give away her femininity, genuinely and *entirely*, in the minutest of her surface effects – in her gait, even in the “simple click of her heel on the ground” – because I, M. Merleau-Ponty, am incarnate (S 87/IL 91). In no unrelated fashion, the sensible ideas, which are not seen, not heard, not even comprehended as such, are nevertheless seen, heard and comprehended on account of their *recognizable, special, unique* ways of veiling themselves in sensible appearances, hence on account of some features which would henceforth seem to be proper to them, to express something genuine about them:

We do not see, do not hear the ideas, and not even with the mind’s eye or with the third ear: *and yet* they are, behind the sounds or between them, behind the lights or between them, recognizable through their always special, always unique manner of entrenching themselves behind them (VI 195/151, my emphasis).

Nevertheless, despite the no doubt irrecusably recognizable way of putting on a display, of entrenching oneself behind appearances, equally exhibited by passing-by women, sensible ideas and nature, it remains theoretically possible that the passing-by woman, for her part, gives herself airs by simply passing by, clicking away as she does, in the distance, that “she” is merely putting up some feminine display in order to amuse or seduce “her” onlookers. In fact it remains perfectly conceivable that the sensual display of femininity that Merleau-Ponty witnesses from a distance, through the screen of his own male, heterosexual fantasies, indeed, through that “whole vegetation of possible phantasms” which the “fragile act” of the look is supposed to hold in check (VI 24/9) is nothing but some delicately produced drag show. On the surface of it, there is nothing in Merleau-Ponty’s concept of style that could exclude this possibility from the outset. Hence a series of questions might legitimately be

not the ultimate Spectre enabling men to avoid the constitutive deadlock of the sexual relationship?” (Slavoj Žizek,

raised concerning both this feminine figure clicking away in the distance and the onlooker who has no doubts concerning the genuineness of its femininity. How could Merleau-Ponty possibly claim to *know* (since he confidently persists in speaking of *her*) that he is here concerned with a woman in flesh and blood and not some male transvestite, unless he has already brought to bear on this scene precisely that whole vegetation of (male, heterosexual) phantasms, unless he has allowed those “hidden powers” (VI 24/9) to completely overpower the fragile act of the look? How could the simple fact of incarnation – that is, the fact that I, M. Merleau-Ponty, “am incarnate” (S 87/IL 91) – suffice as basis for the bold assumption that it is a genuine woman who clicks away in the distance? Can I, M. Merleau-Ponty, know this without support from some higher mental faculty – imagination, to begin with – any more than Descartes allowed himself the luxury of excluding from the outset the possibility that the people passing to and fro on the street below his window might just be moving automata adorned with clothes and hats, from which he concluded that it takes the intervention of my power of judgment to assure their human animation?²⁷¹

But Merleau-Ponty does not earnestly consider such questions and possibilities, any more than he earnestly considers the possibility that the sensible ideas or nature, in all its/their secrecy, might just be pretending to guard some secret under its/their multiple veils in order to amuse and seduce the phenomenologist, in the way that Nietzsche’s fragment “I have forgotten my umbrella”, as Derrida proposes, is destined to provoke and disconcert any hermeneut:

It is quite possible that that unpublished piece, precisely because it is readable as a piece of writing, should remain forever secret. But not because it withholds some secret. Its secret is rather the possibility that indeed it might have no secret, that it might only be pretending to be simulating some hidden truth within its folds. (...) The hermeneut cannot but be provoked and disconcerted by its play.²⁷²

To the extent that Merleau-Ponty does not want to consider the possibility that nature/sensible idea/women passing by may after all only be pretending to protect some ineffable secret behind their veils, and that this may be the reason they have for not showing their reasons – a possibility that is even indicated in his suggestion that there is no vision without the screen – does he not, after all, risk resembling those “dogmatic philosophers”

Welcome To the Desert of the Real!: Five Essays on 11 September and Related Dates (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 31-32).

²⁷¹ “But then were I perchance to look out my window and observe men crossing the square, I would ordinarily say I see men themselves just as I say I see the wax. But what do I see aside from hats and clothes, which could conceal automata? Yet I judge them to be men. Thus what I thought I had seen with my eyes, I actually grasped solely with the faculty of judgment, which is in my mind” (René Descartes, *Meditations, Objections, and Replies*, trans. Roger Ariew and Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub., 2006), pp. 17-18).

ridiculed by Nietzsche, enthralled by a woman-truth who “retreats in the measure we approach” (VI 194/150)?

At any rate, it might be determined – by way of conclusion – that, for Merleau-Ponty, there is nothing ridiculous or laughable about this; rather, it has for him a deeply ontological significance. The impotence that precludes us ultimately from having our way with the sensible idea/nature/woman, the force of resistance by which it/she slips from our possession the very moment we thought we possessed it/her, by which it/she is snatched from our grasp and disappears from view in the last moment, in the very moment it/she was about to take off its/her last veil and surrender it/herself to our grasp – all this is for Merleau-Ponty nothing short of “the Being of this being” (VI 196/151).

²⁷² Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, p. 133.

Chapter 5: Pregnant Nature

The Feminine at Work in Merleau-Ponty's Approach to the Immemoriality of Nature

In this chapter, I return to the issue of the immemoriality of nature that forms the second trajectory of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature as I have laid this out in the first part of the present thesis. From chapter 2, we recall that, in Merleau-Ponty, nature's immemoriality is twofold: it is the immemoriality attested by the alterity of the thing and the natural world as given in perception, and it is the immemoriality announced in the attempt on the part of reflection to recuperate the unreflective, anonymous existence of the body as "natural subject" of perception and action. In what follows I will investigate how Merleau-Ponty's approach to this issue is mediated, at crucial junctures, by setting to work a string of motifs that connote maternity in various ways and to various degrees explicitness.

In the first section, I shall focus in particular on the place and function of the terms *prégnance/prégnant(e)* in Merleau-Ponty's approach to the issue of the immemoriality of the thing and the natural world as given in perception. Although these terms are not used in current French to denote pregnancy in the obstetric sense, I shall argue that Merleau-Ponty's way of using them philosophically reactivates in them their etymological roots in the Latin *praegnans*, the sense of which has survived in the current English use of "pregnancy". I shall argue that Merleau-Ponty's reactivation of the originally maternal connotations of *prégnance/prégnant(e)* constitutes a decisive operation in his attempt to come to terms with the temporal dimensions of meaning-constitution endemic to nature as given in perception. In the next two sections, I investigate the labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty's approach to the issue of the immemorial past of nature as contracted into the anonymous depths of subjectivity. In the first of these sections I focus in particular on the place and function of the motif of birth as "transcendental event" in this approach, before I turn to the motif of intra-uterine life in order to make sense of Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that nothing is perceived in, or remembered from, intra-uterine life while it is all the same the "sketch of a natural self and a natural time". Crucial to this latter investigation will be a careful study of Luce Irigaray's reading of Merleau-Ponty's "The Intertwining – the Chiasm" in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*.

Nature as “Being by Pregnancy”

As mentioned in my Introduction, we find in Merleau-Ponty’s work, from early to late texts, a widespread philosophical use of the term(s) *prégnant(e)/prégnance* (see, for example, PhP 45, 189, 282, 344/23, 154, 244, 304; PriP 42/89; PM 165/118; S 295/181; VI 153, 162, 177, 193, 265/115, 123, 136, 149, 216). To be sure, its recurrence in his texts is a visible trace of the impact exerted by both *Gestalt* psychology and Ernst Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* on the development of Merleau-Ponty’s thought.²⁷³ However, more important for my concern in this thesis than such German connections, is that this very term, whether appearing in the adjectival or nominal mode, seems to mobilize and orchestrate his reflections on diverse topics ranging from the genesis of meaning in nature as perceived, the

²⁷³ The *Gestalt* connection is given in the *Gestalt* theorists’ notion of “the law of *Prägnanz*”, often used interchangeably with “the law of good form”. The “general law of ‘pregnancy’” (*la loi générale de ‘prégnance’*) was explicitly cited by Merleau-Ponty in his research proposal submitted to the French Research Council in 1934 (cf. PriP 27/TD 80), while “good form” appears in PhP 40/17. The “law of *Prägnanz*” is advanced as a key term of *Gestalt* psychology in Koffka, *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, p. 110, and Koffka explains it thus: “Psychological organization will always be as ‘good’ as the prevailing conditions allow. In this definition the term ‘good’ is undefined. It embraces such properties as regularity, symmetry, simplicity and others”. David Katz adds the features of inclusiveness, unity, harmony, and conciseness as further specification of what is to be understood by *Prägnanz* (cf. David Katz, *Gestalt Psychology: Its Nature and Significance*, trans. Robert Tyson (London: Methuen & Co., 1951), p. 40). The significance for Merleau-Ponty’s thought of *Gestalt* psychology and its idea of perceptual structure as spontaneously or autochthonously organized is well-known and well-debated in the reception of his work, and is generally held to be his primary source alongside Husserlian phenomenology in the early phase of his work. Merleau-Ponty’s notion of a level of optimum balance and “best hold” that structures the unfolding of perception from within it appears at the very least to be crucially indebted to the *Gestaltists*’ notion of perceptual and psychological *Prägnanz*. M. C. Dillon is the commentator who has arguably offered the most systematic treatments of the *Gestalt* connection in Merleau-Ponty (see M. C. Dillon, “Gestalt Theory and Merleau-Ponty’s Concept of Intentionality”, *Man and World* 4 (1971); Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, pp. 58-81. Dillon sees the *Gestalt* theoretical idea of autochthonous organization of sensory fields as a major key to the understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s thought, in both its early and its late phases.

Merleau-Ponty’s explicit references to Cassirer’s notion of “symbolical pregnancy of form in content” are the following: PhP 344, 160 n. 2/304, 521-522 n. 67. Cassirer develops this notion in the 3rd volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, where he defines it thus: “By symbolic pregnancy we mean the way in which a perception as a sensory experience contains at the same time a certain non-intuitive meaning which it immediately and concretely represents” (Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen, Dritter Teil: Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2010), p. 231 [Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, vol. 3: The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 202]). My searches online yielded four sources – in French, Spanish and German respectively – that all submit the Merleau-Ponty-Cassirer nexus to some scrutiny, but the scarcity of sources on this subject indicates that it is still a more or less uncharted territory in Merleau-Ponty scholarship. A master’s thesis opens with the question: “Can it be that Merleau-Ponty has pursued Cassirer’s work in order to deepen the concept of the symbolic function by bringing to light its concrete roots?” (Françoise Charron, *Analyse comparative et critique de concept de fonction symbolique chez Maurice Merleau-Ponty Ernst Cassirer* Département de philosophie, L’université d’Ottawa, Ontario, 1994), p. 4). A second source raises the question concerning the pertinence to the reading of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* of a distinction drawn by Cassirer between perception in a strict sense and in a more extensive sense, i.e., between expressive perception ultimately linked to myth on the one hand, and perception as mediated by language on the other (cf. G. Graciela Ralon, “Una interpretación de la percepción: Cassirer – Merleau-Ponty”, *Tópicos*, no. 22 (2002)). Further, Olivier Feron addresses the scarcity of scholarly treatment of the inspiration Merleau-Ponty drew for his phenomenology of perception from Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms, in an attempt also to revive a potential for Merleau-Ponty’s project that was left unexplored in his approach to Cassirer (cf. O. Olivier Feron, “Mein Leib als ‘Integral der Erfahrung’? Das Vorprädikative bei Merleau-Ponty und das Ausdrucksphanomen bei Cassirer”, *Zeitschrift fuer Kulturphilosophie* 3, no. 2 (2009)). Finally, Christian Bermes offers a discussion of Cassirer’s, Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s respective contributions to a philosophical elaboration of the concept of “field” as found in modern science, but he doesn’t address the question of Cassirer’s impact on Merleau-Ponty (cf. Christian Bermes, “Philosophische Feldforschung: Der Feldbegriff bei Cassirer, Husserl und Merleau-Ponty,” in *Formfelder: Genealogien von Ordnung*, ed. Dirk Rustemeyer (Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann GmbH, 2006)).

synergic relation among the senses, to the relation of genesis between perception and language, the emergence of an intersubjective world, the precession of thought in language etc. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, as was also mentioned in my Introduction, he is still using the term as a way to characterize, among other things, the flesh in its aspect as the flesh of the world:

The flesh of the world is not self-sensing (*se sentir*) as is my flesh - - it is sensible and not sentient – I call it flesh, nonetheless...in order to say that it is a *pregnancy* (*prégnance*) of possibles, *Weltmöglichkeit*...that it is therefore absolutely not an object, that the *blosse Sache* mode of being is but a partial and second expression of it (VI 298-299/250).

To the extent that, as I argued in chapter 3, what Merleau-Ponty says of the flesh (and especially, perhaps, of the flesh of the world) must be understood within the context of his pursuit of a philosophy of nature, it is clear that, to Merleau-Ponty's mind, this very word *prégnance* was indeed rich with resources for his philosophical approach to the problem of nature. Yet the question is, of course, what kind of philosophical work, more exactly, does it perform in his philosophy of nature, and what kind of connotative resources, more exactly, are invested in this work.

In this section I shall advance and defend two hypotheses in the way of answering this question, as I believe that the answer might pertain to my overall project of investigating the labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature. The first hypothesis is, as anticipated in my Introduction, that the connotative resources that are invested in Merleau-Ponty's philosophical use of the term(s) *prégnant(e)/prégnance* are, more precisely, the maternal body. The second hypothesis is that the philosophical or conceptual work done by this motif is, among other things, an intuitive presentation of the philosophically troubling dimension of nature's immemoriality, as such as this dimension was sketched in chapter 2 of the present thesis. My strategy with respect to both, ultimately interconnected, hypotheses is to investigate the term's occurrence across a variety of contexts.

With regard to the first hypothesis, I should point out at once that none of the commentators I know of who have remarked, however briefly, however indirectly, on the connotative dimensions of *prégnant(e)/prégnance* in Merleau-Ponty's usage of it have betrayed any hesitation in connecting it more or less immediately to maternity. Jerry H. Gill, who, in his book *Merleau-Ponty and Metaphor*, is concerned to distribute the lexicon of Merleau-Ponty's imagery into various subclasses, understands Merleau-Ponty's *prégnance* as

a “biological metaphor”²⁷⁴ or counts it among his “host of organic metaphors”,²⁷⁵ seeing in Merleau-Ponty’s particular use of it the evocation of “the mystery of biological generation”.²⁷⁶ Anders Nordlander counts, in like fashion, Merleau-Ponty’s *prégnance/prégnant(e)* among the latter’s “most cherished organic metaphors”,²⁷⁷ and he reads Merleau-Ponty’s use of it as the suggestion of something that is “just waiting to give birth”, even as posing the question as to how to be a good midwife.²⁷⁸ The question of midwifery is equally posed yet immediately discarded as Rudi Visker introduces the question as to how *paternity* is to be located within the scheme outlined by Merleau-Ponty’s particular use of *prégnance/prégnant(e)*, thus doubly and indirectly suggesting that he takes this term in the maternal sense. It is a question that imposes itself, according to Visker, when we are to work out the “ontological status of copulation” implied in Merleau-Ponty’s figuration of perception – as discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis – as an *accouplement* of our body with things.²⁷⁹ Citing a passage from *Phenomenology of Perception* in which *prégnant(e)* finds itself modified by the temporal adverb *déjà* – a constellation which will also greatly concern me later on – Visker asks: “[H]ow, if not as a simple midwife, are we to conceive of a father who, upon entering the stage, is confronted with ‘a whole *already* pregnant with an irreducible meaning’?”, and speaks in the same connection of “immaculate conception”.²⁸⁰ Finally, Diana Coole adduces the recurrence of *prégnance/prégnant(e)* throughout Merleau-Ponty’s corpus as evidence that he “certainly used the language of fertility and fecundity from the start”, but she adds to the mystery of biological generation in Merleau-Ponty when she suggests, like Visker, that we are here dealing with “an immaculate conception, a pregnancy without impregnation”.²⁸¹

While I will return below to many of the issues raised by these commentators, it remains, however, as pointed out in my Introduction, that *prégnant(e)/prégnance* are not the words used in current French to refer to pregnancy and the state of being pregnant in the

²⁷⁴ Gill, *Merleau-Ponty and Metaphor*, p. 6

²⁷⁵ Gill, *Merleau-Ponty and Metaphor*, p. 67.

²⁷⁶ Gill, *Merleau-Ponty and Metaphor*, p. 6.

²⁷⁷ Andreas Nordlander, *Figuring Flesh in Creation: Merleau-Ponty in Conversation With Philosophical Theology* (Doctoral Thesis, Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, Lund University, Lund, 2011), p. 203

²⁷⁸ Nordlander, *Figuring Flesh in Creation: Merleau-Ponty in Conversation With Philosophical Theology*, p. 125.

²⁷⁹ Cf. Rudi Visker, "Raw Being and Violent Discourse: Foucault, Merleau-Ponty and the (Dis-)Order of Things," in *Merleau-Ponty in Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Patrick Burke and Jan Van der Veken (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993), p. 115.

²⁸⁰ Visker, "Raw Being and Violent Discourse: Foucault, Merleau-Ponty and the (Dis-)Order of Things", p. 115. Visker cites a passage from *PhP* 45/23, emphasizing the word “already”.

²⁸¹ Diana H. Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics After Anti-Humanism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), p. 214.

obstetrical sense, for which are used instead *grossesse* and *enceinte* respectively. Hence, since the present project is to such an extent characterized by a close textual approach to Merleau-Ponty's work as it is, I cannot make things too easy for myself; it is necessary to assemble textual and related types of evidence in favour of my guiding assumption concerning maternal connotations, beginning with some etymological considerations.

Pregnancy, Prägnanz, Prénance, Praegnans: Etymological Matters

Considered as part of current French vocabulary and idiom, the words *prénance* and *prégnant* do not, then, have anything in particular to do with pregnancy in the obstetrical sense. Rather, like the German *Prägnanz* and *prägnant* as well as their cognates in the Scandinavian languages, they function in a figurative sense only, as a way to speak of the quality of being full of or heavy with something, primarily in the sense of being heavily charged with significance or meaning, a striking manifestation of meaningfulness. Conversely, the words used to denote “pregnancy” and “pregnant” respectively in the obstetric sense are *grossesse* (lit. “largeness”) and *enceinte* (lit. “enclosed”). While, as already noted, the terms *prénance* and *prégnant(e)* abound in Merleau-Ponty's prose, to the best of my knowledge Merleau-Ponty has hardly ever used either of the former terms in a philosophical context in any of his texts.²⁸²

Yet, like their German and Scandinavian parallels, *prénance* and *prégnant* are, as *Le petit Robert* confirms, etymologically related to the Latin *praegnans*.²⁸³ *Oxford Latin Dictionary*²⁸⁴ (hereafter OLD) states that, in Latin, *praegnans* is an adjective that, predicated of a female individual, means “pregnant with child”, while also being used to refer to vegetative sprouting and swelling from which flowers and fruits issue. Already in Latin, the term was used figuratively to express the state or quality of being laden or swelling with something. *Praegnans* is a composite of the prefix *prae-*, meaning a (spatial) position of being in front of, ahead of, or at the end, or else temporal precedence, and *natus*, “son” (singular) or “children” (plural), while also referring more generally to offspring of animals.

²⁸² One exception is found in the third *Nature* course, when he writes that “the soul or consciousness of the mother is not pregnant (*enceinte*) with the soul or consciousness of the child” (N 271/209). Compare the passage a little further down, where the thematic context is identical to the one just cited, and where he uses *prénance* to express a more or less equivalent position: “The soul of the child is not issued from the soul of the mother; there is no pregnancy (*prénance*) of souls. It is a body that produces pregnancy and that moves to perceive when the actions of the world attain it” (N 280/217-218; see also N 284/222).

²⁸³ J. Rey-Debove, H. Cottez, and A. Rey, eds., *Le Petit Robert: Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française* (Paris: Le Robert, 1968), p. 1375.

Natus is in its turn a participle of the verb *nascor*, having a wide range of meanings, all relating (depending on the temporal mode) to the process or activity of bringing something to existence, the process of being brought to existence, or the state of having been brought to existence. Hence, as Merleau-Ponty himself also points out apropos of the Latin origins of the word “nature” at the outset of the first *Nature* course (cf. N 19/3), *nascor* can mean to be born or to have been born or to live in the biological sense. The OLD further specifies that, in Latin, the verb *nascor* can also be used figuratively to denote processes and conditions of generation in the inanimate world, as well as to refer to the emergence of abstract and non-material things (i.e., states, communities, constitutions, institutions). Further still, OLD also emphasizes in relation to *nascor* that it marks the difference between spontaneous (i.e., natural) production and production imposed by initiative. Finally, the verb *nascor* is related to the verb *gigno* (ultimately of the Greek *gignomai*), which can denote the act of bringing into being or creation in either a divine, biological (involving sexual union) or more generally natural sense (e.g., a thing of which one says *gigno* is “producing from itself”).²⁸⁵ We can thus see that although a native French speaker would never say of a pregnant female that she is *prégnante*, the very term *prégnant* carries an etymological past in which it was overdetermined by obstetrical and generative connotations, a past it shares, as we have seen, with the very word “nature”.

While Merleau-Ponty, as we have seen, explicitly connects, at the opening of the first *Nature* course, the word “nature” with *nascor* as its Latin root, he never provides any similarly explicit consideration of the etymological roots of the word *prégnance* (or its adjectival cognate). But there is one occasion on which he obliquely gestures toward those roots. This occurs in a working note to *The Visible and the Invisible*, in which he charges “the psychologists” – by which he most probably means the *Gestalt* psychologists and the developments following in their wake – with *forgetting* what in his view is the primary (i.e., not secondary) meaning of “pregnancy”: “*Pregnancy (prégnance)*: the psychologists forget that this means a power to break forth, productivity (*praegnans futuri*),²⁸⁶ fecundity - - Secondly: it means ‘typicality’” (VI 258/208). One might have objected to Merleau-Ponty that he is too sweeping in his critique of “the psychologists”. According to Barry Smith, in

²⁸⁴ See the entries on *praegnans*, *prae*-, *nascor* and *gigno* in *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 2 vols. (Oxford 1968).

²⁸⁵ Heartfelt thanks go to Latin scholar Lars Morten Gram at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, for his patient help and guidance in sorting out the etymological details of the Latin word *praegnans*.

²⁸⁶ This is a term from Leibniz, which Cassirer invokes in the course the exposition of his notion of “symbolical pregnancy” in *The Philosophy of Symbolical Forms*. (REF)

the *Gestalt* tradition (more precisely, in the work of Edwin Rausch), the term *Prägnanz* took on a diversity of different meanings, among which we find that of diversity itself, which, he suggests, evokes the English sense of “pregnancy” as (among other things) fecundity. Ironically, though, Smith numbers this sense of *Prägnanz* as “second” after that of “simplicity”:

Secondly there is the dimension of [+/- diversity], a matter of the fullness or numerical stock [*Bestand*], of the multifariousness or manifoldness of a structure. This is the English sense of “pregnant”, a matter of a structure’s having a richness of elements, its being fruitful, heavy, significant, weighty, full of something.²⁸⁷

At any rate, it seems to me that, in Merleau-Ponty’s opposition between a primordial and a secondary meaning (only the latter of which is considered by “the psychologists”) of *prégnance*, we hear the echo of the opposition between the natural and the artificial that governs Merleau-Ponty’s critique of classical (i.e., post-Cartesian), ultimately sterile, conceptions of nature (see chapter 3 in the present thesis).

Although someone like Barry Smith might have taken issue with Merleau-Ponty’s perhaps too sweeping diagnosis of a forgetting of the maternally connoted sense of *prégnance* (or *Prägnanz*) on the part of *Gestalt* psychologists, it seems to me that the stakes in Merleau-Ponty’s appropriation of the term, and its relation to his general concern with the problem of natural vs. artificial production, are amplified in an encyclopedic article on *Gestalt* psychology written by T. R. Miles. In the course of the text, the author pauses at what he takes to be the relevant etymological connections pertaining to the term *Prägnanz* as used by *Gestalt* theorists:

The word *Prägnanz* is of course ultimately connected with the Latin *impregnare*. The suggestion here, however, is not that of something being fertilized or made pregnant but rather that of something being stamped or pressed into a particular shape (compare the word *prägen*, which is used primarily to refer to the minting of coins). Certain types of configurations, one might say, are particularly impressive; they carry a certain stamp or they strike us in particular ways.²⁸⁸

What, in relation to my present concern, is striking about Miles’ account here is, first, that he resolutely bends the meaning of *Prägnanz* in the direction that Merleau-Ponty considers to be its secondary meaning (i.e., as typicality). Further, and even more striking, is that this prioritization is accomplished through a no less resolute prioritization of an image evoking technological production (i.e., the minting of coins) over one which in Merleau-Ponty’s time

²⁸⁷ Barry Smith, “Gestalt Theory: an Essay in Philosophy,” in *Foundations of Gestalt Theory*, ed. Barry Smith (München: Philosophia Verlag, 1988), p. 65.

²⁸⁸ T. R. Miles. “Gestalt Theory.” In: Paul Edwards (ed), *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. New York: Macmillan, 1967

was still a mode of natural mode of production (i.e., the conceiving and gestation of a child). In so doing, he perpetuates what Merleau-Ponty took to be the error that inaugurates the classical (i.e., Cartesian) conception of natural production, that is, as the fabrication of an inert product according to a form or a law that are constituted or decided upon prior to the event of production, thus leaving the materiality and the facticity of nature in the role of a docile recipient of the action and order of forms and laws subsisting independently of it.

Before I proceed to look at the temporal aspects pertaining to Merleau-Ponty's use of *prégnance/prégnant(e)*, I would like to consider another of its many instantiations in Merleau-Ponty's texts. It is a passage that is most commonly referred to when it is a matter of explicating Merleau-Ponty's indebtedness to, and re-writing of, *Gestalt* theory. It is just as striking, however, for the way it brings into play Merleau-Ponty's opposition – on which he would lay stress in an explicit fashion only much later (in the *Nature* lectures) – between artificial and natural production (of meaning), and thus how it probes the maternal dimension reverberating in the word *prégnante*:

We cannot apply the classical distinction of form and matter to perception, nor can we conceive the perceiving subject as a consciousness which “interprets”, “deciphers”, or “orders” a sensible matter whose ideal law it would possess. Matter is “pregnant” (*prégnante*) with its form which is to say that...the relation [of the perceiving subject and world] is somehow organic (PriP 41-42/89).

To begin with, what we get from these lines is an open assault on the hylemorphism that, to Merleau-Ponty's mind, had come to entrench itself in what had become the standard terms in which the problem of the genesis of meaning in the perceived world was addressed in his time, even in certain strands of Husserlian phenomenology (cf. PhP 189 n. 1/527 n. 12). This impression is strengthened when we recall that, in the “Cogito” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty rallies against the *hylē/morphē*-distinction in terms of which Husserl had developed his theory of intentionality in the first volume of his *Ideas*. There, Husserl had suggested that we can speak of a “sensuous ὕλη” and an “intentionive μορφή”, intending thereby to separate absolutely between the “*formless stuffs* and *stuffless forms*” of intentional experience.²⁸⁹ Among the two “strata” of the intentional process, it would seem that only that of the stuffless forms is allowed to contribute to the intentional, meaningful character of experience, insofar as it is that which “animates” or “*bestows sense*” on a sensuously given matter that would henceforth seem to have nothing to contribute to the

production of meaning.²⁹⁰ Now, against such a way of thinking, although without mentioning Husserl's name yet unquestionably having the latter in mind, Merleau-Ponty retorts: "There is no *hylē* and there is no sensation without communication with other sensations...and *for this very reason*, there is no *morphē* and no apprehension or apperception that would be charged with giving a sense to an insignificant matter" (PhP 466/427).

However, in the passage from "The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences" quoted above, Merleau-Ponty proposes a different strategy for undermining hylemorphism than simply dispensing with the very notions of form and matter altogether. He does not say we must dispense with any talk of matter and form whatsoever, but that we must renounce the *classical* – presumably, Aristotelian – way of relating form to matter that still held sway in his contemporaries' attempts to comprehend the emergence of meaning in nature as perceived. Along these lines, he proposes to subvert classical (and Husserlian) hylemorphism by underlining the arbitrariness involved in the figuration of the emergence of meaning in nature along the lines of technological and artificial production, that is, as the *imposition* of a self-subsistent form on a docile, heterogeneous matter. It is against the background of the misgivings he clearly has about the technological model of production as the medium of our understanding of how meaning comes to emerge in nature that we can see how he invests his proposed alternative, that of "matter-pregnant-with-form", with an allusion to generation in the biological sense, i.e., as the process of gestation taking place in the maternal body. That the relation between the perceiving subject and the perceived world thereby appears as "somehow organic" would seem only to strengthen this impression.

Hence, from the point of view of the etymological connections pertaining to the word *prégnance/pregnant(e)* in general, of Merleau-Ponty's critique of an alleged tendency to forget the fecundity and productivity that should be heard in that word – keeping in mind that productivity, for him, should be understood along natural and pre-technological lines – as well as its peculiar role in Merleau-Ponty's attempt to undermine classical hylemorphism, I think one can justifiably proceed with the hypothesis that Merleau-Ponty uses this word in a way that evokes maternity. In what follows, I intend to further substantiate this as I proceed

²⁸⁹ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Book I, General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1982), § 85: "Sensuous ὄλη and Intentive μορφή"

²⁹⁰ Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Book I, General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, p. 203.

to consider some passages that showcase how it infiltrates and augments his approach to the temporal dimensions of the natural world, and particularly its immemorial dimension.

Pregnant Prior to Conception and Beyond Birth

As indicated in my Introduction, and further developed in chapter 2, there is in Merleau-Ponty an attempt to think the temporality of nature as a sort of eternity, as the permanence of an ongoing productive process, or the eternal return of its own beginning or “first day”. For him, there can be no question of returning to some ultimate first cause or origin or of finding some immanence of the result in the beginning; rather, “the originating breaks up (*l’originnaire éclate*), and philosophy must accompany this break-up (*éclatement*), this non-coincidence, this differentiation” (VI 163/124). Yet this break-up of the originary, the originating or the inaugural is precisely eternal: “for me it is no longer a question of...but one sole explosion (*éclatement*) of Being which is forever” (VI 313/265). There is then some validity to be acknowledged in “the idea of an eternity of nature (the eternal return)” (N 20/4), but it is not a dead, frozen and immobile eternity – it is in every way a most living and pulsating eternity. Yet how does philosophy accompany this explosive yet indestructible, seemingly a-temporal temporality of the natural?

Perpetually Pregnant

It is with regard to this task that we find in Merleau-Ponty, it seems to me, a certain speculation on the fecund philosophical resources of the maternal body. This appears in an exemplary form in the following passage from the “Interrogation and Intuition” chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*:

We never have before us pure individuals, indivisible glaciers of beings, nor essences without place and without date. (...) [W]e are experiences, that is, thoughts that...do not hold under their gaze a serial space and time nor the pure idea of series, but have about themselves a time and a space that exist by piling up (*d’empilement*), proliferation, by encroachment (*d’empiètement*), by promiscuity – a perpetual pregnancy, perpetual parturition, generativity and generality, brute essence and brute existence, which are the nodes and antinodes (*les ventres et les noeuds*) of the same ontological vibration (VI 152-153/115).

This is arguably one of the most spectacular passages ever to have issued from Merleau-Ponty’s pen, evoking a most sublime “ontological vibration”. As Michael B. Smith dryly remarks of the French original “Metaphysicians have seldom written this way”.²⁹¹ Whatever

²⁹¹ Michael B. Smith, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Expression* (Doctoral Thesis, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1979), p. 138

reservation one might legitimately have against the kind of speculation on maternal labour for philosophical profit in which Merleau-Ponty indulges here, it seems that one would have to agree with Smith's verdict, if only from a stylistic point of view: "This is Merleau-Ponty at his daring best, mixing metaphors..., assonance, repetition and parallel constructions. (...) It is a steady rhythm that contrives to produce the effect of hastening toward the conclusion..."²⁹²

For the moment, however, let us focus on what becomes of pregnancy and how it works philosophically in this passage. First, what immediately strikes us is how Merleau-Ponty has conjoined pregnancy and birth. In qualifying both pregnancy and birth as "perpetual", the moment of birth becomes something like an eternal moment, forming part of an eternal cycle of pregnancy whose term is also its beginning (i.e. conception). Delivery becomes a continuous extension of a pregnancy that never really arrives at its term, but perpetually feeds back into and augments itself. In this troubling of the division between beginning and end, origin and limit, both terms find themselves dissolved for the benefit of a perpetual process of generation, having always already begun and never arriving at its definitive term.

The perpetuity of pregnancy and birth that Merleau-Ponty invokes to describe the piling up and proliferation of space and time is further emphasized by the accompanying image of the "nodes and antinodes" (*les ventres et les noeuds*) of an "ontological vibration". A vibration or wave has its nodes and antinodes: The node of a standing wave pulsation, e.g. a vibrating guitar string, is the point – or series of points – at which the amplitude of the wave is at its minimal (such as its end points), whereas the antinode is the point of maximal amplitude of the wave, which is to say, the peak of its curvature. In the passage with which we are dealing, *noeuds* and *ventres* correspond to the nodes and antinodes of (ontological) vibration respectively. As it happens, *noeud* can, while denoting a nodal point or a knot, also be used idiomatically (in slang) to refer to the male sexual organ (cf. *tête de noeud*). More important, however, is the fact that the term used for antinode is also the French word for the abdominal region of the body, that is, the stomach. Although the word is denotatively neutral with regard to male and female types of body, its appearance in the same context in which it is also a question of pregnancy and birth makes it also evoke, as Michael B. Smith points out, the womb.²⁹³

²⁹² Smith, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Expression*, p. 138

²⁹³ "The sound metaphor requires that 'ventre' be taken in its technical sense of 'antinode', but the parturition and fecundity motif suggests its other meaning, 'womb' as well" (Smith, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Expression*, p. 138).. (). Beyond

Let me digress to add that Merleau-Ponty's use of *ventre* here must make us think of Luce Irigaray's essay, in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, on the myth of the cave in the seventh book of Plato's *Republic*. I will return to that text in the final chapter of the present thesis, but let us for the moment recall that her concern there is to read Plato's allegory as "a metaphor of the inner space, of the den (*de l'antre*), the womb (*matrice*) or *hystera*, sometimes of the earth – though we shall see that the text inscribes the metaphor as, strictly speaking, impossible".²⁹⁴ One of the devices Irigaray sets up for the pursuit of this end – the exhibition of the manifold detours along which the allegory tries to set up the cave as a substitute for the maternal womb – is the homonymical pair that the word for den, *antre*, forms with *ventre*: "As the story goes, then, men – with no specification of sex – are living in one, same place. A place shaped like a cave or a womb (*aurait la forme d'un antre, ou ventre*)".²⁹⁵ One can thus easily imagine that the *prégnance-parturition-ventre* nexus in text quoted above from *The Visible and the Invisible* would have been at the centre of Irigaray's attention were she to have subjected it to an analysis.

All in all, from the preceding considerations, it can be determined how and to what extent Merleau-Ponty has found it convenient to imbue the "ontological vibration", in which pulsates the eternal return and break-up of nature's inauguration, with an unmistakably sexual and maternal resonance. The addition of the image of a standing wave pulsation to the image of a perpetual cycle of pregnancy and parturition works to augment this peculiarly a-temporal process with a slightly perverse suggestion: pregnancy and birth alternate and feed into one another in a rhythmic fashion not unlike the node and anti-node of a single vibration.

