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*Corporealities:
From the Logic of Expression Toward
an Ethics of Bodies in Merleau-Ponty*

A Dissertation Presented

by

Donald Arthur Landes

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

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Donald Arthur Landes

We, the dissertation committee for the above candidate for the

Doctor of Philosophy degree, hereby recommend

Acceptance of this dissertation.

**Edward S. Casey – Dissertation Co-Advisor
Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, Department of Philosophy**

**Hugh J. Silverman – Dissertation Co-Advisor
Professor of Philosophy, and Comparative Literary and Cultural
Studies, Department of Philosophy**

**Anne O'Byrne – Chairperson of Defense
Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Department of Philosophy**

**Leonard Lawlor – Outside Reader
Edwin Earle Sparks Professor of Philosophy, Department of Philosophy
Penn State University**

This dissertation is accepted by the Graduate School

Lawrence Martin
Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Dissertation

**Corporealities: From the Logic of Expression Towards an Ethics of
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By

Donald Arthur Landes

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Having developed a phenomenology of lived and embodied experience in his first major work, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945), French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) began to worry that his phenomenological approach remained nonetheless attached to the “philosophy of consciousness” that he had aimed to dissolve. Such a philosophy, namely, the idea that there is a transcendental mind separate from, though somehow attached to the body was, for Merleau-Ponty, the underlying problem with modern philosophy, modern humanism, and the implicit ontology of modern science. Turning his phenomenological gaze towards politics and aesthetics, he began to explore what he called the “paradox of expression” as central to a new conception of human being and metaphysics. By 1953, Merleau-Ponty would conclude that beyond the “bad ambiguity” in the phenomenon of perception, which leads to a mere mixing together of idealist and realist perspectives, there is a “good ambiguity” in the phenomenon of expression. This good ambiguity promised to “be metaphysics itself” and “at the same time give us the principle of an ethics.” Upon his untimely death in 1961, neither of these promises had been fulfilled.

Merleau-Ponty’s fundamental philosophical gesture, namely, the paradoxical logic of expression, draws together his diverse work on perception, language, politics, history, and ontology, thereby addressing the first of these two promises. For Merleau-Ponty, the wonder of human being is that we represent the hinge, or the place of intersection between real and ideal systems, and, nonetheless, our action also creates and

sustains these systems. Hence, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is a rejection of both idealism and realism. There is no pure mind behind our expressive activities and there is no 'ideal text' that our spoken words attempt to translate, nor is speaking a mere mechanical unleashing of physiological and chemical processes. In the speaking of a metaphor, in finding the 'right word' or phrase, I bring about a figurative meaning that did not exist in any real sense prior to its expression, though it certainly did exist as a potential towards which I was drawn. Once spoken, the metaphor has a retroactive effect upon the linguistic landscape. It shifts the potential uses of these words for future speakers and myself. In the context of intersubjective communication, metaphor is possible because of what the words *meant*, but the metaphor also, paradoxically, changes what the words *mean*.

Part I places Merleau-Ponty's paradox of expression in the context of traditional accounts of expression and considers the phenomenological evidence against these traditional approaches. Part II establishes the logic of expression in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy by placing it into dialogue with Henri Bergson's theory of action and memory, Edmund Husserl's theory of language, and the philosophical debate about the nature of metaphor. Part III is a close reading of the expressive logic in Merleau-Ponty's account of perception, language, politics, and aesthetics in order to develop the structure of his ontology. I argue that Merleau-Ponty generalizes the logic of expression by suggesting that all action is both a response to the weight of ideal structures and a creative act in the face of the urgency of the real situation. The results of this expressive activity suggest an open ontology of intersubjective communication. Even if an answer to his first promise for a viable metaphysics can be thus constructed, Merleau-Ponty's sudden stroke at age 53 left his project of finding the "principle of an ethics" through the phenomenon of expression wholly unfulfilled. My contribution not only points to the absence of this ethical reflection, but also offers some preliminary interpretation of what this principle might be, namely, an ethics of responsibility in light of our situated freedom and the accidental consequences of our actions.

For Mom, Dad, Megan, and Kathleen

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Preface

Meaning is Viral

Le moment de l'expression est celui où le rapport se renverse, où le livre prend possession du lecteur.

– Maurice Merleau-Ponty¹

Com-passion: c'est la contagion, le contact d'être les uns avec les autres dans ce tumulte. Ni altruisme, ni identification: l'ébranlement de la contiguïté brutale.

– Jean-Luc Nancy²

Dès que j'existe, j'agis, je séduis, j'empiète sur la liberté d'autrui.

– Maurice Merleau-Ponty³

Meaning is viral. Passing itself from carrier to carrier, it rests dormant in bodies until the conditions are just right for it to express itself in a sudden crystallizing act. Contracted from invisible sources, from *we know not where*; it insidiously reappears in our gestures, our words, our ideas, and our beliefs. Through a past that they repeat, our gestures recognize a future in the midst of a present encounter. Meaning, however, is never merely repeated, how it expresses itself is neither fixed nor de-

¹ “The expressive moment occurs where the relationship reverses itself, where the book takes possession of the reader.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La prose du monde*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1969), 20. Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 12-13. Henceforth cited as *PM*.

² “Com-passion is the contagion, the contact of being with one another in this turmoil. Compassion is not altruism, nor is it identification; it is the disturbance [trembling] of violent relatedness.” Jean-Luc Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1996), 12. Translated as: Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Anne E. O'Byrne and Robert D. Richardson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), xiii.

³ “From the moment I exist, I act, I seduce, I *encroach* upon the liberty of the other.” This passage is from the unpublished notes written by Merleau-Ponty in 1949 in preparation for his presentations in Mexico. Cited in Emmanuel de Saint Aubert, *Du lien des êtres aux éléments de l'être. Merleau-Ponty au tournant des années 1945-1951* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2004), 64. Henceforth cited as *ESA1*. Translations are my own. Saint Aubert's emphasis.

terminated algorithmically. Rather, meaning always shifts through its creative encounter with a new situation; negotiating with a new medium the virus is always mutating, always evading its death in a paraphrase that would fix it — a difference is always introduced in inscribing a word atop a paraphrasing definition, a difference exscribed in that very inscription.

A virus is able to *conscript* bodies for the inscription of its history, possessing something of a genius without subjectivity. The meaningful expression, however, is haunted by a paradoxical subjectivity: an impossible subject that is caused and yet free, that lends its body more or less by choice to the history of the trace whose meaning it has “caught.” In the paradox of expression, or the space between pure creation and pure repetition, we find the spacing that allows us to talk about human responsibility in light of a quasi-actor, a fleeting point of passage, a consciousness and a construct, bodies infected with language and embracing the *jouissance* of so being infected, of being shared by community, of becoming what they are through this sharing that they do and do not choose. The speaker neither wholly possesses language as a transcendental subject nor is wholly possessed by language. To rethink the act of expression on the model of action is to rethink both expression and action and the ethical implications of this subject-effect for the impossible responsibility of speaking and the claim to community exscribed in every inscription.

Expression brings to light that which did not exist prior to the expression, but later could not have been otherwise. It creates a being who presents its meaning as eternal, yet is incessantly altered in every repetition. From the perspective of the accomplished, it is seen as responding to an urgency that summoned it in the logic of *après-coup*. But if we place ourselves on the cusp of speaking — in the “I feel... I don’t know what I feel,” literally on the tip-of-the-tongue, i.e., that bodily perturbation we might call the bodily pre-consciousness of an immanent expression, — all action is expressive. Expression claims to create, denying the depth of repetition at its very heart. Yet expression is always *between* pure creation and pure repetition, and always responsive to what it will be when it has been accomplished — we must come to grips with the *future anterior of responsibility*. Expression is always in play with the field that prepares for its crystallization and the accidents that will befall its reception — we cannot turn away from these challenges of a situated responsibility and project ethics into a sterilized laboratory. Ethics must be found in the messy reality and is always exposed to contagions.

Expression is the passive response to the urgent call of a situation and the active claim that this repetition of a word, a metaphor, a sentence, a gesture, *means here too*, if we can hear this verb in the intransitive, and if

we can shake the myth that there is an original meaning in the first utterance, then every utterance is *essentially* repetition and creation. In a world in which our very desires are manufactured insidiously by forces with the sole purpose of masking their operation, that expression *must* be between repetition and creation is our hope for an ethics. Expression is the name of the paradox of action and the call to the impossible responsibility for all that is beyond our power, a site of resistance that remains available so long as we are expressive bodies. To speak is to shift the linguistic landscape, to answer one question is to open another, and to open to an *other*, and thus to shift their potentials as well. To act, then, is to trespass, to leave a mark, to *empiète*. Responsibility is the price we pay for the freedom to act, an un-chosen at the heart of our ethics that demands an ethical response – the universality of ethics is from its un-chosen status and its demand for a response. To act is to communicate, and communication is violence. The ontology of bodies that emerges from an exploration of the paradoxical logic of expression is an ontology that reveals how the demand for response to violent relatedness is universal, that ontology is already ethics. Rethinking these demands and the possibilities of response is our task.

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Introduction

Nos analyses de la pensée font comme si, avant d'avoir trouvé ses mots, elle était déjà une sorte de texte idéale que nos phrases chercheraient à traduire. Mais l'auteur lui-même n'a aucun texte qu'il puisse confronter avec son écrit, aucun langage avant le langage.

– Merleau-Ponty⁴

What Saint Augustine said about time and what Merleau-Ponty says about the world — that they are “perfectly familiar to each, but that none of us can explain it to the others”⁵ — is, I will argue, equally to be said about the phenomenon of expression. The concept of time offers itself to Western common sense, at first glance, as a simple phenomenon: linearly progressing “now” points or a simple division between the past that *is no longer* and the future that *is not yet*. The world seems through and through unproblematic, prior to interrogation, as the ensemble of medium-sized dry objects that I sense or represent as *outside* of me. We live through time and move through the world unreflectively and without disruption, without problem, without so much as a suspicion of a mystery worthy of our attention. Time and the world sustain our actions and respond to our expectations, but when we press these two phenomena, withdrawing from them through reflection, or rediscovering them through some breakdown, their supposed clarity is found wanting. We are left astounded at just how unknown and fleeting such familiar or intimate aspects of our experience could suddenly become. This lack,

⁴ “Our analyses of thought give us the impression that before it finds the words which express it, it is already a sort of ideal text that our sentences attempt to *translate*. But the author himself has no text to which he can compare his writing and no language prior to language.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Le langage indirect et les voix du silence,” in *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 69. Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” in *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 42-43. Henceforth cited as *IL*.

⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 17. Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 3. Henceforth cited as *VI*.

discovered at the very heart of an experience in whose possession we felt most secure, is perhaps the motivation behind phenomenological reflection, the desire to explore the unfamiliar of the familiar in Husserl's phenomenological reduction or the rupture in Heidegger's description of the broken tool that rips the ready-to-hand from its *hiding in plain view* and sets up the object as present-to-hand.

The phenomenon expression also offers itself as simple and straightforward, as nothing other than *the making public of the inner*. As Merleau-Ponty shows again and again, phenomenological disruptions of this conviction leave us standing in wonder before the phenomenon of expression. But are we right to describe the event of expression in the same terms as time or as being-in-the-world? What could be more obvious than expression? "If you have something to say, say it!" We have all at some point bitten our tongue, or wished we had. We have all uttered the words: "no, that's not quite what I meant." Is there not, despite Wittgenstein's doubts,⁶ clearly something I am looking for when the words are on the "tip of my tongue?" But what, we might ask, lies behind this metaphor of possessing something to say, of *having* something to say, and where exactly does this inner world or treasure chest of ideas exist? And what does the tongue have to do with it, whether we mean that fluttering organ or the particular way our community has of singing the world?

When we begin to press this nexus of concepts, as has often been done by philosophers in their reflections on language or aesthetics, this default definition too dissolves, and we are left with strange paradoxical formulations—*aporias* of creation, confusions over the endurance (or even the very location) of the artwork, problems of constituting or communicating a new sense, or of communicating at all, debates about the existence of ideal meanings or objectivities. Such paradoxical formulations haunt any aesthetic theory that does not take as given a modern or transcendental subject behind or before artistic activity and that questions a theory of communication that rests upon coding and decoding signs from the safety of an interpretive distance.

Now just as the rethinking of time as temporality in Saint Augustine and later in Heidegger, or the rethinking of the familiar world

⁶ In fact, there would be much to discuss between Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein, particularly the suspicion toward ideal and inner realms of meaning. As Wittgenstein writes, "The words 'It's on the tip of my tongue' are no more the expression of an experience than 'Now I know how to go on!' — We use them in *certain situations*, and they are surrounded by behavior of a special kind, and also by some characteristic experiences. In particular they are typically followed by *finding* the word. (Ask yourself: 'What would it be like if human beings *never* found the word that was on the tip of their tongue?)" Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958), 219.

of empiricism in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, leads to an urgent questioning of the founding presuppositions of our very tradition, I will demonstrate how a rethinking of expression throws our notion of subjectivity irrevocably into question and calls for a new thinking of ontology and ethics. The study of expression may be just one path among many towards such a rethinking, as the critique of modern subjectivity has certainly been one engine driving twentieth-century Continental Philosophy,⁷ but I will argue that there is some priority to the question of expression, as it quickly leads to the complicated and paradoxical relationship between real bodies and the ideal structures that influence their behavior. I will, however, limit my scope, for the most part, to establishing *the urgency* for this rethinking of ontology through the question of expression, and we will take Merleau-Ponty as our guide, as one thinker who followed this aporia of expression into ontology and its ethical implications. Thus, our more modest goal is an exploration of the paradoxical logic of expression in Merleau-Ponty. The project of a general account of subjectivity and an ethics properly situated in relation to classical ethical theory will have to wait for this foundational ground to have been secured.

In the paradoxes of time or of the familiar world, in that they are “perfectly familiar to each, but that none of us can explain it to the others” (VI, 17/3), another priority to the question of expression appears, a paradox in the act of description itself. The attempt to *say what time is* reveals that our experience overflows what we can say about it. The paradox of expression is sparked in the irrepressible space between what we live and what we say, a metastable⁸ silence that both makes its organization in speech and the simultaneous undoing of that organization possible. The paradox of expression is not just alongside other paradoxes, it is their condition, and philosophy must be the constant, though absurd, attempt to raise the paradox to speech. Silence is not a treasure chest of ideas to be

⁷ *Continental Philosophy* should be understood quite broadly to indicate the branch of Anglo-American philosophers today working *from* philosophers or schools of thought developed since Descartes on continental Europe, including but not limited to *phenomenology, hermeneutics, existentialism, structuralism, postmodernism and critical theory*. This loosely drawn and porous group stands out against an *analytic* tradition in philosophy whose lineage is more closely tied with logical positivism, ordinary language philosophy, pragmatism, and cognitive science. I would prefer to see figures such as Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein as possibilities for positive and fruitful dialogue across this divide. For a pertinent discussion of this issue, see: Hugh J. Silverman, *Inscriptions: After Phenomenology and Structuralism*, 2nd ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 1-9.

⁸ The term “metastable” is drawn from Gilbert Simondon’s work, and will be the focus of Part I, Chapter III below.

discovered, but a metastable structure of potentials and tensions, of possibilities that guide the creative act that, paradoxically, gives them voice and sustains them. The philosopher speaks, and Merleau-Ponty admits, "this is a weakness in him." "His entire 'work' is this absurd effort. He wrote in order to state his contact with Being; he did not state it, and could not state it, since it is silence. Then he recommences..." (VI, 164/125). The paradoxical logic of expression names the open movement of philosophy itself, as the constant and forever abortive attempt to close the gap between what we live and what we say, or as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it:

Man began in the calmly violent silence of a gesture: here, on the wall, the continuity of being was interrupted by the birth of a form, and this form, detached from everything, even detaching the wall from its opaque thickness, gave one to see the strangeness of the being, substance, or animal that traces it, and the strangeness of all being in him.⁹

* * *

The theme of language and expression is present throughout Merleau-Ponty's work. In his first text, *La structure du comportement*,¹⁰ language is treated in a secondary fashion, although he does offer a significant discussion of the new structures of meaning that are introduced within the human order of behavior as creating urgencies for action beyond the merely vital. Questions of language and expression become central in *Phénoménologie de la perception*¹¹ and the lecture courses of the

⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, "Peinture dan la grotte," in *Les Muses* (Paris: Galilée, 1994). Translated as: Jean-Luc Nancy, "Painting in the Grotto," in *The Muses, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 69.

¹⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La structure du comportement* (Paris: Quadrige, Presses Universitaires de France, 1990). Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. Alden L. Fisher (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1963). Henceforth cited as SC.

¹¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006). Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002). Henceforth cited as *PhP*. The reader is alerted that I am citing from the most recent printings of the French and English editions, which have introduced a substantial repagination in both cases. For a concordance chart between the original 1945 printing and printings after 2005, please search for David Morris's concordance chart or "Ponty Program" online.

same time period.¹² In fact, Merleau-Ponty turns to expression at the crucial moment in which he shifts from his phenomenological critique of other theories of embodiment toward his own account of our embodied experience as “*être au monde*.” That crucial chapter 6 of Part I of *Phénoménologie de la perception*, “*Le corps comme expression et la parole*,” opens with the bold claim that in “trying to describe the phenomenon of speech and the specific act of meaning, we shall have the opportunity to leave behind, once and for all, the traditional subject-object dichotomy” (*PhP*, 213/202). This conviction, that expression is the royal road to rethinking the relation between embodiment and being, clearly drives much of Merleau-Ponty’s subsequent research, even after he leaves behind the essentially critical or archeological approach of *Phénoménologie de la perception*.¹³ Not only does he consistently turn to expressive activities such as painting or writing in order to draw out vivid examples of his thought, he also devotes many pages to defining and exploring the idea of expression generally.¹⁴

The concept of expression motivated his extended, though eventually abandoned, project on language and literature pursued throughout the early 1950s entitled *La prose du monde*.¹⁵ In the most important part of this project, much of which was extracted and polished for publication on its own in 1952 in the long article “*Le langage indirect et les voix de silence*,” Merleau-Ponty suggests that “Language is much more like a sort of being than a means,” and that we must “rid our minds of the idea that our language is the translation or cipher of an original text” (*IL*, 69/43). Thus,

¹² See, in particular, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “*La conscience et l’acquisition du langage*,” in *Psychologie et pédagogie de l’enfant. Cours de Sorbonne, 1949-1952* (Paris: Verdier, 2001). Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*, trans. Hugh J. Silverman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

¹³ A nice discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s shift away from his earlier approach and its reliance on the language of intellectualism (that is, a philosophy of consciousness) can be found in Renaud Barbaras, *De l’être du phénomène. Sur l’ontologie de Merleau-Ponty* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1991), *passim*. Translated as: Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, trans. Leonard Lawlor and Ted Toadvine (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

¹⁴ An exemplary piece is the work on Cézanne, followed the publication of *Phénoménologie de la perception* very closely, and which develops the consequences of this text for a theory of painting. See further, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “*La doute de Cézanne*,” in *Sens et non-sens* (Paris: Nagel, 1948). Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “*Cézanne’s Doubt*,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996). Henceforth cited as *DC*.

¹⁵ For a very complete and insightful statement of Merleau-Ponty’s thought on aesthetics, see: Hugh J. Silverman, “*Art and Aesthetics*,” in *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*, ed. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008). In fact, as Silverman indicates, Merleau-Ponty’s engagement with aesthetics directly begins as early as 1946 in his courses offered immediately following the War at the *Univeristé de Lyon* (96).

continuing to deepen his insights from *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Merleau-Ponty sought through expression to understand the embodied *accomplishment* of thought. This rejection of the “original text” is one of the central insights into the paradoxical structure of expression. And even though the inquiry into expression through literary language was abandoned around 1952, in that very same year Merleau-Ponty penned the following statement in a report submitted for his candidature to the *Collège de France*:

The study of perception could only teach us a ‘bad ambiguity,’ a mixture of finitude and universality, of interiority and exteriority. But there is a ‘good ambiguity’ in the phenomenon of expression, a spontaneity which accomplishes what appeared to be impossible when we observed only the separate elements, a spontaneity which gathers together the plurality of monads, the past and the present, nature and culture into a single whole. To establish this wonder would be metaphysics itself and would at the same time give us the principle of an ethics.¹⁶

This passage suggests much of the work that I hope to achieve here, and we will certainly return to it below. It includes a reference to the accomplishment of spontaneity (Merleau-Ponty’s link to existentialism), a reference to a unity over separate elements (Merleau-Ponty’s continued reliance upon the unity of structure as defined by *Gestalttheorie*), a reference to temporality (Husserl) and to his own reflections on nature and culture (as we will see, this is Merleau-Ponty’s road to understanding the question of “other people” [*autrui*]). What is most striking, however, is the continued commitment to expression as that event or phenomenon that will overcome such notorious pairings as the subject-object divide, and in his later work, the past and the present, and nature and culture. But most of all – and he could not be more explicit as he ends this passage – Merleau-Ponty makes two promises: (1) that he will show how the *wonder* of expression *is* metaphysics, and (2) that he will show, *simultaneously*, how understanding this metaphysics, this wonder, reveals the “principle of an ethics.” Although the scope of the investigation into this metaphysics will only point toward the ethics it implies, moving toward the fulfillment of these two promises is the trajectory that I am attempting to open here.

¹⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Un inédit de Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” in *Parcours Deux: 1951-1961* (Lagrasse, France: Verdier, 2000), 48. Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: A Prospectus of His Work,” in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 11. Henceforth cited as *Inédit*.

Indeed, even if Merleau-Ponty abandoned the project of *La prose du monde*, it appears to have been a matter of seeking a better approach than one of shifting to a new object of investigation. As his thought enters what fate would determine to be the final stage, represented by the essay *L'Œil et l'Esprit*,¹⁷ the final courses at the *Collège de France*, the unfinished *Le visible et l'invisible* and the accompanying working notes, expression continues to guide Merleau-Ponty's thinking.¹⁸ In *La prose du monde*, Merleau-Ponty says "[i]n its live and creative state, language is the gesture of renewal and recovery which unites me with myself and others. We must learn to reflect on consciousness *in* the hazards of language and as quite impossible without its opposite" (*PM*, 17/26). This description, emphasizing the fact that language is what unites me with others and with the world, and that consciousness is nothing without its other (language), is perhaps the perfect foreshadowing for the central role of language and expression in the final moment of *Le visible et l'invisible*, where he asserts that "[t]his new reversibility [speaking/hearing] and *the emergence of the flesh as expression* are the point of insertion of speaking and thinking in the world of silence" (*VI*, 145/188, emphasis added). Thus, expression is the means that Merleau-Ponty chooses to carry forward his discovery of the pre-subjective experience of meaning in his first two projects and the shift to characterizing this pregnant silence in the 1950s in order to forge an ontology of the flesh. Expression is the paradoxical place of chiasm and transition, the wonder that repeatedly drew Merleau-Ponty's philosophical gaze, that is, expression is the problem of philoso-

¹⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Œil et l'Esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964). Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Galen Johnson, *Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993). Henceforth cited as *OE*.

¹⁸ Any reading of Merleau-Ponty will of course have to take up the question of how to read the progression of his thought, which I will certainly endeavor to address in Part III. I do not foresee this question having a definitive answer given the unfortunate conditions of his death, nor does the hope for a definitive truth of this progression hold any real weight given the theory of expression at work. In other words, I am approaching Merleau-Ponty's work as a *corpus*, in the Nancean sense of the word: the exhaustive collection of the ex-scriptions of a singular plural existence, as a trajectory of a life to which we can join, and thus alter, by lending our bodies to it, a unity with a transcendental reason. This description too quickly drives to the heart of the logic of expression, which we hope to make clear as we proceed. Nancy's work on the concept of *corpus*, see the bilingual edition of Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, ed. John D Caputo, trans. Richard A Rand, *Perspectives in Continental Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008). For a discussion of this point, see my article: Donald Landes, "Expressive Body, Exscriptive Corpus: The Tracing of the Body from Maurice Merleau-Ponty to Jean-Luc Nancy," *Chiasmi International IX* (2009): 261-62.

phy itself and the necessity of the constant and absurd task of interrogation.

Perhaps taking him at his word, then, we take up this search for a metaphysics and an ethics *via* expression. In fact, there is more than a thematic continuity at work in the progression just sketched. I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's philosophical practice itself is deeply marked by the paradox of expression, and in a sense, the explicit work on expression is more of a movement towards an implicit, though open, *telos* of his thought. In short, the paradoxical logic of expression is inherent in Merleau-Ponty's style as much as in the content of his reflection, and *contains* as potential not only what he thought explicitly, but also *how* he thought it and *where* it might have taken him. The paradox of expression colors Merleau-Ponty's reading of scientific theory in his very first book, determines his method of critique in *Phénoménologie de la perception*, and guides his positive contribution in aesthetics, politics, and ontology. In other words, truly accounting for expression in Merleau-Ponty is not to merely identify his dealings with classical questions of artistic creation, for instance, but rather to come to terms with Merleau-Ponty as an *expressive thinker*, as the thinker of the paradoxical movement of expression, both explicitly and, even more so, implicitly in his every philosophical gesture.

For Merleau-Ponty, in expression there is no pure "discovery" of something that exists complete in itself, waiting to be expressed. Thus, the attempt to read a philosopher is always a creative act, but we must not thereby assume that it is a purely creative endeavor. There is an urgency for an account of what I will call a responsible expressive reading, or what Jenny Slatman calls "*une répétition génératrice* [a generative repetition],"¹⁹ or what Emmanuel de Saint Aubert calls the "Merleau-Pontian hermeneutic" (*ESA1*, 20). Thus, I will try to achieve, from within a Merleau-Pontian theory of expression that allows us to have an open and creative account of the production of sense, an understanding of expression and of Merleau-Ponty that is true to the creative and expressive nature of action. Such a reading would thus *perform* the very notion of responsibility that we will find at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of expression. As such, a theory of expression is always already a philosophical anthropology and a humanism that finds expression as the essence of human action, that is, an open humanism that leaves itself open, for expression is away in the state of becoming, never finished. We will have to come to terms with this subtle relation to humanism, as Merleau-Ponty's thought both demonstrates and aims to articulate our being as expressive bodies.

¹⁹ Jenny Slatman, *L'expression au-delà de la représentation. Sur l'aïsthésis et l'esthétique chez Merleau-Ponty* (Paris: Peeters, 2003), 6. Translations are my own.

Such a task is as much an ethics of reading as an exigency to formulate an ontology of intersubjectivity that is always already ethics.

* * *

Corporealities, I will argue, captures the very relation between embodiment and being that I foresee as the culmination of a theory of expression. As Merleau-Ponty shifts away from what he called a lingering “philosophy of consciousness,” he, for better or worse, never lets the focus of his research move far away from the question of embodied or lived existence. The language certainly shifts, but the objectives remain the same: making sense of human being as the paradoxical place of the union of the soul and body, nature and culture, the real and the ideal. The phenomenology of expression leads to an ontology of bodies essentially in relation, even if no particular relations are thereby essential. Bodies share meaning, carry forward and sustain the virtual or the invisible, and perform actions in communication with a multiplicity of others and with innumerable ideal systems. As Merleau-Ponty says, “All human acts and all human creations constitute a single drama, and in this sense we are all saved or lost together.” (*Inédit*, 10/46). A phenomenology of expression, then, leads from a naive notion of a consciousness expressing an inner thought complete in itself to an understanding of the single drama of the actions of bodies in communication, and a responsibility for *saving ourselves, together*.

Such a insights could not be more in harmony with the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, who reminds us repeatedly to seek meaning nowhere other than *right here*, in materiality, and in the relations between bodies sharing, sustaining, and shaping that meaning. As Nancy emphasizes, we “do not ‘have’ meaning anymore, because we ourselves *are* meaning,”²⁰ an insight that itself should be read in the lineage of Merleau-Ponty given its implication of a Marcellian understanding of *être* (being) and *avoir* (having).²¹ The bodily realities that we are, repeating *and* creating through expressive action, point to an ontology that is simultaneously an ethics of bodies in communication. Hence the importance I will give to rethinking the notion of *weight*, as both the real material reality of bodies and the ideal influence they carry forward or can have on each other. “Ideas,” writes Merleau-Ponty, “are the centers of our gravitation, this very definite void which the vault of language is built around, and which has

²⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel*, 19/1.

²¹ I will discuss the influence of Gabriel Marcel on Merleau-Ponty in Part III, Chapter 1, below.

actual existence only in the weight and counterweight of stones.”²² Through Merleau-Ponty’s paradoxical logic of expression, *Corporealities* aims to establish this foundational ontology of weight.

²² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Préface," in *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 37. Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Preface," in *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 20. Henceforth cited as *Préface*.

Part I

An Introduction to the Paradox of Expression

Part I, Chapter 1

Classical Theories and Phenomenological Disruptions: Meaning and its Communication

Le langage, de même, n'est au service du sens et ne gouverne pourtant pas le sens. Il n'y a pas de subordination entre eux. Ici personne ne commande et personne n'obéit. Ce que nous voulons dire n'est pas devant nous, hors de toute parole, comme une pure signification. Ce n'est que l'excès de ce que nous vivons sur ce qui a été déjà dit.

– Merleau-Ponty²³

In commencing a study of expression, we are immediately confronted with the seemingly clear concepts of meaning and communication. This is not surprising, for language surely gives us access to a meaningful realm and a community with which we can and do share that meaning. So we begin from what I am going to call, for simplicity, “classical theories of meaning,” since the previous sentence — an almost banal echoing of common sense — already reinforces a certain understanding of the act of speaking and the subjectivity implied therein. It seems to go without saying that, being the animal possessing language (*zoon logon echon*), we “have” meanings, held in some reserve storehouse like ammunitions for a potential battle. In communicating, we deploy this arsenal to achieve the ends that can be defined outside of the means they make use of — the ability to communicate is a question of logistics, efficiency, or technique. By classical theories, then, I will understand any approach to the act of speaking, writing, or hearing as a case of interpretation or translation from a source *outside the unity of the gesture in question*, whether this “outside” be an “inner” language, a *mental-ease*, a merely causal process, a mirroring of the structure of the world, or a transcendent

²³ “...language is not meaning’s servant, and yet it does not govern meaning. There is no subordination between them. Here no one commands and no one obeys. What we *mean* is not before us, outside all speech, as sheer signification. It is only the excess of what we live over what has already been said.” *IL*, 134-35/83.

system of signs, structures, correspondences, and rules. In other words, a classical theory will be any theory that understands communication and interpretation to be interchangeable notions, or theories of language that fail to include phenomenological insights of accomplishment and intentionality. We might call these theories, then, “technical theories of language.”²⁴ This matches Merleau-Ponty’s framing of the problem in his chapter “*Le corps comme expression et la parole*” in *Phénoménologie de la perception*, and his style of recognizing common presuppositions beneath a supposed debate in the history of philosophy.

Labeling this set of theories “classical,” of course, covers over the subtle distinctions and important insights that wait for a patient study of such theories of meaning, but such a study is not our task. The question is rather to discover the phenomenological evidence that disrupts any such classical theory and to thus begin to develop some of the major concepts that will be required for a positive theory of expression and the ontological groundwork of the ethics it implies. Yet the approach to a paradoxical phenomenon cannot be a straightforward one. As Gilbert Simondon argues, to understand individuation in nature, an individuation in thought is required;²⁵ and so too here: the attempt to understand expression requires expression. Merleau-Ponty never tires of making this point: we talk *about* language *with* language; the theorist of language is never able to get away from his or her object of study in order to find a pure vantage point. According to Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is responsible to this situation. “[T]he unfinished nature of phenomenology and the inchoative atmosphere that has surrounded it,” suggests Merleau-Ponty, “are not to be taken as a sign of failure, they were inevitable because phenomenology’s task was to reveal the mystery of the world and of reason” (*PhP*, 21-22/xxiii-xxiv). Phenomenology, at least for Merleau-Ponty, puts into question the possibility of *pure repetition*. But isn’t this urgency to speak that outruns speech the very engine of philosophy? As Merleau-Ponty himself says, “if any kind of history has ever called for our interpretation, it is surely the history of philosophy” (*PhP*, 8/viii, translation modified). Here we sense Merleau-Ponty’s own understanding of “interpretation” as standing in contrast to the interpretation of a classical theory; for Merleau-Ponty, “interpretation” is an expressive reading, a

²⁴ This is a nod towards R.G. Collingwood’s rejection of classical or technical theories of art. I will return to Collingwood at length below in Part I, Chapter 2, Section 2. R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 15, and onwards. Henceforth cited as *P*Art. Also, see his intriguing discussion of “Art Proper and Art falsely so-called,” at *P*Art, 275.

²⁵ Gilbert Simondon, *L’individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d’information* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 2005). Henceforth cited as *ILFI*.

reading in which “the philosopher we are speaking about and the philosopher who is speaking are present together, although it is not possible even in principle to decide at any given moment just what belongs to each.”²⁶

How might we give some flesh to this sweeping concept of “classical theories”? According to Merleau-Ponty, classical theories share a common presupposition, namely that the “word *has* no significance” (*PhP*, 216/205). In the case of mechanistic approaches to the study of language, the word becomes a mere sign or stimulus that has the peculiar property of triggering some association of sounds and behaviors that give us the impression of some mental activity. On the other hand, and this is the more deeply embedded theory that Merleau-Ponty devotes more time to criticizing, namely, the claim that words have no meaning in themselves because meaning is reserved for thought. The word is an “empty container” into which thought rushes, and thus as such remains an external accompaniment to a thought that is pure in itself (*PhP*, 216/205). As he explains further in “*La conscience et l’acquisition du langage*,” “from this perspective, one ends up by devaluating language.”²⁷ Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, a classical theory of language is one that either sees language as a mere system of behavioral triggers or a merely external accompaniment to a pure inner thought. In fact, the most important part of this picture is the one it paints of subjectivity. On the empiricist view, “there is nobody who speaks,” because the mechanical processes of recording and reacting to stimuli are stripped of any need for a consciousness, all such claims being merely indicative of epiphenomenal effects. On the intellectualist account, there is a pure subject, but this subject is a thinking subject, not a speaking one.²⁸ The ideas or thought of this subject are pure and true while the accidents and particularities of language and dialects are obstacles to expression. “One considers [language] only as a piece of clothing for consciousness, an accoutrement of thought.” For the idealist, there is a complete divorce between the true aspect of human nature, consciousness, and the coding or ciphering of this thought into the external system of signs and meaning is “an exclusively technical problem.”²⁹

This criticism of classical or technical theories of language, first expressed here in relation to a general description of mechanistic or

²⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Le philosophe et son ombre,” in *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 260. Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Philosopher and his Shadow,” in *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 159.

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty, “*La conscience et l’acquisition du langage*,” 10/4.

²⁸ See *PhP*, 216/205.

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, “*La conscience et l’acquisition du langage*,” 9-10/3-4.

idealist philosophies, is repeated in 1951 against Husserl's early philosophy of language. According to Merleau-Ponty, Husserl's analysis in the *Logical Investigations* of an "eidetic of language and a universal grammar"³⁰ is a repetition of the idea that language is a mere accompaniment to the activity of transcendental consciousness. Indeed, this attitude takes an important tone in Husserl whose universal grammar goes quite far towards a "pure language," or at least a pure logic. Such a language would be, in a sense, the perfection of a tool, a system of available expressions and connections between them devoid of all ambiguity. Merleau-Ponty admits that the desire for a language without ambiguity, a language that would allow for thought to express itself without remainder, is a natural effect of the very structure of language. Language is always pointing us away from itself. It seems, when observed from a third-person perspective, that the words lay in wait as the mere tools of our thought, that, as Merleau-Ponty writes, the "person speaking is coding his thought. He replaces his thought with a visible or sonorous pattern which is nothing but sounds in the air or ink spots on the paper. Thought understands itself and is self-sufficient" (*PM*, 12/7). But the "algorithm," or "the project of a universal language," argues Merleau-Ponty, "is a revolt against language in its existing state and a refusal to depend upon the confusions of everyday language." Such a project, repeated again and again, is an attempt to "tear speech out of history" (*PM*, 10/5). The fundamental premise of the logic of expression is that language, spoken or written, has a meaning, that is, that words *accomplish* thought. If this is the case, then the conversion of the question of language into a technical question is to refuse to reflect upon language at all.

Without wanting to get too far into the details at this early moment, some of the phenomenological disruptions that Merleau-Ponty shows to be inconceivable upon the classical picture are worth noting. Many of these examples, which appear first in *Phénoménologie de la perception*, reappear again and again. If thought was complete in itself, then it seems impossible to explain, writes Merleau-Ponty, why "thought tends towards expression as towards its completion, why the most familiar thing appears indeterminate as long as we have not recalled its name, why the thinking subject himself is in a kind of ignorance of his thoughts, so long as he has not formulated them for himself, or even spoken and written them" (*PhP*, 216/206). Moreover, on the classical picture, it seems that communication means only the reconstruction of the ideas of one person

³⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Sur la phénoménologie du langage," in *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 136. Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "On the Phenomenology of Language," in *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 84. Henceforth cited as *OPL*.

by another through the external aids or indications of conventional signs. Yet this conviction precludes the very real experience we have had of genuine learning through conversation. Listening intently to a speaker leaves no room in our minds for a pure thought, there “is an ability to think *according to others*” (*PhP*, 218/208). And this is not limited to the speaking of an interlocutor, for in my own speaking “my spoken words surprise me myself and teach me my own thought” (*OPL*, 144/88). In other words, although Merleau-Ponty never quite formulates it as such, the phenomenon of expression is always already one of *inter*-subjectivity, a spacing that divides and connects.

To account for these phenomenological disruptions, Merleau-Ponty attempts to relate three major points. First, the word itself has a meaning, a claim that emerges in both *Phénoménologie de la perception* and *La Prose du monde*. Secondly, speaking or writing shares the intentional structure of gestures, and more and more becomes for Merleau-Ponty *the* paradigmatic example of intentionality. Finally, speaking is always related to silence, but not a silence that would lack any and all structure, not a silence that is a pure nothingness. For Merleau-Ponty, this silence is highly structured and provides the basis for all speaking — it is sedimented language, institution, *langue* (versus *parole*), the *not nothing* of negation, and as such acts as an ideal realm, but one that only exists because I repeat, sustain, and reshape it with every expressive act. “Our present expressive operations,” argues Merleau-Ponty, “instead of driving the previous ones away—simply succeeding and annulling them—salvage, preserve, and (insofar as they contain some truth) take them up again” (*OPL*, 155/95). Phenomenological reflections preclude the treatment of language as a mere object or a mere tool, for they take us back to the “speaking subject,” precisely that phenomenon precluded by the classical position. Beginning from the pure thought of the speaker or the presumed solitude of interlocutors leaves the question of meaning and communication untouched.

* * *

Part I, Chapter 2

What is the “Paradox of Expression”?

– § 1. –

An Eye for Resemblances: Expression, Perception, and Genius in Action

But the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius, since [to metaphorize well] implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars.

- Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1459a, 3-8³¹

It may seem strange to begin this section, which promises to clarify the paradox of expression, with a citation of Aristotle, especially since we would certainly have to label the Stagirite a “classical” theorist of language on the criterion discussed above. And yet, this passage has the distinct advantage of throwing together a number of key themes for understanding the paradox of expression. Not only is he crowning the person who can navigate a metaphorical landscape as someone possessing the highest form of speaking, he is also linking it directly to action, perception, and expressive competence, or better, showing that these are all sides of the same (three-sided) coin. Indeed, as Paul Ricoeur points out, he even transforms the noun into a verb (*RM*, 30). The metaphor is depicted as the height of speech acts insofar as it implies an “intuitive perception” or *recognition* of the similar in the dissimilar, or as one translation has it, “an eye for resemblances.” By invoking recognition, Aristotle shows us the

³¹ Cited by Paul Ricoeur in his important and nearly exhaustive account of metaphor. In particular, see: Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny (London: Routledge Classics, 2003), 227. Henceforth cited as *RM*. The translator or edition of the Aristotle passage, however, is not indicated.

way in which meaning is repetition, but an active repetition, or to recall Slatman's phrase, a *répétition génératrice*. Indeed, Aristotle seems to be suggesting that metaphorical acts are a sign of genius, a balance between repetition and creation, which is one of the framing structures of expression. This first approach then is not an interrogation of meaning, but an interrogation of action through which we can begin to sketch a question of what it might mean to be a *body subject to the weight of the ideal*.³²

So, even if we have already begun, it still seems that we are standing before the seemingly innocent question: *What is expression?* Let me state a provisional definition as a starting point:

Expression is action that responds to ideal weight.

Whether or not this initial statement seems radical will depend on how one hears "ideal." On the one hand, this formulation could appear at first to harmonize with a standard and conservative, resolutely "modern" response to the question, namely, that expression is the *making public of the inner*. The "ideal" would refer to our thoughts and expression would be the act of making those thoughts public. On such an interpretation, the classical theorist could certainly embrace this initial definition. On the other hand, we might understand the "ideal" as pointing towards expression conceived as a betrayal of the ideal, the *outing* of that which we would prefer to keep invisible, the placing out in the open of that which is properly, in all propriety, private. The action, here, shows the world the ideal influences we would prefer to keep secret. Indeed, is it not a conservative force that tells us, silently, that expression is not proper, that we should keep to ourselves, control ourselves?³³ In this second and related sense, symptoms express an inner or invisible condition, as when symptoms manifest the flu, but are not themselves the flu, or the tears manifest sadness, but tears are not themselves sadness. A malicious interlocutor guesses our secret, and red blood rushes to our face *betraying* our anger or embarrassment.

³² As I proceed, I sketch an initial theory of expression *as action* that should serve to orient the reader towards the break with classical theories mentioned above, while noting that a more patient study of action will follow in Part II, Chapter 1, and of metaphor in Part II, Chapter 3.

³³ In fact, in expression I am literally forcing myself on others, I am encroaching. Good manners tell me to control myself *and* keep to myself. But if this shows how emotions invade the experience of the others in my presence, then we have already moved beyond the classical picture. This notion of "encroachment," will occupy us at length in the reading of Merleau-Ponty.

Is there something to the distinction between ex-expression, as the classical theorist intends the word, and expression properly so-called?³⁴ If the reader simply reads our formulation of ideal weight as a strange, perhaps even unprofitable way of talking about the thoughts which precede or govern their translation into speech, or inversely, an awkward way of pointing to the invisible condition that linearly causes the symptoms, then they would look past the essential importance of the little word “responds” in our initial definition. Classical theories either do not provide an understanding of the role of response in expression, or reduce response to a pure passivity. The first position gives us too much control, the latter, not enough. And both assume that *that-to-which* one responds pre-exists the response. The paradox of expression throws this presupposition into question.

In a sense, our entire investigation could be captured in Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that “Every production of spirit is a response and an appeal, a co-production.”³⁵ In other words, ideal weight exists nowhere else but in the response. Every production of spirit, that is, every action that could have been otherwise, is both a response to the forces that lead to it, an appeal to the reshaped field that will only exist after the expression has come to pass, and a co-production, because that appeal is as much to the future as it is to others with whom we shape that future. The governing conviction of this study, then, will be that all expression is between pure repetition and pure creation, neither a purely outward action nor a purely passive reception — in the space of response, which is always between the past and the future, between the act and the material, between our best intentions and a world resilient to our plans, we dis-

³⁴ This distinction is implied by Bernard Waldenfels in the article that will occupy us at length below: Bernard Waldenfels, “The Paradox of Expression,” in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of Flesh*, ed. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 93. Henceforth cited as *PEx*. Also, Collingwood challenges the presuppositions of this position, which I will explore at length below. See in particular the final chapter of *PART* on the artist and the community.

³⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Résumés de cours. Collège de France - 1952-1960* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 166. Henceforth cited as *RC*.

A translation of this particular course is available in the English version of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Husserl aux limites de la phénoménologie,” in *Notes de cours sur L’origine de la géométrie de Husserl. Suivi de Recherches sur la phénoménologie de Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Renaud Barbaras (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998). Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Resumé of the Course: Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology,” in *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology: Including Texts by Edmund Husserl*, ed. Bettina Bergo and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 8. This course is henceforth cited as *HLP*.

cover that *almost nothing*, or the *not nothing* of the logic of expression that explodes into both an ontology and an ethics.

If these initial reflections suggest that the classical theorist is wrong to read our working definition as compatible with their own account of language, how ought we to read it? Enter Aristotle. In the above passage regarding metaphor, his transformation of the noun into the verb “to metaphorize” is essential.³⁶ The point that we want to stress here is that in speaking, the speaker’s body is a point of connection between the present situation and the ideal, the passage of the ideal into the real, as well as a weight in the intersubjective field of the sharing of meaning. Again, we see the “transition phenomenon” at work here, and the body is a “hinge” between sensible and active/productive being (*RC*, 163; *HLP*, 7). The transition, however, is not merely a determined process. There is a type of genius at work here, a *body* genius that is best characterized as recognition of the similar in the dissimilar. A transition is a movement, an operation, an open negotiation, not a linear causality, and so not bound to the rigid categories of the classical theories.

This type of action is the same as the notion of expressive reading we discussed above. Consider how the notion of a recognized similarity is working in Aristotle’s characterization of metaphor. If I “see” the similar in the dissimilar, if I have “an eye” for resemblances, then we might ask where “similarity” exists. Is it an objective feature of the universe? Would we be justified in enumerating a situation’s one hundred most salient features in order to compare it to other situations or to critique another person’s judgment of similarity? Today in the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* is no doubt similar to yesterday, but is it more similar to yesterday here or to today in a different library? Is there a “base level” of similarity offered by the fact that it is the “same” library, or do we see the attribution of similarity often break free of such geographical or material questions? But if similarity is not an objective property, is it merely a product of comparative discourse or the product of an act of juxtaposition? Does the person making the metaphor “see the similar in the dissimilar” precisely because she *makes* the dissimilar appear similar? We gave up the idea that expression *makes nothing*, that is, that expression is a mere accompaniment of thought pure in itself. Must we swing this far to the other side, to the suggestion that expression is a pure creation, that it makes *everything*?

The recognition that similarity is a phenomenon of decision, and not of objective description, should not lead us to reject Aristotle’s formulation, but rather to recognize in it the importance of the paradoxical structure of action and the role that creation has in *situated* expression. The

³⁶ Again, for an important discussion that we will return to below, see Ricœur at *RM*, 30, and our discussion below in Part I, Chapter 3 on metaphor.

point that Merleau-Ponty will stress is that our actions are *motivated*, not caused. The situation calls forth bodily decisions based upon my past, my habits, the others involved in the landscape and my intentions, which are clearly here but one factor of the overall situation. I no more make the similarity out of nothing than do I find it already there in the world. Similarity is a situation in which fields of perception and ideal structures *gear into* each other, it is a transition phenomenon from ideal configurations in potentiality to acts of *taking up* a situation *as* similar — a taking up which is both a creation and a repetition. Hence, this notion of navigation or the gearing into the ambiguous will occupy us below as we explore the meaning of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of expression.

We need to find a logic that allows us to say that the metaphor *both* responds to the similarity *and* makes it. Thus, a body subject to the weight of the ideal does not merely *respond* to an ideal realm that exists in itself, nor does it respond merely to the world that is in itself. The body subject to the weight of the ideal is the hinge, the transition, the always incomplete and always eclipsed act that gears into the world with the armature of a past it repeats, sustains, and reshapes. We can only see recognition as a pure creation if we fail to see that the act of recognition is a comparative act, a bridging between a current situation and past or ideal situation, the act of recognition expresses the connection through the rushing into the body of that to which the body is responding through its double response, a response to the ideal and a response to the concrete situation. The action is not a "comparison" of two ideal objects; it is the embodied *taking up* of the one in the other. The body genius recognizes the past in the present, and plays that past forward through an act that says nothing other than "I recognize you," or "I've been here before." The body *exscribes* its unity, its historicity, in every gesture subject to the weight of the past through which it inscribes its passing by in the weighty material of the world.

Collingwood and the Paradox of Expression

At first, he is conscious of having an emotion, but not conscious of what this emotion is. All he is conscious of is a perturbation or excitement, which he feels going on within him, but of whose nature he is ignorant. While in this state, all he can say about his emotion is 'I feel... I don't know what I feel.' From this helpless and oppressed condition he extricates himself by doing something which we call expressing himself.

- R.G. Collingwood (*P*Art, 109)

Avant l'expression, il n'y a rien qu'une fièvre vague et seule l'œuvre faite et comprise prouvera qu'on devait trouver là quelque chose plutôt que rien.

- Merleau-Ponty³⁷

At a first glance, R.G. Collingwood's 1938 *The Principles of Art* would appear through and through "classical." One needs simply to open this book to find such damning phrases as: a "work of art is not a real thing," but "an imaginary thing" (*P*Art, 130), or even more repeatedly, that the work of art exists only in the artist's "head" or "mind" (*P*Art, *passim*, see particularly 125-54). Moreover, beyond these specific formulations that reappear in his analyses, Collingwood is associated with British Idealism and Empiricism,³⁸ which certainly lends credence to the reading of Collingwood's aesthetics as an "Ideal Theory of Art."³⁹ In fact, we have already hinted that Merleau-Ponty himself tries to move beyond a phi-

³⁷ "Before expression, there is nothing but a vague fever, and only the work itself, completed and understood, will prove that there was *something* rather than *nothing* to be found there. *DC*, 32/69.

³⁸ For a nice discussion of this historical positioning, see: Richard Sclafani, "Wollheim on Collingwood," *Philosophy* 51, no. 197 (1976): 357-58.

³⁹ This phrase, as Aaron Ridley notes, does not appear in Collingwood's text. Aaron Ridley, *Collingwood* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 18. Henceforth cited as *C*. Also see: Aaron Ridley, "Not Ideal: Collingwood's Expression Theory," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, no. 3 (1997). For a nice discussion of Collingwood's historical position in relation to Idealism and Empiricism, see: Sclafani, "Wollheim on Collingwood," 357-58. For a more dialectical reading of Collingwood, see: Richard Murphy, "Collingwood and the Crisis of Western Civilisation" *British Idealist Studies* 4 (2008)..

osophy of consciousness, and consciousness, in relation to imagination, is arguably *the* key component of Collingwood's thought.

What, however, could be a better starting point for demonstrating the paradoxical logic of expression than showing how the very phenomenological disruptions I have mentioned forced a proponent of the classical model into an intriguing theory of art as "expression," and indeed leads him to adopt some of the paradoxical pivots and formulations that we will show below as central to Merleau-Ponty's own position?⁴⁰ Moreover, Collingwood's clear motivation in his *Principles* is toward an ethical invocation against what he calls the "corruption of consciousness," which is essentially a typically modern failure of expression and self-understanding that, according to Collingwood, paves the way for manipulation. As Aaron Ridley rightly reminds us, Collingwood's text appears in 1938 amidst the alarming success of fascism in Europe. The masses were being swept up by emotions that were muddled, lazily permitting their emotions to be given shape by demagogues, literally shirking their *responsibility as expressive thinkers* (C, 9). Collingwood's aesthetics acts as a clarion call to responsibility to ourselves and to the true nature of artistic expression, and one wonders if we have come any closer to understanding his call. Thus, as the very enactment of the paradox of expression, and as a call to responsibility as expressive beings, taking the time here to explore Collingwood's reflections on expression certainly aligns with the direction of this study. In the end, we will have to point to why Collingwood's approach fails for lack of a phenomenological move beyond his idealism. Nevertheless, we would do well to come to terms with his suggestion that "[a]rt is the community's medicine for the worst disease of mind, the corruption of consciousness" (*P*Art, 336).

(a) *Art, Falsely So-Called*

The first division of Collingwood's text is an attempt to circumscribe the domain of art "properly so-called" through the negative approach of eliminating the various instantiations of what he calls the "technical theory of art" (*P*Art, 17). This rubric acts for Collingwood in precisely the manner that our own naming of traditional approaches to language and expression as "classical" works in Merleau-Ponty. The technical theory of art includes a few, seemingly quite acceptable, com-

⁴⁰ There is no indication that Merleau-Ponty was aware of Collingwood's work. However, as is already shown by the epigraphs above, Merleau-Ponty's work bears some striking similarities, particularly in his work on Cézanne.

mon sense approaches about the nature of art, and it allows the inclusion of accounts that are often positioned as diametrically opposed. The idea is, in its most general form, that art is a peculiar or highly refined type of craft, that is, a means for some type of end. For instance, perhaps the end is to arouse an emotion in an audience, to entertain them, or perhaps to teach them something. On such an account, art's end is some 'extra'- or non-artistic goal, and art's appropriateness or success is to be judged against this non-internal goal.⁴¹ In other words, art is *craft*. Even if beautiful or highly refined, it is nonetheless a technical process towards achieving an externally defined goal.

In order to begin to evaluate technical theories, Collingwood tries to break apart some of its constitutive claims. I will not go into all the details here, or the important historical and etymological descriptions that Collingwood traces from the Greek term *techné*,⁴² but it is worth raising some of his negative positioning. Perhaps the most important presupposition held by technical theories, evident in our very description above, is that art follows the same means/end apparatus as what we call craft. According to the technical theory, the "poem is means to the production of a certain state of mind in the audience" (*P Art*, 20), just as the table is the production of a certain use-object in the house of the client. Collingwood suggests that in fact the production of a work of art, although it may certainly include many of the characteristics of technical production, cannot be *reduced* to them. In response to the means/end distinction, the table in fact leaves behind the means that were used in its production, while the production process of the work of art continues to be essential to the artwork. The short, groping brushstrokes employed by Cézanne are not inessential to the value of the work of art — they are part of its expression. If the end is defined as a goal that is clear and distinct before the artist even lifts her paintbrush, then any means employed could, in principle, be replaced without changing the artwork. This is clearly, claims Collingwood, not the case in art — that Cézanne expresses through paint is an essential aspect to both how *and* what he expresses. For Collingwood, there certainly *may* be a means/end relationship in the production of an artwork, but this is not *necessarily the case*, and thus we need to look

⁴¹ Given one of the avenues we will explore below, it is interesting to note that this is very similar to Rorty's reading of Davidson's theory of metaphors. See Part I, chapter 3 below for more.

⁴² I will not go into all the details here, or the important historical and etymological descriptions that Collingwood traces from Greek terms such as *technê*. See, particularly, *P Art*, 17-20. For an interesting reading of this aspect, see: Stanley H. Rosen, "Collingwood and Greek Aesthetics," *Phronesis* 4, no. 2 (1959). Also, see: Christopher Janaway, "Arts and Crafts in Plato and Collingwood," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 50, no. 1 (1990).

beyond the technical theory to find what it is that makes a created object “art.”

This last point leads into a second quality of the technical theory, namely that the technical theory conceives of there being a obvious distinction between the planning and the execution of the artwork, just as the craftsman plans the dimensions and support structures of the table, so too the artist plans his work before executing it (*P Art*, 21). This again points to the underlying presupposition that there is some idea or goal that is complete in advance, and that art joins the movement of craft in aiming to execute this plan by encoding this idea or emotion into conventional expression. And yet, are we to say that the sculptor who, simply playing with some clay, “found the clay under his fingers turning into a little dancing man,” has not produced a work of art (*P Art*, 22)? The work of art can come to be in the very moment of creation, and so although surely there is planning involved in many works of art, we again have reason to reject the claim that planning in advance is *essential* to a work of art.

A third aspect of the technical understanding of art assumes that there must be a “raw materials/end product” distinction at work in art the way it is at work in the production of craft (*P Art*, 23). In craft, I collect some raw materials, and I impose some form on them to turn them into the final product. Collingwood asks: Is it really the case that in producing a poem I am making something with ink, paper, and muscle movements? In fact, the poem, for Collingwood, is complete in the head of the poet, and he makes the poem out of words, not out of “raw materials.” Words themselves cannot be raw materials because they are never before us in the manner that raw materials are. The poet does not make a pile of words he wants to use and then paste them onto the page in a poetic form.⁴³ Moreover, Collingwood quite quickly debunks the idea that the raw materials in art are “emotions” that are turned into the artwork in anything like the way raw materials are turned into objects in craft. There is an emotion, suggests Collingwood, that is “converted” into the expression, but this cannot be analogous to craft unless the vague “desire to pay the rent” is what the blacksmith used to *make* the horseshoe (*P Art*, 23). I build the poem out of language in general, in relation to all that could be said and the urgency I *feel* in trying to say something. I don’t build a house out of lumber in general, but out of this pile of lumber I have ordered.

It would be false, as Ridley notes, to go from Collingwood’s conclusion that some art is not reducible to technical production to the outlandish claim that any *technical* aspects of an “art object” immediately deflates its status to that of a mere craft. This shift is present in Peter Kivy’s criticism of Collingwood when he maintains that Collingwood

⁴³ Of course, this could be a great Oulipo strategy.

rejects any planning from the realm of art, and therefore ends up with a bizarre focus on “expression.”⁴⁴ Artistic technique and training are certainly essential to the artist, and Collingwood himself decries any “sentimental notion that works of art can be produced by anyone, however little trouble he has taken to learn his job, provided his heart is in the right place” (*PArt*, 26). The point, however, remains. The technical skill of the crafts person is measured against the products of his or her labor, barring some lacunae in his or her training or some defect in his or her materials, the skill set of the craftsman is more or less a guarantee of leading to a well-crafted object. However, no matter the breadth or depth of her training, the artist is never *guaranteed* to succeed in her expression, and if she puts her training to the purposes of craft, to *making* rather than *creating* (*PArt*, 128), then an artistic training has been turned away from art properly so-called. For Collingwood, as Ridley again rightly emphasizes, the categories of art falsely and art properly so-called may be populated with many of the same objects, and Collingwood would surely agree with Kivy that for most works of art their genesis is a “mixed bag.”⁴⁵ Surely artistic technique is essential in great works of art, but Collingwood’s point is that something else makes up the nature of art (*C*, 14), something beyond merely technical perfection. It is not a question of dividing mutually exclusive sets of things, but rather of recognizing that something “crafty” may also have an “aspect” of art, and vice versa, but that in neither direction is this a necessary property (*C*, 15). The point for Collingwood is merely that the technical theory of art fails to understand the “art-aspect” of artworks, even if it adequately explains some of the craft-aspects of objects properly called artworks.

(b) Phenomenological Insights in an Idealist Framework

Still without a positive theory of art on the table of what this essential characteristic of art might be, it is nonetheless pertinent here to pause and discuss the idealist aspects already emerging above at the heart of Collingwood’s philosophical position. As we saw in the distinction be-

⁴⁴ Peter Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 106-08. Although this section is certainly a defense of Collingwood from critics such as Kivy, this latter does find one claim, that “every utterance and every gesture that each one of us makes is a work of art,” at least “intriguing” enough to explore its application in questions of expression in performance. See: Peter Kivy, *The Art of Repetition: Essays in the Philosophy of Music* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 144-48.

⁴⁵ Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts*, 107.

tween the raw materials/end product structure, Collingwood couldn't be clearer in saying that "[t]he poem is complete in the artist's mind" — what are we to make of such a claim when we have a much less classical theory in view with Merleau-Ponty?⁴⁶

According to Ridley, many idealist-sounding claims in *The Principles of Art* are in fact highly strained attempts to say something that becomes lost amidst Collingwood's philosophical baggage (C, 17). The quite natural conclusion to be drawn from his suggestion that there is something other than technical production in the case of proper artworks *and* his many claims that the artwork exists somehow in the head or mind of the artist is that, for Collingwood, the words on the page, the sculpture in stone, the paint on the canvas must all be merely "secondary and inessential versions of the real things, generously but dispensably made available by the artist to an audience" (C, 17). Collingwood himself surely seems to say as much.

Ridley offers us reasons for reading Collingwood more charitably. First, one should not assume that the materials are *never* important to the artwork just because Collingwood says that *sometimes* art happens without raw materials (but with language as a whole, for instance). His own insistence on "technique" shows something of a manipulation of materials (C, 18). Collingwood's insists:

... the music, the work of art, is not the collection of noises, it is the tune in the composer's head. The noises made by the performers, and heard by the audience, are not the music at all; they are only means by which the audience, if they listen intelligently ... can *reconstruct* for themselves the imaginary tune that existed *in the composer's head*. (*P*Art, 139, emphasis added)

Such a statement, admits Ridley, seems just about as conclusive of a statement of the implausible "idealist theory of art" that one could imagine. This, as Ridley notes, would be to have a theory of art that failed to recognize the impact of different mediums of expression on the expression itself and the essential aspects of the techniques that continue to make the art interesting (i.e., Cézanne's groping). How an artist "*handles*" the medium is as important as the medium and the subject being expressed (C, 19). An ideal theory of art, in the end, seems to reduce to a theory about

⁴⁶ The "idealist" reading of Collingwood is perhaps best characterized by Richard Wollheim's attack on the "Croce-Collingwood Theory." See, in particular: Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 36-37. For a response along the lines of Ridley and the one to be offered here, see: Sclafani, "Wollheim on Collingwood."

ideas and not a theory about art *at all*, such a theory of art seems implausible at best, bizarre at worst (C, 20).

In fact, what saves Collingwood from a naive idealist position of art being solely in the artist's head is his very idealism. As an idealist, *everything* we perceive is "idea," existence and idea are the same thing. The point is not so much that everything is ideal, and so Collingwood needs to be re-read after having replaced the offending words to better fit a material ontology; the point, according to Ridley, is to follow a more phenomenological (he doesn't use that word) rethinking of Collingwood's point. For Collingwood, the distinction (borne out by the inset passage just above) is between the "brute series of noises" and "the piece of music heard by a person who understands those noises *as music*" (C, 22).⁴⁷ The role of imagination in perception allows Collingwood to say that "[t]he music that he actually *enjoys as* a work of art is thus never sensuously or 'actually' heard at all [...] But it is not imagined sound" (*P*Art, 151, emphasis added). The work of consciousness is to raise the merely sensuous givens (which are ideal as well) to the level of meaningful objects, to *understand* it, or to have it as an imaginative object in mind. To say that the music is in the head of the artist, or the painting in the head of the painter means that seeing something *as music* or painting involves imagination, the work of art exists *in itself* only as a merely physical object.

Now it would certainly be a stretch to say that Collingwood is a phenomenologist, or to extend this reading to his entire corpus, but it seems to be plausible here in his theory of art that the notion of understanding is somewhat analogous to a notion of *intentionality*. His suggestion is that when we hear a bunch of noises *as music*, there is imagination at work, for otherwise they would remain just these brute noises. But the upshot is that out there, in the real world, there is no music in this sense, there are only brute noises, black marks on a page, or splotches of color on a canvas. What is intriguing for us, as we will explore below, is the importance of the properly situated and trained body for expression, and the sort of preparation required for the audience to "listen intelligently."⁴⁸ So, to be clear, Collingwood's emphasis that the music or artwork exists in the mind of the artist is not a question of it existing prior to the artistic process as a pure idea, and not a question of it

⁴⁷ For an additional discussion that has phenomenological implications, although again merely implicit ones, see: David W. Black, "Collingwood on Corrupt Consciousness," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 40, no. 4 (1982). As Black explains, "Raw sensation is ungraspable, since it lacks formal expressiveness" (396-97).

⁴⁸ As we will see, "Authors who try to produce a fool-proof text are choosing fools as their collaborators" (*P*Art, 321). This will have important consequences of the notion of shared responsibility as we proceed below.

existing independently of its material support as a pure ideal object in itself. The claim is rather that the artwork exists as a function of its being seen *as* an artwork, as a unity or a signification, rather than as a group of punctual sense data, confused noises, or splashes of color. For Collingwood, the invocation of the imagination or the imaginative existence of the artwork is not a naive idealism, it is the best he can do to capture the phenomenological point of intentionality given his unremitting commitment to idealist ontology.

As Ridley's demonstrates, this notion of understanding, that is, intentionality or seeing *as*, is not a passive phenomenon. When we listen to a speech, the speech is not a mere grouping of noises and visual gestures, the speech "is a collection of ... thoughts related to those noises in such a way that a person who not only hears but thinks as well becomes able to think those thoughts for himself ... [It is] something we have to reconstruct in our own minds" (*P Art*, 140-41). This is a very subtle way of putting some flesh to the phrase "its all Greek to me." If I am in the presence of expressions in a language or medium that I cannot understand, then I do not understand them as the expressions that they are. When I do understand the speaker, I have something "in my head" that I have "reconstructed," which for Collingwood seems to mean just "I hear these words *as* meaningful," they are not mere noises, they *say* something to me. The more intelligently I can listen, the more they say, and the closer I can get to fully understanding, and this is for Collingwood an activity of the "imaginative experience of total activity" (*P Art*, 148). For Collingwood, when the listener gears into the expression, there is a reproduction of the imaginative experience of the artist, which specifically does not mean that I get her idea, which pre-existed the expression, in my head. This requires the sensuous level that is raised or converted into the imaginative experience; the imaginative experience "is not generated out of nothing" (*P Art*, 306). Thus, we are left with the paradoxical claim that the artwork exists in the mind of the artist *and* that the material expression is *essential* to the artwork. But let me turn to his more positive comments on art properly so-called before trying to fully flesh out this account of expression and the implications it has for communication. As we will see, Collingwood's descriptions are not as fortuitous as one would like, for the ideas of "reconstruction," "reproduction," or "conversion" threaten to mask the fact that he is aiming beyond a "classical" theory expression.

(c) *Art Properly So-Called: Expression and its Paradoxes*

So leaving behind any theory of art that reduces it to the technical production of some effect, such as the arousal of a particular emotion, the representation of a particular reality, the amusement or edification of the audience, Collingwood reminds us that all of these could have a role in an artwork, but that none of them could reach the bottom of what is essential of art. According to Collingwood, art properly so-called is "expression." For Collingwood, the artist begins from a sort of perturbation that is vague and indeterminate, an "I feel... I don't know what I feel" (*PART*, 109), and the artist's motivation is thus to "get this clear" (*PART*, 114). From this initial place of oppression and confusion, the artist sets about expressing herself, and this expression will be a conversion of this "vague fever," to recall Merleau-Ponty's similar characterization, to a clear self-understanding of what that emotion is. And here is the paradox: the emotion *becomes* what it is through its expression. As Ridley puts it, echoing the philosopher's "absurd effort" mentioned by Merleau-Ponty (*VI*, 164/125), "[e]xpression, then, is the activity of getting clear about one's own experience, an activity which transforms the experience as it clarifies it" (*C*, 27). The vague sense of perturbation is not an idea fully formed and guiding the expression, nor does the expression equal the simple reproduction or encoding of this vague sense. "Until a man has expressed his emotion," observes Collingwood, "he does not yet know what emotion it is" (*PART*, 111). Such a point is strikingly familiar to the manner in which Merleau-Ponty describes the phenomenological disruptions we began to explore above, that "thought tends toward expression as its completion" (*PhP*, 216/206) and that "my spoken words surprise me myself and teach me my own thought" (*OPL*, 144/88). The point to take here is that expression is a work of self-clarification of one's vague emotional impulses or one's thoughts, and yet is not a mere linear translation of those impulses or sensations, but a transformation and thus a creation of them.

Collingwood, continuing his style of debunking errors along the way, demonstrates that expression is different in kind both from the betrayal of emotions and from the description of emotions. In the betrayal of an emotion, my ears turning red in embarrassment, there may in fact be nothing of a self-awareness of the emotion, and it is a wholly undirected activity. The betrayal of an emotion does not help the person become clearer on his or her own emotions in the moment of activity. With the case of description, Collingwood makes the very apt observation that, if description or naming the emotion were enough, then we would have no poetry or literary art at all. When I name or describe something, I give it a

category; I say that this thing is of this type. However, when I express, I individualize the emotion, I turn it into this emotion expressed in this medium. The activity of expression is about “getting this [emotion] clear,” not learning something about this type of emotion.

The essential point for understanding the implications this has for communication is the different relationships between the artist and the audience. In art falsely so-called, the supposed artist and the audience stand in relation to the work of art in the manner of the doctor and the patient to the drug. The doctor does not suffer; he supplies the drug as a means for the goal of relieving the suffering of the patient. If the “condition” is the need for an emotional outlet, the artist provides a sad or an exuberant set of symbols or archetypes and the patient takes in the drugs and sleeps soundly through the night. If art properly so-called, however, is about clarification *to one’s self*, then the true artist is not a technician evaluating and distributing medications, she suffers and has no means of relief other than expressing — hence the urgency of expression. In doing so, the artist’s concern is not about raising or giving any particular idea or emotion to the audience, nor to herself. The artist is attempting to express, to bring to clarity, the emotion, idea, or situation that is calling to her powers as an artist. The true artist is no “purveyor of sobstuff” (*P Art*, 31), no doctor administering emotion-provoking drugs — nothing could be farther from the proper activity of art, which is about a responsible consciousness getting clear on its own content and thus transforming the vague impetus or urgency felt towards expression into clear expressions. The “address” of the expression is not to any particular audience: it is addressed “primarily to the speaker himself, and secondarily to any one who can understand” (*P Art*, 111). The urgency of expression is captured in the expression, and thus it addresses itself to an audience that does not yet know it has this need to express: “If a work is successful,” observes Merleau-Ponty, “it has the strange power of being self-teaching” (*DC*, 33/70).

Since the expression is not “replaceable” by another expression, since it individualizes the emotion as *this* expression, then there is no room for thinking of the expression as pre-existing its expression in this medium. There is unmistakably a paradoxical logic of expression at work here, the expression expresses something that did not pre-exist its expression and, retroactively, determines what it was before its expression. Only the expression itself, as Merleau-Ponty argues, “will prove that there was *something* rather than *nothing* to be found there” (*DC*, 32/69). We might worry, quite legitimately, that such an account of expression goes too far in the opposite direction from the ones Collingwood rejects. It seems that on such an account that there is no necessary reference to “truth.” If the vague impulse to expression is not, in any real sense, the *what* of the

completed expression, is “successful” expression a mere illusion? Collingwood certainly says that the expression is the “lightening of emotions,” that the oppressed feeling has “vanished” (*PArt*, 110). But as Wittgenstein so often pointed out, the feeling that I have found the right word or the right rule to follow does not itself *make* it the case.

The objection seems plausible only if we accept that the question of success is always a question of truth.⁴⁹ In fact, we have already waded into a paradoxical realm, and it would be thus strange to dismiss our findings as wrong since they imply paradoxes. I would, however, point with Ridley to the activity of expression and how there is a felt sense of completion upon finding the right expression. We have all had the experience of not being able to find a word, the experience of something on the tip-of-the-tongue. This, suggest Ridley, is just what is happening when the artist is engaged in a certain “directed process” — towards some type of equilibrium that cannot be “foreseen and preconceived” (*PArt*, 111). The idea of successful expression cannot be understood on the model in which the product is measured against the pre-existing plan, but rather an activity that is a sort of directed groping that responds to an urgency in the field of expression. The artist stands before the work and says “No, that’s not quite right ... try again ... no ... Yes! *That’s* what I was after” (C, 33), and some notion of success is implied when the artist says, “this line won’t do” (*PArt*, 283). In this sense, Collingwood is very much caught up in the type of language games that Wittgenstein emphasizes as undergirding all speech acts:

How do I find the ‘right’ word? How do I choose among words? Without doubt it is sometimes as if I were comparing them by fine differences of smell: *That* is too, *that* is too, —*this* is the right one.—But I do not always have to make judgments, give explanations; often I might only say: “It simply isn’t right yet”. I am dissatisfied, I go on looking. At last a word comes: ‘*That’s* it!’ *Sometimes* I can say why. This is simply what searching, this is what finding, is like here.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ For Collingwood’s explicit discussion of truth, see *PArt*, 286-99. In this section, Collingwood reminds us that art is indeed a pursuit of truth, but that “the truth it pursues is not a truth of relation, it is a truth of individual fact ... Art is knowledge; knowledge of the individual,” 288-89. More importantly, as I will stress below, truth is a question of responsibility in successful communication.

⁵⁰ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, 218. For an additional account of the relation between Collingwood and Wittgenstein (and Ryle), see: Sclafani, “Wollheim on Collingwood,” 357ff.

From this we can see both the importance of technique, and why Collingwood also seems to agree with Aristotle's claim that expression can't be taught: "Expression is an activity for which there can be no technique" (*PArt*, 111). The artist prepares for the moment of expression by training, but this training cannot teach that genius-quality that will be called for, cannot guarantee the necessary creativity that the artist will need in order to express. As Merleau-Ponty says, there is a "genius for ambiguity" that captures our expressive and situated nature.⁵¹ For now, let us take seriously this directed activity that is nonetheless not directed in the manner of the classical model of externalization, but is rather the creative activity of expression. "There is no question," insists Collingwood, "of 'externalizing' an inward experience which is complete in itself and by itself" (*PArt*, 304). Given that the artist is in the quest of self-clarification, the audience too needs to be properly prepared in order to share in this production, to be able to gear into the artwork *as* an expression. This notion of communication in Collingwood is both essential to understanding expression and to determining its relation to the corruption of consciousness.

(d) *Hints Toward Responsibility and an Expressive Anthropology*

In order to establish his claim that art proper is both expression and imagination, Collingwood turns to a long reflection on language. This discussion in a sense repeats the attack on technical theories of art and harmonizes with the suggestions we already began to make above. For Collingwood, language proper is the expression of emotions or thoughts, and "[s]ymbolism or intellectualized language thus presupposes" language proper (*PArt*, 226). His point is that to consider language as first and foremost symbolic is to adopt the prevailing view that natural or "living" languages ought to be cleaned up in favor of securing a scientific or "philosophical language" that would be free of any ambiguities and emotional charges (*PArt*, 226-27). In other words, Collingwood too takes up the fight against the algorithmic approach to language that we mentioned with Merleau-Ponty above. Moreover, like for Merleau-Ponty, the acquisition of language in childhood demonstrates for Collingwood the

⁵¹ This term "genius" is not invoked to connect to any notion of the "cult of the artist as genius" (*PArt*, 312), but rather to point to the way that expressive activity is a creative navigation of a highly complex web of real and ideal influences, a "finding/creating" of an equilibrium for which, to follow Wittgenstein, I can only *sometimes* give an explanation. We also should note that the idea here of the preparation for the moment of expression is central to understanding a second layer of responsibility, but we will have more to say about this below.

fundamental nature of language: the expression of emotions or thought. After successful expression, the products of language can be “used” for other means: arguing, convincing, etc. When the products of expression used in such a way are taken as the *essence* of language, then we have a “technical theory of language,” not a theory of language proper. This would be any theory of language that sees language as an instrument for the use of consciousness, a mere accompaniment of thought. In language proper, Collingwood argues that the speaker gains a certain consciousness of herself. Remember, for Collingwood this is a work of imagination and so happens “in the head” of the speaker, since meaning is something that cannot exist *in* the world of punctual sense data. The expression is not an addition made to a thought complete in the head of the speaker, but rather “the two are inseparably united, so that the idea is had as an idea only insofar as it is expressed” (*P Art*, 249). In other words, the speaker “is his own first hearer. As hearing himself speak, he is conscious of himself as the possessor of the idea which he hears himself expressing” (*P Art*, 249).

It should now be clear why Collingwood moves from saying “art is expression” and “art is imagination” to saying that “art is language” (*P Art*, 273). In fact, at this point Collingwood’s understanding of language is as broad as possible to include gestures, facial expressions, and any other forms of expression such as painting or poetry. Even scientific uses of language require some basis of emotional charge; otherwise the scientific discourse would in fact be no discourse at all. Expression may be minimized in approaches that “use” language for technical purposes, that is, the expression may be closer to a pure repetition, but it can never reach pure repetition. There is not an artistic discourse of emotions and a scientific discourse of facts, there is always a series of expressions somewhere on the scale between the two.⁵²

The essential question, however, is to ask: how does such a theory of expression as self-clarification have any room for communication? The technical theory of language has no problem accounting for communication: the listener simply reconstructs the ideas for herself based upon the conventional signs into which the speaker has translated her original thoughts. Moreover, this idea of communication seems required for Collingwood’s use of figures like the “reconstruction” of the ideas originally had by the artist (*P Art*, 251). However, despite these unhappy formulations, his point remains: the self-clarification structure of expression itself is what, paradoxically, makes communication possible. In expression, as self-clarification, there is already a speaker-hearer relation, and this is what makes sense of the seemingly paradoxical set-up that the

⁵² See in particular, *P Art*, 276, where Collingwood discusses the “use” of the “by-products” of expression.

speaker is expressing something that she somehow must pre-possess, and the speaker is learning something that she must somehow receive from the expression. Speech is thus “addressed,” but the address is in a sense open. The speaker speaks to herself as much as to anyone else, and in the physical words she comes to know her ideal thoughts. Thus, these physical words can also be the basis for someone else to come to an understanding of the emotions or expressions they clarify. This “imaginative reconstruction” of the “total activity” of the expresser is thus not a scientific quest to reconstruct the meaning out of a set of conventional signs, but rather a quest to reconstruct the whole situation of the expression and thus to *understand* in the sense of being able to treat the words as *our own expression* (*PArt*, 250). As Collingwood says, citing Coleridge: “we know a man for a poet by the fact that he makes us poets” (*PArt*, 118). Such an “understanding” is never perfect, because the artist’s situation necessarily outruns any description or reconstruction. Communication does not just require a shared set of dictionary definitions, but rather that the hearer also have an experience of the world and emotions *similar enough* to the speaker to be able to understand the expressive context.

“We can never absolutely know,” admits Collingwood, “that the imaginative experience we obtain from a work of art is identical with that of the artist,” although he insists that our conviction can become “progressively stronger” (*PArt*, 309). And this is precisely the case in language generally. As the conversation progresses, we are more and more led to believe that we understand each other, and the more we converse the more we shape our shared linguistic interaction. Collingwood embraces this fact, suggesting, “partial and imperfect understanding is not the same thing as a complete failure to understand” (*PArt*, 309). In other words, understanding the other is an open and constant task that is the responsibility of all those who speak. The listener must, therefore, be able not only to hear the words, but also to understand the urgency to which they respond, and the artistry in art is not only self-clarification, but of conveying also the urgency to which this self-clarification responds for anyone who has ears to hear. Of course, the artist also gives us ears that we could not have fashioned ourselves. Hence the paradox of expression.

As a result of this notion of the “address” of expression as primarily to the self, but ultimately to anyone who has the ears to hear, Collingwood takes this theory of expression to be an attack on “Individualism”:

Individualism conceives a man as if he were God, a self-contained and self-sufficient creative power [...]. But a man, in his art as in everything else, is a finite being. Everything that he does is done in relation to others like himself. As artist, he is a speaker; [...] he speaks the tongue in which he was born. The musician did not invent

his scale or his instruments; even if he invents a new scale or a new instrument he is only modifying what he has learnt from others. The painter did not invent the idea of painting pictures or the pigments and brushes with which he paints them. [...] They become poets or painters or musicians not by some process of development from within, as they grow beards; but by living in a society where these languages are current. Like other speakers, they speak to those who understand. (*PArt*, 316-17)

Every expression, then, must be between a pure creation and a pure repetition. Expression happens in dialogue with the structures and fields in which the artist is expressing, and this analysis of expression generalizes to all of these “languages.”

The reading of Collingwood offered by Aaron Ridley, which we followed closely in the previous sections, does not linger over this generalization to language. In fact, Ridley attempts to water-down the generalization of Collingwood’s point, and I believe it is important to sketch a defense of Collingwood here. Ridley argues that although Collingwood is right to stress, “art is continuous with the rest of life, and not sharply cut off from it,” he nonetheless “overstates his case” (C, 39). Citing Collingwood’s claim that, “[e]very utterance and every gesture that each one of us makes is a work of art” (*PArt*, 285), Ridley suggests that since many things seem to be much more profitably seen as craft, or at least as mere “uses” of once meaningful by-products of expressions, that Collingwood has forgotten his own claims that artworks can have craft aspects. Thus, argues Ridley, we should allow Collingwood only enough rope such that his invocations of responsibility reach the corruption of consciousness in clear and socially important artworks, and not enough rope to hang himself on the overstated claim that all gestures are works of art. “His case, properly stated,” argues Ridley, “is only that speaking and gesturing *can* be art, not that they must be” (C, 40).

Although his reading is otherwise infallible on Collingwood, on this essential point Ridley comes up short. To take language in general, Collingwood clearly states that there is always, even when it is being “used” more on the side of craft, an emotional charge to the expression. Collingwood’s claim is not that there can be words and gestures that *may* have a bit of art as expression mixed in, his point is that *if they are language*, then there must be some aspect that is *expressive*. In fact, Ridley’s own criticism is self-defeating when he says, “in the run of everyday practical life, [speaking and gesturing] may be more appropriately seen as craft than as art” (C, 39). Collingwood could certainly agree to this, and yet not give up his strong claim above, which his own thoughts on the art-aspects of craft can certainly accommodate.

Beyond the falsity of the claim that, on Collingwood's account, speaking and gesturing can ever be fully seen as merely uses and not expressions, Ridley's watering down attempt is even more suspect with respect to Collingwood's claims regarding the corruption of consciousness. As David Black suggests, the corruption of consciousness is intimately linked with Collingwood's understanding of imagination.⁵³ A corrupt consciousness is unaware of itself; it does not engage its true nature, which is *to be expressive*. To avoid the corruption of consciousness, we must not shirk the task of clarifying our emotions and thoughts through the hard work of expression by merely using the available ready-made expressions we find lying around in our linguistic community. When Collingwood says that every gesture and utterance is a work of art, he is expressing the open and infinite call to us to be responsible speakers that is imposed *because* there is no utterance or gesture that is a mere repetition. If the corruption of consciousness were merely a problem for me as I walk into the art gallery or curl up with my favorite Proust novel, then there is no urgency to the ethics that Collingwood is after. That is, ethics and responsibility, on Ridley's reading, would remain isolated to those who speak publicly or create works of art. This completely overlooks that for Collingwood, the audience's task is as urgent and onerous as the artist's, and our responsibility is *as a community* towards a self-understanding. The idea that each of us, in every gesture and every utterance, is not somehow perpetuating the failures of our community to express is tantamount to closing the book on all that Collingwood has argued for. This was clearly not Ridley's intention, but we need a theory of expression that does not artificially separate some acts as art and some as merely going about one's business. If Collingwood is correct – that expression is public and is communal – then we must reject Ridley's attempt to scale back the depth of Collingwood's ethical call to responsibility. The corruption of consciousness is the evil, and the artist's responsibility may be "prophetic," but it falls to all of us as expressive beings to work towards *understanding* as a community. The urgency of this call cannot be explained away as some overzealous formulations on the final pages of *Principles of Art* — it permeates Collingwood's entire text.

I will attempt to give some more flesh to Collingwood's claim that "[e]very utterance and every gesture that each one of us makes is a work of art" (*P Art*, 285) in the section on metaphor and meaning below, and as we proceed with Merleau-Ponty. If the worry is that making all gestures artworks and thus as essentially implicated in an ethical responsibility against the corruption of consciousness would be simply too hard of an ethics to promote, then Ridley has misunderstood the role that ethics

⁵³ Black, "Collingwood on Corrupt Consciousness," 395-96.

plays for Collingwood's theory of expression. Nevertheless, there are other more legitimate worries about Collingwood's formulations of reconstruction, of conversion between impressions and ideas, and the lack of an account of embodiment in expression. These, it seems to me, leave Collingwood with an unexamined step in his theory, between the reality of what expression is to the normative claim that the responsibility for expression ought not to be shirked. Indeed, expressing with a corrupt consciousness is still expression, as we just saw in rejecting Ridley's suggestion that we can see a layer of non-expressive activities that watered down the very urgency of the normative claim. The paradoxical structure of expression does, I will argue, provide a pathway to thinking ethically about our situation, the consequences and the "by-products" we produce, and the violence we preserve and play forward. Getting clear on precisely such an understanding of expression is the task to be undertaken in our reading of Merleau-Ponty below.

– § 3. –

The Paradoxes of Expression in Merleau-Ponty

The beginning is the pure and, so to speak, still mute experience, which it is now the issue to bring to the pure expression of its own sense.

– Husserl⁵⁴

Il s'agit, dans l'expression, de réorganiser les choses-dites, de les affecter d'un nouvel indice de courbure, de les plier à un certain relief du sens. Il y avait ce qui se comprend et se dit de soi-même [... et] il y a ce qui est à dire, et qui n'est encore qu'une inquiétude précise dans le monde des choses-dites.

– Merleau-Ponty⁵⁵

Above I suggested a working definition of the paradox of expression as “action responding to ideal weight,” and I have just shown how a phenomenological attentiveness to the structures of expression leads Collingwood to a much more subtle account than his philosophical baggage would seem to permit. Moreover, in our defense of Collingwood’s claim that every gesture is a work of art, we see the urgency of the link between ethics and aesthetics emerging directly from the generalization of the logic of expression to all action. In this final section, I turn back to Merleau-Ponty. The goal here is to gain a preliminary understanding of the paradoxical logic of expression, and to this end we can follow Bernard Waldenfels in outlining the operative concepts of expression as we find them emerging in Merleau-Ponty. This is, however, only the first step towards the ontological situation that the paradox of expression describes. The body, for instance, is not here discussed by Waldenfels, nor is an attempt made to provide a more robust logical framework for the paradox of expression. As such, it seems that Waldenfels does us the service of providing a glimpse at the complex structures that must be accounted for by such an ontology and logic, which we will begin to provide in the

⁵⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), 39.

⁵⁵ “Expression is a matter of reorganizing things-said, affecting them with a new index of curvature, and bending them to a certain enhancement of meaning. There is that which is of itself comprehensible and sayable ... [and] there is that which is *to be said*, and which is as yet no more than a precise uneasiness in the world of things-said.” *Préface*, 34-35/19, emphasis added.

extended reading of Merleau-Ponty in Part III. Nevertheless, we will see that even this incomplete account already recognizes the importance of response and responsibility.

(a) *The Operative Concepts of Expression*

In “The Paradox of Expression,” Bernard Waldenfels develops an account of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of expression as a progressively deepening through what he calls a “radical” repetition (*PEx*, 94). His reading emerges from the passage already cited, which is worth repeating here:

The study of perception could only teach us a ‘bad ambiguity,’ a mixture of finitude and universality, of interiority and exteriority. But there is a ‘good ambiguity’ in the phenomenon of expression, a spontaneity which accomplishes what appeared to be impossible when we observed only the separate elements, a spontaneity which gathers together the plurality of monads, the past and the present, nature and culture into a single whole. (*Inédit*, 48/11)

For the moment, I will leave aside these broader metaphysical and ethical implications and focus on the paradoxical aspect of the event of expression and the aporetic structures that Waldenfels nicely circumscribes.

As Waldenfels notes, Merleau-Ponty often cites the following phrase from Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations*: “The beginning is the pure and, so to speak, still mute experience, which now it is the issue to bring to the pure expression of its own sense.”⁵⁶ Husserl is seeking the proper starting point for psychology, characterized as pure experience, and in particular a pure experience that is mute. Yet if this experience is condemned to being mute, then psychology could only ever speak *about* it; if, on the other hand, it were already speaking, then there is no need to say anything, for then experience would simply speak itself. Hence a paradox. What is mute experience such that it might allow itself to come to expression without either always *escaping* that expression, whose very attempt is inevitably a violation of this experience’s purity, or always already *being* that expression and hence having no need of “us” to bring it to anything?

In fact, Merleau-Ponty shifts the citation almost imperceptibly by eliding the carefully conservative Husserlian “so to speak” (*PEx*, 90). For Husserl, there is no truly mute experience; there is only a mute experience,

⁵⁶ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 39.

so to speak. Dropping this clause, which Merleau-Ponty always does, is to importantly change the sense of Husserl's claim. For Husserl, the things themselves are only mute, *so to speak*, and so phenomenology is about letting them speak – something they do on their own, *so to speak*. One must bracket the noise of the natural attitude so that we can listen to the things themselves. This is possible with a pure language that does not violate them, that allows their being to speak through our pure descriptions. Husserl's intentions, then, are still wholly classical in *Cartesian Meditations*.⁵⁷ For Merleau-Ponty, the continued emphasis on expression, his adoption of Heideggerian formulations of language "having us," *so to speak*, and his late reflections on the relation between *Logos* and Nature of the flesh, demonstrate that his relationship to silence is much different. Merleau-Ponty is looking for a "third way" (*PEx*, 90) between a purely mute experience and a purely detached expression, and thus he focuses on *passage or transition*.

As Waldenfels demonstrates, Merleau-Ponty often invokes phrases such as "the paradox of expression," expression as a "paradoxical activity," or indeed the characterization of speech or language as "wonder" or "mystery."⁵⁸ The paradox, begins Waldenfels, "originates in an inner tension of the expressive event, an event that is neither homogeneous nor reducible to its components" (*PEx*, 92). In particular, there is a tension to be found between the *what is to be expressed* and its *means of expression*, which is to say the materials that will be used to build the expression.

This approach certainly gives priority again to "clear" cases of expression, and Merleau-Ponty makes extensive use of acts of expression in literature, music, and especially painting in order to further his project. Initially, Merleau-Ponty's thought seems to be drawing him in two directions with regards to creative expression. The first direction expresses a desire to delimit moments of expression as rare moments of great artistic achievement: "There is, of course, every reason to distinguish," argues Merleau-Ponty, "between an authentic speech, which formulates for the first time, and second-order expression, speech about speech, which makes up the general run of empirical language. Only the first is identical to thought" (*PhP*, 217-18 (note 2)/178 (note 1)). This distinction seems to be repeated in the delineation of *speaking* speech versus *spoken* speech that

⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty finds a different Husserl in *The Origin of Geometry*, which will occupy us in Part II, Chapter 2.

⁵⁸ As I will explore below, this notion of wonder and mystery emerge most clearly from Merleau-Ponty's early guide, Gabriel Marcel. See Part III, Chapter 1 below. Some references to the occurrences of these phrase can be found at *PEx*, 101 (note 5).

re-emerges throughout his later work.⁵⁹ A more generalized ontology of expression bursts through even in his early text. For instance, “Expression is *everywhere* creative, and what is expressed is *always* inseparable from it” (*PhP*, 391/448, emphasis added), or again, “Language transcends us, and yet we speak...The phenomenon of language is not explained, but eliminated, if we duplicate it with some transcendent thought” (*PhP*, 392/448-9). Thus, it does not seem that we can ever merely speak a constituted language, for that would involve the expression not touching the transcendent thought that it is duplicating, leaving it pure despite its incarnation.

Hence the emerging importance of the “‘good ambiguity’ in the phenomenon of expression” (*Inédit*, 48/11). As Merleau-Ponty will write, echoing the position of Collingwood, “[A]ll perception, all action which presupposes it, and in short, every human use of the body is already *primordial expression*” (*Préface*, 108/67). The gathering together of the past and present, of nature and culture, accomplished by expression would seem to be a description of every gesture – ambiguity is not a fact of a spectacle, but the other side of a *taking up* through expressive operations. The point is not to explain away Merleau-Ponty’s comments that there is a difference between speaking and spoken language, nor to dismiss the important difference between authentic and secondary speech. This difference is not, however, a difference in kind. Such a difference in kind would be to separate thought and language, and Merleau-Ponty tells us that “[e]xpressive operations take place between thinking language and speaking thought; not, as we thoughtlessly say, between thought and language” (*Préface*, 34/18). There is no pure thought and no pure language; every action is on a scale between the two.

How should we understand the claim that expression is always between pure repetition and pure creation, a point that Waldenfels pushes and that I take as central? In other words, there is no event of expression that is not a mixture of creation and repetition; neither “extreme” can be reached (*PEx*, 93). As Jenny Slatman writes, “the distinction between speaking speech and spoken speech is not a factual distinction. In every performance, the two intermingle. This distinction is purely analytic.”⁶⁰ And placing the right emphasis on action and the body, Hugh Silverman observes: “Speech announces itself as the body in action—what it pro-

⁵⁹ For an important statement of the role of speaking versus spoken speech in the various stages of Merleau-Ponty’s work on language, see Hugh J. Silverman, “Merleau-Ponty and the Interrogation of Language,” in *Merleau-Ponty: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, ed. Ted Toadvine, *Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 2006), *passim*, though especially section III.

⁶⁰ Slatman, *L’expression au delà*, 145.

duces is a 'spoken speech' (*parole parlée*), — its producing is 'speaking speech' (*parole parlante*)."⁶¹ A pure creation would have to be a saying that has no affair with the said, and so would remain always on the outside of the said since for it to have meaning within the order of the said it would be violated or sullied, thus sedimentation would be a violent movement from the pure to the said. On the other hand, a pure repetition would not actually say anything, for that which was repeated would already be complete in itself. As Waldenfels writes, "pure creative discourse would say *nothing*, purely repetitive discourse would have nothing to *say*" (*PEx*, 289). So expression would then seem, by the constraints of its own concept, to require an admixture of repetition and creation. But is this enough to make it paradoxical?

This paradox is certainly not of the linguistic order (such as the Liar's Paradox); but rather a *paradox of action or of being itself*. As Harry Adams writes, "this paradox is ontological and irreducible in so far as it inheres in the very nature of expression of a world."⁶² Expression cannot be reduced to a function of competing linguistic registers or categories; expression is a paradoxical event that "belongs to 'the things themselves'" (*PEx*, 92). The point is that "expression is embodied in a *doing*" or that in "expression, something happens, something comes to pass, something comes into expression, a threshold is crossed" (*PEx*, 92). Indeed, Merleau-Ponty is interested in the "good ambiguity" in the *phenomenon* of expression, not the linguistic concept. Expression is then an eventizing of intentionality or the "as" relationship, expression is the transition from nothing to something as something, it is the being born to the world of a "*sens*."⁶³ Hence the use of wonder or mystery to characterize this event — expression is an antinomy that nevertheless *happens*. Neither empiricist nor intellectualist accounts of language can understand expression, for they make expression either the irrational unfolding of empirical facts or the rational unpacking of a sense that is already there and complete, making the unsaid of expression merely the "not-yet-said" (*PEx*, 93). Expression is neither the exteriorizing nor the possessing of an idea, transparent and complete, *expression is the happening and the continuing of*

⁶¹ Silverman, "Merleau-Ponty and the Interrogation of Language," 179.

⁶² Harry Adams, "Expression," in *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*, ed. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008), 156.

⁶³ Here is as good a place as any to acknowledge the importance of this little French word that carries so much weight for Merleau-Ponty. *Sens*, as the reader will recall, has three important meanings: 1) direction (as in *sens de la visite*), 2) meaning or sense, and 3) sense as in hearing or sight. This *mélange* itself guides us, as it indicates how expression is implicated in movement, meaning, and perception, and the reader is invited to keep the richness of this term in mind as we proceed.

an existential event of transition. Expression thus happens on a temporal scale between the instantaneous now-point and the eternal and pure existence outside of time. “What is necessary,” argues Collingwood, “is only to insist that in thinking we are concerned with something that lasts, even if it does not last for ever” (*PArt*, 159).

Thus, Waldenfels takes this 1952 indication of a “good ambiguity” to mark a generalization of the logic of expression to all ontological transitions. Merleau-Ponty would later confirm this point when, continuing the self-critique of the *Phénoménologie de la perception*, he admits that the problem with the bad ambiguity of perception is that “the tacit cogito [is] a concept that leads us to understand not how language is possible, but why it is not impossible” (VI, 227/176). As he writes, “[t]here remains the problem of the passage from the perceptual meaning to the language meaning, from behavior to thematization” (VI, 229/176). And as Waldenfels reminds us, this passage, as so many others — nature to culture, past to future, alien to one’s own, ideal to real — *happens in and as expression*. Rather than trying to reduce the event of expression into something positive, Waldenfels offers to his reader a series of operative concepts that, in their play, are stable enough to allow us to grasp “determinate expressive movements” (*PEx*, 95). For our purposes here, I propose to just sketch Waldenfels’ four operative concepts and to suggest how they will be supplemented by our own working concepts of weight, communication, dis-symmetration, response, and the metastable.

Écart. Waldenfels begins by asserting that Merleau-Pontian expression “proceeds indirectly, laterally, not directly and frontally” (*PEx*, 95), an unfolding that is characterized as *déviaton*, *écart*, or divergence. Expression, as much as perception, is a field phenomenon, and so there is no sense in talking about expression as indifferent to the field into which it is introduced. Moreover, part of the expression then will be the spacing or divergence that is introduced into the field. “[T]he event of expression vacillates between the relatively new and the relatively old,” and Waldenfels suggests that every act of expression will have some effect then on the field. Not that minute shifts are unnoticed or are actually literal uses of language, but that they are still expression despite the imperceptibility of their influence. As Waldenfels reminds us, “the [mere] feel of cobblestones under his feet makes Proust’s narrator recall the Guermantes way and makes a forgotten world reemerge right before his eyes” (*PEx*, 95).

The engine of *écart*, then, is “coherent deformation,” a concept that Merleau-Ponty introduces in *The Prose of the World*, borrowed from Malraux. Each act introduces a difference into the field, and thus shifts the field by deforming it. To this concept, I propose to append the notions of *dis-symmetration* and Metastability. The ideal field, although relatively

stable, is not a mere relation of terms. It exists as a reservoir of potentials, like a supersaturated solution. In other words, the ideal is *metastable*.⁶⁴ The event of expression, however, is a dis-symmetration of the metastable field, which is at the same time a crystallization of the event and a new configuration of the field. The outcome is not linearly predictable and the field is never exhausted, but is rather carried forward and always ready for further crystallizations. The nice aspect of dis-symmetration over coherent deformation is that we do not reduce the events that can shift the field of meaning to merely intended events, for non-linguistic events can certainly shift the potentials and themselves be dis-symmetrations (such as how a conversation and its potentials shifts when the hikers arrive at the top of the mountain overlooking the valley below).

Translation. Again, Waldenfels' guide is the Merleau-Ponty who is a reader of Proust. In this case, the event of expression is characterized as a movement of translation that is both the reading of an "inner book" of experience and also the "creation" of that experience. "The paradoxical character of this creative translation and creative reading," explains Waldenfels, "rests on the fact that the reading neither simply finds an original text nor simply produces a text" (*PEx*, 95), and indeed this movement stems from the original tension in the concept of expression between pure creation and pure repetition. Expression appears here as a translation, but without an original, its original is always created in the act of translation, for Merleau-Ponty there is no "original text" (*IL*, 69/42-43).

This initial characterization hints at a new sense of communication. In this notion of paradoxical translation, equated by Waldenfels with "creative reading," expression is communication with the self speaking or reading, and there can be no interpretive distance between the speaking and the understanding of a text, even if, and here is the paradox, there is nonetheless at least an address from me *to me* in this act. Yet this cannot be collapsed either to mere passivity, for the expression is never closed nor wholly impervious to the new situations into which it arrives. Below I will explore communication in terms of one system influencing the potential behavior of other systems. Communication is the shifting of the potential actions of one system by another, and systems can communicate across time or space.

Après coup. This third movement of expression continues to explore the space between pure creation and pure repetition. If the expression actually *ex-presses* something that, on the classical model, preexists it, argues Waldenfels, then either the expression is impossible or unnecessary. Thus, there must be a non-linear temporality to the event of expression, "the event precedes *itself*," or "present and past do not follow

⁶⁴ I will explore this term just below in Part I, Chapter 3, with Gilbert Simondon.

one another but are entangled within one another" (*PEx*, 96). What appears as preceding an expression only finds its place there in the past retroactively — "expression antedates itself," argues Merleau-Ponty, in reference to Bergson, "and postulates that being was coming towards it."⁶⁵ If expression is not taken up, if a lack or a question in the landscape flickers but disappears before we lend it our weight, then what was passed over, not spoken, is not in any sense a *what* at all.

We are caught by the illusion of the existence of this "what" preceding expression because we begin from the authority of successful expressions, in which a "what" has certainly come to be what it was that was *to be* expressed. But to understand expression, we have to put ourselves back into the becoming of expression, an injunction Merleau-Ponty consistently invokes.⁶⁶ As Merleau-Ponty writes, "[b]efore expression, there is nothing but a vague fever, and only the work itself, completed and understood, will prove that there was *something* rather than *nothing* to be found there" (*DC*, 32/69). That which exists as metastable is merely virtual, and only appears to *have had* a positive existence after crystallization — expression is a function of the future anterior and the perfect past. Hence, expression (and individuation) requires an open account of truth such as to allow for a "retrograde" movement.

Excess. That which is brought into presence in the expression always overflows either what is intended or what is literally said, if we can still provisionally make use of that category. In a sense, rather than preceding itself, the event of expression "also remains behind itself... as an 'excess'" (*PEx*, 293). This, once again, is a necessity of the inner tension of the concept that places expression between pure repetition and pure creation. If an expression was closed upon itself; if, in other words, it was the "master" of its limits and frontiers, then it would close itself to future expression, and thus it would have been a pure creation not being subject to the relations it has as a field phenomenon in its new field. This is why Silverman stresses the repeated discussions of "algorithm," and how Merleau-Ponty "rejects the ideal of a 'successful' language which can

⁶⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Éloge de la philosophie, et autres essais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), 35. Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology*, trans. James M. Edie and John Wild (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 35. This translation also includes the translation of *Resumés de cours*, which is cited as RC.

⁶⁶ "Language, not as ready-made (not as a linguistic system, as a given field of the nameable including everything, even my psyche), but rather language as being in the process of being made, in the process of striding, in the process..." See further, *HLP*, 67/55.

stand disembodied from experience."⁶⁷ If it said nothing beyond its expression, if it made possible a mere repetition without any excess, then it would presuppose an original text or experience that would be complete in itself. Either way, expression has to overflow itself both in the moment, as it is a field phenomenon, and in terms of its future, since it will not be separable from real acts of reading or speaking that will introduce divergences. An expression is neither ever wholly empty nor wholly full, it is always alien to itself thanks to an internal tension in the very event itself, and this is because expression is the enactment of a passage or a movement, and not the creation of a thing.

Given these paradoxical formulations, it seems to me that "weight" is the perfect metaphor for an account of expression that respects the various ideal and real dimensions of experience. As I have already mentioned, Waldenfels does not attempt to explore the embodied aspects of expression in his article. *Écart*, translation, *après coup*, and excess capture aspects of expression on the ideal side, but do not further an embodied understanding of the phenomenon of expression, nor help us to fully articulate an ontology between the real and the ideal. The bodily aspects of the action required for expression and the weighty material into which expression arrives as a trace are captured by the notion of weight. Consider Jean-Luc Nancy's description of what I am calling weight:

Meaning needs a thickness, a density, a mass, and thus an opacity, a darkness by means of which it leaves itself open and lets itself be touched *as meaning* right there where it becomes absent as discourse. Now this 'there' is a material point, a weighty point: the flesh of a lip, the point of a pen or of a stylus, any writing insofar as it traces out the interior and exterior edges of language. It is the point where all writing is *ex-scribed*, where it comes to rest outside of the meaning it inscribes, in the things whose inscription this meaning is supposed to form. This *ex-scription* is the ultimate truth of inscription.⁶⁸

Thus, weight indicates the materiality of the expressing bodies and the ideal weight to which expression responds: "I feel, I don't know what I feel," argues Collingwood, is the state of burden or oppression felt by the artist. And once the expression has been completed, the artist is somehow *lightened* and eased. For Nancy, this act is not only the inscription of a meaning, but also the exscription of a world, a material world of bodies

⁶⁷ Silverman, "Merleau-Ponty and the Interrogation of Language," 187.

⁶⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le poids d'une pensée* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1991), 8. Translated as: Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman, trans. François Raffoul and Gregory Recco, Philosophy and Literary Theory (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1998), 79-80.

sharing and inscribing meaning, and thereby shared by that meaning. Gearing into the ideal alleviates the weight of expression by giving it real weight. The weight of the virtual, potential, or metastable is not “virtual” in the sense of having no influence – it guides real bodies subject to its weight along non-causal dimensions. To turn again to Nancy, this virtual is nowhere other than in the world, just like Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the invisible:

Either as an audible voice or a visible mark, saying is corporeal, but what is said is incorporeal; it is everything that is incorporeal about the world. Language is not the world or inside the world, as though the world were its body: it is the outside of the world in the world... The incorporeal exposes bodies according to their being-with-one-another; they are neither isolated nor mixed together. They are *amongst themselves* [entre eux], as origins.⁶⁹

Thus, the concept of weight points to what commences and sustains the movement of expression, the incorporeal of the corporeal, the ideal that weighs upon some bodies *and* owes its own existence to their potential gestures. What is the experience of being in a metastable field? Can we think through the being of bodies subject to ideal weight, of bodies as being able to “matter” across multiple dimensions, and of our actions having a weight insofar as they shift and sustain virtual or metastable fields, like new points of gravity in a realm where movement is only ever potential? This, I believe, is the goal of an ontology that emerges from the paradox of expression.

(b) *Situated Freedom: Hints of an Unremitting Virtù*⁷⁰

Having outlined the operative concepts of expression, Waldenfels turns to a brief and intriguing discussion of the role of “response” in expression. What, he asks, motivates expression, what gets expression moving and sustains it? What gives rise to the *vague fever*? Where does the “uneasiness” come from in Merleau-Ponty’s phrase “there is that which is to be said and which is as yet no more than a precise uneasiness in the

⁶⁹ Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel*, 84/108.

⁷⁰ [I would like to acknowledge the important caution suggested in relation to the masculine history of this term by Professor O’Byrne during the public defense of this dissertation. The question of rethinking virtue is one I intend to pursue in future projects, and I will have to be careful to avoid falling back into this tradition.]

world of things-said" (*Préface*, 27/19)? And how normatively are we to take this "to be said?"

Waldenfels sketches an answer through the notion of desire or will *to say* and the simultaneous claim or call *to be said*, that is, between a *vouloir-dire* (wanting-to-say) on the side of a speaker and a *quelque chose à dire* (something-to-be-said, with the emphasis on the "to be" as an imperative) on the side of the world. Response in expression involves decision, and so involves taking up or leaving behind things to be spoken, involves the expresser as being that hinge between a multiplicity of unequal and irreconcilable forces, and having to respond in the face of imperfect knowledge of what impact her expression will have. Such is the very complicated freedom and responsibility, the motor of expression, and this opens the question of an ontology of bodies in relation as always already being a question of politics and ethics. This study, then, is as much about Merleau-Ponty as it is a taking up of the challenge to be found in Waldenfels claim: "The current demarcation between ethics and aesthetics completely misses the event of expression that lies beneath the most diverse ways of life and expression" (*PEx*, 100).

Indeed, to invoke again an important passage, Merleau-Ponty tells us, "[e]very production of spirit is a response and an appeal, a coproduction" (*RC*, 166; *HLP*, 8). Harry Adams is quite right to suggest that expression is at work, "not only in written texts or linguistic contexts, but also through artistic, political, social and scientific enterprises."⁷¹ For Collingwood, there is no private expression; expression is a self-clarification that which can be read or heard by anyone who is properly situated and, moreover, expression is language, broadly construed, to include all human gestures. The retroactive account of truth mentioned above suggests that the external factors of how my expression is received or taken up by others can radically alter what it meant. This conviction is at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's attempt to understand the claims made by Bukharin in the Moscow Trials.⁷² It also explains Merleau-Ponty's understanding for why Paul Nizan felt despair when he realized that because actions are historical, nothing is ever "irrevocably accomplished" (*Préface*, 31). Expressive bodies, bodies subject to the weight of the ideal, do not merely repeat the ideal. Expressions say more than is contained in spoken language. In speaking, all of the other possibilities that called to be said are left to the side, and so each expression reshapes the field from which our future acts will crystallize. Actions are disseminated by the very

⁷¹ Adams, "Expression," 156.

⁷² See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanisme et terreur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), *passim*. Henceforth cited as *HT*.

public and material necessity of expression. These physical traces too shape the cultural landscape, which is itself a metastable set of actions. The paradoxical logic of expression shows our nature as essentially violent and always faced with contingency. Waldenfels is certainly correct that “Merleau-Ponty belongs to that group of philosophers who remain skeptical in regard to every explicit ethics” (*PEx*, 100), and yet something like a virtue ethics is emerging here from the description of our embodied situatedness. The study of the paradox of expression entails rejecting any account of subjectivity that could ground Kantian or utilitarian ethical approaches. I will attempt, then, to clarify the metaphysics to be found in the phenomenon of expression, in order to come to the never fulfilled promise to also show “the principle of an ethics” (*Inédit*, 48/11).

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Part I, Chapter 3

Communication and Metastability: Simondon and the Logic of Individuation

Nous avons à trouver un sens dans le devenir du langage, à le concevoir comme un équilibre en mouvement [...] c'est une nouvelle conception de l'être du langage, qui est maintenant logique dans la contingence, système orienté, et qui pourtant élabore toujours des hasards, reprise du fortuit dans une totalité qui a un sens, logique incarnée.

– Merleau-Ponty⁷³

Ethics is the sense [sens] of individuation, the sense of the synergy of successive individuations. ... every gesture has meaning and is symbolic in relation to the whole life and to the totality of lives. The value of an act does not depend on its capacity to be universalized, according to the norm that it implies, but upon the effective reality of its integration in a reserve of actions that is its becoming.

– Gilbert Simondon⁷⁴

Merleau-Ponty often suggests, as shown in the epigraph above, that the paradoxical structures revealed in language point toward something like an incarnate logic. His account of the development of higher-level behaviors in his early *La Structure du comportement* invokes a dialectical logic in contrast to linear accounts, and this notion of dialectic will return particularly in his discussions of history and Marxism as an adven-

⁷³ “We have to find a meaning in the development of language, and conceive of language as a moving equilibrium. [...] a new conception of the being of language, which is now logic in contingency — an oriented system which nevertheless always elaborates random factors, taking what was fortuitous up again into a meaningful whole — incarnate logic.” *OPL*, 140, 142/ 87-88, emphasis added.

⁷⁴ *ILFI*, 334. Translations are my own. Translation of this passage, however, provided in a translator’s footnote to Deleuze’s review, Gilles Deleuze, “Review of Gilbert Simondon’s *L’individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* (1966),” *Pli* 12 (2001): 48, note 4. (Translation modified slightly.)

turous dialectic rather than a teleological one. In the texts on expression, he sometimes refers to the “allusive logic of the world” (PM, 91/65) or the “clouded logic of a system of expression” (PM, 53/37). In *Le visible et l’invisible*, Merleau-Ponty invokes the notion of a “logic in action whose philosophical status must be defined if we wish to get out of the confusion in which the ready-made notions of thought, subject, and object throw us, and if we wish to know finally what the world is and what being is” (VI, 135/100, emphasis added).⁷⁵ In other words, it remains for us to assess if the paradigmatic transition phenomenon in the event of expression gives us a glimpse of a more robust logical framework. Yet Merleau-Ponty did not set about writing a foundational text such as Husserl’s *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, nor did he suggest that such a task could be completed. In fact, I have kept our focus on the notions of creation and freedom from within the event of expression. This could, however, overly privilege a particular angle, and we might do well to look for the logic of expression in places less phenomenologically inspired. Completing such a counter project, however, is beyond the scope of the present investigation, and would require quite an extensive exploration of a different set of thinkers than the ones adopted thus far.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, I do believe that accounts of expression that begin from an anti-subjectivist perspective are also often working with what I have been calling the logic of expression. Consider Deleuze’s formulation:

...we must return to what is common to Leibniz and Spinoza, to that use of the notion of expression which presents the whole force of their Anticartesian reaction. This notion of expression is essentially triadic: we must distinguish what expresses itself, the expression itself and what is expressed. The paradox is that ‘what is expressed’ *has no existence* outside its expression, yet bears no resemblance to

⁷⁵ That Merleau-Ponty introduces this “logic in action” in a discussion of crystallization is not irrelevant, as we will see below this becomes the guiding image in Simondon’s work on individuation.

⁷⁶ We will see below that Merleau-Ponty himself saw the need for a double approach, and indeed *La Structure du comportement* in many ways attempts this “other” angle. That text shares some important intuitions with Simondon’s work that perhaps get lost in Merleau-Ponty’s own as he focuses on responding to the criticism or misreading of *Phénoménologie de la perception* after 1945 as only having psychological and not ontological scope. In his courses at the *Collège de France* on Nature in the late 1950s, Merleau-Ponty is clearly returning this “other angle” to the fray of his overall investigation. I will for the most part limit myself to point out the convergence in Part III, chapter 2 as I analyze the logic of expression in Merleau-Ponty’s first book.

[that expression], but relates *essentially* to what expresses itself as distinct from the expression itself.⁷⁷

Rather than embarking on the difficulties of Deleuzean ontology and his reading of the History of Philosophy,⁷⁸ however, I propose in this section to invoke something of a middle figure between Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty. In particular, it is my conviction that the transductive logic at work in Gilbert Simondon's philosophy of individuation and metastability provides us with an important and robust development of the incarnate or expressive logic *in action* hinted at by Merleau-Ponty's work.

(a) "*À la mémoire de Maurice Merleau-Ponty...*"

Even if this passage echoes some of the ideas we have already begun to attribute to Merleau-Ponty in the previous section — the critique of the Kantian subject, the importance of the fact that every gesture is expressive — it remains nonetheless difficult to argue that Gilbert Simondon, a student of Merleau-Ponty's who dedicated the publication of the first part of his thesis in 1964 to "*la mémoire de Maurice Merleau-Ponty*," actually owes much philosophically to his teacher. He does not discuss Merleau-Ponty's work, nor does he cite it. Moreover, Simondon's method is decidedly not phenomenological, aiming more or less for a first philosophy derived from "physical schemas."⁷⁹ In fact, Simondon's philosophy focuses primarily on reinterpreting scientific discoveries and conceiving of the individuations of technological objects in themselves,⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 333. Merleau-Ponty would have placed himself in the lineage of Leibniz rather than Spinoza, and not have tried to read them together. For an interesting discussion of Merleau-Ponty's concept of chiasm in relation to Leibniz's pre-established harmony, see Emmanuel de Saint Aubert, *Le scénario cartésien. Recherches sur la formation et la cohérence de l'intention philosophique de Merleau-Ponty* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2005), 185-240. Henceforth cited as *ESA2*.

⁷⁸ For a discussion of this possibility, and the important convergences and divergences on the notion of expression, see: Leonard Lawlor, "The End of Phenomenology: Expressionism in Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze," *Continental Philosophy Review* 31, no. 1 (1998).

⁷⁹ Jean-Hugues Barthélémy, *Penser l'individuation. Simondon et la philosophie de la nature* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005), 7. Henceforth cited as *SEG*.

⁸⁰ This would be the superficial reading of his text on technological objects. The treatise is as much a call for a new humanism as it is a study of technological objects. See further,

and as such implies a strident critique of taking perception as the starting point for phenomenological reflection.⁸¹ He even comments at one point that, “the body can only be called flesh as a possible cadaver, and not as a real living being [*vivant réel*]” (*ILFI*, 270). Although the comment about the flesh was written in 1958, and so is not a reference to *the flesh* in Merleau-Ponty, it is surely a reference to the emphasis Merleau-Ponty puts on embodiment. In other words, it seems *prima facie* difficult to reconcile the positivism of Simondon with the phenomenological work of Merleau-Ponty.⁸² Add such comments to a text that rarely takes up any of the themes central to Merleau-Ponty’s thought, and the case against anything other than an artificial juxtaposition seems open and shut.

Such a hasty conclusion would fail, however, to recognize the very notion of “*mémoire*” invoked by Simondon’s dedication. As Jacques Garelli notes in his “Introduction à la problématique de Gilbert Simondon,” “memory implies recognition, and thus loyalty.”⁸³ Garelli claims that the loyalty to Merleau-Ponty can be readily seen in Simondon’s adoption of the critique of *Gestalttheorie* or his call to rethink the “elemental.” Garelli goes further elsewhere, making a case for an understanding of Simondon’s relation to Merleau-Ponty to be of the same genre as Merleau-Ponty’s relation to Husserl in light of Merleau-Ponty’s account of reading: rather than “simply repeating” the theses of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty proposes to “resume ... the very movement of his thought” (*OPL*, 136/84). If this is the case for Simondon as well, if his thought is a taking up of the movement of Merleau-Ponty’s in some sense, then we are certainly justi-

Gilbert Simondon, *Du mode d’existence des objets techniques* (Paris: Éditions Aubier, 1958), 9, 13-16.

⁸¹ Simondon amazingly only mentions Merleau-Ponty once in his course dedicated to the topic of perception: Gilbert Simondon, *Cours sur la Perception (1964-65)* (Paris: Les Éditions de la Transparence, 2006), 96. This text reads as more of a history of perception than a phenomenology of perception, something that would match perhaps more closely with the role of art in touch as explored by Jean-Luc Nancy in Jean-Luc Nancy, “Pourquoi y a-t-il plusieurs arts, en non pas un seul?,” in *Les Muses* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2001). This is something I address at length in Donald Landes, “Le Toucher and the Corpus of Tact: Exploring Touch and Technicity with Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy,” *L’Esprit créateur* 47, no. 3 (2007). Simondon’s course on perception focuses more on the biological signification of perception than on phenomenological structures. See further, the *Préface* to this text, written by Renaud Barbaras, particularly pages IX and XV.

⁸² These difficulties are further elaborated by Xavier Guichet in an article that we will draw on below: Xavier Guichet, “Théorie du lien social, technologie et philosophie. Simondon lecteur de Merleau-Ponty,” *Les Études philosophiques*, no. 2 (2001). Guichet also indicate the difficulty of the positivism behind Simondon’s thought as out of phase with Merleau-Ponty at Xavier Guichet, “Merleau-Ponty, Simondon et le problème d’une ‘axiomatique des science humaines’,” *Chiasmi International* III (2001): 103.

⁸³ The mentioned article serves as the introduction to *ILFI*, found on pages 9-19.

fied in presenting his work with an eye towards the retroactive effect it can have for our understanding of Merleau-Ponty. This would be to respect Simondon's Merleau-Pontian sounding formulation that "every act takes up the past and encounters it anew" (*ILFI*, 334), and Merleau-Ponty's influence is certainly large in the metastable structures of Simondon's thought. Indeed, for Simondon everything turns on this idea of metastability. And as I will argue, Merleau-Ponty implies this concept, for instance, in *La prose du monde*, where new meanings or knowledge results from the crystallizations that were "contained" in the potentials "only in the way French literature is contained in the French language or a writer's future works in his style" (*PM*, 182/131). Institutions bring about some sort of *pre-being*, the potentials for Merleau-Ponty are both instituted and yet are an "unlimited fecundity" (*IL*, 95/59), not a "positivity" to be discovered, but a direction that "remains to be created" (*AD*, 30/22).⁸⁴ As Leonard Lawlor points out, this potential exists as a "halo of generality," which is not an empty form in the sense of an idea having a separate existence from the plane of immanence.⁸⁵

Although others have begun to connect Simondon and Merleau-Ponty on the specific content of their philosophies,⁸⁶ I have a deeper reason for pausing over the relation between them. As I will argue, there is a profound link between the philosophical gestures embodied in the paradoxical logic of expression and the transductive logic of individuation. The paradoxical logic here that implies containment as potential and yet as creative "anticipations, encroachments, transgressions, those violent operations through which I build within the form and change its operation" (*PM*, 183/131), will be shown to be just the account of metastability in Simondon, and hence equally implicated in the ethics Simondon sketches from this structure. Guichet does point quite rightly to the fact that both Merleau-Ponty and Simondon argue adamantly against any "technical" theory, but what is even more striking is the harmony of their positive accounts of the importance of human productions in a proper

⁸⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Les aventures de la dialectique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 30. Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. Joseph Bien (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 22. Henceforth cited as *AD*. I draw this connection to *Adventures de la dialectique* from Guichet, "Merleau-Ponty, Simondon, et le problème," 109; see also 125, note 18.

⁸⁵ For this discussion, see Lawlor, "End of Phenomenology," 23. Also, *PhP*, 512/521

⁸⁶ For instance: Garelli linking Merleau-Ponty's rejection of Gestalt and dynamic understanding of structuration with Simondon on individuation; or Guichet noting the connections between their respective interest for sociology.

understanding of humanism.⁸⁷ How do the hints at containment, at a halo of generality, at an unlimited fecundity of the *Stiftung*, lead us to a logic of metastability? First, we must be clear on Simondon's investigation into individuation.

(b) *Toward a Realism of Relations*

Simondon's work has remained, until recently, all but a footnote to Deleuze's — Jean-Hughes Barthélémy recently calling Simondon “the most well-known unknown,” or the “most ignored of the great French thinkers of the 20th century” (*SEG*, 15). Indeed, this particular introduction through Deleuze led to the folding of Simondon's work and concepts into the complex Deleuzean ontology, and thus we have seen a general inclusion of his concepts under the rubric of “anti-humanism,” rather than a proper exploration of his own post-phenomenological “encyclopedia” (*SEG*, 4). As I have already begun to indicate, his theory of technological objects is in fact a call for a more subtle humanism, and it is certainly true that his encyclopedia bridges his texts on individuation and on technology. Indeed, a brief foray into Simondon's work does not give the reader the desire to return (at least not immediately) to *Difference and Repetition* or *Thousand Plateaus*. One rather finds oneself drawn in a number of directions: into quantum mechanics, thermodynamics, and biology — struggling to recover a basic understanding of the standard reading of these fields in order to grasp the interesting reading being offered by Simondon. Perhaps it is as much this intimidating set of theoretical objects that has contributed the most to the slow engagement with the central concepts of his work.

Any attempt to understand Simondon must begin with the concept of individuation, which has entered our philosophical parlance more or less detached from the complex ontological edifice that Simondon builds around it, and which needs to be carefully insulated from any superficial reading that equates it with “individualization” (*SEG*, 4). Individuation is an understanding of being through becoming, not an understanding of individuality through differentiation. In his 1966 review of Simondon's *L'individu et sa genèse physico-biologique*, the first half of Simondon's doc-

⁸⁷ See Guichet, “*Théorie du lien social*,” 230-35. We will also have a chance to reconnect with the suggestions on history between the two as raised by Guichet (“*Merleau-Ponty, Simondon, et le problème*,” 109, below in our return to Merleau-Ponty in Part III, chapter 4. In terms of humanism, I am thinking of the connection between *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* and Merleau-Ponty's focus on production in *HLP* that we will discuss below.

torate thesis published in 1964, the two parts of which were only reunited in publication in 2005,⁸⁸ Deleuze acknowledges both the respectable and even venerable status of the notion of individuation in the sciences, and a corresponding lack of engagement by philosophers.⁸⁹ It seems little has changed. In his review, Deleuze endorses Simondon's critique of the tradition that begins from the "already made, fully constituted, individual,"⁹⁰ and then seeks a "principle" of individuation prior to or outside of the very processes of individuation and the pre-individual metastable state from which individuation emerges. This formulation echoes the concern above that reproaches a tradition that would find a "thought" existing outside and thus governing an act of expression and Merleau-Ponty's repeated injunction that we return to "[l]anguage, not as ready-made [...], but rather language as being in the process of being made, in the process of striding" (*HLP*, 67/55). Deleuze suggests that "the profoundly original theory of individuation [implies] an entire philosophy."⁹¹

Simondon's philosophy begins from the observation that traditional accounts of the nature of the individual begin from a common and noxious presupposition, thus mimicking Merleau-Ponty's early style. On the one side, he identifies substantialist or monist approaches, which see the individual as possessing a unity, as grounded upon itself, as having an identity for itself, and as being resistant to that which it is not. On the other side, there is a tradition stemming from Aristotle in which the individual is considered as a union of form and matter, the *hylomorphic* route. The common presupposition between these two approaches is that there exists, in some real sense, a principle of individuation which is "anterior to individuation itself, able to explain individuation, produce it, drive it" (*ILFI*, 23). As such, Simondon argues, theories of the individual begin from the fully constituted individual and work backwards to the conditions of possibility that brought about that individuation. Simondon questions the presupposition that "the individual as constituted individual is the interesting reality, the reality to be explained" (*ILFI*, 23), and

⁸⁸ The second half of the thesis, *L'individuation psychique et collective*, was published in Paris by Aubier, but not until 1989! The two texts are now available in French (along with an historical study of the concept of individuation unpublished by Simondon during his lifetime, *Histoire de la notion d'individu*) as *ILFI*. Again, translations are my own.

⁸⁹ Deleuze, "Review of Gilbert Simondon," 42.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*: 43.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

thus rejects the ontological primordality accorded to the fully formed, concrete individual.⁹²

In both cases, according to Simondon, there is an *obscure zone* which covers over the operation of individuation (principle → ~~operation~~ → individual), and this middle ground is seen as merely an inconvenient aspect that needs to be explained away, the black box, if you will, of the mere mechanics or ontic unfolding of the deeper truth of the principle of individuation. Simondon stresses that individuation does not merely produce an individual as an isolatable thing that would definitely leave behind its genesis. Already we can see something of the account Collingwood gave of artistic production, as it seems that individuation is something of an expressive movement that remains an unfinished task [*inachevé*], even if it is derived from a certain set of positive scientific observations (*SEG*, 6).⁹³ But does this approach avoid the opposite problem of destroying any notion of freedom or subjectivity in favor of the impersonal forces that produce the individuation?

The *process* of individuation must, according to Simondon, be returned to the center of the investigation into the nature of the individual, because the individual is a relational reality, a “*réalité relative*” (*ILFI*, 12). The possibilities for individuation are not all contained in the individual, but are a function of the individual in relation to its milieu and its reservoir of potential shifts. Moreover, these shifts are not the deduction or solution from a set of principles or premises, but result from the problematic being in the process of becoming, and as Deleuze rightly points out, the idea of a “*problematic*” becomes one of the guiding themes of Simondon’s reflection.⁹⁴ (*RGS*, 46). In addition, Barthélémy has recently

⁹² In fact, if there is a principle of individuation that preexists individuation itself, Simondon argues, that principle is a first term and is thus an “individual,” at least insofar as it has the properties of an individual (fully formed, separable, resistant, non-relational) and the process of individuation that we observe is then merely one of unfolding that which is there in advance, one of production (or deduction) rather than negotiation or propagation (or, as he will call it, ontogenesis or transduction). Atomism, for example, makes atoms the “real” individuals, grounding and explaining the “individuals” that we encounter.

⁹³ This movement back to the operation and the recognition of the aspects beyond the individual which are also produced are the key elements which can help us move forward the theory of expression, because as we have already begun to see, the event of expression throws into question the idea that there is a previous idea guiding the expression, of which the expression is the diminished translation, and which exists as concrete and fully formed on its own. As I will continue to develop below, the process of expression is key to understanding it; we cannot work backwards from the completed expression towards the conditions of its possibility.

⁹⁴ Deleuze, “Review of Gilbert Simondon,” 46.

attributed this as an epistemological position from which Simondon draws a generalized ontological position, a realism of relations, particularly in the style of Bachelard (*SEG*, 11-13). Isabelle Stengers has called the raising of relations to the status of being “*le grand thème de Gilbert Simondon*.”⁹⁵ Simondon himself introduces this theme as one of a twofold relationality. The individual, he tells us,

...would thus be understood as a relative being [*réalité relative*], as a certain phase of being which presupposes in itself a pre-individual reality, and which, even after individuation, does not exist all by itself [*toute seule*], for individuation does not erase, in a single stroke, the potentials of the pre-individual reality. On the other hand, individuation does not only bring about the individual, but also the individual-milieu couple. (*ILFI*, 24-5)

Thus, we have a doubling of the ambiguity of the individual. Neither is the individual complete, since it carries along a pre-individual set of metastabilities of which it is but a phase, nor is it separable, for it is no more the product of individuation than is the milieu-individual couple. Since relations are “real” for Simondon, that is, they make up part of the being of an individual, then the very notion of an individual can no longer be separated from that of individuation, which is his name for a relational process.

In this description, Simondon also introduces the key concept of the “pre-individual reality.” We should be very careful here to distinguish this concept from any idea that the “pre-individual” is a repetition of the “classical” models described above by Simondon. The pre-individual is not the idea or principle of the individual. Rather, it represents the virtual or the potential for crystallizations in an individuating process. However, since these potentials are determined relationally, they do not “exist” in the manner of separable ideas or things prior to the communication between dimensions that is the individual. There is no unity or identity in the pre-individual, these are products of individuation and exist only in the individual, which itself is just one phase in a process of becoming. The individual is both the “theater and the agent” of individuations (*ILFI*, 63). If this is the case, then the individual is *much more virtual than real*, but paradoxically, this virtual is no less real for being virtual, which is to say “more and less than a unity” (*ILFI*, 29). Just like the expression, which carries forward a potential set of intensities beyond its “real” meaning and which plays into a milieu, a relation that is also constituent of its being, the individual is a double-edged relation, a crossing of relations, a chiasm.

⁹⁵ Isabelle Stengers, “Pour une mise à l’aventure de la transduction,” in *Simondon*, ed. Pascal Chabot (Paris: J. Vrin, 2005), 138. Translations are my own.

In other words, the individual is the double resolution of a double tension, first between the pre-individual and the individual, second between the individual and the milieu. Yet, just as Merleau-Ponty will emphasize in his particular reading of Saussure, the difficulty is to think of the relation as primary, as constitutive of the related terms themselves.⁹⁶

Thus, Simondon's reflections on individuation lead him to rethink the relationship between being [*être*] and becoming [*devenir*]. Being has been understood mostly through the model of substance (*ILFI*, 25). The fact of individuation shows that one aspect of being is the ability to "*se déphaser*," or to undergo a destabilization, a phase shifting, or as we said above, a dis-symmetrization. The event of individuation is the appearing of these phase differentials, the rub between different levels of being, which is resolved through an individuation or crystallization, and this, Simondon concludes, is only understandable if we think of being as supersaturated. This initial state then, rich in potentials, shifts to one in which the tensions between different levels are placed into harmonious communication, the individual. Thus, individuation and the operation that it reveals forces us to understand being, not as substance, but as a "tensed system, supersaturated, above the level of unity, not consisting only in itself, and not being able to be understood by means of the principle of the excluded middle" (*ILFI*, 25). In other words, complete being or concrete being is "*plus qu'une unité*," more than a unity. To consider it a unity would be to consider it on the model of substance and as the highest "individual." But being is the *pre-individual*, that out of which the process of individuation breaks, but that which is not thereby left behind.

In Simondon's philosophy, then, the concepts of unity and identity only apply to one phase of being, and not even the most important phase. As Barthélémy puts it, "the relation that *is* the individual is a relation *between* orders of magnitude, which do not exist in turn except relative to each other and thus are no longer substantial terms canceling anti-substantialism" (*SEG*, 14). In other words, a realism of relations can *de-substantialize* the theory of the individual without thereby making the individual unreal [*sans déréaliser*], because it conceives the individual as a relation between levels of intensity (*SEG*, 14). Being is the *pre-individual*, as the reservoir that may crystallize into actions or individuals that paradoxically carry that pre-individual forward and sustain it.

The predominant image in the descriptions of individuation is crystallization, and this could easily lead one to understand Simondon's project — given that he aims to generalize individuation to the universal theory of genesis — to amount to an anti-humanism. Even if his return to the process of individuation precludes any theory of mere linear causality

⁹⁶ See, for instance, *IL*, 63/39.

in the production of individuals, if his account of relations and intensities leads us to understand the unpredictability of individuation and the carrying forward of the charge of the pre-individual for future transformations, it nonetheless seems to preclude anything like the creation or freedom we explored with Merleau-Ponty and Collingwood above. Deleuze embraces the anti-humanist aspects of Simondon's thought, but also acknowledges that one might wonder if "in his ethics, Simondon does not re-institute the form of a Self."⁹⁷ It seems to me that Deleuze overlooks the important aspect of Simondon's "*humanisme difficile*" (SEG, 4).⁹⁸ When it comes to individuation in terms of life, Simondon argues that the theory of "adaptation," as an understanding of a field of competing forces, fails to account for one aspect of individuation, namely, the related terms are not fixed (ILFI, 209-14). Such an account requires that the individual be *passive*. The individual, however, is always *individuating itself*, can operate individuations upon itself and also shift the milieu through its operations. In fact, precisely this dimensional negotiation, or better, the "discovery of the signification of this *disparation* [between dimensions]" (ILFI, 211), makes a complex or difficult humanism and ethics so urgent.

(c) *Metastable Equilibriums and Transductive Logic*

Simondon argues that the notion of individuation has not yet been adequately understood because we lack a properly expanded notion of "equilibrium." In fact, only the metaphysician lacks such a concept, for the physicist has long been working with a more subtle account of equilibrium. Simondon suggests that the Western tradition has only been able to think about the difference between a stable equilibrium and an unstable one (ILFI, 27-8). The problem is that a stable equilibrium is a state of the lowest possible potential energy, a state in which all the transformations have been undergone, whereas instability is simply any system not at rest, not at equilibrium. Simondon argues that there is another equilibrium

⁹⁷ Deleuze, "Review of Gilbert Simondon," 49.

⁹⁸ To be fair, we should remember that Deleuze was reading the publication of only the first part of Simondon's thesis, which focuses on physical and vital individuations. The psychic and social individuations are not well developed in the introduction, and the ethical reflections which make up the conclusion may well have seemed strange given the significant positivism of the first part of Simondon's thesis.

that, although not stable, is nonetheless not unstable. This, he names the metastable equilibrium.⁹⁹

A metastable state is either a state of a system that is stable provided that it only suffers small disturbances, or a substance or particle that is “theoretically unstable but so long-lived as to be stable for practical purposes” (*New Oxford American Dictionary*). In other words, the metastable state is precariously stable. It is stable, but not in all situations. This immediately recalls the notion of expression requiring an existence between the punctual moment and eternity. Simondon’s concept of metastability rests upon an understanding of potential energy that incorporates the reality of relations, and so Simondon translates this concept into the following framework: “metastability generally presupposes the concurrent presence of two orders of magnitude and the absence of an interactive communication between the two” (*ILFI*, 232). In other words, the metastable is the possible or potential of an individuation, but this potential is not contained by any individual, it is *in* the relation.

In fact, Simondon prefers to discuss the metastable as the “real potential” rather than as the virtual, and this is precisely because he wants to draw his ontology out of the solid observations of empirical science, which explains his insistence on the chosen physical paradigms as guiding examples for all levels of individuation. Thus, the metastable is a charged system, a system brimming with potential energy, although incapable of crystallizing itself or placing its own disparate intensities into communication. Simondon’s understanding of potential energy is not standard, even if he does draw upon some venerable physicists. For Simondon, the potential energy of a system is not understood as part of the “total energy” of the system. As Barthélémy points out, the classical understanding of potential energy is just that energy of the body that has not yet been used up, and that could lead to a transformation. Simondon, guided by the idea of a “real potential,” which includes the real relations it *could* enter into, understands the potential energy to be more than what is

⁹⁹ Now, in order to define the meaning of this metastable equilibrium, Simondon concedes that one has to have access to a molecular science or something of the sort. Although he suggests that the intuition of metastability can be detected in certain ideas from the ancients, metaphysics had to wait for the development of certain sciences to properly think metastability. This would be a fascinating juncture to offer a reflection on the relationship between ontology and epistemology, something that Barthélémy begins (*SEG*, chapter 1, *passim*), especially since much of philosophy has preferred to understand the success of scientific observation and theory to mean the end of metaphysical speculation. Simondon is part of a very important line of French thinkers who begin their observations from the sciences towards a deeper ontological understanding (Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, Canguilhem, to name a few). In the particular case of metastability, one needs to have recourse to the notion of potential energy, although Simondon’s particular use of this notion is not without controversy.

circumscribed by the classical theory. In other words, the metastable is the pre-individual, which is radically different from any particular phase (or classically, individual) but that is nonetheless centered there in that individual.¹⁰⁰

In other words, the idea that potential energy is real potential is one that shifts the placement of the potential to the *between*, but a “double-between” of the individual and the pre-individual and a between of the individual and the milieu — a chiasm.¹⁰¹ The pre-individual is not a set of things or causal factors, but a set of intensities and probabilities that are articulated along the lines of relations between orders of magnitude. This “double-between,” then, *is the individual* in a certain phase of becoming, and reveals *how the individual is neither a unity nor a singularity*. As the location of the metastable, the individual is the center of a very complex web of forces that are not merely causal forces nor are they merely part of the description of the individual as a separable entity. This accounting of the individual from the notion of the metastable then is why we might agree with Barthélémy in saying that Simondon is “a thinker - perhaps *the* thinker - of complexity” (*SEG*, 16).

So metastability is thought from the complicated placement of the individual in a web of forces and relations that are not superfluous or accidental, but rather are part and parcel of its being. Once this is observed, the idea of a “stable” equilibrium becomes displaced:

...the general case of states is perhaps that of metastable states: the equilibrium of a realized structure is only stable within certain limits and on a single order of magnitude, not having any interaction with others; it apparently hides the potentials which, freed, could produce an abrupt alteration leading to a new, equally metastable, structuration. (*ILFI*, 326-27)

So the point is not that there are in fact two types of states, stable and metastable, but rather that *all* structures or phases of individuation are

¹⁰⁰ Both Stengers (141) and Barthélémy (*SEG*, 21-24) address the way that Simondon passes over the theories of Niels Bohr in favor of valorizing the “double solution” of Louis Broglie, a theory that helps him work out his own notion of potential energy. This foray into physics and chemistry, however, is beyond the ken of this author, and I refer the reader to these others for the details.

¹⁰¹ [As was discussed during the public defense of this thesis, I am using the term “between” in a substantive sense, drawing on the work of, and conversations with, Professor Hugh J. Silverman. In my response to a question posed by Professor Edward Casey, I stressed that, for Simondon, the between is not an empty space constituted by a relation between individuals, but rather is the space of individuation itself. In a transductive logic, as in a Merleau-Pontian theory of expression, the related terms are brought into being in the relation.]

metastable, even though within certain conditions they remain stable and do not “show” their potentials.

Simondon also argues that the individual is not the sole product of the process of individuation. The product is the individual-milieu couple, and the process of individuation is one that requires negotiation between the metastable forces involved and the field in which these potentials will crystallize into an individual. In the end, the true principle of individuation is “a mediation, generally presupposing an original duality of orders of magnitude and the initial absence of interactive communication between the two, then communication between the orders of magnitude and stabilization” (*ILFI*, 27). So, the individuation is always at a medium level. The system then will have an influence on the make-up of the individual, it will provide in some sense the material that will be present in the individual, but the particular form of the individual is not predictable. How the crystal forms is probabilistically predictable, but not in a linear fashion. Individuation is propagation, but a propagation that is expressive of the intensive negotiation between the metastable and the milieu. This is why Simondon argues that we cannot work backwards from the products to the process to understand individuals.¹⁰²

Before shifting back to expression more explicitly, it is worth pausing over Simondon’s suggestion of a new type of logic required to think individuation, and his suggestion that we need to introduce the concept of information in place of the traditional notion of “form.” Simondon’s description of the individual as “more than a unity” or as the

¹⁰² Just a note here on the difference, according to Simondon, with regards to the individuation of life versus those of mere physical processes. In the physical system, the transformation of individuation is instantaneous, it happens in a moment and is definitive. However, when we turn to the living system, Simondon observes that the organism is a “permanent” putting into communication of levels of magnitude. It is a perpetuation of the individuating activity, and the “milieu” becomes the individual itself. What is most essential is that this individual, as interiorizing a permanent process of individuation, and as also being a potential element in an individuation at a higher level, is the opening for more complex and productive types of individuation, namely the psychological and the trans-individual. We don’t have the time to get too far off into this final and fascinating aspect of Simondon’s theory, but the theory of individuation is a complex of relations between levels which are constitutive of individuals who both carry the pre-individual (metastable) and yet which are not wholly that pre-individual being. In other words, from the realism of relations, an ontology of bodies becomes possible *without* positing new substances or realms to account for value, meaning, or any of the other aspects we would like to avoid stripping from the universe through a reductive realism. The double-relations of interior and exterior, which Simondon calls “participation,” accounts for psychological and collective structures, (what he calls the transindividual structures), and here I will be suggesting how our relation to, and participation in other relations (to language, our past, our environment) also can be accounted for without such a reference to an elsewhere of meaning.

center of a metastable field throws into question the idea that individuals can be treated by a logic based on identity or on the excluded middle (*ILFI*, 25). Moreover, he introduces the notion of transduction into his very definition of being: “being possesses a transductive unity, that is, it can fall out of phase with itself, overflow itself on both sides of *its center*” (*ILFI*, 31). In attempting then to define transduction, Simondon offers the following characterization:

We understand by transduction an operation, a physical, biological, mental, or social operation by which an activity gradually propagates within a domain, in grounding this propagation upon a structuration of the operative domain here and there: each region of structure constituted serves as the principle of constitution for the following region... (*ILFI*, 32).

Thus, the simplest form of crystallization provides the picture of the logic of transduction. Each subsequent layer of crystallization takes its direction from the previous, and thus we see a propagation, not a deduction from a pre-existing principle. *Each individuation serves as an essential part of the milieu for subsequent individuations.* It is much more complicated for higher-level transductive processes, such as vital ones. The shared transductive center is not that there is “growth” in the sense of size, but that there is a structural or functional “center” from which the propagative activity proceeds. Transduction is not reducible to layered growth, but is “the correlative manifestation of dimensions and structures in a being that is in a pre-individual state of tension, that is, in a being which is more than a unity and more than an identity” (*ILFI*, 33). This is precisely the point I want to make about human action, for example, and the paradoxical logic of expression. The body that expresses is more than a unity and more than an identity; it is a body subject to the weight of multiple dimensions.

As a result, transduction is not deduction, because it does not seek the principle for the resolution of a problem outside of the domain of the problem. Nor is it induction, which, although it keeps its investigation on the inside of the domain in question, only conserves the positive terms, or common terms, within. “The transductive order,” argues Simondon, “conserves all the concrete aspects and is characterized by the *conservation of information*” (*ILFI*, 34). This latter term, information, is offered by Simondon as a replacement for the more substantialist term of “form.”¹⁰³ The term “information” is used by Simondon is not meant to call up notions of transmission, but rather to refer to the signification that appears

¹⁰³ This will be seen to harmonize with Merleau-Ponty’s shift to “structure” rather than form. Simondon argues that Gestalttheorie cannot account for metastable equilibriums (*ILFI*, 35).

in the moment of disappearance, that flashes between levels of a metastable state. The individual is *information*, that which places disparate dimensions into communication. In other words, the individual is an expression of the disparity between the systems now placed into communication by this very individual. In transduction, the related terms do not preexist the relation. Information is what is created in the communication, not what is “transmitted” from one preexisting system to another (see *ILFI*, 31, note 8). In other words, it seems that *information is relation itself*, and hence transduction is the moving logic of expression. According to Simondon, “this notion can be used to understand all the different areas of individuation; it applies to all the cases where an individuation occurs and reveals the genesis of a network of relations based on the being” (*ILFI*, 33). This “transductive” logic then, by taking its point of departure from the “center” of the manifestation and carrying forward of the virtual, is perhaps that which is called for by the paradoxical logic of expression. Moreover, it is both “metaphysical and logical,” it “applies to ontogenesis and it is ontogenesis itself” (*ILFI*, 33).

Consider an example, offered by Jacques Garelli, that perhaps helps to connect this scientific discourse with expression. Consider the relation between a sketch and the finished painting.¹⁰⁴ In creating the sketch, the painter engages a metastable field in which the lines, materials, her trained gestures, and the desire to express progressively crystallize into a sketch. Each gesture builds upon the previous one, and may indeed invalidate it, requiring it to itself be rethought. As the picture stabilizes on the paper, the expression becomes more or less individuated, a resolution of the multiple dimensions. The genesis of the artwork, as we have seen above, is not left behind, and there is a carrying forward of the pre-individual dimensions that preceded the individuation. The sketch is a locus of all of the potentials that it could have been, not as articulated things or ideas, but as metastable potentials carried forward. This sketch, now leaning against a larger canvas in the painter’s studio, opens up for the painter a new metastable field that includes colors, brushes, different techniques, different time constraints, and both the original charge of the pre-individual *to be* expressed and the weight of the sketch through which the forms are engaged with again. This new situation was perhaps anticipated in the sketch, which was a weight on its production. As the painting crystallizes this new set of dimensions, it again seems to be more or less stable. However, it again becomes engaged in an individuating process when the viewer approaches, steps back, and allows the painting to express through her own history, allows it to speak through her own situated body. The painting becomes a weight in other metastable fields,

¹⁰⁴ For his discussion of this example, see Garelli’s introduction to Simondon’s *ILFI*, 16.

for the creative activity of the curator, for the act of including it in a montage or as a photograph in a brochure. The situations in which this initial expressive individuation may become part of an alternative individuating whole are unpredictable and open, and so too then is the “meaning” of the painting.

Finally, Simondon’s notion of the “transindividual,” which more or less serves as the “pre-individual” of human culture, is worth mentioning. According to Simondon, any idea that there is a fixed and stable human essence must be working with a non-relational ontology, that is, must have presupposed the very idea of a principle of individuation or a fixed and separable individual that he dismisses from the outset. In fact, beyond being an unrealistic accounting of individuation, this would also fail to account for true collective individuation. According to Simondon, a mere grouping together of already constituted individuals cannot account for the potentials or metastability of the individuals who are in a group. The community is not the sum of separate individuals. It makes them coincide, “it makes them communicate through significations” (*ILFI*, 302). This communication means that there must be a transindividual that precedes the collective individuations, what Nancy calls the “incorporeal” of corporeality. This transindividual then is the metastable for language, for instance, or communication, that is both larger than any individual and yet nonetheless shifts and responds to the various crystallizations or expressions that it receives.

This notion of the transindividual seems to again point towards the very important way in which there is meaning, but only insofar as it is shared between us. Now, what is it about certain bodies that allows them a creativity and hence a responsibility for their actions? The account of the structural logic of individuation threatens to remain on the structural level, while precisely the phenomenological level will help us reach the ethical implications that Simondon’s account suggests. As Nancy says, we do not “have” meaning, but we are meaning, or better “meaning is its own communication or its own circulation—and *we* are this circulation.”¹⁰⁵ For Simondon, the psychical individuation and collective individuation are two sides of the same coin — that is, individuation is about *being singular plural*. The paradox of expression is that meaning does not exist outside of my act and yet it overflows that very act, it depends upon our sharing transindividual fabrics. We conclude then this Introduction in order to turn toward Merleau-Ponty’s thought more directly in order to see the our situation as expressive bodies and the “unremitting *virtù*” to which we are thus called.

¹⁰⁵ Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel*, 20/2.

Part II

The Weight of Language and of the Past

Part II, Chapter 1

Bodies Subject to the Weight of the Past: Bergson and Merleau-Ponty

Mais tandis que nous nous sentons suspendus à ces objets matériels que nous érigeons ainsi en réalités présentes, au contraire nos souvenirs, en tant que passés, sont autant de poids morts que nous traînons avec nous et dont nous aimons mieux nous feindre débarrassés.

- Henri Bergson¹⁰⁶

'Il est peu probable' que je détruise à l'instant un complexe d'infériorité où je me suis complu pendant vingt ans. Cela veut dire que je me suis engagé dans l'infériorité, que j'y ai élu domicile, que ce passé, s'il n'est pas une fatalité, a du moins un poids spécifique, qu'il n'est pas une somme d'événements là-bas, bien loin de moi, mais l'atmosphère de mon présent.

- Merleau-Ponty¹⁰⁷

As has often been noted, the pathway to thinking Merleau-Ponty and Bergson together is as oblique as the resonances are clear. Beyond their shared style of seeking a middle position between opposed philosophical traditions, and in addition to their similar respect for contemporaneous empirical research, the content of their philosophies are marked by the attempt to rethink the body, to explore the importance of

¹⁰⁶ "But while we feel ourselves to be dependent upon these material objects which we thus erect into present realities, our memories, on the contrary, inasmuch as they are past, are so much *dead weight* that we carry with us, and by which we prefer to imagine ourselves unencumbered." Henri Bergson, *Matière et mémoire. Essai sur la relation du corps à l'esprit* (Paris: Quadrige, Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), 160. Translated as: Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 144-45. Emphasis added. Henceforth cited as *MM*.

¹⁰⁷ "'It is improbable' that I should at this moment destroy an inferiority complex in which I have been content to live for twenty years. That means that I have committed myself to inferiority, that I have made it my abode, that this past, though not a fate, has at least a *specific weight* and is not a set of events over there, at a distance from me, but the atmosphere of my present." *PhP*, 506/514, emphasis added.

habit and temporality and, consequently, to reorient our understanding of the subject by revealing a primordial level of experience. It nonetheless remains impossible to simply present Bergsonian concepts as taken up by Merleau-Ponty in order to show the influence of the former on the latter, nor can we rely upon Merleau-Ponty's explicit reading of Bergson,¹⁰⁸ which, although it develops throughout his career, remains for the most part critical and dismissive. In fact, Merleau-Ponty's look back on the role of Bergson in 1959 is full of melancholy, describing Bergson as a missed opportunity. Although "Bergson's influence was not very important"¹⁰⁹ during his formative years, he also admits that, "if we had been careful readers of Bergson, and if more thought had been given to him, we would have been drawn to a much more concrete philosophy, a philosophy much less reflexive than Brunschvicg's," and that the insights of a philosophy of existence could have thus been available much earlier (*Ex*, 253/132). Merleau-Ponty came to recognize in Bergson an important understanding of truth that became intertwined with his account of expression, namely the "retrograde movement of truth."¹¹⁰

In this first chapter of Part II, I would like to establish the deep Bergsonian origins of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of expression, and more particularly, the role of something like a virtual structure in Merleau-Ponty's own thought that we can begin to characterize as a metastable structure given the work on Simondon. In order to achieve this reading, I will continue to develop the concept of "weight." This will offer a solid account of the role of memory in action and clarify what we mean by the phrase I used to open a definition of expression: expression is any action subject to the weight of the ideal. But most importantly, I hope to show here that despite possible differences or historical distance, that the

¹⁰⁸ In particular, it is Renaud Barbaras who has offered a clear reading of how Bergson offers a target for Merleau-Ponty's earlier critique of any philosophy that retains something of a transcendental inspiration, and also, as his own philosophy shifts, towards an understanding of a positivism that is not immediately contrasted with negation, but is a new sort of immanent negation. See Renaud Barbaras, *Le tournant de l'expérience. Recherches sur la philosophie de Merleau-Ponty* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1998), 48-50. Henceforth cited as *TE*.

¹⁰⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "La philosophie de l'existence," in *Parcours deux: 1951-1961* (Paris: Verdier, 2000), 252. Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Philosophy of Existence," in *Texts and Dialogues: On Philosophy, Politics, and Culture*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman and James Barry (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1992), 131. Henceforth cited as *Ex*.

¹¹⁰ In fact, Merleau-Ponty makes use of this phrase numerous times across his work, but most publically in his address to the Collège de France in 1953, see Merleau-Ponty, *Éloge de la philosophie*. This phrase is used by Bergson most prominently in the title of his introduction to Henri Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant* (Paris: Quadrige, Presses Universitaires de Paris, 1993).

Bergsonian account of action and memory's role therein is an example of the logical structure of expression at work. Indeed, as Alia Al-Saji notes, a certain "unthought" Bergson haunting the pages of Merleau-Ponty's texts,¹¹¹ an "unthought" that has been explored in relation to habit and temporality.¹¹² I will try to find a shared logical, indeed paradoxical structure in Bergsonian memory and Merleau-Pontian expression. In other words, Merleau-Ponty thinks Bergson *through* expression. Indeed, although expression is hardly a central topic for Bergson, Merleau-Ponty nonetheless claims, "we can summarize the internal movement of Bergsonism by saying that it is the development from a philosophy of impression to a philosophy of expression."¹¹³

¹¹¹ Al-Saji is of course playing on Merleau-Ponty's own reading of Bergson and more generally of the history of philosophy in his *In Praise of Philosophy*. Alia Al-Saji, "The Temporality of Life: Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, and the Immemorial Past," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* XLV (2007): 178.

¹¹² Ibid; Edward S. Casey, "Habitual Body and Memory in Merleau-Ponty," *Man and World* 17 (1984); S. Muldoon, *Tricks of Time: Bergson, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur in Search of Time, Self and Meaning* (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 2006). In particular, Al-Saji is able to show how Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy adopts something of Bergson's account of an immemorial past, thus leading to his very subtle suggested ontology of the flesh. I aim to show the logic of Bergson as already implicated in Merleau-Ponty's thought of expression from the beginning (or at least his *Phenomenology of Perception*). Thus, we can see the "unthought" Al-Saji speaks of as already entwined the very formation of his thinking as Merleau-Ponty is engaged in an unconscious playing forward of his sedimented past by creatively applying a Bergsonian logic to the question of the act of expression. However, I am certainly following the style of Al-Saji in this text, in that I am taking, rather than an exegetical survey, a set of concepts or tools from Bergson to read Merleau-Ponty.

¹¹³ Merleau-Ponty, *Éloge de la philosophie*, 34/28.

The Weight of the Past and the Logic of Memory

The metaphorical use of the concept “weight” is deeply embedded in our everyday language and often appears at key moments in philosophical argument. Yet despite its pervasiveness, the ambiguity between the range of uses of “weight” itself has rarely been made the object of philosophical reflection, notably appearing recently, if opaquely, in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, in addition to physical things having a quality of “heaviness,” we immediately understand a range of metaphorical uses of weight: situations are *heavy* or get you *down*, decisions can carry a lot of *gravity*, we feel ourselves *pulled* in certain directions, and we literally *bear* our burdens.¹¹⁵ Such metaphors, however, are more than figurative descriptions or abstract characterizations – they connect to a real set of embodied sensations and serve as important descriptions of how our actions unfold in a lived world brimming with expectations, injunctions, and sometimes unbearable responsibilities that weigh upon our bodies as much as upon our spirits. The ambiguity in the word “weight” is thus important to clarify in order to understand such descriptions of experience.

I propose that, on a phenomenological level, this concept points toward the paradoxical relationship between materiality, or the weighty stuff of the world, and the ideal or virtual structures that influence the behavior of certain bodies and systems. In other words, I am proposing to extend the ambiguous structure of weight to capture the reality of living in a world as expressive bodies whose actions are guided by more than just physical processes – bodies who are, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, the

¹¹⁴ See, in particular: Nancy, *Le poids d’une pensée*.

¹¹⁵ Not to mention, man, “he’s not heavy, he’s my brother.” It might be worth noting that I am following George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s understanding of metaphor here. They argue that our conceptual fields are for the most part governed by general metaphors under which a whole range of metaphors and the experiences they describe are thereby understandable. For instance, with the umbrella metaphor “Argument is War” active in our linguistic community, I can *attack* a position, suffer a *defeat*, and have my best points *disarmed*. However, as should become clear, the “metaphorical” status of our theme of weight here may be put into question, especially when we move into the phenomenological register below with Merleau-Ponty. For their characterization of metaphor, see: Mark Johnson and George Lakoff, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

“hinge”¹¹⁶ between the real and the ideal, that is, “bodies subject to the weight of the ideal.” In memory and expression, weight names the paradoxical nature of bodies who respond to a virtual; who, as weight in the world, weigh upon other bodies, altering situations, and, through action, crystallize one possibility from that set of metastable possibilities that we are. These actions both create and sustain the virtual by carrying it forward.

Let us give some flesh to this concept by considering how Bergson’s theory of the body as the place of a “zone of indetermination” and his understanding of memory offer us a window into the paradoxical structure of weight. Bergson sketches two types of memory: habitual memory and recollection, and in both cases the past has a *weight*, for it can influence the actual behavior of a real body. Although Bergson speaks of a past that preserves itself, it seems that memory only exists insofar as there are real bodies properly situated to provide a medium for the return of the past into the present.¹¹⁷ So we already see a paradoxical relationship at work between the two sides of our guiding image of weight – there is a co-dependency of weight as material and weight as influence in the virtual survival of the past and the role of bodies subject to its influence.

We need to consider Bergson’s overall metaphysical position to help clarify these initial thoughts. Bergson, trying to find a middle ground between realism and idealism, famously describes matter as an “aggregate of images,” where “image” means “a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a *representation*, but less than that which the realist calls a *thing*” (*MM*, 1/9). Images act upon and react to each other “according to constant laws” by which an omniscient being could deduce the future or past of any given image (*MM*, 11/17). But in contrast to a radical idealist position, Bergson does not make the *being* of these images depend upon their *being perceived* – the images do not cease to exist if my body is removed or damaged. An image for Bergson has an independent representational content; a “self-existing image” (*MM*, 2/10). Images, then, seem to be already functioning within the ambiguity of weight. Images are not merely part of the physical universe of objects, *partes extra partes*, as Merleau-Ponty will so often say, nor are they purely ideal, wholly dependent upon a constituting consciousness, or as Merleau-Ponty will say, *pensée naturante*. Nevertheless, these images interact in the manner of physical relations, and the “future of the images must be contained

¹¹⁶ Bergson makes a similar claim in *Matter and Memory*, describing the body as the “hyphen,” *MM*, 151/169.

¹¹⁷ This follows from Bergson’s separation of the manner of existing of living and non-living bodies. *MM*, 11/17.

in their present and will add to them nothing new" (MM, 11/17). These are not yet *expressive* bodies.