Already Pregnant

Let us next recall that, for Merleau-Ponty (as we have also already seen in my Introduction and in chapter 2), eternity is always intimately connected with the past. The idea of an eternity of nature is for Merleau-Ponty one with the sense of its solidity (N 20/4), yet "the weight of the natural world" is, in its turn, "already a weight of the past" (VI 162/123). This is why the time of nature has a structure that resembles mythical time, as the re-enactment in

this terminological overlap, however, I am not implying any further points of overlap between the place of the maternal body in Merleau-Ponty's rewriting of the perceived world and in Irigaray's subversive appropriation of the Platonic cave.

²⁹⁴ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 243 [Luce Irigaray, *Speculum: de l'autre femme* (Paris: Minuit, 1975), p. 301]

²⁹⁵ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 243 [Irigaray, *Speculum: de l'autre femme*, p. 301].

the present of an immemorial past that has never been present. The apparent solidity of the eternal is not a solidity in itself, but rather one way in which the immemorial past announces itself as immemorial: “The non-temporal is the acquired. (...) We are, as Proust said, perched upon a pyramid of the past. (...) Acquisition must be acknowledged as an irreducible phenomenon” (PhP 453-454/413). As we also saw with abundant textual evidence in chapter 2, this monumental past in which is kept the archaic beginnings of reflection and thought is not restricted to the unreflective life of percipient nature (i.e., of the body as natural subject of perception), which reflection encounters only as “an explicable alteration, a strange distance” (VI 163/124). This alteration or strange distance is also, for the unreflective life of our body as natural subject of perception, the trace of this same past contracted into what is presently perceived in and of nature.

Now, as Merleau-Ponty emphasized in the résumé to the first *Nature* course, “reflexive thought is disoriented by this implication of the immemorial in the present” with which nature presents us (RC 94/133). This is because reflexive thought, on Merleau-Ponty’s analysis, expects that a nature cut off from its transcendental source in constituting, synthesizing consciousness would be nothing but “a flash of instantaneous being, extinguished no sooner than it has appeared”, and because it insists on treating the “phantom and tenacious existence of the past” as but a diminished present, hence as “the exact correlative of our acts” (RC 95/133). Conversely, if one is not to confine oneself within the complacency of such a luxuriant approach, if one is to acknowledge that not all meaning appearing in nature is constituted by consciousness but is instead endemic to nature as such, it is necessary – as the series of phenomenological descriptions referred to in chapter 2 make clear – to “recognize that primordial being which is not yet the subject-being nor the object-being and which in every respect baffles reflection” (RC 95/133-134). In this endeavour, Merleau-Ponty proposes to follow Schelling in the search for that in nature which “makes it such that it would impose itself upon God himself as an independent condition of his operation” (RC 95-96/134). In so far as Merleau-Ponty’s thought, as I attempted to show in chapter 2, was riveted to the mystery of the immemorial past of nature from his earliest works to the latest, one might say that he was always in search for that in nature which would impose itself even upon some almighty creator-figure as an “independent condition of his operation”. In other words, he was in search of that in nature which would betray the impotence at the core of any divine operation of creation – or of the latter’s substitute in the

transcendental operations of constitution taking place in human reason (cf. N 59/36) – that would otherwise pass for a display of omnipotence.

Let us now observe that the positive terms in which Merleau-Ponty proposes to describe, particularly in *Phenomenology of Perception*, that of nature which divests or has always already divested any divine or transcendental project of creation or constitution of its illusory omnipotence – i.e., the illusion of being able to proceed independently of certain exteriorly or anteriorly given conditions – is destined to disorient or baffle not only reflexive thought but indeed thought of whatever stars and stripes. They involve a most baffling modification of the temporal structure of the pregnancy with which he, as we saw above, imbues matter so as to subvert the grip of classical, artificialist hylemorphism. Here are the most salient examples from *Phenomenology of Perception*:

By returning to phenomena, we find, as a fundamental layer, a whole (*ensemble*) *already* pregnant with an irreducible sense (PhP 45/23, my emphasis).

[The intellectualist analysis] simultaneously distorts the sign and the signification; it separates them by objectifying the sensory content, which is *already* “pregnant” with a sense, and the invariant core, which is not a law, but a thing (PhP 189/154, my emphasis)

Every sensation is *already* pregnant with a sense, inserted into a confused or clear configuration (PhP 350/310, my emphasis).

In and of themselves, such phrases should not surprise us after having recognized that, as we saw above, matter is *perpetually* pregnant with its form or meaning. Yet, as Rudi Visker justifiably points out, Merleau-Ponty’s repeated and explicit insistence that matter is *already* pregnant with its form cannot but beg the question as to “what is the ontological status of copulation, what ontology is going to make it possible”,²⁹⁶ that is, that “coition” (*accouplement*) in terms of which Merleau-Ponty describes, as we saw chapter 4, the perceptual intertwining of body and world. If the body-world relation is indeed comparable to coition, then it is not enough to say that the relation is erotic, but that it is (at least potentially) fecund. And if Merleau-Ponty had contented himself with saying merely that matter is pregnant with its form, we might have assumed that pregnancy is conceived on account of the fecundity of the body-world relation, and that it would be left to, say, language, art or some other expressive effort to assist in the delivery of the offspring. Such expressive efforts would find the perceptual field woven between body and world already pregnant with an irreducible meaning

However, as we have seen in previous chapters, not only do artistic expression, language and thought begin their efforts in a nature that is always already pregnant with an irreducible meaning – already expressive, already murmuring with inaudible, nameless voices, already the opening of a universe of ideas – so does the anonymously perceiving body. Thus, in order not to relieve reflexive thought of its bafflement at this unsuspected scenario, Merleau-Ponty augments the bafflement of us all by suggesting the following procreative scenario. Form and meaning has always already begun to develop, to gestate in the fecund depths of nature even ahead of the entrance of the natural subject – which at this point can be said to appear quite unambiguously in the figure of a male progenitor – on the scene of perception, the very task of whom seemed at first to be that of fertilizing things by copulating with them. And so he projects the moment of conception further back than the moment when the natural subject, the father, takes a “grip” on the world. Hence, it would seem that Merleau-Ponty imposes on the natural subject of perception, the male progenitor in this procreative process, the impossible task of conceiving a pregnancy that is always already conceived, hence a pregnancy that never seems to have been conceived, or else has been auto-conceived. One could hardly ask for a more vivid display of divine/paternal impotence and, correspondingly, of natural/maternal autarchy. Consequently, as both Rudi Visker and Diana Coole correctly observe, we are facing the motif of an immaculate conception,²⁹⁷ one which, moreover – as Coole specifies – yields a “pregnancy without impregnation”, “a giving birth without the holy or oedipalized family of God or Man”, a “continuous process of recreation, outside the law of the Father”.²⁹⁸

However, I do not think that the anomalous situation in which Merleau-Ponty has placed the paternal progenitor in the scenario of natural production he has envisioned entitles us to jump to the conclusion immediately drawn by Coole: “Merleau-Ponty was not modeling his ontology on maternal reproduction, although this did not preclude his description of another rhythm of generativity – one without sexual identity or opposition – that might interest feminists”.²⁹⁹ Why should the subtraction of the paternal instance from the site/event of conception entail subtraction of the maternal part as well, especially given Coole’s own rejection of sexual identity or opposition? No doubt, there is something deeply

²⁹⁶ Visker, "Raw Being and Violent Discourse: Foucault, Merleau-Ponty and the (Dis-)Order of Things", p. 115.

²⁹⁷ Cf. Visker, "Raw Being and Violent Discourse: Foucault, Merleau-Ponty and the (Dis-)Order of Things", p. 115; Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics After Anti-Humanism*, p. 214.

²⁹⁸ Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics After Anti-Humanism*, pp. 214-215.

²⁹⁹ Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics After Anti-Humanism*, p. 215.

un-natural about a conception that takes place entirely in the autarchy of maternal fecundity. To the best of my knowledge, modern reproductive technology has yet to come up with reproductively capable sperm produced by purely artificial means and with which aspiring mothers may fertilize themselves without any male intervention whatsoever. For an indefinitely long time still, the scenario of procreation depicted by Merleau-Ponty as involving a purely maternal immaculate conception, and into which he contracts the substance of nature's immemoriality, will in all likelihood remain a *mythical* image of generation. Yet, Merleau-Ponty's thought is not unappreciative of the value of myth for the mobilization of thought. To begin with, nothing guarantees that "the occult trading of the metaphor" to which Merleau-Ponty says the philosopher must submit himself if he wants to attain an adequation of nature (cf. chapter 3 in the present thesis) will not end up churning out one or two oneiric images that are simply not credible from a positive, realistic point of view, yet in which the philosopher may recognize the outline of a thought to be followed. Moreover, to the extent that, as already indicated, nature's immemorial past resembles that of the myth and perhaps even – as Merleau-Ponty suggests with regard to the *true* hawthorns embodying Marcel's desire for Albertine – "belongs to a mythical time" (VI 291-292/243), we should perhaps not be surprised to see Merleau-Ponty turning to mythical images in order to interrogate this past.

Further still, at least if we are to believe Gary B. Madison, "the similarity – at least in appearance – between Merleau-Ponty's ontology and mythopoeic and cosmogonical thought in general is quite remarkable".³⁰⁰ Although Merleau-Ponty's figuration of nature in terms of Earth as the "living stock from which objects are engendered" (N 110/77) draws directly on Husserl (see chapter 3 in the present thesis), Madison sees in this figuration the resumption of Greek cosmogonical myths, invoking *Gē* as the primal mother of everything:

In Greek mythology the common *mother* of the gods and men is Γῆ, the Earth. For Merleau-Ponty the originating is also the Earth, the mother, and this "polymorphous", "undivided Being" has a strange resemblance to the original chaos of the cosmogonical myths which is the one and the many.³⁰¹

While Madison probably has no intention of conflating the Earth with Chaos as depicted in Hesiod's *Theogony* – unless, perhaps, he finds this suggested in Merleau-Ponty – it might be recalled, following Vigdis Songe-Møller, that

³⁰⁰ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, p. 243.

³⁰¹ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, p. 243.

Hesiod invokes Chaos and Earth as two mutually independent sources for everything that exists, in the broadest possible sense. Not only the physical parts of nature such as Heaven and Earth, mountains, and rivers, but also phenomena such as day and night, war, age and mendacity can be traced back to one of these two principles. This means that there are in fact two genealogies in Hesiod's universe, with either Chaos or Earth as the "primal mother" of each ancestral line. Eros caters for loving embraces, thereby helping the lines of both Chaos and Earth. (...) The Hesiodic universe begins of necessity with autogenesis. This is true of both the generation that begins with Earth and that which begins with Chaos.³⁰²

At any rate, what we get from this brief detour through Greek cosmogony is that: 1) every existing thing (gods, men, physical nature and phenomena) descends in the final analysis from a primal mother (Earth or Chaos), thus from a recognizably feminine genealogical source;³⁰³ 2) generation is inaugurated in this source through autogenesis, hence in the autarchy of maternal fecundity. In so far, then, as we are well advised to consider Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature against the background of Greek cosmogony, then the ostensible impotence of the paternal instance in the procreative scenario in terms of which Merleau-Ponty proposes to think the immemorial past of nature does not, *pace* Coole, warrant the conclusion that he "does not model his ontology on maternal reproduction", but rather quite the contrary (with all reservations taken with respect to the term "ontology" here, cf. the next chapter).

Let me pose a final question concerning Merleau-Ponty's envisioning of nature's immemorial past as matter *already* pregnant with form: what does the aspiring paternal progenitor/natural subject of perception have to do with it, all the time it/he has been divested of any substantial role to play in the conception of the child/object/meaning? It is in answering this question that both Rudi Visker and Andreas Nordlander consider the possibility that Merleau-Ponty might have consigned the father/the natural subject of perception to the role of a midwife. Rudi Visker writes of this possibility in a way that makes clear that it is one that should be discarded, and that it is desirable to find some role for fathers in Merleau-Ponty's economy of cosmic (re)production:

[W]hat is the ontological status of copulation, what ontology is going to make it possible, or, at least, is not going to make it impossible, and how, if not as a simple

³⁰² Vigdis Songe-Møller, *Philosophy Without Women: the Birth of Sexism in Western thought* (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 23-24.

³⁰³ Songe-Møller mentions that the sexual identity of Chaos is disputed, and that it is commonly considered to be sexually neutral, yet she holds for her part the opinion that it too must be regarded as "essentially feminine": "I myself believe that also Chaos – if not Chaos in particular – can be seen as essentially feminine, in that it functions as a kind of sexual symbol: Chaos was the original cleft or chasm" (Songe-Møller, *Philosophy Without Women: the Birth of Sexism in Western thought*, p. 24).

midwife, are we to conceive of a father who, upon entering the scene, is confronted with “a whole *already* pregnant with an irreducible meaning”?³⁰⁴

For Nordlander, on the other hand, Merleau-Ponty’s description of a production of meaning proceeding from the pre-subjective, pre-human depths of nature in terms of “matter pregnant with form” recalls to us that, as far as the activities proper to the natural subject are concerned, “there are better or worse ways of being a midwife”.³⁰⁵ He further underscores this line of reading by comparing the meaning or structures of the world made available through perception to “the child to be delivered”.³⁰⁶

Now, although Visker believes he has found in his experience of copulation, of “almost losing myself in the other and yet at the brink of fusion losing hold of him in the uncontrolled movements of my spasms”³⁰⁷ the requisite for an ontology that might – despite everything – make copulation (and thereby paternity) possible, I think Nordlander’s suggestion can be supported on relevant textual evidence. As already pointed out in chapter 3 in the present thesis, there is in Merleau-Ponty a tendency to think of the relation between human expression (in perception, painting, language and thought) and nature as a relation of mutual dependence: human subjectivity emerges (at the site of bodily auto-affectation or reflexivity) as an event of nature, and yet nature requires precisely this event in order to “come to itself”, in order to emerge from its moorings in an obscure, anonymous state. While I will return to the issue of how this system of natural productivity in Merleau-Ponty is worked out on the level of motif in the next chapter, I may at this juncture point to one mode of this elaboration, and which seems to resemble the relation between a laboring mother and a midwife assisting in her delivery. Consider the following excerpts from the section on Schelling in the first *Nature* course – and here again I assume that Merleau-Ponty is not merely expounding on Schelling, but also articulating a perspective that is congenial to his own project:

At bottom, Nature must be considered as an arrangement of materials, which cannot be considered as the vehicle of an idea [i.e., not an in itself formless stuff that carries the stamp of forms that are essentially immaterial], but which prepares the sense that human being gives to it. (...) There must be in the things a preparation of what will then be an explicit sense, a liberation of the captive sense in the natural thing. (...)

³⁰⁴ Visker, "Raw Being and Violent Discourse: Foucault, Merleau-Ponty and the (Dis-)Order of Things", p. 115.

³⁰⁵ Nordlander, *Figuring Flesh in Creation: Merleau-Ponty in Conversation With Philosophical Theology*, p. 125.

³⁰⁶ Nordlander, *Figuring Flesh in Creation: Merleau-Ponty in Conversation With Philosophical Theology*, p. 125.

³⁰⁷ Visker, "Raw Being and Violent Discourse: Foucault, Merleau-Ponty and the (Dis-)Order of Things", p. 120. I think there is one problem with this suggestion, however. Visker invokes copulation as an instantiation of the “paradox of immanence and transcendence” according to which Merleau-Ponty explicates his approach to the problem of perception (cf. PriP 49/93), yet copulation (*accouplement*) is for Merleau-Ponty for the most part a term he uses to describe the immanent aspect of perception, as opposed to that of the caress (as discussed in the previous chapter).

What lives in Nature is not mind or spirit, but rather the beginning of meaning in the process of ordering itself, but which has not fully emerged. (...) The subject has to intervene in order to bring meaning out fully (*pour dégager le sens*), but this disengagement (*dégagement*) of meaning is not constituting (N 67-68/42-43).

There is, then, captured at the bottom of nature, held deep within its interior hollows, something – namely, sense – already alive, already in the process of being prepared, in the process of development and maturation, awaiting eventual release or liberation at the hands of an agency that will “disengage” it from its archaic abode, bring it out in the open, allow it to unfold. The task put to the human subject – or rather, to the human body *qua* natural subject of perception – in this generative scheme is not to constitute (i.e., to impose form on an otherwise formless, heterogeneous, docile matter), not to conceive. Rather, it is to release, bring out, assist in the emergence of that which (from our point of view) is already constituted, already conceived, already in the process of being ordered, of being formed, of morphogenesis. Thus, *pace* Visser, I think that, in Merleau-Ponty, the “confused problem” that sensible nature poses to sentient nature (cf. PhP 259/222; see chapters 1 and 2 in the present thesis) is in large part the problem, as Nordlander suggests, of how to assist appropriately in the former’s labour, that is, of how to be a good midwife.

Moreover, if the very term *prégnance* is absent from the passage just cited from the *Nature* lectures, a working note to *The Visible and the Invisible* – the very same working note that reproaches the psychologists for having silenced the fecundity that should be heard in the word *prégnance* – describes a corresponding scenario precisely in terms of *prégnance*: “The pregnancy is what, in the visible, requires of me a *correct* focusing, defines its correctness. My body *obeys* the pregnancy, it ‘responds’ to it, it is what is suspended on it, flesh responding to flesh” (VI 259/209). Pregnancy in the visible, in nature is what solicits from my body the very movements (of focusing, of gesture) that will release sense from its captivation in the invisible recesses of the visible. Again, as yet another working note has it, “the visible is pregnant (*prégnant*) with the invisible” (VI 265/216).

However, I do not in the least want to hide the fact the relations between the visible and the invisible, between sensible and sense, nature and idea in Merleau-Ponty cannot always be related straightforwardly to the obstetric scenario just described. To begin with, in the previous chapter, I emphasized how Merleau-Ponty also inscribes the invisible as the desire-enticing and desire-frustrating force of resistance through which nature refuses to give it/herself without simultaneously giving it/herself for something. Moreover, there are many passages in which we would seem to find in reverse order the distribution between the

visible and the invisible of the roles corresponding to mother and child respectively. This would be the case, for example, when Merleau-Ponty speaks of the invisible (*qua* meaning, sense, or style) as the “armature” (*l’armature*) (VI 193/149) or the “interior framework” (*membrure*) of the visible (VI 265/215). With these terms borrowed from the domain of construction (also of boats, as indicated by *membrure*), Merleau-Ponty wants to emphasize how the visible is somehow “sustained” from within itself by the meaning or idea that comes to be manifested on its surface, in the way that the interior framework of a construction is visible on the surface through the (perceived) stability it gives to the construction as a whole from within it.

This line of thought seems also to be in play when Merleau-Ponty speaks of “the flesh of things” at the conclusion of the description of the red colour of the dress early in “The Intertwining – the Chiasm”: “Between the alleged colors and visibles, we would find anew the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a *flesh* of things” (VI 173/132-133). Here, the flesh appears in the role of what “sustains” and “nourishes”, what accounts for the possibility of things in their visibility, yet remaining itself in latency, remaining invisible. According to Luce Irigaray – to whose reading of Merleau-Ponty I shall deal with much more in depth later in this chapter and in the next – such a way of phrasing things makes the flesh evoke the invisibility of the maternal body in so far as it is that which envelops, shelters, sustains and nourishes the development of the embryo:

Where does this tissue come from? How is it nourished? (...) [A] maternal, maternalizing flesh, reproduction, subsistence there of the amniotic, placental tissue, which enveloped subject and things prior to birth. (...) Here, Merleau-Ponty makes flesh go over to the realm of things and as if to their place of emergence, their prenatal ground, their nourishing soil.³⁰⁸

On such a reading, then, the visible would not be, as suggested above, pregnant with the invisible, but rather the inverse: the visible is nourished in and born from a prenatal, maternal abode that – at least from the point of view of the visible – remains invisible. Yet it is not clear how one could make this accord with Merleau-Ponty’s suggestion that the flesh *qua* invisible sustains and nourishes the visible from within, in the way that an armature or an interior framework does for a construction.

³⁰⁸ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 159 [Luce Irigaray, *Éthique de la différence sexuelle* (Paris: Minit, 1984), pp. 149-150].

Adding to this difficulty is a third variation on the same theme, in connection with which Merleau-Ponty suggests – in a passage I also quoted in chapter 4 in the present thesis – that the invisible is related to the visible in the way that the nervure is related to the leaf:

As the nervure bears the leaf from within, from the depths of its flesh, the ideas are the texture of experience, its style, first mute, then uttered. Like every style, they are elaborated within the thickness of being and, not only in fact but also by right, could not be detached from it, to be spread out on display under the gaze (VI 157/119).

Here, it seems, we find some kind of combination of perspectives: experience is related to ideas in the same way as the leaf is related to its own nervure: it is borne, sustained, nourished by it from within, in the thickness of itself. Yet, this very thickness – which, by the time we come to the second sentence, has imperceptibly shed the skin of “experience” now to show up as “being” itself – is also the milieu in which ideas themselves are *elaborated*, in which they are held and sheltered, protected from the violence of the hungry gaze. Merleau-Ponty seems to want to have it both ways: nature elaborates and shelters within its interior recesses something – that is, style, meaning, idea – that cannot ultimately be detached from it absolutely, yet which, in its turn, will bear, sustain and nourish it.

I do not want to suggest that it is possible, not even in principle, to integrate all the variations in Merleau-Ponty’s practice of figuring – whether implicitly or explicitly – generative processes of meaning in nature in terms of maternity into a system that might have given an air of consistency. What I *have* wanted to suggest in this section is rather the following. When it comes to the difficulty of comprehending the way we bodily *experience* what he calls the baffling implication of nature’s immemorial past in every present, Merleau-Ponty has a tendency to do this in terms of a most baffling procreative scenario. More precisely, it is one in which 1) nature is figured as a mother who conceives a child (meaning) without paternal intervention, and in so doing 2) beckons to some figure (the body as natural subject of perception) who at the outset was positioned in the role of nature’s copulating partner, and who therefore acquires the features of an aspiring paternal progenitor; yet, because he ends up arriving on the scene of procreation only to find a matter *already* pregnant with its form 3) he comes instead to occupy the slightly less potent or virile role of the midwife who assists in the delivery of nature’s meaning-child. Here again (as we saw toward the end of the previous chapter), a vivid display of (male) impotence in face of some femininely coded power – whether the power of resistance to male conquest, or the parthenogenetic autarchy of maternal fecundity – is seized upon as the trace of what in nature

“would impose itself upon God himself as an independent condition of his operation” (RC 95-96/134).

Birth as “Transcendental Event”³⁰⁹

Thus far in this chapter, I have focused on how nature’s immemoriality is inscribed as maternity across Merleau-Ponty’s works when nature is considered from the angle of sense, things, objects and the world as experienced. I would now like to shift the focus from Merleau-Ponty’s description of the “object” side of experience to the “subject” side, in order to consider how his elaboration on the immemorial depths of the natural subject also invokes a certain labour on the part of the maternal body.

The basic stimulus to my investigation of this issue in Merleau-Ponty is found in the opening section of the chapter on “Others and the Human World” in the second part of *Phenomenology of Perception*. This section, for which Merleau-Ponty gave the subtitle “Intertwining of natural time and historical time” in the discursive table of contents (cf. PhP 535/361), opens with the reaffirmation that the nature into which we are thrown is given not only as what exists on the outside, “in objects devoid of history”, but is “also visible at the center of subjectivity” (PhP 403/361). The visibility of nature at the centre of subjectivity, we are further told, is attested first by the irreducibly artificial character of all attempts to conceive of one’s own life as a history with a certain meaning or direction, a certain chronological ordering of events: “Theoretical and practical decisions in my personal life (...) can introduce a historicity into my life. But there is always something artificial to this order” (PhP 403/ 361). That there is always something artificial to this order means, first, that it is always provisional and subject to revision, and that “my possession of my own time” is always deferred to a moment that never comes, since such a moment will in its turn be inscribed by the imminence of a future in which I shall once again be able to take a fresh look at my own time (cf. PhP 403/362). It means, second, that the power which gives my voluntary and rational life “the air of a work in progress” is the power of natural time, which both opens the possibility of a genuinely personal and historical present while also

³⁰⁹ In writing this section, I have found much inspiration in Gary B. Madison’s discussion of the issue of birth as transcendental event in his *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, and in the course of which we find the succinct statement that, for Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*, “the subject’s birth is what is truly fundamental and irreducible; it is the *Urarchē*” (Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, p. 230; see also pp. 51-72, 157-162, 230-232). However, Madison presents his reading of this issue in Merleau-Ponty within the horizon of a certain critical intervention that makes my next chapter a more suitable context for a confrontation with it.

threatening the latter's integrity and singularity. The power of natural time is precisely what both makes it possible that I shall soon be able to "reflect upon what is opaque in my present" while also inserting that strange alteration between my present and my past that sees to it that "what I understand never precisely links up with my life", that "I am never at one with myself" (PhP 404/362). The same sense of not being at one with myself is also present at the level of unreflective perception, at which "I am conscious of integrating distracted and dispersed 'consciousnesses', namely, vision, hearing, and touch, along with their fields, which are anterior to and remain foreign to my personal life" (PhP 404/362-363). I experience the anonymous functioning of my sensory fields as the trace or opacity of an originary past: "Along with sensory fields and the world as the field of all fields, consciousness discovers in itself the opacity of an originary past" (PhP 408/366).

How to understand this sense of not being at one with myself while all the same being given to myself as the horizon of a possible narrative or direction of events, the sense of integrating into a perceptual present the opacity of dispersed sensory fields which are nonetheless indestructibly anterior to me and remain foreign to me? Merleau-Ponty's first answer, and which shall concern me in the present section, is as simple as it is abrupt: "Such is the fate of a being who is born, that is, a being who once and for all was given to himself as something to be understood" (PhP 404/362). This answer gives rise to the hypothesis that, for Merleau-Ponty, the key to the mystery of the immemoriality of nature – of natural time and of my sensoriality as natural subject – lies, at least in part, with the event of the subject's birth as a living, sensate body and as an open temporal register. This hypothesis would, in an indirect fashion, at some level, also concern the role played by maternity in Merleau-Ponty's account of the reflective and perceptual subject's originary past, in so far as the living, sensate body in which subjectivity is incarnated is, for Merleau-Ponty, by definition a human body, and in so far as reproduction among humans is still sexually differentiated and involves pregnancy and labour on the part of the female parent. Hence, the significance Merleau-Ponty may seem to accord to the event of birth as a key to understand the implication of an originary past of nature in the subject's perceptual, practical and reflective present merits some investigation in a project like the present one that is concerned with the labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature.

Let us first observe how the recourse to the condition of natality intervenes in Merleau-Ponty's approach to the immemoriality of bodily sensoriality and intentionality with respect to the subject who takes it up perceptually. Admittedly, in the "Sensing" chapter of

Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty's evocation of the anonymity of the life of my bodily senses in terms of natality is complemented by a symmetrical reference to mortality:

I have no more awareness of being the true subject of my sensation than I do of my birth or my death. (...) Being at the extreme the first, last, and only one of its kind, every sensation is a birth and a death. The subject who experiences it begins and ends with it, and since he can neither precede himself nor survive himself, sensation necessarily appears to itself in a milieu of generality. It arrives from beneath myself, and it results from a *sensitivity* that preceded it and that will survive it, just as my birth and death belongs to an anonymous natality or mortality. I grasp through sensation, on the margins of my personal life and of my own acts, a given life of consciousness from which these later determinations emerge, the life of my eyes, hands, and ears, which are so many natural selves (PhP 260-261/223-224).

Although natality appears here in a sort of mirror arrangement with mortality as the double emblem of anonymity in its temporal dimension, I think that, for Merleau-Ponty, natality nonetheless claims a certain privilege among the two, which we shall also see confirmed further down. As we saw in the previous chapter, following Leonard Lawlor's reading in *The Implications of Immanence*, Merleau-Ponty's thought – from *The Structure of Behaviour* up to *The Visible and the Invisible* – has no place for the positivity of death, because he insists that death must somehow make sense, it must be subjected to poetic productivity. We shall see in the course of this section that the origin of meaning, of presence in the world and therefore of subjectivity and agency is associated by Merleau-Ponty much more closely with natality than with mortality. For the moment, I may point out that, even in the passage just quoted, the sense of natality dominates that of mortality, even if, in the explicit register, it is balanced by its apposition with mortality. It is more a description of the *emergence* of “my personal life” and “my own acts” than of their progression toward their inevitable termination in death. In passages like this, what Merleau-Ponty is concerned to think about is the enigma contained in the fact that, while as a perceiving, acting and expressive subject I participate in the generation of meaning in the world, I am not my own origin; in my capacity to bring forth meaning or let meaning happen, I originate from other than myself. To this extent, each sensation or even the continual flux of sensory life recalls, like a watermark etched into my body,³¹⁰ the event of my birth, of my emergence from other than me, my emergence from a maternal and feminine other, more than it anticipates my death.

Moreover, toward the end of the discussion of the first spatial level in the chapter on “Space”, Merleau-Ponty makes precisely this suggestion, with no mentioning of death. We saw in chapter 2 that, on Merleau-Ponty's analysis, the constitution of a new level of

horizontality and verticality upon its disruption always supposes some previous constitution, some constitution always already done. While Merleau-Ponty refuses, on the one hand, to acknowledge absolute directions in space or, in general, any spatiality that would reside in itself ready-made prior to a perception that tries to take its bearings in space, still there is for him, on the other hand, no perception that would not be at least minimally oriented and would not therefore “pass forward an already acquired spatiality” (PhP 302/264). And so even the first spatial level would presuppose a previous level. Now, just as in the case of sensing, Merleau-Ponty sees in this insurmountable delay of the subject of experience behind the moment of constitution a mark of both anonymity and natality:

There is, then, another subject beneath me, for whom a world exists before I am there, and who marks out my place in that world. (...) At the core of the subject, space and perception in general mark the fact of his birth, the perpetual contribution of his corporeality, and a communication with the world more ancient than thought (PhP 302/265).

It would seem, then, that, even for pre-reflective, perceptual consciousness, the anonymous life of the body *qua* natural subject of perception is a sort of continuous repetition and recapitulation of the inaugural event by which this consciousness was given to itself from other than itself and made present to the world. For Merleau-Ponty, then, the fact that consciousness – whether reflective or unreflective – always finds itself already at work in the world, already taking up and resuming an archaic life that is anterior to it and remains foreign to it is quite simply the symptom and after-effect of the fundamental natality that lies at the root of subjectivity as such. With each breath, each focusing gesture, each motor initiative, each expressive effort, my body commemorates and renews that event that brought me forth and made me into a presence to the world. This is why Merleau-Ponty would write that “[t]he consciousness that conditions language is...merely a comprehensive and inarticulate grasp of the world, like that of the child’s upon his first breath” (PhP 465/426).³¹¹

³¹⁰ Cf. Grosz, “Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray in the Flesh”, p. 156.

³¹¹ Here I have modified Donald Landes’ translation in line with Colin Smith’s rendering of it in his 1962 translation: “The consciousness which conditions language is merely a comprehensive and inarticulate grasp upon the world, like that of the infant at its first breath” (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002, p. 470). Landes corrects this to “The consciousness that conditions language is *not* merely a comprehensive and inarticulate grasp of the world...” (my emphasis). As such, Landes is actually faithful to the French original, which says “La conscience qui conditionne le langage *n’est qu’une* saisie globale et inarticulée du monde...”. I advance the bold hypothesis that the French original contains a misprint. To say that the consciousness that conditions language is *not* “merely a comprehensive and articulate grasp of the world” seems to fly in the face of the claim that appears only a few lines above, to the effect that “this indeclinable subjectivity has but a fleeting hold upon itself and upon the world” (PhP 465/426). Moreover, when we consider the prevalence of the motif of birth throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, it seems unlikely that Merleau-Ponty, in the section that precedes the section that most intensely invokes the motif of birth so as to describe the condition of subjectivity and which concludes the “Cogito” chapter (cf. PhP 466-431/426-431), should suggest that prereflective consciousness should not be crucially related to the child at its first breath.

Insofar as in perceiving and moving, but also – as we shall soon see – in speaking and thinking, we remain the child we once were at our first breath, then we are, as subjects, “like a continued birth (*naissance continuée*), the subject to whom a physical and historical situation has been given to run, and [we are] this subject again at each instant” (PD 41/UT 286). If, at the core of the subject, perception marks the fact of his birth, then it is as if we perceive, move, act and even speak and think in order to (re)gain our breath, just as, in order to perceive, speak and think, we must first draw (our) breath.

With respect to the inscription of immemoriality as natality at the centre of reflective consciousness, we can see Merleau-Ponty being lead to this as he struggles to emphasize the dimension of *passivity* that always accompanies each of our activities as reflective, personal subjects aspiring to individuality and autonomy:

Our birth, or, as Husserl puts it in his unpublished works, our “generativity”, simultaneously establishes our activity or our individuality and our passivity or our generality, that internal weakness that forever prevents us from achieving the density of an absolute individual (PhP 491/452).

If, for Merleau-Ponty, birth establishes our passivity (and generality) in virtue of the same process through which our activity is also established, this is because – it seems to me – the event of my birth, the fact that I am born, the condition of having issued from other than myself, constitutes the condition of not being one’s own origin. The failure to be one’s own origin would seem to amount to an insurmountable passivity, indeed to the very dimension of passivity at the core of my very being; it is the event *par excellence* that establishes and subtends, on the far side of any possible initiative or desire on my part, the eventuality of my existence, the openness of my existence to the new, to the unforeseen, to the event. To be born is to be submitted to the surprising condition of always having to resume a past that has never been present. As Françoise Dastur puts it, obliquely gesturing toward Merleau-Ponty:

We did not ask for our birth, and this is testimony to the fact that we are not at the origin of our own existence. To be born means that we are conditioned by a past that was never present [sic!] to us. It can only be appropriated by us later, by assuming these determinations of our existence that we have not chosen. There is therefore a surprise in us in relation to our birth. It is the permanent surprise of being born which is constitutive of our being. It is testimony to the uncontrollable character of this proto-event. In each new event there is a repetition of the proto-event of birth.³¹²

More explicitly confronting Heidegger’s determination of the temporality of *Dasein* as being-toward-death, Christina Schües suggests that “the essential features of natal existence

³¹² Françoise Dastur, “Phenomenology of the Event: Waiting and Surprise”, *Hypatia* 15, no. 4 (2000), p. 186.

(*Dasein*) must include being-from-birth (along with being-with and being-toward-death) if we are to understand intentional existence and if we are to address the question of ‘who someone is’.³¹³ Indeed, she argues, “birth is the condition of possibility of intentionality”.³¹⁴ This is so because, she explains, intentionality occurs within the space of what she calls a “double difference” – the difference between the intended and the intending (i.e., the self-world separation), and the difference between the intended and the sense in terms of which it is intended – and birth is the very inauguration of this difference, because it is a first *differentiation*: “Birth leads to the *first difference*: new conditions of light, temperature, nourishment, etc.; a constancy of physical conditions changes to the world of differences, of discontinuities, of differentiations in bodily spatiality”.³¹⁵

According to Johanna Oksala, the very condition of natality such as Dastur and Schües describe it must be acknowledged to represent not only some regional problem to which phenomenology might attempt to apply its customary procedures of intentional analysis starting from the lived experience of the subject. She follows Dastur in considering the condition of natality as the submission to an “unpredictability to experience capable of shattering the unity of the subject’s horizon of expectations”, in so far as one’s own birth continues to occasion surprise at the fact of being present to the world.³¹⁶ But she thinks that the condition of natality should be acknowledged as a challenge to the very protocols of phenomenology as a retreat to the “lived” constitution of sense: “A careful analysis of birth also questions the privileged phenomenological subject in another sense, highlighting the limits of egological accounts of sense constitution”.³¹⁷

It seems to me that, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty was trying to face up to precisely the kind of challenge to phenomenology formulated by the authors just cited, and that he did it largely in terms of a meditation on subjectivity – whether unreflective or reflective – as a *gift*.³¹⁸ “The central phenomenon, which simultaneously grounds my subjectivity and my transcendence toward the other, consists in the fact that I am given to myself” (PhP 417-418/377). To begin with, for Merleau-Ponty, to say that “I am given to myself” is far from a celebration of the transparency of psychic or transcendental

³¹³ Christina Schües, “The Birth of Difference”, *Human Studies* 20 (1997), p. 243.