One image, however, is sensed from the outside by perception *and* from the inside by affections, an image I call "my body" (MM, 12/17). These perceptions and affections are invitations to act, and hence the selection of images perceived will be images in which my body has an interest or at least "sees" a possible action.¹¹⁸ "My body is," Bergson observes, "an image which acts like other images, receiving and giving back movement, with, perhaps, this difference only, that my body appears to choose, within certain limits, the manner in which it shall restore what it receives" (MM, 14/19). Any body, then, is a "*place of passage*" (MM, 169/151) of the energy of the environment, while the *living* body introduces choice, or better, "indetermination" into this exchange, a difference that brings real novelty into the universe. Images which do not interest the body or which remain out of reach of its power simply pass by without being reflected, as weightless, not exerting any "pull" on experience.¹¹⁹

So *my* body is not *merely* a point of passage, it plays forward what it received in an expressive way, and it also "weighs" in the determination of what images at all will be captured by perception. "Weight," it seems, is an apt characterization of the many relations at work in Bergson's ontology. If Bergson is correct, — that is, if our bodies and brains are functional structures inviting the influence of the past, and not representational devices for the "storing" images, — then we need to account for weight as *virtual* influence on real bodies. As Ed Casey notes,¹²⁰ Bergson is the first to dethrone memory from the untouchable heights of ideality and representation by demonstrating that there are in fact two types of memory, habit memory and recollection. In fact, I am going to argue below that we need to further dethrone recollection, following Merleau-Ponty's early reading of Bergson, for there is no good reason to maintain a difference in kind between habit and recollection once we press the role of recognition in this

¹¹⁸ The reader should be reminded here of the importance of Aristotle's emphasis on the act of metaphor, of *seeing the similar in the dissimilar*, which will emerge again below.

¹¹⁹ Although we do not have the space to further consider the role of perception as "selection of images" for Bergson, it is worth noting that his account has some striking similarities to the more recent contribution of J.J. Gibson and his concept of affordances. Bergson says, the "*objects which surround my body reflect its possible action upon them*" (MM, 21/16 [Bergson's emphasis]). Thus, in the very presentation of the images around my body, perception "affords" possible, nascent, or virtual actions. In other words, the weight of the body's potential actions influences its very perception of the surrounding environment, and since the selection is governed by the past, we can say that the past weighs upon our very perception of the world. See: James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986).

¹²⁰ Casey, "Habitual Body and Memory in Merleau-Ponty," 279.

distinction. Nevertheless, we can follow Casey in noting that the past expressing itself in habits has more of a character of *hexis* in Aristotle or style in Merleau-Ponty, for: "In habit, character, virtue, and style alike, we find an inextricable commixture of intention and behavior, of animation by mind and enactment by body,"¹²¹ and indeed, this is precisely what I hope to capture with the concept of "weight." Bergson characterizes habit memory as a mechanical or instinctual mimicking of natural repetition, while recollection is an active intellectual activity, a distinction revealing a modernist influence.¹²²

To demonstrate this point from *Matter and Memory*, we can bring together the types of memory through a series of events that *weigh* in two dimensions. Take, for instance, the memorization of the route home from the library. The first time I walk to the *Métro*, descend to my train, make a transfer, leave the *Métro* and walk home, I may check a map, make mental note of prominent landmarks, or hesitate at the exit as I have been turned around by the twisting passageways of the Paris underground. These more conscious acts build upon the vast metastable possibilities, the innumerable habits that I bring to the event, from my style of walking to my particular way of being in public space. Each event has a particular time that, according to Bergson, remains ideally recorded in a pure memory. The following day I repeat the trip, free of my map, assertive with my choice of exit and my direction home, glancing over a landscape I had, just yesterday, interrogated. This second trip too has a localized time, but my body has already become somewhat habituated. I play forward into the new situation of this trip home the experiences that help me make my way through the environment and obstacles of today. I realize the front of the train will be closer to my exit; I note that there is an escalator if I follow this tunnel. These factors are allowed more weight given the comfort my habituation has offered for the overall task of the trip home.

On the third day, I proceed through this ritual almost unconsciously. I no longer count the stops, but I recognize the stations as the right one or not. I sense from the extra long time between *Gare de Lyon* and *Châtelet* that I need to get off and make my transfer. I have developed habits such as preferring to stand or seeking a seat, of moving to the exit before the train stops or waiting to head to the doors when they open. These habits and this habituation develop organically, not through a

¹²¹ *Ibid.*: 280.

¹²² This is certainly in line with Bergson's notion in *Creative Evolution* that in order for life to conquer matter it had first to make itself almost matter, but developing the *élan vital* in relation to Merleau-Ponty would be a whole other paper. See Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover Publications, 1998), Chapter 1, also 267.

survey of all possible subway behaviors, but through the building up of experiences of coping with accidental situations. Moreover, they are never purely repeated. If I am in a rush today, I may head to the door before the train stops, even if I am not generally inclined to do so. The weight of today's urgencies may outweigh the sedimentation of the past. My habits crystallize in dialogue with the new situation that presents itself, and never as a mere triggering of sedimented action.

Indeed, sitting here writing about my route home takes me back to that route itself, not as an explicit image of each major stage, but as a bodily transposition that puts me on the cusp of speaking about those "images" or stages. This act of expression repeats the experience in a new medium and in a situation that the route itself could only call to if an accidental series of events had introduced a phenomenologist into its web of relations, and then this phenomenologist later needed an example for a paper or a thesis. And to speak with Simondon, the event as remembered by my body is never closed, but remains part of a metastable pre-individual that could crystallize in new and quite disparate situations. Months later, on a day off, I happen upon my station from a completely different direction. In this case, I stand in awe, as if my street had just magically appeared out of nowhere, and of course, for me, it has, it has appeared without the proper process of its usual genesis. My virtualities, my virtual maps all must shift to include now this other route within the schemas I have already built up — the weight of the past is reconfigured with the weight of the present experience, a new configuration to which I must habituate in turn.

For Bergson, the virtual past can return in two ways: recollection or action. First, each trip can be remembered for itself. "Did you see that guy jump on the subway at the last second?" "Did you notice our *boulangerie* was closed today? Is it closed every Monday?" These questions take me back to the specific event. But rather than talk of an intellectual act by which I tense or loosen my place within the whole of my recorded history, I would suggest the memory "appears" through the act now of my body trying to speak *about* a moment in that past, and thus the recollection of the trip comes into the present through my body and the situation crystallizing together on the cusp of speaking thereof — it is a temporal act of negotiating the ambiguities of the past in the present response to the demand to speak. In a different sense, set with the task of making it home, my body's habitual schemas take over through the recognition of the call that this new situation makes to their powers.¹²³ So, in the recollection we

¹²³ Consider the error when one's body schemata takes over in a mis-recognized situation. I am driving to a friend's house for dinner rather than home, and instead of taking the earlier exit 52, I keep right on driving, only realizing my mistake when my own exit

do not “see” anything, we in fact have oriented our body towards an *as if*, a nascent action, we have put ourselves in virtual communication with our past just as our body is in virtual communication with the objects it *could* influence. If we are thus inclined to suggest that the image is an illusion of my body taking up a disposition to speak *as if* looking at the *boulangerie* again – which is a wholly bodily disposition – then we are hard pressed to see any difference in kind between these two forms of memory.¹²⁴

This description of Bergson’s position already suggests an implicit criticism, visible in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phénoménologie de la perception*, that questions Bergson’s insistence that there is a *difference in kind* between these two types of memory. At the rudimentary level of habit, Bergson talks about a passive recognition triggered by the natural similarity between situations (*MM*, 237-8/267 ff.), or that habit “acts our past experience but does not call up its image” (*MM*, 151/168). Habit, it seems, would require a sort of body intelligence capable of recognizing, mechanically, that two situations are merely “superficially different” (*MM*, 160/178). This would then map quite directly onto the worry above about Aristotle’s account of the genius in metaphor-making as somehow between the recognition of objective similarities and a mere making of similarities through juxtaposition. Yet, according to Bergson’s own formulation of duration, and duration must be in the mix if we are talking about memory, we must not only conclude that there are no two identical situations, but that there is always an uncountable set of relations at play. Even in the case of a seemingly triggered response, there will be more than a body intelligence, for the act of recognition then must be a creative act. In

appears and I become immediately conscious of having taken a wrong turn (or the right turn for a different task).

¹²⁴ Many pages of cognitive science and philosophy of mind/perception journals have been dedicated to the reality of mental images, or more broadly, the representational content of the mind. This point can also be approached through the question of learning skills and the non-representational content implied by Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the intentional arc, discussed in Hubert L. Dreyfus, “Intelligence Without Representation – Merleau-Ponty’s Critique of Mental Representation: The Relevance of Phenomenology to Scientific Explanation,” in *Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Ted Toadvine, *Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 2006).

other words, there is a *body genius*¹²⁵ that can “see” the similar in a dissimilar situation¹²⁶ – this seeing is a “creative playing forward.”

So the situation of making my way home is never identical to a previous one, and the memories that aid me in that trip are never limited to those memories that shared the broad strokes of the same intention “get home from the library.” As Merleau-Ponty writes: “In fact the reflexes themselves are never blind processes: they adjust themselves to the ‘direction’ [*sens*] of the situation” (*PhP*, 79/94). There is a layering of body habits and dispositions drawn from uncountable directions, and thus recognition is never pure repetition, it is always a creative synthesis, a *taking up* of experience towards the demands of this new situation. The point, however, is not to reject Bergson’s dethroning of representational accounts of memory, but to extend it by seeing expression and habit all the way down.¹²⁷ Action subject to the weight of the ideal is neither pure repetition nor pure creation, but a creative playing forward, that is, even the most reflexive appearing action seems to be *expression*.

As mentioned, Bergson does not thematize the concept of weight, and uses *poids* [weight] only once in *Matière et mémoire*, although his translator inserts the word *weight* at a justifiable second moment. The body, as a moving point which is “driven into the future” by the past (or by the weight of the past, as the translator says), is that part of the universe subject to the ideal influence of the past. In acting, the body is more than just a causal mechanism, but is responsive to the influence of the numerous dimensions and planes of the past, a dead weight we carry, virtually, even if we “prefer to imagine ourselves unencumbered” (*MM*, 160/145) — for only so unencumbered could we claim the pure freedom of an autonomous subject. Although the past preserves itself in the virtual, or the potentialities of a body that might reactivate it, this reactivation cannot be a pure repetition, for it plays the past into a new situation. Only

¹²⁵ Again, note that by “genius” I do not mean an exemplary intelligence. Rather, I mean to invoke that some bodies have aptitudes for creatively playing forward a past that is preserved virtually, “a genius for ambiguity which might well serve to define man” (*PhP*, 230/189).

¹²⁶ And so again, this phrase from Aristotle’s take on metaphor appears *before* we turn to metaphor and meaning. In any case, it should be noted that we are taking this logic from the lofty heights of poetry down into the structure of any action whatsoever, the need for which we established with Collingwood above.

¹²⁷ Now it could be argued that Bergson’s later work, *Creative Evolution*, answers this critique by identifying life with creation in action. A further study would, however, be required to assess this development in Bergsonism against the overall project of Merleau-Ponty work. For the texts in question, see Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, “Introduction,” and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, trans. Robert Vallier (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), see in particular: 51-69.

through this creative aspect can we speak of freedom, albeit a freedom between pure creation and pure repetition.

At a key moment in the expression chapter, having just established that empiricist and intellectualist accounts of speaking share the same fundamental error of not seeing that thought is accomplished in speaking, Merleau-Ponty tells us that: "The Bergsonian dualism of habit-memory and pure recollection does not account for the near-presence of the words I know: they are behind me, like things behind my back, or like the city's horizon round my house, I reckon with them or rely on them, but without having any 'verbal image'" (*PhP*, 220/209). In this description we hear quite clearly a notion of "habituation," that familiarity with a situation that is built up through habits and skills, across diverse experiences and pathways, but that does not support a dualism or a difference in kind between habit and recollection. There is no pure act of recollection, for it is an act, and all acts are a creative playing forward of the past, accomplished by a body subject to the weight of the virtual. This implicit critique of recognition in triggering habits in Bergson and of the representational character of recollection suggests that we cannot not rely upon a rigid distinction between the two types of memory. It also speaks to the fact that for Merleau-Ponty perception is always itself expressive, not merely passive in such a way that it merely selects the useful by waiting for previously observed configurations of the given. What memory *is*, or what the past *means*, is shaped by the evolving and compounding acts of memory. Although the past preserves itself in the virtual, it is hardly fixed; it preserves its self as a *metastable structure*. As the body repeats the past, new habituations develop and new connections are made. The virtual preservation of the past is fluid, and thus we see something of a paradoxical structure. As a memory comes to aid our present action, we shift that memory and play it into a new situation. There is a double relation at work then in the weight of the past weighing upon real bodies, and action crystallizes in this ambiguity. Merleau-Ponty is here telling us not only that we need to think of expression and memory together, but also that we need to complete the dethroning of all memory, including the ones that seem most intimately to involve images. Recognition is not merely mechanical here while wholly intellectual there, any recognition is a creative synthesis of habits and schemata developed across a multiplicity of disparate activities.

Merleau-Ponty's Early Critique of Bergson's Realism

The early critique that Merleau-Ponty levels against Bergson helps to clarify the logic of expression. In fact, it should be noted that Merleau-Ponty's sympathy for Bergson's approach is apparent as early as his third publication, a review of Sartre's book *L'imagination*. At the end of the review, Merleau-Ponty offers a weak defense of Bergson's philosophical account of images, and indeed shows a nascent gesture of expressive logic. Suggesting that Sartre's reading of Bergson's notion of image is perhaps unfair, Merleau-Ponty continues:

It is possible, for example, to find a deeper significance in the 'images' of Bergson's *Matter and Memory*. It is possible to be of the opinion that Bergson, by presenting the world as a set of 'images,' wished to suggest that the 'thing' should neither be broken down into 'states of consciousness' nor sought beyond what we can see in a substantial reality.¹²⁸

In other words, "it is possible" to undertake a more subtle reading of Bergson that would not immediately denounce him for being an idealist, perhaps just as we did above with Collingwood. Merleau-Ponty continues: "[these Bergsonian "images"] would be precisely, though in a far less precise language, an anticipation of the Husserlian *noema*."¹²⁹ Thus, Merleau-Ponty's first reading of Bergson sees in him a precursor of the Husserlian phenomenological intuition that, for Merleau-Ponty, should be understood in the refusal to break apart the poles of intentionality.

The second major indication of Merleau-Ponty's reading of Bergson is to be found in *La Structure du comportement*, and consists in a more subtle critique of Bergson's understanding of action outlined above. According to Merleau-Ponty, Bergson's account of the body does not properly account for the new dimensions introduced by the human order of behavior. In particular, Bergson's notion of action always aims at vital action relating to how the animal holds itself in being against the forces of its environment. This, according to Merleau-Ponty, sets up a difference in

¹²⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "L'imagination," in *Parcours: 1935-1951* (Paris: Verdier, 1997), 53. Translated as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "On Sartre's *Imagination*," in *Texts and Dialogues: On Philosophy, Politics, and Culture*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman and James Barry (Amherst, NY: Humanities Books, 1992), 113.

¹²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, "L'imagination," 53/113.

kind between vital action and a sort of “mystical” action that seems somehow irrelevant to our embodiment seen in pure memory. If the human builds a house or puts on clothes, this is merely a different solution to the same vital problems presented to every organism of shelter and warmth; if the human retreats into memory, then this is somehow pure introspection. Moreover, although Bergson’s account begins to approach a notion of action as a melody with an internal harmony, he “sometimes returns to a purely motor notion of action. Habit is finally only the ‘fossilized residue of a mental activity,’ the active gesture only a ‘motor accompaniment’ of thoughts” (SC, 176/163). We can see here that Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Bergson is directly framed with the language he will use against classical understandings of expression. Gestures, as we saw above, can no longer be reduced to the mere external accompaniment of thought, but must rather be seen as the accomplishment of thought. The paradoxical nature of the weight of the ideal here is shown to be wholly dependent on the bodies properly habituated for its repetition, the body’s gestures are not possibly, at least once we are talking about the human body with expressive structures, to be the mere accompaniment of a consciousness that can remain pure.

The criticism that Bergson’s understanding of habitual action does not cut deep enough, that is, does not succeed in recognizing the paradoxical logic of consciousness and the virtual existence of the ideal, is suggested again in *Phénoménologie de la perception*. At this point, Merleau-Ponty’s critique takes on more fully the vitriol leveled against Bergson by G. Politzer in 1929.¹³⁰ In short, Bergson’s emphasis on consciousness *as* duration, even if it raises introspection to a refined level, remains mired in the problems associated with introspection. That is, it reinforces a division between the interior and the exterior, and leaves the reader with the need of a manner of uniting the soul and the body. Thus, Bergson’s philosophy remains tied to the fate of introspective psychology “from the moment that he opposes the ‘multiplicity of fusion’ and the ‘multiplicity of juxtaposition’” (*PhP*, 86/68, translation modified), that is, time and space. In other words, Bergson’s insistence on pure perception versus pure memory, and his understanding of habit as vital behavior achieved differently and consciousness as a more or less directed and free act of tensing and loosening one’s place on the cone of memory, repeat fatally that distinction between pure repetition and pure creation that the paradox of expression leads us to reject.

¹³⁰ For a discussion of Politzer’s argument in *Critique des fondements de la psychologie* (1928), see Renaud Barbaras, *Le tournant de l’expérience. Recherches sur la philosophie de Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Jean-François Courtine, Bibliothèque d’histoire de la philosophie (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1998), 35-37..

As mentioned above, despite this initial critique of Bergson's emphasis on vital action, Merleau-Ponty can, to follow Renaud Barbaras's characterization, "neither integrate nor purely and simply reject" Bergson's thought (*TE*, 34). In fact, paradoxically, if the above critique that Bergson is too idealist seems to provide every reason Merleau-Ponty might need to simply reject Bergson, his third major critical engagement with Bergson suggests that, on the other hand, his account is too realist. In a series of criticism that, we will see below, mirrors almost precisely Merleau-Ponty's rejection of the underlying realism of *Gestalttheorie*, Merleau-Ponty rejects Bergson's theory of images because it assumes that the images exist in some real sense above and beyond consciousness. In other words, because consciousness is a reflection of the images that interest it, perception itself "proceeds through negation or subtraction" (*TE*, 39). There is a reality in itself of the totality of images, and consciousness is "cut out" of that total. "Bergson has," according to Merleau-Ponty, a "certain blindness for the proper being of consciousness and its intentional structure."¹³¹ Without the phenomenological coupling of *noema-noesis*, there is no way to overcome what appears as a fundamental dualism. This second critique, then, trades on precisely the way in which expressive action is creative of the world as not merely responsive to it. Just as we saw above with the limiting of Bergson's account of vital action, here again we find Bergson unable to fully grasp the creativity that should be recognized as the zone of indetermination, that this zone is also the genius for ambiguity that it both creates and sustains.

¹³¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'union de l'âme et du corps chez Malebranche, Biran et Bergson* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1968), 81. Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Incarnate Subject: Malebranche, Biran, and Bergson on the Union of Body and Soul*, trans. Paul B. Milan, Contemporary Studies in Philosophy and the Human Sciences (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2001), 89.

A Philosophy of Expression: Merleau-Ponty's Return to Bergson

Now between his initial critique of Bergson and his later more ontological reflections, Merleau-Ponty indeed finds in Bergson an “unthought” movement towards a philosophy of expression. As already quoted, he writes “we could summarize the internal movement of Bergsonism by saying that it is the passage from a philosophy of impression to the philosophy of expression.”¹³² Merleau-Ponty, reading past the famous negative comments Bergson makes regarding language and its fixed and spatializing character, argues that Bergson sees clearly the notion of a living speech, “equal and unrivaled by thought,” and yet always needing a material support, a body, a brain, a pen and paper. Further, he labels the movement Bergson outlines in *Creative Evolution* “expression,” where: “Matter is an obstacle to life, but it is also its instrument and its stimulant.”¹³³

In addition, through a clarification of what he means by expression, Merleau-Ponty makes clear to his attentive reader that the link he was pursuing between expression and truth in his abandoned mid-career project is of deeply Bergsonian origins:

What we call expression is nothing but another formula for that which Bergson would never tire of returning to, and which we might call the *retroactive effect of truth...*, which is a fundamental property of truth... Expression antedates itself and supposes that being comes towards it. This exchange between the past and the present, matter and mind, silence and speech, world and us, this metamorphosis of the one into the other, with, in transience, a glimmer of truth, is, in our opinion, much more so than is the famous ‘intuitive coincidence,’ the very best of Bergsonism.¹³⁴

In other words, with this *retroactive effect of truth*—the very *après coup* structure found above at the foundation of the paradox of expression—Merleau-Ponty draws clearly the relation between the logical structure of memory and that of expression. Such praise of the unthought expression

¹³² Merleau-Ponty, *Éloge de la philosophie*, 35/29.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 35-36/29-30. (translation modified)

in Bergson's work begins to show how expression plays an ontological role, marking all paradigmatic transitions between the ideal and the real as we outlined above with Bernard Waldenfels. Choice *and* determination are together at the heart of expression, and matter is as much the obstacle as the opportunity for the ideal to return. Expression is any creative playing forward of the sedimented into an indefinite future for which we, as those bodies acting under the weight of the ideal, are nonetheless responsible.

Merleau-Ponty no more thematizes the concept of weight than Bergson did, though he perhaps draws on the image more regularly. In trying to develop a more situated notion of freedom than that offered by Sartre, Merleau-Ponty invokes the image of weight as a manner of describing how the past or the situation make certain actions or decisions more or less probable, though not thereby determinate. Consider the sustained inferiority complex, Merleau-Ponty says: "that [for 20 years] I have made [this inferiority complex] my abode, that this past, though not a fate, has at least a specific weight and is not a set of events over there, at a distance from me, but the atmosphere of my present" (*PhP*, 506/514). We might then best characterize this "atmosphere" in terms of sedimentation, which names the way in which the past does not merely pass for certain bodies, but rather remains as a potential influence on the future actions of this body. As Merleau-Ponty argues, this past is not an "inert mass" or an acquired possession. Rather, it is a depth, a field, or a landscape that we can "take up in a fresh momentum of thought" (*PhP*, 163/150). In this way, Merleau-Ponty characterizes consciousness as simultaneously spontaneity and sedimentation, as the relation between a past being taken up towards a future by sedimenting a present, and the place of this restrained freedom is to be found in the body. As Edward Casey notes:

The process of sedimentation is ever at work: intentional threads go back and forth between the body and its ever-changing phases, which are continuously reanimated by current experience. If sedimentation is to be conceived as a precipitation of the past into the present, it is an active precipitation actively maintained.¹³⁵

As we have already seen, this activity cannot be confused with a conscious activity.¹³⁶ The habituated lived body shows how sedimentation can exist

¹³⁵ Casey, "Habitual Body and Memory in Merleau-Ponty," 284-85.

¹³⁶ Casey points out a problem: in *Phenomenology of Perception*, habit is both the fundamental way of accounting for the lived body and also only one way among others (sexuality, expression, style) which in fact all express something of a fundamental power. The point that Casey wants to make is that Merleau-Ponty does not quite reach the subtle theory of a "habituated-lived-body," although he does allow us to think that the body "is

as potential or virtual action for higher level animals, but it is more important to see the generalization of this logic, the paradoxical logic of expression, to apply to action generally, and thus to find expression and action all the way down.¹³⁷ If, as Hugh Silverman puts it, "consciousness is already corporeal and speech is already the incorporation of meaningful thought,"¹³⁸ then we are right to reject a difference in kind between the two types of memory.

Expression, I would like to suggest, offers the best chance of see the way the past returns, actively played forward by bodies. Even in seemingly banal moments of "near" pure repetition, if indetermination is involved then there is a tinge of creation. In the recognition that this situation calls forth a sedimented act, indeed, a recognition that is the act itself, we find action as a form not just of a bodily intelligence, but also of a *body genius*. The recognition required for habit contains the germ of genius that will one day burst into language by lending its body to the ideal weight of the past and of the ideal. This gives us a good foundation in understanding our non-causal relation to an ideal structure that affects our behavior. We turn now to consider how the body can be subject to real weight in a non-causal way, that is, how the traces of other bodies can weigh upon us, and how we can gear into them.

engaged ... not in the construction of pseudo-presents but of massively layered and richly over-laden actual presents shot through with virtualities." The answer would be, I would argue, rather than proliferating types of body memory that might not be habitual, as Casey does, we need to see the generalizable structure of memory and action as expression, or in other words, as located in this body subject to the weight of the past. This paradoxical logic is beneath all of these transition phenomena, from trauma to styles of walking, just as Collingwood argues that every gesture is a work of art, or for Merleau-Ponty how every act of speaking is not between language and thought, but between thinking language and speaking thought (*Préface*, 34/18). For Casey's argument, see *Ibid.*: 294.

¹³⁷ Although it was through Casey's work that I suggested the original split in Bergson between habit and recollection, it does not appear to be the case that anything in Casey's presentation hangs on the difference in kind instituted by Bergson and critiqued above. In his exploration of multiple layers and particularly an active-passive habituation between trauma and habit, Casey seems to be aiding us in clarifying how Merleau-Ponty takes expression to make any such transitional phenomenon and thus would seem positive in this reading of expression itself. Our position in fact suggests a third movement, if Bergson took memory theretofore thought of as representation and made a space for a non-representational (habitual) memory and a more or less representational recollection, then we are suggesting that memory is truly non-representational all the way down.

¹³⁸ Silverman, "Merleau-Ponty and the Interrogation of Language," 179.

Part II, Chapter 2

Gearing into the Weight of Language: Husserl and Merleau-Ponty

Language is also the possibility of the permanence of the ideal outside of all conversation, and even when the interlocutors are dead, and even when it has not yet been lived in evidence by anyone. It is communication become virtual. [...] The conveyed sense is 'forgotten,' 'sedimented,' and 'reactivable' [...] insofar as humans are sprechende Wesen [speaking-beings] and insofar as the world can be spoken.

- Merleau-Ponty¹³⁹

In the previous chapter I explored the role that memory has for action in Bergson and Merleau-Ponty, and the idea of an ideal weight or influence that the past can have on our action. Yet there is another weight that needs to be added into the mix, namely, the weight of the traces of expressive actions fallen into the weighty, that is, taken broadly, "the written." The expressing body cannot express without some friction, without a foothold in the weighty stuff of the world. As we saw with Collingwood, expression proper is an address to oneself, a becoming clear on what is *to be* expressed, reaching an understanding of that which weighs upon us. In expressing, however, the artist is also speaking for all who have ears to hear. This suggests a different understanding of communication, what makes communication possible is not the ideal structures that words signify, but the possibility they present for speaking *again*. And this is precisely the structure of the written.

Indeed, the above passage, drawn from Merleau-Ponty's 1959-60 course *Husserl aux limites de la phénoménologie*, places the emphasis here on

¹³⁹ Merleau-Ponty, "Husserl aux limites de la phénoménologie," 29. Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, ed. Bettina Bergo and Leonard Lawlor, trans. John O'Neill and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 25. Henceforth cited as *HLP*. (underlining by the author)

the idea that written language is “an activity which has fallen into obscurity,” and not on the “meaning” of the words or sentences that are represented there. The written is a trace in the way a footprint is a trace, a vestige. As Jean-Luc Nancy writes, the vestige is the “almost nothing [*presque rien*],”¹⁴⁰ the footprint, or the trace of the passerby, and not the imprint of a form. The vestige is only the “remains of a step,” for as “soon as the step is taken, it is past. [...] It thereby cuts a *figure*, but this figure, or this vestige, is not an image [...] The step of the figure, or the vestige, is its tracing, its spacing.”¹⁴¹ In the moment of inscription, the trace exscribes the passing by of a world, of an expressive event. One needs to have a body, a past, a language enough like that of the passer-by to gear into the written, to write the text again by reading it, as Sartre might say.¹⁴² And this is no different from speaking and hearing. The written, then, is a part of our perceptual world that has a specific weight, it affords our eyes and our voice the grooves along which they can “reactivate” an expressive activity, and such a reactivation will never merely repeat or retrieve an ideal meaning, what the first author meant. If I rewrite the text by reading it, that means I take it up from my place in the world and in my history, in a new situation that also contributes to what it “means,” its meaning will be “the reciprocity of the openness of the field realized at an earlier time, *the outcome of this field in me*” (HLP, 22/20, emphasis added).

In this chapter, I propose to explore an important example of reading, of how the reader does not merely “repeat,” but actually takes up and “resume[s] ... the very movement of [another’s] thought” (OPL, 136/84) by gearing into the traces or vestiges of that expressive moment, namely, Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Husserl’s *The Origin of Geometry*. Now, Merleau-Ponty places Husserl’s early reflections on language and speaking squarely in the camp of classical theories. Husserl’s call for an “eidetic of language and a universal grammar” joins with the more or less natural tendency to disparage the confusions of natural language — language is contaminated through contact with the masses. Husserl thus attempts to establish a pure language, or at least a pure grammar, that would allow one to think clearly and without ambiguity, and provide a place from which natural languages could be criticized. “Posited in this

¹⁴⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, “Le vestige de l’art,” in *Les Muses* (Paris: Galilée, 1994), 152. Translated as Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Vestige of Art,” in *The Muses, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 94.

¹⁴¹ Nancy, “Le vestige de l’art,” 156-57/98.

¹⁴² See Sartre’s discussion of reading as an appeal to a directed creation, although this is predicated on a different understanding of meaning to be found by the reader than we will be after here. Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 45.

way as an object before thought," concludes Merleau-Ponty, "language could not play any other role in respect to thought than that of an accompaniment, substitute, memorandum, or secondary means of communication" (OPL, 137/84).

Merleau-Ponty's belief, however, that the "contrast between certain early and late [Husserlian] texts is striking," (OPL, 136/84) was a conviction that he held throughout his published writings. On the first of April 1939, Merleau-Ponty was the first non-Louvain-based researcher study at the Husserl Archives. Upon the invitation of R.P. van Breda, Merleau-Ponty spent six days in Louvain where he met Eugen Fink and read some of Husserl's late manuscripts, such as *Ideen II* and the unpublished parts of *Krisis*.¹⁴³ In these later texts, Merleau-Ponty would find the promise of an ambiguity in phenomenology itself, the contradictions between a descriptive phenomenology and a genetic phenomenology (*PhP, Avant Propos/Preface*), and the promise of a new relation between phenomenology and language. "In the more recent writings," suggest Merleau-Ponty in 1951, "language appears as an original way of intending certain objects, as thought's body (*Formel und transzendente Logik*), or even as the operation through which thoughts that without it would remain private phenomena acquire intersubjective value and, ultimately, ideal existence (*Ursprung der Geometrie*)" (OPL, 137/84-85). This latter text was certainly read by Merleau-Ponty in the key 1939 edition of the *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* (January) dedicated to Husserl, and upon which Théodore Geraets is correct to place such an emphasis.¹⁴⁴ In *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Merleau-Ponty attributes to this text the pivotal idea of "thinking according to others" (*PhP*, 218/208).

Merleau-Ponty's interest in this text did not dissipate when he "turned" from what he dubbed a lingering "philosophy of consciousness," perhaps "too Husserlian," that blocked his initial studies from reaching the deepest problems of philosophy.¹⁴⁵ As Françoise Dastur insists, in the

¹⁴³ H.L. Van Breda, "Merleau-Ponty and the Husserl Archive in Louvain," in *Texts and Dialogues: On Philosophy, Politics and Culture*, ed. James Barry and Hugh J. Silverman (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1992).

¹⁴⁴ Gereats argues that this special issue on Husserl and the trip to Leuven, both in 1939, mark profoundly the development of Merleau-Ponty's thought. Théodore F Geraets, *Vers une nouvelle philosophie transcendantale. La genèse de la philosophie de Maurice Merleau-Ponty jusqu'à la Phénoménologie de la perception*, vol. 39, *Phaenomenologica* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), 29, and all of chapter 1. Henceforth cited as *VPT*.

¹⁴⁵ This discussion would have to also address the complex role of Heidegger's influence on Merleau-Ponty. For interesting and competing commentaries, see: Renaud Barbaras, "Perception and Movement: The End of the Metaphysical Approach," in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*, ed. Leonard Lawlor and Fred Evans, *Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); Emmanuel de

Origin of Geometry text Husserl himself “came to see in language, through a surprising reversal in relation to his earlier position, the condition of possibility of ideal objectivity.”¹⁴⁶ The surprising point is that no longer does the embodiment of the ideal in the sensible threaten the purity of the ideal, but it now is seen to make the ideal possible.¹⁴⁷ Far from being “too Husserlian,” the stakes of Merleau-Ponty’s late philosophy, namely how to account for the intersubjective generation and sharing of meaning, are precisely those at issue in Husserl’s fragment, and as Renaud Barbaras has put it, “The Origin of Geometry” was “a text upon which Merleau-Ponty never stopped meditating.”¹⁴⁸ This is the key to Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of what is at stake in *The Origin of Geometry*, for the very possibility for truth to be *generated* in history demands a rethinking of expression and the truths expressed, and a “remanipulation of the distinctions between fact and essence, real and ideal” (HLP, 20/19).¹⁴⁹ Thus, it is hardly surprising that in the late 1950s, during the initial formulation of his phenomenologically inspired ontology, Merleau-Ponty would offer a course called *Husserl at the limits of Phenomenology*.

Thus, even if on the surface this *rapprochement* of Merleau-Ponty to Husserl could provide a significant difficulty for the reading of the paradoxical logic of expression we have been sketching, it also perhaps offers us the perfect introduction to the subtlety of this logic. As suggested by Merleau-Ponty’s mention of the *Origin of Geometry* in the quotation above, Husserl’s aim is to show how ideal objectivities can be constructed through subjective meaning-giving acts. In other words, *The Origin of Geometry* is surely still an attempt to understand expression as the *making public of the inner* as understood by the classical theorist. Husserl hopes to demonstrate how words gain a meaning that is true for all, and hence

Saint Aubert, *Vers une ontologie indirecte: Sources et enjeux critiques de l'appel à l'ontologie chez Merleau-Ponty* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2006), 223ff; Leonard Lawlor, “Verflechtung: The Triple Significance of Merleau-Ponty’s Course Notes on Husserl’s ‘The Origin of Geometry,’” in *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, ed. Bettina Bergo and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), ix-xvi; Bettina Bergo, “Philosophy as *Perspectiva Artificialis*: Merleau-Ponty’s Critique of Husserlian Constructivism,” in *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, ed. Bettina Bergo and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 174-76.

¹⁴⁶ Françoise Dastur, *Chair et langage. Essais sur Merleau-Ponty* (La Versanne, France: Encre Marine, 2001), 49.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Barbaras, *De l’être du phénomène*, 74.

¹⁴⁹ Indeed, as we have mentioned, the sister project of *The Prose of the World* was precisely to be called *The Origin of Truth* (*Inédit*, 8/44), and morphed into *The Visible and the Invisible*, indicating precisely a new language for rethinking the relation between the real and the ideal.

fixed and sharable. This attempt leaves Husserl caught in the illusion of the retroactive effect of truth. As Lawlor rightly notes, by holding onto something of a Husserlian consciousness, Merleau-Ponty is able to resist a complete "mysticism of language."¹⁵⁰

There is, then, an absolutely central aspect to the paradox of expression here, and it emerges precisely from the way in which expression *is a making public*, if not of the inner as a completed and pure idea or thought, then at least of the *sens* of a gesture and a world that passed by and left behind a trace. The material support of the expression, the real weight left behind in the expressive fields and reconfigurations of potential actions of real bodies are not to be read as signs pointing towards an ideal meaning, but rather as the call for a retracing that both joins with the expression and alters it through what I bring with me. What is made public, then, *is the activity of expression*, of responding to ideal weight in real weight, which is the unspoken conviction that we have when we come across words or traces of human behavior. Re-performing, not representing is the basis of communication. This structure leads Sartre to say, "if you open [the book], you assume responsibility for it,"¹⁵¹ or Derrida to talk about responsibility, to "take upon oneself the exchange of sense in order to stand guard over its progression."¹⁵² This idea of a performative understanding of meaning will be the direct focus in the chapter that follows on metaphor and performance, and I will introduce this change with a short section on the fatal logic of writing below. Before this, however, let us pause over Husserl's late fragment and then Merleau-Ponty's reading of it in order to understand the role of writing or the trace in Merleau-Ponty.

¹⁵⁰ Lawlor, "Verflechtung," xvi.

¹⁵¹ Sartre, *What is Literature?*, 48.

¹⁵² Jacques Derrida, "Introduction," in *L'Origine de la géométrie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962), 149. Translated as: Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1978). We are of course drawing this second connection from Lawlor, "Verflechtung," xxxi..

Husserl at the Limits of the Paradox of Expression

(a) *Weight and the Rückfrage*

Husserl's *The Origin of Geometry* has much less to do with geometry than it does with 'origins,' and from the beginning he distances himself from an historical investigation with the aim of revealing the first geometer. Husserl characterizes his method as *Rückfrage*, a return or "regressive" inquiry "into the submerged original beginnings of geometry as they necessarily must have been in their 'primally instituting' function [*urstiftende*]."¹⁵³ The identity of Galileo, despite its historical interest, is secondary to the return inquiry into the instituting acts of a tradition — the *Rückfrage* is specifically not looking for anything Galileo had "explicitly in mind," indeed Galileo was using geometry, not making it thematic.¹⁵⁴ Thus, the investigation aims to go below the empirical history of a specific science named geometry and to reach to the "deepest problems of meaning, problems of science and of the history of science in general, and indeed in the end to problems of a universal history in general" (OG, 93). Thus, Derrida is quite right to note that this text, like many of Husserl's, "has both a programmatic and an exemplary sense."¹⁵⁵ Take, for example, Husserl's assertion that:

...our interest shall be the inquiry back into the most original sense in which geometry once arose, was present as the tradition of millennia, is still present for us, and is still being worked on in a lively forward development; we inquire into that sense in which it appeared in history for the first time—in which it had to appear, even though we

¹⁵³ Edmund Husserl, "The Origin of Geometry," in *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, ed. Leonard Lawlor and Bettina Bergo (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 94. Henceforth cited as *OG*.

¹⁵⁴ It seems to me that there is a tension in Husserl's thought here which could be quite consequential given his notion of reactivation as the vaccine against the seduction of language. On the face of it, it sound much like Collingwood's discussion of the corruption of consciousness. And on Husserl's own account, the first geometers are no more in "clear" possession of the objects of their claims than are the functionaries of the regional ontology.

¹⁵⁵ Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, 27.

know nothing of the first creators and are not even asking after them.
(OG, 94)

Husserl calls the ready-made geometry from which we begin such an inquiry a “tradition,” and “human existence moves within innumerable traditions” (OG, 94), which we can generally call the cultural world. The tradition thus is already being characterized as the past that makes the present what it is, the past that shapes how we live in the present, and to whose origins or provenance we are ignorant. In a very direct sense then, we are repeating here a reading of “weight,” this time seen through the notion of the weight of tradition that shapes our lived present, perhaps more broadly conceived than Bergson’s past that is utterly personal.¹⁵⁶

Now, the production of tradition emerges from Husserl’s invocation of the primary instituting function [*urstiftende*] of spiritual acts or simply productions [*Leistung*], which is a concept that both Merleau-Ponty and Derrida stress in their readings, for “everything traditional has arisen out of human production” (OG, 94). Husserl’s particular use of the image of production seems to imply the impossibility of pure production, given that any act of production requires materials, and those materials are not produced in the production, but found by the inventor. We might of course here plant a small worry in the mind of the reader, for this notion of production would at first glance seem to miss the point that the materials are themselves changed in the act of production: not only are they shaped into a product, but their nature is retroactively changed as having been prepared for this change, as waiting for this producer. This looping back effect, as we have seen, is of utmost importance for the concept of expression, and also is what creates the illusion that the words always meant what they have here come to mean, and so we would have to require that the theory of production itself not begin from products, but rather begin with the dynamics of production. Of course, Husserl’s main point is not about production, but rather about the justification of the reverse interrogation of tradition, the *Rückfrage*, the working back through tradition to uncover the initial transcendental constitution that must have taken place such that our tradition comes down to us as it does.

Indeed, geometry is undoubtedly a tradition passed down through generations of geometers as a ready-made set of propositions and algorithms, which must have emerged on the basis of a first institution, or as the first acquisitions of “first creative activities” (OG, 95). Having been built out of spiritual productions, it continues forward through additional spiritual acts, of course leaving this notion of spiritual acts broadly con-

¹⁵⁶ It seems the early Husserl had only room for a personal history as well through the notion of retention.

strued. The type of progress is one we might call horizontal progress, in that the total of all acquisitions are implicated in the style and horizons of the original production. For Husserl, geometry never suffers a complete rupture in the Kuhnian sense, but is a tradition through its horizontal structure, which makes progress, and tradition possible. Yet Husserl insists that there must nonetheless be sense in talking about a first production, a first *Vorhabe*, which is to say “pre-possession” (OG, 95).

Husserl makes a bold assertion here, one that perhaps opens up phenomenology to the logic of expression we are seeking, and indeed a claim that is taken up enthusiastically by both Merleau-Ponty and Derrida:

But when we note that mathematics has the manner of being a lively forward movement from acquisitions as premises to new acquisitions, in whose ontic sense that of the premises is included (the process continuing in this manner), then it is clear that the *total* sense of geometry [...] could not have been present as a prepossession and then as a mobile fulfillment at the beginning. (OG, 95)

Husserl must have in mind a certain type of anticipation, a certain intuition such as when we begin a sentence or melody not knowing how it will end, but nonetheless towards an ending that we vaguely sense or “pro-tend.” Husserl calls this a more “primitive formation of sense” that comes before the development of the higher-level scientific articulation of it. And indeed, it is in the realization of what is merely anticipated that there is the sense of “successful realization” (OG, 95). The sense of successful realization comes from the prepossession as a sort of “self-evidence” to the actor, the producer of the ideal object, but this “self-evidence” is only actually present in “actual success.”

Here we see something of the logic of expression at work, particularly the idea that expression responds to and brings into being something that was not at all fully formed prior to its expression — although as we will see Husserl quickly restricts this creativity to the institution of ideal objects which then are pure and fixed. With this Husserl turns to the question that guides the rest of the text, namely the problem of how a subjective production of an ideal object can become “objectively there for ‘everyone’ (for actual and possible geometers, or those who understand geometry)” (OG, 96). Importantly, Husserl emphasizes that the “process of prepossessions and successful realizations occurs, after all, purely within the *subject* of the inventor... its whole content lies, so to speak, within his mental space” (OG, 96). As we have already begun to see, this reinstitution of the pure inner cannot stand in the face of the logic of expression, for expression always happens out there, in the weighty. In other words, with this assertion, Husserl retreats back towards a classical understand-

ing of subjectivity that we are trying to move beyond. For the time being, let us continue with Husserl to see how there are some intriguing nascent gestures beyond this transcendental solipsism.

(b) *Writing as Communication become Virtual*

For Husserl, the question is how the forms of geometry are, from their first institution, available for all who take them up, and are identical in all reproductions that begin from the prepossessed forms of the tradition called geometry. Husserl here famously generalizes this structure (without further argument) to a “whole class” of spiritual productions that we call the “cultural world” and that includes even the constructions of “fine literature.”¹⁵⁷ The point is phrased here in a notion of repeatability: *ideal objects*, which must exist as that to which we respond or which we “intend” whenever we speak empirically, says Husserl, exist only once, and are thus unchanged in translation, unsullied by repetition, and identical in whatever language they may come from - “no matter how many times it has been sensibly uttered, from the original expression [*Aussprache*] and writing-down [*Niederschrift*] to the innumerable oral utterances or written and other documentations” (OG, 96).¹⁵⁸ As Husserl assures us, the exemplars exist just like other bodies in spatio-temporal dimensions, but this is not the case he insists, with what we might call the ideal objectivities of the objects. “In a certain way,” he tries to clarify, “ideal objects do exist objectively in the world, but it is only in virtue of these two-leveled repetitions and ultimately in virtue of sensibly embodying repetitions” (OG, 96). Is he glimpsing here a sense of metastable equilibrium or an ideal weight in the world?

Consider this two-leveled repetition, for here he quite clearly recognizes that the ideal objects, despite their objectivity, depend quite literally on the “sensibly embodying repetitions” (OG, 96). In speaking the word *squirrel*, the speaker is both in the process of bringing about a sensible presentation and, at the same time or in the same act itself, is repeating that word that exists only once in the English language. It “has, from its primal institution [*Urstiftung*], an existence which is peculiarly supra-

¹⁵⁷ To be fair to Husserl, he does include a footnote that seems to indicate that there is indeed at least a problem of translation in terms of literature that does not exist for the sciences (cf. OG, 96; 115 note 2).

¹⁵⁸ This short paraphrase of Husserl’s certainly mixes the oral and the written, but the point to take away is that of the purity of the ideal for Husserl.

temporal [*überzeitliches*]” (OG, 96).¹⁵⁹ The attitude of the speaker or the listener is always towards something, is through and through intentional in the phenomenological sense, and indeed, should we be turned towards the material expression, making the words or the empirical structures thematic, we would immediately lose the sense.

For Husserl, then, there is a visible and an invisible side to each meaningful act. In order for an act to be meaningful, both a material trace *and* an ideal objectivity must be repeated, the latter being an intentional act. Moving towards how we understand the production of a material exemplar as a response to the ideal object, there is a sense in which the body that expresses is subject to an ideal weight in its very way of being as weight. Of course, for Husserl, the possibility of this thematic shifting makes the investigation possible, and allows him ultimately (or from the outset, for that matter) to set up the ideal as a pure objectivity in relation to its impure material exemplars. But the logic of expression is no more a question of a linguistic paradox than it is one of how to begin a psychological investigation—it is a paradox of the things themselves. Husserl is thus mistaken to take the conditions of a phenomenological investigation to be generalizable to the structure of the phenomenon itself.

Husserl here is most intrigued not by the reality of this two-leveled repetition, but rather by how such a two-leveled repetition can lead from the solipsism of a single “first” inventor to exist objectively for any possible geometer who may come along. Husserl summarizes the question in the following way: “how does geometrical ideality [...] proceed from its primary intrapersonal origin, where it is a structure within the conscious space of the first inventor’s soul, to its ideal objectivity” (OG, 97)? The answer, he foreshadows, is through the notion of *Sprachleib*, or the “linguistic living body” (OG, 97), which will morph into the written trace shortly. In order to answer this question, Husserl turns to the notion of horizon as world. The world is the constant horizon of things, our interests, our activities, and other men [sic]. Whether we are conscious of these or not, we are at least pre-consciously aware of our neighbors, our friends, and the others in general, and vaguely aware of other influences though we might be at pains to ever make them explicit. Others exist within our horizon of a civilization and, according to Husserl, we “know” we are living in a civilization or culture, which is a “linguistic community” (OG, 98). Here is where “common language” belongs. Indeed, although this is

¹⁵⁹ Of course, this is in some sense just a new way of saying what was true in the *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, and even evident in that early discussion of “expression” in the *Logical Investigations*. The underlying point is that the sense of an utterance can be separated from its material presentation or articulation, a dualism not unrelated to that of the body and the soul.

certainly not intended to be a Freudian pre-consciousness, there is a sense that this horizontal structure is the personal and communal “available.”

People express themselves, talk about the surroundings, name the things, the world is the world for all — in other words, humanity is a community of individuals who have the ability to reciprocally express themselves and to be, normally, fully understood (OG, 98). “Thus men as men, fellow men, world—the world of which men, of which we, always talk and can talk—and, on the other hand, language, are inseparably intertwined [*verflochten*]; and one is always certain of the inseparable relational unity, though usually only implicitly, in the manner of a horizon.” (OG, 98). From this intertwining of men, world, and language, Merleau-Ponty will find much inspiration. But beyond the ability for us to express the horizon amongst our community, this still leaves open the question as to how the geometer can make a new ideality exist once and for all. This is more than a sharing of common experience as in psychical transfer; for Husserl, the goal is to set up an ideality once and for all, to give some content to the pure grammar and logic of *Formal and Transcendental Logic*.

In order to sketch an answer, Husserl turns to the temporal structure of retention that he developed earlier. Although in the first moment of the spiritual production of geometry there is a vividness of self-evidence, a first “eureka!,” if you will, it nonetheless:

...passes—though in such a way that the activity immediately turns into the passivity of the flowingly fading consciousness of what-has-just-now-been. Finally this “retention” disappears, but the “disappeared” passing and being past has *not* become *nothing* for the subject in question: it can be *reawakened*. To the passivity of what is at first obscurely awakened and what perhaps emerges with greater and greater clarity there belongs the possible activity of a recollection [*Wiedererinnerung*] in which the past experiencing [*Erleben*] is lived through in a quasi-new and a quasi-active way. (OG, 99, emphasis added)

The “original being-itself-there, in the immediacy of its first *Erzeugung* [production],” (OG, 98) experienced by the geometer in the successful expression of the geometrical thought sinks into the retentional field of the individual. Assuming we communicate the thought to another person, all we have done is added another retentional field. Ideal objectivity must be radically different from this *adding on* of consciousnesses. The objects of geometry are valid *supra-temporally*.¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ As Merleau-Ponty phrases Husserl’s point: “ideal objectivity, supratemporal, accessible to everyone and [to] all times” (HLP, 24/21).

Husserl returns to a conservative position on expression through his reification of certain ideal objects. He posits that there is a difference with regards to mathematical objects in that this reawakening, should it be fulfilled in accordance with the self-evidence of the original production, will result in a second production of the identical object, and so with the recognition of its repetition and the self-evidence of the first act is produced a double self-evidence of identity between this new one and the first act. This is a sort of doubling of the self-evidence and an original "coincidence" between the productions (OG, 99). With the first institution of sense, a capacity for indefinite iteration is "co-instituted," a repetition that will be true to the self-evidence of the original production and so will be the formation of a tradition without remainder or lacunae. But this self-evidence remains locked, admits Husserl, in the bounds of a subjective consciousness. The move to temporality does not move beyond the theory of ideal objects beyond a single consciousness.¹⁶¹

To move into the realm of objectivity, Husserl reminds us that for every speaker there exists a community of fellows in a relation of language and empathy. There is, it seems, not the mere invocation of a listener who interprets the signs received, but rather a community of fellows who can *actively* re-understand (OG, 99), which is itself a production or reproduction of that which was originally produced in the first inventor's mental space. For Husserl, an identity between *noetic acts of reactivation* results in a necessary identity on the side of the *noematic* products as well. In other words, there are pure objects of thought that are communicated by actors "'coinciding" in their activity" (OG, 99). As a production, and not a product, we can see that the embodying of the ideal into linguistic bodies can be repeated, the same steps can be followed, and the same evidences will be obtained. In the repetitions of its *production process*, the community can share the ideal object.

This emphasis on the production and not on the product is important, as Derrida shows, in that it marks a move of Husserl's away from an over-emphasis on the *noema* as the content that remains identical for many intentional acts, whereas in this remarkable text he finds himself led to invoke a genetic phenomenology. As Derrida explains, the shift in Husserl from his early work to the later is the movement from a reduction in which the eidetic act was one of "iteration of noema," while in genetic phenomenology, and in spite of the fact that the historical reduction operates also via variation, this time it is *reactivating* and *noetic*. "Instead of repeating the constituted sense of an ideal object, one will have to re-awaken the dependence of sense with respect to an inaugural and

¹⁶¹ Thus we see here again this failure to recognize the true nature of expression beyond a pure interiority.

institutive act concealed under secondary passivities and infinite sedimentations—a primordial act which created the object whose *eidos* is determined by the iterative reduction.”¹⁶² The bridge to the identity of the ideal object is through the repetition of the instituting production and the resulting identity of the objects constituted (and of course the co-instituted capacity for recognizing the identity across multiple productions).

Even if the original expression “co-institutes” the capacity for pure repetition, there is still no “objectivity” introduced (OG, 99), for it does not account for the “*persisting existence* of the ‘ideal objects’ even during periods in which the inventor and his fellows are no longer wakefully so connected or even are no longer alive. What is lacking,” stresses Husserl, “is their continuing-to-be even when no one has realized them in self-evidence” (OG, 99-100). *Enter writing*. The written makes communication possible without speakers, so to speak, or as Husserl has it, “without immediate or mediate personal address.” The written is “communication become virtual” (OG, 100). Written signs, received passively, can be transformed back into their corresponding activity. By writing, the *act* of writing itself is sedimented, and since every human is able to *Aussprechen*, or express, we can all “reawaken” the sense sedimented in the written word. The writing down transforms the self-evident structures of the original production into a sedimentation that can be reactivated. Although writing thus takes on a very important role, it depends upon our “being” as speakers that can (re)perform the living evidence of speaking. The important thing to take here is the notion of human existence as “speaking beings” [*sprechende Wesen*].

Consider this claim that writing is the key to ensuring the “continuing-to-be” of the ideal objects. The change that Husserl sees in relation to writing down marks both an advance in phenomenological thinking and a confirmation of Husserl’s position in the classical interpretation of communication. For Husserl, there is no problem in thinking about the completion of an ideal object in the “mental space” of a single subject, as we saw above. So, when he comes to connect us to the production of the ideal objectivity out of a subjective act, he needs to break the ideal object out of an enclosed mental life, and hence out of a retention that returns even here to the personal level. But this again brings up this problematic assertion that the subject has the (infallible) capacity for identity recognition, a capacity co-instituted with the original institution. If we hold to the side the question of whether or not there is a truth that preexists and outlasts all material or actual statements of its existence, and Husserl’s later invocation of the persistence of the “human surrounding world” in order to avoid the question of whether geometrical truths are made or

¹⁶² Derrida, “Introduction,” 47-48.

discovered, then the question becomes less one about the role of writing with regards to the virtual than one of the virtual in itself, less one of truth in repetition than one of repetition and the trajectory of truths through those very performances of traces. Now, if Husserl has just suggested that the ideal object certainly does subsist in the retentional field, but that we need writing to break it out to be shared, then this reveals that he does not have the apparatus to think about expression in terms of accomplishment, and that he has taken the highly developed inner monologue of speech to be basic, rather than as a phenomenon derived from a more fundamental structuring of expression.

Leaving aside this objection, we can round out the reading of Husserl's text before going on to consider later ways in which its gestures were extended. Now for Husserl, of course, the crisis is that nothing necessitates a reactivation of the original sense-fulfilling production — there is a lapse into what other philosophers might call "idle chatter" or "the corruption of consciousness." Through the seduction of language, the original self-evidence of language is lost by its sedimentation, for the use of the sedimented can remain passive until it leads to some breakdown of reliability. Regardless of how this changes things, we certainly have to agree with Husserl that the sedimentation of spiritual products is "unavoidable," and even if we disagree that the reason for this is that it "can be taken up again at first merely passively and be taken over by anyone else," we have to admit that "such constructions remain a constant danger" (OG, 101).

We can guard against such dangers — an injunction Husserl points towards the individual scientist — by resolving to re-activate the original self-evidence of the foundational production. In the fragment, he goes so far as to name a norm that should guide the functionaries of the sciences, a *common responsibility* to the maintenance of the ideal self-evidence sedimented beneath their activities and theories. In other words, an ethics of the functionaries of meaning (OG, 101).¹⁶³ Now Husserl rightly steps back

¹⁶³ This idea of an ethics of those charged with or caught up in the repetition and the carrying forward of the ideal weight is indeed again a pregnant suggestion of the pursuits of this dissertation. However, a mere functionary ethics misses the creative aspect so central to the action side of expression explored above, and also obscures the notion of an ethics of the metastable that falls on us individually to be explored below. If bureaucrats run the machine, the responsibility lies between them, for they "salvage, preserve, and take up" this system through their actions (OPL, 155/95), the war machine is not set up by a few "Machiavellis and serviced by the obedience of others," by the functionaries, it is prepared for in every gesture that sustains the potential violence. This is a point that will be essential in our chapter on Merleau-Ponty's politics below. The passage is from: The passage is from: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "La guerre a eu lieu," in *Sens et non-sens* (Paris: Éditions Nagel, 1948). Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The

from such claims, for *progress* requires the taking forward of the sedimentation without the need for total reactivation. That the reactivation is possible, that the forgetfulness is not a complete obliteration, is guaranteed by writing. By writing, the *public* existence of ideal objectivities is secured through the creation of the grooves that any rational mind could follow.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the few remaining pages of this fragment is the idea that the cultural structures (and any given proposition as an exemplar), insofar as they appear on the scene in the form of a tradition, make a "claim" to be the sedimentation of sense. This notion that the trace makes a *claim* to *have been* a moment of sense or to be the opportunity for sense to be reactivated, no matter from whence the trace comes or how the trace is produced, is not something that Husserl dwells upon. However, he does admit the claim is justified only by the actual capacity for reactivation. And the claim leads then to assume itself to be justified given the original formations of sense, the "primal premises, so to speak, which lie in the prescientific cultural world" (OG, 107).

In any case, the considerations and sketches of methodological reactivation of self-evidence in the present formations lead Husserl to cast the entire enterprise as one in the philosophy (or genetic phenomenology) of history. "We can say now," suggests Husserl, that "history is from the start nothing other than the vital movement of the coexistence [*Miteinander*] and the interweaving [*Ineinander*] of original formations and sedimentations of sense" (OG, 109). History is not a set of externally related facts, but a dynamic development of structures that have internal relations and that can be discovered through a rigorous working backwards, or as we might say, a de-sedimentation. Rather than getting bogged down in the Husserlian account of history or his actual attempt to begin a sketch of the world that we can assume for that "first" geometer, those elements that must have been there for the first productions, I propose to move on to Merleau-Ponty's reading of this text and the unmistakable logic of expression he draws out of this production of ideal objectivities.

War Has Taken Place," in *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964). Henceforth cited as *GL*.

Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxical Logic of Writing

(a) *Resumé: The Weight of the Whole Past and the Whole Future of Culture...*

*...ma corporéité est communicable – participable
dimension – par elle je peux ‘verstehen’ d’autre
Corps, et ainsi mettre en connexion mon expérience
avec la leur.*

– Merleau-Ponty¹⁶⁴

In the opening sentences of the *Resumé* of the 1959-60 course, Merleau-Ponty sketches a few methodological considerations with regards to reading a philosopher, or more generally the history of philosophy.¹⁶⁵ Merleau-Ponty rejects the notion of an objective reading which would be a summary of the “neatly defined concepts, of arguments responding to perennial problems, and of conclusions which permanently solve the problems” (*RC*, 159; *HLP*, 5). In the works left behind by a philosopher, which are only considered fixed and finalized “works” through some artificial interruption, there is an “unthought” [*impensé*] that emerges from listening to the direction [*sens*] in which the literal meanings left behind were trying to think, by allowing the “lateral implications” to guide us as much as the “manifest or frontal meaning” (*RC*, 160; *HLP*, 5). This, of course, is Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of Husserl’s claim that we need a “poetry of the history of philosophy,” a “participation in an operative thought” (*RC*, 160; *HLP*, 5). That he places the emphasis on creative reading before embarking on a reading of a text about writing seems hardly

¹⁶⁴ “... my corporeality is communicable – participable, dimension – through my corporeality I can “verstehen” other bodies and in this way I can put my experience into relation with theirs.” *HLP*, 87/71. [Although I do not focus on the question in this dissertation, I would like to thank Professor Lawlor for raising the question of animality at my public defense. In particular, Merleau-Ponty follows this quote with a brief invocation of how my body can “understand” the bird, thanks to both of us being bodily and ultimately both of us as sharing the ground of the earth. See: *HLP*, 87/71-72. For Lawlor’s considered position on animality and ethics, see: Leonard Lawlor, *This Is Not Sufficient: An Essay on Animality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

¹⁶⁵ As Leonard Lawlor observes, this theme is also taken up in Merleau-Ponty, “Le philosophe et son ombre.” See: Lawlor, “Verflectung,” xi.

irrelevant. The reader, in this case, Merleau-Ponty, participates in a production, but is neither fully in control nor fully controlled by either the authority of the author or the traces on the page.

Following this notion of an expressive reading, Merleau-Ponty suggests the need to discover a “third dimension,” a characteristic of his thought that is consistent throughout his career.¹⁶⁶ The third dimension at issue here is one of a “depth history or the genesis of ideality” (*RC*, 161; *HLP*, 6). There is a third dimension for certain bodies that are subject to the weight of the ideal, and this dimension is not made up of an objective “out-there” and a subjective “in-here,” but is always already an irreducible expressive factor in any action. The instituted field of geometry is that depth lived beyond the literal, it sketches out a direction [*sens*] for thought, inexplicitly, and it is this “sens,” if you will, that we will find the lines along which the tradition will move. Thanks to this surplus of sense, this depth history, the tradition can be passed down, not as a ready-made object, but as an opening towards a “second creation,” which itself will entail more openings, “new spaces of thought,” until the whole direction of implication is exhausted (*RC*, 161-2; *HLP*, 6). Merleau-Ponty is able in this way to rethink or recast ideality as a field, as “a sense of initiation or a sense of openness which involves continuous production and reproduction” (*RC*, 162; *HLP*, 6). Expression “launches” culture toward a future, both through its forgetfulness, which is its openness to second creations, and through its carrying forward of its historicity, or that weight of the past that it bears forward creatively.

Indeed, the initial road into thinking about the “surplus” of sense that is to be found in any text, thanks to depth or depth-history, is quickly complemented in this summary by a nod towards the important theme of production. “Ideality is history because it rests upon acts and because ‘the only way to grasp an idea is to produce it’” (*RC*, 163; *HLP*, 7). For Merleau-Ponty, “the historicity of an idea is the positing, through the living human, of a task which is not uniquely his, but one that echoes back to earlier foundations” (*RC*, 163; *HLP*, 7). What we need to hear is a rejection, then, of the ideal object as a thing, and rather understand it as a trajectory. The living human literally summons up the whole history of productions, which is not a reference to documents or evidential claims, nor a question of consciously holding all of these acquisitions *in* mind. Rather, in the living and expressive body, “history has its point of insertion in him, in

¹⁶⁶ In a loosely related essay and with a thinly veiled allusion to the course that we are considering, Bernard Waldenfels, proceeds to trace this attempt to find “a third dimension on this side of subject and object as a staple of Merleau-Ponty’s approach.” Bernard Waldenfels, “Perception and Structure in Merleau-Ponty,” in *Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Ted Toadvine, *Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 36.

the hinge between his sensible or natural being and his active and productive being. He has only to think in order to know that thought is made, that it is culture and history" (*HLP*, 7; *RC*, 163). History, or the depth of meaning, inserts itself in the individual, and is thus passed on to another generation, but is also shaped by the individual's life and accidents into which it arrives. Merleau-Ponty calls it both a *relance*, "reverberation" according to the translation, but perhaps better captured as a "re-launching," or a "re-vival" of the past (to avoid the difference sense of echo or weakened perceptions), and a *Vorhabe*, or pre-possession of the future here in the present thought, the living of the ideal in the weight of the material: "the living human summons up the whole past and the whole future of culture as its witness" (*RC*, 163; *HLP*, 7).

Moreover, for Merleau-Ponty, we need to remember this moment of crossing in which the act responds to and plays forward the "whole past and whole future," in relation to the point made by Simondon that "every gesture has meaning and is symbolic in relation to the whole life and to the totality of lives" (*ILFI*, 334). This massive metastable presence is not "present," but is rather the third dimension is that *not nothing* of the invisible, the particularly fruitful understanding of negativity that Merleau-Ponty develops in his latter work. Merleau-Ponty makes it clear then that there is an important impasse in trying to think about the passage from a "pure and detached ideality" to the "space of consciousness," or vice versa. By placing the emphasis on Husserl's comments regarding the interweaving of our horizons or the horizons of humanity with language, Merleau-Ponty sketches a reciprocal chiasmatic relation in which language is carried by our relationship to the world and the world is carried by language. Through language, our world and horizon is "an *offen endlos* [open unlimited]" (*HLP*, 25/22). And thus, the very structure of being both the actor and the point of passage for ideality allows us to think of the ideal as never "pure and detached" (*RC*, 163; *HLP*, 7). And here we can't help but note the structure of the paradox of expression, between pure repetition and pure creation.

Merleau-Ponty says that "[a]lready within my space of consciousness, there is a sort of message from me to me" (*RC*, 165; *HLP*, 7); and this *écart* is the space of consciousness, or that dimension of crossing we just mentioned. Moreover, he emphasizes the trajectory of production to which my act is joined in a sense of solidarity:

I can be sure today of thinking the same thought that I thought yesterday because the wake which it leaves is or could be *retraced* exactly by a new act of productive thought, which is the only genuine accomplishment of my remembered thought. I think in this near past, or rather yesterday's thought passes into today's thought: there is an

encroachment [*empiètement*]¹⁶⁷ of the passive upon the active which is reciprocal. (RC, 165; HLP, 7-8).

The past can come back into the present by a re-production, which is active and so is a source of agency of the body that carries its past forward, not relying on the “efficacy” of the past in the present, but upon the re-acting of the past in the present. This is a “re-following” of the groves left behind by my former acts, and so his stress on a gap [*écart*] within the self between the active and the passive sides of speaking, or even remembering — each act is then always a passive repetition and an active creation, even in merely remembering, because it requires a “retracing” — “And it is thus that ideality “makes its entrance” [*Eintritt*]” (RC, 165; HLP, 8).

Now, in an important passage, Merleau-Ponty makes many of these points briefly and directly:

No more in my relationship to myself than in my relationship to others is there any question of survey or of pure ideality. There is, however, the overlapping of a passivity by an activity: that is how I think within the other person and how I talk with myself. Speech is not a product of my active thought, standing in a secondary relation to it. It is my practice, my operation, my ‘*Funktion*,’ my destiny. Every spiritual production is a response and an appeal, a coproduction. (RC, 165-6; HLP, 8)

Thus, Merleau-Ponty alludes to the consequences of finding expression always between pure creation and pure repetition through concepts such as response, appeal, and co-production. There is no pure ideality, not even in my relation to myself, there is no possibility of *survol*, a term which he always identified with the philosophy of reflection. Rather, there is an *encroachment* [*empiètement*] between the active and the passive. This, as we have already begun to see, is precisely the structure that we are calling the logic of expression.

(b) Communication Become Virtual, Version 2.0

How does this emphasis on historicity and production connect to the written? In fact, as Lawlor notes, this course demonstrates that a

¹⁶⁷ I will return to this term in relation to the exhaustive tracing it has received from Emmanuel de Saint Aubert. *Empiètement*, as I hope to show below, is just another name for the paradoxical logic of expression.

reading of Merleau-Ponty as only interested in speech is a caricature.¹⁶⁸ Indeed, Merleau-Ponty more or less adopts Husserl's position here, though in such a way that emphasizes the essential role of writing, that is, the necessity of a weighty side to all expression. Merleau-Ponty proceeds, in a move repeated more radically by Derrida, to follow Husserl in his invocation of the "essential mutation" introduced by writing. He agrees with Husserl that, if "ideal being subsists outside all actual communication," and if "ideal being seems to preexist speech," then it requires a support which breaks out of the individual memories of speaking humans and institutes a generalized saying that in principle belongs to anyone and everyone: "the speaking of *x* to *x*," as Merleau-Ponty puts it, or the "making of communication possible without immediate or mediate personal address; [the written]" (RC, 166; HLP, 8; OG, 100).

The written is, then, a non-subjective capturing of meaning, a capturing of the space that was between me and me, transformed into a structure between *anyone* and *her or himself*, a holding of meaning in a state of readiness but now rather than relying on the fleeting memory of individual minds, it is held in the hard and secure material by a spell that is broken passively by any "living spirit" that happens upon it and holds the key (can *aussprechen*). Indeed, as Lawlor emphasizes, Merleau-Ponty calls the written a *grimoire*, a book of spells (HLP, 69/57). Words, as potential acts of speech, exist as ideal, but live and die with the body of the speaker. Writing, Merleau-Ponty tells us: "metamorphoses definitively the sense of spoken words into ideal being" (RC, 166; HLP, 8). The act of writing, by *making sense* in the weighty, secures a more or less stable place for the ideal. When we trip over some bit of writing, the sense that is *there* is "far beyond our explicit thoughts," and rather than "infinite," it is characterized as "open and endless" (RC; HLP, 8). Hence, sedimentation, a term originally taken from a physical image to give some sense to the ideal continuation of presence in retention, turned back on itself to indicate real sedimentation, that is, documentation, traces, vestiges, the written.

What, we might ask, is "definitively" changed in this passage from spoken words into ideal being as affected by writing? As we saw for Husserl, writing secures the public and timeless nature of ideal objectivities, breaking meaning out of seemingly subjective meaning-giving acts. For Merleau-Ponty, it is not as clear what this change amounts to. He calls this an essential mutation. The written releases the speaking body of the burden of carrying the meaning forward, and the meaning from thenceforth belongs, in principle to everyone. It does not seem correct to claim that the enduring nature of the written is unimportant, but it seems equally as problematic to suggest that the ideal object, if there is indeed

¹⁶⁸ Lawlor, "Verflechtung," x.

such a thing, is secured once written, for the written traces themselves are not free from erosion, safe from destruction, immune to intentional or unintentional misreading, or secure from ideological eradication. Even less so does a written status ensure that a word will mean the same thing in a different time or place, since its written status promises to take it further and farther from its cultural point of production — wild dissemination opens the trace to forces and audiences which could never have been foreseen by the writer.¹⁶⁹ Indeed, it seems to me that to insist upon a difference *in kind* here is to mischaracterize two aspects of weight that we have already begun to develop above. Merleau-Ponty has simply accepted the claim that the written introduces a difference in kind, but it is not clear that we have more than a difference in degree in this case. As Collingwood stresses, expression does not require a timeless idea, just an idea that has some duration. It seems here that writing might secure some *more* duration for the idea, but this is not necessarily a difference in kind.

If I am a body subject to the weight of the past, does not the spoken “write” itself in my history, in my metastable? To think of memory in terms of an ideal inscription and not as through and through bodily is to fall into the same problematic of modern subjectivity, to continue to sustain an idea about subjectivity being locked into the ideal space of consciousness. Ideal weight changes the metastable structures of the *physical* body, shifts the potentials for action, primarily unconsciously, and so should open us up to thinking that weight is about movement, not about materiality. The difference between the inscription of spoken thoughts versus written ones, then, is only one of degree, for writing simply multiplies the potential for the opening up of the spaces of creation, increases the reservoir of the fields of ideality or metastability, which even if less vast are no less enduring fields in spoken inscription or subjective experience than they are in written prose. Writing perhaps lends more weight to the ideal, in both senses, but it doesn’t change the basic foundation of the ideal, which is *Aussprechen*.¹⁷⁰ The corruption of consciousness is as much a bodily refusal of real dialogue as some error of a pure mind.

¹⁶⁹ This is, of course, an important theme in early Derrida, present in his readings of Husserl and other philosophers. See, for instance, “Plato’s Pharmacy” in Jacques Derrida, *La dissémination* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972). Translated as: Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

¹⁷⁰ In a world where the text itself is perhaps even more fleeting than spoken language, where the cell phone SMS system has demonstrated that the written can be just as “phatic” as a spoken word or a hand gesture, where even the telephone seems too time consuming and threatens us with real dialogue, while an email relieves us of this worry, we cannot continue to see here a difference in kind. The very technology of communication itself disrupts such a difference in kind.

Perhaps Merleau-Ponty might respond by saying that the real definitive move in writing is not that the ideal endures, but that it becomes *general*, his notion of the written as the *speaking of x to x*. But this notion of a general address seems also to fail with regards to introducing a difference in kind, for there are many acts of speech that are of general address (“one should always carry one’s identity papers,” “have your passport opened to your photo when you get to the control”). Indeed this could very well characterize the sedimented reservoir from which we draw our acts of speech. But the generality cannot have meaning outside of when it is spoken, and hence to rely on generality here would draw us back into a structuralist or classical model of speaking. A ready-made comment, again from the phatic register, contained nowhere but in the possibilities of a speaking body, is a general structure as much as a written trace is, and is no less so just because it lacks a physical weight. In every case, someone needs to take up the trajectory.

So if we are strict to Merleau-Ponty’s logic, we are always active and passive, general and particular, all the way down, and writing is never in itself general, but has a haze of generality about it in relation to the acting living body. The written cannot have a power of its own within a phenomenologically inspired ontology, cannot be a *pure en soi*, and so the written must only introduce a difference in degree, a proliferation of possibilities of expression. Indeed, is there not a lie at the heart of the written if it claims to be a generalized address, for was not speaking always a speaking *to*, and isn’t Merleau-Ponty himself careful to say “ideal being *seems* to preexist speech” (RC, 166; HLP, 8)? As Merleau-Ponty himself says, “[n]ow the pure sense of the written which sublimates the solidity of things and then communicates that solidity to thoughts is also petrified, sedimented, latent, or dormant sense, as long as no living spirit comes along to awaken it” (RC, 166-7; HLP, 8). The written is an offloaded metastable, but only in relation to bodies that can read.

We turn away now from the safety of the words intended for publication in this *Resumé*, and to the posthumously published notes, undoubtedly delivered differently as a result of Merleau-Ponty’s style of lecturing freely, undoubtedly peppered with additions, repetitions, or ambiguities. Indeed, what could be better than this very example of expression? Merleau-Ponty wrote these lecture notes, full of thoughts of how they would flow forth, of how they would guide him through the arguments and analyses before his audience at the *Collège de France*. He wrote as a manner of off-loading his memory. He stood up and began to speak, and surely created a different lecture than the one he had envisioned. He reproduced *and* created a cultural object, a lecture, he did not repeat truths secured in the letters of these notes. And all we are left with are some grooves to follow in the same trajectory begun in response to an

“I think... I don't know what I think” at 10 rue Saint Michel, but also begun in 1939 in Louvain, and indeed in Husserl's office somewhere before that. Trajectory and performance are the essence of expression.

(c) *Concepts From the Course Notes*

As mentioned already, the course notes of *Husserl at the Limit of Phenomenology* were neither intended nor prepared for publication. They are at times purely exegetical, at other times tantalizingly cryptic, and often they are either elliptical or dreadfully repetitive. Indeed, about a third of the way in, Merleau-Ponty begins his commentary over again with a “new version” (HLP, 31/27). Thus, the format of these notes would simply not lend itself well to an exegetical eye, — even more so than Merleau-Ponty himself says of Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*: “the last texts, which are often fragmented and repetitious, *Wiederholungen*, *Überholungen*, *Anfangsuntersuchungen* <‘repetitious, revisions, beginnings of investigations’>: hardly appropriate for textual explication” (HLP, 16/16). Thus, here I will here present some brief sketches or strategically chosen loci for exegesis of what I take to be the important insights and emphases to be found here with respect to our purposes, namely continuing the exploration of the logic of expression.

(i) *The unthought...surplus of sense...openness...ideality as a field...*

One of the undeniable themes revealed in these notes is Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the idea that there is an unthought or “surplus of sense” (RC, 161; HLP, 6) in any event of speaking beyond the literal meaning or authorial intention of the speaker. The unthought is the metastable or invisible which overflows the literal, and is understood on the model of perception: “...the lived or perceived universe: not only made out of things but also out of reflections, shadows, levels, horizons, which are not nothing, which are *between* the things and delimit their variations in one sole world. Similarly, the work: latent articulation between things said” (HLP, 15/14). The ideal, then, is a field phenomenon just like perception, and so the task of giving a reading is far from seeking a clear cut, separable, fixed meaning. One must see texts and the ideal objects they instituted as situated, linked, and relational — thus, having the unity of a field in which the observer is an important factor. And in this description we need to hear the “not nothing” loudly, for Merleau-Ponty, at least throughout his late philosophy, is seeking to describe a new type of negativity, a “not nothing” that is between something and nothing, or in my language,

weight. This is just the type of negativity that Merleau-Ponty wants to attribute to Husserl, and in particular in Husserl's intimations that ideality is to be placed "in the order of the negative" (HLP, 57/46).¹⁷¹ Again, this has to do with rethinking our experience as a "deep present," which is "the living present as the connection of the present and past of an invisible..." (HLP, 16/16). In other words, that good ambiguity, the paradoxical logic of expression, allows us to think such paradoxical phenomena.

Thus, Husserl (the person or the texts) bears the weight of an unthought. He is not "some ideas," as if we could possess "Husserl," but rather, since it is a field, a thought is something that we need to circumscribe (HLP, 14/14). The act of circumscribing involves marking out or restricting the space in which a movement can take place. Knowing Husserl means being able to recognize the field of Husserl, to move within this field with competency, to adopt his style, to see a particular set of demands as calling for a response. The ideal object, which is linked to a body, brings with it more than physical relations in the field in which it is perceived. It overflows itself in virtual directions, announcing possible responses well beyond the dimensions of physical force or natural or mechanical movement. There exists an "atmosphere" of possibilities around the expression that is never held explicitly nor mastered by the actors who nonetheless can (and do) speak. This atmosphere *is* meaning. But this is not an impersonal investigation, for "we are moments of the open field—and which is not an external, causal relation, which is grasped from a necessity—which is *Sinnogenesis*, sense in genesis" (HLP, 20/19). The surplus of sense, or the unthought in the literal, or the ideal as a field rather than a thing, leads Merleau-Ponty to suggest that we "require a total remanipulation of the distinctions between fact and essence, real and ideal" (HLP, 20/19). Such a remanipulation can only come from thinking the logic of expression as the paradoxical relation between the real and ideal, one of self-arrival, of the ideal in the real expression. And as such, there is a temporality to tradition, "we are in the past and the past lives in us" (HLP, 20/19).

(ii) *Tradition and forgetfulness*

"The essence of tradition," argues Merleau-Ponty, "lies in being not immediately graspable in a static essence. In front of our reflection, geometry and its tradition become a hollow; they open a dimension" (HLP, 22/20). The tradition, then, is not something to be known but is rather that

¹⁷¹ In particular, it is Barbaras, "Perception and Movement: The End of the Metaphysical Approach." and Lawlor, "Verflechtung." who draw out this aspect of his thought most convincingly.

through which we live, that by which we act, that which we repeat by taking it up in new directions. Tradition, then, requires something of us as well: we must, on the one hand, be able to recognize the dimension that is being opened to us and, on the other hand, we must be able to lend our bodies to the task there outlined, we must be able to retrace the “pretraced possibilities” (HLP, 22/20). Merleau-Ponty identifies these pre-traced possibilities as “potential *Wissen*,” the place of possibility from the potentials of one body to bodies (so-disposed) in general. Tradition is not a thing we possess, it is a style, perhaps *the* style, or as we might say, the metastable.

The first of these conditions is met through a familiarity “of all human activity with all human activity” (HLP, 22/20; again at 26/23), or in other words, there is something of a sharing of basic bodily abilities and, within our cultural milieu, sharing of learned cultural bodily skills. In the margins, Merleau-Ponty here scribbles “spiritual worldhood,” “fellow-creatures,” and “it has its body and its world which is language” (HLP, 79 note 31 / 22 note 2). The point is that the trace has been left by a body that is enough like my body, that had a history and a language enough like my history and my language, so that I can *see this trace as something to be read*. The second condition then is met simultaneously, for in the recognition of the traces we are already reading them. This, suggests Merleau-Ponty, is the very nature of the trace: it presents itself as “engendered by human activity,” and as belonging to “our human space,” a phrase he draws from Husserl (HLP, 32-3/28). There is not first a recognition and then a lending of my body to the trace; it is in lending my body to the traces that they are recognized as “to be read.” In coming across the trace I come across an unsigned message, a message from “X to X,” that is assuredly of human origin, but whose empirical origin is already lost. Thus, tradition has an internal characteristic of generality, of an absent origin that opens up the trace to be carried forward by anyone.¹⁷²

So in the “recognition of the spiritual by the spiritual: what I reposit by means of *Leistung* (accomplishment [*création*]) on the basis of traces has been posited through *Leistung*” (HLP, 28/33). Since the ideal object is a field for Merleau-Ponty, that field, even if produced in the same way as the original production, is not the same field. Thus, the production is both a repetition and a creation, for the product is not defined except in its relations, which cannot be the same from producer to producer. This insight is in fact at the heart of what we are calling the logic of expression — every repetition must find a place in a new field of metastable intensities. This is precisely the skill of the artist, to see something as *needing* to

¹⁷² Indeed, this suggests the of the “death of the author,” to note a thread emphasized by Lawlor, “*Verflechtung*,” xxiv.

be expressed, vaguely at first, and then going through the actions of expression it, responding to and creating the meaning. What is given in this expression is never a complete idea that pre-exists its creation, but rather the trace takes our bodies over into the openness of a field that is a certain emptiness, or a certain negativity, and at best, a certain forgetfulness. This forgetting at the heart of tradition is what makes tradition possible, and Merleau-Ponty goes so far as to imply that forgetfulness is the engine of *logos* and brings about the fruitfulness of tradition itself (HLP, 23/20). So if this structure is correct, then the ideal is not a pure idea that is repeated, nor is it a pure creation, the present is not “a mode of existence into which the essence falls, but [...] *Ineinander* of the present and of the past, intentional historicity [...] the reciprocity of the openness of the field realized at an earlier time, *the outcome of this field in me*” (HLP, 22/20, emphasis added).

The origin must be forgotten so that the field that is opened by this trace of a past activity of expression can be intertwined with my field of openness. Meaning is the *outcome* of this field, intertwined now with my entire history and the situation in which I lend it my body. Thus, “according to its inner sense, tradition is a human production... [and] the non-knowledge of the factual origin is knowledge of this active human origin” (HLP, 24/21). The disappearance of the author is what makes the origin remain perpetually active, open, and thus *living*. The generality of cultural objects is that they “express performed possibilities” (HLP, 23/21), possibilities of acting or speaking that have been performed by someone, groves dug and left behind in the long history of sense, a long history of performance. Sedimentations then, or “the buried beginnings” of the traces we come across, are the ultimate structures of tradition and hence of the past (spoken), present (speaking), and future (open field of meaning) of all cultural objects: “an acquisition enlarging itself in new acts and new acquisitions. Reunited to a prior acquisition and therefore to a reiterated acquisition. Its past continues to live in its present, and continues in its present to an open future” (HLP, 24/21).

(iii) *Production, co-production, and creativity... the impossibility of complete reactivation*

Traditions, then, are born. Merleau-Ponty thus sees Husserl as calling for the “interrogation of a *tradition*, i.e., of what is given as constructed by man, as “spiritual,” not natural, being, as engendered and therefore as born” (HLP, 19/21). For Merleau-Ponty, something that has a birth is both historical, rather than eternal, and living, as in somehow connected to ideal weight. Nevertheless, following Husserl’s trajectory, Merleau-Ponty raises the question of how we can move from the subjec-

tive production of ideal objects to their “ideal objectivity, supratemporal, accessible to everyone and [to] all times” (HLP, 24/21). Merleau-Ponty invokes the interweaving of humans, world, and language, and his interpretation of Husserl’s conviction that “through language finally everything is nameable, sayable, objective” (HLP, 25/22). But the mere fact of the open horizon of language is not quite enough to explain ideal objectivity, for we still have to account for the modality shift between a subjective idea and an ideal object, the latter being, according to Merleau-Ponty and Husserl, “entirely different” (HLP, 25/22). In order to give some flesh to this change, Merleau-Ponty dwells on the notion of production (*Erzeugung*). The first aspect of production that we have to have on the table involves its persistence: “There was an *Erzeugung* (“production”) which has passed away, but which by passing away, by becoming passivity, never becomes nothing” (HLP, 25/22).

The solution appears through a shift to the question of production rather than products. Merleau-Ponty suggests that in the structure of production there is always left behind a “not-nothing” which is the possibility for reactivation, for living through the production again in a quasi-new way. Indeed, he goes so far as to say that there is nothing sealed in the present that keeps me from having the production return, that the essence of memory is the return of the original with the addition of a “quasi” or a “re-” attached to it, that the character of production is to be found in “*Urstiftung*” (institution) as that which passes away and yet is “recuperable” (HLP, 26/23). Nonetheless, this description of the recognition of the “same” product through the quasi-reproduction of the lived through production itself, remains a subjective synthesis. Enter the community of language. Merleau-Ponty suggests there is a kind of co-production [*co-Erzeugung*], that through the empathy of two or more in a community of language there emerges a consciousness of not “two “similar” productions, but yet the experience of a spiritual *Gebilde* [structure] that is numerically one in the two *Erzeugungen* [productions]” (HLP, 27/24). This is important, because the idea of a co-production is not the same as the idea of an identical production. The experience of expression in dialogue does not in fact leave intact the purity of two separate egos, and indeed this is precisely how Merleau-Ponty asks us to think of reading – where it is no longer clear what belongs to the writer and the reader.

For now, let me follow out the Husserlian framing of the problem by Merleau-Ponty. There is something about the structure of language then that can give the same ideal object to two different acts of production, not just in me (i.e., recollection, *Wiedererinnerung*), but in us (through empathy, *Einfühlung*, and the community of language, *Sprachgemeinschaft*). From this initial sketch, the two main themes that recur when Merleau-Ponty returns to the question of production are 1) the fact that any prod-

uct can itself only be grasped through production and 2) that a complete re-production is impossible. As Merleau-Ponty says, in almost a refrain, “The only way to renew, to remember a production, is by producing,” (HLP, 51/42), or again, “[g]eometry, like every product of *Erzeugung*, can be grasped only through ‘production,’” (HLP, 66/54). Shortly after both of these citations, Merleau-Ponty again launches into the progressive argument from recollection to communication as co-production. All of this comes from the fact that the production of a recollection is taken as “exemplary for understanding ideality” (HLP, 52/43). The point that seems essential to take is that in the new production, we have not a remembered object, but the object itself, an “obtainment of the past itself into the present” (HLP, 67/55), and that this is going to be a result of the single “activity-passivity system” that underlies all of these different levels of production. Each reproduction somehow joins with the *single trajectory* of the cultural object, the continuity and identity of ideal object is a result of *participation* and *performance*. The individuals shift the meaning of the species through their individual lives. This paradoxical structure suggests a new theory of meaning.

Through production, we reach a generalized theory of “communication” as from either me to me, the past to the present, or from speaker to audience, which is about real production and real sharing, not one of interpretive distance. For Merleau-Ponty, there can be nothing outside the process of the production that could be had or followed or recalled: “precisely because the ideation is creation and is instantaneous: ...there is no other way of following memory as far as it can go than by beginning the ideation again” (HLP, 66/54-5). Thus, the importance of the transductive logic of Simondon should now be clear. The new production is not compared to a memory, it is the past in the present, the thought of the speaker is not behind the speech, it is in the words themselves, and this instantaneousness is the basis of the encroachment made possible by my status as an activity-passivity system:

...speech as the encroachment of others upon me (as thought) and me (as thought) upon others [...] Just as the only way to remember an idea is to begin the ideation over, the only way of yielding to intersubjective thought is to retrace the trace, to think anew by operating through an activity an exact coincidence with a passivity [...] the explanation is sought in the activity-passivity coupling which functions in speech. (HLP, 67/56)

Now, a complete reactivation is in principle impossible, for Merleau-Ponty, because the ideal object is a field not a thing. Indeed, in a bracketed comment in the text, Merleau-Ponty notes that “here” is a place to “push Husserl.” The point is that the *Stiftung* is not “enveloping

thought, but open thought, not the intended and *Vorhabe* of an actual center, but intended “off-center” which will be rectified, not the positing of an end, but the positing of a style, not a frontal grasp but a lateral divergence, algae brought back from the depths” (*HLP*, 30/26). The ideal field, like any field, is made up of gaps, lateral connections, and hidden attachments, in other words, an invisible that supports the visible, makes it possible, and silently but essentially makes it what it is.

(iv) *Ideality as the hinge of community*

If “speech is the encroachment of others upon me (as thought) and me (as thought) upon others of others upon me” (*HLP*, 67/56), this violence is also required for meaning, because “ideality is at the hinge of the connection between me and others... it is operative, effective there. It is realized in and through this connection” (*HLP*, 27/24).¹⁷³ In Merleau-Ponty’s words, there is a “positivity of the relation,” the terms of the relation “are realized in interweaving: while I open myself to the other I make myself capable of ideality and while I open myself to ideality, I make myself capable of joining back up with the other in the *Erzeugung*” (*HLP*, 28/24). By placing ideality in the realm of praxis, Husserl, according to Merleau-Ponty, is able to maintain that ideality is that “something [*Etwas*]” of which I and the other are merely the two sides, hence ideality is that invisible through which the world of community is articulated.¹⁷⁴

The community of language, for Merleau-Ponty, signifies less a group of people with a transparent world of nameable things than a group of speakers who can *encroach* [*empiéter*] upon each other, can think *in* each other, can thus be part of an active/passive relation of thought being accomplished in thinking and communication being accomplished in the immediacy of its expression. Later on, Merleau-Ponty writes: “ideal identity founded on the identity of the *Erzeugung* in *Sprachgemeinschaft* [linguistic community], on the active *nachverstehen* [reunderstanding] of others, on the penetration into the consciousness of others (cf. I see

¹⁷³ We will explore this aspect of the violence of expression in Chapters 3 and 4 of Part III below.

¹⁷⁴ This formulation is indeed deeply Husserlian, for it is directly from the line of argument about interweaving [*verflochten*] from which Merleau-Ponty will develop an entire ontology of the flesh. In the original text, however, Husserl first couches this movement in terms of the speaking subject being “conscious of humanity from the start as being an immediate and mediate linguistic community” (*OG*, 98). Moreover, Husserl takes this community of language as thus being able to explain how the geometer can “express his internal structure,” a classical understanding of making the inner public through coding.

through the eyes of the other)" (HLP, 71/59). Note the prevailing language of encroachment and penetration, the chiasm of community appears here to be much more a question of violence than one of happy intertwining. And these passages are followed by a mention of the *sprechende Wesen*, or the being of man as *speaking being*. If then the ideal is the hinge of community, it is that invisible that holds together and creates those who can speak, a zone in which we can gesture together.

(v) *Language, writing, and Aussprechen...and sedimentation*

What Merleau-Ponty does with the question of writing is perhaps the most difficult aspect of these course notes, and probably the most interesting for our purposes.¹⁷⁵ As mentioned above, if at times Husserl's invocation of writing seems to elect ideality to a realm safely insulated from the vicissitudes of actual acts of speaking, this messy realm in which we communicate is never far from Merleau-Ponty's concerns. Nevertheless, he does allow Husserl's text to define the problem, following Husserl's analysis from the praxis of speaking and linguistic community towards the "second" and more important (and indeed, game changing) role of the written as that which is "the possibility of the permanence of the ideal outside of all conversation, and even when the interlocutors are dead, and even when it has not yet been lived in evidence by anyone" (HLP, 28/24-25. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis).¹⁷⁶

Merleau-Ponty modifies Husserl's formulations regarding the written with the more general term "language": "Language is virtual communication" (HLP, 29/25),¹⁷⁷ or "the preexistence of the true in relation to the utterance (and not only the survival of the true in relation to the utterance) is founded on the written *and language*" (HLP, 28/25, emphasis

¹⁷⁵ One of the best accounts of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of "writing," and of its important relationship to Derrida, can be found in: Hugh J. Silverman, *Textualities: Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 1994). This discussion is particularly important on the relation between writing and "style" for Merleau-Ponty.

¹⁷⁶ It is interesting that for Husserl, the question is about the permanence of the ideal object when the speaker is no longer alive or when the objects are not currently being lived by anyone, and so it is not clear that Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the "pre-existence" of the ideal, not yet lived in evidence, has any real connection in Husserl's text. However, at times we find Merleau-Ponty making this claim as if it is a phenomenological observation about the way we feel after the act of expression, it seems *as if* what is expressed was always already there, true, guiding the expression, and hence related to his various attempts to return us to the place where speaking is happening (i.e., "considering the ideal sense not once it is made..., but at its birth" (HLP, 40/34); or "Language, not as ready-made..., but rather language as being in the process of being made, in the process of striding" (HLP, 67/55)).

¹⁷⁷ For Husserl, the "written" is "communication become virtual" (OG, 100).

added). For Husserl, it is the “written, documenting linguistic expression” (OG, 100), not language in general, and Merleau-Ponty’s subtle shift to language in general is fully in harmony with his own accounts of expression. Although in later formulations in the course notes he more closely follows Husserl’s more restrictive use of the “written” in these cases, these two more general formulations point us back to the importance that Merleau-Ponty lends to speaking or at least *Aussprechen*, when it comes to the written *and* the influence of Heidegger moving him further towards being able to say “language speaks.”¹⁷⁸

Take, for instance, his first major attempt to approach the written aspect. Immediately after repeating Husserl’s framing of the problem as one of the permanence of the ideal outside of any lived experience of its self-evidence, he inserts a square-bracketed paragraph in which he connects the preexistence of the ideal to the experience of speaking consciousness. The point, he tries to make, is that we need to see even here something of a passive-active structure; language can neither be contained by consciousness nor can consciousness envelope language. The only way for us to think this rich, transductive relation between language and consciousness is by thinking of “speaking consciousness as divergence and not as something positive” (HLP, 29/25). Returning to the main thread of exegesis, he repeats Husserl’s claim that writing introduces a difference in which the expressed can gain a permanent existence. But the emphasis of this passage is again on the activity:

...the words, the texts exist objectively in the fashion of physical things, and, in this permanent existence, they convey their sense as an activity which has fallen into obscurity but which is reawoken and which can again be transformed into activity. The conveyed sense is ‘forgotten,’ ‘sedimented,’ and ‘reactivatable’ (the sense to come appears also as ‘buried,’ ‘hidden,’ i.e., as clear over there) insofar as

¹⁷⁸ Lawlor, “Verflechtung,” xiv-xvi. [This point was perhaps the source of the liveliest discussion at the public defense of this dissertation. In particular, Professor Lawlor pushed me on how Merleau-Ponty’s later turn towards Heidegger may, in fact, represent a significant turn away from anything like expression. It seems to me that although Merleau-Ponty’s late attraction to the more mystical formulations (“language speaks”) marks a shift in his thinking, it is not thereby a definitive break with the logic of expression. In fact, it rather marks a final shift away from a philosophy of consciousness, but not one that results in precluding a theory of action and expression. For Merleau-Ponty, it seems to me, even in the last shift to Heidegger, there is the urgency of finding a place between pure creation and pure repetition. “Apparently: passivity. Cf. Heidegger letting words speak [...] / However: the words say that only when *we think about them*. It is Heidegger who speaks in them: proof: before him, we were not thinking about them; we had forgotten them [...] Therefore this is not simple passivity: reception (‘mystic’ of language).” HLP, 63/51.]

humans are *sprechende Wesen* < 'speaking beings' > and insofar as the world can be spoken. (HLP, 29/25)

Thus, the notion of the sense of the words is tied into sedimentation for both spoken words and creative moments, for in the latter the sense *to come*, that sense not yet here, but nonetheless to which our expression paradoxically responds, "appears" as sedimented. All of this only because we are speaking beings and we have a world to be spoken.

Now Merleau-Ponty here, again in a square bracketed insertion, tries to work out the implication of speaking consciousness in relation to the written. Here he emphasizes the passage or transmission from the ideal to the written, claiming that, "even for the "I" who expresses it," the expressed sense is "different from what it was before" (HLP, 29/25). There is no pure transmission; there is a change in that which was *to come* through its very coming. In this moment, Merleau-Ponty characterizes this change not as a change of the ideal object but as a change in that the expression becomes *available* for other productions, and that in particular "[s]edimentation is this availability" (HLP, 29/25). By overcoming passive life, by being a production, this sedimenting is thought, is the realization of thought in and as sedimentation. What falls into the written traces is not a complete thought or idea, at least according to Merleau-Ponty. Things are sedimented because we possess a body that can reactivate the traces in lived self-evidence, and this means that we can act *with* these traces. What is sedimented is less a positive content than: "pivots, hinges, matrixes of possibilities, negative equivalents or traces of positive acts, things forgotten that are fruitful, that is, operative negations" (HLP, 29/26). This is not the pure meaning of the ideal object, the circumscribed idea or essence pointed to by a word, but the "whole sense of what precedes 'passes into' what follows" (HLP, 31/26). Thus, sedimentation is really a question of temporality, a past which offers itself up to a future through the act of the present body that can reactivate it in a speech act. There is no "total reactivation" because what sediments is not a thing, but a metastable set of potentials and the trajectory, *sens*, of the trace.

Although language "bears" ideality, it is also essential to the very appearance of ideality. This question, "what is the essence, the ideal?" (HLP, 40/34) haunts Merleau-Ponty. It necessarily refers to incarnation, but cannot be explained by or reduced to incarnation. The tentative solution he offers is that: "*Sprache* makes the sense descend into the real world and sets it up at the same time in ideal being" (HLP, 40/34). This "contradictory" double movement, which sets up the ideal sense at the same time as it becomes sedimented into the weighty, is exactly what we are calling the paradox of expression. Hence there must be an operative language that both supports the ideal and makes its fall into the sensible world

possible. Thus, again Merleau-Ponty is led to diminish the focus on writing in favor of our status as speaking beings, and in particular our *Aussprechen-Können*, our “ability to express,” an ability that he says is “the actual existence of humanity” (HLP, 44/37). Indeed, if I am right thus far, then this claim would be just another expression of “that genius for ambiguity that might well serve to define man” (PhP, 230/187). Most importantly here is this focus on the ability to express rather than on actual expressions. From this ability to express, “[o]bjective being (the spoken world) is founded,” and “the things are founded as expressible” (HLP, 44/37). The ability we have to express merges with the written as a possible expression, an invitation to retracing, which results in an open endless horizon for humanity.¹⁷⁹ In other words, an ability to express is an ability to read the language of expressions, and this is nothing but the active re-writing of the traces of expression in creative playing forward.

Merleau-Ponty suggests that Husserl “places ideality in the order of the negative... Taken positively, ideality is a myth: there is no *Erzeugung* which is a total reactivation” (HLP, 57/46-47). A little bit further on, Merleau-Ponty makes this explicit:

Simply, ideal objectivity is not in something before me; it is the lateral connection, the hidden and internal attachment of different ideations which are identified with one another across memory, conjugation of passivity and activity, equivalence of a passivity and an activity, encroachment of one on the other: passivity as a mold or negative of an activity. (HLP, 66/55)

This characterization of ideality as the invisible, if you will, leads Merleau-Ponty to posit a single speech that is this ideal. In his own words: “Ideality is truly an inter-being, a cloth between ‘thoughts’ or productions, a field in which the different, factual *Einfühlungen* are the partial realization of one

¹⁷⁹ It perhaps should be noted that here I am attempting to avoid the essential distinction drawn by Dufrenne between the use object and the art object. For Dufrenne, although both certainly show themselves to be the products of human action, there is a difference in kind in that the art object tells us something about the artist. Although this harmonizes with the point Collingwood seemed to be making above, it here is show to draw a line in the sand between aesthetics and other human actions, a line I believe Merleau-Ponty comes to reject. For his discussion of this point, see: Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, trans. Edward S. Casey (et. al.) (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 97ff. For a shorter statement of some of the key point’s in Dufrenne’s philosophy, see: Mikel Dufrenne, “Literary Criticism and Phenomenology,” in *Phenomenology: Critical Concepts in Philosophy*, ed. Dermot Moran and Lester Embree (New York: Routledge, 2004). This text, although very close to the Merleau-Pontian theory of expression to be defended in this dissertation, reveals some of what I take to be Dufrenne’s overly Husserlian formulation, also revealed in his use of the term “eidetic” in the previously cited work.

Speech" (HLP, 68/56). This fabric of ideality that holds us together, that surreptitiously gives us the grooves that our acts of speech will follow, that "speaks in our thoughts is supported by the written" (HLP, 68/56).

Thus, this question of the ideal, and what is its relation to the written, remains open. Ideal beings only exist in actual speech, but Merleau-Ponty insists that this does not render them "intermittent," that ideality exists in "the universal question of the world" (HLP, 68/57). The permanence of ideality is not a result so much of its material permanence in a text. Rather, it results from its newfound general being in the inscription of the expressive act, which allows the overcoming of the personal or fleeting experience of co-production in communication. And Merleau-Ponty thus finally comes to his own spin on Husserl's formulation: "Through the written, meaning is virtually in the world" (HLP, 69/57). Sensible communication, the written, supports the ideal world because it is both sensibly present (thus experienceable for anyone) and is the presence of a past act of expression, or in other words, the "sedimentation of sense," which is the virtual possibility of a "re"-*Erzeugung*. The permanence of the ideal "rests on the world containing virtualities of *Erzeugung*" (HLP, 69/57). The written is a trick, a *grimoire*, a book of spells, and this is all made possible because the logic of expression grounds Merleau-Ponty's reading "of man as a speaking being. *sprechendes Wesen*. Sedimentation is expression" (HLP, 72/59). The mode of sedimentation in writing is one, however, not of a certain forgetfulness, like a memory that we can recall, but of essential forgetfulness, forgetfulness in general which means that when we read we activate an ideality in general, we never "reactivate everything," which in the end brings the notion of truth as an ideal goal of expression.

(vi) *Meta-personal future anterior...Why is ideality "speaking" speech?*

Why does Merleau-Ponty repeatedly remind his reader that he is taking us back to "ideal sense not once it is made... but at its birth" (HLP, 34/40) or "language in the process of being made, in the process of striding" (HLP, 55/67); and what is the relation between this operative speech and "an ideal speech that traverses man" (HLP, 35/41)? Writing, the breaking free from personal idealities to generalized ones, points towards a "future anterior, the anticipated warehouse of our present in a present, to come [*à venir*]" (HLP, 71/58). What is this future anterior ideality other than what will have been said once everything has been said? Hence, writing is the institution, though not the realization, of a Total Speech: "The written (cf. Valéry) is the support of this passive-active, metapersonal thought: it opens the field of this exact Thought, without ever fulfilling it. The written as speaking of—which remains a speaking to,

Speech to the singular" (*HLP*, 71/59). Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, the difference that writing introduces in the logic of expression is not so much the permanence of the traces or the ideality of meanings, but their generality, which opens it to the project of truth. The more robust address made from "X to X," to a total speech, which opens the "present to a retrospective view which we will have when everything will have been said" (*HLP*, 78/64). And this "total speech" shares affinities with Merleau-Ponty's confidence in a shared world of perception and the infinite logos hinted at the end of *The Visible and the Invisible*.

We should listen to the tempering of these claims that we hear if we take the *Resumé* to be his considered opinion on the matter:

As 'virtual' communication, the speaking of x to x , which is carried by no living subject and which belongs in principle to everyone, the written evokes a total speech, metamorphoses definitively the sense of spoken words into ideal being, and moreover transforms human sociability. Now the pure sense of the written which sublimates the solidity of things and then communicates that solidity to thought is also a petrified, sedimented, latent, or dormant sense, as long as no living spirit comes along to awaken it. (*RC*, 166; *HLP*, 8).

And so, the ideal, which preexists us, which is permanent, which offers the promise of total speech and universal and eternal truths, is neither ever purely given nor is it able to endure without our very being as speaking beings. Thus, there is never a written without speaking, without beings who can speak again, can follow the traces and thus invoke the field of potentials offered up to them by the previous expressive acts of speakers gone by, speakers who thankfully knew to write it down.

(d) *Life and Death: Writing and Responsibility*

Although "death" does not figure very large in Merleau-Ponty's writings, it does figure quite importantly in this late course, even if it is not named as such. In the *Resumé* to the course, for instance, Merleau-Ponty relates the work of a life that is a progression or a trajectory with the artificial nature of a "work" that we find in the cultural landscape to be read. The "work" is merely the result of an "interruption — an interruption that is always premature — of a life's work" (*RC*, 159; *HLP*, 5). The interruption here under consideration is Husserl's death, and the trace of the life that is embodied in the "work" is but a phase in the becoming of a life that had a past and a future, a trajectory that we have seen is what

Merleau-Ponty calls the “unthought.” Thus, suggests Merleau-Ponty, the “meaning of a man’s work” cannot be “wholly positive.”¹⁸⁰

As Lawlor rightly points out, the necessity of the death of the author becomes the key to Derrida’s reading of Husserl, but this death also shows the importance of the living one who can come along and reactivate the trace. The author must be absent in order that the written be virtual, omni-temporal, and yet, as Lawlor writes, “the *logos* would itself die unless there were humans to reactivate it; there would be no temporality of sense without this localization and temporalization of sense in the world; there would be no virtuality.”¹⁸¹ Without bodies subject to the weight of the ideal, the ideal would lose all its weight. Perhaps this explains why Merleau-Ponty can say that a complete reactivation would be the death of the *Logos*, that without forgetting, there is no meaning at all, there are only Aristotelian Prime Movers. The interruption of a life that turns Husserl’s living oeuvre into a “work” is the same as the interruption of any expressive gesture, just on a different scale. As soon as the work falls away from the gesturing body, it fails to express that body’s life, for now the lived weight of the expressive body carries a new charge of having expressed itself, which was absent in the expressing body. Expression is an inherent failure, and “absurd effort” (VI, 125/164). There is always a spacing at the heart of expression that precludes its success.

If the death of the author makes possible the awakening of the trace by the one who reads, however, then we are also justified in following Lawlor’s connection to responsibility. As an expressive body, the trace awaits me, “I am the one selected, on whom the sense depends.”¹⁸² As Derrida writes, to read or to express is to “stand guard,” even just for an instant, over the “progression” of sense.¹⁸³ We have already seen how Merleau-Ponty begins in the 1950s to use “expression” as a way of invoking the exchanges or transitions that make up the progression of sense, and here we can see that the responsibility that he invokes in a “reading” is generalizable to the paradoxical lending of our bodies to the trajectory of the meanings we both passively repeat and actively create. I will turn now to explore an account of meaning as trajectory, as the loose affiliation of its many performances, held together by the weight of its traces.

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¹⁸⁰ Merleau-Ponty, “Le philosophe et son ombre,” 260/159.

¹⁸¹ Lawlor, “Verflectung,” xiv.

¹⁸² Ibid., xxxi.

¹⁸³ Derrida, “Introduction,” 149.

Part II, Chapter 3

The Life and Death of Metaphor: Meaning and Expressive Performance

Une 'direction' de pensée — Ce n'est pas une métaphore — Il n'y a pas de métaphore entre le visible et l'invisible, (l'invisible: ou ma pensée pour moi, ou le sensible d'autrui pour moi): métaphore, c'est trop ou trop peu: trop si l'invisible est vraiment invisible, trop peu s'il se prête à la transposition.

- Merleau-Ponty¹⁸⁴

In the two previous chapters, I have tried to circumscribe the idea of “weight” by analyzing the relationships between the ideal weight of the past and the real weight of the acting body and between the acting body and the weight of the written. As such, I have focused on the event of expression, on the bodies and ideal structures that shape their behavior, on the expressing and the expression. I have not yet focused on *what* is expressed. Now it certainly seems justified to say that *meaning* is expressed. I have, however, been putting into place a critique of any classical sense of this term. Although I have argued against the idea that expression is the making public of a meaning or idea in the head of the speaker, I have also insisted that expression is meaningful, it is not merely mechanical, pure repetition. In this chapter, I would like to explore the idea that meaning is a moving negotiation, that meaning is viral, that meaning is not a thing, but a trajectory, a *sens*, a progression. When we express, we both take up and alter the course of a meaning, and lending our bodies to the expression we make ourselves responsible for the past we are allowing to repeat and the future will draw its legitimacy from our voice. An understanding of meaning as the open trajectory of the many performances of the trace is both the direct result of the paradoxical logic of expression and the indication we could make towards the call this expres-

¹⁸⁴ “A ‘direction’ of thought — this is not a *metaphor* — There is no *metaphor* between the visible and the invisible (the invisible: either my thought for myself or the sensible given to the other for me): *metaphor* is too much or too little: too much if the invisible is really invisible, too little if it lends itself to transposition.” VI, 271 / 221-22.

sive nature makes to us for the “unremitting *virtù*” that is our constant task for all those transitions which are never “irrevocably accomplished” (*Préface*, 61; 55/35; 31).

In what has gone before, I have tried to show that every action, that every gesture, no matter how banal, no matter how close to pure repetition, is nonetheless expressive. Just before penning the phrase quoted in our epigraph above — that there is no metaphor between the visible and the invisible — Merleau-Ponty writes: “every painting, every action, every human enterprise is a crystallization of time, a cipher of transcendence — At least if one understands them as a certain spread (*écart*) between being and nothingness, ... a certain manner of modulating time and space” (VI, 258/208). Thus, in saying that there is no metaphor, Merleau-Ponty means that there is no “metaphor” as it would be understood on a classical model. This also implies, since every gesture is a modulation of the sedimented, and thus every gesture is a “seeing” of the similar in the dissimilar, that metaphor (properly understood) is *everywhere*. The field of metaphors provides a very ripe landscape for this pursuit. In a realm of discourse governed, metaphorically, by the idea of living and dead metaphors, repeated in the figurative versus literal meaning distinction, that is, a field where “meaning” is most at stake, Merleau-Ponty’s theory of expression offers a robust way of rethinking meaning itself. Communication is the constant play between life and death, and indeed, *prima facie*, if we are correct that all expressions are between pure creation and pure repetition, then there can be nothing of a figurative/literal meaning distinction.

Just as when I tried to defend the radical claims made by Collingwood, albeit for different reasons, from Ridley’s conservative interpretation, we can see again that the consequence of finding all expression, even the most banal, as having a tinge of creation invokes the most rigorous of ethical thoughts. In this chapter, then, I attempt to rethink meaning as progressive iteration, shifting trajectory, open history, participation, and this aims to give the infrastructure for meaning that is not reserved for the genius or the artist, but that is to be generalized to our very being in the world as expressive bodies subject to the real and the ideal weight under which we act. The living and dead metaphors distinction, then, calls for a comparison with the work on life and death in writing indicated at the end of the previous chapter. The essence of writing it seems includes the death of the author. If writing is language become virtual, if the forgetting of the real origin of a trace is the condition of its existing as *to be read*, then we have to see the death of the author as the beginning of a series of lives for the trace. The trace is the support for a single life *à plusieurs*, a life lived by many, but a life of fits and starts, of incessant transformation, or long dormant periods and long shadows cast.

The written is the suspension of life and the creation in the cultural field of a call to the bodies that can reawaken it through the lending of their bodies — that is, the appeal to community. The coming together of the life of the trace and my life overflows the punctual meaning of the expression, just as the individual overflows the punctual phase in its individuation. Because an event of reading can happen, the trace and I belong to a certain transindividual metastable structure, and the accidents of our union will both instantiate a meaning (a phase of becoming) and overflow this meaning.

The Landscape of Metaphorical Meaning

The entire investigation thus far could be seen to stem from a metaphor we inscribed at the outset of the preface: *meaning is viral*. Meaning has to do with bodies. Indeed, if we press on the Husserlian formulation that the ideal object has a “linguistic living body,” an image that Merleau-Ponty embraces, then it seems the notion of the trace being infected by meaning opens up a field for thinking through expression. Meaning is carried, sustained, communicated (as a communicable disease) and expressed by bodies, whether they be human bodies or physical traces. Indeed, just like a virus, it cannot exist for long outside of bodies. They offer it shelter and sustenance, and yet it exists nowhere, literally, outside of the metastabilities of a body (of speaking, of being-read...) — meaning is as precarious as the bodies that carry it. The point that I want to make is that *the most important effect of a metaphor is its effect on the virtual*. Just as I characterized bodies as much more virtual than real in the section on action above, the meaning of the metaphor is also much more virtual than real. Sure, it has a number of “real” sides to it, just as our body in action is itself weighty, subject to inertia, driven by the need to maintain innumerable equilibriums at both a micro and a macro level, the metaphor too is material, a trace on the page, a vibration upon an eardrum, and it too must maintain a certain set of relations and equilibriums to be heard, for instance, in a noisy room (macro), or to make sense as a deviation from normal usage (micro). As Nancy writes, “Meaning needs a thickness.”¹⁸⁵ Further, just as the body is always performing some “real” action, the metaphor has a “real” meaning in terms of the use of this fragment of language in relation to a project of some body, *trying to mean something at this moment*, synchronically, in *this* context. Or again, just as the meaning of the body’s actions depends upon the real configuration of the field of bodies, the metaphor too has a “real” sense of this juxtaposition in a linguistic field of meanings.

The mistake of searching for the meaning of a metaphor has to do with a misunderstanding, or at least a mischaracterization, of meaning as a thing, that is, paradoxically, the reification of the real over the virtual, the individual over the metastable. Meaning is a field, or better, it is a shift, or a weight, in the metastable fields that could crystallize (or not) into gestures. The careful point that we will have to make is that the most

¹⁸⁵ Nancy, *Le poids d’une pensée*, 8/79-80.

important aspect of a metaphor, even for that first person who speaks or writes it, is what it opens up, what it makes possible. To speak a metaphor is not to “mean” some *thing*, it is to charge a particular metastable with a new potential energy - to crystallize one set of potentials into an individual act and to open up a new metastable, however delayed or deferred it may be. Whether “charging” comes from an instituting act or a lending of one’s body (metastable locus of acts) to a metaphor through reading it or hearing it is irrelevant. One is perhaps more creative, while the other is perhaps more repetition. Repetition is never free of creativity, nor is creation ever free of repetition. For just as a virus will shift its expression given the weight and history of the body and environment into which it is haphazardly introduced, the metaphor too will never *mean* just the same thing, for there are no identical situations, not even for the same body who repeats that metaphor, and yet the new performance of the trace is nevertheless a repetition. We neither possess language nor does language possess us. We are only “we”¹⁸⁶ insofar as we are infected by language, insofar as we are carriers, insofar as we bear language in our virtual acts, and insofar as language survives as a surging forth across particulars, but not reducible to those particulars. This, as we have suggested, is our being shared by Speech, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, or our carrying the Transindividual that is language in our metastable fields. As I have also just shown above, the act of expression leaves behind the trace, and marks the death of the author and the possibility of reactivation, repetition, and performance. The death of the metaphor is simultaneously its being made available for rebirth, which is re-death. And so the landscape of meanings is not a set of things, but a set of forces and lines, constant births and deaths, fields of potential crystallizations, and the metaphor does not just “re-describe” this reality, it reshapes it.¹⁸⁷

Thus, there will be three guiding themes to this section. First, the notion that the metaphor is mostly virtual will guide our positive theory. Secondly, the concept of metaphor as having a meaning, but not in a traditional sense, rather, that meaning is the contingent trajectory of the many performances of the trace. And finally, that a critique of classical theories of metaphor will show again how expression quickly takes us all the way down. Beginning with the last of these three major themes then,

¹⁸⁶ [The worry over the meaning of “we,” who it includes, excludes, and who has the right to say “we,” was raised during the public defense by Professor O’Byrne. My usage of “we” vs. “I” in writing is influenced by the work of Jean-Luc Nancy. For his most direct discussion of this issue, see: Jean-Luc Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel*, 21/5. In addition, it is worth noting that my use of terms such as “foundational” also stem from his usage, and should always be taken as open to question.]

¹⁸⁷ See, for instance, Ricœur’s discussion of re-description, *RM*, 5.

we turn to briefly sketch some classical theories of metaphor in order to problematize them.

(a) *Ricœur and Aristotle*

We have already cited Aristotle's most explicit definition of metaphor above, that metaphor is the greatest thing for it is the one thing that cannot be learnt and it implies an ability to see the similar in the dissimilar. It now seems that we can connect this "eye for resemblances" with the essential place of our ability to express (*Aussprechen*) in the previous section. The ability to express is the ability to creatively repeat, and the ability to creatively repeat is none other than seeing a similarity in a dissimilar situation. This hardly, of course, scratches the surface of Aristotle's theory of metaphor, which is not in the end so much grounded on the phenomenological observation of the act of metaphor as it is in the linguistic apparatus used in the metaphorical phrase. As we know, "Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy" (*Poetics*, 1457 b6-9; cited at *RM*, 13). It should be clear that this is an art, the transference of the name, and thus is an act.

In his attempt to weave an interpretation of Aristotle's apparently paradoxical inclusion of metaphor in two regional ontologies, (since it is defined in both *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*), Ricœur makes a number of helpful observations that we can embrace here. First of all, the definition seems to imply that metaphor is actually a categorical transgression, and thus has the character of a mistaken attribution. This works then by invoking the two ideas from the four situations above (species-genus, etc.), and thus the act of metaphor is the putting together of two ideas. This putting together is a "calculated error" (*RM*, 23). Thus although the metaphor's vehicle is the "word" for Aristotle. However, the aberrant attribution is not "merely" aberrant. It is a skill of genius, an art. Ricœur links the deviance to the lexical order, and suggests that this misses the importance of how metaphors create meaning. Ricœur, however, leaves behind the active side of the art of metaphor-making, and thus seems to be working with a notion of meaning as a thing.

In fact, Ricœur again comes very close to connecting these dots in his discussion of the definition itself. He begins by again stressing his most persistent worry, namely that a theory of metaphor capture the power a metaphor has to re-describe reality. He applauds Aristotle's insight that the metaphor's "error" of description is a "de-constructive

intermediary phase between description and redescription" (RM, 24). Yet he insists that the insight be placed on hold until we move, as his text does, from theories that take (progressively) the *word*, the *phrase*, and, finally, the *order of discourse* as the proper locus of metaphor. Aristotle occupies only the first stage of theories of metaphor in Ricœur's long progression towards a proper theory.¹⁸⁸

Just a few lines later, he makes an important insight, namely, that Aristotle's definition subtly introduces an uncommon verb: *eu metaphérein*, to metaphorize well (RM, 25). Ricœur himself says that the introduction of this verb emphasizes the "usage" of a metaphor and even brings to light that "process prevails over result" (RM, 25). The important part of metaphor then will be the phenomenological part, the *seeing* of similarity in difference required for creative repetition. And this is a "genius," something we have already begun to use as a way of characterizing creatively playing forward above, as different from mere intelligence (mechanical, deductive repetition).

(b) Cognitivists vs. Non-Cognitivists, and Metaphors We Live By

In fact, one common feature of many theories of metaphor is that they invoke some sort of description of the phenomenological aspects of the act or experience of metaphor, even though they rarely make this the basis of their investigation or the foundation of their account. Such theories tend to center on the question of the existence of metaphorical meaning, treating it as a thing, and then arguing about its existence or its character. I propose here to outline the important contributions of Donald Davidson, Max Black, and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson.

Max Black's is perhaps the best place to start, as he in many ways embodies much of the tradition and offers perhaps the best account of a cognitive "interactive" view of metaphor. Moreover, Black's description of the meaning of a metaphor is drawn directly from his "phenomenological" description of what the hearer or reader of the metaphor goes through to decode the meaning. In fact, in his most direct account of metaphor,¹⁸⁹ Black himself characterizes his project as one of retrieving the status of metaphor from its marginalized status, of showing how metaphors are valuable and meaningful. Black's "interactive" view, upon which actually takes much of the lead from I.A. Richards, sees the meta-

¹⁸⁸ His "Introduction" outlines this progression quite clearly: RM, 1-7.

¹⁸⁹ Max Black, "Metaphor," in *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962).

phor as something of a filtering structure. Take Black's own example, "man is a wolf."¹⁹⁰ In this metaphor, the idea of wolf is offered as a filter or frame through which "man" can be viewed. In any linguistic group, there are *associated commonplaces* that characterize terms such as "wolf" (and "man" too of course). Such commonplaces are the material of metaphors (and importantly not the real or total set of facts surrounding such ideas or objects). The metaphor has the effect of laying the framing term over the primary term, which itself has the effect of emphasizing, de-emphasizing, and even occluding aspects of the primary term. The metaphorical meaning will *be* that which the frame emphasizes or allows to shine through.¹⁹¹ This structure of metaphorical understanding implies an interpretive distance between the speaking or the hearing of the metaphor and the determining of the meaning. This cognitive work of reflection does not seem to capture the fact that we can and do hear the metaphor in the moment. Black, however, is wedded to the distance between the speaking or hearing of a metaphor and its meaning.

In answering a possible objection to his interaction view, Black dismisses that the resulting shifts in the associated commonplaces will be a threat to this theory by making the associations there depend upon metaphor itself, rendering the theory circular. Black's theory does not necessarily imply that the associated commonplaces be fixed or overtly literal and truth-conditional. He is content to allow that the participants in metaphorical activities themselves need to gage the level of familiarity with the commonplaces. For instance, the park ranger will have much different associated commonplaces regarding wolves from the cartoon watching seven year-old. And this is part of the genius involved in negotiating a metaphor, in knowing one's audience and yet taking them beyond what they already know. He in fact takes this farther by saying, in response to another worry, that it "was a simplification [...] to speak as if the implication system of the metaphorical expression remains unaltered by the metaphorical statement."¹⁹² In an almost Deleuzean sounding claim: "If to call a man a wolf is to put him in a special light, we must not forget that the metaphor makes the wolf seem more human than he otherwise would."¹⁹³ Regardless, the intuition that Black shows of putting the "stuff" of metaphor in motion will certainly be a valuable one for us to keep in mind.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 39ff.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 41.

¹⁹² Ibid., 43.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 44. But this is of course less of an ontological claim than one of becoming-animal.

In addition, there is something else that Black gets right. If we were to import the conceptual structure gained in our discussion of Simondon, perhaps we might recognize that the moment of speaking or reading a metaphor is a moment of individuation. It is a placing into communication of numerous dimensions and forces crystallizing in the act of metaphor. This act also shifts, as Black says, the associated commonplaces involved, or as we would say, the milieu itself. Now, it seems to me that there are multiple levels being put in communication here. There is the body of the speaker gearing into the production (or reproduction) of a material trace; there is the material trace being placed in communication with the field of meaningful acts; there is the history of an individual body and the history of the utterances of the terms involved being placed into communication; and finally there is the metastable being placed into communication with a new metastable. There is something then to this theory of interaction, even if the interpretive distance it implies ultimately needs to be rejected.

To shift gears, Donald Davidson's brief but influential reflection on metaphor is presented in a paper entitled: "What Metaphors Mean."¹⁹⁴ We might characterize Davidson's position on metaphor as non-cognitivist. Davidson argues (against most of the tradition) that metaphors do not have any meaning except for their most literal meaning. In fact, in perhaps one of his most interesting published sentences, Davidson begins his reflection with the claim that "Metaphor is the dreamwork of language and, like all dreamwork, its interpretation reflects as much on the interpreter as on the originator."¹⁹⁵ On Davidson's (non-psychoanalytic) understanding of interpretation and dreams, the dream does not have any meaning, and the interpretation is actually a creative activity, a work of the imagination. For Davidson, the dream has no meaning at the time of the dream, only the later (collaborative) narration of the dream provides it with a meaning. This precisely mirrors his understanding of metaphor. The metaphor means nothing in its strange and paradoxical utterance, or at least it means nothing more than the most literal interpretation of the words deployed. Just as the dream is nothing other than an image of a fortress, the phrase "Juliet is the sun" means nothing other than the false claim that "Juliet is the sun." Such a work of the imagination, according to Davidson, is one that is free of "rules." In fact, "all communication by speech assumes the interplay of inventive construction and inventive construal,"¹⁹⁶ and the difference that metaphors introduce is that they

¹⁹⁴ Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 245.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

require construction along creative lines, free from rules. Davidson even suggests that metaphor “implies a kind and degree of artistic success.”¹⁹⁷

So, in defining the meaning of metaphor as nothing more than the literal interpretation of the utterance, Davidson is not trying to drain the phenomenon of metaphor of its interest, he is rather trying to remove the unfortunate motivation of most theories of metaphor which attempt to find, in addition to literal meaning, something like a “metaphorical” or “figurative” meaning. In fact, as I mentioned above, Davidson’s reflections on metaphor take on a surprising amount of description of the experience of the act of uttering or hearing a metaphor. Davidson thus invokes the distinction between “what words mean and what they are used to do,” and he places metaphor exclusively within “the domain of use.”¹⁹⁸ Davidson, for his part, is not attempting to ground a new theory of meaning, but rather attempting to show that the activity of metaphor is in some important way *other* than a linguistic activity. The characterization that he gives of metaphor in fact leads Rorty to claim Davidson sees metaphors as simply a highly refined “unfamiliar noise.”¹⁹⁹ In his own words, Davidson says that metaphor “makes us attend to some likeness, often a novel or surprising likeness, between two or more things.”²⁰⁰

In fact, more than “unfamiliar noises,” Davidson sees the metaphor as a strange or unfamiliar grouping. Two roses, to use his example, are similar because they are both members of the category rose. Tolstoy and an infant, however, are not members of obvious or familiar categories, so the metaphor: *Tolstoy is a moralizing infant* strikes us as unfamiliar. When we hear this phrase, we have to go off and think about infants and Tolstoy, figuring out where the groups overlap, and why these two disparate things were put together in a single proposition.²⁰¹ At this point we can begin to also characterize Davidson’s theory as involving an interpretive distance between the speaking or hearing of the metaphor and the subsequent figuring out of its meaning. In fact, Davidson’s theory implies that a metaphor can only function given that the utterance is unfamiliar and literal meaning, then, would be achieved when the interpretive distance is reduced to zero. The metaphor dies when it is no longer surprising. He does suggest that “in the metaphorical context we do not necessarily

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 247.

¹⁹⁹ Richard Rorty, “Unfamiliar Noises: Hesse and Davidson on Metaphor,” in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

²⁰⁰ Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean,” 247.

²⁰¹ Davidson, to be fair, says that this is “perhaps” what we do: Ibid., 248.

hesitate over its meaning,²⁰² but this claim is raised in relation to a different theory, and the insight does not lead him to revise his “unfamiliar grouping” characterization of the post-hearing search for what the metaphor means. In any case, the idea that what we figure out is somehow already there in the metaphor is the illusion that gives rise to the idea of metaphorical meaning.

Davidson does, however, make a nice observation that to extend a new meaning to a word via metaphorical meaning would seem arbitrary. Take for example “the mouth of the bottle.” If we think that thanks to some form of figurative content that the word mouth can be appropriately applied to the opening of a bottle, if, in other words, we just see metaphors as expanding the extension of reference, then any wonder in the face of metaphor would evaporate. Metaphor would just be a matter of adjusting our understanding of extension of the use of a term to reflect a new extended usage. As Davidson notes, the extension only happens because of the meaning of the words involved:

What has been left out is any appeal to the original meanings of the words. Whether or not metaphor depends on new or extended meanings, it certainly depends in some way on the original meanings; an adequate account of metaphor must allow that the primary or original meanings of words remain active in their metaphorical setting.²⁰³

This condition, it seems to us, is pivotal. However, is the best way of fulfilling it to make the original meanings the only meaning? Rather than the linguistic or truth-functional definitions of the words, the “shift” in our understanding of the extension of a word is not a cognitive fact, it is a new set of pre-individual metastable structures.

Thus, for Davidson, the metaphor “provokes” a lot of thought, some reflection, some searching — but it is an error to read these effects back into what the metaphor “means.” The metaphor certainly makes us notice things about the world, but it doesn’t *mean* those things. Indeed, since “noticing” stuff is not a finite activity, this could help us to understand the failure of paraphrase, since we can always notice more.²⁰⁴ It seems that Davidson is right that metaphors don’t have “a” meaning in the manner often sought by theorists, however, he is wrong that metaphorical utterances don’t have meaning in the very moment of their speaking. He makes this mistake because of his adoption of a strong distinction between literal and figurative meaning. The result is that his

²⁰² Ibid., 249.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 263.

understanding of the importance of the literal meaning of the term refers to a set of transparent coded, truth-conditional meanings, and not to the history of utterances that are played forward by the speaking of the metaphor. Nor is his account capable of seeing how metaphors charge an atmosphere ready for more metaphors, without ever causing us to go “figure out” what was intended by a strange utterance, there is no room for our coping with ambiguity in Davidson’s universe.²⁰⁵

Another powerful and convincing account of metaphor comes at the problem from a different angle. In their important text *Metaphors We Live By*,²⁰⁶ Mark Johnson and George Lakoff invoke a series of examples that help to establish that much, if not all, of our conceptual activity is metaphorical. In a sense, then, this linguistic approach to the question of metaphors sidesteps the question of cognitive or non-cognitive content, and yet not by placing the metaphor wholly on the side of use. Instead, Lakoff and Johnson show that the particular acts of uttering or reading metaphors are only possible based upon a pervasive metaphorical structuring of concepts that, for its parts, structures the possible utterances that we could make.²⁰⁷ The most valuable insight of Lakoff and Johnson is the implied phenomenological insights into the moment of metaphor, the crux of our positive comments to come below. Lets briefly lay out this fourth foray into metaphor in order to deepen our thinking on the event of metaphor.

First, Lakoff and Johnson are trying to say something primarily about our “conceptual systems,” rather than explicitly identified metaphors. Since our conceptual systems are that *by* which we act, we remain for the most part unaware of them. Thus, the linguist will seek insight into the conceptual systems of a speaker by observing the utterances taken as true or useful, and thus the utterances of language are an “important source of evidence for what that system is like.”²⁰⁸ In fact, the conceptual system turns out to be mostly metaphorical in nature. Their description

²⁰⁵ Of course, Davidson would immediately respond that he is specifically a critic of the representational theory of meaning that our objection attributes to him. But despite his explicit rejection, Charles Taylor has convincingly shown the presence of Cartesian inside/ outside thinking of which representational thinking is a development. See Charles Taylor, “Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 27-28.

²⁰⁶ Johnson and Lakoff, *Metaphors We Live By*.

²⁰⁷ In my opinion, such an account of metaphorical activity gives proper weight to Black’s suggestion above that a metaphor implies a set of subordinate metaphors. Further, it also shows the impact that metaphor has for the description or reality, or to speak more Davidsonian, to determine the truth-conditions of statements.

²⁰⁸ Johnson and Lakoff, *Metaphors We Live By*, 3.

invokes what we might call umbrella metaphors as making possible an open series of actual utterances. Of course, the umbrella metaphor could itself be uttered, but often they find the metaphor simply implied in a relatively stable set of utterances.

Let us take an example to clarify their insight. The first metaphor offered for analysis in the book is the conceptual metaphor “Argument is War.” This metaphor is implied in many of our descriptions of (or, importantly, our *actions within*) arguments. For instance, we say: “Your claims are *indefensible*. He *attacked every weak point* in my argument. His criticisms were *right on target*. I *demolished* his argument.”²⁰⁹ Now the parenthetical above is important for Lakoff and Johnson, because they want to establish that we *act* according to our conceptual system. We actually *win or lose* an argument, and this action is only possible given that our actions are governed by the metaphor ‘argument is war.’ Their thought experiment to this effect is quite convincing. They ask us to imagine a culture in which the dominant metaphor was “Argument is a dance.” This shift in our conceptual system would have drastic ramifications for our actions in an argument. There is no winner or loser in a dance; there are two partners whose “goal is perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way. In such a culture people would view arguments differently, experience them differently, carry them out differently, and talk about them differently.”²¹⁰ We, as the authors point out, would not likely see this activity as arguing at all. Surely both are forms of discourse, but without a winner and a loser, it’s not an argument, right? Well, that is a hard question. There is no universal idea by which one culture has the truth, while the other one is mistaken.²¹¹

From the initial description, a certain fecundity of the metaphor is apparent. Once the metaphor is active, it implies an entire way of acting and speaking. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect to take from their book is their brief discussion of the implications their theory has for truth. Truth, they argue, is a “function” of our conceptual systems, and having described their account of conceptual systems as through and through metaphorical, it turns out that truth crosses the boundaries between the

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 4.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 5.

²¹¹ Now Lakoff and Johnson don’t dwell on this aspect for very long, but for our purposes perhaps this is the most striking feature, if, that is, we understand the conceptual system as the metastable. Given the situation, a conceptual metaphor can crystallize into a speech act or utterance, but precisely how it comes out is unpredictable. Applying the metaphor in one place versus another is a creative playing forward, and may also shift back (as Black showed) to reformat the metastable. There is a feedback loop instituted between the levels that are placed into communication by the individuating utterance.

dominant theories of truth. The crux is that truth must be based on understanding, and the understanding that we have of a situation based upon our (metaphorical) concepts. As a result, they define an “experientialist” approach to truth: “We understand a statement as being true in a given situation when our understanding of the statement fits our understanding of the situation closely enough for our purposes.”²¹² The inclusion of the understanding in the equation implies, in other words, a double relation of “fit,” between the situation (as understood) and the conceptual system (making the understanding possible).

Yet these linguistic structures fail to account for the creative aspects of actions, because they focus almost exclusively on the linguistic structures taken statically. What is needed then would be a diacritical account that cuts across the many phases. Their description hangs on the “meaning” of the words in the metaphor, and yet the performance aspects of meaning do not leave “dance” to be some ideal unity that can be applied to argument without shifting its own meaning as well. When Lakoff and Johnson write, “argument is dance,” something happens, something changes in the possibilities for what they will subsequently write. Something shifts in my metastabilities when I read this expression. It may crystallize again here, or in a wholly different context where my body recognizes its appropriateness again. By remaining within primarily static descriptions, they do not have the space to account of the genius of my negotiations with the many layers of metastable structures that I can take up and repeat in new and varied contexts.

²¹² Johnson and Lakoff, *Metaphors We Live By*, 179.

Meaning as Trajectory: The Performance of the Trace

(a) *Ricœur and the Re-Description of Reality*

The manner in which Renaud Barbaras engages the broad strokes of Ricœur's approach and extends it towards a Merleau-Pontian account of metaphor is directly relevant for our purposes here. In fact, Ricœur's intuition that metaphors can burst and reshape the categories with which ontology describes the world seems to place into question the readymade understanding of the verb "to be" (*TE*, 267). But Barbaras recognizes that the ontological insight is left hanging in Ricœur, who approaches the problem negatively. The "rightness" of the metaphor shows it reveals a dimension of experience often hidden, and that it reveals an "originary sense" of Being that finds its best description in Merleau-Ponty's late ontology.

Barbaras begins by returning to some of the hermeneutical movement of Ricœur's text, which are helpful to note here. First, Ricœur identifies a first stage in the investigation of metaphor stemming from Aristotle, namely, a conception in which metaphor is a trope amongst many in the realm of rhetoric. In this conception, the main vehicle of meaning is the word (*RM*, 1; *TE*, 268). In the metaphor, there is a substitution of one word for the proper word, and the space between the proper word and the one used in the metaphor presents the work of understanding the metaphor. Moreover, there is a "reason" or justification for the substitution, namely the resemblance of the new word for the proper one. This characterization helps us to make sense of the "eye for resemblance" that we have already discussed with Aristotle above. But this focus on the word and on resemblance leaves this account incomplete. The approach has to conclude that the metaphor does not "bring any [new] information: it could be the object of an exhaustive paraphrase" and the return to the literal meaning would regain the full meaning of the metaphor. Secondly, the metaphor is thereby denied all but a "decorative" function (*TE*, 268). Moreover, as Ricœur stresses, this account does not allow us to understand the production of meaning, the act of metaphor implied by Aristotle's seeing is lost in favor of the static meaning of words. Barbaras also suggests that this account misses that a metaphor can have a certain rightness [*justesse*] and can "say better" what a literal phrase might try to say. Moreover, the "very distant" substitution is often meaningful while

the “close” substitution is either meaningless or just confusing. A substitution theory of metaphor then seems to overly emphasize the static meaning of the words and fail to account for the ontological reality of making metaphors.

The second stop on Ricœur’s path is with theories that take the *sentence* as the most basic unit of meaning, a unit that can be broken apart into words, but that is nonetheless not the mere summation of the words taken individually. This movement to the sentence places a large emphasis on the “propositional structure” of metaphors, *Juliet is P*, where P is the Sun. This move does have the happy effect of shifting our discussion to the relationship between sense and reference. The proposition implies a world about which one is speaking, and hence a relationship to reality (*TE*, 269). Moreover, importantly, the words are no longer thought to have a literal meaning, for meaning becomes a “*tension*” or an interaction produced by the sentence. This is essentially the logical structure beneath the theory of Max Black that we noted above, and the work of the listener becomes one of “restitution” of the intended meaning by working through the tension caused by the metaphorical framing of the object term. As Barbaras argues, this account still falls back into a substitution account because it does not conceive of the meaning of the metaphor as something created out of the sedimented language, but rather as something discovered, revealed, by the search. Ricœur does make some important attempts to move beyond this either/or of creation or discovery by suggesting that there is still something of a resemblance theory at work in interaction theories, and that the fit of two distant ideas, despite their distance, is what is precisely suggested by Aristotle’s account of genius. Metaphorical resemblance is what leads Ricœur to suggest we rethink the descriptive image and the iconic function in metaphor, because the metaphor does have purchase and actually “adds to the ways in which we perceive” (*RM*, 224). If this is the case, then we can see the justified insistence that metaphors “burst the previous categories and create new logical frontiers” (*TE*, 270).

This leads Ricœur beyond the first two stages of word and sentence to consider a *hermeneutical* point of view that takes discourse as a whole as *at stake* in the metaphor’s ability to “re-describe reality” (*RM*, 5). Of course, the apparent contradiction here is that the literary object has long been viewed as a suspension of a reference function, and this is even more the case for the metaphor. “Fiction” is specifically self-referential, so what is this talk about re-describing reality? Ricœur takes up the notions of models as heuristic in the sciences, something that he draws from the work of Black and Nelson Goodman, to be in fact again fully in line with the spirit of Aristotle’s description. “Can one not,” asks Ricœur, “say that the strategy of language at work in metaphor consists in obliterating the

logical and established frontiers of language, in order to bring to light new resemblances the previous classification kept us from seeing" (*RM*, 233)? This comment introduces what Ricœur takes to be the addition hermeneutics can offer to a theory of metaphor, namely the introduction of the distinction between the structure of the work in question and the "world" of that work. Within the heuristic function, which implies a "suspension" of literal reference in order to initiate the understanding to the new logical frontiers, the interpretation of metaphor becomes less the need to give its meaning than to display the world that it refers to. This would be to move beyond Black, in that the metaphor comes to re-establish the associated commonplaces along new dimensions. Hence, the quest (Ricœur's word) is not to display the hidden authorial intention behind a text, but to lay clear the *world* displayed before and by a text (*RM*, 260).

But he is quick to move beyond this problem of reference, and I think that Barbaras is right to critique Ricœur's vague answer to this central problem. As Barbaras points out, there is an emphasis on a single type of reference that is not questioned by Ricœur, namely description. Barbaras shows that there are different types of reference the moment we take the phenomenological insight of intentionality seriously. The presupposition that puts description as the only type of reference is precisely the natural attitude of common language and science, and Ricœur's account of heuristic reference is simply an attempt to find an acceptable model of descriptive reference that harmonizes with a hermeneutic approach. Barbaras suggests that the phenomenological insight amounts to a double rejection of the positivism implied by Ricœur's description thus far. We have to reject the idea of a world in itself that merely receives our descriptions and a pure subject that is closed in upon him or herself (*TE*, 272). "[Consciousness] is open onto the world, and is nothing other than this opening," argues Barbaras, and "it is, essentially, consciousness of something" (*TE*, 272). Thus the literary object, or the metaphor, must be a type of reference, an opening of a field of possibilities, even if it is not properly "descriptive." And to now tie our reading of Barbaras back into our account of expression, Barbaras argues that precisely this move of showing that the metaphor opens up a new reality of reference, that it "escapes the alternative between invention and discovery, between revelation and description: by producing another world, the poem reveals a new sense of the being of the world" (*TE*, 273).

Despite this fundamental critique that I would argue invokes the need for the paradoxical logic of expression in understanding metaphor, Barbaras returns to embrace one of Ricœur's conclusions and tries to fold it into the late ontology of Merleau-Ponty. Ricœur argues that the re-description of reality means, "the 'place' of metaphor, its most intimate and ultimate abode, is neither the name, nor the sentence, nor even dis-

course, but the copula of the verb *to be*. The metaphorical 'is' at once signifies both 'is not' and 'is like'" (RM, 6). This leads Ricœur to suggest the very important link between truth and metaphor. I should register an objection of my own at this point. Although Ricœur makes the effort to move away from the rediscovery of the author's intention, replacing this with the world presented by and before the text, this shift actually takes us even further away from the living context of speaking and hearing metaphors. Thus, Ricœur in a sense completes the classical account of metaphorical meaning with this shift to the hermeneutic. The interpretative distance becomes a positive power, between the author and the text as much as between the audience and the text. How, then, might one ever read a text outside one's "logical frontiers," to use Ricœur's phrase. The metaphor, if taken as such, would require that we flesh out the implied "is not" enough to be able to understand the new terrain that we find ourselves on, and so hermeneutical interpretation becomes a *condition* of understanding rather than a description of understanding. The metaphor, however, initiates us into its world without delay; there is neither the time nor the need to complete this hermeneutical work. Ricœur is certainly right about the power of metaphors to re-describe reality, but by limiting the investigation to their textual manifestation and then taking that role to be exemplary leaves his theory without the resources to account for how we speak and hear metaphors all the time, without ever going into the hermeneutical investigation seemingly implied in their mere comprehension.

In fact, thanks to Barbaras, we can take this even further. Ricœur's understanding of the "is/is not" of the metaphor suggests that we are left with a hopeless paradox. On the one hand, it preserves normal everyday reference in which the *is* functions without problem. On the other hand, it suggests a fictive universe in which the *is* does not have a referential function, but a heuristic one. The metaphor, argues Barbaras, suggests that we need to try to understand how a thing can "be another thing while also not being that other thing" (TE, 274). In other words, what the metaphor shows us is that an ontology that is based on identity is incomplete, just as our work on Simondon above showed that completed and self-sufficient individuals are not the basis for a theory of individuation. As Barbaras says, by taking this type of reference as exclusive, and thus by taking the universe as made up of individuals, by assuming as foundational the logic of the excluded middle, of the self-identical individuals, then surely the metaphorical "is" seems paradoxical. But is there, asks Barbaras, another understanding of logic and ontology that can incorporate this paradox, a "meaning of Being that permits us to remove the paradox in such a way that a being would never be itself except in not fully being itself" (TE, 274)? What metaphor shows us by breaking the normal categories of

natural language and the tyranny of descriptive or propositional reference is that another understanding of Being is needed beneath that of individuals. It also shows us the essential link between speaking and Being. In other words, where Ricœur leaves off with metaphor we need to find the late chiasmatic ontology of Merleau-Ponty. A reference that is not description shows that the real cannot be reduced to that which can be said literally, and also this shows that that which is not of the real in this sense is also still contained in the real (*TE*, 275).

(b) *Merleau-Ponty and the Ontological Landscape of Metaphor*

Barbaras suggests that the critique of Ricœur shows that he comes up short in the face of the ontological level that metaphor reveals, and that thus we need to turn to a Merleau-Pontian ontology to fully understand what is going on in metaphor. The first point that Barbaras wants to stress is how the ontology emerges from the phenomenological insight of the intentional structure, though here moved to the ontological level. “We cannot speak about Being,” argues Barbaras, “by passing over in silence the fact that we are talking precisely about Being, that Being is first that of which we are speaking” (*TE*, 275). This idea implies that an “authentic ontology” must understand in Being the possibility of “being spoken,” which points to the essential role of “interrogation” in *Le visible et l’invisible*. Being must be understood beginning from how it is given, and since we speak of it, in how it is given *to be spoken*. In other words, Being “must be situated on this side of *sense* [*sens*]” (*TE*, 276). This is precisely the expressive logic I have been shaping, and it is here found in a paradoxical movement characterized as *signification* at the heart of Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology.

Indeed, Barbaras is quick to point out that if the world gives itself as *sense*, this does not mean it is an “essence,” for even if the consciousness is not merely one thing among others, but rather an opening onto the world, it is also excluded by Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy to set up the consciousness “outside” the world — indeed, only through the consciousness’s sharing of flesh with the world can it know that world at all. There is always a “certain opacity” to all that consciousness does, indeed the very “fundamental obscurity” that Merleau-Ponty began talking about as early as the *Phénoménologie de la perception* (*PhP*, 452/454-55). The late ontology mirrors the paradox of expression, for the relation between being in the world and that world is one of the consciousness being enveloped by that which it sustains, just as the expression is overflowed by that which only exists through this expression. Indeed, Barbaras makes this

connection himself, stressing that language expresses a sense that somehow exists at a perceptual level, but that the “thought” is not pure and complete in itself, “otherwise we would not have the feeling of living in language, and it would remain exterior, like the instrument of an occasional communication of our thoughts” (TE, 277). For both perception and language, the meaning that is “revealed remains at a distance, opaque, and this is why it calls to be taken up again [*une reprise*]” (TE, 277). Despite our understanding of language in the natural attitude or on classical theories that support it, language cannot give us some pure essences to a pure *Cogito*, because even speech reveals “the voice, that is, a certain *articulatory gestuality*, speech also remains the fact of an embodied conscience” (TE, 277). Speech remains essentially in the weighty stuff of the world, as we would say, and thus always maintains that opacity that precludes a pure expression, and so the *Logos* always waits for more speech, calls for it, needs it. Expression is the source of a fundamental desire that is insatiably opened with the first expressive spacing.

Thus, we have an understanding of being that shows the impossibility of there being a pure visibility, a pure transcendental realm, or a pure *cogito* as a *pensée de survol* that we will see is Merleau-Ponty’s consistent target. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical interrogation is the antithesis of both the *pensée de survol* and a raw empiricism, and thus not a synthesis of them. A third way completes the paradoxical logic of expression by finding it as the grounding gesture of the ontological fact. Barbaras characterizes this Being as higher than brute facts, lower than essences, a “unity that cannot be detached from the contents that it structures, as a signification that remains inscribed implicitly in the world” (TE, 278). This can, I would suggest, be best emphasized by the term “weight.” The thing in the world that a classical approach would see as an object in itself, resistant to what it is not, with unity and identity, is a certain weight in the field that is not reducible to its merely physical properties. The object presents itself to us and in harmony with the world of which it is a part, without any need for us to integrate a series of punctual data into a unity. There is a certain cohesion of the object without a concept, as Barbaras puts it, sounding like Deleuze, and so there is no purely passive moment. Barbaras explicitly links this point to Simondon, because the individual thing is understood as less a self-identical thing than as a certain tonality or melody [or weight] whose parts are an equilibrium and which weigh on all the others (as the lemon’s yellow color “already contains the acidity and freshness evoked by the entire fruit” (TE, 279)). Any individual thing in this ontology then is both in a phase of individuating, more than its present and is also less than itself because it *is* only in relation to its milieu. And Barbaras puts this specifically into the terms of expression when he says that I “do not perceive *the thing*, but I perceive *according to it*. It does

not appear then as a definite individual, but rather as a certain accent or a certain coherent deformation of the world" (TE, 279). This notion of coherent deformation, we already saw above, is at the heart of Merleau-Ponty on expression in *La prose du monde*. Merleau-Ponty's late ontology, we might say, is the fruit of the logic of expression.

In other words, this is how we need to understand Merleau-Ponty's use of the term "dimension" as a description of a thing. "The thing," explains Barbaras, "is not an individual but a principle of equivalence or of unity for the totality of the world" (TE, 279). The thing does not represent the whole like a sign and a signifier, but rather acts as a weight in the field shaping the very being of all others through its possible communication with them. The world is an expressive field:

... it is by the same virtue that the color, the yellow, at the same time gives itself as a *certain* being and as a *dimension*, the expression of *every possible being* — What is proper to the sensible (as to language) is to be representative of the whole, not by a sign-signification relation, or by the immanence of the parts in one another and in the whole, but because each part is *torn up* from the whole, comes with its roots, encroaches upon the whole, transgresses the frontiers of the others. [...] It is thus that the sensible initiates me to the world, as language to the other: by encroachment [*empiètement*], *Ueberschreiten*. 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... (VI, 267/218)

The things are thus weights in the field and not individuals in themselves, they encroach upon each other and this fundamental relation, *empiètement*, which is precisely repeated on the linguistic landscape, we will find to be the heart of Merleau-Ponty's expressive ontology.

I think that Barbaras quite rightly points out that such an ontology suggests that a theory of metaphor that rests on the identity of the terms of a relation cannot stand, and yet the world does reveal itself as relations beyond the distinction of identity and difference. Things exist as 'dimensions', which means that they essentially encroach upon other things, relate to them, and thus also shift what they are in the process. As Barbaras puts it, "to be different from other things does not mean to be self-enclosed or to achieve a set of qualities, but rather to embody a ray of the world, to open a dimension of communication with other things" (TE, 280). In other words, the ontology itself implies that each thing exists in (non-explicit though essential) communication with all the others, and this is a world of dimensions that is nowhere other than in the real relations at work. The world then is a world of "pregnancy, participation, lineage, in short the world as the place of an originary *metaphoricity*" (TE, 281). This is

a “place” in which there are not individuals in relation, but transductive relations in which the individuals do not preexist the relation, and in this place there is no need to talk about the “paradox” as fatal to the theory of expression. In the ontology of *empiètement*, there is no contradiction of something being both *something else* and *not something else*, Juliet is both the Sun and not the Sun, *essentially*, from the moment Shakespeare launches this metastable trace. To return the point to Ricœur, it is only in this ontology of dimensions, of weight, that the duality of is and is not can be thought together (TE, 281).

The metaphor takes us then to the originary world of *empiètement*, where the categories of the natural attitude are broken in favor of an open world of dimensions and rays. It initiates us to an understanding of an “unassignable difference,” which is a difference that is a “dimension or a generality” (TE, 281). And most of all, it shows that at the basis of ontology we find a robust and open account of communication that is always already *empiètement*. The metaphor then takes us back to this communication before there were terms, before there was a man and a wolf. The metaphor works because they find in the world some ray or dimension in that they can share, some manner of crystallizing together out of that transindividual metastable that is no-thing before its individuation.

(c) “Il n’y a pas métaphore...,” and Weight

For a philosopher whose philosophy is shot through by metaphorical formulations and analogical transpositions of ideas from the perceptual world to realms such as language, art, and history, it may be strange to not find a sustained engagement with metaphor or figurative meaning anywhere in Merleau-Ponty. Even stranger, Merleau-Ponty writes that, “there is no metaphor” (VI, 271/222). In fact, this phrase comes in a working note that apparently responds to a question (perhaps by a student, perhaps a worry of Merleau-Ponty’s own) as to whether the phrase “a ‘direction’ of thought” is or is not a metaphor. How Merleau-Ponty answers this question negatively depends wholly on the ontology just sketched and a particular understanding of metaphor. Let me explore Merleau-Ponty’s answer here, and then try to apply the same logic to the (non)-metaphor of weight that I have been supporting so far.

The “direction” of thought is not a metaphor, argues Merleau-Ponty, because there “is no *metaphor* between the visible and the invisible (the invisible: either my thought for myself or the sensible given to the other for me): *metaphor* is too much or too little: too much if the invisible is really invisible, too little if it lends itself to transposition” (VI, 271/221-22).

From this cryptic description, we can see that Merleau-Ponty is engaging a classical conception of metaphor that is grounded on transposition or substitution. If the invisible is “truly” invisible, then the idea that a transposition could be made that repeats this pure reality in itself is to give metaphor too much power. If the invisible is already open to being transposed by the metaphor, to being made visible, then the metaphor doesn’t say anything new; it is merely a passive bringing of the silent to speech. In either case, the idea of “transposition” between the visible and the invisible makes no sense on the ontology sketched above, and the classical understanding of metaphor does not capture the true “transition” of expression.

The metaphor “direction of thought” is not metaphorical for two reasons: First, thought does involve a quasi-locality, if not a locality as a spatio-temporal point, at least “a locality by investment, and, when all that is said and done, there is a theater of apparition of the other” (VI, 271/222). Thus, if thought is of the weighty, if it is “placed” in the world in some way, in a theater of appearing (just as the individual is the theater of individuation), then it is not wholly metaphorical (in the classical sense) to say that thought is a “direction.” Second, the idea of movement for things, and movement is implied by the term direction, is not itself “in objective space — A *direction* is not *in* space: it is in filigree across it — it is therefore transposable to thought” (VI, 271/222). In other words, the very ontology that would claim direction and movement are self-identical unities of a purely empirical thought, or clear ideas in themselves, is simply a description of the natural attitude, and not sustainable once we have moved to an ontology of the flesh.

This might apply to my use of the word weight. There is no metaphor here either. Weight refers in “physical” understandings to the relation between an object and another, not to some self-same characteristic that an object “has.” Moreover, weight refers to that which causes bodies to move along certain dimensions, and this is precisely what ideas can do. There is no metaphor at work when Merleau-Ponty says, “[i]deas are the centers of our gravitation, this very definite void which the vault of language is built around, and which has actual existence only in the weight and counterweight of stones” (*Préface*, 37/20).

Now, if “direction” of thought and “weight” are not to be understood as metaphors in the classical sense, why do we insist on still talking about metaphors? For Barbaras, this returns to his guiding characterization that the ontology of late Merleau-Ponty finds Being to be a fundamental “metaphoricity,” that metaphors burst the categories of sedimented language and the natural attitude to reveal a fundamental intertwining of *logos* and *nature*, or weight. However, Barbaras seems to make two steps here that leave his analysis incomplete. The first one is his

over-emphasis on this explanation of “direction” by Merleau-Ponty. His claim that the choice (in this unpublished working note) of the metaphor of direction is significant seems to overstate the case, as it is unlikely that in scribbling down this thought Merleau-Ponty was thinking of defining movement as the fundamental ontological factor, as Barbaras wants to do. It is more likely that Merleau-Ponty was responding to the classical understanding of metaphor and the interpretation such a theory might give of his formulations. The working note, although it rejects the explicit possibility of metaphor, is actually a manifesto in favor of an ontological understanding of metaphorical meaning. This brings me to the second point about Barbaras, namely, that Merleau-Ponty would not argue that there are “individuals” in this fundamental metaphoricity that are robust enough to “have” meanings. In other words, Barbaras seems here to be populating the metastable with ideas, which is an overstatement of the metastable. The metaphor certainly has meaning because of its relation to the metastable, but it doesn’t *mean* the metastable. It reveals it. The fundamental metaphoricity of the ontology of *empiètement* is ex-scribed in the metaphor, not inscribed there.

This is clearly more of Merleau-Ponty’s point if we turn to a closely related working note from the same month in which Merleau-Ponty again mentions this “direction” of thought. “Philosophy has never spoken,” argues Merleau-Ponty, “of the passivity of our activity” (VI, 270/221). In other words, Barbaras’s characterization of the literal meaning of the metaphor to be found in the fundamental metaphoricity of Being does not connect to our activity, only our passivity. The position he sketches only describes the *permanent possibility* of metaphor that is the relation between speech and Being, an ontology of *empiètement*. His position does not give us an understanding of our active role here, since he seems to follow Ricœur in thinking of reality as separable from its ability to be spoken, and thus he seems to miss the fundamental role of speaking by focusing on Speech. The point is that we need to avoid populating the metastable with a set of hard and fast, mutually exclusive possibilities, for this would be to place ourselves and our ontology above the actual movement of individuation which happens *between* passivity and activity, and thus is not mere “discovery” of a the literal sense of metaphors. The ontology of the flesh does not just make metaphors function like literal meanings, it shows the insufficiency of this figurative/literal distinction because of the paradoxical activity that is found in the metaphorical gesture. In this related working note, Merleau-Ponty continues: “new as our initiatives may be, they come to birth at the heart of being, they are connected onto the time that streams forth in us, supported on the pivots or hinges of our life, their *sense* is a ‘direction’” (VI, 271/221). Barbaras’s emphasis is on the first part of this description, but we need also to see how the metaphorical

meaning is not complete in itself and discovered as a deeper truth of Being, but rather how its meaning is the outcome of its past in the lending of our life to it here and now, of our taking it up and sustaining it, in negotiation with the pivots and hinges of our life and history. We need an account of meaning, then, that does not understand it as a thing, but as a *trajectory*, through returning to the act of metaphor rather than the abstract ontological exscription of *empiètement*.

(d) *Meaning as Trajectory: Expressive Performance*

In fact, the metaphor does more than *ex-scribe* the open ontology, it also *ex-scribes* the passing by of the one who speaks. In the interests of tying together the many themes that are on the table thanks to the work of the Introduction and Part I, I will end this chapter with a description of the event of metaphor as a paradigm of the paradoxical logic of expression.

There is no pure creation; the metaphor does not come out of nowhere. The speaker is not a pure subject, a punctual and self-transparent moment of transcendental consciousness. The words she uses are not the words of the dictionary. The life of an expressive body is an historical trajectory, and any given moment or phase is just that, a phase in a long process of becoming. The expressive body, as we have seen, is the body that is subject to the weight of the past. The past is carried along by the body and sustained by that body, for it exists nowhere other than in the metastable structures of this body. The past sediments in numerous ways, into the habits that are closer to pure repetitions, and into the memories, which are closer to purely creative acts. There is also a way in which some structures seem to sediment in an almost impersonal way, as a “past that was never present,” and this accounts for the embodied or sedimented structures of norms, prejudices, all of the things that “everyone knows.” None of these things are wholly impersonal, even the cultural sedimentations that seem as free from our responsibility still depend upon our taking them up and playing them forward. The structures of language, for instance, are merely fictions of the general working together of many personal copings with the sedimentations of successful communication, and yet the language is not the mere summation of these parts. Languages themselves are not static, but trajectories, shaped by the actual situated activities of speaking subjects, and in relation to other languages (be they other tongues or other systems of gestures).