³¹⁴ Schües, “The Birth of Difference”, p. 243.

³¹⁵ Schües, “The Birth of Difference”, p. 247.

³¹⁶ Johanna Oksala, “What is Feminist Philosophy? Thinking Birth Philosophically”, *Radical Philosophy* 126 (2004), p. 19.

³¹⁷ Oksala, “What is Feminist Philosophy? Thinking Birth Philosophically”, p. 19.

immanence, but is indeed the expression of an impenetrable enigma. As we saw above, for Merleau-Ponty, the fate of a being who is born is to be “a being who once and for all was given to himself as something to be understood” (PhP 404/362); and to understand myself and my life is necessarily an unending task, since my existence is constitutively temporal, always drawing along with it a wake of past life with which I can never coincide in reflection yet on which reflection draws, always moving into a futural horizon that already marks my present interpretation as provisional. Far from offering the assurance of clarity, my givenness to myself in reflection is rather the symptom and after-effect of my birth that remains an insurmountable opacity at the core of my being. It is opaque because it is given in such a way that the signature of the donor has become *almost* illegible – it is given with the generality of a “gift of nature”: “Reflection is not absolutely transparent for itself, it is always given to itself in an *experience* (in the sense in which Kant will use this word), it always springs forth without itself knowing from whence it springs, and offers itself to me as a gift of nature” (PhP 68/45). The opacity in the givenness of reflection to itself would seem to issue, in part, from the fact that the giving by which the givenness is given withdraws from every economy – precisely as the gift of life from the mother to her child can never be taken fully into account, or rather, can only be taken into account by not being taken into account.

To be given to myself is also to find myself already engaged, through the anonymous life of my body as natural subject of perception, in a natural and social world in a way that offers it to me as the theatre of my actions and my thoughts:

I am given, which is to say I find myself already engaged in a physical and social world; *I am given to myself*, which is to say that this situation is never concealed from me, it is never around me like some foreign necessity, and I am never actually enclosed in my situation like an object in a box (PhP 418/377).

In chapter 1, I cited a passage in which Merleau-Ponty speaks of his wonder at the “natural powers” that make up his being as a sensing subject: “I am, as a sensing subject, full of natural powers of which I am the first to be filled with wonder” (PhP 260/223), and I suggested that the wondrousness of those powers were due, in part, to their ostensible autonomy with regard to my personal acts and initiatives and to the dependence of the latter on the former. The present discussion concerning the anonymous life of the body as a gift is an opportunity to make more precise the dimension of dependency involved here, for

³¹⁸ What I will have to say on this subject is indebted to Cathryn Vasseleu’s analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “the body as given” in relation to Derrida’s critique of Marcel Mauss’ perspective on the gift; see Cathryn Vasseleu, *Textures of Light. Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 60-64.

Merleau-Ponty also characterizes the anonymous life of my body as natural subject of perception as a “gift of nature”. Such a characterization occurs in the course of a discussion of the dependency of what Merleau-Ponty calls the “symbolic function” upon the infrastructure of bodily existence. For Merleau-Ponty, to say that our bodily power of vision is a “gift of nature” obviously entails a much more radical relation of dependency – while at the same a much more radical possibility for transcendence – than the naturalist recourse to causality:

Visual contents are taken up, utilized, and sublimated to the level of thought through a symbolic power that transcends them, but this power can only be constituted on the basis of vision. (...) [T]he symbolic function does not depend on vision as its ground because vision is its cause, but because vision is this gift of nature that Spirit had to make use of beyond all expectations, to which it had to give a radically new sense and upon which nevertheless it depended, not merely in order to become embodied, but even in order to exist at all (PhP 159/128; see also PhP 261/224).

If the event of my birth remains at the core of my subjectivity as an irreducible dimension of passivity in so far as it has once and for all positioned me as the recipient of a gift beyond all expectation, beyond all hope, and for which no return can ever be attempted but is instead implied in every attempt at return, it is also that which once and for all opens the temporal register into which all my thoughts and actions will be inscribed. Toward the end of the “Cogito” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty makes the following phenomenological case for according to birth the rank of “transcendental event”:

The event of my birth has not completely passed away, it has not fallen into nothingness in the manner of an event in the objective world; rather, it engaged a future, not as a cause determines its effect, but like a situation that, from the moment it takes shape, inevitably leads to some resolution. There was henceforth a new “milieu” and the world received a new layer of signification. In the household where a new child is born, all objects change their sense, they begin to anticipate from this child some still indeterminate treatment; someone new and someone additional is there, a new history, whether it be brief or long, has just been established, and a new register is open. My first perception, along with the horizons that surrounded it, is an ever-present event, an unforgettable tradition; even as a thinking subject I am still this first perception, I am the continuation of the same life that it inaugurated. (...) [I am] a single temporality that unfolds itself [*s’explicitte*] from its birth and confirms this birth in each present. It is this advent or rather transcendental event that the *Cogito* recovers (PhP 468-469/429-430).

If this passage can be taken as representative of Merleau-Ponty’s early approach to the temporal constitution of subjectivity, it can also be taken to emblemize a crucial difference between Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger on this point. Against Heidegger’s privileging of mortality in his determination of the temporality of *Dasein* as essentially being-toward-death, it seems that, for Merleau-Ponty, the temporal cohesion of subjectivity is fundamentally

characterized by a being-from-birth, by the repetition and recommencement in each present of that inaugural past of all pasts that has never been present.

Let me insert a short digression here. Interestingly, Leonard Lawlor has recently proposed that what he calls “continental philosophy” – within which he seems to include Merleau-Ponty, in so far as he devotes a whole chapter to him in his book *Early Twentieth Century Continental Philosophy* – “is always concerned with the experience of death”.³¹⁹ Tracing this concern with death back to Heidegger’s 1927 *Being and Time*, he proposes that, for the continental philosophers thinking in the wake of Heidegger, “the experience of thinking is the experience of the moment, and the experience of the moment is always the experience of what is outside of me, and what is outside of me, at the limit of life, is death”.³²⁰ It would seem that Lawlor would have to consider Merleau-Ponty (along with certain other notable figures, such as Hannah Arendt and Luce Irigaray) a non-continental philosopher at least with regard to this issue, or at least as belonging to another tradition of continental philosophy.³²¹ And this is precisely also what he seems to imply when, in *The Implications of Immanence*, he writes that, for Merleau-Ponty, “nature really concerns birth”, that it concerns birth to such an extent that even death, for Merleau-Ponty, “is really about giving birth”, and this displacement of death by birth is partly what, according to Lawlor, yields Merleau-Ponty’s tranquil principle of nature,³²² as touched upon in the previous chapter. So, from the point of view of the passage from the “Cogito” chapter cited above, one

³¹⁹ Lawlor, *Early Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy*, p. 9.

³²⁰ Lawlor, *Early Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy*, p. 9.

³²¹ Conversely, it is not surprising that we find Christina Schües quoting from precisely the above passage in the “Cogito” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* toward the end of the article (cited above) in which she criticizes Heidegger for a lack of attention to natality (cf. Schües, “The Birth of Difference”, pp. 250-251). See Kascha Snavelly’s doctoral dissertation *Being Toward Death: Natality and Nature in Merleau-Ponty* for a comparison of Hannah Arendt and Merleau-Ponty with regard to their common emphasis on natality as opposed to Heidegger’s privileging of mortality (cf. Kascha Snavelly, *Being Toward Birth: Natality and Nature in Merleau-Ponty* (Doctoral Thesis, Department of Philosophy, Boston College, Boston, 2009).

Apart from Merleau-Ponty and Arendt, one would have to include Luce Irigaray in the tradition of 20th century continental thought that opposes, in the name of a focus on birth and natality, Heidegger’s privileging of mortality as the dominant existential. This occurs in quite explicit terms in her book on Heidegger, *The Forgetting of Air*, where she interprets Heidegger’s preoccupation with death, “what isn’t any good”, as a symptom of the mourning for the lost maternal abode, and at the same time as an attempt to come to terms with the irrepayable debt incurred by the (non-)recognition of the gift of life. In other words, she understands Heidegger’s desire to establish the whole of *Dasein*’s temporality on the ground of being-toward-death as an – ultimately futile – attempt to offer one’s own death as a balancing of the account that has irrevocably put man in debt to his maternal origin: “Isn’t this how he constitutes the space-time of entry into presence? First, an assimilation of her to him – which will remain within the absence of presence. Returning to her what isn’t any good, but especially in ‘form’ of the immensity of a mourning that is projected-left to her, and that upholds the basis for mourning her. (...) In this space-time of mourning, hatred’s *countering* and opposition are forgotten-erased in the fact that she calls him so that he may give-give back to her. Give-give back what? The whole. The whole now amounts to what? To death” (Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, trans. Mary Beth Mader (London: The Athlone Press, 1999), pp. 52-53). For a brief yet concise discussion of the issue of mortality vs. natality in Irigaray’s reading of Heidegger, see Joanne Faulkner, “Anamnesia at the Beginning of Time: Irigaray’s Reading of Heidegger in *The Forgetting of Air*”, *Contretemps* 2 (2001), pp. 132-134.

³²² Lawlor, *The Implications of Immanence: Toward a New Concept of Life*, p. 119.

might have modified Lawlor's formula of the fundamental experience of continental philosophy such as it would have to be written in order to accord with Merleau-Ponty's characterization of birth as the "transcendental event": "The experience of thinking is the experience of the moment, and the experience of the moment is always the experience of what is prior to me, and what is prior to me, at the limit of life, is birth".

Returning again to Merleau-Ponty's notion of birth as transcendental event, it is possible to discern in the "Temporality" chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* an indirect critique of Heidegger's privileging of death as the element of the self-temporalization of *Dasein*: "Heidegger's notion of historical time, which flows from the future and that, through a resolute decision, has its future in advance and saves itself once and for all from dispersion, is impossible according to Heidegger's own thought" (PhP 490/451). Hence, on Merleau-Ponty's reading of Heidegger, the latter tries in vain to make temporality rest on the resoluteness or spontaneity of *Dasein* in the face of its mortality, and in so doing puts the cart before the horse: "I am not the author of time, any more than I am the author of my own heartbeats, nor am I the one who takes the initiative of temporalization; I did not choose to be born, but no matter what I do, once I am born, time flows through me" (PhP 490/451). According to Merleau-Ponty, no decision or existential conversion is so radical or authentic that it severs all our roots in the present or in the past; quite to the contrary, every conversion or decision aiming for the future, which will endow the present and the past with their innermost and authentic meaning, is a modification or deflection of the present on the basis of what is offered there, and is doomed to find, retrospectively, its own motive in the past:

We are always centered in the present, and all of our decisions emerge from there; they can always be placed into relation with our past, they are never without some motive; even if they open up within our lives some process that might be entirely new, they must be taken up in what follows and they only save us from dispersion for a period of time. Thus, there can be no question of deducing time from spontaneity (PhP 490-491/451).

Our being-from-birth thus means, first, that our agency cannot be understood in terms of resoluteness or pure spontaneity, but is always the resumption of a past that has never been present, a past I am no more able to consider to be properly mine than I can claim to be the author of my own heartbeats.

But, second, Merleau-Ponty's recourse to natality as the source of our temporality equally allows him to propose an alternative to Sartre's – and, in some places (as we saw in chapter 1), his own – conception of subjectivity as a power of nihilation, as a retreat or enclave of non-being in the plenitude of being. Temporality is not based on the subject's

ever-present power of breaking with a given commitment; quite to the contrary, this power of withdrawal “which inhabits us and that we in fact are is itself given to us along with temporality and life” (PhP 491/452). The power of withdrawal or nihilation is for Merleau-Ponty parasitic on a more primordial power, which for Merleau-Ponty is synonymous with what, as we have seen in chapters 1 and 2, he calls natural time. With each new breath, each focusing gesture of the gaze, each stirring in it of kinesthesia or of a motor project, my body, Merleau-Ponty suggests, “offers to me some form of living” (*me fait...la proposition de vivre*) (PhP 203/168), which is to say that the temporality that is our natural and natal legacy is a power to *begin*. Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Sartrean freedom can thus in many ways be summed up by saying that, for Sartre, freedom is expressed in the power to *break off*, while, for Merleau-Ponty, freedom is expressed above all in the power to *begin*, and that the former power is parasitic on the latter:

I can no longer pretend to be a nothingness and to choose myself continuously from nothing. (...) I can, of course, interrupt my projects at any moment. But what exactly is this power? It is the power of beginning something else, for we never remain in suspense in the nothingness. We are always in the plenum of being...just as silence is still a modality of the sonorous world. (...) [I]t is not that I withdraw into my freedom, but because I commit myself elsewhere. Rather than thinking of my sorrow, I stare at my fingernails, or I have lunch, or I get involved in politics. Far from my freedom being forever alone, it is in fact never without accomplices, and its power of perpetually tearing itself always leans upon my universal engagement in the world (PhP 516/478-479).

Note in particular that, for Merleau-Ponty in this passage, the power to begin is not opposed or contrary to the plenitude of being, to the fullness of nature, but is rather consonant with our being immersed in it, that is, with our being born into a natural, historical and social world, thus being necessarily a power of, not of beginning *tout court*, but of beginning *something else*. For Merleau-Ponty, then, to act is inseparably the act of resuming an already given situation which I have not constituted but which constitutes me as an agent, while all the same being the commencement of something else, something new.

This ambiguous, while not contradictory, nature of the act is precisely what, for Merleau-Ponty, makes every action, as we saw above, a “confirmation” of our birth. As he puts it in “Cézanne’s Doubt”: “In every life, one’s birth and one’s past define categories or basic dimensions which do not impose any particular act but which can be found in all” (SNS 42/CD 75). His critique of Heidegger and Sartre is therefore connected to the issue of birth – and, by extension, to the maternal body – in a crucial way because he sees both Heidegger’s recourse to resoluteness in the face of mortality and Sartre’s recourse to the

power of nihilation in the face of facticity as different expressions of a hubris that wants to do without any point of departure. In wanting to do without any point of departure, they portray a freedom that arrogates to itself the responsibility for everything from the breathing reflex that sustains it to the ethical act in which it finds its purest expression. They attempt to convert all passivity into activity, to consider as a choice or decision even the failure to abstain from a given commitment, thus making it ultimately impossible to distinguish in any relevant way between an act and a non-act, and in this attempt Merleau-Ponty reads a disavowal precisely of our natality:

As long as we do not perceive that natural outline of a subjectivity between ourselves and the world, and that pre-personal time that rests upon itself, then acts will be necessary to sustain the springing forth of time and everything will be a choice in the same way: the breathing reflex as well as the moral decision, or conservation as well as creation. For us, consciousness only attributes this power to itself if it passes over in silence the event that establishes its infrastructure and that is its birth (PhP 517/479-480).

In light of the preceding, we understand that birth is, for Merleau-Ponty, truly the event *par excellence*, the transcendental event, the event from which eventuality itself springs and which is recalled in every act, every thought and even in every perception. By the same token, we also understand that birth is for him the privileged expression of the immemorial past that is constitutively folded into each present. As such, it is what seals our fate as beings who are born, who are given to ourselves through a giving so radical that, insofar as it ruins all attempts to reciprocate it or to take it fully into account, remains the source of an impenetrable opacity at the centre of our being.³²³

Intra-Uterine Life as “The Sketch of a Natural Self and a Natural Time”

In the second paragraph of the “Others and the Human World” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, we find a second answer to the question raised at the outset of my previous section: How to understand the sense one has of not being at one with oneself while all the same being given to oneself as the horizon of a possible narrative or direction of events? Correspondingly, how to understand the sense one has of integrating into a perceptual

³²³ This exploration of the motif of natality, of birth as transcendental event, in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* is no doubt highly sketchy and provisional. My intention, however, was primarily to highlight the interconnections in Merleau-Ponty between the issue of nature’s immortality and the motif of birth as transcendental event. For a vastly more sustained analysis of natality as an issue in its own right in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature from *The Structure of Behaviour* via *Phenomenology of Perception* and the *Nature* courses to *The Visible and the Invisible*,

present the opacity of dispersed sensory fields which are nonetheless indestructibly anterior to and remain foreign to one? The answer is proposed as an example, an illustration of the conditions that make it be that the disappearance from view of one's earliest years is not due to "some fortuitous breakdown of memory or the lack of a complete exploration" and that "there is nothing to be known in these unexplored lands" (PhP 404/362). The example that imposes itself as an illustration of what is truly immemorial, of the kind of situation that, *par excellence*, withdraws from all memory, is the example of intra-uterine life: "For example, nothing (*rien*) was perceived in intra-uterine life, and this is why there is nothing (*rien*) to remember (*rappeler*). There was nothing (*rien*) but the sketch (*l'ébauche*) of a natural self and of a natural time" (PhP 404/362).

This passage, which once again brings to our notice – while simultaneously effectuating an obliteration of – the labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature, poses to us two interrelated questions: 1) What are we to make of the recurrence of the term *rien* here? and 2) What are we to make of the assertion that, despite its being triply, even abysmally, hollowed out by a perceptual and memorial nothingness, intra-uterine life is nevertheless the place and time in which a natural self is sketched – in other words, what of the *positivity* of intra-uterine life that remains on the far side of its obliteration by perception and memory? I shall advance some brief considerations concerning the first question, before I turn to Irigaray for assistance in answering the second.

A Zero of Perception

In intra-uterine life, according to Merleau-Ponty, nothing was perceived and *therefore* there is nothing to recall of it. To say that nothing was perceived in intra-uterine life may be an adequate proposition if we recall that (as discussed in chapter 3), for Merleau-Ponty, perception is defined by the separation of a figure from its ground, by the requirement that the sensible "form some scene before me and thus cease to be part of myself" (PhP 25/3). Hence, not only is it a precondition for perception that the sensible form some scene before me and organizes itself into a figure appearing against a background from which it is detached, an organization that expresses the "best hold" that my body has on it; this precondition is in its turn premised on a second precondition, namely, that the sensible must cease to fill me completely, I must no longer be completely immersed in it, and some

and its connection with Hannah Arendt's political philosophy as a philosophy of natality, see again Kascha Snavely's treatise (cf. Snavely, *Being Toward Birth: Natality and Nature in Merleau-Ponty*).

distance must intervene so as to prevent “disappearance of the seer or of the visible” (VI 171/131). When Merleau-Ponty considers intra-uterine life a zero of perception (and *therefore* of memory), it is probably because he assumes – rightly or wrongly – that all the necessary conditions for perception are not fulfilled there, although many of those conditions are surely in preparation, although even vision is being “premeditated in counterpoint in the embryonic development” (cf. VI 191/147).

However, in failing to fulfil all conditions necessary for there to be perception, intra-uterine life joins with a host of other experiences in composing a territory of experience into which *Phenomenology of Perception* regularly strays before quickly leaving it again. I am thinking of the range of phenomena which, as we saw in chapter 3, are neither perceptual nor (as in the case of language) dependent upon perception, phenomena such as sensation understood as “the manner in which I am affected” (PhP 25/3), the “sort of stupor into which [sensation] puts us when we truly live at the level of sensation” (PhP 260/223), a “sensing prior to the senses” that vibrates in me and “becomes a highly precise experience of a modification of my entire body” (PhP 273/236), Dionysian ecstasy and the zone of indeterminacy between sleep and waking (cf. PhP 201-202/166-167), the lability and fragility of our spatial anchorage in pre-human nature which is “not merely the intellectual experience of disorder, but also the living experience of vertigo and nausea, which is the consciousness of, and the horror caused by, our contingency” (PhP 302-303/265), psychosis and delirium (cf. PhP 316/278, 338-340/299-300, 391-400/349-358), the anonymous murmur (*rumeur*) of general sensibility (PhP 384/343), nocturnal space (cf. PhP 335/296), and oneiric or imaginary spaces (cf. PhP 335-337/296-298). Whereas the latter would be a case of pure figuration, pure surface without support from any background or depth, a spectral presence divested of the resistant yet assuring haecceity of things that grounds waking perception, all the other cases would be indicative of the experiential register in which, to borrow an expression from Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition*, the ground rises to the surface and dissolves all forms.³²⁴ It is particularly, as we recall from chapter 3, in his description of the spatiality of the night that Merleau-Ponty evokes such a rising, form-dissolving ground: “The night is without profiles, it itself touches me (...) it becomes entirely animated; it is a pure

³²⁴ “Lighting, for example, distinguishes itself from the black sky but must also trail behind it., as though it were distinguishing itself from that which does not distinguish itself from it. It is as if the ground rose to the surface, without ceasing to be ground. (...) In truth, all the forms are dissolved when they are reflected in this rising ground” Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 28).

depth without planes, without surfaces, and without any distance from it to me” (PhP 335/296).

Like all these examples of a zero of perception, and particularly like the case of nocturnal space, intra-uterine life cannot be *just* a privation of perception or memory, but must have a certain positivity to which a certain phenomenology is due. This is so not least in so far as Merleau-Ponty concedes that it comprises the “sketch” (*ébauche*) of a natural self and a natural time, which would also make it stand out among all the other perceptual zeroes as far as constitutive status is concerned. At the same time, in a quite literal sense, intra-uterine life is also Merleau-Ponty’s example of what is the most immemorial about our existence. It therefore seems that an investigation of intra-uterine life in its aspect as the sketch of the natural self on which my personal existence depends would provide us with another privileged entry into the labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature that is also, inseparably, an entry into the issue of the absolute past of the nature that we are. However, Merleau-Ponty has very little to say on this subject in explicit terms, and so whatever resources there may be in his text for an exploration of it will have to be sought in the margins, in the silences and ellipses to which he subjects it. Such an exploration is precisely what has been undertaken by Luce Irigaray in her epochal reading of the fourth chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, and so I need to turn to that chapter and to her reading of it now in order to extract from it that which bears particularly upon my present concern.

“The Tangible Invisible”: Merleau-Ponty with Irigaray, Phase I

As indicated in my introductory chapter, in her reading of Merleau-Ponty’s “Intertwining – the Chiasm” in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray is pursuing several trajectories of investigation that may be distinguished, although, to her mind, they are inseparable. On the one hand, she is concerned to “bring the maternal-feminine into language: at the level of theme, motif, subject, articulation, syntax, and so on”;³²⁵ on the other hand, she is concerned with what she calls “the repressed-censored of another sex that asks to come into being”;³²⁶ a coming into being that requires nothing short of a “chang[e] in the foundations of language”.³²⁷ These concerns are interlinked for Irigaray because the change in the

³²⁵ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 152.

³²⁶ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 177.

³²⁷ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 184.

foundations of language required for the coming into being of another sex – the female subject – requires in its turn that the maternal-feminine be brought into language. The bringing into language of the maternal-feminine is necessary because the silencing of the maternal-feminine also entails the exclusion of women from access to a subject position of their own, beyond their role in the reproduction and maintenance of the hegemony of the masculine subject position in the current symbolical order. As we can gather from what has been said thus far, Irigaray’s reading of Merleau-Ponty forms part of a much larger philosophical and political project that she has continued to work on in one form or another up to the present day, admittedly with certain changes in approach and style along the way.

Now, as sympathetic as one should clearly be to this larger philosophico-political project (granted the accuracy of Irigaray’s analysis of how things stand with sexual difference in the current symbolical order), this is not what I will be concerned with in the following. Instead, I intend – in what follows below and in the next and final chapter – to extract from her essay that trajectory of investigation that most immediately works to throw some light on the place and labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature (understood as the nature we are). This means that I will be following the thread of her attempt to bring the maternal-feminine into language, such as it can be said to have been incorporated yet silenced in Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on the flesh. With regard to the issue now under discussion – namely, the meaning of Merleau-Ponty’s fleeting reference to pre-perceptual and immemorial intra-uterine life as the “sketch of a natural self and a natural time” – it seems to me to be particularly relevant to look at the sense in which, for Irigaray, the maternal-feminine is inscribed yet effaced in the (non-)place in Merleau-Ponty’s text of what she calls the “tangible invisible”, a term she uses only once in the essay.³²⁸ It seems to me that “the tangible invisible” occupies the same position in Irigaray’s essay on Merleau-Ponty as does the wall of the cave in her reading of Plato’s simile of the cave in *Speculum of the Other Woman*,³²⁹ the element of water in her reading of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*,³³⁰ and the element of air in her reading

³²⁸ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 154

³²⁹ Cf. Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, pp. 241-364. See Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, pp. 105-113; Songe-Møller, *Philosophy Without Women: the Birth of Sexism in Western thought*, pp. 113-128; and Sampson, *Ontogony: Conceptions of Being and Metaphors of Birth in the Timaeus and the Parmenides*, pp. 147-152 for expositions of Irigaray’s long essay on Plato in *Speculum* that explain, along different routes, the significance of the wall of the cave in this essay.

³³⁰ Cf. Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, pp. 1-73. For an exposition of Irigaray’s concern, in *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, with the element of water in relation to Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*, see Mortensen, *The Feminine and Nihilism: Luce Irigaray with Nietzsche and Heidegger*, pp. 53-96

of Heidegger in *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*.³³¹ This means that her reading of “The Intertwining – the Chiasm” enters the text through the vision-touch problematic developed therein, and more precisely through Merleau-Ponty’s description of the “touch-vision system” (VI 188/144) as an instance of reversibility (in the sense of intertwining). Since this issue was only marginally treated of in my exposition of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the flesh in chapter 3, I will add only a few supplementary remarks on this issue so as to provide some background for my approach to Irigaray’s at times highly elliptical comments.

The Touch-Vision System

In chapter 1 we saw that, for Merleau-Ponty, the real of nature or the thingliness of the natural thing crucially involves an interpenetration and convergence of sensory fields on the thing as fundamentally an “inter-sensory thing” (PhP 373/331) and that “[s]ynesthetic perception is the rule” (PhP 275/238). In the fourth chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty reasserts this emphasis on the significance of synaesthesia, but the terms of this reassertion are now provided by the vocabulary connected to the flesh as reversibility and more precisely as intertwining. At the same time the emphasis on ontology is more prominent, since Merleau-Ponty more often than not speaks of “the tangible”, “the visible” and “the sensible” rather than of “the sensory fields” or “the senses” (*les sens*), appealing to, we recall, an “ontological rehabilitation of the sensible” (S 271/167).

In “The Intertwining – the Chiasm”, this ontological rehabilitation of the sensible takes the form not only of a description of how the sensate is constitutively inscribed or incorporated into the sensible it discloses, but also of how the landscape of one region of the sensible is recorded on the map of another. Merleau-Ponty’s basis for asserting such an recapitulation of one sensible region (the tangible) in another (the visible) and vice versa is the supposition that it is the same body that both sees and touches, and presents the assertion in the same language he also uses to describe the reversibility between the sensate and sensible within each sense:

We must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut in the tangible, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility, and that there is encroachment, infringement, not only between the touched and the touching, but also between the tangible and the visible, which is encrusted in it, as, conversely, the tangible is not a nothingness of visibility, is not without visual existence. (...) There is a double and

³³¹ Cf. Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*. For an exposition of Irigaray’s concern, in *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, with the element of air in relation to Heidegger’s *Seinsdenken*, see Ellen Mortensen, *Touching Thought: Ontology and Sexual Difference* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2002), pp. 87-97

crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible; the two maps are complete, and yet they do not merge into one. The two parts are total parts and yet are not superposable (VI 175/134; see also VI 186/143).

On the surface of it, at least, this description appears to be an emphatic rejection not only of an ostensibly abstract partitioning of the sensate into different departments functioning in isolation and in need of some superior agency – consciousness – for their coordination. In other words, there is a spontaneous interpenetration between the tangible and the visible that has always already taken effect prior to every attempt to distinguish, for a given experience, the contributions made to it by the visual and the tactile respectively. By the same token, it is equally, at least on the surface of it, a vigorous refusal to accord to any particular sensory domain – the plurality of sensory domains here represented by the difference between the visual and the tactile – any special privilege. This is reflected even grammatically in this sentence: “[t]here is a double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible”. In other words, to judge from these formulations, it would seem that Merleau-Ponty, in “The Intertwining – the Chiasm”, is abandoning all vestiges of ocularcentrism found in certain formulations occurring elsewhere in his writings. Notable among such formulations are “our world is principally and essentially visual; one would not make a world out of scents or sounds” (VI 113-114/83), and, in a note to the “Sensing” chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*:

Of course, the senses must not be placed on the same footing, as if they were all equally capable of objectivity and equally permeable to intentionality. Experience does not present them as equivalent. It seems that visual experience is more accurate than tactile experience, that it gathers into itself its truth, and adds to it, because vision’s richer structure presents modalities of being to me that are unsuspected for touch (PhP 280 n.1/538 n. 64).

By contrast, within the touch-vision system put in place in “The Intertwining – the Chiasm”, it would seem that all senses are put on the same footing, the same “sensible in general”, that one cannot ultimately discern any differences between them in their respective degrees of objectivity, accuracy, veracity, or richness.

Nevertheless, in her reading of “The Intertwining – the Chiasm”, Irigaray is struggling vigorously against the touch-vision system put in place by Merleau-Ponty in that text. Her main reason to do so is that, in setting up this system in the way he does, Merleau-Ponty engages in a “most radical *polemos* with the maternal, the intrauterine”,³³² the symptom of which is given in the obliteration by this system of what she calls, as we have seen, the

“tangible invisible”, which, according to her, is the phenomenological landscape appropriate to the maternal, the intrauterine: “Insurmountable other of the visible, not reducible to its invisible other side. It is a question of another world, another landscape, a *topos* or a locus of the irreversible”.³³² We can immediately determine that her conclusion to this effect is vindicated if we recall that Merleau-Ponty’s touch-vision system entails that “every tactile being [is] in some manner promised to visibility”. If every tactile being is in some manner promised to visibility, then whatever appears to have a tangible yet invisible existence is invisible only in an empirical, non-transcendental and non-ontological sense, hence invisible in a sense that is philosophically negligible as insignificant as far as the constitution of the body as natural subject is concerned.

Irigaray is going to struggle against this touch-vision system – and the concomitant *polemos* with the maternal it perpetuates – by insisting 1) that “[t]he visible and the tangible do not obey the same laws and rhythms of the flesh”,³³⁴ hence that the two are not congruent to the degree implied by Merleau-Ponty, 2) that “the tangible is the matter and memory for all of the sensible”,³³⁵ hence that there is an asymmetry between the tangible and the visible as far as constitutive status is concerned, and 3) that Merleau-Ponty’s text itself supplies the resources to subvert the touch-vision system along precisely these lines and hence assists, despite itself, in bringing the maternal-feminine into language, and that his discourse on the flesh can be said to “remember without remembering thematically”³³⁶ the maternal gift of life that finds itself obliterated on the thematic level of this discourse. In other words, part of her struggle against Merleau-Ponty’s touch-vision system consists in showing how it struggles against itself, in showing how, to borrow an expression from Avital Ronell, it is “traumatized by its own procedures”.³³⁷ If Irigaray is successful in this endeavour, it means that she manages to bring to light a labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature that works to subvert the order put in place on the level of explicit statements, at the

³³² Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 171.

³³³ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 153.

³³⁴ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 162.

³³⁵ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 164.

³³⁶ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 164. This item could be said to be connected to what has become known as Irigaray’s strategy of *mimesis*. I have not felt it necessary to include a special discussion of Irigaray’s complex notion of *mimesis* in order to make sense of what she is doing in her reading of Merleau-Ponty, but see Susan Kozel, “The Diabolical Strategy of Mimesis: Luce Irigaray’s Reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty”, *Hypatia* 11, no. 3 (1996) for a critical discussion of the instance of *mimesis* in Irigaray’s reading of Merleau-Ponty, and Naomi Schor, “This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips With Irigaray,” in *Engaging with Irigaray: feminist philosophy and modern European thought*, ed. Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, and Margaret Whitford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) for a discussion of the nature and function of *mimesis* in Irigaray’s philosophy of sexual difference more broadly conceived.

³³⁷ I heard Ronell use this expression during a session of her course “More Trauma” which she held at NYU in the fall semester of 2007, and which I had the opportunity of auditing.

same time that she also contributes to make explicit what we are to make of Merleau-Ponty's suggestion, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, that intrauterine life elaborates the "sketch of a natural self and a natural time". I shall investigate Irigaray's arguments concerning the "tangible invisible" in "The Intertwining – the Chiasm" from this point of view.

A Difference of Laws and Rhythms of the Flesh

To begin with, Irigaray claims – against Merleau-Ponty's suggestion – that the two "maps" of the tangible and the visible are not congruent one with the other, and that there is a great deal to be said from the point of view of the divergence between them. It can be determined to what extent such a questioning is already anticipated by Merleau-Ponty's own conceptuality. To the extent that he sets up the touch-vision system by following the mode of operation of the touching-touched system of reversibility, then the touch-vision system must also, like the reversibility of the touching and the being touched, incorporate a moment of shift, slippage or deviation (*écart*). Irigaray inserts her interrogation of Merleau-Ponty's touch-vision system in this moment of silence or slippage so as to mark the "difference of laws or rhythms of the flesh" that ultimately makes Merleau-Ponty's "double and crossed situating" of the visible and the tangible in one another an impossibility.