Thus, the paradoxical logic of expression suggests that we find ourselves *within* the metastable. We are both the product and the produc-

ers, we are both speakers and enveloped by Speech. This ambiguous, vertical, situation is crossed by an innumerable set of horizontal trajectories. Each subject finds herself in a situation of unease, a perturbation, a need to express something. This something is not a thing, and yet not nothing. It is prefigured in some vague way in the structures that are coming together between the trajectory of the language, the trajectory of the personal life of the speaker, and the situation with its own complex temporality in which the speaker finds herself. Out of all of the language I know, out of all of the life I have lived, I speak. I crystallize an expression in response to the situation, I repeat words and meanings that seem to me to answer the exigencies I find myself mired in. I am not in control of this past that I repeat in the manner of a transparent directedness, my body responds to the various weights and forces here, and uses them to glide into the situation that calls them forth. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “[m]y freedom can draw life away from its spontaneous course, but only by a series of unobtrusive deflections,” and specifically not by any sort of “absolute creation” (*PhP*, 519-20/529). As such, there is much more exscribed in the moment of inscription than the “meaning” of the expression, I exscribe there my entire language and my entire culture. Each expression is an individuation that expresses the current solution in a trajectory of individuations, but also the metastable out of which that individual came, the new milieu that is created by the individuation, and the future of possible individuations.

This is why it makes no sense to speak about a living or a dead metaphor, for all expressions are in a sense between literal and figurative meaning, between speaking and spoken speech. “Juliet is the Sun.” No number of repetitions or articles about this metaphor can kill it off. When a person who has never heard this metaphor reads Shakespeare for the first time, it is a living metaphor. The question of living or dead metaphors assumes the reality of a linguistic system divorced from the context of speaking. For the first Romeo, trying to express to just how important Juliet was for his entire life, just how brilliantly her beauty shines through “yonder window,” this metaphor is a clarification, an expression. It opens up the dimensions for repetitions and alterations.²¹³ This is not because in

²¹³ Despite the “late” Merleau-Ponty flavor of this passage, it should be noted that such formulations were already present in Merleau-Ponty’s courses on child psychology at the Sorbonne. In particular, the important passage on meaning and performance has very much influences the presentation of this account of metaphor. My thanks to Professor Silverman for directing my attention to this important stage in Merleau-Ponty’s development. For the section indicated, see: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Experience of Others (1951-52),” in *Merleau-Ponty and Psychology*, ed. Keith Hoeller (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993), 49-54. The introduction to the translation of this course offered by Hugh J. Silverman is an important statement of the development of Merleau-

the metastable structures of a fundamental metaphoricity there is an actual intertwining of Juliet and the Sun. Rather, the fundamental metaphoricity is this metastable possibility. The act of metaphor brings it about that this possibility becomes real, for this life and this situation, and only there do we even have the right to speak of the terms of a relation. The metaphor, like all expressions, says something about the world by repeating creatively what has already been said, by playing the "Sun" into this new situation of shining with Juliet from the balcony, by naming that balcony the East. And this meaning is there, right in the moment, it requires no further elaboration, no going off to compare the implicit framing of its terms.

Nor does the metaphor die, the author does. The metaphor falls away from the tip of the stylus into the weighty material whose alteration marks the event of this meaning. The trajectory of the life of the author carries on, the metaphor lodged into the expressive potentials of the body, inscribed as possible actions of the hand or the tongue. There is thus a double trace of every expression. Even if the metaphor crystallizes in spoken words, there is the physical disturbance and the alteration of the weight of the body. None of these traces offers anything eternal or permanent, the existence of meaning is as precarious as the bodies through which it survives, the bodies that it infects. But because of the double trace, the act of expression is always a making public, not of an inner idea real in itself, but of *the production of sense*, which is the marking of the passing by of a world, an opening onto, that is both enveloped by and shaping the ideal structures to which it is responding.

The trace of the expression, then, can be joined through reading.²¹⁴ When I come across a trace of an expression I can lend my body to that trace and awaken it, give it new life, and since the speaker is just the first

Ponty's thought towards the notion of indirect language. As Silverman notes, "indirect language, whether expressed by the painter, by the writer, or by someone speaking, is best characterized in terms of style," Hugh J. Silverman, "Merleau-Ponty's New Beginning: Preface to The Experience of Others," in *Merleau-Ponty and Psychology*, ed. Keith Hoeller (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993), 28. Although less explicitly than in the later works, Merleau-Ponty approaches this understanding by writing, "Dramatic expression involves speaking with the body, constructing with possible body movements an original assemblage which provides the play's signification" (51), and later, "all gestures must have a meaning [*un sens*] which is indicated but not signified directly" (53).

²¹⁴ As Dufrenne writes, "[The work] awaits a reading. [...] [F]or the book as such has as yet only an inert and opaque existence: words, signs on a white page, the significations remain in a potential state as long as a consciousness does not actualize them [...] The reading is a 'concretization'" Dufrenne, "Literary Criticism and Phenomenology," 244. As noted above, we find in Dufrenne a theory of expression very close to that of Merleau-Ponty, and yet Dufrenne does seem to insist on a eidetics and a truth of the expressed.

hearer, the writer is just the first reader, the other readers too must join with the activity exscribed in the trace in order to join with the meaning of the utterance. This cannot be a pure repetition, and this “meaning” is not a thing to be possessed. The life of the reader, even if the first reader is in question, is always itself a trajectory, a transductive negotiation of the intensities of the metastable and the exigencies of the present, always in a state of becoming. The reader cannot bring the pure meaning of the trace back to life; the meaning of the metaphor will be “the outcome” of this metastable structure in dialogue with the metastabilities of the various weights at play. That Juliet can be the Sun depends on the associations within the speaker. It also depends on the historical moment, the tone of voice used, and the situation into which it is played forward. If it is someone sitting down and reading Shakespeare, the context is set by the play, but also by the reason for its reading, the environment around the reader, the attention given by the reader, the expectations sedimented because of the cultural situation of Shakespeare. All of these factors and many more shape what the “meaning” of the metaphor will be in *this* reading. And that is the point; meaning is a function of a reading.

Moreover, the meaning of the metaphor in this reading opens up the possibility for repetitions, alterations, and re-crystallizations. Tied very closely to its many physical supports, the “life” of the metaphor is a trajectory across its many performances, an open history of expression. And this *is* its meaning. There is no “the” meaning of a metaphor, because the metaphor is always between pure creation and pure repetition. The meaning of the metaphor is shifted and altered by the many bodies that lend themselves to it, that take it up, that force it to negotiate again and again with new historical situations. The meaning of the metaphor is no more a thing than a “thing” is a thing for Merleau-Ponty. A dimension, a weight, guides how certain bodies move and that is altered by the very coming into communication with those bodies it calls forth. The trace is the possibility for “speaking again,” for taking up and altering the expression, and this connects to all expressive actions. There is, then, nothing different in the case of metaphor. Once we see that the ontology of expression negates the literal and figurative distinction, and once we see that the fundamental metaphoricity is a metastable field, and thus not populated with individuals but with intensities, then we can see that there is meaning in the act of metaphor, but only insofar as this meaning is linked through the weight of the traces through which the expressive bodies that bring this meaning to life and throw it towards a future *touch across time and space*. Metaphor shows us that fundamentally the ontology of *empiètement* is one of communication, a trajectory itself, by which weight continually distances itself from itself. This type of activity, the expressive performance that lends weight to the weighty traces of expression, is a

form of communication and a precise manner of “amplifying intercorporeal communication” (*Préface*, 35/19) — thus, the logic of expression leads us directly to an ontology of expressive bodies and a responsibility for our complex weighing and weight.

Part III

The Logic of Expression in the Work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Part III, Chapter 1

A Young Merleau-Ponty Against the Establishment: Early Hints of an Expressive Logic

– § 1. –

L'union de l'âme et du corps: "An anxious trembling quickly mastered"

Nos premiers travaux publiés s'attachent à un problème qui est constant dans la tradition philosophique, mais qui s'est posé d'une manière plus aiguë depuis le développement des sciences de l'homme, au point d'aboutir à une crise de notre savoir en même temps que de notre philosophie. [...] Il faut donc comprendre comment l'homme est simultanément sujet et objet, première personne et troisième personne, absolu d'initiative et dépendant...

– Merleau-Ponty²¹⁵

In this passage, drawn from a 1952 summary of his early work submitted for his candidature at the *Collège de France*, Merleau-Ponty identifies a fundamental discord between the internal perspective that a human being can have on their own life and the external perspective that is adopted by the physical and human sciences. In fact, there is more than a mere discord at work here; there is an *antinomy* that generates the para-

²¹⁵ "Our first published works approach a problem that is a constant in the philosophical tradition, but which has become even more acute since the development of the human sciences, to the point of reaching a simultaneous crisis in our knowledge and in our philosophy. [...] We must therefore ask how man is simultaneously subject and object, first person and third person, absolute beginning and yet dependent..." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Titres et travaux. Projet d'enseignement (1951)," in *Parcours deux: 1951-1961* (Paris: Verdier, 2000), 11-12. (Translations are my own). This passage is quoted in an excellent discussion of the possibility of understanding Merleau-Ponty as engaged in a philosophical anthropology in Étienne Bimbenet, *Nature et Humanité. Le problème anthropologique dans l'oeuvre de Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Jean-François Courtine, Bibliothèque d'histoire de la philosophie (Paris: J. Vrin, 2004), 11-12. Henceforth cited as *NH*. (Translations are my own).

doxes that will guide Merleau-Ponty's philosophy until the very end. As we have already begun to establish in Parts I and II, the paradoxical logic of expression overcomes this antinomy and suggests an ontology of expressive bodies essentially in intersubjective relations. Thus, as I will demonstrate in this section, it will be expression that helps Merleau-Ponty to understand how human beings are "simultaneously subject and object, first person and third person, absolute beginning and yet dependent."²¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty's positive philosophy of embodied and expressive action is an attempt to overcome this dualistic philosophy without falling into irrationalism.

The foundation of this antinomy, argues Merleau-Ponty, is to be traced to a single source: René Descartes and the philosophical elaboration of a dualistic ontology of body and mind as two inherently distinct substances. Merleau-Ponty repeatedly shows in *Phénoménologie de la perception* that the supposed debate between intellectualists and empiricists can be traced to the shared assumption of an absolute distinction between an extended matter and thinking substance, that is, a shared Cartesian ontology.²¹⁷ This fundamental shared assumption has the effect of precluding any possible reconciliation. On the one side, there is idealist philosophy, which Merleau-Ponty also names intellectualism or the philosophy of reflection. These terms unite any approach to knowledge or consciousness that posits a mind transparent to itself, secure in its knowledge because it is a constituting consciousness, and hence locked in upon itself without any means of reaching the exterior world or delineating the conditions of its own emergence into the world. As such, the mind is characterized as being both transparent to itself and also possessing an absolute freedom. On the other side, Merleau-Ponty identifies realism, which he also names empiricism and the mechanistic or realist philosophy of the positive sciences. By reducing human being to existing as merely one object among others, external conditions and causes are taken as the only valuable evidence, and consciousness and freedom become illusions. Human beings are seen as absolutely dependent upon the factors that condition, construct, and trigger their action, and the mind is reduced to a sort of epiphenomenalism.

As Merleau-Ponty repeatedly emphasizes, there is no easy solution that would allow the patient thinker to support one side over the other. In this very setting up of his problematic, we can see why expression, which for Merleau-Ponty means action between pure creation and pure repetition, would offer the chance to overcome this antinomy. For Merleau-Ponty, both sides in the debate possess a certain truth, yet both attempt to

²¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, "Titres et travaux. Projet d'enseignement (1951)," 12.

²¹⁷ See, for instance, *PhP*, 36-77/15-59

claim the entire field of truth, condemning the opposing tradition as wholly misguided and trading merely in illusions. Refusing to take up the mantle of either pole of this debate, Merleau-Ponty argues that the answer must be found in a middle position that allows us to understand embodied human being as precisely the link between these un-linkable perspectives, negating the division of these two perspectives in the very acts of the lived body.²¹⁸ The job of philosophy is not to remove paradoxes, but rather to raise them to a philosophical status. Human being is that ambiguous and mysterious place *between* a world existing fully in itself, *partes extra partes*, and a mind existing fully for itself, a constituting consciousness. Or as we will say, and have already begun sketching above, the answer must be found *as expression*. Indeed, rather than trying to alleviate the tension of this antinomy, Merleau-Ponty's consistent approach is to find the paradoxical place that embraces the antinomy and all of its consequences, and this is precisely the paradoxical logic of expression.

If this characterization is correct so far, then contrary to much of the scholarship engaging with Merleau-Ponty's work, his problematic cannot be reduced to a mere response to Husserl, Sartre, Bergson, or Heidegger. Nor are the questions Merleau-Ponty poses truly aimed at Gestalt theorists, Piaget, or Lachièze-Rey, the contemporaneous psychologists and philosophers occasionally taken up by Merleau-Ponty as interlocutors. The first set of names represents Merleau-Ponty's guides in the quest for the middle ground; the second set represents, in a sense, those who remain mired in the drama produced by an original error. This original error itself, however, can only to be understood in a return to Descartes, who is perhaps, then, Merleau-Ponty's most consistent interlocutor.

Indeed, the presence of Descartes in Merleau-Ponty's work cannot be ignored. Despite its prevalence in the History of Philosophy, the source of the problem of the union of the soul and the body is attributed almost exclusively to Descartes in Merleau-Ponty's first book, *La structure du comportement* (1938).²¹⁹ Moreover, Descartes looms large in Merleau-Ponty's rethinking of the *cogito* in *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945), which is a central moment in his rethinking of embodiment (see particularly, *PhP*, Part III, Chapter 1). Descartes' work pervades Merleau-Ponty's courses at the end of the 1940s at the Sorbonne, and is present throughout the 1950s and is the exclusive focus of his last course at the *Collège de France*. In 1960, Merleau-Ponty published a long essay, *L'Œil et l'Esprit* (*Eye and Mind*), that includes a strident indictment of Descartes' *La Diop-*

²¹⁸ This is the position Merleau-Ponty will draw out of the work of Gabriel Marcel, which will be further explored below, in section 3 of this chapter.

²¹⁹ See particularly *SC*, Chapter 4.

trique. When Merleau-Ponty died at his desk of a sudden stroke on May 3, 1961, the following working note, which he had “clearly read and re-read, underlined and marked in the margins with several red lines,”²²⁰ was found on his desk:

*Transgression or Encroachment [Empiètement],*²²¹ which I take philosophy to be, is but *confusion* for Descartes, that is, *nothing*. The philosophy of distinct thought (...) built upon God, that is, supposing God without wanting to see him, seeking in him reasons not to look at him (...) is a philosophy of objective, horizontal being, the opposite of our philosophy of vertical Being. And it is the same philosophy that makes the other inaccessible (...) because it seeks the other *behind* an objective Being that is impenetrable.²²²

The mixing or confusion that Descartes identifies as the union of the soul and the body, a union that is revealed to us paradigmatically in moments of hunger or pain, is eventually left to the side. Playing with all the meanings of confusion, Descartes concludes that the union cannot be an object of thought, we can only grasp the union by *living it*, and thus it must be left outside the realm of philosophy and science, foreign to the proper realm of knowledge. One could perhaps characterize Merleau-Ponty’s corpus as the revaluation of this mixing, the identification of this mysterious place as the most urgently philosophical locus of all, and the attempt to account for it in light of phenomenology and modern scientific developments. The point is not that Merleau-Ponty was a Descartes scholar; he was in fact far from it. The point is rather that Merleau-Ponty viewed contemporary philosophical problems through the lens of a tension in

²²⁰ This is the description by Emmanuel de Saint Aubert as he introduces the following working note, *ESA2*, 23. (Translations are my own).

²²¹ The translation of *empiètement* is as important as it is difficult. The term’s prevalence in Merleau-Ponty’s late philosophy has been noted by many of his readers, and its status as one key to understanding his philosophy has been raised to the level of urgency by Emmanuel de Saint Aubert’s meticulous study of the unpublished materials. In particular, see the introduction to his project. See *ESA1*, Introduction. For our part, we will continue to work with the idea that expression becomes Merleau-Ponty’s understanding for the place of this transgression of dimensions, that is, that Merleau-Ponty’s logic of expression is also the foundation of his use of this term.

²²² “*L’empiètement*, qui est pour moi la philosophie, n’est pour Descartes que *confusion*, c’est-à-dire *néant*. La philosophie de la pensée distincte (...) philosophie adossée à Dieu, c’est-à-dire le supposant sans vouloir le regarder, cherchant en lui des raisons de ne pas le regarder (...) est une philosophie de l’être objectif, horizontal, le contraire de notre philosophie de l’Être vertical. Et c’est la même philosophie qui rend autrui inaccessible (...) parce qu’elle le cherche *derrière* un Être objectif qui est infranchissable.” Cited at *ESA2*, 23.

Descartes' work, through "an anxious trembling quickly mastered" (OE, 56/137). Reopening this trembling, rejecting Descartes' solution of excluding the possibility of a science that could know this "confusion" between soul and body, is precisely that mysterious place of expressive action.

Of course, Merleau-Ponty's Descartes is a *reading* of Descartes in the strong sense of the word. As Emmanuel de Saint Aubert characterizes it, it might be better to say that Merleau-Ponty offers us a "Cartesian Scenario."²²³ In fact, as Saint Aubert notes, Merleau-Ponty tends to generalize Cartesian dualism to the entire problem of a philosophical anthropology, that is, an understanding of the nature of human being. The decisive opening of the modern anthropological problem and its status as an antinomy stems, according to Merleau-Ponty, directly from Descartes' assertion of the separate substances of body and soul, and the framing of the philosophical project as trying to find a solution to their union. This "quasi-mythical reading of Descartes" will "lead Merleau-Ponty to progressively pass from the problematic of *incarnation* to that of the *flesh*" (ESA2, 17-18). Or as Étienne Bimbenet notes, Merleau-Ponty deliberately emphasizes the "mystery" of the union of the soul and the body (NH, 12). Thus, the over-reading of mystery or antinomy in Descartes is what Saint Aubert characterizes as the "Merleau-Pontian hermeneutic" approach: rather than engaging in a strict history of philosophy, rather than attempting to reconstruct what an author said and to what questions the author was responding, rather than limiting oneself to asking questions that were or would have been legitimate to ask of the author in the author's context, Merleau-Ponty "interrogates Descartes beginning from the present and beginning from Merleau-Ponty's own questions. For Merleau-Ponty, it is not about understanding Descartes as he understood himself (...), of reconstructing what he said, but rather of articulating what he says *to us*" (ESA2, 20-21). Indeed, citing an unpublished manuscript, Saint Aubert reports that Merleau-Ponty characterizes his engagement with Descartes in the following way: "Free reflection on certain incontestably Cartesian themes, not to reconstitute their arrangement in the *order* [of ideas], but to appreciate their discordant unity and perhaps to propose a new ontological beginning" (ESA2, 21).²²⁴ As is shown repeatedly in Merleau-Ponty's

²²³ This is a reference to the title of Saint Aubert's second book on Merleau-Ponty. For the general discussion of the *scénario cartésien*, the reader is referred to ESA2, 24-30, and also to the discussion of the *scénario sartrien*, in ESA1.

²²⁴ "Donc réflexion libre sur certains thèmes incontestablement cartésien, non pour reconstituer leur arrangement dans *l'ordre*, mais pour apprécier leur unité discordante et peut-être proposer [un] nouveau départ ontologique." Cited by Saint Aubert as: *La nature ou le monde du silence*, et autre documents inédits: séquence de travail datant probablement de l'automne 1957, plus tard placée dans le volume *Être et Monde*. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, volume VI. ESA2, 12.

reading, his most direct targets are often also his closest friends in his search for a middle position, the case of Bergson being an exemplary example as suggested above in Part II, chapter 1. In Descartes' "anxious trembling quickly mastered," Merleau-Ponty finds a thinker on both sides of the original error (*OE*, 56/137).

Consider, for instance, the lectures given by Merleau-Ponty in 1948 in Lyon and Paris at the *École normale supérieure* entitled *L'union de l'âme et du corps chez Malebranche, Biran et Bergson*.²²⁵ According to these notes, Merleau-Ponty opens the lecture series with a reflection on two dangers confronting the historian of philosophy: "That of being blind, by analyzing texts literally (thus avoiding rethinking them); but also [the danger] of judging more as a philosopher than as a historian and of valuing a work by way of our interpretations."²²⁶ This is an early formulation of Merleau-Ponty will later call an objective versus a subjective reading.²²⁷ In fact, the picture of Descartes is even more complicated, as he is famous for his discussion of the union of the soul and the body. In reality, claims Merleau-Ponty, he only insists on this union three times, while everywhere he insists on the *distinction* of these two terms. Moreover, in Merleau-Ponty's reading, Descartes insisted that the distinction is forgotten in our everyday life, where we rather *live* the unity. Indeed, the three passages that Merleau-Ponty draws out of Descartes' letters at the beginning of his second lecture in this 1948 series all seem to demonstrate Descartes' acknowledgement that, in a sense, the mind is "corporeal."²²⁸ In other words, and contrary to how Descartes is often read, Merleau-Ponty finds in the union of the soul and body more than a mere "speculative difficulty." For Descartes: "The problem is to account for a paradoxical fact: the existence of the human body."²²⁹ As we have seen, Descartes immediately excludes any proper knowledge of the union. If body is body and thought is thought, and if they are united only in living experience, then there is no science that could account for their union.²³⁰ As Merleau-Ponty remarks in *Phénoménologie de la perception*: "When Descartes says that the

²²⁵ These lectures are recreated from extensive student notes, not directly from the hand of Merleau-Ponty. The topic of this seminar was chosen to help students prepare for the *Agrégation*, which was to focus on the three philosophers named in this title. The specific topic and the inclusion of Descartes, who thus would have only been part of the general reading list, was Merleau-Ponty's decision.

²²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *L'union de l'âme et du corps*, 30/10.

²²⁷ This was explored in Part II, Chapter 2 above.

²²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *L'union de l'âme et du corps*, 33/13.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

²³⁰ See in particular *Ibid.*, 35/15.; *ESA2*, 25.

understanding knows itself as incapable of knowing the union of the soul and the body, and leaves it to life to achieve this knowledge, this signifies that the act of understanding is given as a reflection upon an unreflected experience that it re-absorbs neither in fact nor in theory" (*PhP*, 68/49, translation modified). So for Descartes, the paradoxical existence of the human body is something to be overcome or excluded. This mystery or confusion of the union of the soul and the body becomes precisely the center of Merleau-Ponty's thought.

A second key to understanding Merleau-Ponty's reading of Descartes is his identification of "two" Descartes, a fact that is quite important given how Merleau-Ponty reads the contemporaneous debate between philosophy and science, or between intellectualism and empiricism. In the final stretch of *La structure du comportement*, Merleau-Ponty makes a distinction between the Descartes of *La Dioptrique*, in which the author rejects from the explanation of perception any input from the presupposition of a world existing in itself, and the Descartes of the *Meditations*, in which the author admits something of a confusion or mixing of the soul and the body through the phenomenological experiences of hunger, thirst, and pain. As Théodore Geraets notes, for the Descartes who would take the mind to be wholly transcendental, there would have to be a perfect identity between the "thing" itself in the world and the "signification thing" that exists in thought, and indeed this must be true of the body as well, for such a philosophy takes the body as one thing among many at the same time that it makes the body an object of thought. "But for Descartes," concludes Geraets, "the identification of the thing with the signification 'thing' is never completed, and this is precisely Descartes' hesitation that never ceased to attract Merleau-Ponty's attention."²³¹ Merleau-Ponty concludes that Descartes introduces, *via* the discussion of imagination and perception, "an alterity irreducible to the mind" and thus, in *Meditations*, the world of the mind does not encompass the universe without remainder.²³² The naturalism of Descartes' scientific writings remains at the heart of his most idealist reflections.

When Merleau-Ponty returns to Descartes in *L'Œil et l'Esprit* (1960), and in particular to the question of depth, we are reminded that for Descartes, there is nonetheless a world in itself, and that depth is a mere illusion of our body. Since pure thought can only think thoughts, the thought of the soul-body union will be confused by nature, and thus will not be able to be raised to a proper knowing. Again, for Descartes the union is something to be lived, something not properly included in the realm of thought, something banned from metaphysics. But if space is not

²³¹ Geraets, *Vers une nouvelle philosophie*, 86.

²³² See in particular: *Ibid.*; *SC*, 211-12.

the “network of relations between objects such as would be seen by a third party,” as it is for Descartes in *La Dioptrique*, and if “we are a compound of soul and body,” then there must be a philosophy that can explore this body and soul in the world in which they act. Merleau-Ponty writes, “[t]his philosophy, which is yet to be elaborated, is what animates the painter—not when he expresses opinions about the world but in that instant when his vision becomes gesture, when, in Cézanne’s words, he ‘thinks in painting’” (*OE*, 60/139). The reference to painting and the act of expression seem to establish our point: the philosophy that will embrace Descartes’ trembling will be a *philosophy of expression*, a philosophy of a world that embodies the mystery of the soul and body as the paradoxical logic of expression without trying to master this mystery or explain it away.

This Cartesian understanding of the union of the soul and the body resulted in the contemporaneous schism in France at the time of Merleau-Ponty’s formation and arrival as a thinker — this is why Merleau-Ponty could claim that, “our science and our philosophy are two faithful and unfaithful offshoots of Cartesianism, two monsters born of its dismemberment” (*OE*, 58/138). Now although Merleau-Ponty often returns to Descartes, taking him up by name and at length, the originary division of the soul and the body, taken as two substances, results most importantly in the solidification of *causal* thinking. In other words, the “Cartesian scenario,” to recall Saint Aubert’s phrase, is an occasion for understanding the underlying presuppositions of modern conceptions of science and idealist philosophy. By solidifying our understanding of human being as a body with a mind, the Cartesian approach paradoxically justifies two competing *perspectives* on human being. On the one side, there is the “interior or idealist perspective of philosophical reflection, on the other side the exterior or realist perspective of science” (*NH*, 12). Indeed, how could philosophy allege that there is not some truth to the subjective claim of transparency to self, at least in the form of an inherent *mineness* and transparency of thought? On the other side, how could the claims of the positive sciences and the inescapable certainty of perception themselves be without any foundation at all?

In fact, continuing to follow Bimbenet’s account, an intellectual history of France in the nineteenth century would have to emphasize the long standing discord between philosophers and scientists, that is, “between spiritualists and materialists” (*NH*, 13). Philosophy, it is said, remained enclosed in the ivory tower of introspection, renewing and deepening one side of the Cartesian gesture. On the other side, emboldened by its own successes, the scientific community moved dramatically towards an absolute empiricism, radicalizing the opposite Cartesian gesture. This allowed Maine de Biran, well before Merleau-Ponty, to

identify two radically separate points of view on the human being, the absolute perspective of introspection and the physiological perspective that claimed to be the only method for understanding reality.

Such a division, however, was “more than a mere sharing of duties” (NH, 14). Rather than engaging the distinction of soul and body as a call for a division of labor in a unified endeavor towards a completed philosophical anthropology, the distinction was taken up as a manner of brandishing “all or nothing” positions predicated upon the utter failure of the opposition’s theoretical resources. By taking up the Cartesian gesture in this way, science and philosophy were definitively broken apart, both sides claiming to “totalize the human phenomenon, either from below, beginning from the physiological roots of consciousness, or from above, beginning from the animating power of the mind” (NH, 15). And as Geraets puts it, “the discord between these two ‘classical’ views [...] seems total.”²³³ Merleau-Ponty, and indeed his generation, were given the task of repairing this split, and “throughout his work, ‘human being’ [*l’homme*] gives the name of a *sought after unity*, against the opposition of the two perspectives of which each one had long declared itself invincible, since total” (NH, 15-16).

If this initial sketch begins to give the stakes of the terrain upon which Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy was nourished, and against which he felt called to respond, we can already begin to stress the importance of expression in his philosophical task. Merleau-Ponty wants neither to reject one side over the other, nor leave them both totally behind. He aims to take up these traditions by finding, even in Descartes himself, a nascent recognition of the paradoxical logic of expression at work beyond the antinomy. The solution, then, will be to emphasize experiences that display the poverty of either of these dogmatic positions, mysterious or paradoxical phenomena that undermine the very thinking of this separation and the purely causal logic it is predicated upon. Let us turn to the initial articles written by Merleau-Ponty in 1935, on Gabriel Marcel and Max Scheler, to begin to delineate how the logic of expression answers precisely this call.

²³³ Ibid., 33.

A Young Schelerian Against the Master: Toward the Concrete

Tormented by the archaic secrets of his own prehistory, he was infuriated by these well-meaning souls who, taking themselves for small airplanes, indulged in 'high-altitude' thinking [pensée de survol], and forgot that we are grounded from birth.

- Jean-Paul Sartre²³⁴

Jean-Paul Sartre's reference to one of Merleau-Ponty's favorite phrases, *la pensée de survol*, in his long memorial article from 1961 in honor of Merleau-Ponty – his former colleague and estranged friend – thus alludes to the complicated and audacious relationship between Merleau-Ponty and the philosophical establishment in France in the 1930s, almost exclusively represented by the *idéalisme critique* (critical idealism) of Léon Brunschvicg at the Sorbonne. It could be argued that Brunschvicg is the real target of any mention of Kant or Descartes in Merleau-Ponty's early work. In fact, Merleau-Ponty takes Brunschvicg to be the fulfillment of the Cartesian movement that we have just outlined in the previous section. As is noted in a text on Brunschvicg from the era, "the name *Descartes* evokes, for Brunschvicg, an intellectual revolution that freed the modern mind from the yoke of the Aristotelian tradition," and with Kant "human intelligence discovered the *true norms* of its activity."²³⁵ Kant teaches us that the mind supplies forms that make the universe comprehensible as a phenomenon, but that these same forms unravel into antinomies in the realm of uncritical ontology.²³⁶ One can certainly already detect the structure of intellectualism as defined in Merleau-Ponty's critical work.

In fact, Merleau-Ponty's relationship to Brunschvicg is somewhat ambivalent. As Saint Aubert notes, "Merleau-Ponty's general attitude towards Brunschvicg first fulfilled the duty of a formal respect towards a

²³⁴ "...ces braves gens qui se prenaient pour des aviettes et pratiquaient la 'pensée de survol' en oubliant notre enlèvement natal." Jean-Paul Sartre, "Merleau-Ponty vivant," *Les Temps Modernes* 17 (1961): 306. Translated as: Jean-Paul Sartre, "Merleau-Ponty [Vivant]," in *Merleau-Ponty. Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, ed. Ted Toadvine (London: Routledge, 2006), 102.

²³⁵ J. Messaut, *La philosophie de Léon Brunschvicg* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1938), 11, 14. (Translations and emphasis are my own).

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

venerable personality, in order to be able to later de-valorize Brunschvicg's 'intellectualism'" (ESA1, 61). Saint Aubert goes on to note that the repeated critiques in *Phénoménologie de la perception* against the rubric of "intellectualism" and the trope of a *pensée de survol* have to be read as epithets for Brunschvicg and the community of professors at the Sorbonne. It was against this establishment that Merleau-Ponty began to collect into his toolkit certain thinkers who could help him move beyond intellectualism. These thinkers are of course many, from Husserl and Bergson to Goldstein and Koffka. What is most intriguing for our purposes, however, is to work through the influence of Max Scheler and Gabriel Marcel on the young Merleau-Ponty. In fact, as will quickly become clear below, what draws Merleau-Ponty to these two thinkers is the resources they offer for thinking through the logic of expression. Through Marcel's ideas of incarnation and mystery, and Scheler's notion of emotional intentionality and sensible expressivity, Merleau-Ponty began to forge a thinking that could reject intellectualism without falling into irrationalism.

Brunschvicg's presence is essential to understanding Merleau-Ponty's first works. Consider Merleau-Ponty's commentary on Brunschvicg's influence in a 1959 lecture:

Around 1930, when I finished my philosophical studies, (...) the key philosophical thought of the epoch in France had been Léon Brunschvicg. (...) He was a man of the first order, not so much because of the conclusions of his doctrines, but because of his personal experience and talent, which were considerable. (...) Brunschvicg transmitted to us the heritage of idealism, as Kant understood it. (...) We became acquainted with Kant and Descartes through Brunschvicg, which is to say that this philosophy principally consisted of a reflexive endeavor, a return to the self. (...) [H]is philosophy in all cases sought to grasp both exterior perception and the constructions of science as creative and constructive activities of the mind. (...) Such was, in short, the allure of this philosophy, though it must be mentioned that its content is quite meager. (*Ex*, 249-50/130)

Meager or not, Merleau-Ponty is able to repeatedly invoke it in defining himself against either Cartesian or Kantian tendencies. And we should perhaps note that even if Sartre refers to Merleau-Ponty as "delicate,"²³⁷

²³⁷ This characterization is found in Sartre's first draft of the memorial article mentioned above, published only in English as Jean-Paul Sartre, "Merleau-Ponty [1]," in *Merleau-Ponty: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, ed. Ted Toadvine, *Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 2006), 157.

Saint Aubert is right to remind us of the “audacity” of Merleau-Ponty’s engagement with what was effectively the *official* philosophy of the Sorbonne and, hence, of the University establishment in France. Indeed, in a 1938 meeting of the *Société française de philosophie*, Merleau-Ponty did not mince his words in front of Brunschvicg himself. Merleau-Ponty argued that the weakening of student performance on the *Agrégation*²³⁸ was a direct result of the persistent focus of the examination questions on formal and idealist topics from the Kantian tradition, and not on the “material *a priori*” questions that would engage the students’ true passion: lived experience and engaged description.²³⁹ Merleau-Ponty concludes this bold intervention with a defense of a philosophy of existence against the charge of irrationalism and a suggestion that the examination juries attempt to formulate exams that link “philosophy and life.” He even slips in a plea that post-Kantian philosophers such as Nietzsche and “even Husserl” be taught at the Sorbonne, and that concrete and material problems be given more of a place.²⁴⁰ Nothing could have been more anti-Brunschvicgian than suggesting a move away from critical idealism in the philosophical curriculum, an audacious intervention from a very young philosopher still awaiting a university post and stationed in a Lycée outside of Paris. Merleau-Ponty’s passion against the *pensée de survol* of the establishment ran deep.

The description offered in the longer quote above by Merleau-Ponty seems to be quite an apt reading of the larger strokes of Brunschvicg’s work, whose philosophical intentions were always quite clearly displayed on his sleeve. Brunschvicg believed in the necessity of a non-religious conversion of humans to their true and proper nature of the interior life of the mind, or perhaps better, a religion of humans and mind. All knowledge had to be founded on the transparent and free nature of the mind. As a result, he aimed at a humanism, “in the style of an absolute rationalism.”²⁴¹ To the self-transparency of the *cogito* in Descartes and his emphasis of an absolute idealism through Spinoza, Brunschvicg completed his philosophical anthropology with the critical aspects of Kant. “Philosophy is intellectual activity becoming self-aware, the integral study

²³⁸ The highly competitive examination required to teach philosophy in the French Lycée system, which Merleau-Ponty had passed just a few years prior to this meeting.

²³⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “L’agrégation de philosophie,” in *Parcours 1935-1951* (Paris: Verdier, 1997), 57. (Translations are my own). As we will see, this notion of material *a priori* is directly from Scheler.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*: 58.

²⁴¹ Messaut, *La philosophie de Léon Brunschvicg*, 10.

of integral knowledge."²⁴² The mind is a "projecting" and a "constructing" of the world, the thing in itself can never be known, and the transcendental conditions of possible thought must guide the knowledge and truth claims of all positive science. Brunschvicg's humanism, then, is predicated upon the essentially transparent and absolutely free rational mind.

With this in mind, we have to clarify Merleau-Ponty's turn towards the "concrete," hinting at the work of Jean Wahl.²⁴³ As Bimbenet explains, returning to the concrete meant precisely moving in contrast to Brunschvicg and the established idealism, and yet not towards a realism or scientism, but rather to a "research deliberately oriented towards a certain truth of lived experience — a truth defined as originary and that could precede the subsequent abstractions put together by the work of knowledge, science, or philosophy" (*NH*, 154). From this description, one could hardly be surprised that Merleau-Ponty would describe the discovery of phenomenology as an experience "not so much of encountering a new philosophy as of recognizing what [he] had been waiting for" (*PhP*, 8/viii).²⁴⁴ And indeed, in the final pages of his first article, *Christianisme et ressentiment*, to which we turn now, Merleau-Ponty unites Wahl, Scheler and Marcel against the prevailing winds of idealism: "... if objectivity cannot exhaust existence, will it not be the act of the philosopher to try a rediscovery, a description of existence in all its forms? Such is the aim of Mr. Wahl or Mr. Marcel. And it is also the claim of a descriptive philosophy which Scheler has made worthwhile."²⁴⁵ Yet beyond merely being drawn away from idealism, the turn to the concrete meant for Merleau-Ponty the chance to put expressive and lived experience at the heart of a philosophical anthropology. Let me turn here to discuss some of the aspects of Merleau-Ponty's first article to show how the logic of expression is already present in his attraction to Scheler's position.

²⁴² Brunschvicg quoted by Saint Aubert at *ESA1*, 64.

²⁴³ As others have indicated, Merleau-Ponty's was also very sympathetic to a guiding text of this shift. See Jean Wahl, *Vers le concret. Études d'histoire de la philosophie contemporaine: William James, Whitehead, Gabriel Marcel*. (Paris: J. Vrin, 1932).

²⁴⁴ The quote actually refers to "present-day readers," but is clearly a reference to himself, Sartre, and the movement towards the concrete embodied philosophy of Wahl or, for that matter, of the students at the Sorbonne who were uninspired by Brunschvicg's curriculum.

²⁴⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Christianisme et ressentiment," in *Parcours: 1935-1951* (Paris: Verdier, 1997), 30. Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Christianity and *ressentiment* (1935)," in *Texts and Dialogues: On Philosophy, Politics, and Culture*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman and James Barry (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1992), 100. Henceforth cited as *CR*. Translation lightly modified.

Merleau-Ponty's first article, published in the journal *La Vie intellectuelle* in 1935, was a response to the French translation of Max Scheler's book, *Ressentiment*.²⁴⁶ *Ressentiment* is a discussion and development of Nietzsche's understanding of *ressentiment* in *Genealogy of Morals* and a defense of Christianity against the argument that it represents the pinnacle of slave morality. Merleau-Ponty begins the review with a return to Nietzsche's notion of *ressentiment* as the effect of emotions that fail to be expressed. The results are profound, as *ressentiment* eventually settles so deeply into sufferers' personalities that it no longer seems to have an object at all. Unable to have expressed itself in the beginning, the emotions that fester as *ressentiment* begin to develop a manner to relieve the weight of their failure, namely, the revaluation of the value structures in which their very existence is held in contempt. Weakness, sickness, or fear, unable to express themselves against their strong, healthy, and courageous adversaries, reinvent a value scheme valorizing the lower, and hence slave morality is born.

Scheler thinks not only that Nietzsche's account of *ressentiment* is correct on the phenomenological level of the description of unexpressed emotions, but also that it represents a profound discovery "for the explanation of morality" (CR, 12/87). His emphasis, however, is on the experience of *ressentiment*, and not on the intellectual idea of it gained by reflection. Indeed, Scheler develops what he calls a "descriptive psychology" that involves understanding "the units of experience and meaning which are contained in the totality of man's life itself and have not merely been created by an artificial process of 'division' and 'synthesis.'"²⁴⁷ Scheler, by introducing ideas such as forgiveness or the explicit acknowledgement of one's shortcomings, begins to develop Nietzsche's structure towards a more practical application of the insight for psychology.²⁴⁸ The details here are for us less important than the fact that Scheler argues one can be *both* a naturalist and an idealist, at least insofar as he claims to include both vital and super-terrestrial values through his concrete description of Christian morality. Merleau-Ponty will eventually suggest that even if Christianity is a morality that does not reject the values of life,

²⁴⁶ The French title is *L'homme de ressentiment*. The English version of this text is: Max Scheler, *Ressentiment* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1994). Henceforth cited as *R*.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁴⁸ Scheler further defends Christian morality from the attack that it is a product of *ressentiment* through his reading of the emotion of love. Nietzsche, he argues, fails to recognize that in Christianity the direction of love is reversed. Nietzsche assumes that all love ascends from the lower towards the higher, from the slaves to the nobles, while Scheler argues that love descends from the higher to the lower in Christianity, from God to humans.

it nonetheless aims at a different world, and hence is at least a form of “subtle *ressentiment*” (CR, 16/90). But the mixing of natural or vital causes with “super-terrestrial” values is precisely what Scheler reveals in his description of intentionality and emotion.

Merleau-Ponty suggests that a familiarity with Scheler’s phenomenology is necessary, as it establishes a justified resistance to the extremes of empiricism and idealism: “To admit, as does Nietzsche, that everything which manifests itself to consciousness is a direct or indirect product of physiological and vital causality, is an unjustifiable postulate according to Scheler” (CR, 18/90). One cannot, according to Merleau-Ponty, make the claims of such a radical empiricism without having simultaneously explored “the positive content of consciousness” (CR, 18/91). But for Scheler, this will not be a form of reflection or introspection, it will be phenomenological description. In fact, although Merleau-Ponty mentions Husserl here, his initial understanding of phenomenology and intentionality is more importantly borrowed from Scheler’s notion of *actes orientées*.²⁴⁹ “The first task of reflection [in a Schelerian phenomenology],” argues Merleau-Ponty, “is to make an inventory, a description of consciousness, without giving to sensible existence a priority which naturalism surreptitiously concedes to it” (CR, 18/91). Since emotional parts of consciousness must, for Scheler, be included in this description, one will be unable to reduce the life of consciousness to merely a biological causality. From the beginning, Merleau-Ponty recognizes that the *epoché* is not a better form of introspection gaining access to a pure intellectual realm (as for Brunschvicg), but rather “an introduction to a new mode of knowledge which moreover manifests the world as well as the self” (CR, 18/91). Following this approach, we find a whole class of components that cannot be detached from their object, such as sympathy, love, or hatred. For these parts of consciousness, “‘intentionality’ is essential” (CR, 19/91), and the same is recognized as true for all cognitive acts and perceptions. Intentionality, then, is that realm of actions or emotions that fall between a pure idealism and a pure empiricism, the realm we have called expression.

In fact, taking this to be the heart of Scheler’s philosophy, Merleau-Ponty generalizes the discussion or “rhythm” of *ressentiment* as the general movement of theoretical systems that tend to, being unable to conquer the experience they wish to encompass, reduce experience to their own realm. Both idealism and empiricism are thus expressions of *ressentiment*, and “these philosophers no longer know ‘through a direct intercourse with the world and things.’”²⁵⁰ We can make this point reach even further into the urgency of the logic of expression. Since the empiri-

²⁴⁹ See, for instance, *ESA1*, 19, 54; *NH*, 160ff.

²⁵⁰ Scheler quoted by Merleau-Ponty, *CR*, 23/93.

cal and idealist schools are the expression of a *ressentiment* that stems from our failure to express that trembling felt by Descartes in the face of the mixing of the soul and the body, and the vitriol behind the debate is a diversion from the inherent inadequacy of either side to capture the whole terrain of truth they lay claim to, then a philosophy that embraces the mystery otherwise “quickly mastered” would, then, be founded on the logic of expression and would be *responsible* to the phenomena themselves. Scheler’s demand that we embrace our lived situation in both our phenomenological understanding of ourselves *and* in our philosophical reflection is then precisely the notion of responsibility that will reappear in Merleau-Ponty’s own political morality, where he says that a true morality is to “embrace what we are by chance.”²⁵¹ In other words, Scheler’s notion of intentionality connects to the deep passion in Merleau-Ponty against the *pensée de survol* discussed above.²⁵²

This structural insight is grounded in the logic of expression and what Scheler calls sensible expressivity. For Scheler, the affective or moral aspects of consciousness cannot be reduced to the act of an intelligence bestowing meaning on a set of mental states or data given first in a raw format. Rather, a “content of consciousness can naturally have a *meaning*” (CR, 22/93). And it is precisely in this understanding of a paradoxical place between the reductive intellectualism and Nietzsche’s biological monism that Merleau-Ponty finds in Scheler the understanding of immanent transcendence, specifically a notion of transcendence that is not a mere turning away from vitality, but an embracing of it. This type of affirmation only makes sense if we understand the expressive quality of vital action as that which brings with it an excess of meaning, a new meaning, and paradoxically responds to what it will be while creating itself. As we will see, this natural *sens* (meaning/direction) becomes one of the most important ideas in Merleau-Ponty’s first books.

Merleau-Ponty’s initial attraction to Scheler is likely also a result of his understanding of humanism against the “religion of man [*l’homme*],” or the humanitarianism of Brunschvicg. The concrete humanism of the recognition of all humans by all humans, which will infuse Merleau-Ponty’s later political position, is suggested by Scheler’s emphasis on the

²⁵¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Le roman et la métaphysique,” in *Sens et non-sens* (Paris: Nagel, 1948), 71. Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Metaphysics and the Novel,” in *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 40. Henceforth cited as *MN*.

²⁵² The passion against idealism fueling Merleau-Ponty’s work could not be more clear here, where he characterizes Brunschvicg’s critical idealism as essentially a product of *ressentiment*, a slave morality. He writes that “a direct intercourse with things, creatures, and consciousness makes this sphere of life manifest itself where *ressentiment* has wished to imprison spiritual values and religious values under the mask of truth.” CR, 23/92.

Christian rejection of hatred. No matter the violence, the history, or the stakes of a battle, the enemy must, for the true Christian, be nonetheless recognized as “a brother in the kingdom of God” (CR, 25/95), and by this he means the concrete other with whom I am struggling. In contrast, Brunschvicg’s “humanitarianism” does not love the concrete other, but the idea or essence that the other merely incarnates. For Scheler, such a love is a corruption of the love of the concrete neighbor, here in front of me with all their sins and faults, and it gives rise to a corrupted “Christianity” that deserves Nietzsche’s attack. Just like the humanism of Brunschvicg, however, the idea that we can find a quality or a possession of human being that is unrelated to their historical and economic situation, a pure and eternal essence, reveals nothing but an initial hatred of situatedness, embodiment, and expressive being, that is, of facticity. Nature, the other, and the body are irrelevant to this “bourgeois humanitarianism” (CR, 27/96). Love cannot be directed towards an abstract and still remain faithful to the embodied situation of the loving person. When it becomes a love for the “essence,” or for the community as a whole, it becomes a hatred of self and leads to the problems of humanism.

Merleau-Ponty concludes his review by defending Scheler against the attacks of one of Brunschvicg’s disciples, Ramon Fernandez. Fernandez had published a critical report that characterized Scheler’s entire philosophy as the work of thought, and hence as implicitly complaisant with Brunschvicg’s idealism.²⁵³ Merleau-Ponty again boldly attacks Brunschvicg, although here somewhat indirectly.²⁵⁴ The implication is that, against Brunschvicg, Scheler discovers more than a secondary imposition of intellectual laws upon the chaos of sense data, the absence of which is the presupposition of Fernandez’s critique. Instead, Scheler demonstrates that the “universes of perception, art, emotions, [and] religious acts” do have a *sense in themselves* (CR, 32-33/99-100). Merleau-Ponty mocks the audacity of idealism, whose approach to these mysterious or problematic phenomena has “changed as easily as cloud formations” over the years, and suggests that “philosophy has not yet rendered an account of their intentional nature that is compatible with evidence” (CR, 33/100). In other words, philosophy would do well to take the paradoxical logic of expression seriously and to address our concrete experience.

As we can see, Merleau-Ponty is already moving towards a notion of the relation between pure creation and pure repetition based upon

²⁵³ See Ramon Fernandez, *La Nouvelle Revue Française* (1932).

²⁵⁴ Beyond the fact that the passage makes clear Fernandez’s position as “entirely critical and French” (CR, 32/99). The claim is confirmed by Saint Aubert, *ESA1*, 63.

Scheler's concept of "sensible expressivity" and his understanding of intentionality. Consider Scheler's observation that:

From this and other similar facts, we draw the conclusion that 'expression' is the first thing that man perceives in what exists outside of himself; and that he only perceives the sensible phenomena insofar as they are 'representative' of psychical expressions [...]. What is primary, in a general fashion: everything that is given as 'expression.'²⁵⁵

That which is aimed at in Schelerian intentionality is the meaningful or expressive unities in the environment, offered to perception but not merely passively received. As Bimbenet aptly notes, this notion of sensible expressivity relates to Scheler's understanding of "material *a priori*." This is taken up by Merleau-Ponty as a non-formal *a priori* that "cannot be thought part for part and must be understood in a single act as an indecomposable essence [*signification*]" (SC, 185/171). The "material *a priori*," then, is the concrete essence of the intentional relation, gained only through a concrete description. Therefore, the *a priori* of Kant is radically insufficient to understand lived experience, for the "material *a prioris*" only exist in concrete structures of intentionality, and not as formal and eternal structures (NH, 163). As Bimbenet argues:

Nascent perception makes us think of the emergence of human significations that are in principle inseparable from the sensible content in which they are embodied: what the infant grasps prior to perception of a sonorous material and the idea of a pure meaning is an intonation, a style, which precedes the distinction between the expression and the expressed. (NH, 163).

As we are beginning to see, Merleau-Ponty's initial philosophical intuitions are already showing some early signs of the paradoxical logic of expression. He is drawn to Scheler's understanding of intentionality precisely because it allows us to characterize perception as a non-passive response to a sensible expressivity; it suggests a way of understanding nascent perception as an immediate access to the unities of signification in the environment; and it moves us beyond the formalism of Brunschvicg's idealism. Yet beyond these phenomenological aspects, Merleau-Ponty immediately begins to invoke consequences for moral and political structures. The expressive structure that involves an acting of sense prior to the distinction between expression and expressed, that is, as lived and played

²⁵⁵ Cited by Bimbenet, NH, 162. (Translation my own). Max Scheler, *Nature et formes de la sympathie. Contribution à l'étude des lois de la vie affective* (Paris: Payot, 1971), 324-25.

forward in the ambiguous or paradoxical place of oriented acts of the human world (emotions, religion, etc.), suggests an access to a realm of values that is not merely reducible to formal norms nor simple utilitarian calculations (*CR*, 32/99). With this emphasis on action and perception in this review, we already see an emergent tendency towards ethics in Merleau-Ponty's early work.

A Young Marcellian: Body, Mystery, Creation

Je ne me sers pas de mon corps, je suis mon corps.

L'incarnation — donnée centrale de la métaphysique. [...] Donnée non transparente à elle-même: opposition au cogito. De ce corps, je ne puis dire ni qu'il est moi, ni qu'il n'est pas moi, ni qu'il est pour moi (objet).

– Gabriel Marcel²⁵⁶

In a 1959 lecture printed under the title *La philosophie de l'existence*, Merleau-Ponty begins by distinguishing between a “philosophy of existence” proper and that which had come to be understood under the rubric “existentialism,” namely the post-war writings of Jean-Paul Sartre. In addition to some of the key figures that we continue to cite as pillars in the existentialist tradition (Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre), Merleau-Ponty also includes two figures who for him define the *philosophy of existence*: Edmund Husserl and Gabriel Marcel (*Ex*, 247/129). As demonstrated above in Part II, chapter 2, Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Husserl is highly influenced by existential questions that were far from Husserl’s own intentions. Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of phenomenology is specifically related to the problem of moving beyond intellectualism and empiricism through to the paradoxical events of intentionality, and his particular reading of the phenomenological reduction in *The Origin of Geometry* certainly reveals the existentialist tenor of his Husserl.²⁵⁷ Mer-

²⁵⁶ “I do not *use* my body, I *am* my body.” Gabriel Marcel, *Journal métaphysique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1927), 323. “Incarnation – the central given of metaphysics. [...] A given not transparent to itself: the opposite of the *cogito*. I cannot say of this body that it is me nor that it is not me, nor that it is for me (an object).” Gabriel Marcel, *Être et avoir*, ed. Henri Hude, Collection philosophie européenne (Paris: Éditions Univeritaires, 1991), 15. (Translation are my own).

²⁵⁷ Cf., *PhP*, *Avant-Props*/Preface. Beyond the postulation that Merleau-Ponty simply emphasizes the “never-finished” nature of the reduction, Claude Lefort postulates that his movement away from Husserl is in fact a move away from the *vanité* of the Husserlian project that would claim to deliver the “secret” of the constitution of essences for all time. Merleau-Ponty’s insistence that philosophy remain open to the creativity of the future is what inspires much of Lefort’s own political writings, which we will discuss in the section on Merleau-Ponty’s political writing below. See Claude Lefort, *Sur une colonne absente. Écrits autour de Merleau-Ponty* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 116, see also 45-05. Henceforth cited as *CA*.

leau-Ponty's work, however, is rarely discussed in relation to the other philosopher mentioned in this passage. Yet Gabriel Marcel's influence on Merleau-Ponty needs, as I will demonstrate in this section, to be emphasized, particularly in relation to expression. Indeed, as Saint Aubert notes, Merleau-Ponty's encounter with Marcel's work would not only spark his critical stance against the French idealists, represented preeminently by Léon Brunschvicg, but would also prepare him for the urgency he would feel in the touching-touched reversibility that he would discover at the Husserl Archives in Louvain in 1939.²⁵⁸

As Merleau-Ponty himself notes, Marcel's philosophy of existence had, "strictly speaking," a religious "accent" (*Ex*, 261/136). During the 1930s, Merleau-Ponty associated with the editors of two religiously oriented philosophical journals, *Sept* and *Esprit*, and there is a religious "accent" to his own two earliest published works, including our main focus here, *Être et Avoir: Compte rendu de l'ouvrage de Gabriel Marcel*.²⁵⁹ As Saint Aubert argues, Merleau-Ponty found an important inspiration in Marcel's understanding of *incarnation*, and the manner that he eventually frees himself from Marcel is a significant element in Merleau-Ponty's development (*ESA1*, 77). In this section, I will draw out three influences that continued well past Merleau-Ponty's break with Christian existentialism in the mid-1930s.²⁶⁰ The first and most obvious theme is of course Marcel's reflections on *incarnation* and in particular his emphasis on the experience of "one's own body [*le corps propre*]," that is, his famous "*je suis*

²⁵⁸ *ESA1*, 77, 87. It is worth noting that this reading goes directly against the earlier position of Remy Kwant, who claimed that, "'right wing' existentialism has had almost no influence on Merleau-Ponty. See Remy C. Kwant, *The Phenomenological Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, vol. 15, Duquesne Studies (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1963), 152.

²⁵⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Être et Avoir. Compte rendu de l'ouvrage de Gabriel Marcel," in *Parcours: 1935-1951* (Paris: Verdier, 1997). Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Being and Having (1936)," in *Texts and Dialogues: On Philosophy, Politics, and Culture*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman and James Barry (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1992). Henceforth cited as *EA2*.

²⁶⁰ See, for instance, Geraets' discussion of "*les années de formation*," in *Vers une nouvelle philosophie*, particularly 14-26. Geraets locates Merleau-Ponty's definitive break with Christian existentialism in 1936 when he broke contact with Emmanuel Mounier and the journal *Esprit*. Also, see Merleau-Ponty's account of a the shock suffered by a certain *jeune catholique*, whose faith led him logically to be politically left-wing, when confronted by Church representatives justifying the use of state power and police by Dollfuss in Austria in 1936 to put down a worker's movement. "En vieillissant, le jeune homme n'a jamais oublié ce moment." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Foi et bonne foi," in *Sens et non-sens* (Paris: Éditions Nagel, 1948), 306. Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia A. Dreyfus (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 172.

mon corps.”²⁶¹ Secondly, Marcel’s repeated appeal to *le mystère de l’être* becomes a leitmotif of Merleau-Ponty’s own thought and in particular his reflections on expression. Finally, and in a more implicit vein, I will briefly invoke Marcel’s account of creativity. In a sense, this notion unites the body with the mystery of being through an existential act that is neither pure activity nor pure passivity. In other words, although Merleau-Ponty does not take up Marcel’s account of artistic creation, we can nonetheless see the influence it had for Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of expression. We will have to limit ourselves here to how Marcel appears in Merleau-Ponty’s work, since fully adumbrating Marcel’s complicated oeuvre would be a separate project.

Merleau-Ponty’s review of Marcel’s work begins with a quotation from Descartes, revealing from the outset that Merleau-Ponty takes Marcel to be offering an alternative to the dominant tradition we explored above. The quote is of Descartes’ observation from his window (*pensée de survol*) of some walking and talking structures wearing coats and hats. The experience, according to Descartes, is reducible to the observation of some “colored patches and lines,” and the cognitive judgment that confers upon these “inert givens a living meaning” (EA2, 35-36/101), that is, the judgment that “there are some men walking on the street.” Against this Cartesian picture, Merleau-Ponty proposes that we turn our attention towards “*le corps propre*,” “one’s own body” or the “lived body.” This move provides Merleau-Ponty with the infrastructure of *Phénoménologie de la perception* ten years later. In fact, Merleau-Ponty’s attraction to this conceptual shift is apparent even earlier, in his 1933 research proposals, in which we find already *le corps propre* shaping that research.²⁶² In this review of Marcel’s work, Merleau-Ponty links this initial Cartesian picture with the default position in psychology that presupposes the existence of a mass of sense data, some of which have a particularly strong affective pull, and associative judgments building a world of objects in themselves.²⁶³ Both approaches share the same basic structure: they begin from

²⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty uses this phrase in his summary of Marcel’s work from 1936, EA2, 37/102. Marcel himself uses the phrase in Marcel, *Journal métaphysique*, 323..

²⁶² Although Merleau-Ponty does not name Marcel in these proposals, the reference is thinly veiled. See, for instance, the first of these proposals, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Projet de travail sur la nature de la perception (1933),” in *Le primat de la perception et ses conséquences philosophiques* (Paris: Verdier, 1996), 13. Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Nature of Perception: Two Proposals (1933),” in *Texts and Dialogues. On Philosophy, Politics, and Culture*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman and James Barry (Amherst, NY: Humanities Books, 1992), 75.

²⁶³ Again, one can see the systematic continuity in Merleau-Ponty’s work, as this point is made in a more elaborate and mature way in *Phénoménologie de la perception* years later. See *PhP*, Introduction, chapter 3.

the assumption of scattered and essentially meaningless givens, then invoke judgment (and thus consciousness) to provide meaning and order to this chaos. The subject-object divide solidified by Descartes provides the ultimate foundation of empirical psychology. Marcel offers Merleau-Ponty an attractive alternative to this scenario. As Saint Aubert aptly writes, this second article “goes beyond the genre of a book review, [and this time] in an even more pronounced mode against the establishment” (*ESA1*, 81). As he notes, Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Brunschvicg was tentatively slipped in on the final lines of *Christianisme et ressentiment*. In Merleau-Ponty’s review of *Être et avoir*, the attack on Brunschvicg begins from the opening lines.

Incarnation, je suis mon corps. In fact, Merleau-Ponty could not have been more explicit: “In reaction against philosophy of the idealist type—both Kantian and Cartesian—the philosophy of existence is primarily explicable by the importance of a completely different theme, that of *incarnation*” (*Ex*, 254/132). Merleau-Ponty reads this Marcellian theme as a rejection of the relation between things as mere objects (*partes extra partes*) with knowing subjects as pure consciousnesses. In his review, he invokes three types of relations that question this subject-object structure. The first, contra Descartes, is that when another human being is “*present to*” me, this body cannot be reduced to a set of objective properties from which I infer the presence of a “you” (*EA2*, 36/102). The second problematic relation is that of my relation to my own body. Here again it seems impossible to reduce this relation to one between a subject and an object in the scientific sense of the word. “I and it form a common cause,” writes Merleau-Ponty following Marcel, and “in a sense I *am* my body” (*EA2*, 37/102). Incarnation does not leave room for a separation between myself and my body; the relation is one of *being* (*être*), not one of *having* (*avoir*). Finally, “in so far as I really believe in objects and grasp their physiognomies rather than their ‘characteristics,’ they become something like the extension of my body” (*EA2*, 37/102). Merleau-Ponty will develop this third theme extensively in *Phénoménologie de la perception* in relation to how objects can become “incorporated” into the body’s habits and actions: “The blind man’s stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch” (*PhP*, 178/165). For Marcel, these experiences show that the classical understandings of perception are an inadequate account of our lived experience. This experience, this bodily consciousness, is the fundamental fact that underlies any and all secondary affirmations of existence, and hence, quoting from Marcel: “Embodiment,

the central given of metaphysics... is the given on the basis of which a fact is possible (which is not true of the *Cogito*)."²⁶⁴

The significance of these observations for Marcel relates back to an early article of his that Merleau-Ponty had read as early as 1929, entitled "*Existence et objectivité*."²⁶⁵ Both in his 1936 review and his return to Marcel in his 1959 lecture, Merleau-Ponty links Marcel's reflection on existence versus objectivity to phenomenology. The point is that Marcel's intuition does not just "mark off" a peculiar region of being, "one's own body, the domain of the 'you'" (EA2, 38/103), that resists being grasped as an object through a detached and disinterested epistemic gaze. These analyses, rather, open up a "new type of knowledge," because "phenomenology, insofar as it refuses to conjure up, behind the actual or virtual object of our thoughts, *things* that might not bear any resemblance to it, immediately confers undeniable value upon distinctions established between 'contents of thought'" (EA2, 38/103). The classical relation between the subject and the object is one of "having." Marcel's philosophy is "an understanding of life, of the entire set of situations lived through by human beings, each with its own atmosphere" (EA2, 39/103). The body is not a mere object among other objects; it is the "the border of what I am and what I have," at the line of demarcation between being and having" (EA2, 39/103).²⁶⁶ The question becomes one of life, between our being enveloped by our lives and our "power to sacrifice it, my refusal to become indistinguishable from it" (EA2, 39/103). As he says later, the world is no longer a set of objects over there to be known, they "are given to us in the flesh—carnally" (Ex, 254/132). And so any analysis in the Marcellian style will have to invoke subjects who are engaged in a world ("perceiving, thinking, wanting, hoping, and praying") and a set of objects *as* intended or sensed in these acts ("perceived, known, wanted, loved, prayed to") (EA2, 39/103).

With the concept of incarnation pointing towards this sense of involvement, we can clarify how Merleau-Ponty takes up Marcel's rich distinction between problems and mysteries. As Merleau-Ponty first understands the distinction in 1936, problems will have to do with evidence or proof, while mysteries will have to do with actions. In a problem, "an unknown is determined by its relation to known terms." On the other hand, mysteries are not resolved by evidence or a combination of notions,

²⁶⁴ The citation, cited by Merleau-Ponty at EA2, 38/102, is to Marcel, *Être et avoir*, 11-12..

²⁶⁵ The article first appeared on its own as Gabriel Marcel, "Existence et objectivité," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 32 (1925). It was subsequently published as an appendix in the first edition of Marcel, *Journal métaphysique*, 309-29.. Saint Aubert discusses this article and its early influence on Merleau-Ponty in *ESA1*, 78-81.

²⁶⁶ Source of Marcel's words not cited by Merleau-Ponty.

but only by “acts” (EA2, 40/104). Thus, Marcel opens a whole new field of research that includes mysteries such as promises, commitments, and sacrifices, all of which are experiences that cannot be reduced to external causes. All such mysteries are based, for Marcel, upon the foundational or originary mystery of incarnation.

This distinction between mysteries and problems permeates Merleau-Ponty’s work. In fact, even as late as the cited 1959 lecture, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that mysteries are the proper domain of philosophical reflection, and that problems should be left to other disciplines.²⁶⁷ This is a function of the type of deductive or inductive investigation triggered by a problem versus the active, creative expression called for by a mystery: “A problem is a question I pose to myself and then resolve by considering different givens which are external to me,” while in mysteries, “the one who poses them is also engaged. This person is not a spectator in relation to the problem, but is rather caught up in the matter” (Ex, 255/133). Merleau-Ponty suggests that the notion of mystery is just an abstract or general fashion of saying something that is “paradoxical” about our very experience of the “sensible world.” The world always precedes my investigation of it, and as a body I am both perceiving and perceptible, “caught up in the game at the very moment I attempt to understand what is happening” (Ex, 256/133). As Saint Aubert explains, Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of this notion of mystery is thus grounded on the notion of incarnation, and here we have to see Merleau-Ponty’s first exposure to the image of *sentant-senti*, or sensing-sensed (ESA1, 85).²⁶⁸ Incarnation is a mystery because it is an ambiguous formula that is accomplished in an act. Saint Aubert thus seems fully justified in suggesting that Merleau-Ponty’s immediate attraction to Husserl upon his reading of the *Ideen* volumes in 1939 was prepared for and guided by Marcel, and in Husserl, Merleau-Ponty found a more rigorous and scientific grounding of the ideas that had begun to shape his reflection at least ten years earlier (ESA1, 85-87).

In fact, in this characterization of a “mystery” we find a nascent understanding of precisely the logic of expression as we have been defining it. As I will show in the section on *La prose du monde* below, the logic of expression helps Merleau-Ponty definitively overcome what he calls the lingering philosophy of consciousness. Through words such as wonder,

²⁶⁷ Indeed, as we saw above, it is the mystery of the union of the soul and body in Descartes that Merleau-Ponty would like to move to the center of the investigation.

²⁶⁸ See also, Marcel, *Journal métaphysique*, 236 and 52., cited by Saint Aubert, in which Marcel makes precisely this point, and which Merleau-Ponty was certainly familiar with: i.e.: “We see immediately that *my* body is only *mine* insofar as it is *sensed*, as confusedly as this may be. (...) If I am my body, it is insofar as I am a sensing being” (ibid., 236).

paradox, and indeed, mystery, the paradoxical logic of expression involves the subject of the action both creating the ideal structures and being caught up in the forces of his or her own becoming. There is no distant position from which to judge objects, and the expressing being is caught up in the very becoming of the expression, neither transparent to itself prior to the expression nor left wholly unchanged by the expression. This resonates with how Marcel characterizes the ontological mystery. As Saint Aubert writes:

Mystery is not the obscurity of what we cannot think of, that beyond which there is nothing and that which must be abandoned to the non-philosophical life. It is neither a closed door with a no-entry sign, nor the secret of an initiation quest, but rather the unfinished nature of that beyond which there is always more to think. The ontological mystery — and this is what Merleau-Ponty will cultivate throughout his final writings — is the depth of a space of transition and transgression. (*ESA1*, 91).

Thus, mystery is a paradoxical relation in which the knower is neither a mere part or product of the known, nor the constituting of the known. The knower embraces that which envelops her, and hence being is “*envelop-pant-enveloppé*,” to invoke the formula used by Merleau-Ponty in his final writings (*ESA1*, 92). Thus we can see the paradoxical logic of expression is already apparent as the thread that will guide Merleau-Ponty all the way to his ontological conclusions.

Although implicit in his early review, the influence of Marcel’s work on Merleau-Ponty’s thinking of the other and the need to explore a phenomenology of history is made more explicit in the later 1959 lecture. Merleau-Ponty enters into this material by taking up a key to the logic of expression, namely, the experience of reading. He suggests that the relation to the other has been understood on a *classical* model of reading:

Consider philosophers like Kant or Descartes: a philosopher reasons, and it goes without saying that his reasoning can be precisely reconstructed by another person, another reader. This can be accomplished so accurately that the philosopher and his readers parallel and reflect each other. There is no problem passing from one to the other. (*Ex*, 256/133-34)

According to Merleau-Ponty, the presupposition that the philosopher can speak of a universal rationality and that the other is not a problematic concept is, after Hegel, demonstrably false. The pure subjects and the mischaracterization of the distinction between language and thought

require, as we saw above with Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl, an account of reading that is creative expression guided by the text.

In addition, the existence of others is a mystery, in the Marcellian sense, "since I know them only from the outside, while I know myself from the inside" (*Ex*, 256/134). And this new problematic, explained in terms of the classical understanding of expression, leads Merleau-Ponty to raise another problem for the philosophy of existence, namely, *history*, "which is essentially the same as the theme of the other" (*Ex*, 257/134). The perspective of modern Cartesian ontology tells us that we cannot know the other, that we are wholly isolated, while history and language tell us that humans are never "alone," that they must always be considered "in the presence of others, in an extraordinarily complex relation with them [...] a sort of human tissue which is sometimes called a 'collectivity'" (*Ex*, 257/134). This type of overcoming of the problem of the other in the tissue of history and community is precisely what is accomplished by expression. History is made up of the loose trajectory of meaning, open-ended yet motivated by the past. In speaking, in acting, I join myself to this past and to the community that will receive and take up my expression, I am enveloped by and yet shape this collectivity. If Marcel reveals to Merleau-Ponty the problems of history and of the other, he also seems to suggest the very mysterious or paradoxical involvement that is required to fully embrace seemingly problematic phenomena that the classical philosopher would prefer to explain away.

In a final aside before moving to Merleau-Ponty's more mature developments of these themes, it is worth noting a few aspects of Marcel's understanding of creativity that, although not mentioned explicitly by Merleau-Ponty, seem to certainly subtend his own discussions of expression. In fact, creativity is present throughout Marcel's work, and we can begin to see how it points towards a certain understanding of the inherent normativity in expression. Take, for instance, the passage written as the January 9th entry in the *Journal métaphysique* in which Marcel considers himself as a "created being." At first glance, Marcel tells us that he seems to be a fully "caused" being whose characteristics could be explained on a biological or physical register. To accept this initial picture, however, would be to accept a "radical dualism" between what I am as a thinker and what I am as a body.²⁶⁹ If this dualism were true, reports Marcel, action would be rendered impossible. "I can only act," he continues, "insofar as I negate this dualism, action is this very negation" (*ibid.*). This is a way of summarizing Marcel's theory of creativity: creativity is an act

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

that negates the dualism of the tradition, for creation cannot be in any way reduced to mere external causality.²⁷⁰

As such, Marcel's understanding of creation resonates throughout Merleau-Ponty's work. In addition to pitting action against causality,²⁷¹ Marcel observes that the artist does not merely imitate nature or some subject, nor is art a diversion.²⁷² Just as was argued in the section on Collingwood, art as imitation or as entertainment is simply technique. In another connection that could be drawn together with Collingwood's aesthetics, Marcel argues that the creator is both active and passive, possessing both an ability to receive and to create: "There is surely no creation without a certain mystery that envelops the creator and springs forth through him; to the extent that what we call creation is at root a mediation at the heart of which [...] passivity and activity are united and melt together."²⁷³ There is, as Collingwood put it, a certain "I feel... I don't know what I feel" (*PArt*, 109), that is neither a "thing" prior to its expression nor a determinate cause of the resulting expression. Indeed, as Marcel has it, "I myself do not know what I believe,"²⁷⁴ or as we will discover with Merleau-Ponty, "my words surprise me myself and teach me my own thought" (*OPL*, 144/88). We can see here that Marcel's notion of creativity speaks directly to the paradoxical logic that permeates Merleau-Ponty's thought.

The register begins to shift from aesthetics to ethics when we recognize with Marcel that "each person is called to create his or her own being and to participate in the creation of others through love."²⁷⁵ Thus, Marcel's notion of creation descends from the lofty realm of artists and finds itself a normative place at the heart of the actions by which each person creates his or her own being. In our essential relations with others, we are called to create *with* them. Hence, in our very constitution there is a normative pull on our actions since we are individuals *essentially* in community. Nothing could be farther from the normative injunctions found in Brunschvicg's notion of responsibility. Brunschvicg argued that one must

²⁷⁰ See, for instance, the argument at *Ibid.*, 119.

²⁷¹ For his part, Merleau-Ponty introduces the distinction between cause and motivation for actions, which deepens the paradoxical logic of expression between pure creation and pure repetition. See further, *PhP*, 307-08/301-02.

²⁷² These claims are based upon the quotations and commentaries in the valuable resource: Simonne Plourde et al., *Vocabulaire philosophique de Gabriel Marcel*, Recherches: nouvelle série (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1985).

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁷⁴ Marcel, *Être et avoir*, 122.

²⁷⁵ Plourde et al., *Vocabulaire philosophique de Gabriel Marcel*, 156.

constitute oneself on the absolute ground of self-transparent rationality, leading to a spiritual perfection through the purification of any contamination by others.²⁷⁶ Marcel's understanding of creation and incarnate action means that we cannot begin with this type of self-transparency, that action is never pure, but always imbued with a past and caught in an "extraordinarily complex relation" with others (*Ex*, 257/134).

If we are correct that at the germination of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of expression we can detect a Marcellian idea of creation, then we are already on the road towards an ethics of bodies in relation acting in a world that is perpetually in the process of becoming. As Saint Aubert points out, Merleau-Ponty's frequent use of the Marcellian phrase "ontological mystery" becomes associated with the essential terms of "desire," "violence," "adversity," and "transgression" in a characterization of the carnal structures of mystery: "the intertwining of the soul and the body, the chiasm of desire, and the intrusion of violence" (*ESA1*, 94). In this chapter, we have demonstrated how these concepts are situated at the nexus between Merleau-Ponty's resistance to the established traditions and his own development of a responsible philosophy that could embrace mystery. Marcel's concept of mystery, the relation between that which envelops me and yet that in which I am engaged and thus shaping, that is, the passive and the active (*ESA1*, 98), offers an initial sketch for Merleau-Ponty of the embodied paradoxical logic of expression and the subsequent move to ethics.

²⁷⁶ As Brunschvicg concludes, "[t]he true 'conversion' is ... to become aware of self and of what one truly is: the characteristic of *homo sapiens* (...) that he is a consciousness; in him voluntary action follows immediately from the movement of rational reflection." Messaut, *La philosophie de Léon Brunschvicg*, 34.

Part III, Chapter 2

Expression and The Structure of Behavior

Le phénomène de la vie apparaissait... au moment où un morceau d'étendue, par la disposition de ses mouvements et par l'allusion que chacun d'eux fait à tous les autres, se repliait sur lui-même, se mettait à exprimer quelque chose et à manifester au-dehors un être intérieur.

– Merleau-Ponty²⁷⁷

This passage is from a key moment of the argument in *La structure du comportement* and unites the theme of expression with the very movement of Merleau-Ponty's first book. Life, which is certainly an underlying theme of his investigation into behavior, appears as expression, as an interior *expressing* itself on the outside. It might seem the final phrase of this passage, "*manifester au dehors un être intérieur*," echoes precisely the classical understanding of expression that I argued against. However, as I will argue below, this interior does not pre-exist its expression, rather it is characterized here as an internal unity or signification that is understood as a structure. Moreover, the notion of manifestation is meant to capture the characteristic of manifesting *for* consciousness, a fact that must be connected below to the claim that "form" is a perceptual, not a physical reality. In fact, this first approach to the foundational notion of ambiguity finds perception as the paradigm of an ambiguous event. In order for me to set up this point, and indeed to open a pathway into this early text, let me briefly set the stage through the notion of structure and the perspective of "*le spectateur étranger* [the outside spectator]" (SC, 175/162), the two key aspects of this first attempt to rethink the union of the soul and the

²⁷⁷ "The phenomenon of life appeared therefore at the moment when a piece of extension, by the disposition of its movements and by the allusion that each movement makes to all the others, turned back upon itself and began to express something, to manifest an interior being externally," SC, 175/162.

body, and to find that mysterious place between intellectualism and empiricism.

Merleau-Ponty draws the notion of *structure* from *Gestalttheorie* and from Kurt Goldstein's *Der Aufblau des Organismus*, both regularly cited in *La structure du comportement*. Structure is, in its simplest definition, a whole whose parts cannot be defined independently of their place in the whole.²⁷⁸ In other words, a structure is a set of parts whose relations must be given a real status in their definition — structure is Merleau-Ponty's original account of a *realism of relations* in the manner we described above with Simondon. "We will say that there is form," confirms Merleau-Ponty, "whenever the properties of a system are modified by every change brought about in a single one of its parts and, on the contrary, are conserved when they all change while maintaining the same relationship among themselves" (SC, 50/47). Changing just one note in the melody produces a different musical object; transposing the melody into a different key does not. Structure points to a certain unity or internal harmony held by a system. Structures, then, are what unite the strata of being (physical, vital, human) without, however, allowing us to reduce any single order to a mere epiphenomenon of the others.

The other notion that we need to clarify before beginning is Merleau-Ponty's repeated claim to proceed in *La structure du comportement* "from below [*en partant "du bas"*]" (SC, 2/4), taking up the question of behavior and its structures by attempting to maintain an external perspective, a concrete description of behavior from the perspective of "*un spectateur étranger* [an outside spectator]" (SC, 175/162),²⁷⁹ while in *Phénoménologie de la perception* Merleau-Ponty will begin his description from inside perceptual behavior: "we install ourselves in them in order to pursue the analysis of this exceptional relation between the subject and its body and its world" (*Inédit*, 39/4). Bimbenet notes, "to adopt the point of view of the outside spectator is to decide first to show the experience of realism at work in scientific psychology, not in order to install oneself there, but rather in order to enact a rigorous critique" (NH, 37). As Bim-

²⁷⁸ It is perhaps important to note that Merleau-Ponty uses "structure," "form," and even "system" or "order," more or less interchangeably. However, there is more consistency with the use of "structure" when he is speaking of higher level behaviors or consciousness. See: Pascal Dupond, *Dictionnaire Merleau-Ponty* (Paris: Ellipses, 2008), 199-204.

²⁷⁹ For the most extensive accounts of this tactic in *La Structure du comportement*, the reader is referred to Geraets, *Vers une nouvelle philosophie*, particularly pages 38-47 and 67-77. and Bimbenet, NH, 35-48. Bimbenet notes that the phrase *un spectateur étranger* appears in Pierre Lachière-Rey's *Le Moi, le monde et dieu* (1928), attesting to Merleau-Ponty's transcendental direction at this early stage, even if later this writer is one he will ultimately reject in subsequent works (see, for instance, *PhP*, Part III, chapter I).

benet goes on to clarify, this early adherence to the positive sciences is the necessary step in order to develop a new form of idealism, something Merleau-Ponty begins in the final sections of this first book.²⁸⁰

And there is a second aspect to this external perspective. Following the insights of Paul Guillaume,²⁸¹ Merleau-Ponty agreed that our very understanding of ourselves was enriched through the positive sciences, in such a way that would never be possible through mere introspection or reflective analysis. Indeed, despite Merleau-Ponty's often repeated claims that there is some truth to the idealist perspective, and that Descartes was correct in claiming that "every knowledge presupposes the foundational truth of the *cogito*,"²⁸² he remains convinced (at least until 1952, and almost certainly this is behind the *Nature* courses) that merely approaching consciousness through the short route of introspection or reflection gives a "truncated" knowledge of ourselves. "Our knowledge of ourselves owes much more to exterior knowledge of the historical past, to ethnography, to mental pathology, for example, than it does to the direct elucidation of our own life."²⁸³ As he explains in *La structure du comportement*, reflection itself could have taught us that "behavior is constituted of relations; that is, it is conceptualized and not in-itself (*en soi*), as is every other object. [...] But by following this short route we would have missed the essential feature of the phenomenon, the paradox which is constitutive of it: behavior is not a thing, but neither is it an idea" (SC, 138/127).