In order to facilitate this investigation, Irigaray opens the question of the appropriateness of Merleau-Ponty's paradigmatic example, i.e., the situation of double-touch produced by one hand taking hold of the other hand of the same body. Irigaray suspects that this choreography, which is invoked in order to mark out the space in which the reversibility of vision is to be conceived by analogy, has already been staged according to the requisites for the specular functioning of the look, in the service of which traditional dualities of a metaphysical sort are nevertheless retained, despite the subtlety and intricacy of Merleau-Ponty's allegedly subversive operations of reversion, inversion, interweaving, entangling, folding over and turning inside-out etc. Among the traditional metaphysical dualities reinvigorated by Merleau-Ponty's description of the touching hands, Irigaray focuses in particular on the active-passive distinction, doubling that of interiority vs. exteriority and subject vs. object. For Irigaray, it is significant that Merleau-Ponty, despite his intent to overcome the traditional active-passive bifurcation, despite the fact that he laments the failure of traditional philosophy to speak of "the passivity of our activity" (VI 270/221), nevertheless continues this very tradition when he stages the double-touch as the gesture of one hand *taking hold* of the other hand. The very choreography of Merleau-Ponty's

illustration of the double-touch thus becomes one that suggests hierarchy, domination, subjection, arrested flow or movement. Although Merleau-Ponty's point is that I experience – and “as often as I wish” (VI 192/148) – the reversion of this relation across the minuscule hiatus separating the two hands, the fact remains that what is reversed is precisely a relation of domination through which one term is set up as purely active and another as purely passive. In this attempt to accommodate the irreducible moment of passivity by *redoubling* – through reversion across a temporal interval (“as *often* as I wish”) – the active-passive relation as traditionally conceived, Irigaray discerns the horror at “[a] passive forever lacking an active, [m]ore passive than any passivity taken in a passive-active couple”, in compensation for which Merleau-Ponty tries to “put back together the most passive and the most active, (...) establish a *continuum*, a duration, between the most passive and the most active”.³³⁸

In order to mark the possibility that the map of the tangible might not have received the phenomenology which is due to it from Merleau-Ponty's choreography of the touching hands, Irigaray proposes to slightly rearrange his illustration and develop the possible implications of this rearrangement. And curiously, it is a rearrangement already anticipated by Merleau-Ponty himself. As we saw in chapter 3, one of the images he uses to evoke the intimate comingling of the seeing and the visible is the application to another of the body's two “outlines”, figured as the “two lips”. By suggesting that we use the two lips as the template for the touching-touched relation, Irigaray may be seen to turn Merleau-Ponty's own imagery against him:

Is it still “valid”, if the *two hands* are *joined*? Which brings about something very particular in the relation feeling-felt. With no subject or object. With no passive or active, or even middle-passive. A sort of fourth mode? Neither active, nor passive, nor middle-passive. Always more passive than the passive. And nevertheless active. The hands joined, palms together, fingers outstretched, constitute a very particular touching. A gesture often reserved for women (at least in the West) and which evokes, doubles the *touching of the lips* silently applied upon on another. A touching more intimate than that of one hand taking hold of the other. A phenomenon that remains in the interior, does not appear in the light of day, speaks of itself only in gestures, remains always on the edge of speech, gathering the edges without sealing them.³³⁹

It is of course questionable whether or not the lips invoked by Merleau-Ponty are feminine ones, and perhaps it is, partly at least, this questionableness that stimulates Irigaray's recourse to them in the refiguring of Merleau-Ponty's touching-touched relation. According

³³⁸ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 154.

to Bruce Yong, if the lips Merleau-Ponty speaks about are read consistently with reference to the context in which they occur, namely, emergence and birth, then they assume an unmistakably feminine quality: “at any rate the ‘lips’ in this image evoke that opening from which we emerge in birth and so the feminine”.³⁴⁰ Here Yong might even have supported himself on a remark Irigaray herself makes apropos of the feminine, lips, and emergence in *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*: “Out of the storehouse of matter all forms are born. She brings them into the world, she ‘produces’. From between her lips comes every new figure: a warm glowing heat comes out of that self-embrace and becomes ‘visible’”.³⁴¹ Speaking directly elsewhere in her essay on Merleau-Ponty to his surreptitious invocation of the two lips, Irigaray claims that this self-embrace of/in the feminine is nevertheless eclipsed altogether in his account, thus producing a disembodied pair of lips: “Two lips that do not touch each other in the same sensible realm, that, rigorously speaking, do not touch at all, unlike the lips of our ‘body’”.³⁴² It remains, nonetheless, as Elizabeth Grosz points out, that this oblique reference that Merleau-Ponty’s lip image, while negligent of the lived corporeality of women, may nevertheless amount to a surreptitious probing of or speculation on the domain of female sexuality: “These lips invoked by Merleau-Ponty are not those lips lived and experienced by women as such, although his metaphor may be an attempt to reappropriate this carnal intimacy of female corporeality”.³⁴³

At any rate, Irigaray claims that a considerable part of the living body’s tactile life must be recorded on the map suggested by the figure of the two hands joined, evoking as they do the touching of the lips that Merleau-Ponty himself invokes but nevertheless censures by recoding it as an image of specular relations in the visible domain. What Irigaray thereby claims to recover from its obliteration by Merleau-Ponty’s touch-vision system (imposing as the latter does the irreducibly hierarchical and violent ordering of the touching-touched relation into active-passive dualities) is a dimension or register of corporeality prior to and beneath every distribution – even if this distribution is understood in a temporal sense only – into passive and active poles, a passive “more passive than any passivity taken in a passive-active couple”, yet all the same active. Such a passivity that is not the passive complement,

³³⁹ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 161

³⁴⁰ Bruce Yong, "The Language of the Lips, Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray: Toward a Culture of Difference," in *Intertwinings: Interdisciplinary Encounters with Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Gail Weiss (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), p. 88.

³⁴¹ Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, p. 92.

³⁴² Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 166.

³⁴³ Grosz, "Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray in the Flesh", p. 159.

supplement or moment of an activity in so far as it is itself active would give us the difference of “laws and rhythms of the flesh” that Irigaray seeks to mark between the tangible and the visible, although she concedes that the intimacy epitomized by the “two lips” can also be touched upon by the gaze: “[T]he eyes meet in a sort of silence of vision, a screen of resting before and after seeing, a reserve for new landscapes, new lights, a punctuation in which the eyes reconstitute for themselves the frame, the screen, the horizon of a vision”.³⁴⁴

Closely related to Irigaray’s rehabilitation of the tangible invisible suggested by the refiguration of the touching-being touched relation as the “two lips”, is her preoccupation with the “*mucous* of the carnal”.³⁴⁵ The human body is articulated into a series of thresholds between inside and outside and where internal surfaces contact each other, as is the case with lips (oral and vaginal), the digestive system, the respiratory system, nostrils, mouth, ears, eyelids, uterus, clitoral glans, glans penis, foreskin, anus – all of which depend on the lining of mucous membranes for their maintenance and renewal. Now, the concern with the mucous and its “characteristics” recurs consistently throughout *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, not least in the essay on Levinas that follows immediately on the one on Merleau-Ponty. In the essay on Merleau-Ponty, however, the emphasis is primarily on an aspect of the mucous that is probably not totally without reference or allusion to what Merleau-Ponty has inscribed as the *écart* of reversibility, i.e. the evasion of mastery, which once again brings into play the activity-passivity problematic. The mucous neither masters the touch nor is mastered by it – it bypasses, evades mastery altogether:

I will always feel veiled, unveiled, violated, often by the other in this dimension which I cannot protect with my look. These mucous membranes evade my mastery, just as my face does, yet differently. The joined hands perhaps represent the memory of the intimacy of the mucous.³⁴⁶

If the joined hands represent the memory of the intimacy of the mucous, and if the mucous evades my mastery in a way that cannot be compared to the way the visibility of my face evades the mastery of my look, then the mucous amounts to a corporeal dimension that does not appear in the light of day, not even as the shadow of the diurnal. Like the touching of the two lips evoked by the joined hands – or rather being the medium of this touching – the mucous is hence another instance of the tangible invisible, another instance of “laws and rhythms of the flesh” that resist being assimilated to Merleau-Ponty’s touch-vision system,

³⁴⁴ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 161.

³⁴⁵ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 162

³⁴⁶ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 170.

on pain of being violated in their proper intimacy by the hierarchical order of active-passive relations that prevails in this system. Conversely, the tangible invisible as evoked by the touching of the “two lips” and the mucous associated with it is doubly a violation of reversibility as the “ultimate truth” (VI 201/155), in so far as it is doubly an instance of the irreversible: irreversibility (in the sense of an impossibility of a symmetrical reversal between activity and passivity) between touching and touched, and irreversibility (in the sense of qualitative incommensurability) between the tangible and the visible.

These observations have not yet brought us to the issue of the maternal body. Yet, they form an integral part of Irigaray’s project of bringing the maternal-feminine into language from its place of obliteration in Merleau-Ponty’s “The Intertwining – the Chiasm”. This is because, for Irigaray, the maternal-feminine is the silent and invisible ground, both obliterated and incorporated, of all philosophical discourse. According to a basic formula proposed by Deleuze (among others), for a ground to be able to ground something else, it cannot resemble that which it grounds – there must be heterogeneity and not homogeneity of ground and grounded.³⁴⁷ Without speculating on any history of influence here, we may say that Irigaray works, in her essay on Merleau-Ponty in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, according to a similar schema: Since the maternal-feminine will emerge in Irigaray’s reading of Merleau-Ponty in terms of the tangible as the ground of all the sensible (and especially of the visible), it cannot resemble that of which it is the ground: its fundamental difference from the visible has to be emphasized. Let us next consider how the tangible invisible becomes, in Irigaray’s rewriting of Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on the flesh, the “matter and memory of all the sensible”.

The Matter and Memory for All of the Sensible

Whereas the previous line of argument, invoking a difference of laws and rhythms of the flesh between the visible and the tangible, entailed a struggle against the hierarchical order implied by Merleau-Ponty’s choreography of the double-touch (subtending as it does his

³⁴⁷ In *Bergsonism*, Deleuze makes this point with reference to the difference between the classical conception of the relation between the possible and the real and the corresponding conception of the process of realization on the one hand, and Bergson’s transformation of these concepts into those of virtual, actual and actualization: “While the real is the image and likeness of the possible that it realizes, the actual, on the other hand does *not* resemble the virtuality that it embodies. It is difference that is primary in the process of actualization – the difference between virtual from which we begin and the actuals at which we arrive, and also the difference between the complementary lines according to which actualization takes place” (Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, p. 97). For a discussion of Deleuze’s principle of heterogeneity of ground and grounded (along with the principle of immanence) in relation to phenomenology, see Lawlor, *Thinking Through French Philosophy: The being of the Question*, pp. 80-94.

touch-vision system), the next issue will return us to considerations of hierarchy in a more positive register. Objecting to Merleau-Ponty's attempt to effectuate a "double and crossed situating (*relèvement*) of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible", Irigaray argues that Merleau-Ponty in positing such a double and crossed situating thereby forgets or disavows the non-reciprocal relation between these two domains. While clearly having reservations against Merleau-Ponty's language of "situating", "sublation" or "taking up" (*relèvement*) as a description of the relation between the visible and the tangible, she insists that, if one were to speak of this relation in such terms, one would have to accord the privilege of "situating" one-sidedly to the tangible:

*The tangible is, and remains, primary (premier) in its opening. (...) If one were to "situate" [relever], it would be the tangible. But it remains instead the ground that is available for all the senses. A landscape much vaster but never enclosed in a map, the tangible is the matter and memory of all the sensible. Which remembers without remembering thematically? It constitutes the very flesh of all things that will be sculpted, sketched, painted, felt, and so on, out of it.*³⁴⁸

As the dual sense of the French adjective *premier* suggests, the tangible enjoys – on Irigaray's view – primacy both in a temporal and a normative sense with respect to the visible. Thus, the tangible is prior to the visible, and it is – by extension – constitutive for the visible, is its flesh.

To begin with, the temporal primacy of the tangible lies in the fact that it is "received, perceived prior to the dichotomies of active and passive", it is "received like a bath that affects without and within, in fluidity".³⁴⁹ While the two lips and the mucous evoke the tangible invisible as a synchronic excess beyond the touching-touched/touch-vision/seeing-visible system as described by Merleau-Ponty, this reference to intrauterine life emphasizes how this system is put in place retroactively and is nourished on the tangible invisible as a diachronic excess. The tangible invisible is a register of sensibility that is opened prenatally in and through the envelopment by the maternal body – in the warmth, moisture, softness, kinaesthesia of immersion in the amniotic fluids of the intrauterine abode. And here Irigaray once again, like in the case of the two lips and the mucous, emphasizes how the tangible invisible amounts to a passivity in excess of "dichotomies of active and passive". However, whereas the passivity pertaining to the touching of the two lips and the mucous is characterized first of all by a resistance to or evasion of mastery, the passivity instantiated by intrauterine life is more the passivity of the recipient of a gift: The tangible invisible is

³⁴⁸ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, pp. 162-164.

received as that which affects without and within, and that which affects within and without affects with the force of a gift that is given through a giving radically in excess of any possibility of return. Indeed, for Irigaray, it seems to me, the impossibility on the part of vision to take up or measure (*relever*) the tangible without remainder must be read as the trace of the radical non-reciprocity through which sensibility was received in intrauterine life as a tangible invisible on which depend all the sensory and perceptual capacities that the subject, once born, will later cultivate. The sense of touch – at least insofar as it is conceded its own laws and rhythms of the flesh – carries for the subject of vision the memory of “that first event where he is enveloped-touched by a tangible invisible of which his eyes are also formed, but which he will never see: with no seer, neither visible nor visibility in that place”³⁵⁰.

Furthermore, for Irigaray, the tangible invisible that is received as a bath affecting within and without, radically in excess of active-passive dichotomies and economies of exchange, is the matter and memory not only of all the sensible but also of the intelligible understood as the domain of language. Just as Merleau-Ponty’s touch-vision system is unable to accommodate or even recognize the debt incurred by the reception of the tangible invisible in the intrauterine abode, Irigaray suggests that the audible cannot be recorded on the map of the visible for exactly the same reasons. Like the tangible, yet after it and so to speak within it, the audible is received as sexually differentiated, namely, as the mother’s voice vibrating in the womb. Prior to vision, sound, voice and hearing are for Irigaray therefore also first the province of the maternal, of the feminine, before being grammatically subjected to neutralization – which, in French at least, coincides with masculinisation:

In utero, I see nothing (except darkness?), but I hear. Music comes before meaning. (...) I hear, and what I hear is sexually differentiated. Voice is differentiated. (...) Thus, first of all, I hear something of the feminine, some vocalizing in the feminine. However, language is said, is ordered in the masculine, except when it is a case of what linguists call a mark. The feminine follows the masculine grammatical norm, which is supposedly neuter or neutral, by adding to it a mark: *e*. The feminine precedes and follows the masculine in language. (...) [T]he first music is on the acute side. This vocalism is the most memorable, and/but it is not repeated in the weave of language. Which would come into being to take its place?³⁵¹

Just as the tangible invisible received in intrauterine life cannot be taken up and recapitulated in the visible without remainder and is therefore as immemorial as it is invisible, so the

³⁴⁹ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 164.

³⁵⁰ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 154.

³⁵¹ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, pp. 168-169.

vocalizing in the feminine received along with the tangible invisible in intrauterine life is not (despite its being “the most memorable”) taken up in the weave of language. Insofar as the maternal, feminine gift of “the first music” therefore remains both immemorial and inaudible from the point of view of language, then, Irigaray claims, “[i]n our language we are always basically idealists. Cut off from mother nature, where, whence are born, from our archaic state, our archives of flesh (...) a part of the self that does not come back to us in its primary perception-reception”.³⁵²

Note that Irigaray prefers to speak of our *archives* of flesh and not, like Merleau-Ponty, of our archaeology (see chapter 3). The nuance between the two expressions may be significant.³⁵³ Whereas archaeology suggests a process of *natural* forgetting born of the accumulation of layers of sediments under which past civilizations are buried, Irigaray’s reference to “our archives of flesh” suggests a process of forgetting born of *abandoning*: whatever is deposited in an archive has ended up there by having been abandoned, stored away there. Irigaray herself indicates this much when she adds that our “archaic state” is a “primary part of the self that is abandoned ‘with the other’ – another feminine for both the sexes”.³⁵⁴ Yet this archive in which we have deposited our “primary-perception-reception” also assumes the vertical dimensions of an archaeological site or perhaps even a burial ground, in so far she also refers to that archaic state as “[a] part of our vitality that is buried, forgotten with the other, sometimes in the other”.³⁵⁵ By speaking thus of archives and abandonment in relation to our “archaic state” of “primary-reception-reception”, Irigaray weaves a dynamics of repression into her account of the immemoriality of the tangible invisible that is absent in Merleau-Ponty’s account of the past that has never been present.

In sum, on Irigaray’s analysis, in setting up a touch-vision system through which no visible can be recognized short of its participation by principle in the tangible *and vice versa*, Merleau-Ponty is forgetful of, first, the prehistoric, sexually differentiated advent of the tangible invisible of which the visible is made prior to any reversible active-passive positioning of the seer and the visible. Along similar lines, he is also forgetful of the first, sexually differentiated music that opens the dimension through which the possibility of language is announced but which language in its current state has consigned to an archival,

³⁵² Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 169.

³⁵³ Of course, for Foucault, archaeological research must be conducted in archives, and so this nuance does not become that relevant in his case.

³⁵⁴ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 169.

³⁵⁵ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 169.

immemorial existence. It is thus as if by promoting the maternal-feminine to language from the place of its effacement by Merleau-Ponty's touch-vision system in this way, Irigaray is simultaneously undermining this system *and* developing Merleau-Ponty's own point at the opening of the "Others and the Human World" chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* concerning intra-uterine life as the "sketch for a natural self and a natural time".

By the same token, Irigaray argues, Merleau-Ponty also forgets or glosses over the roots that tie sight constitutively to touch at any moment, and this takes us to the second sense in which "[t]he tangible is, and remains, primary (premier) in its opening", as we saw above. The very dimension of light, and even of colour is for Irigaray a reminder of a corporeal dimension without which sight is not possible, yet which is not reflected or recuperated in the visible, is without visible equivalent. It may be true that, as Merleau-Ponty writes, it is as though the look "were in a relation of pre-established harmony with [the things], as though it knew them before knowing them" (VI 173/133) – which is precisely what is incomprehensible to a Cartesian, who would locate all knowledge in an utterly disembodied mind. It nevertheless remains, Irigaray insists, that it is by the grace of light that the movements of the look proceed, that too strong or too feeble a light destroys the look, paralyzes it or renders it defunct, and hence that before and after clairvoyance or foresight there is sensitivity to light, which is tactile:

This colour, the correlative of my vision, of vision, far from being able to yield to my decisions, obliges me to see. (...) I do not see the source of light that allows me to see. I sense it, often when I forget about it. (...) And it remains that I see only by the touch of the light, and my eyes are situated in my body. I am touched and enveloped by the felt even before seeing it.³⁵⁶

It equally remains, she continues, that the eye-movements that Merleau-Ponty wants to situate in the visible landscape, and perhaps – she suspects – even verges on situating exclusively in that landscape, are also, before anything else, born of bodily kinesthesia, and thus also constitutively happen in what she terms "the living crypt of my body and my flesh".³⁵⁷ Hence, vision and the visible live off the tangible, but not the reverse. Although touch is no doubt coloured by the contributions from the other senses, it is its sole privilege to give and maintain the life of the other senses, and will be the last sense to be extinguished at the threshold of unconsciousness and/or death.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁶ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, pp. 156, 163, 165

³⁵⁷ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 165.

³⁵⁸ Cf. Grosz, "Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray in the Flesh", p. 158.

Like the feminine with respect to language, then, the tangible constitutively precedes, accompanies and follows the visible, and in this aspect remains without a visible correlate. Moreover, it observes different laws and rhythms of the flesh. And although one may well read Irigaray's pronouncements concerning the relation between the tangible and the visible as an analogy of the relation between maternal and paternal genealogies that greatly preoccupied her in all her work up to the mid-80's, there is for Irigaray clearly more than a mere analogy here. What she calls "the living crypt of my body and my flesh", tactility whence all sensibility draws its life and intelligence, is for her also, inseparably, our archives of flesh, the trace of an immemorially past sojourn in the maternal body. It is a part of ourselves that does not return to us as seers and speakers (at least not under the prevailing conditions of language), but is irrevocably, as we have seen, "abandoned 'with the other' – another feminine for both sexes", with which no continuum can be established, least of all starting from the visible. The failure, perpetuated by the touch-vision system set up by Merleau-Ponty, to acknowledge this threshold that we cross only once thus comes back in the end, according to Irigaray, as we have seen, to "the most radical *polemos* with the maternal, the intrauterine: irreducible darkness".

Taking Back A Great Deal Of The Phenomenology Of The Tactile

In the preceding two sections ("A Difference of Laws and Rhythms of the Flesh" and "The Matter and Memory for All of the Sensible"), I have considered Irigaray's two interrelated claims that, in "The Intertwining – the Chiasm", Merleau-Ponty fails to give to the tangible the non-hierarchical phenomenology and the ontological primacy that is due to it, and that this failure amounts to the most radical struggle against the maternal genealogy. In what follows, I turn to a third claim advanced by Irigaray in her essay on Merleau-Ponty in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, namely, the claim that "[Merleau-Ponty's] analysis of vision becomes even more detailed, more beautiful...as it takes back a great deal of the phenomenology of the tactile".³⁵⁹ This claim brings us to the third of the trajectories introduced above, namely, the sense in which Irigaray's struggle against Merleau-Ponty's touch-vision system depends, at least in part, on the struggle of this system with itself.

In order to assess the force of Irigaray's claim that Merleau-Ponty's analysis of vision draws its power by "taking back" a great deal of the phenomenology of the tactile, I would

³⁵⁹ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 175 [Irigaray, *Éthique de la différence sexuelle*, pp. 163-164].

first like to emphasize two things. First, I need to stress what is at stake in Irigaray's "phenomenology of the tactile". For Irigaray, the phenomenology of the tactile concerns an "insurmountable other of the visible, not reducible to its invisible other side", "another world, another landscape, a *topos* or locus of the irreversible", an "irreducible darkness". This darkness is insurmountably other to the visible not only in the sense of being qualitatively non-reducible to it, but also in the sense of grounding it non-reciprocally. It is a darkness that Merleau-Ponty's account of vision, as it is presented in "The Intertwining – the Chiasm", cannot accommodate, on pain of disappearance of either seer or visible, a disappearance he has ruled out from the outset: "It is not possible that we blend into [the visible], nor that it passes into us, for then the vision would vanish at the moment of formation, by disappearance of the seer or of the visible" (VI 171/131).

The other thing I would like to emphasize in Irigaray's suggestion that Merleau-Ponty's analysis of vision takes back a great deal of the phenomenology of the tactile is the polysemy of the verb she uses to describe this "taking back", *reprendre*. This French word can be taken in a number of different senses. It can mean the act or process of regaining possession of or putting back into use some property, e.g., land, tool or other resources. To catch one's breath or to regain one's consciousness can also be expressed using this verb. Further, it also bears the meaning of resuming something, like a project or an activity that had been abandoned for a while. Further still, it can mean the act or process of seizing, capturing or apprehending someone again, such as some runaway prisoner. Another possible translation is the act or process of improving, repairing, touching-up (e.g. a photography), or taking in (a garment, such as a dress). Finally, to find fault with someone or something, to reproach and criticize may also be evoked by this verb. We must surmise that Irigaray avails herself of the full force of the polysemy embedded in the word she has picked to describe the textual process of "The Intertwining – the Chiasm". The co-presence of and equivocation between the sense of winning back and the sense of touching-up is particularly telling, since it clearly evokes Irigaray's diagnosis of the destiny of the maternal genealogy at the hands of philosophical discourse, as both obliterated from yet surreptitiously incorporated into the latter. The maternal genealogy is both inscribed in and written out of, both taken in and touched-up by philosophical discourse.

Let us illustrate this surreptitious "taking back" of the phenomenology of the tactile by Merleau-Ponty's analysis of vision by a few examples. We have already had occasion to consider one example: that of the two lips invoked by Merleau-Ponty as an image of the

reversibility of seer and visible, refigured by Irigaray as the lips of our (that is, women's) "body" – those above and those below. Beyond this example, let us further consider, first, the pivotal passage in which Merleau-Ponty for the first time in the text explicitly posits an analogy between vision and touch – a maneuver for which he, ironically, vehemently criticizes Descartes in "Eye and Mind", yet on altogether different terms – and to which Irigaray is no doubt alluding in her diagnosis of this reclamation. Whereas Descartes is blamed for his accommodation of vision to the logic and operation of tactile perception (and especially that part of it that pertains to contiguous contact) (OE 27-28/130-131), Merleau-Ponty nevertheless, as we have seen, thinks it legitimate (in "The Intertwining – the Chiasm") to posit vision as a "remarkable variant" of tactile palpation, making of vision a "palpation with the look". It is clear, however, that insofar as Merleau-Ponty wants to impute the same relation of reversibility to the visible that he had found in the realm of touch (the touching is touched, is somehow formed within it), he has to rest on the strength of the analogy itself, which – as he himself admits – issues singularly from the fact that, in the tactile palpation, "the questioner and the questioned are *closer*" (VI 173/133, my emphasis). Accordingly, it is the closeness involved in touch – emblematically evoked by the "two lips" – that makes it able to illuminate what is at stake in vision. Closeness in touch is accomplished as contiguity, as the application to one another of two surfaces, therefore as the absolute closeness of contiguous contact. But Merleau-Ponty does not speak of contiguity or absolute closeness; he speaks of a *relative* closeness, and locates vision and touch together on a scale of degrees of closeness that extends in principle, asymptotically, to infinity. On this scale, touch is said by Merleau-Ponty merely to be *closer* to (absolute) closeness between questioner and questioned than is vision.

Hence, Merleau-Ponty tacitly substitutes relative closeness to absolute closeness for the contiguous contact of skin. Whereas, in touch, no sensation could take place without contiguous contact of skin, in vision, by contrast, such absolute closeness would entail a "disappearance of the seer or of the visible", since vision requires distance from its object. Contiguity therefore marks the difference without which no analogy between vision and touch would be possible, and which nonetheless has to remain silent or efface itself in order for Merleau-Ponty's analysis of vision to profit from it. It is this self-effaced difference of contiguous touch that offers the background against which Merleau-Ponty can profile his "it is not different for vision" (VI 174/133). The element of touch that grounds its functioning as vision's analogy cannot be contained in the visible, nor in the touch-vision system. And so

Merleau-Ponty's analogy between touch and vision becomes at once vision's reclamation of touch for the benefit of the reversibility of the look while at the same time touching-up the touch that is so reclaimed.

If the preceding analysis is appropriate, one could say that what Irigaray states phenomenologically and ontologically of the tangible – that it is “the ground that is available for all the senses”, that it “constitutes the very flesh of all things that will be sculpted, sketched, painted, felt, and so on, out of it”³⁶⁰ – is pertinent also to the rhetorical process taking place in Merleau-Ponty's text: The analysis of vision incurs a debt to the resources offered by the phenomenology of the tactile, a debt it is unable all the same to acknowledge and must refrain from acknowledging. This would be an economy that, moreover, mirrors the relation of abyssal debt into which every human being is placed with respect to the maternal body that sheltered, fed and nourished it prior to birth, that body from which the gift of life and, by extension, of the tangible and the visible is received.

We have seen that Irigaray faults Merleau-Ponty for not acknowledging, on one level – i.e., the thematic level – the irreversible and primary passage from the tangible to the visible, from a tangible that does not return in the light of day, a passage that occurs only once. Yet, she claims to find in the terms of his descriptions, especially of the visible, an echoing of the archaic state, a state that may lend itself to being “remember[ed] without remembering thematically”.³⁶¹ His text, she would say, recalls *morphologically* that archaic state, that archaic dimension of ourselves kept in the depths of our corporeal prehistory, in “our archives of flesh”, etched into our bodies as a “watermark”.³⁶² The fluid. The motif of the fluid in Merleau-Ponty's text would give us, on Irigaray's reading, a second instance of his reclamation of a great deal of the phenomenology of the tactile for the benefit – yet also subversion – of his analysis of the vision.

The motif of the fluid appears twice in the course of the second paragraph of “The Intertwining – the Chiasm”. First, Merleau-Ponty says – before announcing the impossibility of a blending into one another of the seer and the visible, on pain of disappearance of either

³⁶⁰ Elizabeth Grosz suggests that Irigaray's refashioning of the touching hands somehow “illustrates” the latter's claim that Merleau-Ponty's analysis of vision tacitly depends on the analogy with touch (cf. Grosz, “Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray in the Flesh”, p. 157). As I have already argued, however, Irigaray's refashioning of the touching hands speaks more to the relation of reciprocity within touch than to the relation of non-reciprocity between touch and vision. I think that this latter relation of non-reciprocity – both as regards phenomenological and ontological matters, as well as what pertains to the processes of idealization that take place through analogy in a text – is illustrated to a much larger degree by Irigaray's repeated reference to the intrauterine, as well as by the passage that posits the tangible as the ground that is available for all the senses.

³⁶¹ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 164.

one or the other – that “it is as though there were between [the visible] and us an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand” (VI 171/130-131). This image of the sea and the strand makes it appear, Irigaray notes, that Merleau-Ponty is not really speaking about the visible, but rather about a most singularly tactile phenomenon, namely, immersion in and emergence from the amniotic fluids of the embryo’s intrauterine abode in the maternal womb:

If it were not the visible that was in question, it would be possible to believe that Merleau-Ponty is alluding here to intrauterine life. Moreover, he uses “images” of the sea and the strand. Of immersion and emergence? And he speaks of the risk of the disappearance of the seer and the visible. Which corresponds doubly to a reality in intrauterine nesting: one who is still in this night does not see and remains without a visible (as far as we know); but the other cannot see him. The other does not see him, he is not visible for the other, how nevertheless sees the world, but without him.³⁶³

The second appearance of the motif of the fluid element as observed by Irigaray comes toward the end of the same paragraph in “The Intertwining – the Chiasm”, in connection with Merleau-Ponty’s introduction of the question of colour: “What is this talisman of colour, this singular virtue of the visible that makes it, held at the end of the gaze, nonetheless much more than a correlative of my vision, such that it imposes my vision upon me as a continuation of its own sovereign existence?” (VI 171/131) This question reconnects with the image of the sea and the strand just considered (and especially in so far as this image connotes immersion and emergence), because the description of a certain red of the dress that comprises the following paragraph will largely suggest the scene of emergence following immersion. In short, Merleau-Ponty will describe how vision comes to be “formed in the heart of the visible” (VI 171/130). This red colour that Merleau-Ponty now turns to is not, to begin with, “a pellicle of being without thickness”, but rather “emerges from a less precise, more general redness, in which my gaze was caught, into which it sank, before – as we put it so aptly – *fixing* it” (172/131). What Merleau-Ponty has in mind when he allows the gaze to be immersed in the bath of a generality from which it and the more precise colour arise and emerge together is not only a co-belonging of the imaginary and the real in perceptual experience, that oneiric and obscure atmosphere that houses all our potentially clear perceptions. It is also the differential structure of colour, i.e., its constitutive inscription in a field or web of differences: differences between colours, textures, shapes, things,

³⁶² Cf. Grosz, “Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray in the Flesh”, p. 156.

³⁶³ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 152

constellations etc., in short, the background of generality against which the specification of any colour becomes possible.

For Irigaray, however, something else than the refinement of vision from out of an inchoate, virtual state is also given voice in the course of Merleau-Ponty's exposition, namely, "what is most archaic in me, the *fluid*", and thus, by extension, the intrauterine abode:

From without, colour signals to me that it...pours itself out, extends itself, escapes, imposes itself upon me as the reminder of what is most archaic in me, the *fluid*. Through which I (male or female) received life and was enveloped in my prenatal sojourn, by which I have been surrounded, clothed, nourished, in another body. Thanks to which I could also see the light, be born, and even see: air, light...Colour resuscitates in me all of that prior life, the preconceptual, preobjective, presubjective, this *ground* of the visible where seeing and seen are not yet distinguished, where they reflect each other without any position having been established between them.³⁶⁴

Paradoxically, then, by resorting to an image evoking an elementality that is given above all else as a "bath that affects without and within, in fluidity",³⁶⁵ it is as if Merleau-Ponty were implicitly, indirectly acknowledging that vision depends on a ground of tactile sensibility with which it could not possibly enter into a relation of reversibility but only of reception. By extension, this dependence once again recalls, in several registers, the irrepayable gift of life and corporeity donated one-sidedly by the mother.



In this first confrontation with Irigaray's reading of Merleau-Ponty in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, I have tried to show how Irigaray, by engaging in a struggle with the touch-vision system Merleau-Ponty sets up in "The Intertwining – the Chiasm", actually offers an explication of Merleau-Ponty's own suggestion, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, that intra-uterine life amounts to a "sketch of the a natural self and a natural time". In other words, if Irigaray's analysis is correct, a sustainable account of this sketch – which, for Merleau-Ponty, evokes the most imperceptible and the most immemorial – can only be developed by violating certain of Merleau-Ponty's most cherished principles, namely, on the one hand, that "synaesthetic perception is the rule" or that there is "double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible", and the notion of reversibility conceived as a re-doubled conversion into one another of activity and passivity on the other hand. I have also tried to show that her struggle against Merleau-Ponty's touch-vision system

³⁶⁴ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 156.

³⁶⁵ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 164.

along these lines and the bringing into language of the maternal-feminine it entails is not imposed upon his text from an ineffable outside. It is rather the taking up of a trajectory already at work within the text itself, in terms of its rhetorical infrastructure, its recourse at crucial junctures to motifs and imagery – such as the “two lips” and the fluidity involved in processes of immersion and emergence – that recall, “without remembering thematically”, the tangible invisible landscape of intra-uterine life. This remembering without remembering thematically the immemorial tangible invisible of intra-uterine life would constitute, I suggest, another instance of the labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature – of the natural self on which we depend for our anchorage in a natural and social world – although in this case it is a labour working against the trajectory of his explicit arguments even as it conditions them.

Concluding Remarks

Considering what has been revealed in the course of this chapter through a set of close readings of Merleau-Ponty’s text, I think it can be regarded as established that Merleau-Ponty’s thought of nature as an immemorial past draws heavily upon a labour of the feminine, understood as the maternal work and gift of pregnancy and birth. This has been revealed to be the case whether we consider the occurrence of the immemorial on the side of the invisible depth of things or the natural world as given to perception (and in that case in terms of a matter *already* pregnant with form), or on the side of the anonymous depth of the subject intimated in reflection as the continuous reassertion of birth as the transcendental event or – as Irigaray’s analysis effectively shows – as the tangible invisible amounting to the “sketch of a natural self and a natural time” or “matter and memory for all of the sensible” elaborated in intra-uterine life. The prevalence of the motifs of pregnancy and birth at crucial junctures in Merleau-Ponty’s approach to the issue of nature’s immemoriality as charted in this chapter thus further strengthens the basic hypothesis guiding this thesis, namely, that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature is accomplished to a large extent on the strength of the philosophical function of these motifs in his texts.

Chapter 6: Intergenerated Nature

The Feminine at Work in Merleau-Ponty's Approach to the Generativity of Nature

In this last chapter, I return to the issue of generativity in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature in order to investigate more closely the role played by feminine motifs – especially connected to pregnancy and birth – in Merleau-Ponty's to it. At the core of my discussion will be a concern with Merleau-Ponty's long-standing struggle against what he considers to be the fundamental naivety of the realist notion of an external relation between the subject and object of knowledge and, by extension, between man and nature. Returning to Irigaray's reading of Merleau-Ponty in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, I will suggest – along with Irigaray – that Merleau-Ponty engages in a pervasive maternalizing of his crucial notion of the flesh, and that his commitment to the thesis of the reversibility of this flesh takes on quite “astonishing” features in light of this. I will then present, across the three last main sections of the chapter (“A most radical struggle”, “The four dangers of realism” and “Absolute Idealism Revisited”), an argument to the effect that these astonishing features must be seen in the context of Merleau-Ponty's militant anti-realism in epistemology and ontology. However, since the perspective on the labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty to be developed here will be quite different from the one presented in the previous chapter, I begin by providing some background for this difference through a consideration of a transition in Merleau-Ponty's approach to the event of birth itself. To this end, some remarks by Gary B. Madison concerning Merleau-Ponty's attitude to the event of birth itself will serve as my point of departure.

The Turn from Birth as *Archē* Toward the *Archē* of Birth: On a Transition from Merleau-Ponty's Earlier to Later Thought

The question of how we are to characterize the transition from Merleau-Ponty's early work (epitomized by *Phenomenology of Perception*) to his later work (epitomized by *The Visible and the Invisible*) has long been a concern for his readers. No one denies that there is some transition, if only at the level of style, articulation, vocabulary and so on. The question as to

whether the transition amounts to a change of philosophical direction has largely revolved around the issue of the relation between phenomenology and ontology, in relation to which some argue that Merleau-Ponty's late work is an explication or deepening of ontological trajectories already in place in the early, ostensibly more phenomenologically inflected work,³⁶⁶ while others have emphasized a fundamental break (for better or worse) occurring some time during the Fifties.³⁶⁷ In what follows, I shall also be concerned with the transition from early to late works, yet with a view to a highly specific issue, namely, the issue of the status of birth in the early and late works respectively. It seems to me that the issue of the so-called transition from phenomenology to ontology can be illuminated partly through a consideration of the mutations to which this motif is submitted as we move from *Phenomenology of Perception* to *The Visible and the Invisible*. To this end, I shall take as my point of departure some remarks advanced by Gary B. Madison in his book *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*.