In order to do justice then to the important place of this first book in the development and illustration of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical style, I propose three sections focusing on this text. In the first section I will engage in an exegetical reading of the first two chapters of *La structure du comportement*. Although Merleau-Ponty is here engaged in a reading of positive scientific approaches to behavior, the critique of these approaches is the first major statement of what I am calling the logic of expression, and in fact arguably shapes Merleau-Ponty's entire subsequent engagement with "science." Secondly, I will devote a section to the pivotal work to be found in his chapter III, "*L'ordre physique, vital, humain*," focusing on the section "The Human Order." Getting clear on the role of expressive logic here in the development of an understanding of consciousness "from

²⁸⁰ This shows Merleau-Ponty following the "Brunschvicgian" mandate to apply philosophical idealism to a problem in the positive sciences. See Kerry H. Whiteside, *Merleau-Ponty and the Foundation of an Existential Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 18. Henceforth cited as *FEP*.

²⁸¹ Guillaume's influence is discussed by Bimbenet at *NH*, 43.

²⁸² Merleau-Ponty, "Titres et travaux. Projet d'enseignement (1951)," 12.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*

the outside" will be very suggestive towards our own project. Finally, I will close the discussion of this first book with a brief account of how the final division of it attempts a new account of transcendental thought towards answering the union of the soul and the body.

* * *

Science and the Logic of Expression

Ce qui est exigé par le contenu effectif de la science, ce n'est sûrement pas l'idée d'un univers où tout à la rigueur dépendrait de tout et où aucun clivage ne serait possible, mais pas davantage celle d'une nature où des processus seraient connaissable isolément et qui les produirait de son fonds, ce n'est ni la fusion, ni la juxtaposition, c'est la structure.

– Merleau-Ponty²⁸⁴

The passage chosen here as an epigraph demonstrates Merleau-Ponty's conviction that his critique of scientific theories is motivated by the content of science itself. The very results of experimental science or psychology demonstrate the impossibility of science without a concept of structure. This does not mean that simply adding the notion of form to the linear or mathematical explanations of physics will do. The development of an account of behavior will reveal something important about the very behavior of the scientist, and the need to think not merely with the concept of form, but to *think according to form*. The importance of this philosophical point warrants an extended investigation into the unfolding of this argument, and as will quickly see, the logic of expression emerges in this critique of scientific practice.

In its very nature as directed activity, behavior points to a place between the fields circumscribed by the two main traditions. He promises to demonstrate that behavior cannot be reduced to a "sum of reflexes and conditioned reflexes between which no intrinsic connection is admitted" (SC, 3/4). Rather, by beginning the investigation from an enriched account of behavior, or at least one open to the phenomena rather than decided in advance, and by taking the longer route through various experimental approaches to behavior, Merleau-Ponty claims to be able to build up to consciousness, not as a cause or as a psychological substance, but as a "structure." Or as Bimbenet has it, "this critical pathway will allow Merleau-Ponty in the end to save, on the interior of newly conceived

²⁸⁴ "What is demanded by the actual content of science is certainly not the idea of a universe in which everything would literally depend on everything else and in which no cleavage would be possible, but no more so is it the idea of a *nature* in which processes would be knowable in isolation and which could produce them from its resources; what is demanded is neither fusion nor juxtaposition, rather it is structure." SC, 151/140.

transcendental attitude, a certain truth of realism."²⁸⁵ As Merleau-Ponty will conclude at the end of Chapter II, if one takes the "short route" to the conclusions that behavior is irreducible to mechanism, then one would miss the:

...essential feature of the phenomenon, the paradox which is constitutive of it: behavior is not a thing, but neither is it an idea. [...] It is precisely this which we wanted to say in stating that behavior is a form. [...] [and] this notion saves us from the alternative of a philosophy which juxtaposes externally associated terms and of another philosophy which discovers relations which are intrinsic to thought in all phenomena. But precisely for this reason the notion of form is ambiguous. (SC, 138/127)

(a) *The Implicit Logic of Expression in Reflex Behavior*

In the text itself, Merleau-Ponty engages in a critique of scientific reduction, of the suspicion of the natural descriptions of experience, and of the simultaneous return to the givens of experience to explore a non-reductive movement in the sciences. Merleau-Ponty sets out the approach of "realistic analysis and causal explanation" (SC, 8/9), developing how such a theory clears away any anthropomorphic internal observation, any idea of intention, and claims to account for all behavior through a physiological account of stimuli and effects. In his critique of the classical conception of reductive stimulus-response causal explanations, Merleau-Ponty begins to explore the fact that a "stimulus often acts much less by its elementary properties than by its spatial arrangement, its rhythm, and the rhythm of its intensities" (SC, 8-9/10). Moreover, a complex stimulus engenders unpredictable responses. As a result, the notion of causal dependency breaks down very quickly, leaving us with a significant explanatory gap in the classical model, and a reaction in a complex situation is always "something other than the sum of its elements" (SC, 10/12). But this "something other" need not indicate the presence of some mentalistic substance, but rather introduces the role that form or structure will play for Merleau-Ponty in this text. In fact, this "something other" is the first premise in an expressive logic.

The body, then, is in a sense like an automatic telephone. The *form* of the stimulus modifies the response, but the organism also moves itself, and here, following Goldstein, Merleau-Ponty introduces the notion of

²⁸⁵ Étienne Bimbenet, *La structure du comportement*, Chap. III, 3 - "L'ordre humain", ed. Jean-Pierre Zarader, Philo-textes - textes et commentaire (Paris: Ellipses, 2000), 26.

Umwelt, or milieu, which indicates an environment *to which* the organism adjusts and orients itself. Rather than being able to account for the interaction by reducing all complex stimuli to their constitutive parts, “it is a constellation, an order, a whole, which gives its momentary meaning to each of the local excitations” (SC, 12/14). So “form” here begins to play a role beneath mental substance, and yet is not reducible to linear causality. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the idea of an absolutely simple stimulus is impossible, and classical reflexology is purely conjectural. And this would be a second premise towards something like the later paradoxical logic of expression, namely the notion that the “fate” of an excitation is not pre-determined, but is in relation to the accidental structural arrangements that it encounters, something we saw already in our discussion of metaphor and meaning above.

Working out this more complicated picture, Merleau-Ponty begins to use a language explicitly punctuated with the logic of expression. “Our responses,” suggests Merleau-Ponty, “vary with the state of the muscles which the responses *are going* to bring into play [*qu’elles vont faire intervenir*]” (SC, 22/23). In other words, responses respond to the paradoxical ideal weight of that which will exist in the *future*, responding to a situation that does not yet exist.²⁸⁶ Rather than allowing the physiologist the luxury of adding-on inhibitory structures every time an unexpected reaction occurs, Merleau-Ponty suggests that we think of the “central nervous system as the place in which a total “image” of the organism is elaborated and in which the local state of each part is *expressed* [*exprimé*]” (SC, 22/23, emphasis added).²⁸⁷ In other words, the body organizes around a functional set of current positions and *potential* movements; the body is a moving expression of its past and its present, towards a future that is present as *potential*. The adaptation of our responses does not imply an intervening intellectualism, a calculation, or a mind in nature. “In fact,” explains Merleau-Ponty, “I possess the conclusions without the premises being given anywhere. I execute the proposed task without knowing what I am doing, just as habits acquired by one group of muscles can be transferred immediately to another” (SC, 29-30/30). In other words, without positing an intellectualism, there is an intelligence in bodily action, what

²⁸⁶ On this point, we can’t help but notice a link to the way that Barbaras has developed a notion of desire out of the foundations of Merleau-Ponty’s work. At this point, we simply note that there must be something of desire at work in expression, and hope to address this issue further below or in a subsequent work. For Barbaras’ discussion of desire, see Renaud Barbaras, *Le désir et la distance. Introduction à une phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1999), passim.

²⁸⁷ Even at this early stage, Merleau-Ponty understands “image” to be equivalent to “schema,” a notion he is drawing out of neurological texts and that he will take up more explicitly in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

he will later call an “operative intentionality,” an *expressive* creativity of playing forward into a new situation something that comes from an alternately configured one. This initial critique of classical reflexology is thus guided by an underlying intuition regarding a logic of expression.

Improvisation becomes a key example in clarifying this insight. Indeed, far from being rendered incapable of action, Merleau-Ponty cites many examples of amputation experiments in which an animal’s behavior is improvised to substitute for the missing limb, employing “a new mode of locomotion, a solution to the unexpected problem posed by the amputation” (SC, 40/39). Such improvisation, however, only occurs when a “vital interest is at stake” (SC, 40/40), in other words, artificially produced obstacles are not engaged with the expressive or creative body, they remain detached and fail to create a real urgency or tension in the field of action. The role of these scientific observations is of the utmost importance for Merleau-Ponty, as they “bring to light a directed activity between blind mechanism and intelligent behavior which is not accounted for by classical mechanism and intellectualism” (SC, 41/40). As has already been suggested above, the logic of expression is an attempt to chart a course between pure repetition and pure creation, and here we find Merleau-Ponty unquestionably describing even the most elementary forms of behavior in these terms. Such action can only occur in a network of relations, for “every organic reaction supposes a global elaboration of the excitations which confers properties on each one of them that it would not have singly” (SC, 45/44). Indeed, in concluding this critique of reflex theories, Merleau-Ponty suggests that we rethink the central nervous system as “a field of forces which *express* concurrently the intraorganic state and the influence of external agents” (SC, 48/46). This matches, except in name, with what we have called the metastable equilibrium of Simondon. “The notion of form,” concludes Merleau-Ponty, “does nothing other than express the descriptive properties of certain natural wholes” (SC, 54/51). Thus, from the very opening of this exploration of foundational concepts in the physiology and psychology of reflex behavior, Merleau-Ponty is already working out the implications of a concept of structure that is more than a sum of its parts and a notion of action that we can begin to characterize as creatively playing forward the weight of the past and as the structural side of the logic of expression.

(b) *The Implicit Logic of Expression in Higher-Level Behavior*

This reading is affirmed when we turn to the second major subdivision of *La structure du comportement*, in which Merleau-Ponty shifts from

his focus on simple reflex behavior to more complex behavioral structures, and in particular to the process of learning. Merleau-Ponty quickly submits Pavlov to the critique that he repeats the problematic assumptions of classical reflexology, that is, the failure to recognize form as more than a summation of its parts, as we might say, the failure to see behavior as expressive coping. His brief discussion of Pavlov quickly turns to the material that could arguably be placed at the head of a list of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical influences, namely the work of Goldstein, Gelb, and others in *Gestalttheorie* and neurophysiology. Here Schneider, a war-wounded man, first makes his appearance in Merleau-Ponty's work. The case of Schneider is formative of the particular type of phenomenology sought by Merleau-Ponty after this initial project. In Schneider's case, a single lesion has a large number of global effects, indicating the network of functionality of the brain rather than relatively independent specialized regions (SC, 70-1/65).

In fact, again we find a nascent logic of expression guiding his reading of this tradition. Take for instance his discussion of the physiology of language. Refusing the reductive account that would have the language centers of the brain as "storehouses of ready-made traces" (SC, 95/85), Merleau-Ponty re-conceives of these centers as "command posts capable of executing the most different ensembles on a single keyboard of phonemes, just as an infinity of melodies can be played on a single piano" (SC, 95/85). What is at stake in recognizing or using a word, then, is the ensemble of intensities and distributions, the order of deployment, in short, *structure*. "The same notes, in two different melodies," suggests Merleau-Ponty, "are not recognized as such. Inversely, the *same* melody can be played two times without the two versions having a single common element if it has been transposed" (SC, 96/87, emphasis added). Structure, then, is the "creation of a unity of meaning which is expressed in the juxtaposed parts, the creation of certain relations" (SC, 96/87). If this is the case, then the failure of the pre-established pathways to account for experience results in a structural shift that must be understood in terms of meaning or expression. Rather than pre-existing, "the physiological process which corresponds to the perceived color or position or to the signification of a word must be *improvised, actively constituted at the very moment of perception*" (SC, 97/88).

Merleau-Ponty argues that the necessity of importing phenomenal structures, such as figure and ground, into physiological explanations, shows more than a mere lack of conceptual resources for accounting for physiological functions. In fact, it throws into question the very idea of a "physiological" phenomenon. In other words, since the figure-ground structure only has meaning in the perceived world, "a physiological analysis of perception would be purely and simply impossible" (SC,

102/92). With the failure of the “storehouse” notions of the brain in favor of functional centers, a theory perhaps has need of recourse to psychological explanations if it is to ever account for why this configuration of black lines on paper (English) signifies something for me, while this other configuration (Chinese characters) does not, or vice versa depending on the perceiver, their history, and their current situation. This complex structural set-up cannot be sufficiently dealt with on a reductive model of causal explanation. Even the most basic perceptions then are structural, are improvisations and constitutions of themselves, accomplished in the act and not the enactment of a previously constituted or pre-determined structures. It seems that there is an unmistakable paradoxical logic of expression at work here in Merleau-Ponty’s critique of classical accounts of behavior.

In fact, Merleau-Ponty’s very understanding of an act, *properly so-called*, is a creation that responds to the situation by playing forward a past that is thereby altered. Indeed, he goes on to say that learning is not a modification or new connection of established pathways, but a “general alteration of behavior” that is manifested through a multitude of actions whose content varies but whose significance remains constant (SC, 106/96). This emphasis on generality entails that learning is not, contra the classical conception, the capacity to reactivate the same gesture, but rather of “providing an adapted response to the situation by different means. Nor is the response acquired with regard to an individual situation. It is rather a question of a new aptitude for resolving a series of problems of the same form” (SC, 106/96). When a behavior is learned, it becomes a general ability to respond to situations that have the same *sense* (SC, 107/98), and so it is not a “real operation,” (SC, 108/99), but has a general (and hence, *virtual*) relevance.

On this account, Merleau-Ponty identifies three interconnected levels of behavior, from the most basic or *syncretic* forms, where behavior is a response to abstract configurations of the situation but still tied into the organic or instinctual structure of the organism, to *amovable* forms, in which *signals* not naturally appearing in the organic material are integrated into learned behavioral responses that are nonetheless tied tightly to the situation in which the behavior was learned, to *symbolic* forms of behavior, in which the organism becomes capable of improvising behaviors. In this higher level of behavior, the signal becomes “a proper theme of an activity which tends to *express* it” (SC, 130/120). Merleau-Ponty already resists an account that would overly privilege the linguistic, for such an activity, he says, is “already found in the acquisition of certain motor habits such as the aptitude to play an instrument or to type” (SC, 130/120). The musical essence is the structure of a complex relation between the “character of the melody, the graphic configuration of the

musical text and the unfolding of the gestures [which] participate in a single structure" (SC, 130/120). Merleau-Ponty concludes here that the "relation between the expression and the expressed" is a question of "internal communication," and that the "expressive value of each of the three ensembles with respect to the two others is not an effect of their frequent association: it is a reason for it" (SC, 130/120). In other words, action that responds to the symbolic also brings it about, and meaning is a certain configuration of relations between gestures, rhythms, and textual inscriptions.

For, as Merleau-Ponty stresses, what is conserved in the textual inscription of a piece, what can be abstracted, is a certain structure of gesture, that remains the "same piece" even when transposed for another instrument or into another key. This acquisition for a general aptitude is understood through the language of the in-itself and the for-itself. "*Behavior*," suggest Merleau-Ponty, "inasmuch as it has a structure, is not situated in either of these two orders" (SC, 136/125), that is, it is neither in pure repetition (in-itself) nor pure creation (for-itself). If this in-itself/for-itself division were possible, then behavior would have to exist unproblematically in objective time and space. However, when we look at learning,

...a 'now' stands out from the series of 'nows,' acquires a particular value and summarizes the groupings which have preceded it as it engages and anticipates the future of the behavior; this 'now' transforms the singular situation of the experience into a typical situation and the effective reaction into an aptitude. From this moment on behavior is detached from the order of the in-itself (*en soi*) and becomes the projection outside the organism of a *possibility* which is internal to it. The world, inasmuch as it harbors living beings, ceases to be a material plenum consisting of juxtaposed parts; it opens up at the place where behavior appears. (SC, 136/125)

Perhaps this passage is best summarized by the language we were developing above. A certain now takes on a weight in the future actions of an organism the moment that expression appears, the organism, as the place of response to real and virtual weight is *internally* a metastable field (possibilities) of action, and the emergence of a world is accomplished in the moment of expressive action. Merleau-Ponty's early theory of form and behavior, then, could not be more in line with the paradoxical logic of expression which are surely guiding these reflections from underneath. In other words, in the experience of behavior, in the act that is always between pure creation and pure repetition (in expression as we understand it), "I effectively surpass the alternative of the for-itself (*pour soi*) and the in-itself (*en soi*)" (SC, 137/126). The structure of behavior and learning

then shows that behavior is “neither a thing nor consciousness; and it is this which renders it opaque to the mind” (SC, 138/127).

Pushing just a bit further, we can again find the presence of the logic of expression as Merleau-Ponty makes a final attempt to summarize the ground won from his analysis of classical theories. Because the structure of behavior reveals something of a mixture between thing and consciousness, being object and subject, or between real and ideal, Merleau-Ponty characterizes this in terms of a paradox:

By following this short route we would have missed the essential feature of the phenomenon [of behavior], the paradox which is constitutive of it: behavior is not a thing, but neither is it an idea. It is not the envelope of a pure consciousness and, as the witness of behavior, I am not a pure consciousness. It is precisely this which we wanted to say in stating that behavior is a form. (SC, 138/127)

**Structure and Expression:
Pensée naturée in the Human Order**

Thus, having established through the long excursion through empirical work on reflex and behavior, Merleau-Ponty turns in Part III to establish the “philosophical significance” of this ambiguous notion of form. Merleau-Ponty takes the fruitful outcomes of his initial exploration to be that the “geographical” environment is not identical to the lived environment (*Umwelt*) (SC, 139/129). The world is not just a set of isolated stimuli, but rather solicits the organism through the meaning the stimuli have for the species. “In the same way,” continues Merleau-Ponty, “the reactions of an organism are not edifices constructed from elementary movements, but gestures gifted [*doués*] with internal unity... a kinetic melody gifted [*doués*] with a meaning [*sens*]” (SC, 140/130). Thus, the concept of form implies an *entirely different ontology* of internal connections and immanent intelligibility. Getting to what he takes to be the real implications involves going beyond the conclusions of *Gestalttheorie*, which tends either to reduce itself to a mentalism as a psychology or to a materialism of physical configurations. Merleau-Ponty suggests that the philosophies of form fail to think “according to ‘form’” (SC, 147/137). The world must not be seen as the whole of being into which behavior must be integrated, or from which it can be extracted. Shifting indefinitely between materialism and mentalism, form must rather be *the solution* to the problem of the world, since it reveals the “synthesis of matter and idea” (SC, 147/137). Form must therefore be rethought at all levels: physical, vital, and human, and also by a thinking that proceeds through these new structures. In other words, even if Gestalt theorists discovered form, they failed to move their thinking beyond linear causality and realist metaphysics.

(a) *Physical Structures*

In the section “Structure in Physics,” we already will find the roots of an expressive logic that links that very logic to a more general ontology. The question, here, then is of “what sense form can be said to exist ‘in’ the physical world” (SC, 147/137), and thus, to what extent the underlying realism of *Gestalttheorie* must be attenuated. In the physical sense, form is

defined by Merleau-Ponty to indicate the foundational insight that the whole is not equal to the sum of its individual parts — form is *an irreducible ensemble of forces in a state of equilibrium*. A physical form, again foreshadowing Simondon, is described as that which is a “momentary expression” of a system of internal relations resisting external influences — “the physical form is an individual” (SC, 148/137). The form itself, in establishing its equilibrium, or in redistributing its forces in a new expression of its “immanent law” given an external influence, establishes its own sense from within its dynamic structure and in establishing that very structure. It does not rely upon and express a previously existing law; it makes its law and its relations in making itself. Parts do not have absolute properties; they have properties only within the form in which they are participating.

Now this understanding of form in physics, suggests Merleau-Ponty, must be extended to all of physical knowledge, not limited to the obvious cases of electrical field distribution. Even the most seemingly general laws rest directly upon an a relatively stable system of other conditions: “Thus the law of falling bodies expresses the constitution of a field of relatively stable forces in the neighborhood of the earth and will remain valid only as long as the cosmological structure on which it is founded endures” (SC, 149/138). The laws of physics, then, express not ultimate and universal laws, but the structure of relatively stable reactions given relatively stable conditions. These structures, when brought into a new situation or when subsumed to the influence of other forces, “could withdraw existence from structures which had become stable and bring about the appearance of other structures, the properties of which are not predictable” (SC, 149/139). This notion of structure, and the unpredictability of new structures, fits very nicely with the understanding of meaning that we explored above, and indicates that equilibrium for Merleau-Ponty does mean something more like metastability than classical understandings of the stable/chaos dichotomy. And even more so, “since the law cannot be detached from concrete events where it intersects with other laws and receives a truth value along with them, one cannot speak of a linear causal action which would distinguish an effect from its cause; for in nature it is impossible to circumscribe the author, *the one responsible as it were*, of a given effect” (SC, 150/139, emphasis added).

Thus, the content of physics requires an understanding of the notion of *structure*, and this is a direct path as we have seen to the logic of expression. “It is from the universe of perceived things that Gestalt theory borrows its notion of form,” explains Merleau-Ponty, and therefore this notion of form “is encountered in physics only to the extent that physics refers us back to perceived things, as to that which it is the function of science to express and determine” (SC, 156/144). The unity of the parts

with the whole is not a “physical” reality, but rather a perceptual reality.²⁸⁸ If the physical form were in *space*, conceived objectively, then its parts would exist *partes extra partes*, but “far from the “physical form” being able to be the real foundation of the structure of behavior and in particular of its perceptual structure, it is itself conceivable only as an object of perception” (SC, 156/144).

(b) *Vital Structures*

When Merleau-Ponty brings life into the equation, he observes a significant shift in the conditions that must be implicated in the structures of the organism’s behavior — namely, virtual structures and bringing on board the task of creating the external influences. In other words, life will be those systems or bodies that respond to the weight of the ideal in a milieu that is brought into being in the very moment of individualization: “when the structure, instead of procuring a release from the forces with which it is penetrated through the pressure of external ones, executes *a work* beyond its proper limits and constitutes a proper milieu for itself” (SC, 157/145-6). The organism expresses a style, which is a set of optimal conditions for a given milieu that aid the organism in its project, something Merleau-Ponty calls “a general attitude toward the world” (SC, 161/148). Therefore, the “relations of the organic individual and its milieu are truly dialectical relations (SC, 161/148). The actions of a living body must be understood as “addressed to a certain milieu, present or virtual: the act of taking a bait, of walking toward a goal, of running away from danger” (SC, 164/151).

For the organism, it’s “particularity” is “more and more closely connected with its capacity for action; the structure of the body in man is the expression of character” (SC, 168/155). Whereas in the physical system, there is a unity of correlated parts, the unity of the organism one of *signification*. The vital system is co-ordinated through *meaning* [sens]” (SC, 169/155). When the biologist observes a unity of signification in the organism, how is this not simply “a mosaic of just any visual and tactual sensations” “associated with the internal experience of desires, emotions and feelings” (SC, 169/156)? Merleau-Ponty insists that the phenomenon of a behaving organism “suggests” a unity to us that cannot be reduced to a mere “resemblance.” In fact, and this is one of his favorite examples, a child, prior to having achieved emotional behaviors of his or her own, can nonetheless understand the emotional charge of the gestures he or she

²⁸⁸ Cf., Geraets, *Vers une nouvelle philosophie*, 53-54.

sees. We find a body (and the perception of the body) that is lived as an expression of its own past and future, its situation, and its virtual. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “[t]he gestures and the attitudes of the phenomenal body must have therefore a proper structure, an immanent signification; from the beginning the phenomenal body must be a center of actions which radiate over a ‘milieu’” (SC, 170/157). And the immanent nuclei of signification, of “preferred behaviors” and of “behaviors proper to the species,” is identified as an animal essence, a biological *a priori*. Not that these forms just present themselves to the scientist. Merleau-Ponty stresses how “descriptive biology which, starting with the imperfect intuitions of common perception, reorganizes and corrects them” (SC, 170/157). Common sense includes many notions, such as male and female, that each one of us knows unreflectively — but these notions are *seen* in response to a sort of perceptual unity. In discovering causal correlations, biology deepens our knowledge of these unities, adjusts them, and even modifies them. This marks, in the scientist, an orientation towards a different set of facts.

Acts are meaningful, that is, they are the “spatial and temporal unfolding of certain ideal unities. ‘Every organism,’ said Uexkull, ‘is a melody which sings itself’” (SC, 172/159). Not that the organism has an internal representation of the melody that it expresses, but that its behavior is presented *for* a consciousness, as significant. And here we come full circle to the epigraph of this chapter, namely that life appears as *expression*. In order to understand this claim, we need to turn to the human order, and to the role of dialectic in Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of behavior.

(c) *The Human Order*

Man is not a rational animal. The appearance of reason and mind does not leave intact a sphere of self-enclosed instincts in man. [...] Man can never be an animal: his life is always more or less integrated than that of an animal.

– Merleau-Ponty²⁸⁹

Merleau-Ponty, still continuing his description from the view of the “outside spectator,” suggests that in the human order we find new structures. What the appearance of consciousness means is a new “milieu” and

²⁸⁹ SC, 196/181.

a new species of animal whose milieu it is. Beyond the dialectic of equilibrium in physical structures, and the equilibrium structured around needs and instincts at the animal level, what we find with humans is a third type of dialectic, one of bodies, as I would say, subject to the weight of the ideal. For Merleau-Ponty, this is a world of “work,” a world populated by “ ‘use-objects (*Gebrauchobjekte*)—clothing, tables, gardens—and ‘cultural object’—books, musical instruments, language—which constitute the proper milieu of man and bring about the emergence of new cycles of behavior” (SC, 175/162). Thus, human behavior is characterized not as aptitude-milieu, but perceived situation-work (SC, 176/162). The milieu has become populated with the vestiges of behaviors and expressions.

Thus, consciousness is first approached as “naturized [*naturée*],” and yet this external approach specifically points us beyond a “naturalized” conception, as we understand the term today in modern epistemology. Constituted consciousness, that is, points us directly towards constituting consciousness, what Merleau-Ponty calls “naturing consciousness [*conscience naturante*].” This position is first clarified by showing how competing theories certainly posit a relationship between consciousness and action, but one that remains external, and not dialectical. Consciousness is allowed to remain pure self-transparency, while action remains an external set of events. Against this splitting, Merleau-Ponty invokes what he calls originary or infantile perception. The “myth of sensations” must be avoided (SC, 179/165). For Merleau-Ponty, the “unities of signification” that we observe are not secondary determinations, they are the originary content of perception. Naturized perception is already of structure. Human perception is inherently the perception of the human milieu, beginning first with the perception of the other. What could be more reliant on our animality than infantile perception? Merleau-Ponty does not mean to point to an inherent animality in us, but rather to our experience before objectivizing adult consciousness has covered over its specificity (see NH, 160-61). In a sense, this is a natural phenomenological reduction, and accomplished from the outside.

“Nascent perception,” begins Merleau-Ponty, “has the double characteristic of being directed towards human intentions rather than toward objects of nature or the pure qualities (hot, cold, white, black) of which they are the supports, and of grasping them as experiential realities rather than as true objects” (SC, 180/166). Infantile consciousness, that is, is not an epistemic endeavor. The infant becomes aware first and foremost of faces and gestures, particularly of the mother. Faces and their expressions are not “built up” from raw sense data and combined with some set of experiences or meanings. Certainly, the perception of the face requires the presupposition of the material supports that can later be identified in an analysis, but perception does not collect these parts and compose them

into a whole, it grasps a whole that need not ever be decomposed. "A face," concludes Merleau-Ponty, "is a center of human expression, the transparent envelope of the attitudes and desires of others, the place of manifestation, the barely material support for a multitude of intentions" (SC, 181/167).²⁹⁰

After the gestures of the other human body, the world of the child is made up of use-objects. Although the child is surely unaware of the uses of the objects that surround it, she or he does not see the object in a pure form, as a set of sense data, but rather as an object for some use, mediated by a *raw* language of contexts that share structures, if not words that share clear meanings. The child does not associate a word with a meaning, but rather has a natural ability to recognize the similar in different situations, to realize that certain sounds play a role in certain situations that share some structure, which is not to say "objective qualities." So even if the child looks at natural objects, they are only seen through this raw use of "words," and "nature is perhaps grasped initially only as that minimum of stage setting which is necessary for the performance of a human drama" (SC, 182/168). And so the child lives the forms as realities, not as objects of consciousness, and thus not as epistemic objects groomed for truth verification.

At this point Merleau-Ponty introduces an example that is significant for our understanding of expression in relation to structure, namely, the example of the football player. In the living and urgent situation of the game, the field "is not an 'object,'" but is rather "pervaded with lines of force [...] and articulated in sectors [...] which call for a certain mode of action and which initiate and guide the action as if he were unaware of it" (SC, 182-83/168). He moves fluidly and fluently through the space of the game, which radically changes the urgencies, and possibilities of the space of the field. He senses where his own goal is, he is drawn towards the opponent's goal, and he "knows" where to pass the ball without being able to give anything of an explicit definition or reason. The articulations of the field become new planes of his body, present to him "just as immediately as the vertical and the horizontal planes of his own body" (SC, 183/168). There is not "consciousness" on one side and the milieu on the other: "at this moment, consciousness is nothing other than the dialectic of milieu and action. Each maneuver undertaken establishes in it new lines of force in which the action in turn unfolds and is accomplished, again altering the phenomenal field" (SC, 183/169).

²⁹⁰ The similarity here of the description we gave above of the meaning of the metaphor is be striking. The metaphor itself is the essential but barely material support for the ideal and open possibilities of its meaning.

This is precisely analogous to the description of metaphor offered above. The body is in an expressive dialectic with the milieu and the virtual that transforms this milieu from a place for a picnic into a place for an all out battle for national glory. Each action of the player is both a repetition of his training is pervaded by the sedimented "football" and "competition" experiences that make up his habit body and style, and yet his act is also a creation in the face of an open situation. Each action shifts the meaning, encounters accidental configurations, and reconfigures the meaning of what came before. The player lives "football" here just as we live "language," never as a complete possession, but as a sedimented and thus virtual weight that sketches out our possible creative action or movement, and that is reconfigured retroactively by each action. Action is an enactment of precisely the paradoxical logic of expression, the body subject to the weight of the ideal in playing forward a past that will be given meaning through the unpredictable future encounters it will have.

Imagining an interlocutor who would argue that these observations establish merely the sociological or psychological structures of perception, and do not thereby give us any reason to overturn our reductive accounts of perception, Merleau-Ponty proposes to deepen the *description* of infant perception, which he claims will lead us to a "reformulation of the notion of consciousness" (SC, 183/169). And this is where the rubber hits the road. For since we find a dialectical moment, we will now begin to see how this conception is meant to overcome the idea of a *conscience naturée* and a *conscience naturante*. The theorist who would build up sensations into perceptions, repeated sounds into words and language, would fail to recognize that these sounds, these sensations, would never be associated without there being something of a "predisposition" for them in the nascent perception of the child. There is thus something very different for the human, *and yet fully natural*, namely the potential to be an expressive body. "If language did not encounter some predisposition for the act of speech in the child who hears speaking, it would remain for him a sonorous phenomenon among others for a long time; it would have no power over the mosaic of sensations" (SC, 184/169). The mere statistical occurrence of human gestures or words around the child can exert no pull on the child, is literally *no-thing* for him or her, unless the child is "capable of discovering immediately in these acts and in these objects the intention of which they are the visible testimony. To use a human object is always more or less to embrace and assume for one's self the meaning of the work which produced it" (SC, 184/170). Nothing guarantees the expression will be carried forward, but the body being capable of expression at least ensures it is a possibility. There is no innate language or mentalease, there is a natural being which is shared with animals in which perception sees significant unities, and there is a difference for humans in that for us these

unities and forms can be ideal or virtual, and can nonetheless weigh upon our actions. The discovery of structure is not a mere addition to psychology. For the expressive being: “from the beginning the sonorous phenomenon—whether I speak or another speaks—will be integrated into the structure: expression-expressed; the face—whether I touch my own or see that of another—will be integrated into the structure: alter-ego” (SC, 185/171). Nascent perception then is already exposed in the paradoxical place between expression and what is expressed — and our open structures as expressive bodies are the ground of our being in a world together sharing meaning.

Thus, as a result of the investigation into nascent perception:

...the conception of consciousness which we must formulate is profoundly modified. It is no longer possible to define it as a universal function for the organization of experience which would impose on all its objects the conditions of logical and physical existence which are those of a universe of articulated objects and which would owe its specifications only to the variety of its contents. There will be sectors of experience which are irreducible to each other. (SC, 187/172)

The upshot is that “mental activity,” that is, the activities of representation and judgment, are no longer the sole form of consciousness. Citing Husserl’s regional ontologies in passing, Merleau-Ponty concludes that there are several types of consciousness, several “ways for consciousness to intend its object” (SC, 187/172), and this is something we saw Merleau-Ponty speak positively in his discussion of Scheler. Desire intends the desired object without an interpretation, and “a person can be ‘given’ to a child as the pole of his desires and fears before the long work of interpretation which would arrive at the person as a conclusion from a universe of representations” (SC, 187/172-73). The signifying whole is present to consciousness in a not representational way, and the study of nascent consciousness demonstrates the poverty of representation or judgment an account of our lived experience, and that we must re-conceive it as, in essence, “a network of significative intentions which are sometimes clear to themselves and sometimes, on the contrary, lived rather than known. Such a conception will permit us to link consciousness with action by enlarging our idea of action” (SC, 187/173). That is, as creative expression, a “directed melody” (SC, 188/173). There is an imminent meaning in action that is the enigma of the place of consciousness.

In fact, “[w]hat defines man,” claims Merleau-Ponty, “is not the capacity to create a second nature—economic, social or cultural—beyond biological nature; it is rather the capacity of going beyond created structures in order to *create others*. And this movement is already visible in each of the particular products of human work” (SC, 189/175). Humans do not

make instruments merely for the immediate task, but for “a virtual use and especially in order to fabricate others” (SC, 190/175). There is for humans a natural shift to understanding things as being visible or useful for anyone whoever, the general user of the tool, and as we saw above, this is precisely the type of seeing that is required for *writing and reading*. This “capacity of orienting oneself in relation to the possible, to the mediate, and not in relation to a limited milieu,” says Merleau-Ponty following Goldstein, is the “categorical attitude.” (SC, 190/176). And most importantly for our purposes, Merleau-Ponty defines the human dialectic re-emphasizing this aspect, namely the creative playing forward, that we have already established is the heart of a dialectical expressive logic:

Thus, the human dialectic is *ambiguous*: it is first manifested by the social or cultural structures, the appearance of which it brings about an in which it imprisons itself. *But its use-objects and its cultural objects would not be what they are if the activity which brings about their appearance did not also have as its meaning to reject them and to surpass them.* (SC, 190/176)

When Merleau-Ponty turns to apply the ground gained to an initial critique of Freudian causality, the importance of expression again returns, as he posits that the neurotic act is the one that approaches a “pure repetition”: “the subject perceives it only through the physiognomy that it assumed at the time of the traumatic experience” (SC, 192/178). Or at least this is the attempt, although a pure repetition would be strictly impossible. In the neurotic condition, each new experience pretends to be nothing but a pure repetition, and helps to sediment the structure of behavior into more and more probable future repetitions by adding into the “similarities” the new conditions of the situation. An action purporting to be pure repetition, and therefore breaking the expressive nature of action between pure creation and pure repetition, is precisely the neurotic and no longer properly human act. The complex is not a “thing which would subsist deep within us and produce its effects on the surface from time to time;” “it is,” following Goldstein’s manner of putting it, “present only in the way in which the knowledge of a language is present when we are not speaking it” (SC, 192/178). That is, the complex is a virtual or potential action of our body in the metastable set of potentials that we carry with us as the weight of our past, a potential that could express itself in an action towards a future that is unknown and whose meaning could therefore be dramatically altered in its next expression. The complex is the extreme expression of what Merleau-Ponty here calls a “certain adhesiveness,” a “certain inertia,” or “certain mental automatons” (SC, 192/178). True human actions are ones that *integrate* the past into their action (SC, 195/180).

“The advent of higher structures,” explains Merleau-Ponty, “to the extent that they are accomplished, eliminate the autonomy of the lower orders and give a new signification to the steps which constitute them” (SC, 195/180). This is exactly the process of transductive logic explored above with Simondon. The species or the individual individuates itself in crystallizing the pre-individual structures, and retroactively giving meaning to the process thus actualized in dialogue with the milieu, and hence unpredictably so. The body and the life of the organism cannot be discussed in general, “but only of the animal body and animal life, of the human body and of human life” (SC, 195-96/181).

And so man is not a rational animal, at least insofar as this is understood to mean a rational principle or substance adjoined to a vital or material body. The structures we have identified account for “mind” as the transformation of the entire being into an expressive being, but this has not required any adjoining to humans of a mental substance. Man “is not a new sort of being,” but rather “a new form of unity” (SC, 196/181). With regards to the evidence of introspection, Merleau-Ponty suggests that introspection is simply a different means to express in language the same structures that are expressed in perception, and thus even if we reach consciousness along this pathway of the external observer, this does not give us the right to do away fully with introspection and hence intellectualism. The act of talking about life or consciousness is a very complicated behavior itself, situated in certain practices. Something of this activity of detaching from the perspective of situatedness, the categorical attitude, requires that we consider the relation between the consciousness that we find as the “universal milieu” or “place of ideas” and the consciousness that we have found “enrooted in the subordinated dialectics” (SC, 199/184).

Pensée Naturante...
“Mais notre conclusion n’est pas criticiste...”

If the preceding analyses justify for Merleau-Ponty the methodological choice of beginning from the outside spectator, he nonetheless concludes the third chapter by raising again the observation that even the activity of this analysis presupposes something of consciousness as the “universal milieu” of ideas. A positive description of *pensée naturée* does not do away with the presupposition of *pensée naturante*, constituting consciousness. In the end, asks Merleau-Ponty, must not the outside spectator’s experience succumb to the reality of reflection? And indeed, the entire final chapter of this early text is explored in terms of the union of the soul and the body, connecting Descartes, Kant, and Brunschvicg in a direct line that Merleau-Ponty calls *intellectualism* or critical idealism. But Merleau-Ponty’s solution is not that of critical idealism²⁹¹ – in the course of his description of his differences with critical thought, he again gives an explicit account of human experience that follows the line of the paradoxical logic of expression, and so for our current charge it is worth pausing over these moments of description. If his chapter III solidifies the notion of thought *naturée*, chapter IV attempts to clarify the role remaining for the truth of a constituting consciousness. Indeed, as Geraets notes, it is a question of “[h]ow to overcome this juxtaposition of a thought that still makes up part of nature and a thought before which nature is nothing but a signification.”²⁹²

Merleau-Ponty suggests that through the perspectival nature of perception we can see, even in the most clear moments of judgment – judging that I see a cube while only really seeing three sides – that the very categories and certainty of the judgment proceed from our lived experience, not from purely ideal sources: “Something of the empiricism which it surmounts always remains in intellectualism – something like a repressed empiricism” (SC, 202/187). My body mediates all experience, a fact that becomes acute when there is bodily breakdown or illness. The engaged body may justify the idea of expressive action we have been presenting, but when the body becomes an object, a weight resistant to the intentions of the mind, we are quickly led to the conclusion that the body

²⁹¹ The title to the section in question is the source of the quote making up the title of this section: “But our answer is not that of critical thought” (SC, 248/vii).

²⁹² Geraets, *Vers une nouvelle philosophie*, 87.

is an intermediary between two separate poles: “the real world” and “perception, which are henceforth disassociated from each other” (SC, 205/190). The world again becomes doubled, interior world of perception versus exterior world of physical reality, and “[t]he body proper [*le corps propre*] has become a material mass” (SC, 205/190).

As Merleau-Ponty proceeds, it becomes clear that his target is not necessarily empiricism and intellectualism, but rather “any causal explanation applied to perception” (SC, 206/191). Thus, he embarks on a critique of both pseudo-Cartesianism, which is the Descartes of *La Dioptrique* and the default metaphysics of the scientist, and real Cartesianism, which is how the critical tradition and psychologists have taken up a causal relation between the soul and the body. He tries to overcome these causal reductions by recognizing that internal explanations through the concept of structure lead directly to a theory of phenomena, that is, *phenomenology*. This is a transcendental idealism that aims at the correlation between subjects and objects, not their separation and reconnection. Nonetheless, even for Kant, the relation between the soul and the body remains confused because of the reification of the unique type of consciousness. Without an understanding of naive or sensible consciousness, the body must be folded back into the mere objects, the soul back into the pure realm of judgments and representations. Even Brunschvicg’s careful attention to sensible presentations cannot move beyond the problematic foundation of causal thought.

Merleau-Ponty concedes that his analyses are also lead to a “transcendental attitude, that is, to a philosophy which treats all conceivable reality as an object of consciousness” (SC, 217/201). Yet even so, the basis has been an understanding of structures, higher structures not being merely reducible to lower ones, and thus an account of consciousness that avoids the reifications of Kantian forms of space and time. The question then is not one of absolute consciousness, of spirit becoming self-conscious, but rather of action as the place of dialectical integration. Consider an important example, namely, the question of El Greco and his astigmatism. Merleau-Ponty frames the example as taking issue with popular attempts to “explain” the elongated bodies in El Greco’s work reductively, as being produced by his physiological condition. Yet the account of structural dialects indicates that “when irremedial bodily peculiarities are integrated with the whole of our experience, they cease to have the dignity of a cause in us” (SC, 219/203). The bodily structure no longer has the right to be a direct or linear cause, it has become part of the expressive totality that takes it up and plays it forward. The bodily structures that make up our existence, when they become something we are aware of, are not our destiny, but rather a motivation, an occasion for exploring one of the many aspects of human experience. In the expressive

body, the parts are “integrated” or “conquered,” they become part of the whole manner of being or style. El Greco assimilates the accidents of his life and body and structures them in expressive action, thereby giving them a new meaning. By assuming his condition, he infuses an open milieu with a new meaning; he makes use of the infirmity and thus expresses it forward as part of his total being. Yet this description of El Greco rejoins the movement of critical thought, for it reveals the body becoming an object for a pure subject, and hence in which “man ultimately realizes that absolute consciousness with respect to which the body and individual existence are no longer anything but objects” (SC, 220/204). Does not reflection, then, indicate that Merleau-Ponty’s account rejoins the critical tradition? Indeed, this is the transcendental attitude that resists forms of causal thinking embodied in “psychologism, sociology, and historicism” (SC, 222/206).

Yet Merleau-Ponty insists his position is not intellectualist. Returning to the emphasis on structure, over and against this tradition’s emphasis on “signification,” Merleau-Ponty reminds us that the dialectical relations cannot be accounted for on the idealist picture. Again, a question of the integration of the lower orders into a higher order retrospectively gives the lower orders a new meaning. “Thus the integration of the optic or auditive regions in a functional whole, although it infuses the corresponding “contents” with a new signification, does not annul their specificity; it uses and sublimates it” (SC, 224/207). And this is an embodied and expressive relationship. Merleau-Ponty is willing to grant the transcendental attitude, but not the transcendental subject. “For life, as for the mind, there is no past which is absolutely past; ‘the moments which the mind seems to have behind it are also borne in its present depths.’ Higher behavior retains the subordinated dialectics in the present depths of its existence” (SC, 224/207-08).²⁹³ Even if the structures which constitute a higher-level structure seem invisible, they nonetheless make up part of the “constitutive history” essential to the system, and as we said above with Simondon, they remain part of the associated pre-individual. Indeed, nothing makes clearer the very working of memory, a weight of the past that can crystallize again in the present because held in that metastable potential of this body. And even if inexplicit, the inherence of consciousness in its body, of its history and its dialectical stages, means that critical idealism is wrong to preserve the purity of consciousness over and above the things it purports to think.

In order to clarify this implicit difference between his position and the critical tradition, Merleau-Ponty turns to expression:

²⁹³ The quotation is to Hegel, and refers to precisely the notion of the weight of the past as we developed above.

When we were describing the structures of behavior it was indeed to show that they are irreducible to the dialectic of physical stimulus and muscular contraction and that in this sense behavior, far from being a thing which exists in-itself (*en soi*), is a whole significative for a consciousness which considers it; but it was at the same time and reciprocally to make manifest in 'expressive conduct' the *spectacle of a consciousness* before our eyes, to show a mind which *comes into the world*. (SC, 225/209, translation modified)

What is discovered in the description of behavior from the external perspective is an expressive activity that needed to be understood as a significative unity. Here Merleau-Ponty launches into an important discussion that acts as a precursor of his account of language in *Phénoménologie de la perception* and subsequent works. For the relation between the soul and the body is not to be understood as the same relation as that between the word and the concept, at least insofar as this suggests what I called the classical understanding. On the classical model, the word and the idea exist separately, as "two terms, solitary perhaps, but external to each other" (SC, 226/209). Merleau-Ponty is willing to admit that occasionally the soul finds no means of expression through the body, and that occasionally the body acts in a purely biological way. However, these are derivative moments of disintegration that occur only as secondary to the originary unity of soul and body. They reveal a permanent truth of dualism, but also that dualism is not permanent. For a soul that never found its expression would cease to be, and a body that loses its sense [*sens*] becomes a mere physico-chemical mass. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

The two terms can never be distinguished without ceasing to be; thus their empirical connection is based on the original operation which establishes a meaning in a fragment of matter and makes it live, appear and be in it. In returning to this *structure* as the fundamental reality, we are rendering comprehensible both the distinction and the union of the soul and the body. (SC, 226/209).

There will always be a reappearance of the duality, for there are always breakdowns in the functioning of any system and accidental encounters or influences that hinder the fluent expressions of the integrated dialectic. But the duality of the breakdown presupposes the originary structure of unity. The key is that this duality is "not a duality of substances [...]" The body in general is an ensemble of paths already traced, of powers already constituted; the body is the acquired dialectical soil upon which a higher 'formation' is accomplished, and the soul is the meaning which is then

established" (SC, 227/210). Merleau-Ponty thus concedes that if we consider the relation between the word and the concept in the living accomplishment of meaning, then indeed the relation body-soul matches that of word-concept. In other words, the union of the soul and the body is solved precisely by the paradoxical logic of expression as it is to be found in the living accomplishment of speaking.

Part III, Chapter 3

Expression and Embodiment

C'est en étant sans restrictions ni réserves ce que je suis à présent que j'ai une chance de progresser, c'est en vivant mon temps que je peux comprendre les autres temps, c'est en m'enfonçant dans le présent et dans le monde, en assumant résolument ce que je suis par hasard, en voulant ce que je veux, en faisant ce que je fais que je peux aller au-delà.

- Merleau-Ponty²⁹⁴

The logic of expression, I will argue, is the thread that ties together the far ranging analyses of *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Whether one looks to Merleau-Ponty's analysis of experimental psychology and embodiment, his discussions of the appearing of the world given this embodied nature of the perceiver, or his attempts to rethink the *cogito*, temporality, and freedom in the final chapters of the book, Merleau-Ponty returns again and again to the role of meaning, signification, and the mysterious place that bridges and sustains the tension of the in-itself and the for-itself. In this chapter, I will offer a careful reading of this important text through the logic of expression that emerges from it. Moreover, by demonstrating that as such the logic of expression is the very structure of embodiment for Merleau-Ponty, we can turn to fully appreciate the attraction he felt for painting and literature, and the truly ontological significance of these practices as revealed in his works devoted to their study. So rather than drawing concepts out of this important work, I will attempt to show the important structure of the logic of expression as it appears to provide a new ground towards raising the mystery or trembling, quickly mastered by Descartes, to the philosophical status it

²⁹⁴ "It is by being un restrictedly and unreservedly what I am at present that I have a chance of moving forward; it is by living my time that I am able to understand other times, by plunging into the present and the world, by taking on deliberately what I am fortuitously, by willing what I will and doing what I do, that I can go further. *PhP*, 520/529/

deserves. Much has, rightly, been made of Merleau-Ponty's "turn" away from this work, citing his criticisms that the analysis here remains mired in a philosophy of consciousness. By properly framing even those moments closest to the idealism suggested in this term, I will show that Merleau-Ponty's thought was already moving beyond his own self-criticism.

The Logic of Expression Against Classical Theories of Perception

(a) *Sensation*

“At the outset of the study of perception,” Merleau-Ponty explains, “we find in language the notion of sensation, which seems immediate and obvious” (*PhP*, 25/3). This seemingly secure notion will quickly become the most muddled of all concepts. Whether we take sensations to be a sort of base unit of perceptual experience, a pure impression, or a quality (*quale*), the notion of sensations as sense data immediately falsifies our experience. How could one hope to understand our experience if the starting point is taken to be an object of which there can be no actual experience? The very starting point, then, of classical accounts of perception is a significant error stemming from a “*préjugé du monde*,” that is, the term that Merleau-Ponty often deploys to refer to the natural attitude. From the beginning, perception presents itself to us as giving us access to a world that exists independently of our perceiving, *partes extra partes*, discrete objects made up of discrete units. The edifice of empirical or intellectual investigation, which attempts to explain away the disconnect between our actual experience and the idea of a perception built out of discrete sensations, amounts to no more than a number of “auxiliary” hypotheses “evolved to save the prejudice in favor of an objective world” (*PhP*, 29/7). In this very framing of the problem, Merleau-Ponty hints at the important role that expression is going to play in this treatise: “We must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon. Quality arises. Its meaning is an equivocal meaning; we are concerned with an expressive value rather than with logical signification” (*PhP*, 29/7).

In order to make the point, Merleau-Ponty here returns to some of the ground won through his analysis of reflex in *La Structure du comportement*. As he demonstrates, the idea of a set of punctual sensations cannot be maintained, even as a helpful explanatory concept. The problem becomes clear when it is observed that the analyses of perception through the base units of sensations utterly fails to provide insight into *behavior*. “As in the case of the reflex-arc theory,” argues Merleau-Ponty, “physiology of perception begins by recognizing an anatomical path leading from a *receiver* through a definite *transmitter* to a recording station” (*PhP*, 30-

31/8).²⁹⁵ There is a one to one correspondence between the sensation and the sensor, transmitted and recognized by some mental hardware, which provides the basis of the “constancy hypothesis.” A massive amount of psychological experimentation, however, has shown this idea of dedicated perceptual apparatuses to be simply false, that the context of any light wave, for instance, will have an essential relationship to how it appears. Even if it were possible to train the senses to be more attentive, or to only consider perception when the subject is perfectly rested and in control, this would only go to show the inadequacy of this understanding of perception. It would be to “substitute a special set-up for the original phenomenon” (*PhP*, 31/9). The most basic perceptions, following Gestalt theory, are “already bound up with a larger whole, already endowed with a meaning, distinguishable only in degree from the more complex perceptions, and ... [it] therefore gets us no further in our attempt to delimit pure sensation” (*PhP*, 32/10-11). And most importantly, Merleau-Ponty concludes that the demonstration of the field structure or Gestalt character of perception “rules out any definition of the nervous process as the simple transmission of a given message” (*PhP*, 31/10). The very structure of expression is being explored through the model of communication, and the insufficiency of classical approaches to language. Just as we have already framed the logic of expression against the technical theories of expression above, Merleau-Ponty concludes that: “The sensible is what is apprehended *with* the senses, but now we know that this ‘with’ is not merely instrumental,” (*PhP*, 33/11). Perception indicates a *direction* [*direction*], and one must therefore see the logic of expression and the understanding of meaning [*sens*] at the heart of the infrastructure of *Phénoménologie de la perception*.

(b) Association and the Projection of Memories

As a result of his analysis of sensation, Merleau-Ponty declares that, “[o]nce introduced, the notion of sensation distorts any analysis of perception” (*PhP*, 36/15). As he proceeds in the second and third chapters of this introduction to dismantle the “auxiliary” hypotheses imposed by empiricism and intellectualism, it becomes clear how the structure of expression is working underneath the text. Consider the initial gesture towards the empiricist attempts to save “sensation” through the concepts of “association” and the “projection of memories.” Merleau-Ponty immediately

²⁹⁵ This metaphoric puts the reflex theory and the technical theories of meaning on the same playing field, that is, as making the same errors.

begins to frame the role of “sense” [*sens*]. The point is that in any perception there are already portions of the field seen as ground and other parts taken as figure. As a part of a whole, the different parts possess a particular “sense [*sens*],” a part is *seen as* a figure on a background, when the part of the field is “apprehended” (*PhP*, 36/15). A machine that is able to record fluctuations in the color field, for instance, would not thereby be able to understand the significance. A body subject to the weight of the past is required: “The fact is that a shape is not only the sum of present data, for these latter call up other complementary ones. When I say that I have before me a red patch, the meaning of the word ‘patch’ is provided by previous experiences which have taught me the use of the word” (*PhP*, 37-38/17). This is not a mere external “association” of ideas gained in the past, for if consciousness is limited to the possession of sensations, then past experiences will no more have meaning than the present one. The point is that there can be no such thing as an arbitrary and raw set of data that is organized through something like association, the presence of the perceiving subject is foundational, and the analysis into parts offered by empiricism is secondary. The act of perception itself puts the perceived things into a world of meaningful relations, and it is a mistake to assume that relations are part of the “objective world” (*PhP*, 40/19), as conceived by the classical theorist. The unity of the thing is not a product of association, but the condition of it, and is based on an operative intentionality at work in our stance toward the thing.

Merleau-Ponty considers the example of walking along the beach towards a beached ship that is in front of a forest. The similarity of his description to Collingwood’s description of expression is striking:

... there will be a moment when these details suddenly become part of the ship, and indissolubly fused with it. As I approached, I did not perceive resemblances or proximities which finally came together to form a continuous picture of the upper part of the ship. I merely felt that the look of the object was on the point of altering, that something was imminent in this tension, as a storm is imminent in storm clouds. Suddenly the sight before me was recast in a manner satisfying to my vague expectation. (*PhP*, 40/20)

In approaching the object, there was no intellectual work of interpretation, linking the available data to previous configurations of certain lines or colors. There was quite literally an, “I see... I don’t know what I see.” Just as the artist feels a certain lack or need that remains indeterminate insofar as it is not expressed, the beach walker too *feels* that she is about to perceive something, or something different. Something looms before the artist who reaches for the paintbrush, just as something looms in the charged or tensed landscape before the beach walker. The experience is

precisely analogous to the feeling of having a word or a metaphor on the tip of the tongue. The problematic or tensed system calls for a particular act of the expresser or the perceiver, and this crystallizes into a certain expression or perception:

The unity of the object is based on the foreshadowing of an imminent order which is about to spring upon us a reply to questions merely latent in the landscape. It solves a problem set only in the form of a *vague feeling of uneasiness*, it organizes elements which up to that moment did not belong to the same universe and which, for that reason, as Kant said with profound insight, could not [have been] associated. (*PhP*, 41/20, emphasis added)

Placing together elements that could not have been associated without the act, solving the uneasiness of a tension in the landscape, responding to latent questions. This description of the moment of perception falling into place in the face of a field thrown off due to a ambiguous interaction is to precisely repeat the logic of expression on the level of perception, and to also place perception on the same plane as individuation in Simondon's understanding of the term. Expressive bodies take up the present situation in concert with a past, not through "association," of past configurations with present ones, but in a creative negotiation in which it is not proper to describe the parts of the field as preexisting the communication that *is* the perception itself.

The situation is the same for the moment of recognition, and can thus not be reduced to a mere "projection of memories." At the moment of perception, there is a "deeper, ready-made recognition" (*PhP*, 43/23), or in other words, the moment of recognition already presupposes what the projection of memories is supposed to solve. The idea that memories are projected to complete our perception fails to recognize the fact that, "at a basic layer of experience, [there is] a whole already pregnant with an irreducible meaning: not sensations with gaps between them, into which memories may be supposed to slip, but the features, the layout of a landscape or a word, in spontaneous accord with the intentions of the moment, as with an earlier experience" (*PhP*, 45/25). Merleau-Ponty argues that this idea of projecting memories as discrete unities that fill in the gaps of perception ultimately fails because it mischaracterizes memory. Our former experience, argues Merleau-Ponty, is present to us "in the form of a horizon" that can be re-opened through recollection, but which can "equally be left on the fringe of experience." The past is present through memory as an atmosphere of the present, and gives the present a certain meaning. "To perceive," argues Merleau-Ponty, "is not to experience a host of impressions accompanied by memories capable of clinching them; it is to see, standing forth from a cluster of data, an immanent

significance [*sens*] without which no appeal to memory is possible" (*PhP*, 46/26).

Here again we can see the importance of the logic of expression. Just as our experience of a word or expression happens within an atmosphere of meaning, perception too is an expressive activity within the ambiguity of a network of ideal and real weight. And this is precisely the failure of the empiricist approach, the prejudice in favor of the objective world leads to an utter failure to account for the "cultural" and "human" world that we live in (*PhP*, 47/27). The objects intended are never merely passive recipients of a projected meaning, there is "the anger or the pain which I nevertheless read in a face, the religion whose essence I seize in some hesitation or reticence, the city whose temper I recognize in the attitude of a policeman or the style of a public building" (*PhP*, 47/27). There is a sensible expressivity, to speak again with Scheler, but one that exists only thanks to our intentional presence toward this world, as the other side of the genius for its recognition, as both the call to and the product of our expressive being towards what it will have meant once it has crystallized into a perception or expression.

This move beyond the illusory starting point of empiricism allows Merleau-Ponty to confirm that the human world is not a metaphor, but the place of our thoughts and actions. The human world is not the natural world with a layer of meaning spread over its surface. "What we object to in empiricism is not its having taken [the natural world] as its primary theme of analysis," clarifies Merleau-Ponty, "[f]or it is quite true that every cultural object refers back to a natural background against which it appears and which may, moreover, be confused and remote" (*PhP*, 48/28). As I have already tried to establish, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of expression places a significant emphasis on the weighty element of the world, and he says that "our perception senses how near is the canvas underneath the picture, or the crumbling cement under the building, or the tiring actor under the character" (*PhP*, 48/28). The problem is that empiricism takes this material as a bare set of sensations, and posits that it grasps the primary sensory objects in the material of the expressions that we perceive. Merleau-Ponty argues that the actor is *seen* under the character just as the ground is *seen* under the figure. The character is not an ideal object projected onto the body of the actor, but the body seen as the character, expressing the character, in a situation that allows for this expression and for an audience that can see an actor as a character. This network of the expressive structure is repeated here exactly for the role of perception, and the direct structural analogy between expression and perception could not be clearer.

(c) *Attention and Judgment*

In turning his attention to the more sustained object of critique in *Phénoménologie de la perception*, intellectualism, Merleau-Ponty continues to demonstrate how the auxiliary concepts brought into the mix as a result of the desire to salvage the prejudice of an objective world do nothing more than to obfuscate our experience of perception. The discussion begins with the notion of “attention.” Merleau-Ponty characterizes intellectualism as recognizing that empiricism is limited to merely external relations between sensations, and so is incapable of building up a meaningful world. In contrast, intellectualists begin from the activity of consciousness. Attention, then, is the directed or guided perception through which we come to know “the truth” of an object (*PhP*, 51/31). Moreover, since consciousness constitutes the object out of raw and neutral data, it can only find in the object what is put there, the intelligible structures that it possess (*PhP*, 52/32). For intellectualism, consciousness is never surprised, never learns anything, because experience is constituted by consciousness itself, that is, intellectualism has gone too far the other way. Where empiricism was unable to account for the “internal connection between the object and the act,” intellectual fails to account for “contingency in the occasions of thought” (*PhP*, 52/32). In other words, the problem between intellectualism and empiricism comes down to the paradox of learning in Plato’s *Meno*.²⁹⁶ “Empiricism cannot see that we need to know what we are looking for, otherwise we would not be looking for it, and intellectualism fails to see that we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for, or equally again we should not be searching” (*PhP*, 52/33). There is no room for creative negotiation or learning on either account, that is, for expression.

When one trains his or her attention on an object, for instance, it is not the case that the whole set of sense data was first present in itself and then the mind narrowed in on one aspect of this to get a better look. Although he doesn’t mention it here, this is precisely what Merleau-Ponty critiques in Bergson’s account of images discussed above.²⁹⁷ The act of looking is rather the bringing into being of a “new articulation of [this data] by taking them as *figures*” (*PhP*, 54/35). The key is to maintain that

²⁹⁶ This is a reference to the opening flourish of M.C. Dillon’s important text on Merleau-Ponty. Dillon argues that Merleau-Ponty shares an important intuition with Plato here, that there must be an account given of “imperfect knowledge,” and in many ways this harmonizes with what we have been saying about the moment of expression being both a knowing and a not knowing, an I see or feel, but I don’t know what I see or feel. M. C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), see particularly: 1-3.

²⁹⁷ See, in particular, Merleau-Ponty, *L’union de l’âme et du corps*, 80-85/87-92.

the figures do not preexist the new articulation, which would be just to repeat Bergson's theory of self-existent images in the landscape. That which was present indeterminately is brought to explicit presence through the training upon it of attention. But this is not to "discover" the object that was there before the attentive act of looking at it, it is to constitute "a new object which makes explicit and articulate what was until then presented as no more than an indeterminate horizon" (*PhP*, 55/35). This act is named by Merleau-Ponty the "miracle of consciousness" (*PhP*, 55/35). The miracle is that the act of attention sets the horizons "in motion," and yet places the object of attention again into those horizons, it finds the object by "transforming" it "by means of the still ambiguous meaning which it requires that event to clarify" (*PhP*, 55/35). This act of attention is motivated, not caused, it is *expression*: "This passage from the indeterminate to the determinate," explains Merleau-Ponty, "this recasting at every moment of its own history in the unity of a new meaning, is thought itself" (*PhP*, 55/36). Just as in the act of expression, the act of attentive perception plays a part forward into a new situation and recasts the history of the object in a motivated and thus creative negotiation with the milieu. The unreflective life of consciousness, which is that metastable set of possibilities, must be "awakened to its own history" (*PhP*, 56/36), but in this very act it takes up and reshapes this very history. Even the most basic notions of our experience, then, such as the act of discovery through attention, are cast in the light of the paradoxical logic of expression.

Devoting the last part of this chapter to the attempt, stemming from Descartes, to cast perception in terms of an interpretation or judgment, Merleau-Ponty again relies upon the infrastructure of the logic of expression to reveal the problematic assumption. The position is that we must "interpret" or "judge" there to be a piece of wax in front of us, because the "piece of wax" itself is never given. Since none of the qualities of waxiness are permanent, nothing could give us the essence or idea "wax." Again, this idea that consciousness collects together and constructs reality out of the basic building blocks of impressions covers over "the basic operation which infuses meaning [*sens*] into the sensible" (*PhP*, 58/39). The intellectualist simultaneously relies upon and denies the expressive activity of perception, and thereby constructs a non-sensical picture of perception. Moreover, it theoretically erases the distinction between perception and judgment, which simply does not stand in the face of our experience of illusions. The visual puzzle, the duck-rabbit, can be judged to be seen in two ways, but only through "intuitive realization" can it actually be seen in one way or the other (*PhP*, 59/40). There is, argues Merleau-Ponty, a "meaning inherent in the signs" offered by true perception, "of which judgment is merely the optional expression" (*PhP*, 60/40). We live within

this meaning, we engage with this “life that steals across the visual field and secretly binds its parts together” (*PhP*, 60/40).

Thus, the perception is not an interpretation of just these punctual impressions, but rather a global intending of the object in its context. When auxiliary lines are added to a figure, shifting its appearance, the reason that we *see* the figure differently is because its relations to its context are part of its reality. In the phenomenal field, for Merleau-Ponty, there is every reason to begin using Simondon’s phrase of a reality of relations.²⁹⁸ In fact, Merleau-Ponty goes even deeper into the logic of expression here, characterizing the perceptual field as a sort of “perceptual syntax,” which precedes objective relationships and comes about through a sort of internal logic. The expression of a judgment is merely a result of this complex and creative operation, “placing it on record” (*PhP*, 61/42). Merleau-Ponty concedes that the relations of distance from us, or relief, of an object are not “its” properties in the manner that color and weight are “its” properties, but rather than reducing these relations brought about by perception to the merely subjective field of the mind, he argues that they take their place in a “total grouping” that includes both the traditionally so-called primary and secondary qualities. The problem is that we mistakenly take the relate terms of the relationship to preexist the relationship, whereas in the act of perception, a transductive or expressive logic is at work:

Now here the data of the problem are not prior to its solution, and perception is just that act which creates at a stroke, along with the cluster of data, the meaning which unites them—indeed which not only discovers the meaning *which they have*, but moreover sees to it *that they have meaning*. (*PhP*, 61/42).

This passage again shows that perception is working on precisely the idea of expression, that it is a creative negotiation of tensions that bring about through crystallization a communication that *is* its meaning.

Merleau-Ponty still finds himself drawn into what he takes to be the ultimate truth of intellectualism, that is, the fact of consciousness which allows us to create the distance in which I can *know* myself as situated, that “strange creature which resides nowhere and can be everywhere present in intention” (*PhP*, 63/43). But to take this experience of consciousness to imply the impossibility of a middle place between the *for itself* and the *in itself* is to fail utterly *as philosophers*. “No philosophy,” argues Merleau-Ponty, can afford to be ignorant of the problem of finitude under pain of failing to understand itself as philosophy” (*PhP*, 63/44). The

²⁹⁸ For the discussion of auxiliary lines, see *PhP*, 60-62/41-42.

stakes are high in resisting the attractive purity of the mind of intellectualism:

We shall not reach this constitutive dimension if we replace the plenary unity of consciousness by a completely transparent subject, and the 'hidden art' which calls up meaning from 'the depths of nature', by some eternal thought. The intellectualist process of self discovery does not penetrate as far as this living nucleus of perception because it is looking of the conditions which make it *possible* or without which it would not exist, instead of uncovering the operation which brings it into *reality*, or whereby it is constituted. In actual perception taken at its origin, before any word is uttered, the sign offered to sense and the signification are not even theoretically separable. (*PhP*, 64/44)

In other words, perception and expression are both misunderstood so long as they begin from a pure mind outside of that actual concrete actions by which meaning is brought into the world. Perception is only possible insofar as the perceiving body is subject to the weight of the past and the weight of others, and perception itself is a temporally thick operation, and hence ambiguous negotiation. Classical approaches dissolve the world into the mere universe.

Returning briefly to Descartes, Merleau-Ponty offers a charitable reading much in the vein as I tried to understand Collingwood's idealism through intentionality above. Merleau-Ponty focuses on Descartes claim that, in living perception, there is "no time to weigh and consider any reasons," to mean Descartes sees for the mind something like an immediate perception of meaning, rather than an intellectual operation of judgment. Citing again the letter from Descartes to Elizabeth in which Descartes argues that the human mind is not able to simultaneously conceive of the distinction *and* the union of the soul and the body, for thinking of something being two things at once is contradictory, Merleau-Ponty suggests that "perhaps Descartes' philosophy consists in embracing this contradiction" (*PhP*, 68/49). Reflection, then, is always too late, for it is always an attempt to express the unreflective experience of perception or of this union, and human being then, when reflective, consists in the distancing that never fully accomplishes its task.²⁹⁹ In the concrete act the distance is abolished, an operative knowing is accomplished (*PhP*, 68/50), which is a bodily genius subject to the weight of the ideal. This concrete *knowing* of the situation, of the context, of holding them as present and yet as not the object of focus such that the figure may emerge as meaningful, this is characterized by Merleau-Ponty as "the birth of intelligence and has

²⁹⁹ "Between the self which analyses perception and the self which perceives, there is always a distance." *PhP*, 68/49.

some element of *creative genius* about it" (*PhP*, 69/50, emphasis added). The causes or reasons for perception are brought about in the act of perceiving, are guided by the logic of the *après coup* that characterizes expression, and every act of expression is a "*creative deed*": "a reconstituting of past thought not prefigured in that past thought, yet specifying it perfectly validly" (*PhP*, 70/51). This logic of creation is the very structure of the retroactive effect of truth, and precisely points toward how temporality will emerge in later chapter to ground the logic of expression.

Shifting his focus back to experimental psychology, Merleau-Ponty attempts to point towards the "whole philosophy" that might be implied in the step of rejecting this idea of an objective world and rigid dualism, the conviction that one needs to begin philosophy from the concrete description of accomplishment in the paradoxical logic that guides even the most basic structures of perception. The discussion very quickly becomes framed in terms of the distance between an objective logic and a "real," "silent," or "wordless" logic that is at work in perception and communication. The logic in question is one of motivation rather than causes, one that reckons with the "tensions that run like lines of force across the visual field and the system: one's own body — world, and which breathe into it a secret and magic life by exerting here and there forces of distortion, contraction, and expansion" (*PhP*, 75/56). But even if Gestalt theory recognizes these aspects of lived experience, they lack the new categories demanded by the phenomena, and end up repeating the classical logic or objective thinking that falsifies this reality. And in a passage that could perhaps describe the initial gesture of deconstruction, Merleau-Ponty lays out the stakes involved in getting beyond this faulty objective logic:

Objective thought, as applied to the universe and not to phenomena, knows only alternative notions; [...] it defines pure concepts which are mutually exclusive: the notion of *extension*, which is that of an absolute eternity of one part to another, and the notion of *thought*, which is that of a being all wrapped up in himself; the notion of the vocal *sign* as a physical phenomenon arbitrarily linked to certain thoughts, and that of *meaning* [signification] as a thought entirely clear to itself [...]. Now, as we have seen, the perception of our own body and the perception of external things provide an example of *non-positing* consciousness, that is, of consciousness not in possession of fully determinate objects, that of a *logic lived through* which cannot account for itself, and that of an *immanent meaning* which is not clear to itself... (*PhP*, 75-76/57)

The answer, then, to the failure of the classical logic and the approaches that it has engendered will be to cultivate the "fluid" concepts that can

regain access to the operative reason at work in action, that is, a paradoxical logic of expression.

(d) *The Phenomenal Field as a Field of Expression*

In the final section of his Introduction, Merleau-Ponty offers an account of the results of his critique of empiricism and intellectualism, namely the concept of the “phenomenal field.” Interestingly, he begins by invoking something of the Romantic conception of sensing [*sentir*]. He attributes to Herder a similar theory to the one he has been proffering, namely, the idea that perception has to do with living or meaningful objects, not with neutral or raw sensations that are “dead” and passively received. The wheel strewn on the ground is not “for sight, the same thing as a wheel bearing a load” (*PhP*, 78/60). Perception must then be expressive, because “[v]ision is already inhabited by a meaning [*sens*] which gives it a function in the spectacle of the world and in our existence” (*PhP*, 79/60). Sensing is neither a passive reception, nor an impartial imposition of meaning; our body and our history weighs upon the very meaning that will result from the complex negotiation that happens in any expressive act. These are “strange relationships,” explains Merleau-Ponty, and they are the result of the “vital communication” that happens between the body and the world, such that the world becomes the setting for this life, and the life becomes a response to the call of this world. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls the *phenomenal field*, the relation of the perceiver to the perceived happens in the context of a vital inherence in the world and the rational intentionality of the subject (*PhP*, 62/80). This fittingness, the phenomenal field, is a “reciprocal relationship of expression which presents the human body as the outward manifestation of a certain manner of being-in-the-world” (*PhP*, 81-82/64). Perception is a taking up of something, a bodily “appropriation” or “comprehension;” the phenomenon is “caught” and is a “whole charged with a meaning” (*PhP*, 85/67). The phenomenal field, then, is the immediate place of experience, an immediate that is made up of sense and structure, not raw data to be organized subsequently.

The rejection of traditional approaches leads us to reject a pure objectivity of the world or a pure constituting consciousness. But does not the phenomenological approach offer, ultimately, a transcendental philosophy on Husserl’s own accounting? It seems that if I can fully possess my own experience, then I can make “thinking and thought” coincide (*PhP*, 87/70). The phenomenal field, however, is not the same as the realm of ideal meanings. Since the structures only come to be in the distance

between thinking and thought, there is no coincidence, and the experience can never be fully understood, made wholly explicit. Consider how Merleau-Ponty makes this point:

If then we want reflection to maintain, in the object on which it bears, its descriptive characteristics, and thoroughly to understand that object, we must not consider it as a mere return to a universal reason and see it as anticipated in unreflective experience, we must regard it as a *creative operation* which itself participates in the facticity of that experience. (*PhP*, 88/71)

The creative aspect of reflection, or any act for that matter, becomes the way of avoiding the extremes of empiricism and intellectualism. Thus, phenomenology speaks of a "field," rather than a set of ideal objects. The field is a place of movement, and is thus an engaged manner of being, rather than a mind holding before itself some set of ideas or objects. The grasp the subject has on the field, even the "transcendental field," is "never other than partial and of limited power" (*PhP*, 88/71). "Reflection," argues Merleau-Ponty, "can never make me stop ... thinking with the cultural apparatus with which my education, my previous efforts, my personal history, have provided me" (*PhP*, 89/71). Consciousness is about negotiating the ambiguous presences of a multitude of thoughts that are necessary for any given act to be meaningful, and yet the weight of the past is never made fully explicit. This is the complex reality of situated and expressive being.

If Merleau-Ponty is correct, if reflection and perception are both creative acts of expression, then the idea that any rational mind can be substituted into the analysis is false. The personal history, language, situation of the knower is essential to the known, and indeed the "eternal" ideas or structures are seen here to actually be in motion, transforming, given how, when, and where they are taken up. In other words, the theory of meaning that I began to outline above is absolutely essential to understanding Merleau-Ponty's critique and distancing of himself from idealism, a tradition that never manages to ask itself "*who is thinking*" (*PhP*, 89/72). The identity of the person reflecting, and the fact that reflection *transforms* the world by joining itself to and shifting the trajectories of meaning it encounters must be found as central to phenomenological reflection.

The Body as Expression

Ce n'est pas à l'objet physique que le corps peut être comparé, mais plutôt à l'œuvre d'art. [...] Un roman, un poème, un tableau, un morceau de musique sont des individus, c'est-à-dire des êtres où l'on ne peut distinguer l'expression de l'exprimé... Il est un nœud de significations vivantes...

– Merleau-Ponty³⁰⁰

What helps to take Merleau-Ponty beyond the isolating dualisms or untenable reductions of our experience is the fact of embodiment. Even the reflecting philosopher is situated in a body and in a history, and so all action will be motivated by this reality. In particular, Merleau-Ponty argues that we need to re-conceptualize the experience of embodiment by interrogating that most misunderstood object of our experience, one's own body [*le corps propre*]. Continuing then the influence of Marcel's existential analysis of the body proper, Merleau-Ponty devotes the entire first part of his *Phénoménologie de la perception* to working out an account of the body proper that harmonizes both with phenomenological and existential reflections and also with the empirical investigations into the breakdowns in normal experience (*the phantom limb, Schneider's case, and aphasia*). As the epigraph above shows, the body is re-conceived on the model of expression, as a work of art, and thus we need to continue our reading of the argument of this text through the paradoxical activity of bodies subject to the weight of the ideal.

(a) Rounding Out the Negative Observations

The first chapter attempts to break apart any conception of the body as a mere object, *partes extra partes*, whose analysis would be complete with a full account of the external relationships between its parts. By

³⁰⁰ "The body is to be compared, not to a physical object, but rather to a work of art. [...] A novel, poem, picture or musical work are individuals, that is, beings in which the expression is indistinguishable from the thing expressed. [...] It is in this sense that our body is comparable to a work of art. It is a nexus of living meanings..." *PhP*, 187-88/174-75.

turning towards the shortcomings of physiological and psychological explanations of the phantom limb, Merleau-Ponty considers how the behavior of the animal is a negotiation between the behavioral setting of the animal and the bodily bearing of the organism. An insect, for instance, projects norms and projects into the world. This internal set of relations is more than merely physical equilibrium, and it is only possible if the world presents itself through the bodily recognition of the animal as “an ‘open’ situation” that “‘requires’ the animal’s movements” (*PhP*, 107/90). The notion of animal movement is analogous to the way in which “the first notes of a melody require a certain resolution” (*PhP*, 107/90). Even the most banal reflex movements are an oriented intentionality, are, as we will see, habitual. This “bodily recognition” is a creatively playing forward of the past that is accomplished in the expression itself. The act itself invests the very parts of the situation such that they stand as a situation at all, “[the act] causes them to exist as a situation,” and this represents a sort of *pre-objective* impulse of our bodily bearing that makes subsequent analysis possible at all. “The paradox is,” confirms Merleau-Ponty, “that of all being in the world: when I move towards a world I bury my perceptual and practical intentions in objects which ultimately appear prior to and external to those intentions” (*PhP*, 111/95). The mis-steps of a phantom limb come from the fact that the habit body and the objective body are not equal, that habits can die hard, or be formulated in a single stroke.