In developing my analysis of the motif of birth as gift in *Phenomenology of Perception* in the previous chapter, I was effectively taking up Madison's suggestion that, from the phenomenological point of view adopted by Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*, "the subject's birth is what is truly fundamental and irreducible, it is the *Urarchē*".³⁶⁸ I tried to show how Merleau-Ponty's concern in that work with the subject's ties to the immemorial past of nature could be fruitfully related to the concern with the condition of natality that also runs through it, up to the last pages of the "Freedom" chapter. Now, while one might have been sympathetic to Merleau-Ponty's shift of focus in this way from the condition of mortality (which is perhaps the more dominant motif of 20th century continental philosophy, as Lawlor has argued) to the condition of natality, Madison finds the philosophical importance Merleau-Ponty accords to the subject's birth in the early work plainly unacceptable. Reminding us that *archē* can be read both temporally as "beginning" or "origin" and metaphysically or normatively as "principle", Madison suggests that the problem of the *archē* of subjectivity – a problem Merleau-Ponty would later, as we saw in chapter 3, identify as that of "our archaeology" – is handled in *Phenomenology of Perception*

³⁶⁶ See, for example, Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*; Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*.

³⁶⁷ See, for example, Kwant, *From Phenomenology to Metaphysics: An Inquiry into the Last Period of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophical Life*; John Sallis, *Phenomenology and the Return to Beginnings* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, [1973] 2003); Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*.

³⁶⁸ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, p. 230

with too much emphasis on beginning (due to the privilege of the subject's birth) and with too little concern for the need for a principle:

The reflecting subject cannot reduce his being to his knowing, for in discovering his own *archē* he finds the contingent and gratuitous event of his birth. (...) it discovers at the end of its reflection that the *principle* of rationality is nothing other than its gratuitous *beginning*.³⁶⁹

In thus privileging birth as the “transcendental event”, in thus emphasizing the temporal dimension of *archē* at the cost of its metaphysical/normative dimension, Merleau-Ponty's early thought is, according to Madison, “a refusal of the absolute”.³⁷⁰ For Madison, it seems, Merleau-Ponty's refusal of the absolute and the embrace of an unsurpassable contingency of our presence in the world to which this leads is tied ultimately to his failure to “clarify the event of birth itself”:

Merleau-Ponty thus posits birth as an absolute *origin* of meaning. He does not, however, seek to clarify the event of birth itself; on the contrary, he posits it is a kind of absolute zero point, as the completely gratuitous irruption of the subject, of meaning, in the world. This is to say that his way of conceiving of birth here only underlines all the more the fundamental opposition between the subject and the world, the incomprehensibility, and the unsurpassable contingency of this relationship.³⁷¹

On Madison's line of reasoning, then, the test of a philosophy that wants to be an archeology in the sense of a theory not only of the beginnings but also of the principles of subjectivity and rationality (which is clearly what Madison expects from Merleau-Ponty) would be its capacity to clarify the event of birth itself. It would have to overcome the opacity of birth as so as to arrive at a different *archē* in light of which the event of birth itself would stand illuminated so that our lot would no longer be that of sheer contingency.

Interestingly, this clarification of the event of birth itself, this turn from birth as *archē* toward the *archē* of birth is for Madison precisely what characterizes the transition from *Phenomenology of Perception* to *The Visible and the Invisible*: “[I]n his last writings everything has changed”.³⁷² Merleau-Ponty now searches, Madison suggests, beneath the philosophically unsatisfying *archē* consisting in the subject's birth to a much more fundamental and philosophically prestigious *archē*, namely, Being (or flesh, or nature, or the world in its deepest sense, cf. chapter 3), an *archē* that would presumably ground, clarify and

³⁶⁹ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, p. 160

³⁷⁰ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, p. 160.

³⁷¹ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, p. 230

³⁷² Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, p. 231.

supply the principle of possibility of the former *archē*,³⁷³ one that is not as impenetrable to the light of reason as the event of birth itself seems to be. Commenting on Merleau-Ponty's insistence in "Eye and Mind", quoted in chapter 3, that no accident or string of accidents can be credited with the appearance of a "single man" in the midst of nature, Madison writes: "The subject's birth is therefore not an *accident*, an absolutely gratuitous and contingent fact, an incomprehensible chance event; it is rather *the coming to light of Being itself*", or the "result of an explosion of Being".³⁷⁴ By thus handing over to Being/flesh/nature/world the responsibility of giving birth to the subject, it seems one can leave to the side all the contingencies to which we were submitted as long as the event of birth itself was acknowledged as the true *archē*. Madison does not elaborate on what it is more precisely that makes the event of birth, deprived of any grounding in Being, such an intolerable instance of sheer contingency. But it seems that, in order to elaborate on it, one would have had to take into account contingencies such as parents of both sexes in flesh and blood who must conceive the child at a certain time in a certain place in a certain manner (whether "naturally" or "artificially"), a mother in flesh and blood who must carry, shelter and nurture the child during pregnancy, who must labour in joy and/or in pain during the birth of the child. However, on Madison's reading of Merleau-Ponty, it seems we can now leave such contingencies aside and consider them philosophically insignificant and irrelevant, perhaps even illusory, as compared with, or in the light of, the coming to light of Being itself, which is now the true parent of the subject. For a parent it is all the same, and even a maternal one at that: "Being is the universal, the Earth, 'pregnancy of possibilities', 'polymorphous matrix'; it is the flesh, the 'mother' (VI, 267; VI, 321) from which individuals are born, 'where individuals are formed through differentiation'".³⁷⁵ And so it seems that, according to Madison's reading of Merleau-Ponty's transition, the event of birth itself is clarified when certain of its characteristics – notably, the maternal ones – are purged from the ontic plane of empirical, factual, bodily, events and transposed onto an allegedly more fundamental plane where Being reigns supreme.

Now, if Madison's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's transition with respect to the issue of birth is adequate – and this is what I would like to consider here – then it seems we are invited to take a second look at Irigaray's reading of Merleau-Ponty in *An Ethics of Sexual*

³⁷³ Cf. Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, p. 68.

³⁷⁴ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, p. 231.

³⁷⁵ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, p. 242.

Difference, this time from the point of view of Merleau-Ponty's clarification of the event of birth itself. In her reading of Merleau-Ponty, it seems to me, Irigaray submits Merleau-Ponty's text to a kind of questioning reminiscent of the one she pursues in her long essay on Plato in *Speculum of the Other Woman*. That which gives her pause in the latter could be said to be precisely an attempt on Plato's part to turn from terrestrial, corporeal birth as *archē* toward the true *archē* of birth in the eternal intransient realm of ideal Forms. As this concern is far more explicit in her reading of Plato, yet present in her reading of Merleau-Ponty, let me first pause briefly to consider how she sets up the problem that will orient her reading of Plato, before I proceed to investigate how she carries out this questioning in her reading of Merleau-Ponty.

In the preface to her long text on Plato, Irigaray states her project in the following succinct terms:

The myth of the cave, for example, or as an example, is a good place to start. Read it this time as a metaphor of the inner space, of the den, the womb or *hystera*, sometimes of the earth – though we shall see that the text inscribes the metaphor as, strictly speaking, impossible.³⁷⁶

I would like to emphasize two aspects of the research programme thus described by Irigaray. First, Irigaray says she will read the myth of the cave *as* a metaphor of the womb. In other words, her reading of the myth of the cave is partly based on the fact that Socrates never states in explicit terms that the cave, already a metaphor for the sensible realm of transience and ungrounded opinion, is a metaphor of the womb. Irigaray's long essay on the myth of the cave will be an exploration of the possibility that the likeness of the cave to the womb might have been *implied* or *evoked* by Socrates, and of the philosophical, ethical and political consequences that might flow from this implication or evocation. Furthermore, although she says she is going to read the myth of the cave as a metaphor of the womb, when we go through the text we see that she could have stated her intent in the inverse fashion. In other words, she is going to read the myth of the cave in order to make apparent how the womb serves as an implicit metaphor for the cave, how the scenography and choreography (enclosure, symmetry axes of behind-in front, inside-outside, transverse wall resembling hymen, reproduction, emergence etc.) of the cave is practically inscribed, without it being stated, in the likeness of a womb and a birthing process. Second, Irigaray anticipates that Plato's text inscribes the metaphorical connection between cave and womb as, nevertheless,

³⁷⁶ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 243.

strictly speaking impossible. What we gather from this is that, on Irigaray's reading, Socrates' elaboration of the details of the cave, what takes place in it and how it is related to the world outside is going to progressively cover up the traces it carries of the maternal body in order to produce the image of a masculine reproduction wholly independent of both maternal and material contribution. More precisely, the womb is progressively deformed up to the point when it becomes the – impossible – expedient for a masculine self-begetting.³⁷⁷

As I read Irigaray's essay on Merleau-Ponty in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, it involves a similar line of argument to the one advanced in the essay on Plato in *Speculum*. More precisely, she reads Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh with a view, on the one hand, to how it might be said to evoke the womb – or, as she puts it throughout the text, the intrauterine abode – as its implicit metaphorical infrastructure. On the other hand, she also reads the text with a view to how it nevertheless covers up and submerges this infrastructure in a series of mystifications, inversions and reversals. In short, according to Irigaray, the womb or the intrauterine abode is implicitly a metaphor for the flesh, but the mystifications to which his text submits the womb works to sever its connection with any woman-mother one might possibly encounter in real life in the past, present and future, thus making this womb – and, by extension, maternity itself – strictly speaking impossible. By thus providing himself with a de-contextualized womb, Irigaray wants to argue, Merleau-Ponty reduplicates the same fantasy of a purely masculine self-begetting and reproduction that she had also detected in Plato (and many others). In so far as Merleau-Ponty's concern with the issue of nature as generativity is closely connected, as we have seen, to the question of the subject's emergence from and situation in the natural world, then it seems we can learn something concerning the labour of the feminine in Merleau-Ponty's approach to the generativity of nature by closely studying Irigaray's comments concerning the problematic relation in him between the flesh/nature/being and maternity. Let me therefore turn to her arguments in more detail.

“An Astonishing Reversal”: Merleau-Ponty with Irigaray, Phase II

If Irigaray's reading of Merleau-Ponty in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* is adequate, then we find in Merleau-Ponty's discourse on the flesh a double movement of incorporation and

³⁷⁷ See Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, pp. 105-113 and Songe-Møller, *Philosophy Without Women: the Birth of Sexism in Western thought*, ch. 6.

effacement of the maternal time and place of the subject's origin. The movement of incorporation maternalizes the flesh insofar as it inscribes the flesh in the likeness of the maternal womb, whereas the movement of effacement "revers[es] the maternal gift of flesh"³⁷⁸ insofar as it deforms this likeness so as to sever all links the flesh *qua* womb might have to real mothers in flesh and blood, thus making it into a docile expedient for an auto-genesis on the part of the (masculine) subject. I shall consider these two movements in that order.

Maternalizing Flesh/Nature/Being/World

In the previous chapter, I tried to show how Merleau-Ponty's explicit identification, in a working note to *The Visible and the Invisible*, of the flesh *qua* nature with "the mother" is overdetermined in that work. This is partly due to his description of the generativity of flesh in terms of "pregnancy", a motif with a long career in Merleau-Ponty's work. It is also due to his description of it in terms of embryonic development and his recourse to the term *travailée* which, as Claude Lefort has famously pointed out, has a "singular connotation" in French, namely, the time at which a pregnant woman is about to give birth.³⁷⁹ But we also saw several instances of how, according to Irigaray, Merleau-Ponty's discourse on the flesh recalls the situation of intrauterine life "without remembering thematically".³⁸⁰ I would like to recapitulate and further expound on her line of her argument to this effect, while also supplying it with some of my own observations.

The clue to my exposition of Irigaray's reading of Merleau-Ponty in the previous chapter was her attention to the problematic status in Merleau-Ponty's discourse on the flesh of what she calls the "tangible invisible". We saw that, although Merleau-Ponty's touch-vision system relegates the tangible invisible to the margin as nothing but a reserve of visibility, as the betokening of something visible in principle, it irrupts as such at numerous sites and levels of his description of the visible. Such is the case with, e.g., the asymmetrical dependence of his analysis of vision on the description of the "more closely" related touching hands, his resort to the image of the "two lips" and the prevalence of the fluid element in his description of the formation of vision in the visible.

³⁷⁸ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 179.

³⁷⁹ Cf. Lefort, "Flesh and Otherness", p. 5.

³⁸⁰ Cf. Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 164.

With regard to the latter – the prevalence of the fluid element in Merleau-Ponty’s description of the formation of vision in the visible – I would like at this juncture to emphasize that, for Irigaray, Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of the relation between seeing and the visible in terms of the intimacy obtaining between the sea and the strand recalls the intrauterine abode not only in its phenomenological aspect of being invisible yet tangible, of being the “insurmountable other of the visible, not reducible to its invisible other side”.³⁸¹ It also recalls it in what one might call its choreographic aspect, i.e., the movement or undergoing of the stages of immersion and emergence, especially since Merleau-Ponty himself acknowledges that his own image bespeaks the danger of a double disappearance (of both seer and the visible).³⁸² Despite this caution concerning the risk of disappearance by immersion of one in the other, Merleau-Ponty launches, only a paragraph later, into his well-known description of the red colour of a dress by noting that this red is first an element into which the gaze “sinks” and “gets caught”, an immersion whence it emerges, comes to itself, receives itself, in the process of fixation (cf. VI 172/131). According to Irigaray, if this is an adequate description of how colour is given to vision, or rather, of how vision receives itself from colour as if from some proto-visibility, then colour is “the reminder of what is most archaic in me, the *fluid*. Through which I (male or female) received life and was enveloped in my prenatal sojourn, by which I have been surrounded, clothed, nourished, in another body”.³⁸³

The paragraph that opens with this choreography of immersion in and emergence from fluids culminates, as we know, in Merleau-Ponty’s arrival several pages later at his first mention in the text of the “flesh of things”. This arrival appears also to be a return to the point of departure of the description of the red of the dress, in so far as Merleau-Ponty now speaks of the “flesh of things” as a “latency” – just as the situation of the immersion of the gaze is depicted as a latency in anticipation of emergence – which offers itself as a lining, sustaining and nourishing tissue: “Between the alleged colors and visibles, we would find anew the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a *flesh* of things” (VI 173/132-133). Irigaray’s response

³⁸¹ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 153.

³⁸² “If it were not the visible that was in question, it would be possible to believe that Merleau-Ponty is alluding here to intrauterine life. Moreover, he uses “images” of the sea and the strand. Of immersion and emergence? And he speaks of the risk of the disappearance of the seer and the visible. Which corresponds doubly to a reality in intrauterine nesting: one who is still in this night does not see and remains without a visible (as far as we know); but the other cannot see him. The other does not see him, he is not visible for the other, how nevertheless sees the world, but without him” (Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 152).

to this passage is to point out how it recalls, albeit non-thematically or implicitly, another element of the intrauterine abode, namely, the placenta:

Where does this tissue come from? How is it nourished? Who or what gives it consistency? My body? My flesh? Or a maternal, maternalizing flesh, reproduction, subsistence there of the amniotic, placental tissue, which enveloped subject and things prior to birth, or of tenderness and the milieu that constituted the atmosphere of the nursling, the infant, still of the adult.³⁸⁴

If Irigaray's observations are accurate, we can establish that maternal attributes show up on both sides of the subject-object relation, indissolubly: both in the place of emergence of the subject of vision (the generative choreography of immersion in and emergence from invisibility) and in the place of visible things and colours (the maternal placenta, nourishing and sustaining organic tissues).

Apart from the oblique references to amniotic fluids and placentas that one might discern in Merleau-Ponty's discourse on the flesh, I might add as well the fact that Merleau-Ponty frequently, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, speaks of some sort of "bond" with Being/nature/the world/the flesh. This bond is several times likened by Merleau-Ponty to an umbilical cord, one that attaches us to being, to meaning and to truth. For example, setting the scene for his critique of Husserl's eidetic reduction in the "Interrogation and Intuition" chapter, Merleau-Ponty writes:

Precisely in order to accomplish its will for radicalism, [philosophy] would have to take as its theme the umbilical bond that binds it always to Being, the inalienable horizon with which it is already and henceforth circumvented, the primary initiation which it tries in vain to go back on (VI 142/107).

Similarly, in the appendix, only now with a stronger focus on truth and meaning: "We will not admit a preconstituted world, a logic, except for having seen them arise from our experience of brute being, which is as it were the umbilical cord of our knowledge and the source of meaning for us" (VI 207/157). Now, when Merleau-Ponty describes "our experience of brute being" – which I take to be yet another manner of speaking of our experience of nature as given in sensible perception – in terms of such a bond, we know that he is once again out to undermine the hubris to which both realism and transcendental idealism (à la Kant and the Husserl of his middle period) commit themselves to, as we saw in chapter 3. Both positions want to cut or undo this bond, yet both are undermined in their very attempts to do so. On the one hand, scientific realism doesn't see, or doesn't want to see, that

³⁸³ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 156.

³⁸⁴ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 159

objectivity feeds on the experiencing life of concretely, corporeally, socially and historically situated subjects. On the other hand, reflexive philosophies cannot admit that the laws or structures they claim to have found to be immanently governing the constituting operations of transcendental subjectivity are but a second-order expression of a prior and primary initiation to the world in lived experience. In both cases, what is overlooked is the bodily mediation of experience, which is what makes it be “our living bond with nature” (VI 46/27), which it cannot possibly be all the time it is considered the way in which science and reflexive philosophy are at one in considering it, i.e., as an object. The body as our living bond with nature conditions and nourishes the scientist’s objectifications just as it conditions and nourishes the transcendental idealist’s reflections.

No doubt, as we saw in chapter 3, it is against the latter that Merleau-Ponty most emphatically insists on the impossibility of “going back upon” the primary initiation mediated by the umbilical cord of embodied, concrete experience, faulting it for not respecting the insurmountable limits placed by the natural on any project of fabrication: “[The philosophy of reflection] thinks it can comprehend our natal bond with the world by *undoing* it in order to *remake* it, only by constituting it, by fabricating it” (VI 53/32). Instead of trying to “cut the organic bonds between the perception and the thing perceived (*couperait...les liens organiques de la perception et de la chose perçue*) with a hypothesis of inexistence”, Merleau-Ponty suggests, reflection would fare better in “seek[ing] in the world itself the secret of our perceptual bond with it” (VI 60/38). As we shall see shortly, however, Merleau-Ponty’s largely symmetrical manner of organizing the way nourishment is distributed to the scientific realist and the transcendental idealist alike so as to intimate how they both depend on a source of meaning that they are at one in failing to acknowledge produces an equivocation with regard to where exactly the source of nourishment is to be found, that is, who is located at the donating and receiving ends of the umbilical cord respectively.

Matter as pregnant with form, the sensible as the amniotic immersion whence the sentient comes to itself and into the presence of a particular sensible, the flesh as a placental source of sustainment and nourishment for both gaze and things, the lived body as the living, organic, natal, umbilical cord attaching us to nature – all of this seems to amplify Merleau-Ponty’s identification of flesh/nature/Being/world with maternity. Along these lines, one would have to agree with Elizabeth Grosz when, summarizing Irigaray’s arguments concerning the relation between flesh and maternity in Merleau-Ponty, she suggests that “the

flesh has a point-for-point congruence with the attributes of both femininity and maternity”.³⁸⁵ Along the same lines, we might also wonder with Irigaray whether, in thus presuming such an elaborate similarity between nature and maternity, Merleau-Ponty does not connect up with a certain animistic current of thought:

Isn't this a sort of animism in which the visible becomes another living being? (...) In this indivisibility of the seer in relation to the visible, does some trace of animism remain as a sort of enveloping by the maternal power that is still present following birth, or as an anticipation of the presence of God?³⁸⁶

Let me add that Irigaray's worry here is echoed by one of Merleau-Ponty's most astute and respected commentators in the French context, namely, Renaud Barbaras. In his book *Desire and Distance*, he laments the lack of resolution in the face of the temptation to give in to animism or related doctrines that he discerns in Merleau-Ponty's foregrounding of the sentient body as an “exemplar sensible”: “Whether one wants to or not, the sensibility inherent in the body cannot be transferred as such to the flesh of the world, except by falling into a hylozoism that Merleau-Ponty himself rejects”.³⁸⁷ Whatever may be one's stance toward animism and/or hylozoism, it nevertheless seems an established fact that, at the stage his thought on the problem of nature had reached by the time his last project was cut short by his sudden death, the terms in which Merleau-Ponty presented this thought could hardly avoid invoking a certain animism and/or hylozoism, not least on account of his penchant for maternalizing nature.

Reversing the Maternal Gift of Flesh

As far as I am concerned, it is in light of the preceding observations concerning Merleau-Ponty's pervasive codification of nature/flesh/Being/world in the likeness of the maternal body that we must read Irigaray's hostility to Merleau-Ponty's description of the flesh as reversibility. Besides Merleau-Ponty's failure to acknowledge, on the thematic level of his discourse on the flesh, the asymmetrical relation between the tangible and the invisible that makes the touch-vision system possible, there is for Irigaray a second sense in which Merleau-Ponty's discourse on the flesh is engaged in “a most radical *polemos* with the maternal”. This second aspect of the most radical struggle with the maternal perpetuated by Merleau-Ponty's discourse on the flesh is, for Irigaray, expressed in his very notion of

³⁸⁵ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 103.

³⁸⁶ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, pp. 172-173

³⁸⁷ Barbaras, *Desire and Distance: Introduction to a Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 83.

reversibility, particularly as he interprets it as intertwining (see chapter 3 on Merleau-Ponty's different interpretations of reversibility). I think what Irigaray says concerning Merleau-Ponty's notion of the reversibility of language (between sign and signified, between speech and silence, between language and thought) can be taken to summarize her objection to his description of the sentient body and the sensible as a reversible relation: "A reversal of the maternal gift of flesh, in the autarchy of the subject of and in language".³⁸⁸ In what follows, I try to elaborate an argument that could perhaps be said to support such a verdict.

To begin with, let us recall the trajectory of Merleau-Ponty's description of reversibility as it begins to take shape in the second paragraph of "The Intertwining – the Chiasm", although he will coin the term "reversibility" only later in the text. He first suggests that "it is as though our vision were formed in the heart of things", but then immediately announces the impossibility of our blending into the visible, and insists that distance must be established. This is a distance that, notably, enables the look to envelope and clothe the visible – the heart of which was only a few lines before described as the place of the look's formation – with its "own flesh": "the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh" (VI 171/131). Thus, the look manages to envelope its own place of emergence with its own flesh. Later on, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the relationship by principle that must obtain between seer and seen in order for vision to be possible by suggesting that "He who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is of it (il en est)*" (VI 175/134-135). But in the next paragraph, a strange reversal occurs in this generative order as he proposes that the body is "the sole means I have to go unto the heart of things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh" (VI 176/135), thus suggesting that the body itself makes things be that *of which* it is as seer, suggesting that the things are just as much *of* the seer as the reverse. This redoubling of generative relations is reiterated again in the subsequent paragraph, where Merleau-Ponty explicates what he means by according to the body of perception the status as *exemplar sensible*: on the one hand, this body as "caught up in the tissue of the things", yet, on the other hand, this very tissue is – simultaneously, it seems – engaged in a reversal of the whole situation, in so far as the body "draws it entirely to itself, incorporates it, and, with the same movement, communicates to the things...that divergence between the within and the without that constitutes its natal secret" (VI 176-177/135-136). Once again, then, we are invited to consider the possibility that the body *qua* seer draws from itself and communicates

³⁸⁸ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 179.

to the things the conditions of its own emergence in/from them. This choreography of emergence is echoed, finally, in the “Interrogation and Intuition” chapter:

What makes the flesh of each color, of each sound, of each tactile texture, of the present, and of the world is the fact that he who grasps them feels himself emerge from them by a sort of coiling up or redoubling, fundamentally homogenous with them and that in return the sensible is in his eyes as it were his double or an extension of his own flesh. (...) The things – here, there, now, then – are no longer in themselves, in their own place, in their own time; they exist only at the end of those rays of spatiality and of temporality emitted in the secrecy of my flesh (VI 150-151/113-114).

As anticipated in chapter 3, then, Merleau-Ponty’s account of reversibility suggests a reversibility not only between the active and passive sides of vision – of seeing and being seen – but also a reversibility of generative relations, such that the generator is generated by the generated no less than the reverse.

Now, as Claude Lefort writes in his critical essay “Flesh and Otherness” with regard to the passages just quoted, Merleau-Ponty’s description of reversibility here “tends to be that of *genesis*”, more precisely, a genesis that is also a “self-genesis” or a “movement of self-begetting”, and a “bizarre begetting” at that.³⁸⁹ In this bizarre movement of auto-genesis, Lefort observes, “everything comes to pass as though simultaneously the body emerged from the flesh of things and transported into the things the flesh of its own body”.³⁹⁰ No doubt, one would have to admit that this movement of self-begetting is bizarre merely on account of its very choreography, which Lefort marks out as follows:

A singular sensible emerges from the mass of the sensible by a sort of coiling up, and through redoubling, turns back upon itself – that is to say, at the same, upon the whole of the sensible – so that a double doubling occurs, the body becoming at once sentient and sensible and distinct from the external world that it continues to belong to, to adhere to.³⁹¹

Yet it seems to me that this auto-genetic scenario will have to strike us as even more bizarre when we keep in mind that the flesh of things – from which the seeing body receives itself at the same time as the latter draws it from itself as its own flesh and transports it into the things – is, as we have seen, to such an extent a maternalized flesh. The fact that the flesh of things from which Merleau-Ponty’s seeing body receives itself in the same movement that it makes things flesh is a maternalized flesh is precisely what troubles Irigaray. In a move not unlike Lefort, she calls this movement an “astonishing reversal”:

³⁸⁹ Lefort, “Flesh and Otherness”, p. 5.

³⁹⁰ Lefort, “Flesh and Otherness”, p. 5.

³⁹¹ Lefort, “Flesh and Otherness”, p. 5.

Enveloping things with his look, the seer would give birth to them, and/yet the mystery of his own birth would subsist in them. For now they contain the mystery of the prenatal night where he was palpated without seeing. (...) An astonishing reversal: my gaze, which would receive itself from the visible, envelops things without hiding them and unveils them while veiling them.³⁹²

Hence, if we take into account (as Lefort suggests) that the genetic process of the flesh is a movement of self-begetting by which the seeing body emanates from a flesh of things that it simultaneously gives to things, and if we recall (as Irigaray suggests) that the flesh usurped for this self-begetting is a pervasively maternalized flesh (amniotic fluids, placenta, umbilical cords), then we can read Merleau-Ponty's choreography of emergence in the flesh quite literally as an attempt to dramatize the genealogical order invoked apropos of Schelling in the first *Nature* course: "We are the parents of a Nature of which we are also the children" (N 68/43).

It seems to me that what is at stake in this astonishing reversal between generated and generator, in this choreography of self-begetting by which nature/flesh/world/being is "moved into a reversion of the intrauterine abode",³⁹³ is, as Irigaray repeatedly points out in her essay, ultimately a struggle against the unsurpassable passivity imposed by the condition of not being one's own origin. Compared with *Phenomenology of Perception*, in which Merleau-Ponty was concerned – as we saw in the previous chapter – to recall us to precisely this passivity, this "internal weakness" born of our natal past and that "forever prevents us from achieving the density of an absolute individual" (PhP 491/452), the descriptions of reversible flesh found in *The Visible and the Invisible* read like attempts to overcome precisely this passivity. In the previous chapter we saw that this struggle makes itself felt in the operation of Merleau-Ponty's touch-vision system, in its double operation of incorporation and repudiation of the tangible invisible, of that of the tangible that by principle does not lend itself to sight yet which makes it possible. We are now beginning to see that the same struggle also plays itself out at the level of the choreography of emergence depicted by Merleau-Ponty. As Irigaray puts it:

The seer tries to put back together the most passive and the most active (...) to establish a *continuum*, a duration, between the most passive and the most active. But he cannot manage it. Especially without memory of that first event where he is enveloped-touched by a tangible invisible of which his eyes are also formed, but which he will never see: with no seer, neither visible nor visibility in that place.³⁹⁴

³⁹² Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, pp. 154, 156.

³⁹³ Lefort, "Flesh and Otherness", p. 154.

³⁹⁴ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 154.

What is striking about Irigaray's remark here is the way it resonates, at least in part, with Merleau-Ponty's own criticism of the philosophies of reflection, as discussed above. The philosophy of reflection, on Merleau-Ponty's analysis, tries to go back on our primordial initiation to nature in a way that for him resembles an attempt on the part of some embryo to undo or cut and then remake the bond that ties it to its mother and through which it receives its nourishment and sustenance prior to birth. Yet the version we get of this primordial initiation from Merleau-Ponty's own hand elsewhere in *The Visible and the Invisible* (as well as in certain passages in the *Nature* courses) seems, if Irigaray's and Lefort's analyses are correct, to have more in common with the philosophies of reflection with regard to this issue than he seems prepared to admit: "This reversibility of the *world* and the *I* (which Merleau-Ponty refuses to dissociate, to separate into two) suggests some repetition of a prenatal sojourn where the universe and I form a closed economy, which is partly reversible".³⁹⁵

What are we to make, philosophically speaking, of this bizarre begetting or astonishing reversal that characterizes Merleau-Ponty's turn from the event of birth itself as *archē* to the more fundamental and original *archē* of birth, i.e., his attempt (as Madison puts it) at clarification of the event of birth itself? In other words, what philosophical function is served by the maternal body as it submits itself to Merleau-Ponty's reversing designs that turn it into an impossible version of itself?

With this question – which is a most important question from the point of view of the present project – I reach the point at which the limitations of Irigaray's reading of Merleau-Ponty begin to make themselves felt. When Irigaray is to set forth an interpretation of the pattern of the "astonishing reversal" – a reversal of the maternal gift of flesh – that she has worked so painstakingly to articulate in Merleau-Ponty's text, she reverts to a sort of psychological contextualization that I find neither convincing nor interesting. Here is what she suggests, albeit with certain reservations:

If I wanted to apply some terms which I do not really like to use outside of their strictly clinical setting – where, moreover, I do not use them as such – I might say that Merleau-Ponty's seer remains in an incestuous prenatal situation with the whole. This mode of existence or of being is probably that of all men, at least in the West.³⁹⁶

With this last comment, it seems to me, Merleau-Ponty's text finds itself torn out from its most immediate context – namely, Merleau-Ponty's philosophical project and, more broadly,

³⁹⁵ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 173.

the philosophical traditions it issues from and which it reacts to – and is projected into an altogether different context, namely, the psychological structure of “all men in the West”. With one stroke, the text – replete with its conflicts, tensions, blind spots, disavowals and astonishing choreographies – is set up as a symptom of a reality subsisting outside it and prior to it, in the psychological structure of all men in the West, even as it adds itself to Irigaray’s mass of evidence in support of this bold hypothesis concerning all men in the West. Depending on the specific character of the psychological structure in question, such a move from the text as symptom to its underlying, extra-textual reality might be called for from the point of view of the ethical and political need to effectuate some change in that psychological structure, and from this point of view Irigaray has my full support. However, from the point of view of the need to understand the philosophical labour performed by the feminine in Merleau-Ponty’s thought, which is the problem to which I have found it worthwhile to devote this project, it doesn’t seem that Irigaray’s move gets us very far.³⁹⁷

I think it is possible to extend Irigaray’s insights concerning Merleau-Ponty’s “astonishing reversal” in more promising directions than the psychobiographical reduction entailed by Irigaray’s own resort to clinical terms. In the remainder of this chapter, I shall explore such a direction of analysis, which will connect what Irigaray discloses at the level of motif – reversal of the maternal gift of flesh, resulting in a radical struggle with the maternal – back up with some of Merleau-Ponty’s own most urgent philosophical concerns, namely, the problem of realism. This approach will still consider the patterns and choreographies of the bizarre movement of self-begetting that I have found – along with Irigaray and Lefort – to be present in Merleau-Ponty’s text as a symptom, though not of an extra-textual psychological structure, but instead of the structure of philosophical thought that finds in it its intuitive transposition.

A Most Radical Struggle

In what follows, I will try to develop a bold suggestion that might be summed up in the following simple terms. To the extent that, as Irigaray has shown, Merleau-Ponty’s choreography of self-begetting bespeaks a “most radical *polemos* with the maternal, the

³⁹⁶ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 173.

³⁹⁷ For more elaborate discussion of the psychoanalytical conceptual apparatus invoked by Irigaray in her criticism of Merleau-Ponty, see Cataldi, “The Philosopher and Her Shadow. Irigaray’s Reading of Merleau-Ponty” for a sympathetic approach to this part of Irigaray’s strategy, and Judith Butler, “Sexual Difference as a Question of Ethics: Alterities of the

intrauterine”,³⁹⁸ this struggle is symptomatic of a no less radical struggle taking place on the thematic level of nearly all of Merleau-Ponty’s texts dealing with the problem of nature, namely, his crusade against realism. It seems to me that the “astonishing” (Irigaray) or “bizarre” (Lefort) character of Merleau-Ponty’s choreography of self-begetting (in the) flesh is a highly precise expression of a struggle that his project for a philosophy of nature maintains with itself: a concerted effort to mount an account of the emergence of subjectivity that simultaneously respects the ban, constitutive of all phenomenology (even in its so-called ontological mode), on speaking earnestly of any being or entity as in-itself (i.e., as existing independently of the possibility of a mind cognizing or perceiving it).

No reader of Merleau-Ponty can fail to take account of the deeply anti-realistic sentiment that runs throughout Merleau-Ponty’s works. In the third chapter of *The Structure of Behaviour*, Merleau-Ponty presents a brief critique of Bergson’s theory of the vital impulse, claiming that the relation Bergson posits between this impulse and that which it produces is “not conceivable” (SC 171/158), and then adduces a few arguments in favour of this verdict. For Merleau-Ponty, it seems, the most decisive argument against Bergson’s theory of the vital impulse is the fact that it has been elaborated on “the plane of being” (SC 171/158), which is to say, from a realistic point of view. What Merleau-Ponty would have wanted Bergson to do is that, instead of considering the organism as “a real product of external nature”, he should have considered it as “a whole which is significant for a consciousness which knows it, not a thing which rests in-itself” (SC 172/159), thus giving up the project of a “metaphysics of nature” (SC 174/161).³⁹⁹

Likewise, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, scientific discourse is deemed to be both “naïve” and “hypocritical” on principle, because it continues to present its results and theses as if they were somehow related to a reality external to it, hence in utter disavowal of, yet dependence upon, “that other perspective – the perspective of consciousness – by which a world first arranges itself around me and begins to exist for me” (Php 9/lxxii). It is true that the perspective of consciousness – which is for Merleau-Ponty, of course, first of all an embodied consciousness – is characterized, precisely like scientific consciousness, by an unquestioned belief in a world subsisting independently of it, by a continual movement of

Flesh in Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Gail Weiss and Dorothea Olkowski (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006) for a more critical intervention.

³⁹⁸ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 171.