It is certainly true that we can take the body as a physical object, that it is an intersection of “causalities,” but this would be to fail to see that “my life is made up of rhythms which have not their *reason* in what I have chosen to be, but their *condition* in the humdrum setting which is mine” (*PhP*, 113/96). The act of perception, even the reflex act, “overcomes the dispersal of instants,” represents a style, and the situatedness of the body is “inseparably both freedom and servitude” (*PhP*, 114/98). The notion of temporality, which will be characterized as the creative taking up of the past, that is, expression, and thus as situated freedom, is invoked even in this attack on conceptions of the body as mechanistic. Merleau-Ponty goes so far as to suggest that the movement of history is precisely the same as the movement of the organism. The roles or stereotypes of history are not a “destiny,” he argues, and any “historical *a priori* is constant only for a given phase and provide the balance of *forces* allows the same *forms* to remain” (*PhP*, 117/101). That is, as we saw above with his theory of physical laws, the laws of history too represent an entire system that allows for their functioning. Any given instant of a system or structure is a metastable equilibrium, a charged system remaining balanced only so long as the system is not disturbed. When we turn to see movement in history, we find that “history is neither a perpetual novelty, nor a perpetual repetition, but the *unique* movement which creates stable forms

and breaks them up" (*PhP*, 117/101). The movement of history is not the coming into being of a pre-conceived or pre-existing structure, no more than is the transductive movement of crystallization. It is motivated, directed, but also creative, expressive. The very same movement is immediately invoked by Merleau-Ponty for human being: "Man taken as a concrete being is not a psyche joined to an organism, but the movement to and fro of existence which at one time allows itself to take corporeal form and at others moves towards personal acts" (*PhP*, 117/101). There is never a wholly psychical act, never a merely physical repetition. Between pure creation and pure repetition, the human act is the one that is not a mere coinciding of two separate realms of causality, but rather an "imperceptible twist" that shows the creative negotiation of a situated body subject to the weight of the ideal, and an ideal owing itself to those very acts. The body is not a mere machine, but the place of the intersection of the real and the ideal, the hinge, and the "union of the soul and body" is "enacted at every instant in the movement of existence" (*PhP*, 118/102).

In terms of classical or introspective psychology, Merleau-Ponty suggests it remains mired in assuming the constituting or separate mind that somehow directs the body through its decisions. Just as Descartes leaves the union to be lived, rejecting any science that could think the mind and the body together in their union, classical psychology too seems to be content to leave the relationship between decisions and movements to be a "magical" relationship (*PhP*, 123/108). The body can never be raised above the isolation of a representation, and there is no account for the engaged and paradoxical nature of experience. The classical psychologist forgets that the union of the soul and the body is not made "once and for all in a remote realm; it came into being afresh at every moment beneath the psychologist's [very own] thinking" (*PhP*, 125/110). Neither mechanistic nor classical idealist accounts of the body proper can begin to account for the unity enacted in every expressive gesture. Merleau-Ponty puts this interpretation on the line with an extended analysis into the phenomenology of movement.

(b) *Movement as Expression*

The third chapter of Part 1, "The Spatiality of One's Own Body and Motility," is an long and complex engagement with the notions of lived space, the body schema, and psychological evidence from the Schneider case. I must, however, leave much of it to the side in order to continue the search for the logic of expression. In this chapter, however, Merleau-Ponty explores the importance of the notion of sedimentation – the "acquired

knowledge [which] is not an inert mass in the depths of our consciousness" (*PhP*, 163/150). That which is sedimented, that which weighs on the actions of our bodies, is also that by which our body directs or could direct itself, so long as there are "intentional threads" running out towards the world and giving it significance for my potential actions. The same is true on the level of the linguistic landscape, "acquired thoughts are not a final gain, they continually draw their sustenance from my present thought, they offer me a meaning, but I give it back to them" (*PhP*, 163/150). The past is only present insofar as I take it up in the present, and yet the past is not inert, for the store of past expressions are taken up again to express "for ever afresh the energy of our present consciousness" (*PhP*, 163/150). And beyond seeming to confirm our notion of weight here, Merleau-Ponty introduces again the central idea of the logic of expression, the characterization of expression as between pure repetition and pure creation. In moments of weakness, or inattention, the "world of thought" can be reduced to a few obsessive ideas; in moments of lucidity, my thoughts are alive, stimulating the entire linguistic landscape, reorganizing the very meanings that are being repeated. Wherever on this scale consciousness may fall at a given moment, it is never in the extreme position of a *mere* repetition or an utterly spontaneous thought. This is because "the essence of consciousness is to provide itself with one or several worlds," and the "world-structure" is made up of the two indivisible stages of "sedimentation and spontaneity" (*PhP*, 163/150).

Thus, the world structure is a "living system of meanings" in which the "concrete essence of the object" is immediately recognized. There is no interpretive distance at work for a body in a world. Perceptual experience is a question of fluency, movement without reflection or interpretation, whereas Schneider must translate perception into movement through explicit reflection or linguistic reasoning. Our being in the world is a rhythm or a style, a taking up of the melodic wholes, and just as reflective thought is fatal to expression, interpretation is fatal to the normal manner of being in the world. The very structure of experience, then, depends upon our ability to take up the sedimented, and the meaning of words or language is clearly here demonstrated to be the identical process of being in a world on the perceptual level. The Schneider case, for Merleau-Ponty, offers him the chance to show that expressive embodiment is the starting point, the enactment of which is the very moving beyond of the dualism of the traditions. What Schneider lacks is a certain "freedom," that "concrete liberty which comprises the general power of putting oneself into a situation" (*PhP*, 168/156), the freedom expressed by our being, paradoxically, subject to the weight of the past, that involves us projecting around ourselves a world, an intentional arc, that includes "our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation" (*PhP*,

169/157). Expression is the name for this paradoxical freedom that finds us between creation and repetition. And this understanding, which is clarified in the context of spatiality, shows that in fact the other side of space, motility, is what Merleau-Ponty calls "basic intentionality." (*PhP*, 171/158-59). This basic intentionality shows that the body is not *in* space, but *inhabits* it. This is just to say that the body is in space and time like the perceiver in his familiar environment or the speaker in the course of expressing a thought in her mother tongue. "The space and time which I inhabit are always in their different ways indeterminate horizons which contain other points of view," argues Merleau-Ponty, and my body "understands its world, without having to make use of my 'symbolic' or 'objectifying function'" (*PhP*, 175/162).

This existential analysis is deepened with the analysis of habit, which is not the solidification of some mental acts, as Bergson had it, but rather the "rearrangement and renewal of the corporeal schema" (*PhP*, 177/164). The acquisition of a habit is the sedimenting of experience so as to provide the body a new power of response to and recognition of situations structured like those in the past, and it is not the destining of a particular organ to a particular motion, as even the organ could change in the expression of the habit. The habit body, then, is the paradigm of a body subject to the weight of the past. The habit is something that our body catches; it is a "motor grasping of a motor significance" (*PhP*, 178/165).

Thus, meaning is a viral, and the body catches it insofar as our communication with it shifts the very potentials of our future actions. Habits incorporate objects into our fluid actions — driving a car or the woman with the feather in her hat — our actions reckon with the world in light of the potentials of our actions given the powers and volume of our body, which itself is not objective, for sometimes it is as tall as the feather or as wide as the car. "In the same way, the iron gate to the Métro platform, and the road, have become restrictive potentialities and immediately appear passable or impassable for my body with its adjuncts" (*PhP*, 178/165). As we can clearly now say, the metastable potentials for crystallization of action have changed, and we are adept at coping with our embodiment to the extent that we can catch on to the particularities of the situation without having to go off into reflective interpretation. The body is for Merleau-Ponty, then, the locus of the metastable, or as he says: "Habit expresses our power of dilating our being-in-the-world, or changing our existence by appropriating fresh instruments" (*PhP*, 179/166). The metastable structures of potential actions are made up of our past and the milieu, and space opens up not as an objective place of objects *partes extra partes*, but as the space in which we will take up the sedimented and the material realities of the situation in order to express something new.

The body is the expression of a power of expression, and it inhabits the world as its expressive space of action. The habitual body anchors us both in a general world and in the particular world and literally *is* the communication between the dimensions of the real and the ideal, the past and the present. With the habits of a musician, the organist can see a new keyboard as something *to be played*. Allowing her body to modulate with the demands of the new instrument, the organist allows her body to take up the past of movement and training towards a new situation calling for her to play. Her body responds to the weight of the past by taking it up to perform a piece here, in the present. And the piece here will not *mean* the same thing as a previous performance, but will settle into the new structures and situations in the complex relationship between the expression and its audience. The body of the organist and the organ become one expressive whole, a medium through which the music comes into being (*PhP*, 181/168). The habit body gearing into the new situation creates “a space of expressiveness,” and the “whole problem of habit here is one of knowing how the musical significance of an action can be concentrated in a certain place” (*PhP*, 181/168-69). The point is that we need to understand the body precisely as an “expressive space,” not as one object among many, but as “the origin of the rest, expressive movement itself, that which causes them to begin to exist as things, under our hands and eyes” (*PhP*, 182/169). The body is the “general medium for having a world,” (*PhP*, 182/169), and thereby is an expression, a placing into communication of the disparate levels that crystallize into this body and its milieu, and yet do not precede it such that it could be a mere deduction from them. The acquisition of a habit is not characterized as the sedimenting of some set of triggered movements, but the creation of a new “locus of signification [*noyau de signification*]” (*PhP*, 182/169). “At all levels,” biological, meaningful, cultural, the body “performs the same function which is to endow the instantaneous expressions of spontaneity with ‘a little renewable action and independent existence’” (*PhP*, 182/169). Merleau-Ponty even concludes by suggesting that this account of experience demonstrates a new meaning of the word ‘meaning’ [*sens*]” (*PhP*, 182/170). This is a meaning that is not an imposition from a pure mind, but a meaning as a taking up, a meaning that is situated, that is both general and yet subject to finitude, and the body is that “meaningful core” [*noyau significatif*] (*PhP*, 183/170). Thus, as David Morris writes, “[m]ovement is vested with meaning because it stems from a locus of self-transcending in the flesh, because the body is, ontologically, a locus of self-transcending. This self-transcending is realized in domains of habit acquisition, expression and intersubjectivity that in open and invest our bodies with something more than is what is given in mere biomechanical

determination."³⁰¹ Indeed, a meaning that is a trajectory of situated performance.

(c) *The Body as a Work of Art*

The analysis so far of Merleau-Ponty's use of the logic of expression for understanding experience and critiquing classical approaches comes very clear in the short chapter inserted between his discovery of the body as the expressive space and power for new meanings and his analysis of the body in the examples of sexuality and language. Consider the idea that the body should be understood not as an object, but as a work of art. Indeed, this image connect us directly with Collingwood's claim that every gesture is a work of art, for here Merleau-Ponty is certainly thinking of the living and acting body. The body makes up, then, a unity in gathering up its parts and its past into a harmonious gesture towards a future. The muscles are not externally related through causal structures, but put into communication through the act of trying to reach for *something*.

In a phrase that clearly refers back to Marcel's existential analysis, Merleau-Ponty concludes that I am not "in front of my body [as in front of an object], I am in it, or rather I am it" (*PhP*, 186/173). Even the least reflective gestures, or one's posture, express a certain style or a "certain bodily bearing" (*PhP*, 187/174). This is a wonderful way to capture our notion of weight. Bearing, of course, refers to a manner of being towards the world, a way of "carrying" one's own weight, of having a style. It also both indicates the influence of the past, in the sense that we bear our burdens, and the notion of importance, in that something has or does not have any bearing on this situation. Merleau-Ponty's word in French is "*allure*," which captures this notion of bearing and also emphasizes the role of style. The body then is not just a weight, but also a weight that gathers together the ideal and real dimensions and sustains them by playing them forward or expressing their communication as the very style in which it holds itself.

Thus, the "body is to be compared, not to a physical object, but rather to a work of art" (*PhP*, 187/174), in that the body is a material configuration of a style, a bearing of the weight of the ideal. Although they both somehow reach to express a world beyond any already existing

³⁰¹ David Morris, "Body," in *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*, ed. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008), 119. See also Morris' extend discussion, David Morris, "The Fold and the Body Schema in Merleau-Ponty and Dynamic Systems Theory," *Chiasmi International* I (1999).

meaning in the sedimented language, they are still “not independent of every material aid, and it would be irrecoverably lost if its text were not preserved down to the last detail” (*PhP*, 187/174-75). The particular manner in which this meaning is expressed cannot be changed, without thereby making the poem a different poem, the body a different person. The poem, crystallized in these words on these pages is an individuation, and expresses itself by being some manner of negotiating the forces and urgencies arrayed in front of it. Expressed in a different language, with different metaphors, *what* is expressed would necessarily be different. When Merleau-Ponty says: “Its meaning is not arbitrary and does not dwell in the firmament of ideas: it is locked in the words printed on some perishable page” (*PhP*, 187/175), we have to remember that “locked in the words” means as a metastable potential for reading, and thus as the possibility of entering into an intentional relationship in which neither the reader nor the text is the master. The meaning will be the outcome of this poem *in* me. The point is more that the meaning of the poem is not some eternal truth, but is finite, and tied directly to the cultural objects that support its performance. So too is the meaning of the body tied to the networks of meaning that surround it and make up its cultural and historical milieu. The body, as a negotiation of impersonal forces, turns itself through a creative operation into an individual, just like the work of art, a nexus of open and evolving meanings whose locus is a particular body in constant process or taking up the past towards the future.

This is why the analysis of habit is so crucial. Habit shows us the very way in which the body takes up meanings into its fluent being towards the world, and shows just how the very taking up of habits is viral, is a “catching” of a set of potentialities that may or may not express themselves in the future. The habit body, then, is the place of metastability which is non-interpretive being in the world, the general expressive bearing of a world as immediately understood through the fluid coping of which we are the layered and complex expression, and the “process of grasping a meaning is performed by the body” (*PhP*, 189/177). And just as with the acquisition of the metaphor, that it provides a new set of potentials for speaking, Merleau-Ponty shows how “to learn to see colors is to acquire a certain style of seeing, a new use of one’s own body: it is to enrich and recast the body schema” (*PhP*, 190/177). The acquisition of a habit is to collect together formerly unconnected movements into a particular gesture that will remain dormant in the body until a situation calls for its unified powers. And this acquisition does not happen through any mere summation of the parts in question, it is the enacting of their very relation, their communication, and thus is the negotiation by a bodily genius for this ambiguity. Perhaps there is no better statement of the very thesis of this investigation, that the logic of expression is the fundamental

gesture of Merleau-Ponty's work, as this final sentence from this key chapter could be read as a summary of all of Part I and II of the current investigation above:

Our natural powers suddenly come together in a richer meaning, which hitherto has been merely foreshadowed in our perceptual or practical field, and which has made itself felt in our experience by no more than a certain lack, and which by its coming suddenly reshuffles the elements of our equilibrium and fulfills our blind expectation. (*PhP*, 190/177).

(d) *The Body in its Sexed Being*

As Merleau-Ponty shifts his focus at the end of part one of the text, he turns to consider the manner in which other forms of intentionality share the same structure as that of perceptual intentionality. It is worth indicating a few moments where the logic of expression emerges quite clearly in the chapter on sexuality. Most importantly, we see again clearly here that meaning is a field, that the gesture does not mean some idea of love, possession, or pleasure, but rather the body is the expression of a sexual world. Although Merleau-Ponty resists going all the way with Freud, he at least admits that psychoanalysis is correct in teaching us that "every human action 'has a meaning'" (*PhP*, 195/183). As such, sexual life can neither be mere instinct nor mere mechanical causality through the genital organs, but a "general power" of taking up situations and of gaining "structures of conduct" (*PhP*, 196/183). There is surely a material foundation in this example, as Merleau-Ponty stresses that we have a general anonymous life before we have a human world, but he also warns us here to be careful of classical understandings of expression:

When we say that the life of the body, or the flesh, and the life of the psyche are involved in a relationship of reciprocal *expression*, or that the bodily event always has a psychic *meaning* [signification], these formulations need to be explained. Valid as they are for excluding causal thought, they do not mean that the body is the transparent integument of Spirit. The return to existence, as to the setting in which communication between body and mind can be understood, is not a return to Consciousness or Spirit, and existential psychoanalysis must not serve as a pretext for a revival of *spiritualism*. (*PhP*, 198/185)

In order to understand this “concrete,” then, we have to rethink the notions of expression and meaning as we find them uncritically in “the world of language and thought as already constituted” (*PhP*, 198/185).

The key is to understand the particular mode in which the body is an expression. “The body does not,” argues Merleau-Ponty, “constantly express the modalities of existence in the way that stripes indicate rank, or a house-number a house: the sign here does not only convey its significance, it is filled with it” (*PhP*, 199/186). What is necessary for a proper understanding of expression is an account of meaning in action. And this is why the description in this chapter of the communion of sleep or the gods is so important. The reciprocal relationship of expression is one that precludes the absolute power of the consciousness. In wanting to fall asleep, nothing could be more difficult than accomplishing this goal expressly. I cannot just decide to sleep; I must “call up the visitation of sleep by imitating the breathing and posture of the sleeper” (*PhP*, 201/189). Even if this most passive of activities, I must modulate my body with the situation, there is some activity here as well. Merleau-Ponty describes the moment when sleep “‘comes,’ settling on this imitation of itself,” in precisely the manner that we catch a gesture in acquiring a habit or the manner that the child gets swept up in language after having imitated it through babbling. The expressive act is inherently bodily, and that is why so much of this chapter focuses on “expression” and not on pleasure or sexuality at all. The ability to enter a sexual world is as bodily as the ability to enter sleep, to have the potentials in a metastable state and to enact a bodily recognition of these possibilities. Expression is the model for all bodily acts, and the “body’s role is to ensure this metamorphosis” (*PhP*, 202/190).

This type of expression, then, answers the idea of expression as a mere signification, such as with the house-number and the house. Merleau-Ponty could not be more explicit: “If we therefore say that the body expresses existence at every moment, this is in the sense in which a word expresses thought” (*PhP*, 204/192). Taking the word and the idea as a link between two external objects cannot give us a genuine communication, Merleau-Ponty invokes the “primary process of signification in which the thing expressed does not exist apart from the expression,” in which, that is, the paradoxical logic of expression is at its most explicit. “This incarnate significance is,” argues Merleau-Ponty, “the central phenomenon of which body and mind, sign and significance are abstract moments” (*PhP*, 204/192). Thus, the logic of expression is recognized by Merleau-Ponty as the central phenomenon by which we can understand human nature, because “the relation of expression to thing expressed, or of sign to meaning is not a one-way relationship like that between original text and translation” (*PhP*, 204/192). The body as an expression is not just a mere

external symptom or manifestation, but rather the “perpetual incarnation,” or the “ambiguous setting of their inter-communication, the point at which their boundaries run into each other, or again their woven fabric” (*PhP*, 205/193).

What this excursion into the structure of expression gives Merleau-Ponty is the fundamental nature of ambiguity, indeterminacy, and a new notion of transcendence. Sexuality is present for humans because it is present everywhere, “like an atmosphere,” as the metastable setting of our lives which we understand as present through a bodily feeling and which remains inexplicit so long as we live through it. This atmosphere, which is the other side of the operative intentionality of our bodies, spreads out from us “like an odor or like a sound,” or is that “individual haze through which we perceive the world” (*PhP*, 207/195). Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to characterize this atmosphere here by the images of ineffable presence is meant to show the anonymity of personal existence, or as we have said, the experience of being both inside and yet shaping a metastable structure of potentials. “In other words,” confirms Merleau-Ponty, “ambiguity is of the essence of human existence, and everything we live or think has always several meanings” (*PhP*, 208/196). The indeterminate nature of any situation is not “some imperfection of our knowledge,” but rather “[e]xistence is indeterminate in itself, by reason of its fundamental structure, and in so far as it is the very process whereby the hitherto meaningless takes on meaning... in so far as it is the act of taking up a *de facto* situation” (*PhP*, 208/196).

And this is what Merleau-Ponty names “transcendence,” that is, “this act in which existence takes up, to its own account, and transforms such a situation” (*PhP*, 208/196). In other words, expression is human transcendence, and as such it never detaches itself from embodied action in situations, since it is essentially an embodied taking up of a situation and thereby giving it meaning. All the forces and factors that play into this taking up are essentially related to the expression, and so everything “is a necessity,” and yet everything is “contingency” as well. In other words, expression is between pure repetition and pure creation, no human nature is guaranteed by a mere human birth as an “unconditioned possession,” and neither is any attribute of this open “human nature” a “fortuitous attribute” (*PhP*, 210/198). Taking up the “current of given existence, with the result that we never know whether the forces which bear us on are its or ours,” is the reason that responsibility remains a central point in logic of expression, and why Merleau-Ponty can say that “[n]o one is fully saved and no one is fully lost” (*PhP*, 210/198).

(e) *The Body as Expression, and Speech*

This brings us to what I argue is the pivotal chapter in *Phénoménologie de la perception*, and which offers the most sustained account of expressive logic outside of *La prose du monde*. The argument of this chapter is again faithful to Merleau-Ponty's framing of the current philosophical moment between empiricism and intellectualism. On the one hand, the "possession of language" is taken to be a series of physical or psychic traces that somehow allow future situations to trigger the repetition of the words in question. In this case, there is no "subject" who speaks; there is only "a flow of words set in motion independently of any intention to speak" (*PhP*, 214/203). Following the trajectory of earlier chapters, Merleau-Ponty again turns to the psychological evidence that such a theory presupposes a raw or mechanical causality that is not born out in cases of deficiency, in this case, aphasia. He shows again that the resulting attempt to explain the evidence by positing a transcendent mind behind the categorical activity also fails to account for the relationship between language and thought, shown by the phenomenological disruptions we discussed in Part I. Underlying their particular theoretical formulations, these two theories both hold that the word has no meaning, that the word is only externally linked to a meaning or a function, and so in neither case is there a *speaking* subject. "Thus," concludes Merleau-Ponty, "we refute both intellectualism and empiricism by simply saying that the *word has a meaning*" (*PhP*, 216/206). This claim is supported by the phenomenological disruptions (thought tends towards its expression, language accomplishes thought, and I think *according* to others).³⁰²

Merleau-Ponty makes a case for this strong reading of expression in his discussion of the actual phenomenon of speech. Unlike what we saw above in Ricœur's account of metaphor, Merleau-Ponty does not try to think of language as an object that can be analyzed outside of its actual occurrences. In fact, speech is not at all about representation, because in the act of speaking the speaker does not "posit objects or relations" (*PhP*, 219/209). Knowing a word is to have the possibility of saying it or reading it in the metastable possibilities of one's own body, to be able to read it as meaningful when we happen upon the text or are confronted by the sounds of the orator. The metastable is, for expressive bodies, just this felt presence of the possibilities of action: "the near-presence of the words I know: they are behind me, like things behind my back, or like the city's horizon round my house, I reckon with them or rely on them, but without having any 'verbal image'" (*PhP*, 220/209). In other words, language is all

³⁰² See the work of Part I, Chapter 1 and 2 above.

around us as the potentials of our body to speak or to hear/read meaningfully, and thus is present as a dimension of our experience that will be put into communication with the situation and my body as it crystallizes into a speech act. Just like familiar places, the linguistic landscape exists for as “a certain field of action spread around me,” that is to say, the near-presence of the metastable is precisely the near-presence of “the possible uses of my body” (*PhP*, 220/210).

The same is true here for hearing or reading, because as we saw even at the level of habits, sedimentation is not mechanical, but structural. Something I read can sediment in my potentials and express itself again as speech, and in a situation dramatically different though sharing some sort of structural similarity that my creative repetition is responding to. The logic of expression, then, is the very name for Merleau-Ponty’s account of the body as “our permanent means of ‘taking up attitudes’ and thus constructing pseudo-presents,” and so the body “is the medium of our communication with time as well as with space” (*PhP*, 221/210). The pervasiveness of this logic cannot be missed in the following description:

... the body converts a certain motor essence into vocal form, spreads out the articulatory style of a word into audible phenomena, and arrays the former attitude, which is resumed, into the panorama of the past, projecting an intention to move into an actual movement, because the body is a power of natural expression. (*PhP*, 221/211).

Thus, as the title to the section we arrive at here clearly states: “Thought is expression [*La pensée est l’expression*]” (*PhP*, 533).³⁰³ “Speech,” begins Merleau-Ponty, “is not the ‘sign’ of thought, if by this we understand a phenomenon which heralds another as smoke betrays fire” (*PhP*, 221/211). Words do not designate things by pointing wholly away from themselves, nor is thought anywhere *wordless*, since all the felt possibilities of our situation require the words to come into being, and thus simultaneously change what those words mean, giving them a new performance in the history of their repetition. The word and speech, then, are “the presence of that thought in the phenomenal world, and, moreover, not its clothing but its token or its body” (*PhP*, 222/211). Even if a person reads something they don’t understand, there is a way that the words, as a presence of meaning in the phenomenal world, still offer an existential modulation for the body. The arrival of meaning, which is a self-arrival, or an arrival of that which only exists after its expression, is characterized by Merleau-Ponty not as the “committing to writing” of ideas that could be otherwise lost or forgotten. Rather, “[t]he process of expression, when it is

³⁰³ French table of contents not translated in the current English edition.

successful, does not merely leave for the reader and the writer himself a kind of reminder, it brings the meaning into existence as a thing at the very heart of the text, it brings it to life in an organism of words, establishing it in the writer or the reader as a new sense organ, opening a new field or a new dimension of our experience" (*PhP*, 222-23/212). This is precisely the claim I tried to make in relation to a new concept of meaning in my work above on metaphor.

The relationship between thought and language is directly linked to artistic expression. Merleau-Ponty argues that in aesthetic expression, the existence of the expressed being only enacted or accomplished by the expression is more evident. The material of the expression, whether we take the notes, the canvas, or the actor, is inhabited by the meaning being expressed. The expression brings about what it expresses, "installs it in nature as a thing perceived and accessible to all" (*PhP*, 223/212), and at the same time it takes the material expression out of its merely empirical existence and "bears them off into another world" (*PhP*, 223/212). Merleau-Ponty argues that there is no difference when it comes to thought in speech, there is no separation between the expression and the expressed here either. "Thought is no 'internal' thing," argues Merleau-Ponty, "and [it] does not exist independently of the world and of words" (*PhP*, 223/213). Constituted language is the source of an illusion of a private life, a language we can "silently repeat" to ourselves. This constituted language of pure repetition, however, is immediately rejected by Merleau-Ponty; this "silence" is "alive with words." If there is anything like a pure thought, then it must be something like the sense or feeling of the need to express, a "certain void of consciousness, ... a momentary desire." This "pure thought" can only be expressed in the following way: "by donning already available meanings, the outcome of previous acts of expression. The available meanings suddenly link up in accordance with an unknown law, and once and for all a fresh cultural entity has taken on an existence" (*PhP*, 223/213). For a metaphor, there is no linear manner of finding the right word through an analysis of the word meanings; there is a genius in the taking up of the past or the available materials towards the future.

The words of a speaker who shares enough linguistic and personal overlap such that I can understand them without reflection no more communicates through the punctual and dictionary meanings of the words than does the painter through the mere putting together of discrete colors. The speaker communicates with a style of taking up the world, a world intended by the speech, and the meaning of the words as they respond to what they will have meant in the expression and in this situation. That is, the speaker and the painter bring about a whole that is more than its parts. The listener has to, in a different medium, take up these gestures by synchronizing with them, by actively being carried by them, not to

repeat or recreate the precise meaning of the speech or intentions of the author, but to join in the trajectory of the meaning of the performances of which this is but the latest example. Sustaining by lending one's body to the general and anonymous impulse of a meaning that, like a virus, can jump mediums and will express differently in every host. Without a theory of meaning that can account for this fluidity, there is no hope of understanding communication.

The specter of a secondary, merely sounded language returns for Merleau-Ponty. "We live in a world where speech is an *institution*," and the seemingly ready-made nature of this constituted or sedimented language give rise to what he calls "second order thoughts," thoughts had without any "real effort of expression" (*PhP*, 224/213). The institution of language guarantees communication, because the thoughts are had in just the same way by our listeners, through no real effort of expression. Merleau-Ponty does say that this unproblematic communication is only "apparently" so. He characterizes this everyday use of language as a forgetting of the contingent nature at the origin of expression:

The linguistic and intersubjective world no longer surprises us [...]. We become unaware of the contingent element in expression and communication, whether it be in the child learning to speak, or in the writer saying and thinking something for the first time, in short, in all who transform a certain kind of silence into speech. It is, however, quite clear that constituted speech, as it operates in daily life, assumes that the decisive step of expression has been taken. Our view of man will remain superficial so long as we fail to go back to that origin, so long as we fail to find, beneath the chatter of words, the primordial silence, and as long as we do not describe the action which breaks this silence. The spoken word is a gesture, and its meaning, a world. (*PhP*, 224/214)

So again here we see Merleau-Ponty drawing something of a conservative line between expression in the secondary manipulation of the spoken, and expression properly so-called, which is the instituting act, the bringing about of a world. The silence in this passage is the silence, as yet unspoken, of the intending, a silence that as the supersaturated metastable of what could be said will always fail to be expressed fully.

The implications are far reaching for communication. Consider the example of a child who happens upon a sexual scene, which "will be merely an untoward and disturbing spectacle, without meaning unless the child has reached the stage of sexual maturity at which this behavior becomes possible for it" (*PhP*, 225/214-15). Communication of meaning only happens when the "the powers of my body adjust themselves" to the situation, and the gestures inhabit my body, in that upon seeing them my

body modulates into the world in which these gestures are meaningfully directed. Understanding is not about getting some set of ideas in my head, but about being snapped up into a world that is meaningful and intended by these gestures, it is about a field of meaning. "Communication is achieved," concludes Merleau-Ponty, "when my conduct identifies this path with its own" (*PhP*, 225/215). The knowledge of others is not an epistemic question, but a question of my being swept up into a meaningful world aimed at by more than merely my own intentions. The meaning of the gesture is "intermingled with the structure of the world outlined by the gesture, and which I take up on my own account" (*PhP*, 226/216).

Thus, the meaning of the gesture is "nothing other than the way in which it handles this linguistic world or in which it plays modulations on the keyboard of acquired meanings" (*PhP*, 227/217). Now, although this seems to help Merleau-Ponty point out how there is no mere repetition, he does make another perhaps unfortunate move here, to ground this account of speaking in the emotional essence of gestures. He is worried that if the link between gestures and meanings was wholly arbitrary then there would be no first basis for communication, so he suggests that there is an emotional charge to certain forms that gets taken up differently in different languages. Thus, he argues, there are no purely natural signs for humans, because all human gestures are a taking up of signs into a meaningful world that it not itself the causal source of meaning, and yet no sign can be purely conventional, because any thought must be expressed in "words into which the history of a whole language is compressed, and which effect communication with no absolute guarantee, dogged as they are by incredible linguistic hazards" (*PhP*, 229/218). The massive and contingent coloring of even the most simplistic echoing of constituted language are forgotten by our confidence in the words, but the phenomenologist must recognize that all gestures are as such at risk. The baseline of emotional expression is used by Merleau-Ponty not to reduce language to a causal structure, but to give him a way of showing how gestures get a foothold into a meaningful world. The emotional expression shows that there is a world and not a series of causes triggering behavior.³⁰⁴

For Merleau-Ponty, the "psychophysiological equipment leaves a great variety of possibilities," that is, it is a metastable structure (*PhP*, 230/220). The use that we make of our bodies is "transcendent" in the Merleau-Pontian sense of taking up towards an open future. In human action, everything is "both manufactured and natural" (*PhP*, 230/220). The point is that human actions take up the weight of the body by intend-

³⁰⁴ For an extended discussion of this point, see Barbaras argument at Barbaras, *De l'être du phénomène*, 43-45. Also, see: Whiteside, *Merleau-Ponty and the Foundations*, 254. Jenny Slatman offers a similar take at Slatman, *L'expression au delà*, 147-52.

ing a world, and so just as there is no painting without colors and canvases, there is no human action without a biological body. And yet, the body can no more be reduced to its natural components than the painting can to its materials. "Behavior," argues Merleau-Ponty, "creates meanings which are transcendent in relation to the anatomical apparatus, and yet immanent to the behavior as such, since it communicates itself and is understood" (*PhP*, 231/220). And neither is the mixture between what is cultural and what is natural identifiable, it is what we enact in action, it is our transcending or our genius that also transforms the world and responds to the world as we intend it. The emotional nature that Merleau-Ponty puts underneath language is one of a bodily power of taking up situations, and that could be characterized as, in its most basic form, the "I feel... I don't know what I feel" from Collingwood, that is, expression. And thus, we see that the logic of expression is precisely the justification for Merleau-Ponty's poignant phrase: "there is a genius for ambiguity that might serve to define man [*l'homme*]" (*PhP*, 230/220). The world is transformed by the mere presence of this power, which is what charges the world as the place for possible expression, as an expressive space, which is the very experience we have of ourselves as the locus of the metastable. We learn more, then, about ourselves by looking at our world than we do by looking into ourselves, and our expression is a self-clarification not of something inner, but of our situation and our world. "Speech," concludes Merleau-Ponty, "is merely one particular case of it" (*PhP*, 231/220).³⁰⁵

Thus, rather than moving towards an intellectualism, Merleau-Ponty suggests that we try to answer the question: "What then does language express, if it does not express thoughts?" The paradoxical logic of expression again could not be more clear: "[Expression] presents or rather it is the subject's taking up of a position in the world of his [or her] meanings" (*PhP*, 235/225). The use of the term world is intended to explicitly refer to the structure of the world of action, and hence also to the idea the language is a certain way of being embodied. "The phonetic 'gesture'," observes Merleau-Ponty, "brings about, both for the speaking subject and for his hearers, a certain structural co-ordination of experience, a certain modulation of existence, exactly as my bodily behavior endows the objects around me with a certain significance both for me and for others" (*PhP*, 235/225). The gesture does not contain its meaning as some reference to an idea, but as a certain locus of a metastable structure,

³⁰⁵ As Michael Smith writes, "The body, seat of perception, is also the locus of expression. The gesture accomplishes a transcendence in inherence, for the virtual line extending from the tip of my finger to the object designated gives meaning and direction ("sens") to space and expresses at the same time *my* meaning." Michael B. Smith, "Merleau-Ponty's Aesthetics," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 195.

and the human body is the power of “appropriating” or taking up “significant cores which transcend and transfigure its natural powers” (*PhP*, 235/225). In other words, the human body is the continuous trajectory of discontinuous individuations. In the acquisition of a behavior, what the body is changes as it becomes a new locus of metastable possibilities and becomes the center of a world of new meanings that can call to its powers. The first behaviors in the child that respond to others, to the cultural world, change forever the mere biological processes by taking them up towards the world in a new way, a world of meaning. The body is a “system of definite powers” that is “suddenly decentralized, broken up and reorganized under a fresh law unknown to the subject or the external witness, and one which reveals itself to them at the very moment at which the process occurs” (*PhP*, 235/225). This passage could, word for word, be placed into any section of Simondon’s work. The logic of transduction helps us to see this trajectory of expressive actions as the creative building up of the world and the fluid nature of meaning, and the reference to the ‘unknown law’ points again to the fact that individuation happens as the negotiation of forces without a causal law guiding it. “We must therefore recognize as an ultimate fact this open and indefinite power of giving significance [*de signifier*]” (*PhP*, 236/226).

And expression is a shared effort, a collective trajectory, because “from these gains other acts of authentic expression—the writer’s, artist’s or philosopher’s—are made possible” (*PhP*, 239/229). Thus, new expressions are gained in the joining of the writer to the trajectory of the sedimented gestures and the reshaping of that sedimentation through its placement into a new situation of expression that will not leave it unchanged. Merleau-Ponty calls this, sounding like Jean-Luc Nancy, the “ever-recreated opening of the plenitude of being,” which is the very structure of the relation between speaking and spoken speech, and which is therefore only paradigmatically represented by his favorite examples of the child’s first words, the poet’s expression, etc. Language is a wave that through each surge reconfigures itself, pulls back, and “poises itself to hurtle beyond its own limits” (*PhP*, 239/229). Even if he would water down his claims, we can see that the analysis takes us much further. Every gesture reshapes this wave; every speaker has her or his own personal history and metastable potentials for speaking. There is no ideal sedimented language anywhere that is purely shared, no more than there is an ideal of thoughts complete in itself without words. There is the collective effort of expression by bodies that respond to the weight of the past and the weight of the ideal.

The expressive body, he argues, is “not where it is, nor what it is” (*PhP*, 239/229). This enigmatic formulation foreshadows Simondon, who took the individual to be always more and less than a unity. For Merleau-

Ponty, the expressive nature of the body results from the fact that gestures “secrete” or to exude a meaning “that comes to it from nowhere” (*PhP*, 239/229.). This meaning comes from nowhere because it becomes what it is through its expression. It is certainly motivated, but it is not caused. Merleau-Ponty continues this thought: the expressive body projects this meaning “upon its material surrounding” and communicates it “to other embodied subjects” (*PhP*, 239/229). Expression, then, is both a transformation of the world and a being in intersubjective relationships with other embodied subjects. The body is its expression, and meaning exists only in the act of the body in relation to the object of the gesture (the word being read or spoken) and the world that is intended. This world, shared with all those bodies who act with us, communicated not by giving signs of ideas, but by being the expression itself, is the world itself *as* shared, *as* overrun by meaning and by the potentials for actions of the expressive bodies with which we share it. Expression shows us that there is no “other” place for meaning or ideal objects, and the “problem of the world, and, to begin with, that of one’s own body, consists in the fact that it is *all there*” (*PhP*, 240/230). The mystery of our own body is its expressive being, and “[o]bscurity spreads to the perceived world in its entirety” (*PhP*, 241/232).

From Expressive Bodies to an Expressive Ontology

Although I believe the logic of expression continues to guide Merleau-Ponty's analysis, I propose to only address two moments in Part II. The first example is that of the "thing," and the manner in which the mystery or miracle of expression "extends" to "the whole sensible world" (*PhP*, 239/230). Our second example also connects the perceived world to the expression chapter, this time through the Other and the cultural world. These two moments are particularly useful in moving towards an expressive ontology.

(a) "*Un tableau contient en lui-même jusqu'à l'odeur du paysage...*"

Merleau-Ponty devotes the very long third chapter of Part II to the analysis of the "thing" and the manner of presence of the natural world. The "thing" is the paradigmatic external object, existing in itself, resistant to all other objects, the key to the ontology of empiricism and the focus of external sense in intellectualism. Merleau-Ponty analyzes the way in which the thing's unity is not a mere summation of the properties of the object, but is an *inter-sensory* entity that is the correlate of the inter-sensory communication of our body. The surface that I see is the one that I see (and will) feel *as* smooth, not through some intellectual activity, but because the surface is presented to vision with the horizon of smoothness. This itself is only possible if touching and distinguishing between the rough and the smooth is amongst the possibilities or metastable potentialities of my general powers of perception. My being toward the world is not so many isolated pathways that only get put together again in the mind through judgment. "I perceive the thing because I have a field of existence and because each phenomenon, on its appearance, attracts toward that field the whole of my body as a system of perceptual powers" (*PhP*, 373/371).

Not unimportantly, it is Cézanne who helps Merleau-Ponty make this point, in his claim that "a picture contains within itself even the smell of the landscape" (*PhP*, 374/371). The thing is the expression of a certain unity of sensibility, a material *a priori*, that is, it exists as the self-evident other side of the intentional behavior of a system of perceptual powers. "Prior to and independently of other people," argues Merleau-Ponty, "the

thing achieves that miracle of expression: an inner reality which reveals itself externally, a significance that descends into the world and begins its existence there" (*PhP*, 376/373). This expression is not an "internal essence," but a structure of unity, a set of *internal relations* that make up the thing as a meaningful unity. This is a meaning that exists externally to our perception, out there in the world, and exists "not first of all [as] a meaning for the understanding, but a structure accessible to inspection by the body" (*PhP*, 376/373). Thus, we should not be surprised that when we try to describe the world, the results are inevitably shot through with "anthropological predicates." The real is always the real *for a body like mine*.

In other words, there is no existence for things outside of their perceptual existence, because the very articulations that make up *existence* are those articulations that come from *our* embodiment. "To this extent, every perception is a communication or a communion, the taking up or completion by us of some extraneous intention or, on the other hand, the *complete expression outside of ourselves of our perceptual powers and a coupling [accouplement], so to speak, of our body with things*" (*PhP*, 376/373, emphasis added). The things are always, even in vision where they seem more removed from the powers of our body, are always "concretions of a setting, and any explicit perception of a thing survives in virtue of a previous communication with a certain atmosphere" (*PhP*, 376/374). The perceived world is not autonomous; it is an expression of our expressive presence in the world. The qualities we take as the most objective are only real insofar as we are embodied such as to perceive them; the world itself is a phenomenal world, a relational world between bodies subject to the weight of the ideal (acting bodies) and bodies subject to the weight of perception (things).

As already mentioned, it is to Cézanne that Merleau-Ponty again turns to make this point. What the analysis has shown is that even if the perceptual thing is "offered to perceptual communication as is a familiar face with a facial expression which is immediately understood," we have to remember that the face is not the idea we get from it, but the "arrangement of the colors and lights which make it up, the meaning of the gaze being not behind the eyes, but in them, and a touch of color more or less is all the painter needs in order to transform the facial expression of a portrait" (*PhP*, 378/376). Hence Cézanne, who came to realize that "expression is the language of the thing itself and springs from its configuration" (*PhP*, 379/376). Indeed, in a passage that is central to understanding the act of expression in the chapter I discussed at length just above, Merleau-Ponty writes: "Cézanne used to say of a portrait: 'If I paint in all the little blue and brown touches, I make him gaze as he does gaze... Never mind if they question how, by bringing together a green of various shades and a red, we can sadden a mouth or bring a smile to a

cheek" (*PhP*, 239/230). And now with the analysis of the perceived world, we can see how "this disclosure of an immanent or incipient significance in the living body extends ... to the whole sensible world, and our gaze, prompted by the experience of our own body, will discover in all other 'objects' the miracle of expression" (*PhP*, 239/230). Thus, the logic of expression is just as important for the perceived world as it was for the body.

(b) *Others and the Cultural World*

The final chapter of Part II, "Others and the Human World," opens with a discussion of historicity that explains the language of the logic of expression. The subject may be thrown into a nature, which relates to the natural core of subjectivity, but there is also a manner in which we take up our past and give it a meaning by having it followed by a particular future. In this way, we look back at the past, which was really just so many accidents lived through, as preparing for the future that actually comes to pass and completes it. "If," however, "I take myself back to those years as I actually lived them and as I carry them within me," then I cannot explain that past by the truth which will only be bestowed upon it retroactively. Moreover, the interpretation that we give *après coup* is shaped by my present convictions, my theoretical commitments, and "I shall possibly understand it differently" tomorrow (*PhP*, 403/403). The point is that at any moment we have no more than a "precarious" hold on the past or the future. If I were to demand that I reach a truth about the meaning of my past, for instance, a past event, my ability to do so is "postponed until a stage when I may fully understand it, yet this stage can never be reached, since it would be one more moment, bounded by the horizon of its future, and requiring in its turn further developments in order to be understood" (*PhP*, 403-04/404). This is exactly the structure of the theory of meaning we outlined in Part II above. The metaphor is a trajectory of meaning that is shaped and altered by the many performances of the trace. Here the meaning of the past is shaped and altered by the many performances that take it up again to understand it. Each time, the metastable of the person remembering have shifted, new events or new attitudes, either sedimented or fleeting, will color the performance of the memory act.

Meaning, then, is never secure, it is as precarious as an object of expressive performance, and the lived will always overflow the meaning that any rational or reflective moment tries to give to a moment of my past or present. For Merleau-Ponty, I am always swept up in the natural

movement of time, which is both the opportunity for gaining some sense of the meaning of the past because it opens up a future possibility in which I can reflect, and yet immediately precludes a total grasp of that meaning because I can never then fully coincide with that which I am trying to know. This is the partial knowledge of expression, the lived always crystallizing into an expression and yet never being complete. This natural time which is sensed as the horizon of my personal time, and which can never coincide with this personal time, is inescapable, and “remains at the centre of my history” (*PhP*, 404/404). And this natural time is that against which all my personal acts stand out against, Merleau-Ponty calls this nature itself. The point here, however, is less about the role of a generalized or anonymous presence of nature than it is about the role of culture. “Just as nature finds its way into the core of my personal life,” argues Merleau-Ponty, “so behavior patterns settle into that nature, being deposited in the form of a cultural world” (*PhP*, 404/405). Consider his description of this cultural world:

Not only have I a physical world, not only do I live in the midst of earth, air and water, I have around me roads, plantations, villages, streets, churches, implements, a bell, a spoon, a pipe. Each of these objects is molded to the human action which it serves. Each one spreads round it an atmosphere of humanity which may be determinate in a low degree, in the case of a few footmarks in the sand, or on the other hand highly determinate, if I go into every room from top to bottom of a house recently evacuated. (*PhP*, 405/405).

According to Merleau-Ponty, these objects of human behavior are the depositing of the spontaneous activity by which we pattern our life, and once outside of us they lead an “anonymous existence as things.” In the implements of my own culture I feel my part in the civilization as self-evident, while in another very different setting they only appear as for some activity, even if I know not what. Most importantly, “I feel the close presence of others beneath a veil of anonymity. *Someone* uses the pipe for smoking, the spoon for eating, the bell for summoning, and it is through the perception of a human act and another person that the perception of a cultural world could be verified” (*PhP*, 405/405). Merleau-Ponty will not allow that the answer is through analogy, no more than was the perception of the gesture of anger understood through an inner comparison of my behavior with the others and my inner experience being inferred as identical to theirs. This would be to understand the other or the group through the ‘I’. “But this is precisely the question: how can the word ‘I’ be put into the plural” (*PhP*, 405/406).

The “I” is put into the plural through the body of the other, that is, through the expressive body of the other. Merleau-Ponty does not allow

for a difference in kind between the way that the body of the other expresses an existence and the vestige of the body, the traces of human action in the implements named above. "Whether it be a question of vestiges or the body of another person," argues Merleau-Ponty, "we need to know how an object in space can become an eloquent relic of an existence" (*PhP*, 406/406). That is, we need to understand expression, because a relic can only be *eloquent* if it speaks to us. The perception of others is the problem of expression, because it needs to explain "the paradox of a consciousness seen from the outside, of a thought which has its abode in the external world, and which, therefore, is already subjectless and anonymous compared to mine" (*PhP*, 406/406).

Communication happens from the moment I am a perceiving being and in which I see others as "similar psycho-physical subjects," and this communication is not one of inferring from some movements in the visual field that there must be a mind over there, through some analogy with the kinds of things I do as a psycho-physical subject. "No sooner has my gaze fallen upon a living body in process of acting," observes Merleau-Ponty, "than the objects surrounding it immediately take on a fresh layer of significance: they are no longer simply what I myself could make of them, they are what this other pattern of behavior is about to make of them" (*PhP*, 411/411-12). The world quickly becomes a world of things that are not my own, my private world, but a world of things that are significant as the objects of this other body. In the event of seeing the other body manipulating the objects of the world, a "vortex" forms that reveals objects to be for us. The physical body is not isolatable from the powers that it expresses. We see it as a field of potential actions, to be guided, feared, addressed, or ignored. It becomes "the theatre of a certain process of elaboration, and, as it were, a certain 'view' of the world" (*PhP*, 411/412). This shared hold upon one and the same world by living beings is quickly deepened when we add the cultural objects. The "body schema," argues Merleau-Ponty, "ensures the immediate correspondence of what the child sees done and what he himself does," as he learns to manipulate the world, and to grasp "other people as centers of human action" (*PhP*, 412/412).

Others and the human world are the place for more than just communication of sharing a world and a culture of gestures, they are also the place of language. Merleau-Ponty here emphasizes dialogue, rather than language as something that is my possession or the possession of the other. The dialogue is an example of moving together in a common world, and "my thought and [my interlocutor's] are inter-woven into a single fabric," there is a "shared operation of which neither of us is the creator" (*PhP*, 412/413). In the dialogue, there really is a shared effort in which neither party remains it herself. The contributions go further than what

either could have said, and I even grasp the other's thought the moment they are coming into being. This is truly a sharing of an expressive activity, creating something that is more than a mere repetition by responding to what it will mean when it is expressed. The dialogue, here, is clearly seen as a collaborative work of art. This picture of dialogue will shift in his later work.

What interests us here is how Merleau-Ponty describes what happens next: "It is only retrospectively, when I have withdrawn from the dialogue and am recalling it that I am able to reintegrate it into my life and make of it an episode in my private history, and that the other recedes into his absence, or, insofar as he remains present for me, is felt as a threat" (*PhP*, 412/413). This shows that my life is a trajectory of meaning, and so too is the others'. When we come together in a dialogue, the dialogue crystallizes out of the intensities and the past that we both bring to the table. The fleeting body of the dialogue cannot be sustained, and we both eventually recede into our own bodies as the locus of our metastable structures. The meaning of the dialogue is only safe in its actual coming into being. As soon as we break communication, the conversation settles into our respective pasts, and how we understand its significance or how it sediments such as to influence our potential future actions or speech acts will be different. We immediately also begin to have different experiences, which can color and change the dialogue that we had in dramatically different ways for both of us. This is precisely the point of trajectory of meaning that we tried to make above, and here we see it at the very heart of Merleau-Ponty's account of being in a world with others. And even our collaborator becomes immediately a threat to the meaning of our collaboration, a threat because a claim to the meaning of the collaboration that may well fail to see the truth that the dialogue has taken on in my history, may play it forward in ways I never would have agreed to, may, in my eyes, have failed to "get it." The privilege, however, that would be needed for such claims is the privilege of the constituting ego, and so in the face of the threat and contingency of expression, all we can do is embrace it as a constant task with no end.

This account of meaning does reinforce something of a truth to solipsism. Even as I communicate in dialogue, or when I perceive the behavior of the other, I still remain a reader of the meaning of his gesture. I may not be interpreting the gestures, I may see the anger in the gesture, but I still don't live it except as potential. "For him these situations are lived through, for me they are displayed" (*PhP*, 414/415). Even in the shared project, it is not taken up in the same way by both of us, and there seems to be something permanent here as a subjectivity. As Merleau-Ponty explains:

The difficulties inherent in the perception of others did not all stem from objective thought, nor do they all dissolve with the discovery of behavior, or rather objective thought and uniqueness of the *cogito* which flows from it are not fictions, but firmly grounded phenomena of which we shall have to seek the basis. The conflict between myself and the other does not begin only when we try to *think ourselves into* the other, does not vanish if we reintegrate thought into non-positing consciousness and unreflective living; it is already there if I try to live another's experiences, for example in the blindness of sacrifice. (*PhP*, 414/415)

Thus, the expressive body has a certain mineness, there is a sense of subjectivity that nevertheless is not intellectualism, and this results from my unique trajectory of meaning as a expressive body taking up and playing forward my past. The paradoxical point is that "[c]onsciousnesses present themselves with the absurdity of a multiple solipsism." (*PhP*, 417/418). As such, there is a truth to solipsism, but not one that precludes the being in a shared world. "Solitude and communication ... [are] but two 'moments' of one phenomenon, since in fact other people do exist for me" (*PhP*, 417/418). In fact, with the experience of others and the world as beyond myself, I would never hit upon the mineness that is the very conditions for reflection or existence. The others, things, the natural world, all exist on the horizon, and thus can never be made fully explicit. As a result, I experience myself as given, as situated, as being the locus of potentials for making explicit any one of these objects, and thus never the whole. This point of mineness is the thin slice of freedom that makes the logic of expression work:

My freedom, the fundamental power which I enjoy of being the subject of all my experiences, is not distinct from my insertion into the world. It is a fate for me to be free, to be unable to reduce myself to anything that I experience, to maintain in relation to any factual situation a faculty of withdrawal, and this fate was sealed the moment my transcendental field was thrown open, when I was born as vision and knowledge, when I was thrown into the world. (*PhP*, 418/419).

The multiplicities of perspectives that I can take mean that I can escape into another perspective, I can take myself to a view of the merely material aspects of a work of art that I find disturbing, for instance, and escape into the color rather than seeing the suffering it depicts. But this is not to escape the world into a pure self, solipsism does not imply that I am anywhere other than right here at the world. A rigid solipsism cannot be true because there is no way "to be tacitly aware of [one's] existence

without being or doing anything," for even the "refusal to communicate is still a form of communication" (*PhP*, 419/421,420). Even the writer, locked in a room and wrestling with her ideas, brings along with her the weight of her readers and language, and since subjectivity is enacted as communication in all that we do, even the activities in which we try to see a pure subjectivity are essentially *inter-subjectivity* (*PhP*, 419/421).

The social and natural worlds, others and things, are not sets of objects that we discover in the world. They are "a permanent field or dimension of existence" (*PhP*, 420/421), or as we have said above, they weigh upon us, and we upon them. The body is the expression of both a metastable set of potentials and as the source of meaning in the world. The social world is just another modality of the same expressive structure of transcendence, which we can see this is precisely the paradoxical logic of expression:

Whether we are concerned with my body, the natural world, the past, birth or death, the question is always how I can be open to phenomena which transcend me, and which nevertheless exist only to the extent that I take them up and live them; *how the presence to myself (Urpräsenz) which establishes my own limits and conditions every alien presence is at the same time derepresentation (Entgegenwärtigung) and throws my outside myself.* (*PhP*, 422/423, emphasis is in original).

The idealist and empiricist approaches cannot account for this paradoxical structure, whereas the account of expression can. "If anything of the past exists for us," observes Merleau-Ponty, "it can only be in an ambiguous presence, anterior to any express evocation, like a field upon which we have an opening" (*PhP*, 422/424). He says that our past exists for us even when we are not thinking about it, as an "opaque mass," just in the way that the world exists for us as the inexplicit horizons of our actions. In other words, and the case is strong here, we are bodies subject to the weight of the past, the past weighs on us like a nagging worry that distracts our attention without making itself explicit. It is present because it might come crashing into reality at any given moment, it remains metastable, and as the carriers of this metastable we *feel* its weight, we sense its presence, human existence is the forever failed attempt to answer in reflective thought that which in the unreflective living of our lives we "feel," but "we don't know *what* we feel." The horizons that make others real for me, that make my death real, that make nature real, can never be reached, "[a]nd yet each other person does exist for me as and unchallengeable style or setting of co-existence, and my life has a social atmosphere just as it has a flavor of mortality" (*PhP*, 423/424-25).

Time and Freedom as Expression

La parole est donc cette opération paradoxale où nous tentons de rejoindre, au moyen de mots dont le sens est donné, et de significations déjà disponible, une intention qui par principe va au-delà et modifie, fixe elle-même en dernière analyse le sens des mots par lesquels elles se traduit.

- Merleau-Ponty³⁰⁶

Merleau-Ponty's text culminates with a short Part III in which he takes up the consequences of his analysis of the body and the perceived world for some central philosophical themes, the *cogito*, temporality and freedom. In this section, I will explore first the role of expression in Merleau-Ponty's chapter on the *cogito* and, second, I will show how the logic of expression is temporality itself and the implications that this has for *freedom*. This final foray into *Phénoménologie de la perception*, then, will allow us to solidify the nature of intersubjectivity as the inherent communication of the *cogito*, the link between expression and historicity through temporality, and the role of situated freedom that will propel us into Merleau-Ponty's subsequent political writings.

(a) A New Cogito

"We must," argues Merleau-Ponty, "define thought in terms of that *strange power* which it possesses of being ahead of itself, of launching itself and being at home everywhere, in a word, in terms of its autonomy" (*PhP*, 429/432). But we also err when we go all the way with this intuition and take the *cogito* (which is acting in knowing the "*cogito*") to be eternal and constituting. This results in a vicious solipsism, and substitutes for concrete finite subjectivity a unique God as the *cogito*. "What is brought home here," declares Merleau-Ponty, "is the need to find a middle course

³⁰⁶ "Speech is, therefore, that paradoxical operation through which, by means of words whose sense is given, and by means of already available significations, an intention that, in principle, goes beyond them and modifies them, fixes, in the final analysis, the sense of the words by which it expresses itself." *PhP*, 449/452. Translation modified.

between eternity and the atomistic time of empiricism, in order to resume the interpretation of time" (*PhP*, 432/435).

One of the recurring themes in this chapter that helps Merleau-Ponty move towards a middle course is the emphasis on action. Action, as I stressed at length in Part I above, is expression, is accomplishment and sedimentation, is repetition and creation. "What I discover and recognize through the cogito," concludes Merleau-Ponty, "is the deep-seated momentum of transcendence which is my very being, the simultaneous contact with my own being and with the world's being" (*PhP*, 436/438-39). Moreover, the actions of relationships too are ambiguous in this way. When I tell someone I love them, I am not "interpreting" a number of signs that might carry this meaning in their configuration, I am expressing myself as *in love*. As it is *lived*, this can never be reduced to a single meaning, and its meaning is always in excess of any subsequent analysis. We may be wrong in the sense that our being is not fully expressed as we thought by these words, but the discovery of ourselves as not fully committed later does not make this expression false, it just shows how all expressions are essentially partial. That is the risk of the promise or the declaration; it is the claim to possess myself completely and to have an impossible grasp on the future (*PhP*, 441/444-45). But the precarious nature of these dramatic examples is only the clarification of the very heart of all expression, for all expression is a claim that some gesture means here, and a throwing into the trajectory of this meaning one's own lot, one's reputation. The contingency and precariousness of expression is precisely the reason for the urgency of a theory of responsibility.

As such, the gestures of movement generate space and the linguistic gestures generate meaning, but not a pure constituting, but rather by accomplishing their own existence as the source of possible future movements nascent in the landscape or the conversation. As such:

Our body, to the extent that it moves itself about, that is, to the extent that it is inseparable from a view of the world and is that view itself brought into existence, is the condition of possibility, not only of the geometrical synthesis, but of all expressive operations and all acquired views which constitute the cultural world. (*PhP*, 448/451).

This allows us to say that thought is free, spontaneous, or autonomous, without having to say that it is God and that it must be the unique cogito of my self-enclosed world.

(b) *Speech and the Cogito*

Although this section on speech in the cogito chapter is relatively short and repeats some of the key points that we discussed in relation to Chapter 6 of Part I on this theme directly, it is important to consider how the return to speech is meant to function in this chapter itself. As the key moment here in reformulating the cogito, Merleau-Ponty could not be telling us more clearly that the logic of expression is the key to his entire text and the place to look for his emerging ontology.

Merleau-Ponty begins by reminding us that speech cannot be a mere external accompaniment of thought, nor “the translation into an arbitrary system of symbols, of a meaning already clear to itself” (*PhP*, 448/452). We would not, again, be able to understand why we can learn from speech more than we knew, that is, why it is more than pure repetition. But it is also the case that all speech presupposes the presence of some system of meanings as well, and so there can be no pure creation. As we recall from above, both major traditions concur in assuming that language does not possess meaning in itself, and that thought and language are separable. “But this is just what the experience of language refutes” (*PhP*, 448/452). And here we find Merleau-Ponty making somewhat explicit the theory of meaning as trajectory that we tried to tease out of his thought above. “It is because it has been used in various contexts that the word gradually accumulates a significance which it is impossible to establish absolutely” (*PhP*, 448/452). The meaning of a word is, thus, the accumulative history of its usage, a loose trajectory of the meaningful performance of its trace. Merleau-Ponty continues: “A telling utterance or a good book impose their meaning upon us. Thus they carry it within them in a certain way” (*PhP*, 449/452). This “in a certain way” is the key. The word carries its meaning, not as an explicit idea, but as the potential meanings that might be found in it as modified weight when encountering a lived body who can read it. “As for the speaking subject,” continues Merleau-Ponty, turning to this other side of the equation, “he too must be enabled to outrun what he thought before, and to find in his own words more than the thought he was putting into them” (*PhP*, 449/452). This, again, is why thought tends towards expression, and is not properly thought until it has been expressed. Summarizing, Merleau-Ponty concludes: “Speech is, therefore, that paradoxical operation through which, by using words of a given sense and already available meanings, we try to follow-up an intention which necessarily outstrips, modifies, and itself, in the last analysis, stabilizes the meanings of the words which translate it” (*PhP*, 449/452).

Thus, constituted language or spoken speech plays the role of the material for authentic speech acts, just as colors play a role in painting, but the painting inherently says more than could be gotten from a physical analysis, so to the speech says more than the linguistic pieces of its expression. In this sense, the language must possess a certain inherent signifying. The words are meaningful in themselves, though not transparently so. They are not merely empty forms to be filled up with a pure thought, they are produced, and as such they gain a certain existence. Nancy would say that there is an exscription in the very act of inscription, and what is exscribed is the having been the place of an event, the passing by of a world. If my body is properly prepared, I can take up the vestiges of this world and repeat them in my own trajectory, and the meaning will be the “outcome” of this in its encounter with my past and present. The traces of the expression, the words, notes, or colors, says Merleau-Ponty following Claudel, a kind of enticement to “participate in our creative or poetic action” (*PhP*, 449/453). Thus, expression is as much a clarification for the audience as it is for the speaker, and it calls us to lend our bodies to the production of sense, to participate in the history of the trace. In doing so, we necessarily bring our body and our history, which mean that the meaning will be shifted or altered in dialogue with our being, and the same is for the poet herself between writing and reading.

Here Merleau-Ponty makes it more apparent that all secondary speech presupposes an originating speech that conferred upon them their acquired meanings. Rather than talking about a rigid distinction between living and dead language, Merleau-Ponty here puts the point in terms of our individual coping with language: “we can still remember with what richness they appeared to be endowed, and how they were like a landscape new to us, while we were engaged in ‘acquiring’ them, and while they still fulfilled the primordial function of expression” (*PhP*, 449/453). There is no question of there being a word or region of speech that is secondary *in itself*, it only can be said to be primary or secondary in relation to my engagement with it. As such, even a banal phrase, deeply sedimented in my linguistic landscape, can strike me with richness and depth when I read it in a context not prepared for my the metastable potentials of my body alone, but brought about through the accidental engagement of my life as a trajectory with the trajectory another body, a trace or another person who guides my past into a new creative or poetic action. This is not a causality, but a “fundamentally obscure operation which has enabled us to immortalize within ourselves a moment of fleeting life” (*PhP*, 450/453), crystallized here but never exhausting the metastable possibilities that will immediately undermine its claim to eternal and fixed meaning. This obscure operation is a “bending” of the

spoken into some “fresh usage.” The very definition of meaning include excess:

Language outruns us, not merely because the use of speech always presupposes a great number of thoughts which are not present in the mind and which are covered by each word, but also for another reason, and a more profound one: namely, that these thoughts themselves, when present, were not at any time “pure” thoughts either, for already in them there was a surplus of the signified over the signifying, the same effort of thought already thought to equal thinking thought, the same provisional amalgam of both which gives rise to the whole mystery of expression. (*PhP*, 450/453)

Every expression is sedimented in some sense, like every other cultural object, “like the church, the street, the pencil or the Ninth Symphony” (*PhP*, 450/454). What all of these cultural objects have in common is the relative permanence of materiality in the building, the asphalt, the wood or the score, but also the possibility of destruction. One could burn down a church, tear up the street, or reduce to ashes the pencil and the score. But isn’t the “idea” of the triangle, for instance, some that is true for eternity, whether it exists in any factual linguistic community or not? Even the geometrical ideas, argues Merleau-Ponty, “have their historical and geographical area, and if the tradition in which they have been handed down to us, and the cultural instruments which bear them on, were to be destroyed, then fresh acts of *creative expression* would be needed to revive them in the world” (*PhP*, 450/454, emphasis added). But neither are the ideas to be confused with the mere physical endurance of their documentation, but “continues its existence in a more occult time than natural time,” and is the same “inexhaustible possession” throughout its various manifestations. This idea, however, is not a thing, and so when Merleau-Ponty says the “inexhaustible possession” is the same, this is possible because it is a trajectory or a field, held together by all the richness that was there in its origin and that makes its creative repetition possible, and the subsequent performances must be able to alter the meaning. The performance with these traces, be they memory traces or the words on a page, connects the new performance to the first, and with every performance the “intelligible sky subtly changes color” (*PhP*, 451/454).

The reason why we feel the idea of a triangle is somehow an eternal truth is just because in this case “speech is applied to nature, whereas music, and painting, like poetry, create their own object” (*PhP*, 451/455). There is no “nature in itself” either, as progress through paradigms in science shows, and so “there is no fundamental difference between the various modes of expression, and no privileged position between the various modes of expression, and no privileged position can be accorded

to any of them on the alleged ground that it expresses a truth in itself" (*PhP*, 451/455). And so, if we cannot expunge the hint of expression from even the propositions of geometry, then it seems silly to hold that familiar speech is not expressive. The authentic versus secondary distinction should fall victim to the same argument as Merleau-Ponty levies against an eidetic idealism for mathematics. Which makes it so important that precisely here he makes the following claim: "Expression is everywhere creative, and what is expressed is always inseparable from it" (*PhP*, 451/455). Even in our use of secondary speech, we are still taking up into our personal history some use in some situation, and folding this usage and this situation into the history of the word for us and our audience. In fact, the point seems even stronger because in this moment Merleau-Ponty stresses that the real moment when something is meaningful, when an expression has meaning, is in the act:

There is no analysis capable of making language crystal clear and arraying it before us as if it were an object. The act of speech is clear only for the person who is actually speaking or listening; it becomes obscure as soon as we try to bring explicitly to light those reasons which have led us to understand thus and not otherwise. We can say of it what we have said of perception, and what Pascal says about opinions: in all three cases we have the same miracle of an immediately apprehended clarity, which vanishes as soon as we try to break it down to what we believe to be its component elements. I speak, and I understand myself and am understood quite unambiguously (*PhP*, 451-52/455)

This passage goes very far to connecting this long excursion to the opening gestures of this study, where I suggested that expression was like time for Augustine, and that in living it we are not aware of the paradoxical depths and mysteries that we find when we first stop and try to understand it. In the speaking, I use language and there is no other meaning I am aiming at, I am re-enacting the available meanings here and this is my thought. When I shift to explaining the words I used, I try to do so with meanings, discrete units, and syntax. But what I mean was never an idea in my head, it was a crystallization of meaning in a field, a taking up of many forces in order to respond to a question latent in the landscape of the conversation.

The source of the paradox is again that language "*brings about* the concordance between me and myself, and between me and others" (*PhP*, 452/456), and that this concordance cannot be had prior to expression. The act of thought endures, outlives itself, and sediments then as "an inner power" that can be taken up again. In other words, the logic of

expression is precisely the middle way between objective and eternal conceptions of time, and the following passage is worth quoting at length:

To give expression is not to substitute, for new thought, a system of stable signs to which unchangeable thoughts are linked, it is, to ensure, by the use of words already used, that the new intention carries on the heritage of the past, it is at a stroke to incorporate the past into the present, and weld that present to a future, to open a whole temporal cycle in which the 'acquired' thought will remain present as a dimension, without our needing henceforth to summon up or reproduce it. What is known as the non-temporal in thought is what, having thus carried forward the past and committed the future, is presumptively of all time and is therefore anything but transcendent in relation to time. The non-temporal is the acquired. (*PhP*, 453/456).

Time, then, is also an example of the paradoxical logic of expression, or perhaps they are one and the same thing. The event of expression *takes place*, it happens, and so it takes up a place in the progression or trajectory of a life of expression, be it a trace or a body. The gesture establishes a tradition, and each gesture can alter the meaning of the other ones in the trajectory. Existence "always carries forward its past, whether it is by accepting or disclaiming it" (*PhP*, 453/457). Even the attempt to detach ourselves in order to give our lives or an event a definitive meaning, we still carry with us our past, and this past is precisely what has prepared us for the attempt to disclaim it. Even in the disclaiming of an idea that was falsely taken as a truth, this too is carried forward, and my present truths "have been built out of these errors, and carry them along in their eternity" (*PhP*, 454/458), understanding eternity to be that which is acquired, not that which is fixed and pure. The ambiguity of the paradox of expression "cannot be resolved, but it can be understood as ultimate" (*PhP*, 454/458). There is no point in talking about some ideal truth, some expression that no one could ever express, but rather of "concrete acts of taking up and carrying forward by which, through time's accidents, we are linked in relationships with ourselves and others. In short, we experience a *participation in the world*" (*PhP*, 455/459).

(c) *The Experience of the Metastable: Subjectivity*

The question that was raised above lightly, namely, What is the experience of being the locus of a metastable set of potentials?, is what Merleau-Ponty tries to answer when he turns to the question of subjectivity. The analysis shows that we are a taking up of the past towards a

future, that we are the locus of the coming into being of meaning in the world, and that as such we are assured a place between freedom and determinism. In order to approach a description of subjectivity, it is to language again that Merleau-Ponty turns.

In opening his copy of Descartes' *Meditations*, Merleau-Ponty feels himself as a consciousness humming with words and desires, none of which are explicit. In reading the text, he is guided to crystallize in the act of reading a certain set of ideas, yet these ideas are neither Descartes' original intentions, nor are they purely Merleau-Ponty's subjective contribution. He is guided to the idea that "I think, I am," but what this means in this moment will depend on the situation and on the individual trajectory that is the preparation for this reading. His grasping of the idea *cogito* is not the same as living it. But it is his body's ability to speak that lets him be pointed by language to the expressed ideas. The words have a certain essence of having been produced, of carrying intentions, but if the body is not initiated properly, then the meaning does not "happen" for it, just like the child who has yet to enter the linguistic world, or the spectator who, from the cheap seats, cannot quite follow the unity of the action and music in the performance. Moreover, the gesture that is trying to be understood needs to *establish* a situation for the reader, I have to get into the style of an author or a poet, I need to be snapped up into the world that the gesture is establishing. Merleau-Ponty calls this power a magical one, and this is precisely the mystery or the unknown law at the center of expressive activity, and is present in the person walking towards the beached ship as much as the child surrounded by the buzzing linguistic world:

The power possessed by language of bringing the thing expressed into existence, of opening up to thought new ways, new dimensions and new landscapes, is, in the final analysis, as obscure for the adult as for the child. In every successful work, the significance carried into the reader's mind exceeds language and thought as already constituted and is magically thrown into relief during the linguistic incantation, just as the story used to emerge from grandmother's book. (*PhP*, 462/467).³⁰⁷

The emphasis in the final pages of the *cogito* chapter confirms the importance of this notion of situation and on the *experience* of this power. Take, for instance, Merleau-Ponty's famous insistence here that there is some distinction to be drawn between the explicit ideas and the lived through experience that they try to express. His example is again the *cogito*. He

³⁰⁷ This foreshadows Merleau-Ponty's later use of the image of the *grimoire*. See Part II, Chapter 2 above.

observes that Descartes' idea of the cogito is a spoken cogito, and since it is put into words and understood it inherently misses its mark, because the lived, or silent/tacit cogito will always overflow or outstrip a cogito made explicit. And yet, "I should be unable even to read Descartes' book, were I not, before any speech can begin, in contact with my own life and thought, and if the spoken *cogito* did not encounter within me a tacit *cogito*" (*PhP*, 463/468). In speaking the cogito, Descartes inherently fails to reveal the true cogito, which is the silence of the expressive body coping with the weight of the many dimensions that prepare for its being spoken. Merleau-Ponty confirms this reading in saying that "all those expressive operations," "by definition, always miss their target" (*PhP*, 463/468). But what led Descartes to speak the cogito must be that he "caught a glimpse of his existence" (*PhP*, 463/468), that is, Descartes' expression was guided by the "I think... I don't know what I think." Merleau-Ponty concludes that the true question is to "gain a clear understanding of the unspoken *cogito*," which as we have seen now, is the question of the experience of being the locus of a metastable historicity.

"The word 'sleet'," declares Merleau-Ponty, "is not the set of characters" that I have just typed. We know perfectly well that words are not their mere embodiments. The word cannot be reduced to its occurrences in books or the sound in the air when spoken; these are merely its "reproductions," "in which I recognize it but which do not exhaust it" (*PhP*, 464/468). But neither can the word be some unification of these different instances or some pure ideal object in the intelligible world. As we saw above, the speaker accomplishes thought in speaking, there is no interpretive distance between the words and their meaning, there is rather a comprehension or an understanding of the word, which is a "motor presence of the word" (*PhP*, 464/469). The word is present to me as a possible use of my phonetic and gesticulatory equipment, it is a possibility of gearing into the world, and this reveals a type of generality that is not the universal pure idea, but the generality "of a behavioral style 'understood' by my body insofar as [the body] is a behavior-producing power" (*PhP*, 464/469). As such, the meaning of the word is not gained through reflection or interpretation, but it is "caught and taken up," or again, one day "I 'caught on' to the word," and the word insinuates itself into my body as a potential for future acts of expression. *Meaning is viral*, and it preys upon our power as expressive bodies. The word is a manner of taking up a certain situation, and I only really learn words in context. The word 'sleet,' then, has a meaning in the complex situation which is a meeting of natural and human worlds, in the context of my intentions of crossing the street and the lack of traction under my feet. Just as a virus that cannot be caught by a species is "meaningless" for it when introduced into its environment, meaning requires just the right situation for it to

stick. As such, it makes no sense to talk about meaning outside of its context and hence outside of the trajectory of its life through various performances.

This suggests that behind any explicit consciousness of a word and its meaning, there must be a general embracing of the world of speech in silence, and this, we are arguing, is the silent experience of the need to express: "Behind the spoken *cogito*, the one which is converted into discourse and into essential truth, there lies a tacit *cogito*, myself experienced by myself. But this subjectivity, indeclinable, has upon itself and upon the world only a precarious hold" (*PhP*, 465/469-70). This tacit *cogito* does not constitute the world nor the word, nor even the meaning of the word, since even the meaning of the word is "as indefinable as the significance of a gesture" (*PhP*, 465/469-70). Any attempt to make this experience explicit draws upon the powers of expression that are "a closed book" to the person expressing, and the necessity of the failure of the attempt at a complete expression. The logic of expression necessitates this pre-individual, this metastable structure, that itself is not a *cogito* until it "has found expression for itself," and in this moment is no longer pre-individual at all (*PhP*, 466/470). And the expression never exhausts its possible transformations, never closes expression, but carries forward the pre-cogito, if you will, that will be the source of all further transformations as the field of potential expressions with which we will negotiate that accidents of our encounters.

Merleau-Ponty recognizes that he must try to clarify this account of subjectivity in order to avoid making the tacit *cogito* a mere force or thing "which produces its effects without being capable of knowing it" (*PhP*, 466/470). And this has to be an essential point, because otherwise we have just introduced a more complex causality without any sense of the creative nature that saves subjectivity. The point is just to refuse that the I of the tacit *cogito* is explicit and objective thought. As expressive bodies, we are a "project towards the world," and this world is not a matter upon which objective thought imposes form (*PhP*, 466/471). My experience of the world is not locked up inside me, but rather, as is shown by my being able to share the world with Paul, and in the manner in which my gestures "'invade' Paul's world and guide his gaze," the "world is the *field* of our experience" (*PhP*, 467/472). Since we are thus only one perspective, a concrete perspective, there is no world that is posited from the far reaches of the *pensée de survol*. The harmony between my lived body and the world I live in results in a "corresponding" "open unity of the world" and "an open and indefinite unity of subjectivity" (*PhP*, 468/473). So, if this is the case of our embodied and expressive being in the world, "[w]hat remains, on the hither side of my particular thought, to constitute the tacit *cogito* and the original project towards the world, and what, ultimately, am I

insofar as I can catch a glimpse of myself independently of any particular act" (*PhP*, 468/473). Merleau-Ponty responds to this essential question for his project as follows:

I am a field, an experience. One day, once and for all, something was set in motion which, even during sleep, can no longer cease to see or not to see, to feel or not to feel, to suffer or be happy, to think or rest from thinking, in a word, to 'have it out [*s'expliquer*]' with the world. (*PhP*, 468/473).

In other words, I am the locus of an entire field of potential behaviors; I am the carrier of a metastability. My birth was not a new set of sensations, nor a new "monad," since this would preclude our essential ability to take different perspectives.

And here, when Merleau-Ponty concludes that our birth is the arrival in the world of a "fresh *possibility of situations*" (*PhP*, 468/473), is the most explicit foreshadowing of the Simondonian work we did above. My birth is the arrival of a new metastable trajectory, a new trajectory of individuation that will take up and sustain itself in the complex interaction with and shaping of its milieu, through the transductive or expressive logic of expression, the arrival of a weight in the field of the weighty interaction that will crystallize in motivated but not caused ways. And given all the shifts and turns of the meaning of this body are there in the potentials of the initial charge of Metastability that means that every expressive in individuating act gathers up its entire past and carries forward all of the potentials not yet crystallized. The birth of an expressive being is the opening of a concrete trajectory of expressions that will sustain and transmit the meaning that is more than its expressions and which are nonetheless nothing without these carriers. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

The event of my birth has not passed completely away, it has not fallen into nothingness in the way that an event of the objective world does, for it committed a whole future, not as a cause determines its effect, but as a situation, once created, inevitably leads on to some outcome. There was henceforth a new 'setting,' the world received a fresh layer of meaning. In the home into which the child is born, all objects change their significance; they begin to await some as yet indeterminate treatment at his hands; another and different person is there, a new personal history, short or long, has just been initiated, another account [*registre*] has been opened. (*PhP*, 468/473)

Thus, the individual is the experience of an active expression of a trajectory, a metastable being carried forward. The tacit cogito is not a separate realm of intelligibility, but is the metastable that is carried by each expres-

sive body, and is the more than a unity, the relational reality, of which each action demonstrates the genius we are for negotiating the complex dimensions that weigh upon and thus motivate our every move.

(d) *Situated Freedom*

In the final two chapters of the book, Merleau-Ponty explores two results of this picture of subjectivity that are internally linked and even presupposed by the conclusions above, namely, freedom and temporality. In fact, we have already observed these themes taken up numerous times, and so here it is best to focus just on the question of the relationship between these notions and the new account of subjectivity here offered. In fact, beginning with temporality, we can see that the past and the future as they are conceived in objective time lead to the positing of an eternity that would be the time of the transcendental cogito. However, the past is only the past insofar as it is taken up in a concrete lived situation, and the future is only future insofar as it is reached for by the direction of my operative intentionality (*PhP*, 483/489). As such, “[s]ubjectivity is not in time, because it takes up or lives time, and merges with the cohesion of a life” (*PhP*, 485/491).

This cohesion of a life, which is a direct link to the previous point about birth as the arrival of a new personal history, is taken up by Merleau-Ponty through an analysis of the passive synthesis of time as our joining with that which precedes and outstrips us, and yet that which we sustain. In other words, temporality is for Merleau-Ponty *the* transition phenomenon, which is best characterized as the paradoxical logic of expression. “I am not the creator of time any more than of my heart-beats. I am not the initiator of the process of temporalization; I did not choose to come into the world, yet once I am born, time flows through me, whatever I do” (*PhP*, 490/496). I am not a merely passive subject here, I can make a decision or deflect the meaning of what I take up. “What is called passivity is not the acceptance by us of an alien reality, or a causal action exerted upon us from outside: it is being encompassed, being in a situation—prior to which we do not exist—which we are perpetually resuming and which is constitute of us” (*PhP*, 490/496). Existence is situated, and as such it is a taking up, here more active, here more passive, but always wholly both, because our process of individuation is precisely the “upsurge of time” (*PhP*, 491/497).