³⁹⁹ I owe these references from *The Structure of Behaviour* to Toadvine, “Nature and Negation: Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Bergson”, pp. 109, p. 116 n. 20

transcendence beyond appearances in search of some reality behind them. But the perspective of consciousness is not the perspective of true, radical philosophy, in so far as it is precisely what is to be taken into consideration by philosophy. From the vantage point of this second-order perspective, a discourse is to be launched that is destined to baffle even the most humble and modest of everyday realists: “I am the absolute source. My existence does not come from my antecedents, nor from my physical and social surroundings; it moves out toward them and sustains them” (PhP 9/lxxii).

As we pass to the *Nature* lectures and *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty’s struggle against the realist thesis of the world’s externality to knowledge continues with undiminished fervour, even as it assumes some additional features. In one of the sketches making up the third *Nature* course, we are told that “There is a solution only by putting the ontology of the in-itself back in question” (N 301/237). In *The Visible and the Invisible*, the realist thesis of being in itself is repeatedly referred to as “the night” (cf. VI 21/6, 97/69, 299/251), a night in which naivety “rends itself asunder (*se déchire elle-même*)” (VI 21/6) – at any rate an obvious invocation of Hegel’s famous critique of Schellingian intuition in the preface to *Phenomenology of Mind*, as noted by Madison: “Being without man could [for Merleau-Ponty] only be ‘the night wherein all cows are black’”.⁴⁰⁰ Rending itself asunder in the night, the naïve faith in being-in-itself that scientific thought adopts uncritically from the “natural man” (VI 17/3) destines it to flounder in “illusion” (VI 31/15).

Merleau-Ponty’s insistent ascription of naivety to the realist notion of being as in-itself would seem to imply that Merleau-Ponty’s discontent with realism is of an epistemological sort. However, considering the *Nature* courses and *The Visible and the Invisible*, it is not enough to say that Merleau-Ponty objects to realism only in an epistemological sense, i.e., to the idea that that which makes our statements about reality true or false is somehow external to and independent of those statements or the web of statements in which they are embedded. His anti-realism now also takes on a metaphysical and ontological dimension, he returns to the “metaphysics of nature” he had foresworn in *The Structure of Behaviour*, and this is also, I claim, what accounts for the spectacular development in Merleau-Ponty’s lexicon of imagery. Merleau-Ponty’s suggestion, in the first *Nature* course, that “we are the parents of a nature of which we are also the children”, along with his suggestion, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, that “[t]he things...exist only at the end of those rays of spatiality and of

⁴⁰⁰ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, p. 235.

temporality emitted in the secrecy of my flesh” (VI 151/114) strikes one as a fantasy that could only have germinated in the mind of a philosopher who is prepared to deny at all costs any metaphysical externality of nature in relation to man. Ted Toadvine aptly expresses this trend in Merleau-Ponty’s approach to nature thus:

The difficulty of formulating an ontology of nature therefore concerns the character of the position from which this nature is to be described, that is, the embeddedness of reflection or mind within nature. (...) Reflection emerges from and opens onto nature, yet insofar as this reflection is also conditioned by nature, it cannot exhaustively circumscribe it. To consider the being of nature is also to reconsider our own being, and the moment where the being of nature and of the human cross. It is this moment of crossing, the becoming-nature of humanity and the becoming-human of nature, to which Merleau-Ponty applies the term *chiasm*.⁴⁰¹

I take Toadvine to suggest that, in so far as the project of “formulating an ontology of nature” can be said to *concern* “the character of the position from which this nature is to be described” – a position that is characterized by the human subject engaged in ontological questioning – then this character is internal to the definition of what it means to be natural. This seems to me to be another way of saying that natural being is ontologically internal to man, i.e., that nature is not only unknowable outside the limits imposed on its cognizability by our own cognitive nature, but also *inconceivable* when considered in abstraction from the presence of humanity in it. The idea seems to be that any thinking of nature in abstraction from man’s presence must be condemned as unduly abstract, and that a concrete approach to nature would have to include, metaphysically speaking, in its very conception of nature the cognitive agency – man – approaching the nature so conceptualized. Nature is neither object nor subject, but the whole, the system composed of subject and object in interrelation. Observer and observed, seeing and seen, touching and being touched, body and world, subject and object, self and other are subsystems that in their mutual application fit together in the great system of nature “as the two halves of an orange” (VI 174/133), “[t]heir landscapes interweave, their actions and passions fit together exactly” (VI 185/142). The reversibility of the seeing and the seen, of the touching and the touched, that defines the flesh amounts to “a close-bound system that I count on, define a vision in general and a constant style of visibility from which I cannot detach myself”, as, conversely, “[t]he flesh (of the world or my own) is not contingency, chaos, but a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself” (VI 190/146).

⁴⁰¹ Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, p. 108

It seems to me that Merleau-Ponty's depiction of this system as a process of intergenerational procreation, whereby parents are generated by their own children, partly functions as a strategy to discourage the realist from interfering in this communing of flesh/nature/being/world with itself and in which the human subject is accorded a constitutive role to play. Claude Lefort seems to be thinking along these lines when, apropos of the "bizarre begetting" he has found to be taking place in *The Visible and the Invisible*, he comments: "The description makes irrelevant any attempt to elucidate the phenomenon from a positive, realistic point of view".⁴⁰² A similar point is made by Shazad Akhtar apropos of the phrase from the first *Nature* course I have been dealing with, and which he immediately connects to the notion of nature as the system of internal relations between the subject and the object:

What Merleau-Ponty finds in th[e] idea of the 'subjective-objective' is illustrated for him with reference to a kind of reciprocity of the two orders, subjective and objective, in a quote [i.e., the one invoking the intergenerational parenthood of nature] that also helps to remind us how far Merleau-Ponty is from abandoning a phenomenological first-person perspective for, say, third-person 'realism', [which] does not see the sense in which 'we are the parents of Nature' because it denies any ontological or constitutional role to perception.⁴⁰³

Why is it necessary for Merleau-Ponty to struggle so vigorously against realism in the first place, so vigorously indeed that the rhetorical measures he feels compelled to apply in the course of this struggle are destined to appal many a realist opponent, as well as feminist philosophers like Irigaray? I will try to answer this question by proposing an inventory of four dangers that Merleau-Ponty associates with the realist thesis of being as in-itself, dangers that in his eyes justify the condemnation of this thesis in favour of the transcendental turn toward being for me and, ultimately, toward the notion that we are the parents of the very nature that has given birth to us. This latter turn, I will argue further down, amounts to a resuscitation of the tradition of absolute idealism that arose in Germany around 1800. If the reinvigoration of this tradition by the writings of a philosopher who has perhaps gained larger notoriety – given his typical emphasis on embodied experience – for his anti-idealism than for his anti-realism may seem difficult to digest, some confusion might be lifted if we consider the possible motivations he might have had for making the leap into the absolute as conceived along idealist lines.

⁴⁰² Lefort, "Flesh and Otherness", p. 5.

⁴⁰³ Shazad Akhtar, *The Paradox of Nature: Merleau-Ponty's Semi-Naturalistic Critique of Husserlian Phenomenology* (Doctoral dissertation, Department of Philosophy, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisc., 2009), p. 179.

The Four Dangers of Realism

As far as I am concerned, Merleau-Ponty's struggle against the realist conception of being as in-itself, and his concomitant recommendation that we take the transcendental turn toward being understood as for-us, can be interrogated from the point of view of the dangers that he thinks the realist thesis necessarily entails. I have managed to detect four such dangers that Merleau-Ponty connects, in his late works, with the realist definition of being as in-itself, and which justifies in his view the transcendental turn: skepticism, determinism, reductionism and operationalism respectively. I shall deal with them in this order.

Skepticism⁴⁰⁴

One who has been recommended to acquaint him- or herself with Merleau-Ponty's ontology and has been assigned *The Visible and the Invisible* as the source for this ontology will perhaps be surprised to find that the first section of this book consists of an attempt to refute radical skepticism. Such a reader might feel that the reading he or she has been assigned does not belong in the domain of ontology at all but is rather an exercise in epistemology, since the problem of skepticism that forms its point of departure is a problem facing someone who wants to propose either a way to justify a particular method for ascertaining truth or else a way to justify the meaningfulness in principle of searching for truth. Now, Merleau-Ponty is very far from wanting to propose a particular method for the ascertaining of truth, but I think he is very much preoccupied with the need to defend the meaningfulness in principle of searching for truth, and that this preoccupation forms an important part of the context for his philosophy of nature. It is also this preoccupation that accounts for his radical opposition to realism, as I want to indicate in what follows.

Above, I pointed out that Merleau-Ponty persists, from early to late works, in his evaluation of realism as a "naïve" and "illusory" stance, at any rate when it is considered as a philosophical stance. Now, to characterize someone else's stance as naïve in so far as that someone believes himself to be cognitively well-equipped enough to speak truthfully and validly about at least some state of affairs in the world (say, climate change) would itself seem to amount to the adoption of a skeptical stance. Merleau-Ponty is of course not himself a skeptic, but it seems to me that his condemnation of the realist stance as "naïve" signals

⁴⁰⁴ In putting together this discussion of the place of skepticism in Merleau-Ponty's thought, I have benefitted greatly from Henry Pieterma's exposition, throughout his book *Phenomenological Epistemology*, of the anti-realist stance found in

that he is prepared – as were Kant, Hegel and Husserl before him in the tradition of German idealism – to take the skeptic’s worries seriously, indeed that he thinks these worries are wholly legitimate and that they require a principal response. This is clear from the introductory section of the “Reflection and Interrogation” chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, where Merleau-Ponty betrays an ambition to “answer Pyrrhonism sufficiently” (VI 20/5). The problem facing the skeptic, especially if he or she is of the radical sort, is that he or she cannot bring him- or herself to accept any proposition concerning the world – not even the proposition claiming the world’s independent existence – as true or valid in the realist sense. The skeptic has realized that in all such matters, conclusive evidence is always lacking, but only conclusive evidence will do for him or her.

How does one end up in the frame of mind that makes it necessary to condemn the realist thesis as naïve? To judge from Merleau-Ponty’s exposition, it is enough to be seated at one’s own table with one’s eyes open: “For after all, sure as it is that I see my table...sure as it is that at the horizon of all these visions or quasi-visions it is the world itself I inhabit...still as soon as I attend to it this conviction is just as much contested, by the very fact that this vision is *mine*” (VI 19/4-5). Merleau-Ponty does not explain why he feels the need to attend to the conviction that he sees his table and that he inhabits the world, and he does not give any arguments in support of his claim that acknowledgment of the fact that this vision is his cannot but contest this conviction as soon as he attends to it. In fact, he assures us that the doubts he is raising about his own conviction that he sees the table and that he inhabits the world have nothing to do with “the age-old argument from dreams, delirium, or illusions, inviting us to consider whether what we see is not ‘false’” (VI 19/5). Such arguments are of no consequence, because they take for granted the very thing they purport to put into question, namely, the postulate of the world in general: “[T]his is secretly invoked in order to disqualify our perceptions and cast them pell-mell back into our ‘interior life’ along with our dreams, in spite of all observable differences, for the sole reason that our dreams were, at the time, as convincing as they” (VI 19/5). Merleau-Ponty has still not offered us a convincing reason for attending critically to our conviction that we inhabit the world. All he has done is to deny that, in engaging in this self-critical inquiry, he has drawn any inspiration from the age-old skeptical arguments since they are themselves the expression of a failure to reach down to the bottom of their own naivety.

virtually all phenomenological thinkers – among whom Pietersma treats especially of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-

Nevertheless, in the next sentence – more precisely, in a subordinate clause to the next sentence – the age-old skeptical arguments seem to recover all the validity that Merleau-Ponty had first seemed to deny them: “Valid against naïveté, against the idea of a perception that would plunge forth to surprise the things beyond all experience, as the light draws them from the night wherein they pre-existed, the argument does not elucidate...” (VI 19-20/5). It is important to note the subtle shift of terms that has occurred since Merleau-Ponty reported on his own conviction that he inhabits the world only a few lines above. What is the difference between, on the one hand, the idea that it is certain that I see the table and that I inhabit the world and, on the other hand, the idea of “a perception that would plunge forth to surprise the things beyond all experience, as the light draws them from the night wherein they pre-existed”? There is barely any difference of content between these two ideas: both express the notion that what I see is really there before me, that the table existed before I turned my gaze upon it and will continue to exist when I turn my attention elsewhere, and that it is not my belief to this effect that makes it be so. The difference lies in the terms of their description. Whereas the first description is a first-person report on the experience of seeing, the second description is wrought in the terms of someone who subjects this first-person report to a critical inspection. This is to say that the age-old skeptical arguments were already in play the moment Merleau-Ponty decided to throw into question his conviction that he sees the table and that he inhabits the world. Hence, from the outset, Merleau-Ponty is determined to take seriously and provide a satisfactory response to the skeptical arguments concerning the meaningfulness of our search for truth. Along these lines, it can be anticipated that everything that Merleau-Ponty will point out with regard to Being, nature, the flesh and the world will issue in part from his concession that the business of raising skeptical doubts with regard to our naïve certitude of seeing the table and of inhabiting the world is legitimate on principle as the absolute beginning of philosophical inquiry.

Having conceded to the validity in principle of skeptical arguments against the realist naivety of supposing that perception puts us in contact with things subsisting independently of experience, Merleau-Ponty begins his attempt to “answer Pyrrhonism sufficiently” (VI 20/5). As we shall see shortly, his persistence in this attempt will eventually require of him that he renounces the realist idea of being as in-itself. He first supposes that he might answer his skeptical opponent sufficiently if he recalls to him or her some phenomenological truths

Ponty – as largely an epistemological response to radical skepticism.

about experience, truths that might have been left out of the account that equated perception with the dream:

[W]e answer Pyrrhonism sufficiently by showing that there is a difference of structure and, as it were, of grain between the perception or true vision, which gives rise to an open series of concordant operations, and the dream, which is not *observable* and, upon examination, is almost nothing but blanks (VI 20/5).

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, this difference of phenomenological grain between the real and the imaginary was pointed out in terms of a notion of the thing's alterity, an alterity that Merleau-Ponty, as we saw in chapter 1, connected intimately to the sense of an inexhaustible plenitude of sense contracted into the thing as an open, indefinite trajectory of exploratory movements converging toward it.⁴⁰⁵ Yet the skeptic with whom Merleau-Ponty now converses is not impressed by this inexhaustible plenitude of sense that constitutes the difference of grain between the real and the imaginary. For this skeptic is afraid that this difference of a phenomenological order might just be exactly that, an expression of the psychological design of the knower, and to which nothing need correspond in the real world outside our experience, if such a thing exists at all. Once again, Merleau-Ponty concedes validity to the age-old skeptical arguments. No matter how different the fabrics of the dream and the fabrics of perception may be to anyone who attends carefully to it, it nevertheless happens that we dream that we are awake and it happens that we believe we see things which are really not there, which do not have the properties we ascribe to them and which have properties that we fail to ascribe to them: "there remains the problem of how we can be under the illusion of seeing what we do not see, how the rags of the dream can, before the dreamer, be worth the close-woven fabric of the true world" (VI 20/5). That Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that this is a problem that must be handled means that he is going to continue arguing with the skeptic and to try to show the latter that it is meaningful after all to maintain the distinction between perceiving and imagining or dreaming.

How does one answer an opponent who sticks so fiercely to his skepticism, and who is not persuaded by phenomenological considerations? In fact, Merleau-Ponty does not answer this opponent. Instead, he effectively announces that the conversation is over in so far as he recognizes that he is trying to persuade an interlocutor who is after all unworthy of consideration. This is because the latter is under the sway of naiveties and illusions that he or

⁴⁰⁵ Today, this emphasis on a difference of structure/grain between perception and other intentional modalities is typical of what is called "disjunctive theories" of perception (cf. William Fish, *Philosophy of Perception: A Contemporary Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2010), ch. 6).

she is not willing to call into question, naiveties and illusions that, notably, are also the source of his or her skepticism:

[B]y themselves [the Pyrrhonian arguments] would deter us from any elucidation, since they refer vaguely to the idea of a Being wholly in itself and by contrast count the perceived and the imaginary indiscriminately among our “states of consciousness”. At bottom, Pyrrhonism shares the illusions of the naïve man. It is the naïveté that rends itself asunder in the night (VI 21/6).

With this attribution of naivety and illusion to the skeptic on account of the latter’s conception of being as “wholly in itself” to which true representations or states of consciousness can only be related in an external fashion (which is also what, for the skeptic, ultimately rules out the possibility of satisfactorily validated representations of reality), Merleau-Ponty prepares to take his own discourse into the domain of the “philosophy of reflection (*la philosophie réflexive*)” (VI 20-21/6) that is going to receive a separate treatment from him later on. Of course, this philosophy of reflection is also, in its turn, going to be condemned as naïve and as being under the sway of its own set of illusions (cf. VI 55/34). But not before Merleau-Ponty has first fully accepted the reflective philosopher’s invitation to consider as naïve and illusory on principle the very idea – shared by the realist and the skeptic alike – of “a Being wholly in itself”, concomitant with the idea of an external relation between subject and object; in other words, not before he has performed the transcendental turn.

Hence, given that Merleau-Ponty considers it necessary to defeat radical skepticism and come up with a satisfactory approach to “the problem of our access to the world” (VI 20/5), and given that the realist conception of being as in-itself turns out to be the very soil in which all skepticism takes root, there would seem to be no other solution than to reject the realist conception of being altogether and to perform the transcendental turn. It can thus be determined that part of the motivation behind Merleau-Ponty’s struggle against realism can be understood as the epistemological concern to defeat the radical skeptic’s doubts about the extent of our access to the world, i.e., about the possibility of knowledge, a concern that – as we shall see – also provides the context for his late approach to the generativity of nature.

Determinism

The second danger that Merleau-Ponty seems to associate with the realist concept of being as in-itself is the danger of determinism, hence a danger that bears more explicitly on ontological (as well as ethical and political) issues than does the danger of skepticism with

regard to the epistemic status of our experiences. How does realism become linked with determinism, according to Merleau-Ponty?

We may glimpse an answer to this question if we consider the title to the section on the Cartesian idea of nature at the beginning of the first *Nature* course held at the Collège de France. The title begins by naming the Cartesian idea of nature as an “entirely exterior being” (N 25/8). According to Merleau-Ponty, the exteriority of nature’s being, as posited by Descartes, is conceived along three axes. First, nature is “made of exterior parts”, which amounts to the idea that there is no such thing as internal relations occurring within nature, in other words, it amounts to the idea of nature as pure mechanism (the mechanist thesis). If nature is pure mechanism, then everything that is part of it is, in principle, absolutely determined, as Laplace would suppose more than a century later (cf. N 123-124/88-89), and the possibility of freedom can only be bought at the price of introducing a metaphysical dualism between mind and matter, which is too high a price to pay. Second, according to the Cartesian idea of nature as summarized in the title, nature is “exterior to man”, which amounts to the idea that nature exists in itself, independently of man (the realist thesis). And third, nature is an entirely exterior being in the sense of being “exterior to itself”, which to me seems to be a way of expressing the idea of an external relation between productive nature (i.e., God) and nature as product (the creationist thesis). But to conceive of nature as a pure product utterly exteriorized in relation to its producer is to conceive of it as determined and as being incapable of genuine evolution.

There can be no doubt that Merleau-Ponty sought a way to conceive of nature that would escape the determinism involved in the definition of nature as mechanism and as product. But I think his diagnosis of this problem consisted in the notion that no feasible solution can be had at the level of being in-itself, and that this diagnosis justifies abandonment of the realist idea of nature as external to man. To object only locally, on the plane of being, to mechanism and creationism will not suffice for Merleau-Ponty. On the one hand, simply rejecting the idea of nature as existing *partes extra partes*, hence as a machine, can for Merleau-Ponty only lead, as soon as a non-reductive account of life must be provided, to the introduction of some incomprehensible principle of entelechy supervening on and interfering in a materiality that remains defined along mechanist lines. To this extent one is still stuck with “the philosophy of the thing”, now comprising mechanism and vitalism as dialectical counterparts, both of which make the phenomenon of life “incomprehensible” (cf. RC 173/19). According to Merleau-Ponty, it seems, the only alternatives to be found on

the plane of being are either eliminative materialism *qua* mechanism or dualism *qua* entelechy miraculously supervening on mechanism. Between the two, no compromise is in sight, and one faces an impossible choice.

On the other hand, simply rejecting the idea of nature as divided externally between productivity and product cannot but lead to the idea that nature has its constitutive conditions nowhere else than in itself, which is what, as Merleau-Ponty notes, Spinoza suggests in the notion of nature as infinite, hence as coextensive with God (N 31/13, 33/15). As infinite, nature becomes *causa sui*, with absolutely nothing lacking from its fullness or positivity. With nothing lacking (which would require “a subject proclaiming it as a lack and regretting the absence of something”), nature as infinite productivity becomes equivalent to “a permanence of Nature” (N 33/15), which is to say that determinism still reigns supreme.

Hence, for Merleau-Ponty, it seems that there is no satisfactory solution to the problem of determinism to be had on realist premises. The vitalist invocation of an entelechy supervening on mechanism may alleviate determinism somewhat, but it does so at the price of introducing magical components into the picture as well as enforcing an intolerable metaphysical dualism. Neither mechanist monism nor vitalist dualism can satisfactorily account for the phenomena of life and mind. Furthermore, the creationism involved in the notion of nature as exterior to itself (that is, in the notion of nature as distributed between producer and product externally related), cannot, on pain of determinism, be checked by collapsing the distinction between producer and product in the idea of an infinity of nature. On both counts, it seems, one tries in vain to solve the difficulties on realist premises. The conclusion seems inevitable: “There is a solution only by putting the ontology of the in-itself back in question” (N 301/237). One gets rid of the problems of determinism linked with mechanism and creationism only by renouncing the realist idea that nature is external to man and, presumably, by embracing the idea that we are the parents of a nature of which we are also the children.

Reductionism

The third danger that Merleau-Ponty seems to associate with the realist concept of being as in-itself is the danger of reductionism, which is closely linked to the issue just discussed, but which Merleau-Ponty seems to consider a danger that might survive even the end of determinism.

The danger of reductionism becomes particularly acute, according to Merleau-Ponty, when realism matures into scientific realism, that is, into the notion that what truly exists is that about which perfected science speaks. This is how Merleau-Ponty defines the position of scientific realism in *The Visible and the Invisible*: “The true is the *objective*, is what I have succeeded in determining by measurement, or more generally by the *operations* that are authorized by the variables or by the entities I have defined relative to an order of facts” (VI 30-31/14). In such a regime of objectivity, what is in danger of being reduced to terms improper to it is “our *contact* with the things”, “the lived experience”, or “the predicates that come to things from our encounter with them” (VI 31/14-15). Such things are left out of account because what naturally interests the scientist are phenomena that exceed the boundaries of what can be given in lived, experimentally and algorithmically unmediated experience. Merleau-Ponty describes the process by which this reduction takes place in terms that make it resemble a conspiracy:

Thus science began by excluding all the predicates that come to the things from our encounter with them. The exclusion is however only provisional: when it will have learned to invest it, science will little by little reintroduce what it first put aside as subjective; but it will integrate it as a particular case of the relations and objects that define the world for science. Then the world will close in over itself, and, except for what within us thinks and builds science, that impartial spectator that inhabits us, we will have become parts or moments of the Great Object (VI 31/15).

Merleau-Ponty’s attitude toward the idea of the Great Object he describes here is not always easy to pin down. In the next paragraph, he labels it an “illusion”, born of naivety. Along similar lines, later in the chapter, he speaks of the danger that science may condemn itself to life in “a state of permanent crisis” all the time it refuses to renounce its objectivist prejudices so as to undertake “an analysis of the procedures through which the universe of measures and operations is constituted starting from the life world (*monde vécu*) considered as the source, eventually as the universal source” (VI 35/18). One may wonder what there is to fear from a reductionist scientific program that, as such, is nevertheless fated to live in a state of permanent crisis, suffering from ontological illusions, forgetfulness of its true source of meaning and validity, etc. In speaking of such a crisis, it is as if Merleau-Ponty were in fact concerned to restore to scientific discourse an objectivity that he thinks it has lost (or perhaps never had) – more on this further down.

However, it is clear that Merleau-Ponty considers the lifeworld to be threatened with reduction at the hands of the crisis-ridden scientific endeavours, and that he urges us to struggle against this danger. The danger that the lifeworld may disappear from view

altogether is for Merleau-Ponty constituted by an unfortunate alliance between contemporary physics and psychology. It is contemporary physics that, even as “the very rigor of its description obliges [it] to recognize as ultimate physical beings in full right relations between the observer and the observed”, nevertheless aggravates the situation, because “the physicist continues to think of himself as an Absolute Mind before the pure object and to count as truths in themselves the very statements that express the interdependence of the whole of the observable with a situated and incarnate physicist” (VI 31-32/13). Judging from what follows on the next pages, it is clear that Merleau-Ponty is here thinking of both relativity physics and quantum mechanics, of contemporary developments in both macrophysics and microphysics. They both commit, in his eyes, the sin of introducing the observer constitutively into the picture only to make the observer-observed relation in its turn into an object to be investigated from a detached point of view, applying the same methods of formalization; this manoeuvre can only work to banish the lifeworld from the scene of physical knowledge at the moment it appeared that it had been restored by the very rigour of their descriptions, the result being that the authority of the Cartesian impartial, non-situated absolute spectator is reinstated even more forcefully. The more successful contemporary physics has been in opening new avenues of inquiry and in developing the tools for the formalization of the experience obtained from this inquiry, “the more conservative it has shown itself to be in what concerns theory of knowledge” (VI 32/16).

Quantum mechanics comes in as one of Merleau-Ponty’s examples of this trend, in so far as its practitioners tend to think, according to him, that

the horizon phenomena, the properties without carriers, the collective beings or beings without absolute localization, are by right only ‘subjective appearances’ which the vision of some giant [would reduce to] the interaction of absolute physical individuals (VI 33/16-17).

Merleau-Ponty’s basic impression of quantum mechanics at the time he wrote this (around 1959) seems to have been that it perceived the encounter with the mentioned “subjective appearances” in the texture of microphysical phenomena – appearances that he thought were congruent with and indeed expressive of the lifeworld – as an invitation to try to reduce them in the interest of a theory that would preserve classical physical objectivity and the “Cartesian representation of the world” (VI 34/17). It might be added that he contents himself with adducing the case of Louis de Broglie as his support for this general impression. But strangely, it is as if his description of the philosophical interpretation of quantum mechanics he finds reproachable fits above all else Einstein’s “hidden variable theory”,

according to which the uncertainty relation merely covers up a spatio-temporal co-ordination of the particle that may be empirically unobservable yet which must nonetheless be given in objective physical reality.⁴⁰⁶ The Copenhagen school (associated with the names of Bohr, Heisenberg and von Neumann), which in the first *Nature* course he refers to as “the probabilists” (N 125/89), receives no mention here. But it is clear that what he regards as the philosophical lesson to be drawn from the empirical discoveries in quantum mechanics bears a certain resemblance to the currents of thought that came to be associated with the Copenhagen school, namely, that it is necessary to “make the contact between the observer and the observed enter into the definition of the ‘real’” (VI 33/16). I shall return briefly to the Copenhagen school and Niels Bohr in the final, concluding chapter.

The reductionist trend that Merleau-Ponty thinks is perpetuated and even exacerbated in contemporary physics, in so far as it clings to the classical (i.e., realist) conception of objectivity, thus has the effect of “confining lived experience within the order of our ‘representations’ and the sector of ‘psychological’ curiosities” (VI 34/18). This order or sector of lived experience or perception will be left with the psychologists to be dealt with. Yet these psychologists – epitomized, according to Merleau-Ponty, by the *Gestalt* theorists – tend to approach their domain of study in exactly the same manner as the physicists do in relation to their domain of study, namely, as an order of objective facts to be co-ordinated by a cognitive agency that feigns not to be implicated in the recording and co-ordination of those facts. And so it is the psychologists who carry out that part of the reductionist program, described above, that consists in integrating, little by little, the whole lifeworld as “a particular case of the relations and objects that define the world for science”. This is particularly so because the psychology of perception as developed by the *Gestalt* school ultimately appeals to causal factors of a physical order when the time has come to provide *explanations* for the phenomena it discloses on the level of description. Such explanations are typically given in terms of functional dependencies involving variables that are ultimately subject to objective measurement. Thus the *Gestalt* psychologist believes he or she has explained, for example, the visual impression of a road extending toward the horizon when he or she has related this phenomenon to its functional dependence on certain measurable magnitudes, such as apparent width of the road at a given distance (cf. 39/21). According to

⁴⁰⁶ Cf. Ragnar Fjelland, "The 'Copenhagen Interpretation' of Quantum Mechanics and Phenomenology," in *Hermeneutic Philosophy of Science, Van Gogh's Eyes, and God*, ed. Babette E. Babich (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), pp. 55-57.

Merleau-Ponty, the project of reducing – on realist premises – lived experience or the lifeworld to the rank of “psychism” (VI 38/20) and the concomitant attempt to explain this psychism by objectively measurable conditioning factors would – if it were possible in practice – have as its ultimate consequence the reduction of man to an epiphenomenon of facts that are ultimately of a physical order:

If one really thinks that perception is a *function* of exterior *variables*, this schema is (and approximately indeed) applicable only to the corporeal and physical conditioning, and psychology is condemned to that exorbitant abstraction that consists in considering man as only a set of nervous terminations upon which physico-chemical agents play (VI 42/23).

Once the lifeworld gets reduced to its physical infrastructure, then, all that remains of it is the causal interaction among its components. This is why, as already indicated, the danger of reductionism is coextensive with the danger of determinism. And it is the psychologists who are to blame for the exacerbation of this situation. Despite the fact that, as Merleau-Ponty recognizes in the first *Nature* course, quantum mechanics entails that “probability enters into the fabric of the real” (N 127/91), it is as if the scientific ambitions on the part of psychology work to consolidate the classical ideology of mechanism and determinism in the physical domain: “[I]t is even from psychology that the objectivist preconceptions return to haunt the general and philosophical conceptions of the physicists” (VI 44/25).

We have seen how, for Merleau-Ponty, the twin dangers of reductionism and determinism spring inevitably from the realist thesis in its scientific guise, namely, the thesis that the range of phenomena described by science is the real in-itself, independently of man. According to Merleau-Ponty, then, the only way to forestall the dangers of reductionism and determinism would seem to be to condemn the realist conception of being-in-itself in the name of “an analysis of the procedures through which the universe of measures and operations is constituted starting from the life world (*monde vécu*) considered as the source, eventually as the universal source” (VI 34-35/18), hence to subject scientific discourse to transcendental critique. In other words, it would require that one “make the contact between observer and observed enter into the definition of the ‘real’” (VI 33/16), a definition that he considers to be already underway, yet insufficiently recognized as such, in the developments of modern physics. Again, as we have seen, for Merleau-Ponty, such a definition of the real ultimately entails an overthrow of all customary protocols of genealogy (which are probably only products of realist illusions anyway) in favour of an intergenerational parenthood between man and nature.

Now, the dangers of reductionism and determinism – posed by a scientific endeavour thus proceeding self-confidently under the inspiration drawn from the realist thesis of being-in-itself – are intimidating for sure. Indeed, it would seem that it is necessary to hurry up with the transcendentalist work of restoring the lifeworld to its rightful place as the universal source of all scientific knowledge, a move that Merleau-Ponty thinks will forestall the danger. Yet, as we have also seen, as long as the constitutive grounding of scientific knowledge in the lifeworld remains unacknowledged and untheorized, this knowledge finds itself marred in “a state of permanent crisis” (VI 35/18). Now, what could it mean to be in a state of crisis, unless it meant that such a state is a state in which one faces some kind of danger? If the critical situation in which reductionist and determinist discourses find themselves on account of their realism is a situation in which they face certain dangers, what would the relevant dangers be? Merleau-Ponty’s answer is that it is only by making the transcendental (re)turn to the lifeworld so as to overthrow the realist thesis of being as in-itself that we may “put an end to the crisis situation in which our knowledge finds itself when it thinks it is founded upon a philosophy that its own advances undermine” (VI 45-46/26).

So the crisis situation turns out to consist in a lack of proper epistemological foundations; and in such a situation, presumably, one is the likely prey of all sorts of illusions, the naivety of the thinking undertaken in such a state sooner or later “rend[ing] itself asunder in the night” (VI 21/6). Paradoxically, it seems, Merleau-Ponty wants to undermine the discourse bent on perpetuating reductionism and determinism, not by pointing out that its claims about reality are inadequate, based on insufficient evidence, or obtained through a dubitable methodology or the like; rather, it will be by reminding it of its transcendental grounding in the lifeworld, which is to say, by restoring to it its foundations. But unless some convincing argumentation be adduced to the effect that the foundations this discourse presumed it had in a realist conception of being are under threat, the representatives of this discourse are unlikely to be impressed by the transcendental philosopher’s theory about the lifeworld as universal source of all meaning-constitution, and will continue their reductive and determinist business in good faith.⁴⁰⁷ Whence the

⁴⁰⁷ I think Pietersma observation with regard to this issue is a pertinent one: “Now is somebody who refuses to perform the so-called transcendental turn uncritical? What if the realist cannot recognize the problem to which the turn is supposed to be a response? This might be a failure on his part, but what if there really is no problem? In that case the realist is vindicated, for there is nothing naïve or uncritical about denying a problem that does not exist” (Henry Pietersma, “What Happened to Epistemology in Our Tradition?”, *The Review of Metaphysics* 59, no. 3 (2006), p. 576).

indispensability for Merleau-Ponty of the age-old skeptical arguments, as we have seen above.

Operationalism

The fourth danger that Merleau-Ponty seems to associate with the realist concept of being as in-itself – and once again invoked as the motive to perform the transcendental (re)turn toward the lifeworld as universal source of meaning – is the danger of what he calls operationalism or “operational thought” (*la pensée “opératoire”*) (OE 9/122). While this aspect of scientific realism has already transpired in the course of the previous section, Merleau-Ponty’s concern with this danger is most evident in the opening paragraphs of “Eye and Mind”, in the course of which Merleau-Ponty offers a diagnosis of the contemporary state of scientific ideology. As we shall see, operationalism is for Merleau-Ponty the aspect of scientific realism that most explicitly provokes ethical and political concerns. Crucial to Merleau-Ponty’s diagnosis of the self-understanding of the natural scientist in the course of these pages is a nuance that was not present in his earlier criticism, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, of scientific realism, namely, a distinction between “classical science” and science “today”. It is not even present in this form in the critique of science that we find in the text of *The Visible and the Invisible* discussed in the previous section. In fact, it is only now that we get from Merleau-Ponty, in explicit terms, a distinction between two varieties of realism, and which parallels his distinction between “major rationalism” and “minor rationalism” in the essay “Everywhere and Nowhere”, included in *Signs* (cf. S 238-246/147-152).

To be sure, whether in its classical or contemporary avatars, science is for Merleau-Ponty still defined by the generic aspect of being a way of thinking that “manipulates things and gives up living in them”, and “whose fundamental bias is to treat everything as though it were an object-in-general – as though it meant nothing to us and yet was predestined for our ingenious schemes” (OE 7/121). One discerns here the same wariness of the inherent “naivety” that Merleau-Ponty elsewhere unqualifiedly ascribes to the scientific mind, but the issue here goes further than a mere epistemological critique. It now concerns the scope of operation that contemporary science – or rather “a widely prevalent philosophy of the sciences” (OE 7/121) – is in the process of allowing its “ingenious schemes”, which for Merleau-Ponty represents a source of worry rather than hope on behalf of the future of humanity. For whereas classical science “clung to the feeling for the opaqueness of the

world” (OE 7/121) and thus proceeded on the presumption of some transcendent or transcendental foundation that it acknowledged to be irreducible to scientific variables, contemporary science proceeds on the presumption that “everything that is and has been was meant only to enter the laboratory” (OE 9/122). As we pass from classical to contemporary science, the sense of that minimal mismatch in principle between model and reality is lost, and the scientist (or rather the prevalent philosophy of science) now treats the operationally defined variables around which he or she organizes his or her experimental manipulations – definitions which travel between research domains more and more according to “intellectual fads and fashions” (OE 8/122) – as though they were simply natural kinds.

Up to a certain point, Merleau-Ponty admits, this “operational thought” may appear to be an “admirably active, ingenious and bold way of thinking” (OE 7/121). But the day arrives when the attention of operational thought is turned toward the human being, such as happens in the field of artificial intelligence and cybernetics, “where human creations are derived from a natural information process, itself conceived on the model of human machines” (OE 9/122). Under the sway of such scientific measures – or, rather, of the political and cultural regime in the context of which they are deployed – human being risks “[becoming truly] the *manipulandum* he thinks he is”, and from there “we enter into a cultural regimen in which there is neither truth nor falsehood concerning humanity and history, into a sleep, or nightmare from which there is no awakening” (OE 9/122). Although he doesn’t further specify what the cultural regimen that is likely to take root if we fail to set bounds to operational thought will look like, it is clear that Merleau-Ponty had in mind the spectre of a civilization in which everything real will be reduced to technologically manageable units of information and resources. In such a situation, the boundaries between political decisions, public administration and scientific experiments will have disappeared altogether in favour of a comprehensive, self-perpetuating artificial system in which human beings have become integrated like components of a machine instead of being the ones who run it and thus assume the responsibility for its effects. In such a cultural regimen, all considerations of truth and falsity in relation to knowledge, right and wrong in relation to politics, good or evil in relation to life, have been abandoned in favour of the sole concern to maintain the smooth running of the system.

It should be noted that, in his analysis of contemporary scientific ideology, Merleau-Ponty seems to consider irrelevant any attempt to distinguish between realism and positivism or empiricism, although his picture of operational thought would seem to suggest a

conception of scientific knowledge that has more in common with positivism than with realism, to which positivism is in many ways opposed. He seems to take no account of the fact that a strong emphasis on the operational side of scientific inquiry amounts to an anti-realistic conception of objectivity: to say that the objective is per definition what may declare itself under carefully controlled experimental conditions, within the proviso of a certain operationalization of variables, is effectively to renounce the appeal to any external or transcendent guarantee of truth, residing in the things themselves. To say that scientific propositions are true or false in virtue of their reference to facts or states of affairs that remain what they are independently of their being investigated by science is one thing, and to impose evidential constraints on the capacity of those propositions to be either true or false is quite another thing; the first approach is realist, the second anti-realist. Yet, for Merleau-Ponty, the appeal to external guarantees and the appeal to operations involved in experimental conditions seem to come back to the same thing. Thus, in the essay “Everywhere and Nowhere”, Merleau-Ponty understands the ideology of contemporary science – the “scientific ontology” of 1900’s “minor rationalism” that supplants the “living ontology” of the seventeenth century’s “major rationalism” – as one which “set[s] itself up uncritically in external being as universal milieu” (S 238-41/147-148).⁴⁰⁸ In Merleau-Ponty’s estimation, then, the unrestricted epistemic and ontological authority that the ideology of contemporary science accords to scientific operations far surpasses the rationalism and science of the seventeenth century as far as dogmatism and lack of critical self-reflection is concerned because, for classical or “major” rationalism, “[t]here is also the being of the subject or the soul, the being of its ideas, and the interrelations of these ideas, the inner relation of truth” (S 241/148).

What nevertheless accounts for the co-substantiality, in Merleau-Ponty’s eyes, of the realist appeal to external epistemic guarantees and the operationalist appeal to evidential constraints is their common disregard for lived experience or the lifeworld as the basis on which all inquiry most proceed. At any rate, it appears that, for him, it is such a disregard that

⁴⁰⁸ It should be noted that Merleau-Ponty writes of the “minor rationalism” of 1900 as if it were a bygone epoch: “It is very difficult for us to recapture this frame of mind, even though it is very close to us. But it is a fact that men once dreamed of a time in which the mind, having enclosed ‘the whole of reality’ in a network of relations, would henceforth (as if in a replete state) remain at rest or have nothing more to do than draw out the consequences of a definitive body of knowledge and, by some application of the same principles, ward off the last convulsive movements of the unforeseeable” (S 238-239/147). However, the state of contemporary science depicted in the opening section of “Eye and Mind” seems not to have changed with respect to the scientific ambition to enclose the whole of reality within the parameters according to which it manipulates the information extracted from carefully controlled experiments. This would suggest that what is described as

lies at the root of the dangers represented by science as conceived along operationalist lines, and hence the antidote to the cultural regimen that appears on its horizon would seem to be to “return to...the site, the soil of the sensible and humanly modified world such as it is in our lives and for our bodies...this actual body I call mine, this sentinel standing quietly at the command of my words and my acts” (OE 9/122). In so far as this site, this soil of lived experience will teach “science’s agile and improvisatory thought” to “ground itself upon things themselves and upon itself, and...once more become philosophy” (OE 10/123), we must once again conclude that Merleau-Ponty prescribes the transcendental turn as the antidote to the dangers that he sees coming from a scientifically conceived realism. And once again we face the following ambiguity in Merleau-Ponty’s account of scientific discourse: on the one hand, he offers an account of certain dangers posed by certain developments in a scientific discourse that assumes (what he takes to be) a realist conception of objectivity; on the other hand, he suggests that these dangers are due to the lack of – or rather neglect of – a proper foundation for this objectivity, and that the dangers might be forestalled if consciousness of this foundation (i.e., the lifeworld) is (re)awakened. On the one hand, operational thought threatens us with a nightmare from which there may be no awakening; on the other hand, there would seem to be nothing to fear after all, because this thought has not yet graduated to the level of a self-conception that might qualify as properly philosophical in the eyes of the transcendental philosopher. Paradoxically, the dangerous discourse is to be countered not by being gainsaid, not by being rejected in the name of something more credible, but by being divested of its illusory foundations and by having its proper foundations restored.

In this section I have considered what I take to be Merleau-Ponty’s basic motivations for making the transcendental turn from the realist conception of being as in-itself. This manoeuvre determined, as we have seen, his philosophical trajectory no less in *The Visible and the Invisible* (and in the *Nature* lectures) than in *Phenomenology of Perception*, where he had proposed that “I am the absolute source” and that being-for-me amounts to “being in the only sense that the word could have for me” (PhP 9/lxxii). Similarly, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty sides with the “philosophy of reflection” in its condemnation of the realist conception of being as in-itself and in its turn toward consciousness as the milieu of truth insofar as “this movement of reflection...is imperative, and one does not see how

“minor rationalism” in “Everywhere and Nowhere” represents Merleau-Ponty’s picture of the ideology of contemporary

philosophy could dispense with it” (VI 51-52/31); it is “not only a temptation but a route that must be followed” (VI 52/32). But, as we have seen, just as he had proposed in *Phenomenology of Perception* that we must venture to understand how subjectivity is both indeclinable and dependent, so, in the corresponding passage in *The Visible and the Invisible*, he finds reason to doubt whether the movement of reflection “has brought philosophy to the harbor, whether the universe of thought to which it leads is really an order that suffices to itself and puts an end to every question” (VI 52/31). The way Merleau-Ponty phrases this doubt about the movement of reflection suggests to us that he is still burdened by skeptical worries, even if the dangers of determinism, reductionism and operationalism may have been averted by this movement. Why is he worried that the reflective philosopher might not have succeeded in leading us to “an order that suffices to itself”, unless such an order is precisely what he thinks is needed in order to answer skepticism sufficiently?

I am inclined to think that Merleau-Ponty in fact envisioned such an order, and that this order is precisely what his discourse on the flesh – along with its correlative in the *Nature* courses – was designed to illuminate. In the next section, I shall argue that the philosophy of nature expressed in Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on the flesh reinvigorates certain lines of thought typical of the tradition of absolute idealism such as it was formulated in Germany around 1800, and that it is indeed hard to make sense of his philosophy of nature in isolation from this context. My contention is that such a connection makes sense especially when we profile Merleau-Ponty’s ontological claims concerning the flesh against the background of his epistemological concern to defeat radical skepticism and to legitimate the meaningfulness of our search for truth.

Absolute Idealism Revisited

Above, we have seen that Merleau-Ponty agrees to follow the route staked out by the philosophy of reflection (i.e., Kantian and Husserlian transcendental idealism) in order to escape the skepticism that will necessarily grip the philosopher concerned with “the problem of our access to the world” as long as he or she stays on realist soil. Yet this route must ultimately lead beyond the philosophy of reflection, because Merleau-Ponty does not think that the transcendental immanence – the constituting life of transcendental consciousness – to which it leads represents a self-sufficient order at which philosophy might find a harbour.

Let us take one more look at what, for Merleau-Ponty, is at stake in following the route of reflection beyond the limits of reflection.

The Route of Reflection

Transcendental reflection on the *a priori* structures of experience or of the lifeworld, Merleau-Ponty claims, is “true in what it denies, that is, the exterior relation between a world in itself and myself” (VI 52/32). Being right about the error of positing the relation between the world and myself as an exterior relation, it is *ex hypothesi* right to conceive of the relation between the world and myself as an *internal* relation. Hence it is thanks to the philosophy of reflection that we first catch sight of the “natal bond between me who perceives and what I perceive” (VI 52/32). Now, if the world and I – I who perceive and what I perceive, subject and object – are to be internally related, then we must together form a whole of which we are the parts; being thus parts of a common unitary matrix, we condition one another reciprocally, just as we are conditioned by the whole whose constitutive parts we are. But Merleau-Ponty doubts that this internal relation receives from the philosophy of reflection the conceptualization that is due to it, because it thinks that this internal relation can be grounded in the communion that transcendental consciousness has with itself in the unity of apperception. It thinks it can derive the meaning “world” from the constitutive operations of this consciousness, and thus to reduce the perceived world to a universe of thought or a fabric of beliefs entertained by the transcendental ego. In this, the philosophy of reflection is in error, for the *a priori* universe of thought it believes to have discovered through reflection is ultimately nourished in its evidentiality on the perceptual presence of the world: “As an effort to found the existing world upon a *thought* of the world, the reflection at each instant draws its inspiration from the prior presence of the world, of which it is tributary, from which it derives all its energy” (VI 54-55/34).

The whole problem, then, is that the internal relation between perceiver and perceived, myself and the world, cannot on principle be contained within the domain of consciousness, no matter how transcendently inflated one conceives of this consciousness. This is because no consciousness, however transcendental, could possibly draw the “prior presence of the world” from its presence to itself. There thus remains a residue of externality between the subject and the object that must be reconciled with their internal relatedness. This tension between internality and externality in the subject-object relation is precisely what Merleau-Ponty wants to get at with his notion of perceptual faith, entertained by the “natural man”,

who “thinks *at the same time* that his perception enters into the things and that it is formed this side of his body” (VI 23/8). Only an order that allows for both the internality and the externality that is proper to the relation between the subject and the object of perception will be an order that suffices unto itself, at the same time as it would provide the necessary response to the radical skeptic. The task of attaining such an order is precisely what Merleau-Ponty thinks ontology is about – recall that he understands the ontological problem as “the problem of the relation between subject and object” (N 182/135) – and it is also what philosophy of nature is about, since he thinks (as we saw in the introductory chapter) that every conception of nature is always implicitly ontological.

Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on the flesh – and the philosophy of nature it adumbrates – seems to be precisely what he advances as a response to the challenge sketched out above. The ontological discourse on the flesh begins where the transcendental discourse on reflection reaches its impasse, and must be understood in the context of its role as a surpassing of transcendental idealism, a surpassing that nevertheless conserves the truth of transcendental idealism, a truth that will henceforth remain unquestioned, namely, the anti-realism enforced by the insistence that the subject and the object of experience be internally related. As such, I claim, Merleau-Ponty’s departure from transcendental idealism (or, in his idiom, the philosophy of reflection) amounts to a return to absolute idealism and notably that of Hegel in particular. This has indeed been recognized by several commentators. Thomas Baldwin, for example, concludes that the ontological position Merleau-Ponty adopts through his discourse on the flesh “remains recognisably idealist in spirit, partly indeed through his explicit affirmation of the ideality of ‘the flesh’”,⁴⁰⁹ although Baldwin doesn’t specify in what sense he takes the term “idealist”. Furthermore, according to Henry Pietersma, “Merleau-Ponty’s metaphysics is of the kind that has been characteristic of transcendental thought since Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel”.⁴¹⁰ Further still, David Storey thinks that there are salient parallels to be explored between “Hegel’s ‘metaphysics of Spirit’ and Merleau-Ponty’s ‘ontology of flesh’”,⁴¹¹ he sees “a certain analogy between Hegel’s relationship to Kant and Merleau-Ponty’s relationship to Husserl”,⁴¹² and he reads Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on the flesh as an indication that “Merleau-Ponty was convinced that certain

⁴⁰⁹ Thomas Baldwin. “Merleau-Ponty, Maurice.” In: E. Craig (ed), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 1998.

⁴¹⁰ Henry Pietersma, *Phenomenological Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 160.

⁴¹¹ David Storey, “Spirit and/or Flesh: Merleau-Ponty’s Encounter with Hegel”, *PhaenEx* 4, no. 1 (2009), pp. 60-61.

⁴¹² Storey, “Spirit and/or Flesh: Merleau-Ponty’s Encounter with Hegel”, p. 61.

aspects of Hegel's approach needed to be retrieved",⁴¹³ as an attempt to "renew Hegel".⁴¹⁴ None of these authors, however – and especially not the last one, who focuses extensively on Merleau-Ponty's criticism of Hegel – seem prepared to assume a simple homology between Merleau-Ponty's discourse on the flesh and the tradition of absolute idealism inaugurated by Hegel and several of his contemporaries.

Still, depending on what one regards as the defining features of that tradition, I think a case can be made for the claim that Merleau-Ponty's discourse on the flesh amounts to a reinvigoration of that tradition with respect to the latter's most basic characteristics.

Absolute Idealism Defined

What are those basic characteristics? The question is of course subject to controversy, and its answer depends on what historian of philosophy one consults. It would take me too far afield at this juncture to review this vast scholarly field. At any rate, in any attempt to answer the question, one would have to explicate two basic aspects of the tradition under consideration: on the one hand, what were the basic philosophical problems addressed by the representatives of the tradition and, on the other hand, what tended to be their typical approach to these problems, such as they defined it? In his classical study *Hegel*, Charles Taylor famously suggests that the problem addressed by Hegel's generation of thinkers was that of "uniting two seemingly indispensable images of man, which on one level had deep affinities with each other, and yet could not but appear utterly incompatible",⁴¹⁵ both of which were reactions toward the alienating and objectifying tendencies of the Enlightenment. The first of these two seemingly indispensable images of man, Taylor explains, was the image advocated by Herder and his followers, namely, an anthropology that approaches human existence in terms of expression. A notable aspect of the expressivist anthropology, Taylor explains, was an emphatically anti-dualist conception of the relation of man with nature and the aspiration that "man be united in communion with nature, that his self-feeling (Selbstgefühl) unite with a sympathy (Mitgefühl) for all life, and for nature as living. (...) What is sought for is interchange with a larger life, not rational vision of order".⁴¹⁶ The other of the two seemingly indispensable images of man was the one advocated in the spirit of Kantian moral philosophy, and it was one that approached man above all as a "radically free

⁴¹³ Storey, "Spirit and/or Flesh: Merleau-Ponty's Encounter with Hegel", p. 73.

⁴¹⁴ Storey, "Spirit and/or Flesh: Merleau-Ponty's Encounter with Hegel", p. 78.

⁴¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 3.

⁴¹⁶ Taylor, *Hegel*, p. 25.

moral subjectivity”,⁴¹⁷ thus emphasizing radical – and rational – freedom and autonomy above all else as the defining characteristics of man. What makes this image of man seem incompatible with the one previously discussed is, among other things, that it is ultimately premised on the very dichotomy between man and nature attacked by the expressivist anthropology. But Hegel and his generation felt that both aspirations are legitimate, and that a way must be sought to reconcile the two seemingly indispensable yet incompatible anthropologies with one another. As the title of his book suggests, Taylor is exclusively concerned with Hegel’s response to this challenge, and he sums up the basic idea constituting this response in the figure of “self-positing Spirit” (which is the title of the book’s third chapter), or, alternatively, in the idea that “the absolute is subject”.⁴¹⁸

For all the erudition and lucidity of Taylor’s account of the fundamental aspirations and positions characteristic of Hegel’s generation of thinkers, its relevance for my present concerns is limited, in so far as he focuses on anthropological questions above all else, whereas, as I am trying to show, the fundamental question that drives Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on the flesh is the epistemological difficulty of finding a way to defeat radical skepticism. This is why Frederick C. Beiser’s account, in his book *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1791-1801*,⁴¹⁹ of the fundamental concerns and positions defining post-Kantian German idealism will be more useful, since he focuses particularly on the epistemological aspects. Beiser suggests that the major problem addressed by this generation of thinkers was that of how to explain the possibility of objective knowledge in the wake of Kant’s critical enterprise. This is how Beiser formulates this problem, which takes the form of a dilemma: “How is it possible to explain the possibility of knowledge according to idealist principles and yet to account for the reality of the external world?”⁴²⁰ This problem constitutes a dilemma, since the project of explaining the possibility of knowledge according to idealist principles entails a bracketing of the externality of the external world, in so far as it becomes a matter of showing how knowledge acquires its objectivity by its conformity not with the thing in itself but the with the universal, *a priori*

⁴¹⁷ Taylor, *Hegel*, p. 30.

⁴¹⁸ Taylor, *Hegel*, p. 87. Taylor’s attribution of the latter thesis to Hegel should no doubt be understood in the sense obtained when it is read from left to right, namely, that subjectivity is a property of the absolute, and not the opposite thesis (the one advocated by Fichte), namely, that the absolute has a subjective status, that absoluteness is attributed to the (transcendental) subject, from which everything is derived.

⁴¹⁹ Cf. Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781-1801* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁴²⁰ Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781-1801*, p. 14

structures of phenomenal experience, thus apparently excluding any consideration of an extra-subjective status of the object of knowledge.

The solution advanced by the proponents of absolute idealism, of which Beiser reckons Hölderlin, Novalis, Schlegel, Schelling and Hegel as the principal representatives, consists in a theory of the absolute that Beiser considers to represent a confluence of three basic theses, all of which emphasize a crucial aspect of how these thinkers conceived of the “absolute”: monism a la Spinoza, rationalism a la Plato and vitalist materialism a la Herder. He explains these theses as follows:

The first thesis is straightforward *monism*: that the universe consists in not a plurality of substances but a single substance; in other words, the only independent and self-sufficient thing is the universe itself. The second thesis is a version of *vitalism*: that the single universal substance is an organism, which is in a constant process of growth and development. The third thesis is a form of *rationalism*: that this process of development has a purpose, or conforms to some form, archetype, or idea. Putting these theses together, absolute idealism is the doctrine that everything is a part of the single universal organism, or that everything conforms to, or is an appearance of, its purpose, design, or idea.⁴²¹

Along the lines of this composite of Spinozist monism, Platonist rationalism and Herder’s vitalism, then, the proponents of absolute idealism thought it would be possible to approach to the problem of objective knowledge along idealist lines and still be able to allow for the externality of the world. This was because it suggested that the transcendental structures of experience could be disengaged from the subjective pole of the relation (to which Kant and Fichte had confined them) and to regard them instead as structures of the absolute, the autogenerative process of which the subjective and the objective would then be but finite, determinate expressions or manifestations: “As aspects of a single absolute, the subject and object of knowledge are no longer divided into distinct ontological worlds but are different degrees of organization and development of living force”.⁴²² The stunning implication of applying such metaphysical measures to the problem of knowledge – that is, of conceiving of the relation between the subject and the object of knowledge in ontological terms – is, as Beiser notes, that the subject’s cognitive activities and achievements become the medium of the object’s self-consciousness and self-realization: “[T]he subject’s consciousness of the object is nothing less than the self-realization of the nature of the object itself. (...) The

⁴²¹ Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781-1801*, p. 352

⁴²² Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781-1801*, p. 371.

subject's knowledge of the object is then nothing less than the object knowing itself through the subject".⁴²³

Merleau-Ponty's Absolute Idealism

Let me then return to Merleau-Ponty. It seems to me that Merleau-Ponty's later thought, as comprising his discourse on the flesh, can be said to resonate with the tradition of absolute idealism as sketched above on several counts. To begin with, as can be seen from my discussion above of his way of setting up the "problem of our access to the world" – the imperative to begin by taking the route of transcendental reflection on the conditions of experience, coupled with the imperative to follow that route beyond its own limits, all the while in observance of the anti-realist injunction to consider being-in-itself an illusion – seems largely to accord with the basic problem facing the absolute idealists: how to explain the possibility of knowledge along idealist lines, and simultaneously be able to allow for for the world's externality? Likewise, Merleau-Ponty concedes to transcendental idealism the thesis that the relation between the subject and object must be considered as an internal relation. And yet he expects from a theory of knowledge that it also be able to account for "the prior presence of the world", a challenge he thinks the philosophy of reflection (or transcendental idealism) has not been able to own up to because, when all is said and done, it thinks it can grow the "living bond" between subject and object from the subject-side of the relation alone. As the story goes, Merleau-Ponty thought that Husserl had in his heart of hearts realized this and that he was on the path toward "a philosophy of Nature [that] was difficult to integrate into the framework of a transcendental idealism" (N 112/79); "Husserl's thought is as much attracted by the haecceity of Nature as by the vortex of absolute consciousness" (S 270/165). But he also had the impression that this represented a cause for "embarrassment" to the father of phenomenology, who seems never to have given up the contrary ambition to integrate everything into the transcendental consciousness' system of apprehensions (N 112-113/79), and who might have felt that the philosophy of nature Merleau-Ponty thinks he discerns in "the margins of some old pages" of his (S 261/160), namely, in the second book of the *Ideas*, was "against his plans" (S 294/180). In fact, for Merleau-Ponty it is nothing less than the Hegelian absolute – namely, "that identity of 're-entering self' and 'going-outside self'", in other words, the identity of identity and non-

⁴²³ Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781-1801*, pp. 371-372.

identity – that speaks from those margins, seemingly without Husserl being fully cognizant of it (S 263/161). And this idea of the absolute – which is the absolute as understood by absolute idealism – is emphatically embraced by Merleau-Ponty, as is clear from the conclusion to the “Interrogation and Reflection” chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*:

I was able to appeal from the world and the others to myself and take the route of reflection, only because first I was outside of myself, in the world, among the others, and constantly this experience feeds my reflection. Such is the total situation that a philosophy must account for. It will do so only by admitting the double polarity of reflection and by admitting that, as Hegel said, to retire into oneself is also to leave oneself (VI 73/49).

Moving now to Merleau-Ponty’s suggested approach (i.e., his discourse on the flesh, and the philosophy of nature adumbrated therein) to the “total situation that a philosophy must account for”, I think the traces of absolute idealism (at least as summarized along the lines suggested by Beiser) can be clearly discerned there too. Let us begin with the thesis of monism. Merleau-Ponty clearly alludes to this when he anticipates that “the flesh is an ultimate notion, that it is not the union or compound of two substances, but thinkable by itself” (VI 183/140); moreover, we have just seen above that he chides the philosophy of reflection for failing to attain “an order that suffices to itself”. Non-duality, ultimacy, self-sufficiency, inherent intelligibility as such – these are all ciphers of what Spinoza chose to call substance:

By “substance” I mean that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself: in other words, that of which a conception can be formed independently of any other conception;⁴²⁴ Whatsoever is, is in God, and without God nothing can be, or be conceived.⁴²⁵

Of course Merleau-Ponty would have fiercely opposed having his “flesh” being confused with a notion of something that is considered to be simply “in itself”. Yet it seems that he was gesturing toward a kindred idea of a unity of being of which apparently separate orders (such as subject and object) would be but internal modifications, differentiations, or qualifications of the one ultimate something which he proposed to name “flesh”. Again, as stated in a famous working note, whatever plurality of seemingly separate or disparate orders one might conceive of is to be interpreted as “*differentiations* of one sole and *massive* adhesion to Being which is the flesh” (VI 318/270). Hence, Merleau-Ponty’s vehement misgivings about Spinozist realism notwithstanding, I think Henry Pietersma is right to

⁴²⁴ Benedictus de Spinoza, *The Ethics*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (Project Gutenberg, 1999), p. 6

⁴²⁵ Spinoza, *The Ethics*, p. 40.

suggest that Merleau-Ponty's repeated claims to absolute lack of historical precedence with respect to what he tries to think in terms of his notion of flesh⁴²⁶ is a mistake:

There is no doubt that [Merleau-Ponty's] repeated statement to the effect that no previous philosopher had a name for what he calls flesh is just a mistake. Although he might wish to maintain that, for example, Spinoza's designation of it as *Deus sive Natura* is wrong or misleading, and that Hegel's term "spirit" is not sufficiently neutral, what such thinkers had in mind, one cannot deny, was an essentially similar unity of being.⁴²⁷

Let us recall in this connection that, in "Eye and Mind", Merleau-Ponty speaks of a "universal visibility" – corresponding to the "Visibility" that is equated with the flesh in "The Intertwining – the Chiasm" – in terms of "one sole Space that separates and reunites" (OE 57/147). Given that, in the sentences immediately preceding the appearance of this unique Space, Merleau-Ponty speaks of the relation between "me" and "what is not me", it seems that what is separated and reunited by flesh as the unique Space is precisely the subject and the object. Along these lines, Pietersma is again right to consider that Merleau-Ponty's resort to metaphysical monism is supposed to solve a problem of an epistemological order: "Although the unity of being called flesh may thus leave intact a difference between subject and object, it also serves to bring them together. In that respect it serves as the ultimate guarantee of knowledge".⁴²⁸ This attempt to solve the epistemological difficulty of accommodating a difference within the subject-object identity through recourse to monist metaphysics is again reminiscent of absolute idealism, as sketched out above.

Second, despite Merleau-Ponty's unflinching critique of vitalism throughout his career – a thesis he never stopped regarding as a magical notion – it is clear that the understanding of the unity of being he seeks to express through his discourse on the flesh smacks unmistakably of vitalism. This is what I have sought to develop throughout this thesis by considering generativity a decisive aspect of nature such as we find it in Merleau-Ponty's writings. Although he emphasizes in the *Nature* lectures (as remarked in my introductory chapter and in chapter 5) that nature is characterized by a certain "inertia", "solidity" and "eternity", he is also just as much concerned to rehabilitate a sense of the productive forces intrinsic to nature. As we have seen in earlier chapters, he speaks about an autoproduction of sense from nature, and nature is conceived as the originating ground of both objects and

⁴²⁶ "It is...this anonymity innate to Myself that we have previously called flesh, and one knows there is no name in traditional philosophy to designate it" (VI 181/139); "What we are calling flesh, this interiorly worked-over mass, has no name in any philosophy" (VI 191/147).

⁴²⁷ Pietersma, "Merleau-Ponty and Spinoza", p. 317.

⁴²⁸ Pietersma, "Merleau-Ponty and Spinoza", p. 316.

subjects, just as the flesh is conceived as “the formative medium of the object and the subject”. Nature/flesh/Being/the world evolves and involves itself through a process of self-replication, self-complication, self-implication and self-explication, where each level of natural being – physico-chemistry, life and mind – is portrayed as an individual fold in a continuous and organic process of self-complication and self-unification on the part of the same basic primordial nature/flesh/Being/world. As we saw in chapter 3, Merleau-Ponty seems to write appreciatively of Schelling’s insistence that there is no decisive break or difference between the organic and the inorganic. There can be no doubt, then, that Merleau-Ponty was at least strongly attracted by the vitalist idea – so dear to the proponents of absolute idealism – of an organic, self-evolving universe, an idea that is consonant with the rejection of a more restricted vitalism that supposes a supervenience of vital energies on an otherwise purely mechanical materiality. And, as we have seen in both the present and previous chapters, the pervasive presence of motifs of procreation, pregnancy and birth in Merleau-Ponty’s projected ontology makes sure that we never lose sight of that “wild-flowering world and mind” or that “baroque world” he thought he had caught sight of in Husserl (S 295/181).

As anticipated above, following Beiser, monism and vitalism alone do not make up the absolute idealism developed by Hegel, Schelling and others of that generation in German thought. The combination of monism and vitalism alone, Beiser notes, could suggest something like Schopenhauer’s metaphysics, according to which “the universe consists in a single irrational will struggling for power”,⁴²⁹ and perhaps Nietzsche’s philosophy of the will to power might also be understood along similar lines, with all reservations taken with respect to the complexity involved in Nietzsche’s suggestion of a differentiation into active and reactive forces.⁴³⁰ In order to have absolute idealism, however, one must add the ingredient of the *ideal* or the rational to the composite, according to which the living process of the universe exhibits some kind of direction or purpose, or comes to embody, express or realize some kind of archetype, form or idea.

Again, third, it seems to me that this rationalist component of absolute idealism can also be seen to resonate in Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on the flesh (and in the philosophy of nature correlative to it). The universe described in the latter is a world in which everything

⁴²⁹ Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781-1801*, p. 352.

⁴³⁰ With regard to this duality of forces in Nietzsche, see Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), ch. 2.

forms a system, in which everything “fits” and is “joined” together, a world characterized by self-conformity and cohesion among parts according to some implicit and immanent formula that eludes discursive comprehension and instead beckons to a more artistic and perhaps even religious sensibility. The flesh inheres no less in the ideal than in the real, and the ideal here is precisely the immanent principle according to which the flesh coheres with, conforms to, itself:

[T]he moments of the sonata, the fragments of the luminous field, adhere to one another with a cohesion without concept, which is of the same type as the cohesion of the part of my body, or the cohesion of my body with the world. (...) We will therefore have to recognize an ideality that is not alien to the flesh, that gives it its axes, its depth, its dimensions (VI 196-197/152).

Again, “the flesh (of the world or my own) is not contingency, chaos, but a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself” (VI 190/146). One would have to admit that the internal resistance inscribed into the flesh in terms of the *écart* (see chapters 1 and 3 in the present thesis) only adds to the beauty of it all, and poses no danger that the system may be thrown off-balance and fly off in unexpected directions, for “it is spanned by the total being of my body, and by that of the world; it is the zero of pressure between two solids that makes them adhere to one another” (VI 192/148). The “unique Space” that both separates and reunites that we read of in “Eye and Mind” is equally a principle of cohesion, indeed, *the* principle of cohesion, insofar as it “sustains every cohesion (and even that of past and future, since there would be no such cohesion if they were not essentially parts of the same space) (OE 57/147).

Along the same lines, it must further be stressed that that which coheres so pervasively and seamlessly in Merleau-Ponty’s world of flesh is the subject-object relation or, alternatively, the self-other relation. The subject and the object adhere to and conform to one another in the cohesive and self-conforming flesh of the world no less than do the parts of the luminous field, the moments of the sonata or the signifiers in a signifying chain. The touching and the being touched, the seeing and the being seen, self and other, speaking and being spoken are subsystems that are applied to one another to make one comprehensive system, like “the two halves of an orange” (VI 174/133), such that “their landscapes interweave, their actions and their passions fit together exactly” (VI 185/142) and “form a close-bound system that I count on” (VI 190/146). What Merleau-Ponty seems to be getting at with all this fitting, joining and binding together of terms – the subjective and the objective – that have traditionally been conceived as contraries seems to be the idea that they

are somehow *meant* for one another.⁴³¹ To say that the visible has thickness, Merleau-Ponty writes, is nothing but a way of saying that it is “naturally destined to be seen by a body” (VI 176/135), hence that, according to its own nature, the visible awaits the appearance of a sight-endowed (human) body to come forth in the world to fulfil its destiny.

Hence, to the extent that we are indeed entitled to interpret Merleau-Ponty’s fitting together of the subject and the object in a metaphysical (and not merely epistemological) sense, we need not wonder why Merleau-Ponty cannot consider the appearance of “a single man” in some corner of the universe a mere accident (see chapter 3 in the present thesis). This is because he seems to consider the possibility – or, rather, the destiny – of being perceived in the way a (human) body perceives to be inscribed in matter already in its most inchoate state of (dis)organization. And so (human) percipience and cognitivity would seem to be pre-meditated by the universe in its embryonic state, just as, in a more restricted sense, the seer is “being premeditated in counterpoint in the embryonic development; through a labour upon itself the visible body provides for the hollow whence a vision will come” (VI 191/147). The visible body undergoing embryonic development is eminently a seeing body, it is a development that “render[s] probable, in the long run inevitable” the current that will make it a seer (VI 190-191/147). In the same way, “natural being is a hollow, because it is the being of totality, macrophenomenon, that is, eminently perceived being, ‘image’” (N 281/218). From times immemorial, natural being has been co-substantial with perceptible being, thus also promising to give rise to percipience, because, as the flesh of the world, it is “a Being that is *eminently percipi*, and it is by it that we can understand the *percipere*”, “[i]t is by the flesh of the world that in the last analysis one can understand the lived body” (VI 299/250). Thanks to this identity of being and being perceived (which would seem to parallel that of subject and object), Merleau-Ponty rests assured that the Being he is concerned with is “not Being in itself, identical to itself, in the night, but the Being that also contains its negation, its *percipi*”, and on this condition he is prepared to grant primacy to Being and not to consciousness (VI 299/251).

Perhaps the most spectacular feature of absolute idealism to find a resonance in Merleau-Ponty’s last writings, being also the feature that sums up the monism-vitalism-rationalism-composite described by Beiser, is the hypothesis that the absolute is devoted to

⁴³¹ “The idea seems to be that vision and its objects fit together, that their relationship is not merely a matter of fact, external and thus in some sense accidental. Speaking metaphysically (as Merleau-Ponty understands this), they were made for each other” (Pietersma, *Phenomenological Epistemology*, p. 162).

its own comprehension through the cognitive activities for which finite human subjects, being part of the absolute, are the most fitted to undertake. The development of knowledge, and of the type of consciousness through which it may be articulated and in which it can be embodied, seems to be integral to the functioning of the absolute or the universe itself. Let me repeat Beiser's gloss on this idea: "[T]he subject's consciousness of the object is nothing less than the self-realization of the nature of the object itself. (...) The subject's knowledge of the object is then nothing less than the object knowing itself through the subject".⁴³² It seems to me that Merleau-Ponty enthusiastically embraces such an idea in his last period. At any rate, there are quite a few phrases of his that are difficult to make sense of outside of this context. For example, I am inclined to read his statements, in "The Intertwining – the Chiasm", concerning the narcissism of all vision against such a background. In the course of the text, he distinguishes between two senses of the narcissism that is involved in vision. On the one hand, since the seer, being himself visible, is caught up in the tissue of what he sees, "it is still himself he sees" (VI 181/139). On the other hand, however, since the seeing emerges in the midst of the visible, in the midst of nature, it is in a more fundamental sense – the ontological sense – the visible or nature that looks at itself, comes to itself through the seer, such that "we no longer know which sees and which is seen" (VI 181/139). Given such a confusion of the roles of seer and seen, Merleau-Ponty concludes that to state that "we perceive the things themselves", that "we are the world that thinks itself" or that "the world is at the heart of our flesh" come back in the end to the same thing (VI 177 n/136 n. 2). Similarly, as we have seen in chapter 3, Merleau-Ponty characterizes the painter's vocation as somehow issuing from the demand of the things themselves, casting the painter as the medium or channel of the coming-to-itself of nature: "[I]t is the painter to whom the things give birth by a sort of concentration or coming-to-itself of the visible" (OE 47/141); "There is no break at all in this circuit; it is impossible to say that here nature ends and the human being or expression begins" (OE 58/147). Likewise, on the level of speech and language, flesh/nature/being/the world claims privilege over the signifying initiatives of the human subject, but only by according those initiatives a prominent role to play in the grand scheme of things: "[T]he things have us...it is not we who have the things. (...) [L]anguage has us...it is not we who have language...it is being that speaks within us and not we who speak of being" (VI 244/194).

⁴³² Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781-1801*, pp. 371-372.

One might object that we should not take so literally such statements, and that they are intended to convey in a phenomenologically suggestive way a kind of experience typical of visual artists and writers who are particularly sensitive to the auto-production of sense in nature. Yet Merleau-Ponty famously insists that “it is indeed a paradox of Being, not a paradox of man, that we are dealing with here” (VI 178/136), and so the narcissistic structure of vision and nature’s self-comprehension and self-expression through finite (human) sensibilities, expressivities and cognitivities seem to concern not only our experience of nature but rather archetypical structures of nature itself. Thus it seems that Merleau-Ponty thinks he can mount an ontological explication (“we are the world that thinks itself”) of our naïve realistic certitude (“we perceive the things themselves”) that preserves the truth contained in the transcendental turn (“the world is at the heart of our flesh”). At any rate, it can be determined that Merleau-Ponty – once again on the pretext of claiming to find the idea marginally or parenthetically evoked by Husserl – envisioned a teleological relation obtaining between Being and the active, cognitive and expressive life of man, a life that can henceforth not be abstracted from the system of Being, since it is man’s “jointing and framing” that allows it to hang together – a teleology that, notably, authorizes rejection of the realist thesis of being-in-itself:

[T]he irrelative is not nature in itself, nor the system of absolute consciousness’ apprehensions, nor man either, but that ‘teleology’ Husserl speaks about which is written and thought about in parentheses – that jointing and framing of Being which is being realized through man (S 295/181).

Of course Merleau-Ponty would have protested against such a contextualization of his ontological project within the horizon of absolute idealism that I have sketched out here. He would have insisted that he is not an absolute idealist because he does not think that absolute knowledge is possible. But this is a point he makes precisely on the strength of absolute idealism itself. On the one hand, he thinks Hegel is right in denouncing Schelling’s appeal to intellectual intuition of the absolute as a “night wherein all cows are black” (N 75/48), Merleau-Ponty contending (as he will also contend against Bergson) that such an intuition is illusory and hypocritical, since it is as such “distinguished quite poorly from a state of unconsciousness”, so that it is rather “reflection’s appreciation of intuition, and not the intuition of intuition of intuition” we are dealing with (N 70-71/45). On the other hand, he defends Schelling’s critique of Hegel’s privileging of the concept and of the latter’s lack of appreciation of our experience of nature as resistant (N 76/49). In place of the extreme positions with respect to our access to the absolute as represented by Hegel and Schelling,

Merleau-Ponty proposes a kind of compromise that he calls “[t]he dialectic of intuition and reflection” (N 73/47), which he considers to be the truth of a tension he claims to discern within Schelling himself. But it seems to me that what he makes of this dialectical or circular relation between intuition and reflection amounts to a consolidation of precisely the very thesis that was so dear to the authors he claims to be criticizing: “The circularity of knowing places us not in front of, but rather in the middle of the absolute” (N 73/47) – of course, because the whole point of absolute idealism was to conceive of subjectivity as a constitutive moment of the absolute, and not subjectivity as the absolute, nor as the place from which the latter is projected.

Concluding Remarks

In order to gather together the threads laid out in this chapter and move towards a conclusion, let me return to Irigaray. It is well known that Irigaray, in her essay on Merleau-Ponty in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, repeatedly charges Merleau-Ponty with a “labyrinthine solipsism”, a solipsism that comes to be elaborated through a “rigorous and luxuriant approach” to perceptual experience,⁴³³ through an analysis that “excludes solitude even though its own systematization is solipsistic”.⁴³⁴ No doubt, Irigaray considers the solipsism she claims to detect in Merleau-Ponty – against his own best intentions – to be but the flipside of what she also takes to be his “most radical struggle with the maternal”. Along this line of thought, failure to acknowledge the maternal gift of life as a necessarily unidirectional relation of giving without possibility of return and failure to acknowledge (in one’s philosophical theory of experience) the presence of another subject irreducible to the horizon of the reflecting subject would be closely interconnected.

It is remarkable, though, that, in the passages to which Irigaray typically refers in substantiation of this criticism, the question of the epistemic and/or ontological status of other minds is not at issue. Rather, what is at issue in the passages with which she is dealing is nothing less than flesh/nature/Being/the world. There are long passages in “The Intertwining – the Chiasm” in which Merleau-Ponty treats of the more restricted question of intersubjectivity, and in which he tries to explain both that it is possible to have intersubjective (or, in his idiom, “intercorporeal”) relations that do not cancel the limitations of one’s own perspective or the alterity of the other. In this connection he speaks of “the

⁴³³ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 157.

solipsist illusion that consists in thinking that every going beyond is a surpassing accomplished by oneself” (VI 186/143). But Irigaray does not take up these passages to consider whether what Merleau-Ponty has to say on this issue amounts to a departure from the solipsist illusion that he himself acknowledges as an error to be avoided. What are we then to make of her charges of solipsism against Merleau-Ponty?

I am inclined to think that what, for Irigaray, smacks of a “most radical struggle with the maternal” (a struggle that, as we have seen, is also an appropriation of the maternal) in Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on the flesh, and to which she has given the perhaps not so precise name “solipsism”, is rather the pervasive anti-realism entailed by his invocation of German absolute idealism at the level of his ontology. After all, the problem of the knowability and independent existence of other minds is a problem that is structurally analogous, if not subordinated, to the more general problem of how to account for both the knowability (or the internality to the knowing subject) and independent existence (or the externality to the knowing subject) of the world that the German idealists (as discussed by Beiser) and Merleau-Ponty were at one in considering the highest problem of philosophy. Hence I think that there is an important subtext to Irigaray’s more explicit misgivings about Merleau-Ponty’s alleged inability to acknowledge an irreducible other *subject* (more precisely, an irreducibly other subject sexually speaking), and that subtext concerns his unwillingness to acknowledge a *world* (or nature) that is radically irreducible to the subject, a world or nature that is in itself without necessarily being identical to itself, a world or nature that has room for subjects but which does not need them. As I have tried to suggest in this chapter, and as Irigaray’s analysis of Merleau-Ponty helps us to see, it is Merleau-Ponty’s unwillingness to acknowledge the existence of such a world that transpires in the “most radical struggle with the maternal”, in its turn expressed in the formula “we are the parents of a nature of which we are also the children”.

⁴³⁴ Irigaray, *An Ethics Of Sexual Difference*, p. 173.

Conclusion

In the course of this dissertation, I have investigated the confluence of two salient aspects of Merleau-Ponty's work: his concern with the problem of nature, and the prevalence of feminine motifs forming part of the elaboration of his approach to this problem. The hypothesis I have tried to explicate and to some extent defend along the way has been that the relation between the two mentioned aspects of his work is an internal relation: his philosophical concerns solicit a certain way of elaboration on the level of motif, just as the mode of elaboration affects the kind of philosophical thinking for which it serves as the infrastructure. Basing myself in Merleau-Ponty's own way of stating the philosophical problem of nature, I have followed the track of his meditation on the alterity, immemoriality and generativity of nature respectively, showing how the character of these dimensions come to be determined through their elaboration in terms of the feminine operation of the veil and in terms of maternal fecundity, pregnancy and labour.

To begin with, I have suggested that, for Merleau-Ponty, philosophical reflection on natural being raises the issue of alterity, and that this emerges whether one considers nature in terms of the field and milieu of our perceptual life or rather nature in terms of the subject – the body as natural subject of perception – that opens unto this field, and unto which we open in reflection even as we emerge from it as reflective subjects. Delving further into the matter, we saw that nature's alterity asserts itself across Merleau-Ponty's texts in terms of a coefficient of resistance, a resistance that turned out to be the resistance offered to a movement of experience that is most closely described as the movement of desire, more precisely, of a traditionally masculine desire to conquer a constitutively ineffable and self-dissimulating feminine object. The feminine signature of this resistant nature can be determined, so I have argued, with reference to the way the motif of desire interacts with the decisive role Merleau-Ponty accords to the operation of the veil in his elaboration of this resistance.

Furthermore, along similar lines, I have tried to bring out the centrality Merleau-Ponty accords to the issue of immemoriality, of the immemorial "past that has never been present", in his approach to the problem of nature, following his own clue that this problem constitutes the "proper concern of the philosophy of nature". This issue parallels the previous one in being doubly inscribed – both at the level of our pre-reflective experience of nature, at which

the auto-genetic movement of meaning in the perceptual field appears to have been “always already” begun, and at the level of our reflective experience of ourselves as pre-reflective subjects of perceptual experience, at which we find ourselves “always already” pre-reflectively at work in the world, even as subjects of reflection. Looking more closely at Merleau-Ponty’s textual elaboration of these issues, I have tried to show that the maternal body is engaged along both axes of nature’s immemoriality. At the level of the pre-reflective experience of nature’s immemoriality, Merleau-Ponty evokes a mythological scenario of maternal auto-genesis, reminiscent of early Greek cosmogony, in relation to which the prospective male progenitor (the body-subject who is said to “copulate” with things) finds himself re-assigned the role of midwife. At the level of our reflective experience of ourselves as anonymous subjects of experience, Merleau-Ponty invokes natality and even pre-natal existence as a motif through which to think about the immemorial past of nature that we drag behind us as personal selves, who find ourselves always “given” to ourselves as through a “gift of nature”. I used Merleau-Ponty’s mention, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, of pre-natal existence as the “sketch for a natural self” as a way into Irigaray’s attempt, in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, to retrieve the maternal-feminine from its places of inscription and obliteration in the fourth chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*.

Lastly, I have been concerned with the issue of the generativity of nature such as it preoccupies Merleau-Ponty particularly in his later period, as epitomized by the *Nature* lectures and the manuscripts and notes making up *The Visible and the Invisible*. I have chosen to profile his concern with this issue against the background of his statement, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, that subjectivity must be acknowledged as both dependent and indeclinable. This is because it poses the difficulty of accounting for how subjectivity is contingent on factors external to it – factors of a presumably natural order – and yet how it nevertheless retains its claim to transcendentalty. With this in mind I have undertaken a thorough investigation of his discourse on the flesh, and the correlative meditation on nature that we find in the *Nature* lectures, in order to ascertain whether (and how) the flesh/nature/Being/the world (terms I have more often than not found to be more or less synonymous in Merleau-Ponty) is capable of filling the role Merleau-Ponty assigns to it, namely, as the “formative medium of the object and the subject”, and particularly with regard to the subjective side. In trying to unpack Merleau-Ponty’s at times highly obscure thinking on this issue, I found myself constantly running into his pervasive anti-realism and his notion of a sort of internal relation – typically expressed by the motif of “intertwining” – obtaining

between subject and object, man and nature, flesh of the body and flesh of the world, an internal relation that he nevertheless wants to make compatible with a feeling for the externality and independence of nature.

I have suggested that his solution to the difficulty of reconciling the transcendental idealist notion of an internal relation between subject and object with the acknowledgement of the “prior presence of the world” assumes the features of a variant of absolute idealism, typically expressed in Merleau-Ponty’s formula “we are the parents of a nature of which we are also the children” or, alternatively (as described in *The Visible and the Invisible*), in his notion that the seer is formed in the medium of a flesh of things that it draws from itself and communicates to the things. Such formulas are open to the kind of interpretation to which Irigaray subjects Merleau-Ponty in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, and I have largely mounted a defence of her conclusion in that essay that the *modus operandi* of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology largely reads like an “astonishing reversal”, more precisely, an attempt to “reverse the maternal gift of flesh” that amounts to the “most radical struggle with the maternal”. Bypassing the psychobiographical bias entailed by Irigaray’s own attribution of certain unconscious attitudes to “all men in the West” as a way to account for Merleau-Ponty’s astonishing reversal, my defence of her conclusion consists in showing that what Irigaray explicates at the level of motif in his text in fact reads like a dramatization of his attempt to mount a generative account of subjectivity on philosophically anti-realist grounds.

Perhaps one might take a second look at the place of alterity and immemoriality – along with their feminine correlatives at the level of motif – in Merleau-Ponty’s approach to the problem of nature in light of what has been established with regard to his approach to the generativity of nature. Perhaps the overriding focus on system, self-conformity, cohesion, fitting and hanging together, jointure, and not least teleological progression that declares itself as we approach the inner sanctum of Merleau-Ponty’s thinking on the place of human subjectivity within the grand scheme of flesh/nature/Being/the world is a cause for embarrassment to a philosopher who has also suggested that the world as the work of coordination of perceptual beings is an “unfinished task” (PD 40/UT 286); moreover, this is also the philosopher who has described the seeing body as “Visibility sometimes wandering (*errante*) and sometimes reassembled” (VI 179/137-138); furthermore, he says, a singular colour is but “a sort of straits between exterior horizons and interior horizons ever gaping open” (VI 173/132); finally, he is also the philosopher who envisioned a cosmology of the visible that would entail “one sole explosion of Being which is forever” (VI 313/265).

Something must be introduced into the system of nature that may account for the constitutive incompleteness of the harmonious integration toward which it nevertheless seems to be moving by the grace of man's activity. Whence, perhaps, Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the indefinite search or "exegesis" of the caress as emblematic of the human subject's way of "jointing and framing" Being, on the necessity of the feminine operation of screens, veils, dissimulations and occlusions that both frustrate and nourish our pursuit of totality, harmony, reason and truth, so as to continue the work of coming-to-itself through which flesh/nature/Being/the world is realized as such. His emphasis on the immemorial, elaborated in terms of maternity, may perhaps be seen to play the same role, insofar as the aura of eternity surrounding the immemorial past is precisely an eternity that is also generative: it is "perpetual pregnancy, perpetual parturition" (VI 153/115). Perhaps such measures on the level of motif are strictly indispensable for a philosopher whose ambition is to mount a philosophy of natural generativity on strictly anti-realist terms and who considers, as we have seen, the reflective turn of transcendental idealism a necessary station toward such a goal.

I should like to end this communication by formulating some queries related to the legacy of Merleau-Ponty's thought. They pertain to Merleau-Ponty's reasons for taking the transcendental turn on the way to his understanding flesh/nature/Being/the world, his reasons for considering a reflection à la Kant and Husserl on the transcendental conditions of experience "not only a temptation but a route that must be followed" (VI 52/32), in other words, his reasons for considering the realist thesis of being as in-itself an affront to the spirit of true philosophy, as discussed in chapter 6. I think there are good reasons to question Merleau-Ponty's reasons on this score, even if it means scandalizing the inner sanctum of his thought, and I think we should do so in the interest of allowing his legacy to assist us in opening up and pursuing viable avenues in such fields as the philosophy of cognitive science, environmental philosophy and feminist philosophy in the years to come.

Let me begin by considering the dangers of determinism and reductionism that Merleau-Ponty regards as intrinsically connected with the realist thesis of being as in-itself. As discussed in chapter 6, Merleau-Ponty seems to suppose that it is impossible to defend a view of nature as genuinely productive and eventful on realist premises, i.e., on premises that reject any constitutive reference from nature to the possibility of man's presence within it. In this he could have regarded the defenders of the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics as allies, yet he seems to have considered their approach to be too little appreciative of the pre-predicative dimension of meaning-constitution taking place in the lifeworld. Niels

Bohr was no doubt far more concerned with the constitutive role played by the workings of measuring apparatuses – prostheses of human perception – in the scheme of uncertainty than with the hidden sides of the cube and the bodily kinesthesia involved in their imminent presence to the subject of perception.⁴³⁵ Although Merleau-Ponty might have felt that Bohr's focus on matters largely pertaining to experimental operation fared no better than heavy-handed realism with respect to disregard for the lifeworld as universal source of meaning-constitution, it remains that Bohr has gone down in history as a modern representative of a view of scientific objectivity that constitutively implicates a living human subject in the objectivity of what is known.

Now, according to Ilya Prigogine in his book *The End of Certainty*, it is precisely this anti-realism that faces a challenge in the name of recent developments in non-equilibrium physics, chaos theory and the physics of unstable systems, fields of knowledge that describe a non-deterministic and evolving world that no longer relegates the phenomena of life and mind to the status of epi-phenomena to be explained away by perfected science. The crucial breakthrough consists for Prigogine in the recognition of the natural basis for “the arrow of time” in nonequilibrium processes, without which “life on earth would be impossible to envision”.⁴³⁶ Hence, contrary to what Merleau-Ponty would have us believe, natural productivity and emergence do not constitutively refer to the world perceived by us (which is for Merleau-Ponty nature in the only sense of which there is reason to speak, cf. N 270/208); instead, Prigogine suggests – in terms that appear almost to have been chosen in direct

⁴³⁵ As is well known, Einstein never gave up his contention that the uncertainty relation cannot be an exhaustive description of physical reality, hence that the value of the empirically undetermined parameter (say, position of the particle) must nevertheless be determined somewhere in objective physical reality – whence the title “hidden variable interpretation” given to this interpretation (Fjelland, “The ‘Copenhagen Interpretation’ of Quantum Mechanics and Phenomenology”, pp. 55-57). Bohr, on the other hand, thought for reasons of principle that there is no way to get around the uncertainty relation. These reasons turned on his understanding of the role of the measuring apparatus during microphysical experiments: “[A]n account of the functioning of the measuring instrument is indispensable to the definition of the phenomenon” (Niels Bohr, “On Atoms and Human Knowledge”, *Daedalus* 87, no. 2 (1958), p. 172). The reason why such an account is indispensable in quantum physics is that the application of the measuring instrument necessarily entails a certain ineradicable and uncontrollable scope of interaction – the “quantum of action” – between it and the object studied: “[E]very experimental arrangement permitting the registration of an atomic particle in a limited space-time domain demands fixed measuring rods and synchronized clocks which, from their very definition, exclude the control of momentum and energy transmitted to them. Conversely, any unambiguous application of the dynamical conservation laws in quantum physics requires that the description of the phenomena involve a renunciation in principle of detailed space-time coordination. The mutual exclusiveness of the experimental conditions implies that the whole experimental arrangement must be taken into account in a well-defined description of the phenomena” (Bohr, “On Atoms and Human Knowledge”, p. 171). Hence, for Bohr, the reason why the uncertainty relation cannot be regarded a merely provisional statement of the facts is that – given the quantum of action – the determination of one variable requires a total experimental set-up which, for reasons of principle, *excludes* the simultaneous application of the experimental set-up required for the determination of the other variable. The experimental conditions are mutually exclusive, yet complementary, in so far as “they together exhaust all definable knowledge of the objects concerned” (Bohr, “On Atoms and Human Knowledge”, p. 171).

⁴³⁶ Ilya Prigogine, *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos, and the New Laws of Nature* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), p. 3.

defiance of Merleau-Ponty – “[w]e are actually the children of the arrow of time, of evolution, not its progenitors”.⁴³⁷

Coming from a slightly different disciplinary standpoint (namely, biological anthropology and neuroscience), Terrence W. Deacon presents, in his relatively fresh book *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged From Matter*,⁴³⁸ a sort of “theory of everything” that is supposed not to make an incomprehensible absurdity out of the fact of our emergence as conscious, intelligent and not least normatively goal-directed beings from the natural world. Yet, as far as I have been able ascertain, Deacon seems to have felt no need whatsoever to make compromises with either transcendental or absolute idealism in this endeavour. The key to his 545 pages long account of the emergence of mind from matter, as stated in his introduction, is the idea of life and mind as “absential features” of material ensembles, and it is on this premise that it might be understood how mental phenomena may be ascribed causal relevance without “undermin[ing] any known physical principles” or “introduce[ing] novel, unprecedented physical principles or special fundamental forces into contemporary science”.⁴³⁹ If Deacon is to be believed, then a scientific comprehension of the emergence of life and mind from matter that is both non-deterministic and non-reductive is on the horizon. It must be said, though, that Deacon’s “absential features” resemble what Merleau-Ponty describes, in the second *Nature* course, as a natural negativity, according to which “[w]e must place in the organism a principle that is either *negative* or based on *absence*. We can say of the animal that each moment of its history is emptied of what will follow, an emptiness which will be filled later” (N 207/155). Yet we have no reason to believe that Merleau-Ponty would have ended up presenting this theory as if its reference were simply the organism as existing independently of any constitutive reference to the possibility of being perceived, which is precisely what he affirms when, in the third course, he explains that the subject of the previous courses could “obviously only be Nature perceived by us” (N 270/208). The point I would like to stress by these few references, however, is that Merleau-Ponty’s unrelenting defence of the indispensability of the transcendental turn in the interest of a non-determinist and non-reductive account of the place of human subjectivity in the natural scheme of things is gradually being made obsolete by new openings in the natural scientific understanding of these issues.

⁴³⁷ Prigogine, *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos, and the New Laws of Nature*, p. 3.

⁴³⁸ See Terrence W. Deacon, *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emergence from Matter* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012).

Let us turn next to Merleau-Ponty's concern with the danger of radical skepticism. As discussed in chapter 6, one of Merleau-Ponty's lines of argument in favour of the transcendental turn seems to be: 1) the realist conception of being as in-itself cannot but provide an opening for radical skepticism; and 2) the challenge from radical skepticism with regard to the possibility of knowledge and the meaningfulness of our search for truth in general *must* be taken seriously by any philosophy worthy of the name. While many a hard-headed realist would surely have disputed premise 1, my concern here lies exclusively with the second premise: namely, the idea that it is the task of philosophy as such – even as ontology – to take radical skepticism concerning the possibility of knowledge seriously and provide a viable response to it. My impression is that this notion operates as a kind of unquestioned dogma in Merleau-Ponty's thinking, presented as something that should be so self-evident to anyone with the properly philosophical frame of mind that it requires no further substantiation. Yet what if one fails to see what is so self-evident about this? I think there are at least three reasons to put into question the alleged self-evidence of this truth, two philosophical and one historical.

The first philosophical reason to put into question Merleau-Ponty's dogmatic concession to the legitimacy of the problem of radical skepticism can be formulated in terms of a line of thought advanced by Charles S. Peirce regarding the (psychological) nature of doubt. Commenting on the largely Cartesian habit of finding the beginning of one's philosophy in skeptical questions concerning our cognitive capacity *in general* for truth in the realist sense, Peirce suggests that we should distinguish between genuine or real and pretended or artificial doubt respectively. A philosopher who begins his or her philosophy in the decision to cast all inherited and habitual beliefs and certainties into doubt is for Peirce a person who merely pretends to doubt: "We can throw any proposition into the interrogative mode at will; but we can no more call up doubt than we can call up the feeling of hunger at will".⁴⁴⁰ Hence, genuine doubt must be understood as a psychological state in which one finds oneself when one's belief regarding a certain object or state of affairs of a certain practical or vital import has been unsettled by the train of events or experience. Such a doubt is what may stimulate genuine and fruitful inquiry and thought (although it may just as easily motivate tenacity and/or appeal to authority or to *a priori* arguments). Initial skepticism with

⁴³⁹ Deacon, *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emergence from Matter*, p. 540.

⁴⁴⁰ Charles S. Peirce, cited in Milton K. Munitz, *Contemporary Analytic Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 31-32.

regard to everything, by contrast, “will be a mere self-deception, and not real doubt; and no one who follows the Cartesian method will ever be satisfied until he has formally recovered all those beliefs which in form he has given up”.⁴⁴¹ In the terms of Peirce’s distinction between artificial and real doubt, I think one might say that the doubt that motivates Merleau-Ponty’s transcendental turn – namely, the doubt concerning the conviction that “I see the table” and that “I inhabit the world” that arises “as soon as I attend to it” (VI 19/4-5) is largely an artificial doubt, not least insofar as he never provides a compelling reason for why we should attend critically to such deep-seated convictions.

The second philosophical reason why we should put in question Merleau-Ponty’s dogmatic concession to the legitimacy of the problem of radical skepticism lies with his implicit assumption that it is necessary to resolve problems of a skeptical sort in order to get in position to assert something concerning ontology: “We have to reformulate the skeptical arguments outside of every ontological preconception and reformulate them precisely so as to know what world-being, thing-being, imaginary being, and conscious being are” (VI 21/6-7). I think this move is unfortunate, in so far as it entails the collapse of any distinction between epistemology and ontology (or metaphysics), a distinction that we cannot afford to renounce. As suggested in chapter 6, Merleau-Ponty’s ontology (his discourse on the flesh and the philosophy of nature correlative to it) reads like an attempt solve the epistemological problem of the possibility of knowledge by ontological means, and this is partly what accounts for the revisiting of absolute idealism that takes place in his final thought. But his way of transposing the epistemological problematic of the relation between the subject and the object of experience onto the ontological plane – or rather, of simply renaming epistemology as ontology – seems to me to obfuscate the very sense of both the subject-object relation and of what ontology or metaphysics is about.

First of all, what are we to understand by “subject” and “object” respectively? I think I do not depart significantly from common usage if I suggest that they are terms we use to depict the respective *roles* that individuals or collectivities may occupy in a cognitive, linguistic, practical, aesthetic or libidinal context. Sometimes we find ourselves in the role as subjects within such contexts (for example, as the ones who carry out the cognitive operation that will bring about knowledge about some object), sometimes we find ourselves in the role as objects, sometimes we find ourselves within a community of individuals who are all

⁴⁴¹ Peirce, cited in Munitz, *Contemporary Analytic Philosophy*, p. 32.

allowed to perform as subjects. The question as to what roles or positions are open to an individual or a group of individuals may be a question of historically and geographically contingent political, cultural and symbolic regimes, as Marxist, feminist, anti-racist, post-colonial and queer theories have taught us about. The question of the relation between subject and object is the question of the relation between roles, and this is precisely what makes for the possibility of speaking of them as reversible: the roles of subject and object can be exchanged between role takers, such that a certain configuration of role-distribution between role takers may be reversed.

However, if – on the other hand – the question of ontology is a question that engages that of nature (since, as we have seen, flesh/nature/Being/the world are practically synonymous in Merleau-Ponty), and if this question is to concern the relation between subject and object, then it seems to me that one faces the difficult task of having to figure out how nature is composed of the combination of two *roles* in interaction. I just cannot bring myself to understand how this could be possible, or even desirable. Hence I am inclined to agree with Henry Pietersma when he proposes that “[o]ne should not confuse the metaphysical dualism of consciousness and things (mind and matter) with the epistemological subject-object duality”, and that one’s position with regard to how the epistemic duality may be bridged “has...nothing to say about what kinds of entities there are in the world”.⁴⁴² For example, one may be an externalist in epistemology and still be a mentalist in ontology; or one may be an internalist in epistemology and still be a materialist in ontology.

Perhaps Merleau-Ponty would have objected that the question as to what kinds of entities there are in the world is not properly ontological because it is formulated in the language of what he calls the ontology of the object, which is not a genuinely ontological position since it is utterly negligent of the subject. Yet, to the extent that he is concerned about the danger of reductionism – more precisely, of reduction of the mental to the material on the pretext of some crude cerebralism – that he considers to be looming large in contemporary science, one would have to say that the question as to what entities there are in the world matters to him. At the risk of being labeled a naïve objectivist by devoted Merleau-Pontians, I think we cannot afford not to consider the question as to “what kinds of entities there are in the world” a most urgent question of ontology still today, particularly when the

⁴⁴² Pietersma, *Phenomenological Epistemology*, pp. 159-160.

kinds of entities in question are those of mind and matter. The steady growth of research programs in the cognitive sciences and in the philosophy of mind designed to work out, through reverse engineering of the human brain, a way to eliminate everything mental from the ontological map of the world should prompt us to develop better and non-reductive yet non-dualist accounts of the mind-matter relation, and I see no reason why such an important task should not deserve the name of ontology. But I think our capacity for this task, a task which was very dear to Merleau-Ponty himself, requires us to put into question his own tendency to conflate epistemology and ontology, in order that we might see more clearly what is at stake.

Beyond the question concerning what kinds of entities there are in the world, I think there is another issue that may not receive the treatment that is due to it within the confines of Merleau-Ponty's reduction of ontology to a question concerning the relation between subject and object, and this is the old issue of the relation between being and becoming. It is in and of itself strange that Merleau-Ponty should have failed to identify the ontological problematic with this issue, given his pervasive preoccupation with generativity, growth, process, flow etc., and so we are led to believe that – just as with the previously discussed issue – he acknowledges that something has to be said philosophically with regard to the question of the relation between being and becoming. After all, in the second *Nature* course, he advances the no doubt plausible hypothesis that “[t]he reality of the organism supposes a non-Parmenidean Being, a form that escapes from the dilemma of being and nonbeing” (N 239/183), and in the first course he approvingly cites Heraclitus' notion that “Nature is a child at play” (N 119/84), which, as Merleau-Ponty's editor remarks, should probably be understood as a reference to fragment 79: “Time is a child playing draughts” (N 119 n. 1/296 n. 1). The strife between Parmenidean being and Heraclitean becoming is clearly not only a classical *topos* of mere historical interest, since it has fairly recently been explicitly recognized by, e.g., Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers as the issue that is at stake as we begin to gain an appreciation on scientific grounds of time symmetry-breaking non-equilibrium processes, dissipative structures and unstable systems.⁴⁴³ Given his concern with the issue of natural productivity and generativity, we must assume that Merleau-Ponty would have welcomed these developments in scientific knowledge with enthusiasm. It remains, however, that the form in which he left his last thought as it was cut short by his premature

death seems to imply that the genuinely ontological question of the relation between being and becoming should be subordinated to the more epistemological question of the relation between subject and object, leaving us to work out the articulation of the relation between being and becoming in terms of the relation between the subject and the object (and vice versa).

I am inclined to think that it is precisely this way of setting up the relation between the domains of philosophical inquiry (between epistemology and ontology) that draws Merleau-Ponty's thinking into what Irigaray terms a "most radical struggle with the maternal", emblematically expressed in Merleau-Ponty's formula that "we are the parents of a nature of which we are also the children". If Irigaray is right that the continuation of such a struggle can only mean barring the way not only for the emergence of a female subject irreducible to masculine projections but for a genuine cultural growth in difference among humans in general, then I think it is in the interest of feminist philosophy to take issue with Merleau-Ponty's tendency to obfuscate the boundaries between the epistemological and ontological domains of inquiry respectively.

The historical reason why I think we should question Merleau-Ponty's concession to the radical skeptic's insistence that knowledge produced on realist premises is always in principle problematic and unsatisfactory is connected to the marginal branch, within the scientific community, of so-called "climate skepticism" bent on undermining the scientific credibility of IPCC's⁴⁴⁴ conclusions regarding the connection between global warming and human industry. I am worried that, in such a situation, the concern to overcome radical skepticism on philosophical grounds – even if it requires abandonment of the belief that we are cognitively well-equipped enough to state something true about the world as it is independently of our cognitive activity – may risk becoming part of the problem of "climate skepticism" rather than its solution. Of course, Merleau-Ponty is far from despairing of scientific objectivity. As we have seen, he is sure, like Husserl before him, that it will be possible to find a more proper grounding for the legitimacy of scientific knowledge in the lifeworld, now that the radical skeptic has shown that the world as it is in itself cannot do the job. But while the transcendental philosophers are busy carrying out the laborious work of explicating how scientific knowledge in general – and, by extension, the scientific research

⁴⁴³ See Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1984).

⁴⁴⁴ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

on global warming – is ultimately grounded in the lifeworld and not in the world in itself, the “merchants of doubt”⁴⁴⁵ can continue their business of undermining the legitimacy of imposing, on a grand scale, unpopular yet necessary measures against climate change. The present situation shows us, I think, that skepticism should not always be treated as a problem that every field of knowledge – whether philosophical or scientific – must confront (and in the process rid itself of its realist reveries), but is in certain situations (like the present one) more deserving of being handled through political means.⁴⁴⁶ If the question as to when we are and when we are not to heed radical skeptical doubts concerning the sustainability of knowledge claims must, for historical reasons, ultimately be a matter of pragmatic judgment, then I think we should retain a healthy skepticism about the openness in principle to the general skeptical questions that marks the starting point of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical inquiry.

Consider, finally, Merleau-Ponty’s warnings concerning the dangers of “operational thought”, also discussed in chapter 6. He considers this “operational thought”, prevalent in a certain scientific ideology, to be the contemporary heir of classical rationalism, in so far as it continues the Cartesian habit of “treating everything as if it were an object-in-general”, which is his choice of terms here to designate the realist thesis of being as in-itself. At the horizon of operational thought, such as Merleau-Ponty describes it, is the reduction of humanity to a “manipulandum”, producing a situation in which the borders between scientific, governmental and economic manipulation with – and exploitation of – human and other resources threaten to disappear altogether, which would be a “nightmare from which there is no awakening”.

While I think Merleau-Ponty was, in this analysis, remarkably prescient of a danger that faces us even more urgently today, in an age when human enhancement, optimization of human capital and commodification of natural resources have become the order of the day, I think he was wrong to blame this situation on the realist thesis of being as in-itself and to consider the transcendental turn to be its solution. As already pointed out in chapter 6, I think that what Merleau-Ponty labels “operational thought” may perhaps pass for some contemporary avatar of positivism in the philosophy of science, but such a position does not

⁴⁴⁵ See Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010).

⁴⁴⁶ Here I concur with the Norwegian environmental philosopher Trygve Lavik, who argues on the grounds of John Stuart Mill’s utilitarian-liberalist theory of free speech that “[s]ociety should put restrictions on the ‘climate change denial’

consist in “treating everything as if it were an object-in-general”; rather, it consists in a certain idea with regard to what conditions must be fulfilled in order for a proposition to be accepted as scientifically true. Far more problematic, however, is Merleau-Ponty’s belief that the dangers induced by operational thought may be averted by exhorting it to “return...to the site, the soil of the sensible and humanly modified world such as it is in our lives and for our bodies” (OE 9/122), in order there to “learn to ground itself upon things themselves and upon itself, and...once more become philosophy...” (OE 10/123). I think the expectation that such a return is forthcoming among the proponents of operational thought is utterly unrealistic, just as the idea that they need some grounding that they have been unable to acknowledge is absolutely irrelevant; these ideas of a return to – and grounding in – lived experience, and of how nice things would be if scientists became philosophers again, today seems like little more than empty nostalgia. What Merleau-Ponty so aptly describes as operational thought does not secretly nourish itself on the disavowed soil of lived experience, but on its place within a scientific-political-economic matrix that promulgates a growing osmosis between knowledge-production, techniques of governance and administration, and unrestricted utilization and exploitation of all human and non-human resources in the interest of global capital flows. In trying to respond to such a situation, I think that the most dangerous thing we can do is to follow Merleau-Ponty’s transcendental turn back to the soil of the lifeworld.

What would Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature look like without the transcendental turn, if it will be necessary in the end to decline to take this turn? To start with, my guess is that it would have granted a different role to play for the feminine, if any role at all. But with regard to this question, one can only speculate.

industry’s right to free speech” (Trygve Lavik, “Climate Change Denial and the Freedom of Speech.” Unpublished paper presented at Department of Philosophy, University of Bergen 31.01.2013).

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* This is the translation of *Phenomenology of Perception* that is used throughout this dissertation, with the exception of one instance (in chapter 5) at which it is referred, in the course of a footnote discussion of an issue of translation, to Colin Smith’s translation.

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