If subjectivity and the logic of expression reveal the essential nature of taking up and carrying forward, we still have not placed our claims of a situated freedom on a firm foundation. The first point to emphasize is that

a temporal thickness is actually necessary for freedom, because freedom is a 'doing,' and so requires more than a punctual decision, that is, the cohesion of a gesture and the inability must not be merely undone by the next instant. An absolute freedom of decision remains locked into the idea of an objective time. As Merleau-Ponty argues, "a decision once taken and action once begun, I must have something acquired at my disposal, I must benefit from my impetus, I must be inclined to carry on, and there must be a bent or propensity of the mind" (*PhP*, 501/508). Indeed, freedom happens against the background of the sedimentation of my life. As we mentioned above, the past, and the habits through which I potentially or actually express it, have a "specific weight" in my field of action (*PhP*, 506/514), and this temporal thickness is the condition of freedom, which as a doing requires some thickness against which it can gain traction. Thus, weight again is seen to be just the right image, even for temporality.

The point of freedom is that we are born into a world that is both "already constituted, but also never completely constituted" (*PhP*, 517/527). We are both acted upon and yet "open to an infinite number of possibilities," and the paradox of expression is the attempt to think of these two aspects of our being as simultaneous. As such, there is "never determinism and never absolute choice, I am never a thing and never a bare consciousness" (*PhP*, 517-18/527). Even the choices and decisions that we make freely become weights on our freedom. Moreover, it is impossible to determine the exact contribution of the situation and of the decision. There are always motivations at work in any freedom, and this is not to cancel freedom, but to provide the very possibility of taking up the situation in the creative way that we do. Freedom is, then, "always a meeting of the inner and the outer—even the prehuman and prehistoric freedom with which we began—and it shrinks without ever disappearing altogether" (*PhP*, 518/528). We are free to the extent that we "enjoy immediate and remote possibilities" (*PhP*, 519/528). Freedom is the power for the possible, the power to take up and engage a significance, the power for expression. Linking definitively the temporal with freedom in the logic of expression, Merleau-Ponty writes: "By taking up a present, I draw together and transform my past, altering its significance, freeing and detaching myself from it" (*PhP*, 519/528). This detachment is not an absolute creation, but rather a commitment elsewhere or a different taking up of the past. In overcoming the specific weight of my past, "[m]y freedom can draw life away from its spontaneous course, but only by a series of unobtrusive deflections" (*PhP*, 519-20/529).

Our freedom, then, is situated. This situation is the world of nature and culture, and hence is the world of inextricable entanglement with others. Moreover, "[i]t is by being unrestrictedly and unreservedly what I am at present that I have a chance of moving forward" (*PhP*, 520/529). In

other words, I can only be free by fully lending myself to the concrete natural and cultural situations in which I am what I am, and thus can begin to alter that relational existence through acts that shift and reshape those meanings. The role of philosophy is to “teach us to see [things and historical situations] clearly once more” (*PhP*, 520/530). No more than can we fully “speak” the tacit cogito than can we fully articulate freedom. The emphasis on concrete expressive bodies and their experience as the locus of the metastable, as the act between pure creation and pure repetition, leads Merleau-Ponty to invoke the hero, who does nothing else but “lives out his [sic] relations to men and the world, and it is not fitting that another speak in his name,” and foreshadowing the next project, turns to the words of a writer who reminds us that “Man is but a network of relationships, and these alone matter to him” (*PhP*, 521/530).³⁰⁸

³⁰⁸ The reference is to Antoine Saint-Exupéry, *Pilote de guerre. Mission sur Arras* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1942).

Part III, Chapter 4

Expression, *Empiètement*, and Politics

The Cartesian [political theorist] would doubtless reply that if we hold ourselves responsible for the most distant consequence of our thoughts and actions, the only thing left for us to do is refuse all compromise as does the hero. And, he would add, how many heroes are there among the men who today take pride in their having resisted [the Occupation]? ... This line of reasoning is hard, but it leads in the direction we want to go.

– Merleau-Ponty³⁰⁹

Although all of Merleau-Ponty's work is at least implicitly political in nature,³¹⁰ the four major texts published during his lifetime after 1945 are all explicitly so.³¹¹ Indeed, his political thought is deeply connected to his philosophical orientation, namely, his long-standing critique of modern instantiations of Cartesian subjectivity in intellectualism and empiricism. Against this prevailing tradition, which he names "*pensée de survol*," or "high-altitude thinking," Merleau-Ponty developed a concrete account of lived experience as an attempt "to seize the meaning of the world or of history as that meaning comes into being" (*PhP*, 22/xxiv). When he turned his attention to politics, he believed this approach allowed him to engage both in moral reflection and in concrete action. This

³⁰⁹ Merleau-Ponty, "GL," 257-58. Translated as: Merleau-Ponty, "GL," 45-46. Henceforth cited as *GL*.

³¹⁰ Indeed as Diana Coole argues, for Merleau-Ponty, "it is the philosopher's responsibility to plunge into the labyrinth of coexistence in order to interpret its emergent significance," Diana Coole, "Politics and the Political," in *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*, ed. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008), 91. As I will argue in the next chapter, to plunge into the world rather than "surveying it" from above is what Merleau-Ponty takes to be the inherent ethical responsibility of expression. For Merleau-Ponty, this conviction manifests precisely in his political engagement. See further VI, 60/38-39.

³¹¹ *Humanisme et terreur* (1947); *Sens et non-sens* (1948); *Les aventures de la dialectique* (1955); *Signes* (1960).

is precisely the flavor of Merleau-Ponty's political engagement — to never shirk the difficult task of situated responsibility in the face of historical contingency and irreconcilable demands. For instance, upon the demobilization of the French military in 1940, Merleau-Ponty helped to set up a resistance group at *École normale supérieure* named *Sous la botte* [Under the boot], and in 1941 he became an important figure in the movement *Socialisme et Liberté*, whose mission was to reconcile socialism with individual liberties. Despite strict curriculum restrictions, he even taught Marx at *Lycée Carnot*, insisting, “[m]oral reflection ... is consistent with political activism.”³¹²

In this chapter, I demonstrate that Merleau-Ponty's political writings are a paradigmatic illustration of the paradoxical logic of expression. Moreover, his political thought sets the stage for his explicit focus on language and communication as revealing the inherently intersubjective nature of expressive bodies. I begin by establishing Merleau-Ponty's initial formulation of coexistence and the contingency of history in his first explicitly political essay. In the second section, I explore his analysis of the Moscow Trials and his understanding of responsibility through political action in the face of historical contingency. The third section develops Merleau-Ponty's reading of Machiavelli's understanding of political *virtù* and demonstrates Merleau-Ponty's shift away from Marxism. This section also develops the fundamental notion of *empiètement*, or encroachment, which becomes a central concept in Merleau-Ponty's later ontology. In the concluding section, I reconnect the role of *empiètement* with the logic of expression, which is Merleau-Ponty's primary focus beginning in the early 1950s. While his early political thought is informed by his philosophy, I establish that the understanding of intersubjectivity through *empiètement* in his political thought begins to inform his understanding of expression and to provide the opening for his deepening ontological position. Thus, despite the obvious roots of his later ontology in his phenomenological work on perception and embodiment, this chapter establishes that Merleau-Ponty's political thought is also fundamental to the development of this later ontology.

³¹² French political philosopher Claude Lefort was among his students. Merleau-Ponty was able to breach this restriction because of a friendship with Inspector General Davy. See Whiteside, *Merleau-Ponty and the Foundations*, 33-34.

- §1. -

“La guerre a eu lieu... et personne n’a les mains propres...”
Recognizing the Violence of Intersubjectivity

Merleau-Ponty’s first explicitly political publication appeared in 1945, and it bears the mark of this engagement with the concrete reality of the political. Indeed, the title of his first essay is decisive: “The War Has Taken Place,” the war *happened*. Merleau-Ponty speaks in the first-person plural and describes the pre-war atmosphere as a product of a certain Cartesian or Kantian optimism, generated by the belief that at root society is made up of rational and isolated subjects. This optimism allows one to explain away violence as merely errors or accidents, to believe that humanity is progressively approaching peace in a kingdom of ends, and to imagine a world in which the war has not *really* taken place, that is, to imagine subjectivity as not *essentially* marked by the contingent yet real violence and suffering of history (*GL*, 245/139). Merleau-Ponty’s humanism is thus a revolt against any traditional humanism that would assume a pure essence of human nature or a pure standpoint from which to observe history; it is a return to the concrete situation. The difficulty is to not thereby fall into an irrationalism or an immoralism, and the logic of expression allows Merleau-Ponty to navigate the poles of a seemingly forgone dichotomy. Thus, just as his philosophy of perception looks for a path between empiricism and intellectualism, his understanding of politics and history seeks a path between an account that finds in history a series of random and contingent events (Nietzsche) and one that sees in history a determinate progress (Hegel, Marx, Liberalism). Just as we needed to account for the ambiguity of lived expression, here we need to understand the “complexity and ambiguity of history.”³¹³

And so the war *has taken place*. Just like any event that shifts our reality, such as the learning of a language, the war becomes a dimension of one’s experience rather than a set of isolated memories. Just as we saw in previous chapters how a metaphor sediments not into a storehouse of memory-images, but into the nascent possibilities for future speech acts, the war also alters our experience and our world. As Emmanuel de Saint Aubert notes, “*La guerre a eu lieu*” is not merely Merleau-Ponty’s “[r]eflection on the past,” but rather “this article is also a self-reflection and a disguised confiding in us of a secret: the war has taken place, we are

³¹³ Sonia Kruks, “Philosophy of History,” in *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*, ed. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008), 71.

no longer the same, I [Merleau-Ponty] am no longer the same" (*ESA1*, 35). The war is experienced not as an idea or a thought, but precisely as a reconfiguration of the field of experience. The possibility of living in a landscape, caught up in one's projects or games, is forever altered when the landscape suddenly becomes a territory to defend, a hill to capture, or the stronghold of an occupying force. The war is everywhere, and yet nowhere, in its expressions, expressions that each person involved must take up somehow into his or her personal history. The world itself takes on a fresh, and this time frightening, layer of significance.

Merleau-Ponty discusses how the war shows that far from reaching some eternal essence that could ground a universal humanism, individualism and rationalism themselves have a place in time and a location on a map. The war reveals the illusions of transcendental subjectivity because we find that everyone is essentially caught up in the historical moment and everyone's expressions help to shape the reality and the possibilities for everyone else – that is, our fundamental situation is *coexistence*. All that remains is the essential fact of expressive intersubjectivity as the possibility of taking up the past towards the future, which is merely an openness that guarantees our essence neither a content nor a form. As such, others must not be supposed to be pure and separate minds. Although each of us is on a separate trajectory, this does not imply that we have an interiority that is hermetically sealed. The very possibility of experience requires an intersubjectivity in which *empiètement*,³¹⁴ or encroachment, is the violent reality of an expressive and situated humanism.

Thus, the meaning of the "other" is not eternal. It is as contingent as the historical situation itself. People are dramatically reshaped by events and a close look at history will show that "we find culprits nowhere, but accomplices everywhere; so it is that we all played a part in the events of 1939" (*GL*, 249/141). In other words, we are all open and on contingent trajectories *together*, and we are all implicated in this situation that we sustain through our expressive acts and gestures. For example, a German exchange student's subtle pre-war nationalism, resilient even in the face of being unable to defend any particular Nazi policy, becomes a foreshadowing of the Holocaust that should have been recognized, even though history could have been otherwise and thus so too could have been the

³¹⁴ The translation of *empiètement* is as important as it is difficult. The term's prevalence in Merleau-Ponty's late philosophy has been noted by many of his readers, and its status as one key to understanding his philosophy has been raised to the level of urgency by Emmanuel de Saint Aubert's meticulous study of the unpublished materials. In particular, see the introduction to his project, *ESA1*. For our part, we will continue to work with the idea that expression becomes Merleau-Ponty's understanding for the place of this transgression of dimensions, that is, that Merleau-Ponty's logic of expression is also the foundation of his understanding of *empiètement*.

meaning of this nationalism. This student himself becomes radically altered under the Occupation. He becomes a person who one must salute and, surely, no longer address in a familiar way (*GL*, 249-50/141-42).

We can see that political considerations are framed in precisely the way Merleau-Ponty understood the historically situated nature of perception and the contingent nature of meaning as dependent upon the accidents of history.³¹⁵ The question becomes how we might continue to talk about responsibility in the face of the contingency of history and if *everyone* is an accomplice in the movements of historical events. Can we accept the difficulties pointed out by the Cartesian? Can we embrace the exigent nature of a situated responsibility? In the messy reality of historical situations, when there is no idol to rely upon, does one still have the right to speak of ethics? From this initial political engagement, we need to begin to clarify the nascent humanism in Merleau-Ponty's work in order to bring out the political implications of the logic of expression.

In his discussion of the concentration camps and anti-Semitism, Merleau-Ponty explores an understanding of human nature as expression in the face of historical situatedness. On the one hand, the events of WWII cannot be explained away as accidents of history, as contingent and isolated facts or isolated acts only given meaning afterwards by a synthetic judgment. The accidents of history have meaning in how they are taken up. On the other hand, history does not proceed in some guaranteed progression, whether such a progression ends in the Hegelian State, a classless society, or the victory of freedom. For Merleau-Ponty:

There is no history where the course of event is a series of episodes without unity, or where it is a struggle already decided in the heaven of ideas. History is there where there is a logic *within* contingency, a reason *within* unreason, where there is a historical perception which, like perception in general, leaves in the background what cannot enter the foreground but seizes the lines of force as they are generated and actively leads their traces to a conclusion... in order to do so they need to be taken up into human initiative. (*RC*, 46/97-98)

As we have established above, it is the logic of expression that provides Merleau-Ponty with the solution to this need for the generation of mean-

³¹⁵ As Merleau-Ponty argues in *Phénoménologie de la perception*, my interpretation of the past helps to determine what that past means for my present action and experience. For example, having studied or not studied psychoanalysis is an accident of one's personal history, and yet will dramatically reshape the interpretation and thus the meaning of one's childhood. Psychoanalysis does not reveal, according to Merleau-Ponty, a "truth" about the past, but *creatively* expresses that past by carrying it forward and thus giving meaning to it. Indeed, "I shall possibly understand it differently" tomorrow. *PhP*, 403/403.

ing through concrete gestures, the paradoxical logic of expression is the understanding of an action that is between pure repetition and pure creation, between freedom and determinism. When Merleau-Ponty calls for a “new idea of reason” in the *Préface* to this collection of essays,³¹⁶ the logic of expression must be his answer.³¹⁷

Consider the horrific example of the Nazi concentration camps. Since history is always open and contingent, they cannot be explained as the necessary conclusion to some historical process or original error. “Anti-Semitism,” argues Merleau-Ponty, “is not a war machine set up by a few Machiavellis and serviced by the obedience of others. It is not created by a few people any more than language is, or music. It was conceived in the depths of history” (*GL*, 252/143, translation modified). The war machine that caused such unspeakable real suffering was first a metastable potential of a concrete historical people. That it crystallized was *motivated* by a layering and accumulation of historical forces and influences, and yet this is precisely why it *could* have been otherwise. The decisions and manipulations of one man would not have been able to create this horror out of nothing, because no one person is purely free to create anything *ex nihilo*. Individual actions, like all actions, were a negotiation with the situation and the traditions that prepared the way for the event. This suggests that we might need to distinguish between an “absolute” responsibility and a “pure” responsibility. We are absolutely responsible for how we take up a situation and for the unforgivable directions we give to history, that is, for the *real* violence we cause. But for Merleau-Ponty, this absolute responsibility is not thereby a “pure” responsibility, no more than we could accord a “pure” *non*-responsibility to all the members of the community that sustained these possibilities through their subtle and barely conscious gestures, that is, to those who sustained and carried forward the *potential* violence that was made so heartbreakingly real. We can see that the intersubjective reality of human situations raises the question of responsibility to a level of urgency for Merleau-Ponty and opens up an ethical responsibility we have for the potential or metastable violence that our gestures sustain and carry forward.³¹⁸

What Merleau-Ponty wants to show in rejecting reductive or merely causal understandings of such an event is that “*personne ne commande absolument et personne n’obéit absolument*” [no one fully commands and no

³¹⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et non-sens* (Paris: Éditions Nagel, 1948), 8. Translated as: Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 3.

³¹⁷ Indeed, as I will show in the next chapter, the importance of his explicit theory of expression in his work from the early 1950s cannot be over-emphasized.

³¹⁸ I explore the rich philosophy of ontogenesis of Gilbert Simondon in Part I, Chapter 3 below.

one fully obeys]" (*GL*, 252/143).³¹⁹ If this is the case, then we have to rethink our understanding of responsibility in order to connect our theories to the real and contingent nature of the ethical or political act. Merleau-Ponty considers an analogy to how an individual's past *somehow* prepares the way for loving a particular person and thus how one's history sediments into the possibilities of the future. The encounter with the person, argues Merleau-Ponty, always overflows the past that is taken up in the present — the act is always a taking up of the potentials in a creative expression. Since such acts are *motivated* by the past and the situation, and not *caused*, we still have the right to talk about responsibility — even if we cannot attribute a pure or rational decision behind every act. When viewed from the position of the accomplished act, the decision appears to have been a necessity. The key is to return to the actual situation in which the many ways of proceeding remained open, when the outcome still remained charged with possibilities, the experience from within the zone or indetermination, from within the metastable system. An act in the moment of speaking is the complex crystallizing of a multiplicity of factors that is guided by contingency, between pure repetition and pure creation. In other words, in this first explicit engagement with the political, it is Merleau-Ponty's understanding of expression that leads him to complicate the notion of *responsibility* and to adopt the idea that history certainly has a *sens*, not like a river has a direction (*sens*), but like an expression has a meaning (*sens*).³²⁰

What the Occupation and the anti-Semitism of the 1930s and 1940s teaches Merleau-Ponty is that the idea of a separable and rational mind or historical progression is an illusion that keeps us from properly addressing our situated and intersubjective reality. As Merleau-Ponty concludes:

We did not think there were Jews or Germans but only men, or even consciousnesses. It seemed to us that at every moment each of us chose to be and to do what he wished with an ever-new freedom. We had not understood that, just as an actor slips into a role which envelops him and which alters the meaning of all his gestures, just as he carries this great phantom with him, animating it and yet controlled by it, so, in co-existence, each of us is presented to others against an

³¹⁹ In fact, this formulation is one of Merleau-Ponty's favorites, and it appears in quite diverse moments. See, for instance *IL*, 34-35/83.

³²⁰ Of course, this formulation in French trades upon the rich meaning of the word *sens*, which can be translated as sense, meaning, or direction. It also should be noted that this ambiguity between sense and direction is fully intended by Merleau-Ponty's title of the 1948 collection *Sens et non-sens*, which is as much about "meaning" as it is about the idea of a dialectical direction versus a merely contingent nature of history. The particular river/expression metaphor can be found at *AD*, 44/28.

historical background which we did not choose; and our behavior toward others is dictated by our role as 'Aryan,' Jewish, French, or German. (*GL*, 254/144)

Our actions are always those of a situated being, and yet they are always a choice of taking up the past and that situation in a particular way within the possibilities available. Indeed, our open nature of being expressive bodies first grounds Merleau-Ponty's somewhat particular understanding of a Marxist humanism. Merleau-Ponty suggests that the anti-Semite could not commit the acts of torture against these real persons if he "truly saw them" (*GL*, 252/143). That is, if he saw them as human beings, as the expressive being that is the underlying and essential possibility of the "roles" indicated in the passage just cited. In fact, in *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Merleau-Ponty defines a human being as a "living subject, man as creativity, as a person trying to endow his life with form, loving, hating, creating or not creating works of art, having or not having children" (*PhP*, 210/199). Indeed, as Sonia Kruks argues, human existence is a fundamental "capacity for transcendence," and "we create meanings only to continually pass beyond them."³²¹ The anti-Semite must be "mystified" by the myth of "the Jew," and be acting against this myth, and so the expression of anti-Semitism is a false or mystified expression. The anti-Semite "struggles with dream figures," and through the concrete bodies that are reduced by this mystification to being merely external expressions of some supposed noxious essence, his or her "blows fall on living faces" (*GL*, 252/143). The illusion does not begin from individuals nor does the action aim at individuals, because individuals are not reducible to an essence in this way. As expressive beings, Merleau-Ponty's understanding of individuals is that they always overflow any determination that we may give of them, because they are essentially open trajectories of creative expression. Until we establish a community that respects our expressive nature, that removes the mystifications that fail to allow us to be expressive beings together, that is, a politics of the logic of expression, then "the life of society will remain a dialogue and a battle between phantoms—in which real tears and real blood suddenly start to flow" (*GL*, 144/254).

As expressive and embodied subjects, we are already essentially in relation and hence responsible to and for each other, even though our actions might be mystified by these phantoms. And the most pervasive mystification is precisely the one that assumes the pure and separable ideal subject. Merleau-Ponty characterizes this false view of history and of historical subjects as a Cartesian politics, a politics of *survol*. Such a politics assumes that there exists a free and pure mind, and thus remains blind to

³²¹ Kruks, "Philosophy of History," 73.

the breakdown of the interiority-exteriority distinction as demonstrated in the essential *empiètement* of expression. In other words, a Cartesian politics is blind to the logic of expression as the creative taking up of the past towards the future, and the expressive body that does not *have* a mind, but *is* itself the “Objective Spirit” of an intersubjective reality (*GL*, 257/146). My words accomplish the thoughts of my interlocutor, my gestures reframe and reshape her landscape, and the mere presence of my body is enough to dramatically affect the very possibilities of her actions. Human being, then, is essentially *empiètement*.

In addition to being forced to see the impossibility of renouncing one’s role in society, because even the decision to not get involved is a manner of acquiescence, “*La guerre a eu lieu*” also invokes a responsibility for the consequences of our actions. “We have been led,” argues Merleau-Ponty, “to take upon ourselves and consider as our own not only our intentions—what our actions mean for us—but also the external consequences of these actions, what they mean in an historical context” (*GL*, 256/145). Merleau-Ponty contends that a Cartesian politics would respond by suggesting that such an account of responsibility is only for heroes, and how many of us are heroes? Every person compromises their integrity to some extent, everyone fails to avert or safeguard all of their expressions against every possible violence, and this morality would only lead us to “renounce every transaction” (*GL*, 257/146). Who are we to judge people according to impossible standards, and wouldn’t this just promote a total lack of engagement?

Merleau-Ponty takes this criticism to be moving in the very direction that he wants to take us, namely, toward rejecting a “pure” morality and embracing the exigent reality of situated responsibility. Being engaged in or attempting to stand outside of our historical reality are both manners of living and thus of being mired in a situation. By staying in Paris during the Occupation, “one is compromised,” because one has then to negotiate between passive collaboration and active resistance in every action. By fleeing the country “one is also compromised,” even if not directly, by conceding the ground and thus having a responsibility for the “ravages of the Occupation” (*GL*, 259/146-47). In short, “*personne n’a les mains propres* [no one’s hands are clean]” (*GL*, 259/147).³²² With this insight, Merleau-Ponty, making use of an image that Sartre would immortalize in a theatri-

³²² As Merleau-Ponty discusses in this passage, not even is Martel’s suicide upon the capture of Paris an escape from implication in the situation. Merleau-Ponty continues to struggle in his work with this impossible and sometimes unbearable responsibility in his discussion of Nizan in his late 1960 *Préface* to the collection *Signes*. Nevertheless, in the *Préface* he concludes that the “remedy does not lie in rebellion, but in unremitting *virtù*,” a nod to his reading of Machiavelli that we will take up in the next section. See *Préface*, 61/35.

cal piece a few years later,³²³ re-orient his philosophy according to an image that was primarily latent to this point. He now understands that the dismissal of a logic of purity entails the re-conception of his ontology of expressive bodies via the images of transgression, intrusion, encroachment [*empiètement*], and violence. The person who claims to speak about morality tacitly claims to stand above the messy reality of the world, but “people do not have that freedom” (*GL*, 259/147). Since this moral purity assumes a division between what is interior and what is exterior, between the *for itself* and the *in itself*, we can see that this account emerges precisely from Merleau-Ponty’s conclusions in *Phénoménologie de la perception*. “We are,” argues Merleau-Ponty, “in the world, mingled with it [*mêlé avec lui*], compromised with it” (*GL*, 259/147). My freedom and my expressions are bound up with the freedoms and the responses of the other, who exists nowhere else than in the world as well, and with whom we continue to sustain the potential violence of our possibilities. “Freedom exists in contact with the world, not outside it” (*GL*, 261/148).

Merleau-Ponty ends this short piece with a call to a humanism that is able to endure the failure of eternal norms and essences, that can stand against the contingency of history by making this contingency its very core, and that can properly account for a responsibility in the complex interconnections of morals, doctrines, thoughts, customs, laws, works, and words—all which express each other in the world itself without any reference to a pure realm of meaning or rationality (*GL*, 269/152). He believes at this early stage to have found such a humanism in Marxism. In *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Merleau-Ponty interprets Marxism as offering the possibility of a theory of history as “ambiguous, but this ambiguity cannot be made a matter of reproach, for it is inherent in things” (*PhP*, 211/199). As such, Marxism here seems to be the privileged solution to our situation because it gives a theory of *coexistence* in the contingent nature of history.³²⁴ Economic factors are not a pure causality, but, as Kruks argues, they “offer the ‘historical anchorage’ to other phenomena.”³²⁵

Thus, an existential understanding of history would have to account for free human actions from *within* the situated context of a multiplicity of *motivations*. As Merleau-Ponty says, “there is no history but for a subject

³²³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les mains sales* (Paris: Broché, 1948).

³²⁴ At least, of course, in Merleau-Ponty’s existential and phenomenological reading of Marxism. For an excellent discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s reading of the early, or “existential,” Hegel versus the later, or “textbook,” Hegel, see Kruks’ discussion in *PH*, *passim*, or Merleau-Ponty’s articles in Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et non-sens*, particularly “L’Existentialisme chez Hegel”.

³²⁵ Kruks, “Philosophy of History,” 79.

who lives it, and no subject but one historically situated" (*PhP*, 212/200). What he discovers in his first explicit foray into the political, then, is the radical contingency of action and the very difficult conclusion that it implies, namely, that "[b]y action, I make myself responsible for everything; I accept the aid of external accidents just as I accept their betrayals" (*IL*, 116/72). The war, then, *has taken place*. We are no longer the same, the world is no longer the same, and in the face of the contingent nature of history, no one's hands are clean.

– §2. –

Humanism and Contingency: The Accidental Traitor

Only children imagine that their lives are separable from the lives of others, that their responsibility is limited to what they themselves have done, and that there is a boundary between good and evil. A Marxist knows very well that every human undertaking polarizes interests not all of which can be answered for. He simply tries to act in such a way that in all his confusion the forces of progress might prevail. In a world of struggle no one can flatter himself that he has clean hands.

– Merleau-Ponty³²⁶

In his 1947 collection of essays, *Humanisme et terreur*, Merleau-Ponty turns to emphasize these aspects of violence and contingency. As the passage above indicates, Merleau-Ponty again invokes the image of unclean hands as a way of characterizing a situated and impure humanism. Citing some of Merleau-Ponty's unpublished lecture notes from 1946-47, Saint Aubert comments that the notions of "*se salir*" [to get oneself dirty] and that of "*empiéter*" [to encroach] emerge as synonymous (*ESA1*, 37-39). They become guiding images for the essential nature of *coexistence*. As Taylor Carman notes, even the title is meant to indicate that there can be no rigid distinction between humanism and violence, and the text continues Merleau-Ponty's demand that we turn away from "principles" and judge nations based on the actual relations they establish between citizens.³²⁷ Merleau-Ponty appears to favor Marxism here because of its pragmatic relation to violence and its recognition of violence as only justified insofar as it moves toward a classless situation. For Merleau-Ponty, the colonial system and the class system perpetuated by capitalist societies hide a structural violence behind the rhetoric of equality and democracy. Although very sympathetic to a Marxist interpretation of history in the 1940s, Merleau-Ponty never joined the Communist Party in France and never offered more than a "critical support" to actual commu-

³²⁶ *HT*, 64/59-60.

³²⁷ Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 158.

nist regimes.³²⁸ He was skeptical as to whether the Soviet Union represented the true humanistic potential of Marxism, and by 1952 he concluded that the USSR was no longer to be considered as pursuing Marxist goals.³²⁹ Indeed, by the early 1950s, he began to refer to Hegel and Marx as the “museum” of philosophy and in 1960 as “classics” (*IL*, 132/82; *Préface*, 23/11). In other words, these are texts to be studied for the ideas that can be taken further, taken up again in a “fresh momentum of thought” (*PhP*, 163/150), rather than as statements or presentations of an eternal truth. Let us return to Merleau-Ponty’s engagement with Marxism, as we can see the paradoxical logic of expression again at work in the movement of his emerging political thought.

Humanisme et terreur famously centers on Arthur Koestler’s novel, *Darkness at Noon*, in which the author depicts the Moscow Trials. The novel critiques Nicolai Bukharin (through the character Rubashov), who was a Soviet official executed as a result of having pleaded guilty to treason and spying. Koestler was a member of the German Communist Party until 1938, when he became disillusioned due to the Moscow Trials and the conflict in Spain. He took asylum in France, where he wrote this novel. Although *Humanisme et terreur* is commonly read as a critique of Koestler and a defense of communism, Merleau-Ponty’s position is in fact more complicated. As Kerry Whiteside notes, Merleau-Ponty carefully read and annotated the 1945 English version that preceded the French publication, and one can find many similar views on the situation between Koestler and Merleau-Ponty. Whiteside goes on to demonstrate that the novel itself is ambiguous, that there was no “one” meaning of *Darkness at Noon*, but rather a metastable field of potential crystallizations. Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s interest was “from the start not polemical, but genuinely philosophical.”³³⁰

Darkness at Noon depicts Rubashov struggling between two ethical perspectives: an individual versus a collective ethics. Having pursued a life for the collective, Rubashov discovers an individualism in prison, and yet eventually concedes and confesses falsely to the charges of treason. The reception of the novel was strikingly ambiguous – it was read as both a strident critique of communism and party loyalty *and* a clear defense of a communal ethics valorizing communism. As Whiteside writes, “curious ambiguity: ... depending on which morality its readers found most persuasive, the morality of individual worth or the morality of social utility,

³²⁸ Kruks, “Philosophy of History,” 71.

³²⁹ See, in particular, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “L’U.R.S.S. et les camps,” in *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003). Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The U.S.S.R. and the Camps,” in *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

³³⁰ Whiteside, *Merleau-Ponty and the Foundations*, 169.

Darkness at Noon could be understood as an apology for the revolution or a blistering indictment of it."³³¹ Merleau-Ponty, however, reminds his reader in the very opening lines of *Humanisme et terreur* that each "side forgets part of the truth about violence." He champions the book for its ambiguity, and his polemic is properly understood as against the attempt to fix just one interpretation, namely, the anti-communist interpretation that was winning out in France.³³² This interpretation is best understood through the logic of expression in political action. In particular, Merleau-Ponty wants to account for how Bukharin can confess to the actions of spying or sabotage while consistently denying that he is a "spy, traitor, saboteur, and terrorist" (*HT*, 49/45).

According to Lydia Goehr, Merleau-Ponty takes Bukharin to be the "intellectual" in contrast to the politician, and this helps to explain his vacillation.³³³ This glimmer of ambiguity introduced into the situation of guilt by the hesitations of the intellectual that drew Merleau-Ponty's attention. As Merleau-Ponty writes, the greatness of the book is that "it makes us see that Rubashov does not know how to evaluate his own conduct" (*HT*, 29/xxxvii). Moreover, as Claude Lefort reminds us, Merleau-Ponty claims that Bukharin's seemingly contradictory gestures are linked to the fact that all parties involved at the trial shared the "idea of a revolutionary politics," which "supposes in effect that at any given time, there is one, and only one, alternative to advancing the movement towards the goal of the classless state."³³⁴ In this interpretation of Bukharin, there is an objective answer to whether or not his actions were revolutionary or counterrevolutionary; the action chosen "burdens itself with the weight of its consequences" (*CA*, 81/361). From within this accepted "objectivist" framework, the ambiguity of Bukharin's confession reveals the consequences of our historical situatedness, namely, that we have a responsibility not merely for the intentions of our actions, but also for the consequences of them.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

³³² In fact, this interpretation is found again in Taylor Carman's presentation of the book as depicting Bukharin as a victim of misguided party loyalty, especially when Carman goes on to champion liberal values as solving the ambiguity, see *MP*, 158 and 162, and our critique below.

³³³ Lydia Goehr, "Understanding the Engaged Philosopher: On Politics, Philosophy, and Art," in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman and Mark B. Hansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 329.

³³⁴ Lefort, *Sur une colonne absente. Écrits autour de Merleau-Ponty*, 80. Translated as: Claude Lefort, "Thinking Politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman and Mark B. Hansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 361. Henceforth cited as *CA*.

Merleau-Ponty moves away from the objectivity of this account of history, but he nonetheless wants to make room for Bukharin's confession to make sense:

There is a sort of maleficence in history: it solicits men, tempts them so that they believe they are moving in its direction, and then suddenly it unmask, and events change and prove that there was another possibility. The men whom history abandons in this way and who see themselves simply as accomplices suddenly find themselves the instigators of a crime to which history has inspired them. And they are unable to look for excuses or to excuse themselves from even a part of the responsibility. (*HT*, 43/40)³³⁵

As expressive subjects we carry with us a non-explicit sense for the possibilities of action, and this is what Merleau-Ponty calls a "genius for ambiguity" (*PhP*, 230/220). We can see here a notion of a political competence for action within the ambiguity of history that is an expressive art, a "particular virtuosity that is the vocation of the political actor."³³⁶ Bukharin, too much of an intellectual, fails to find a fluency of action in the political landscape and cannot immediately perceive, as the political actor should, "the real significance and pattern in a given situation" (*HT*, 68/63). Bukharin thus fails to harmonize his praxis with the ambiguous movements of history.

His acquiescence to the charges brought against him is not a mere expression of party loyalty. History has moved forward without Bukharin; his "perhaps blameless intentions nonetheless proved culpable given their consequences."³³⁷ As Lefort notes, Bukharin's actions "have become treason," and that in the living through of the situation, that which "appears in the end to be a necessary decision was initially improvised, in confrontation or in struggle, in the absence of any objective guarantee, under threat of error, and moreover in response to so many varied contingencies that what was truly at stake was not even obvious" (*CA*, 81-82/362). No matter what the action, it is always a sedimentation and a negotiation with the complex systems from which it is motivated and into which it arrives. Its arrival, its entering into the field as a communication, is owed to action, expression, and hence is neither reducible to the outcome of a faceless causality nor the movement of impersonal forces.

We see here a political dramatization of the logic of expression: Bukharin's action was not taken up by the proletariat, and thus it is

³³⁵ This passage is cited by Goehr, "Understanding the Engaged Philosopher," 330.

³³⁶ Coole, "Politics and the Political," 83.

³³⁷ Goehr, "Understanding the Engaged Philosopher," 330.

judged to have been counter-revolutionary. In expression, the audience needs to be able to take up the expression of the artist, and if it cannot, then the act is meaningless. Or, alternatively, the expression can, through the accidents of its negotiation with its material and with the audience, fail to exhaust the initial impulse, an abortive expression that could indeed block future expressions, distract the audience, or end in an empty illusion. Here, the audience of the political act is the proletariat, and the value and meaning of the act depends upon how it sediments into the possibilities of the proletariat taking up a mutual recognition. In other words, the art of politics is the creation of "institution[s]." ³³⁸ As Lefort puts it: "From the moment his ideas failed to inscribe themselves in collective praxis, from the moment they were not taken up, expanded, transformed into demands, and failed to take on a social dimension, they were destined either to perish or to turn into opposition from the *outside*" (CA, 85/364).

Merleau-Ponty does not, however, suggest that the objective interpretation is correct. In the situation of coping with the complexities of engaged action, there is precisely no *discovery* of the right way, but rather, in successful action, a *creation* of the right way that will look like a discovery only *après coup*. As Merleau-Ponty says, following Marx, "men of honest intentions carry little weight in history where only deeds and their internal logic count for anything" (HT, 152/141). Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty, Bukharin's confession exemplifies the recognition that there is more at stake in the attribution of responsibility than intentions. There is something like an "historical responsibility." Bukharin "was willing to be held accountable not only for what he *intended to do*, but also for what he found he *had done* in light of subsequent events" (HT, 73/43). ³³⁹ Even the purely intentioned actor, due to lack of foresight, lack of information, or simply due to some accidental constellation of history, could intend the good of the revolution but nonetheless hurt the revolution. In this case, which Merleau-Ponty generalizes to all action, she must bear some responsibility for the reach of her actions, even when they have fallen into the milieu from the last limits of reasonable control she could have over them. And he adds to this that there is not just, objectively, a single best course; political action is always in negotiation with a complex layering of dimensions. This is the very difficult upshot of a proper accounting of historically situated beings caught in the obscurity and urgency of action.

The connection to expression should be made even further, particu-

³³⁸ This suggests Merleau-Ponty's important discussion of "institution" as "those events which sediment in me a meaning, not just as survivals or residues but as the invitation to a sequel, the demand for a future" RC, 61/108-09.

³³⁹ Passage cited by Whiteside, *Merleau-Ponty and the Foundations*, 175..

larly drawing on the idea of trajectory that we discussed above in our account of metaphor in Part II. Even if Merleau-Ponty wants to avoid a purely objective history, he is nonetheless drawn to Marxism as seeing some sense or reason in history. History is moving in a direction, for Merleau-Ponty, towards the overarching theme that he draws out of Marx, namely, the idea of a concrete humanism of mutual recognition. This is the necessity of the logic of the proletariat, agrees Merleau-Ponty at this stage, and he argues that the key to reaching this goal is understanding lived engagement with the ambiguity of history. Thus, Marxism is a “philosophy of history that reveals our historicity” (CA, 91/369). For the Merleau-Ponty of *Humanisme et terreur*, “[t]o the extent that Marxist politics finds an *anchoring* in proletarian existence, it gains rightful access to the truth” (CA, 92/369). As such, the Marxism that Merleau-Ponty is after in this early text is something like an indeterminate utopia. As Kruks explains: “[Merleau-Ponty’s] Marx avoids a reductive determinism, yet nevertheless offers a plausible sketch... towards a more human future.”³⁴⁰

Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s Marxism places a large emphasis on the logic of the proletariat, which he understands to harmonize directly with his own understanding of intersubjectivity. “If [Marxism] accords a privilege to the proletariat,” argues Merleau-Ponty, “it does so because on the basis of the internal logic of its condition, and its least settled mode of existence—that is, apart from any messianic illusion—the proletarians ‘who are not gods’ are the only ones in a position to realize humanity” (HT, 214/111). This idea of realizing, or achieving humanity, then, is the foundation for Merleau-Ponty’s humanism. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty thinks that even if Marxist humanism is not expressed in actual institutions, it nonetheless remains the only critique of all other definitions of humanism. But as Lefort stresses, in *Humanisme et terreur*, Merleau-Ponty makes the faithful leap between the claim that “Marxism is not definitely false” to the claim that “it may in fact be true,” and thus maintains something of a *telos* of history towards a universal humanism (see CA, 96/372).

³⁴⁰ Kruks, “Philosophy of History,” 79.

History, Freedom, and Violence *Empiètement* and Political Virtue

We do not have a choice between purity and violence but between different kinds of violence. Inasmuch as we are incarnate beings, violence is our lot. There is no persuasion even without seduction, or in the last analysis, contempt. [...] What matters and what we have to discuss is not violence but its sense or its future. It is a law of human action that the present encroaches [enjamber] upon the future, the self upon other people. This intrusion is not only a fact of political life, it also happens in private life.

– Merleau-Ponty³⁴¹

The importance of Merleau-Ponty's political philosophy should not be confused with his engagement with Marxism as outlined just above. This was certainly an historical necessity and, as Lydia Goehr notes, the question of whether a "humanistic Marxism could really be sustained in the light of a rejection of its reified, concrete expression in Stalinism was one of the most urgent questions for all Marxist philosophers of the period."³⁴² Beyond the role of contingency that we have been exploring above, there is a second aspect to the work on history and Marxism that we have already begun to see, but that must be made more clear here, namely, the explicit exploration of the violence of intersubjectivity. Indeed, as Sonia Kruks argues, the more general point of *Humanisme et terreur* is that "individuals who pursue moral ends — be they liberal ideals of justice and freedom, or the Marxian goal of a non-exploitative society— cannot avoid violent consequences stemming from their actions."³⁴³ And in fact, this point emerges directly from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological work. As Diana Coole writes: "It is because actors are embodied and intersubjective ... that politics is an ineluctably unstable realm where violence and encroachment proliferate but where mutual recognition and partial agreement are also possible. This is why politics is so important

³⁴¹ *HT*, 214/109.

³⁴² Goehr, "Understanding the Engaged Philosopher," 328.

³⁴³ Sonia Kruks, *The Political Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty* (Brighton, UK: Harvester, 1981), 81.

and the stakes are so high.”³⁴⁴ Our embodiment is already a form of communication, and we are part of an intersubjective and intercorporeal world.

As Merleau-Ponty realizes in this overtly political phase of his work, nothing of this intersubjective situation guarantees a peaceful coexistence or suggests a tending towards more freedoms. Our embodied nature is violence and encroachment. In other words, whether it be the speech or the mere presence of an expressive body in my field of perception, my landscape shifts dramatically. I am my body, as a material expression of my being towards the world, and as much as I am on the outside, the other intrudes upon me on my inside. As we concluded in the previous chapter, the “truth” of solipsism is that I am a trajectory of a life that is my historicity, and I am not forever locked-up and hermetically sealed-off from the other. Real communication happens, which is not a coding and decoding of ideas through language, but an expressive activity that materially brings together our histories and our worlds. This, however, is in some sense an encroachment, a violence.

Thus, it is important to understand what Merleau-Ponty means by violence. As Kruks argues, violence for Merleau-Ponty is any form of objectification, whether this is physical violence or exploitive political systems.³⁴⁵ In fact, it seems that Coole gets closer to the point when she argues that Merleau-Ponty has a “broad conception” of violence: “perceptual and textual interpretation [count] as acts of violence in the sense that violence might involve carving a new layer of significance out of existence or reconfiguring some accepted meaning or habit.”³⁴⁶ As such, violence is the intersubjective condition of my expressive being and can be either creative or destructive.

As Saint Aubert has established convincingly, Merleau-Ponty’s increasing usage of the family of terms around *empiètement* (*enjambement*, *intrusion*, etc.) during the late 1940s is specifically linked to political instances where the intention or means to political progress is violent (*ESAI*, 41-43). Moreover, the necessity of *empiètement* is linked, as we see in the epigraph above, to our embodiment. What the experience of the Occupation taught Merleau-Ponty was that we are always mixed up with concrete history and relations, that only a falsely “pure” morality could enjoin us to remain pure, to keep our hands clean. What he suggested in 1945 was a sort of “vulgar [or popular] immoralism” (*GL*, 259/147). The necessity of trying to think about morality in some sense resulted from

³⁴⁴ Diana Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics after Anti-Humanism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 140.

³⁴⁵ Kruks, *Political Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, 80.

³⁴⁶ Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics*, 142.

traditional morality requiring some pure separation from the world and some absolute respect for the autonomy of the other. The essential fact of encroachment in our very concrete and intersubjective embodiment reveals, “that it is impossible to respect the autonomy of the other” (*ESA1*, 40). The “*Noli me tangere*” of popular morality is based on an illusion of an “un-corruptible” core or interior existence. As I have argued above, with Merleau-Ponty we can no longer talk about a pure and isolated interior; consciousness happens in the weighty and material world into which it paradoxically arrives, and this original engagement of consciousness in the world is what makes the question of violence necessary (*ESA1*, 44; *HT*, 212). Expressive embodiment is the essence of human nature, and any attempt to stand outside and speak of a pure morality that would remain above the fray is, to refer to his characterization of the project of a universal language, “a revolt against” humanity in its existing state and a refusal to depend upon the confusion of everyday action (*PM*, 10/5).

It should be conceded that *Humanisme et terreur* is a flawed book with regard to the superficial project of understanding Bukharin’s action. As Taylor Carman has argued, neither Koestler nor Merleau-Ponty capture Bukharin’s actual intention, which was rather an attempt “to use his trial as a platform from which to attack the regime.”³⁴⁷ But the political thought emerging in *Humanisme et terreur* should not be wholly rejected based upon an empirical error. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty’s engagement is already focused on Koestler’s novel as much as it is on the actual transcripts of the Moscow Trials, and the question is never one of clearing the name of a particular man, Bukharin, but rather of determining the “nature of political action, the conditions and scope of responsibility, the meaning of guilt...”³⁴⁸ As such, it is important to follow Saint Aubert in extracting from the text some of the key gestures that are not as definitively tied to the trials or the particular historical difficulties of the immediate post-war analysis of Marxism. As Saint Aubert argues, I think rightly, “Merleau-Ponty’s anthropological approach to violence, disguised behind the desire to ‘understand Marxist violence,’ is thus largely independent of the circumstances that serve as the pretext of *Humanisme et terreur*” (*ESA1*, 44; *HT*, 218).

The critiques against Merleau-Ponty’s text were swift and wide-ranging. He was called an immoralist, a Machiavellian, or an apologist for communist violence.³⁴⁹ Drawing an important connection here, Saint

³⁴⁷ Carman, *MP*, 161.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 162. Although Carman admits that Merleau-Ponty’s larger political thought is nonetheless importantly demonstrated by this text, he dismisses the arguments in a manner I will respond to just below.

³⁴⁹ His frustration with his readers appears in the *Préface* to the text in which he responds

Aubert shows how a short text on Machiavelli serves as an initial response to his critics. The 1949 “*Note sur Machiavel*” does not mention the Moscow Trials, nor does it discuss at length any other contemporary examples, showing that Merleau-Ponty realized the engagement with Bukharin simply ended up distracting the reception from his deeper theoretical points. What we find in this text is an attempt to embrace, again, the difficult account of morality that recognizes the impossibility of purity, a concrete morality in the fray, and this is attempted through a very personal reading of Machiavelli’s understanding of political *virtù*. Referring to some unpublished materials, Saint Aubert shows how Merleau-Ponty, feeling largely misunderstood, adopts the indefinite pronoun, offers a non-scientific reading of Machiavelli, and returns repeatedly to the themes of his own political engagement. It thus seems reasonable to understand this intervention as Merleau-Ponty painting “a self-portrait disguised by lending to Machiavelli his own face” (*ESA1*, 45):

How could he have been understood? He writes against good feelings in politics, but he is also against violence. Since he has the nerve to speak of *virtue* at the very moment he is sorely wounding ordinary morality, he disconcerts the believers in Law as he does those who believe that the State is the Law. For he describes that knot of collective life in which pure morality can be cruel and pure politics requires something like a morality. We would put up with a cynic who denies values or an innocent who sacrifices action. We do not like this difficult thinker without idols.³⁵⁰

Merleau-Ponty sees himself taking up this very position of being a “difficult thinker without idols.” Such a thinker begins from the recognition that human relations are essentially struggle and violence and realizes that the justification of power is always precarious and threatened. This opening clearly places the cynic versus the moralist, and indicates his own position of trying to find something of a moral position between the two. As such, he specifically turns the tables on his own detractors (*ESA1*, 45) and, dismissing the abstract or false humanism of the tradition, tries to sketch out a “serious humanism” somewhere between a political moralism and a mere political opportunism (*Note*, 363/223).

This text itself immediately refers us to Merleau-Ponty’s own understanding of intersubjectivity. The relation between humans is not “the

to the initial critiques he had received upon the publication of the individual essays in *Les Temps Modernes*.

³⁵⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “*Note sur Machiavel*,” in *Signes* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2003), 343. Translated as: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “*Note on Machiavelli*,” in *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 211. Henceforth cited as *Note*.

relationships of sheer force that hold between objects" (*Note*, 345/212). Because we are embodied and expressive beings, there is an immediate communication between our bodies that does not have to pass from an immaterial mind to another through the coding and decoding of interpretation. The other encroaches upon me, but not because I guess that they are there behind their body through some analogical process. The other is there as soon as I see her:

After all, a face is only shadows, lights, and colors; yet suddenly the executioner, because this face has grimaced in a certain way, mysteriously experiences a slackening—*another anguish* has relayed his own. A sentence is never anything but a statement ... And yet when the victim admits defeat, the cruel man perceives another life beating through those words; he finds *another himself*. (*Note*, 344-45/212)

This inherent intersubjectivity of the political situation needs to be accounted for by a proper humanism and, thus, by a theory of expression and communication. Moreover, Machiavelli argues that sheer force and political ruse must be balanced in order to govern the community, and Merleau-Ponty understands this to be a recognition of the intersubjective makeup of a community that is not merely a totality of rational minds. The prince must be able to negotiate the reality of intersubjectivity, because "there is no power which has an absolute basis. There is only a crystallization of opinion, which tolerates power, accepting it as acquired" (*Note*, 345/212). These notions of crystallization and the "acquired" are directly drawn from the logic of expression, which indicates an action that is between pure repetition and pure creation. For Merleau-Ponty, pure violence "can only be episodic," it has to "procure the deep-seated agreement which constitutes power" (*Note*, 347/213-14). This structure of an initial constitution of power that must sediment into the institution of the State is directly analogous to the role of expressive speaking, when successful, taking hold in the constituted language. This is not to justify all uses of political power, but it is to recognize the art of politics as an expressive activity. Making the connection between expression and political action explicit, Bernard Dauenhauer writes: "genuine politics [for Merleau-Ponty] requires not merely the acknowledgement of the weight of the determinate political situation, the language in which one finds oneself located, but also the risky endeavor to transform that situation, to revivify it by the exercise of *virtù*, the uttering of a new speech."³⁵¹

According to Merleau-Ponty, the insight one gains into humanism by

³⁵¹ Bernard Dauenhauer, "Merleau-Ponty's Political Thought: Its Nature and Its Challenge," in *Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Ted Toadvine (London: Routledge, 2006), 35.

reading Machiavelli is that he introduces us “to the milieu proper to politics and allows us to estimate the task we are faced with if we want to bring some truth to it” (Note, 347-48/214). Machiavelli reveals that power is not about birthright, moral superiority, or even force, but rather about *technique*. This is not a technical procedure in the sense of an algorithmic or linear application, but rather an expressive operation that repeats again the paradoxical logic of expression. Just as speaking is a constant negotiation between the sedimented language, the urgency of the situation, and the retroactive effect of how one’s words are taken up, just as all human action could be characterized as drawing upon a “genius for ambiguity,” so too must the political actor possess an expressive art. Beginning from the fact of communal life and the threat from the outside, *The Prince* is not a handbook for deceptive politics, but rather the outline of the conditions “for a power which does not mystify, that is, participation in a common situation” (Note, 350/215). The result, then, is a political immoralism grounded in embodied intersubjectivity and the necessary violence of relatedness.³⁵²

Merleau-Ponty admits that such a reading is a development of Machiavelli’s thought, but he also insists that it is nonetheless a faithful one. He rejects Machiavelli’s first defense of this immoralism, namely, that “a man who wants to be perfectly honest among dishonest people can not fail to perish sooner or later.”³⁵³ This weak argument does not seem to Merleau-Ponty to be the source of Machiavelli’s position, since it places all the emphasis on immorality in terms of its expediency. Merleau-Ponty extracts a deeper argument: “in historical action, goodness is sometimes catastrophic and cruelty less cruel” (Note, 350/216). In other words, Merleau-Ponty finds his own notion of responsibility in the complex situation of historical forces prefigured here in Machiavelli’s understanding of the use of violence. This complex historical situation leads Merleau-Ponty to follow Machiavelli in claiming that the prince ought not only to act according to “goodness, clemency, piety, loyalty, and justice,” but “furthermore, he should have all these good qualities.”³⁵⁴ Yet such a list of

³⁵² This recalls one of the epigraphs used for the entire dissertation: “Compassion is the contagion, the contact of being with one another in this turmoil. Compassion is not altruism, it is the disturbance [trembling] of violent relatedness,” Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel*, 12/xiii. We are beginning to see now just how harmonious the political and aesthetic thought of Nancy is with Merleau-Ponty. We return to this connection in the following chapter on Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics.

³⁵³ These are Machiavelli’s words, quoted by Merleau-Ponty at Note, 350/215. See further *The Prince*, Chapter XV.

³⁵⁴ Cited by Merleau-Ponty on Note, 352/217. See further, *The Prince*, Chapter XVII. Emphasis added by Merleau-Ponty.

virtues cannot be universal or eternal, nor can they shackle the political actor. Just as we could never reduce art to merely a technique, since the genius of the artist is to know when to suspend these techniques in order to succeed in expression, here too such a list is only provisional. Given the messy reality of politics, the prince must also know when to suspend these qualities, when to become the fox or the lion. The prince must remain free, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, “even in respect to his virtues” (*Note*, 353/217). As Machiavelli says, the prince should remain “sufficiently master of himself to show their contraries when it is expedient” (*Note*, 353/217).³⁵⁵ This offers, according to Merleau-Ponty, a “political precept that could well be the rule for a true morality as well” (*Note*, 354/217). Political action, seen here in the model of expression, thus demands to be understood as the creative operation that takes up the past and the present towards the open future, and Merleau-Ponty is struggling to establish an understanding of responsibility that is between pure repetition and pure creation.

Merleau-Ponty’s Machiavelli, then, does not promote governance through “lies, terror, and trickery.” Rather, “he tries to define a political *virtue*, which for the prince is to *speak to* these mute spectators gathered around him and caught up in the dizziness of communal life” (*Note*, 353/217, emphasis added). In other words, the prince must express himself and the community in such a way that it is taken up by the community, and thereby creates that community in the very same moment as the group takes up his expression into their own potentials. This paradoxical response to the community that will exist only after its expression is precisely the logic of expression we have already outlined in Merleau-Ponty’s work. Such a morality and politics would combine both the “contingency and irrationality in the world with a taste for the consciousness or freedom in man” (*Note*, 354/218). Virtue is, for Machiavelli, action in the face of historical chance and, as such, virtue exists only in community. In other words, such an understanding of virtue is “equally remote from solitude,” the idea of a pure and isolated rational source for morality, “and docility,” the cynical notion of a world without any value or action as the mere effect of historical forces (*Note*, 355/218).

And so, asks Merleau-Ponty, “[w]hat humanism is more radical than this one?” (*Note*, 356/219). Machiavelli is reproached, says Merleau-Ponty, for his idea that “history is a struggle and politics a relationship to men rather than to principles. And yet is anything more certain?” (*Note*, 357/218). Just as we saw Merleau-Ponty enjoin us to embrace the Cartesian criticism that his theory of subjectivity implies a difficult morality, here too we again find the same gesture. For Merleau-Ponty, the task of

³⁵⁵ See also, *The Prince*, Chapter XVII.

finding a difficult or serious humanism in the face of the complex and compromised reality of intersubjectivity without idols is a task that cannot be shirked. This is fully in harmony with the recognition that principles in themselves commit us to no virtue, and that principles are, like the written was for Plato's Socrates, pharmacological, that is, they are not inherently good or evil in themselves. Just like a drug, they may turn out to be a remedy or a poison depending on the environment into which they are introduced or the manner in which they are administered. Thus, one cannot stop with merely having values. Rather we must take up the difficult task of *expressing* these values in order that they take root in our community – for “it is not just in the past that we see republics refuse citizenship to their colonies, kill in the name of freedom, and take the offensive in the name of law” (Note, 359/221). There is, then, an entire political philosophy and a nascent ethical theory emerging from Merleau-Ponty's theory of expression as it inserts itself into his understanding of the expressive nature of action.

Although up to this point, Merleau-Ponty seems content to leave the positive content of a political philosophy to the historical actors, here he begins to look for a more decisive approach. “[Machiavelli] was not wrong to insist upon the problem of power,” recognizes Merleau-Ponty, “but he was satisfied with briefly evoking a power which would not be unjust; he did not seek very energetically to define it” (Note, 359-60/221). Merleau-Ponty argues that what is missing is an ability to choose a power structure or governing technique that could “elevate *virtue* above opportunism in a decisive way” (Note, 361/222). Surrounded by a society so deeply divided between governing and governed, Machiavelli's *The Prince* hardly seeks outside this paradigm. This is why the project of a universal humanism remains, according to Merleau-Ponty, merely nascent in his text. Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty understands the underlying “real humanism” along the lines of a Marxist humanism of universal recognition, and this again connects us to Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the implicit tasks of the proletariat, which are the development of a mutual recognition amongst the exploited and the development of a new relationship between power and those governed. The event of 1917 was a decisive moment, but the ideals of the revolution quickly re-descended into traditional power structures and hierarchy.

Merleau-Ponty concludes by noting that the problem of a real humanism remains still intact a hundred years after Marx. Nevertheless, we are now in a position to properly understand what such a humanism entails: not a “philosophy of the inner man,” but rather “a philosophy which confronts the relationship of man to man and the constitution of a common situation and a common history between men as a problem” (Note, 363/223). And we can scarcely miss the return to the autobiographi-

cal tone at the end of the essay when Merleau-Ponty writes: “[a]nd in this perspective the repudiation of Machiavelli which is so common today takes on a disturbing significance: it is the decision not to know the tasks of a true humanism” (*Note*, 364/223). This is, as we have seen, a recognition of the expressive and intersubjective nature of human action. Merleau-Ponty seeks a “tough politics” that “loves men and freedom more truly than the professed humanist”:

Considering this history in which there are so many disorders, so many oppressions, so many unexpected things and turnings-back, he sees nothing which predestines it for a final harmony. He evokes the idea of a fundamental element of chance in history, an adversity which hides from the grasp of the strongest and the most intelligent of men. And if he finally exorcises this evil spirit, it is through no transcendent principle but simply through recourse to the givens of our condition. (*Note*, 354/217-18)

In addition to this focus on Marxism and violence, the period after the publication of *Phénoménologie de la perception* saw Merleau-Ponty take up a broader study of the question of expression, specifically in the fields of cinema, painting, literature, and linguistics. This study, suggests Saint Aubert, “directly benefited from the interrogations raised by the experience of the war and the Occupation, and the analyses of violence — *empiètement* or *enjambement* — as the fundamental expressivity of human being” (*ESA1*, 53). Saint Aubert argues that the new figure of *empiètement* thus comes out of the real experience of human conflict. He is certainly correct that this experience helped to bring this set of concepts into focus, but as we have already shown, the logic of expression guides even Merleau-Ponty’s earliest works. Since expression is the name Merleau-Ponty gives to any action that is a taking up of the past towards a future and the encroachment of the speaker on the listener. The implication of a notion of responsibility for our expression in the complex situation of an act that is both free and determined can be seen from the beginning.

We are also now in a position to defend Merleau-Ponty’s early politics from criticisms recently offered by Taylor Carman. Carman contends that Merleau-Ponty is committed to a direction in history that moves towards a privileged state, which is an account of history that does not appear to have any justification from within history itself. Secondly, he argues that although Merleau-Ponty offers a stringent critique of liberalism in practice – of the use of a certain “liberal mystification” that covers over the concrete violence that is the very opposite of its professed ideals – Merleau-Ponty’s text does not offer a critique of liberal principles *in themselves*. Perhaps, he argues, there is nothing wrong with liberal

principles, only with our current failures to live up to them.³⁵⁶

That Merleau-Ponty seems to suggest a rational direction to history in this text is surely substantiated in the explicit Marxist sounding claims that punctuate *Humanisme et terreur*. And yet, as Lefort stresses, “[w]hat Merleau-Ponty sought in Marxism was the idea of a logic composed of contingency, the principle of a *determinate indeterminacy* that he believed could be found in the proletariat, the inscription within history of a fertile ambiguity that opened onto the truth” (CA, 95/372). Thus, even in this earlier text, Merleau-Ponty guards the space that would allow something between an irrationalism of history and a determinism of privileged outcome. Consider the following passage in which Merleau-Ponty clearly distances his understanding of history’s direction from a deductive process:

When people demand a ‘solution’ [to the dialectic of history], they imply that the world and human coexistence are comparable to a geometry problem in which there is an unknown but not an indeterminate factor and where what one is looking for is related to the data and their possible relationships in terms of a rule. But the question that we are faced with today is precisely that of knowing whether humanity is simply a *problem* of that sort. (HT, 203/186)³⁵⁷

We have already established Merleau-Ponty’s distinction, drawn from Gabriel Marcel, between a *problem* and a *mystery*. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “a problem is a question I pose to myself and then resolve by considering different givens which are external to me,” while in mysteries, “the one who poses them is also engaged. This person is not a spectator in relation to the problem, but is rather caught up in the matter” (Ex, 255/153). When Merleau-Ponty considers the question of history, it is not from an external perspective of determining the outcome as if to a problem with defined givens. This is why Lefort can write: “We cannot think history without thinking ourselves situated in history, and without preserving a memory of the mystery of our situation” (CA, 101/376). History, for Merleau-Ponty, is a progression, not like perception towards the truth of the object, but like expression towards the forever-open project of bringing to expression our experience that, in its rich silence, destines the failure of the very movement of which it is the catalyst. “The idea of a *complete* expression is nonsensical,” and the same would thus be true for history (IL, 70/43). As Merleau-Ponty writes later, “[t]he illusion was only to precipitate into a historical fact — the proletariat’s birth and growth — history’s total meanings, to believe that history itself organized its own

³⁵⁶ For Carman’s criticisms, see Carman, *MP*, Chapter 5.

³⁵⁷ Cited by Lefort, *CA*, 97/373-74.

recovery" (AD, 284/205).³⁵⁸ This passage, coupled with the idea of history being a mystery rather than a problem, suggests that the logic of expression is again driving Merleau-Ponty's thought. For Merleau-Ponty, the problem is simply the Marxist claim to be able to read the truth and future of human history in the proletariat (CA, 98/374).

We can also respond to the second half of this critique from Carman, namely, that the principles of liberalism are fine in themselves and that the problem lies merely with our attempts to live up to them. Carman admits that since principles are always abstract they are thus "always vulnerable to hypocrisy."³⁵⁹ However, although Merleau-Ponty does attack the examples of violence in capitalist or liberal states as being perpetuated due to the mystification or justification offered by the high-flying ideals of liberalism, his critique does not restrict itself to identifying hypocrisy. Merleau-Ponty's attack is on the idea of "timeless" or eternal principles that can stand outside the movement of history and concrete experience. This is a fundamental Merleau-Pontian theme, and this again points us towards why Merleau-Ponty emphasizes not the predetermined role of the proletariat, but the potential that can be seen in its internal logic. We must remember that for Merleau-Ponty, history begins with the concrete relations between humans. Insofar as liberal ideals assume a place outside of the concrete evolution of the relations between humans, they will fail to offer a genuine politics – principles must be generated from below and be open to historical evolution.

In this sense, Merleau-Ponty's mature position in *Adventures de la dialectique* (1955) is that Marxist thought also fails to break with the idealism of history, which also shows why his theory of history exemplifies the logic of expression. Here he stresses the need for a concrete analysis of praxis. This is why, as Whiteside points out, Merleau-Ponty shifts his analogy of historical meaning with a living being towards an analogy with "spoken language" (AD, 30/17).³⁶⁰ History does not reveal a meaning that pre-existed its expression, and "history does not work according to a model; it is, in fact, the advent of meaning" (AD, 29/17). History, then, moves according to the paradoxical logic of expression and is not reducible to a single causal factor of such as economic determinism: "Religion, law, and economy make up a single history because any fact in any one of the three orders arises, in a sense, from the other two. This is due to the fact that they are all embedded in the unitary web of human choices" (AD, 31/19).

³⁵⁸ Cited by Lefort, CA, 101/376.

³⁵⁹ Carman, MP, 166.

³⁶⁰ Whiteside, *Merleau-Ponty and the Foundations*, 259.

The discovery of subjectivity as inherently expressive intersubjectivity calls for a politics of the concrete interactions between bodies, and although Merleau-Ponty's suggestion is that this will emerge from the proletariat, this is because of his ontological commitment rather than his political leanings. As Lefort contends,

In the image [Marx] draws of the proletariat, we recognize the symbol of a blossoming social unity and a calling into question of, in the very movement of history, man's relation to being. If these intuitions have been buried in the myth of the universal class and a human community expanding to the limits of the earth, it is perhaps, in the final analysis, because Marx was more influenced than he realized by the rationalism of Western political philosophy. (CA, 104/378).

Indeed, as others have argued, this leads Merleau-Ponty towards the development of a notion of history along the lines of Saussure more than Marx,³⁶¹ with history progressing through the contingent and complex logic of difference and diachrony. In history, however, there is not a single "problem" or speaker that orients the movement, and "[h]istorical epochs become ordered around an interrogation of human possibility" (AD, 40/24). As Whiteside argues, "[w]here history is hypercontingent, it harbors no immanent universality."³⁶² Indeed, as we will see in the next chapter, this process is identical to how Merleau-Ponty explores expression. Whiteside writes, "I am necessarily the expression of innumerable historical sedimentations, my style, if explored with originality and courage, has the best chance of making contact with my contemporaries."³⁶³ This is the flavor, then, of Merleau-Ponty's late return to a parliamentary or liberal model. It is not a flight to conservatism or to the eternal truth of liberal principles, but rather a courageous attempt to think through historical contingency without the earlier excesses or belief in an end to history.

³⁶¹ Ibid., chapter 9; Dauenhauer, "Merleau-Ponty's Political Thought," passim.

³⁶² Whiteside, *Merleau-Ponty and the Foundations*, 261.

³⁶³ Ibid., 263.

– § 4. –

**From *Empiètement* to Expression:
The Mexico Lectures**

*Dès que j'existe, j'agis, je séduis, j'empiète sur la
liberté d'autrui.*

– Merleau-Ponty³⁶⁴

This brings us back from the more abstract level of history to the fundamental position about expressive bodies discovered in *Phénoménologie de la perception*, now with the added layer of the violent relatedness of intersubjectivity and with the idea that history moves in the same way as expression. In 1949, Merleau-Ponty boarded the *Queen Elisabeth* and made his way to Mexico to give a lecture titled, “*Autrui* [The Other].” Although his notes remain unpublished, Saint Aubert has recently published a description of their content and a few select passages. The lecture is an attempt to think about the other on two levels: that of knowledge (for reflection) and that of morality. The text reportedly appears in two relatively similar drafts. Here I provide my translation of the two versions of an important passage, as cited by Saint Aubert:

On [the] moral level: conflict of freedoms, master and slave. Even if I decide to respect [the] freedom of the other, to not exert an influence on him, I in fact *encroach* upon his freedom, I confirm him in his solitude, in his availability [*disponibilité*]. My freedom – being always an example for or an intervention upon the other – is thus incompatible with his freedom. And if, in the end, in order to respect the freedom of the other, I devote myself to him, then it is my freedom that ceases. Plurality of consciousnesses is impossible.³⁶⁵

Expression of the same difficulty on the moral level: how is my freedom reconcilable with that of the other? Is there not here a mastery

³⁶⁴ “As soon as I exist, I act, I seduce, I *encroach* upon the freedom of the other,” cited by Saint Aubert, *ESA1*, 64.

³⁶⁵ “Sur [le] plan moral: conflit des libertés, maître et esclave. Si même je décide de respecter [la] liberté d'autrui, de ne pas influencer sur autrui, j'*empiète* en réalité sur sa liberté, je le confirme dans la solitude, la disponibilité. Donc ma liberté étant toujours exemple ou intervention sur autrui, est incompatible avec la sienne. Et si enfin, pour respecter [la] liberté d'autrui, je me dévoue à lui, alors c'est la mienne qui cesse. Pluralité des consciences impossible.” *ESA1*, 63-64. Emphasis added by Saint Aubert.

and slavery? For if I decide to respect the freedom of the other, to never exert an influence upon him, by the same decision I do not respect him: I refuse a certain union, which is very well what he may want, I deeply affect his life, I force him in turn to remain available and alone. I am always an example or a model. As soon as I exist, I act, I seduce, I encroach upon the freedom of the other. It seems, both in practice and in theory, impossible to say that there is a plurality of consciousnesses, nor that I and the other are compatible.³⁶⁶

From the moment I exist, I encroach upon the other – as an example, as a model, or as a refusal of his or her freedom, even if I make my existence into the attempt to try and respect that freedom. My very existence is a weight in the expressive field; I exist *as* communication. As Saint Aubert concludes from these passages, “encroachment is not an accidental determination of my freedom that could be corrected... it is existential” (ESA1, 64). Moreover, Saint Aubert argues that this somewhat pessimistic account of the violence of existence is interpreted by Merleau-Ponty in an optimistic way that prepares the ground for his later ontology, of a chiasm of the flesh, a passing into the other of myself and of myself into the other.

Empiètement is thus an ambiguous fact of existence, both the necessity of violence and the “essential ingredient of the construction of a living community with the other” (ESA1, 65). In discussing *Le sang des autres* by Simone de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty writes in the first draft of the unpublished Mexico notes: “impossible to escape [our] common situation: one influences without meaning to, one does not leave his freedom to the other. But in reality, freedom is to be accomplished, not of being available, it exists in the relation with the other and not anywhere else” (ESA1, 65). Or again, in the second draft, “[t]here is no freedom outside of our engagements” (ESA1, 65).

How, then, does Merleau-Ponty go from the pessimism of an inescapable violent relatedness to the location of this as the very place and condition of freedom at all? According to Saint Aubert, the Mexico notes reveal three arguments. The first is based on our perceptual experience of

³⁶⁶ “Expression de la même difficulté sur le plan moral: comment ma liberté est-elle conciliable avec celle d’autrui? N’y a-t-il pas maîtrise et esclavage? Car si je décide de respecter la liberté d’autrui, de ne jamais influencer sur lui, par là même je ne le respecte pas: je refuse une certaine union, qui est peut-être ce qu’autrui veut, j’affecte gravement sa vie, je lui impose à son tour de rester disponible et seul. Je suis toujours exemple ou modèle. Dès que j’existe, j’agis, je séduis, j’empiète sur la liberté d’autrui. Pratiquement comme théoriquement il ne semble pas possible de dire qu’il y a pluralité des consciences, ni qu’autrui et moi sommes compatibles.” ESA1, 64. Emphasis added by Saint Aubert.

depth,³⁶⁷ while the second argument is a Schelarian account of the transcendence of affective intentionality.³⁶⁸ But finally, and most importantly for our purposes, the final pages of the notes for the Mexico lectures attempt to establish the pharmacological aspect of *empiètement* through the “phenomenon of expression” (ESA, 65-66). Merleau-Ponty here begins to use the name “expression” for any event in which we find the “coexistence of impossible elements” (ESA1, 66). In other words, the idea of *empiètement*, discovered in his political reflections, offers the foundation for his ontological interpretation of the paradoxical logic of expression. Consider the following passage:

Expression is even the solution to the problem [of the other] that we were studying, since it is transcendence, passage of myself into the other. There is no alternative between myself and the other when we are a common project and a common situation ... expression is pre-eminently constitutive of such common situation. (ESA1, 66, elided by Saint Aubert).

Saint Aubert reads this as the “first time that Merleau-Ponty gives such an importance” to the theme of expression, although it seems that the discussion above of the logic of expression has established that this is rather the first time that Merleau-Ponty truly recognizes the important unthought of his own philosophical gesture.

Thus, what we have seen in this chapter is the coming to expression of the logic of expression itself through Merleau-Ponty’s engagement with the political. The reference to the preeminent reality of expression here foreshadows the project of *La prose du monde*. We turn now to this final movement towards ontology in order to fully appreciate the depth of the logic of expression and to determine how it is taken up towards an ontology of bodies. This return from the truth of the proletariat towards the logic of expression as the “field of experience” culminates in a deepening ontological position:

There is a flesh of history in which (as in our own body) everything counts and has a bearing—the infrastructure, our idea of it, and

³⁶⁷ Although Saint Aubert does not elaborate on this argument, we can conjecture that the point here is that our experience of space is also an implication of ourselves in that space as we developed above in Part III, Chapter 3 devoted to *Phénoménologie de la perception*.

³⁶⁸ Again, Saint Aubert does not elaborate on this argument. However, given his mention of a focus on desire and sexuality, we can again conjecture that Merleau-Ponty again draws on the ambiguous relation between an operative intentionality and ontology, and the realism of related being and creative taking up of situations. The influence of Max Scheler on Merleau-Ponty was developed above in Part III, Chapter 1.

above all the perpetual exchanges between the two in which the weight of things becomes a sign as well, thoughts become forces, and the balance of the two becomes events. It is asked, "Where is history made? Who makes it? What is this movement which it traces out and leaves behind the figures of the wake?" It is of the same order as the movement of Thought and Speech, and, in short, of the perceptible world's explosion within us. Everywhere there are meanings, dimensions, and forms in excess of what each "consciousness" could have produced; and yet it is men who speak and think and see. We are in the field of history as we are in the field of language or existence. (*Préface*, 37-38/20).³⁶⁹

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³⁶⁹ [I would like to acknowledge Professor Silverman's important suggestion during the public defense of this dissertation to consider Merleau-Ponty's extended engagement with Hegel and Marx on the very questions on History and humanism in the 1960-61 course at the *Collège de France*. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Hegel," in *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997). In fact, in this course Merleau-Ponty returns to the notion of "bad ambiguity," but rather than in perception, he indicates that there is a bad ambiguity inherent to philosophy, since philosophy fails to "inhabit the things it discusses." Merleau-Ponty posits that what is needed is a "thinking which is at the same time concrete and universal" (72). This clearly shows the connection between Merleau-Ponty's political thought and again his work on expression, which is precisely the place in which such a "good ambiguity" can be circumscribed. It is an openness that is embodied in the theory of expression that would seem to answer Merleau-Ponty's critique of *praxis* as subject to repeating the positive exercise of power in the Party: "Philosophy and non-philosophy: a detached philosophy always reappears in disguise. What is needed is a negation of the negation which we do not fix either in negativism or positivism" (83). That is, what is needed is a politics based on the logic of expression, a logic of expression that emerges from the political reality of *empiètement*.

Part III, Chapter 5

Expression and the Arts: From Aesthetics to Ontology

Le philosophe parle, mais c'est une faiblesse en lui, et une faiblesse inexplicable: il devrait se taire, coïncider en silence, et rejoindre dans l'Être une philosophie qui y est déjà faite. Tout se passe au contraire comme s'il voulait mettre en mots un certain silence en lui qu'il écoute. Son "œuvre" entière est cet effort absurde. Il écrivait pour dire son contact avec l'Être; il ne l'a pas dit, et ne saurait le dire, puisque c'est du silence. Alors, il recommence...

- Merleau-Ponty³⁷⁰

It remains to explore the final and suggestive evolutions of Merleau-Ponty's thought. As I have argued above, Merleau-Ponty's political engagement with questions of history or violence led him to make more and more explicit the paradoxical logic of expression that we have identified in even his earliest works. In particular, I argued that through his reflection on the other [*autrui*], Merleau-Ponty is led to the essential fact of intersubjectivity as *encroachment* [*empiètement*], and that this seemingly pessimistic observation actually initiates the positive account of the act as the creation of a common situation. This model becomes increasingly deeply embedded in his argumentation. In this chapter, I turn to the most explicit accounts of the logic of expression, Merleau-Ponty's work on language and aesthetics, in order to begin to show how expression goes from being the fundamental gesture of his thought to the very object of his study of silence and the incessant attempt to express it.

³⁷⁰ "The philosopher speaks, but this is a weakness in him, and an inexplicable weakness: he should keep silent, coincide in silence, and rejoin in Being a philosophy that is there ready-made. But yet everything comes to pass as though he wished to put into words a certain silence he hearkens to within himself. His entire "work" is this absurd effort. He wrote in order to state his contact with Being; he did not state it, and could not state it, since it is silence. Then he recommences..." VI, 164/125.

From Silence to Expression

As I noted above, Merleau-Ponty reported in 1952 to be working out the consequences of his early work through two separate though related projects. The first, entitled *Introduction à la prose du monde*, was to deal with literary language as the paradigm for all problems of truth, which would be treated then more fully in a subsequent work named: *L'Origine de la vérité* (*Inédit*, 44-45/8-9). In fact, it is clear that Merleau-Ponty was quite disappointed by the reception of his early work and the criticisms that it received as being non-philosophical psychology, and that the epistemological and ontological projects named here are a response to this reception. In fact, Merleau-Ponty tries to forestall the objection in his address to the *Société française de philosophie*, published as *Le primat de la perception et ses conséquences philosophiques*. This last clause, of course, shows Merleau-Ponty's awareness that the weight of his investigation was being misunderstood. It is worth mentioning a few points from the essay as preparation for the outcome, which is a profound and explicit meditation on expression.

Merleau-Ponty puts his cards immediately on the table: "Do [the results of *Phénoménologie de la perception*] have any value beyond that of psychological description?" (*PrP*, 42/13). The consequence that Merleau-Ponty specifically highlights is the manner in which the world is not perceived as a raw matter organized by a mind, but that "[m]atter is 'pregnant' with its form," that is, perception is horizontal, and that we perceive in action and not by having an explicit "idea" of the thing. The upshot is that the perceiving subject and the world are in a contradictory relation of "immanence and transcendence" (*PrP*, 41-42/12-13). According to Merleau-Ponty, the ideas that the tradition takes as the foundation that can give some certainty to the perceived world are based on an illusion of thought, which is in fact historical and based itself on perceptual experience. If thought is progressive towards truth, if ideas can be true for more than an instant, this is because of the temporal structure of perception, and also means that they can never be complete, that rationality and truth need to be "brought down to earth" (*PrP*, 43/13). The perceived world and the presence of other perceiving bodies results in the demand of a "true communication, and confers on my objects the new dimension of intersubjective being or, in other words, objectivity" (*PrP*, 53/18).

Responding to some questions that had been sent to him in advance, Merleau-Ponty reports that some will grant all of his descriptions as true on the level of psychological description, but hold that nonetheless

there remains beyond the perceived world a “true” world, a “verified” world, “the world of science” (*PrP*, 53/18). The point is that psychological descriptions of our experience are aimed at a region of our experience, and that “there is no reason ... to give such descriptions any universal value” (*PrP*, 53/18). Moreover, to the description of perception as “paradoxical,” for instance when Merleau-Ponty writes “the perceived thing itself is paradoxical; it exists only in so far as someone can perceive it” (*PrP*, 49/16), his critics object that it is not pertinent to place contradiction and confusion as the ultimate foundations of knowledge. They argue that because of the very description of perception as confused that it must then be raised to the level of thought. Finally, Merleau-Ponty’s position, since it involves the injunction to return to the world as we live and experience it, amounts to a disavowal of reflection and hence of philosophy itself.

Merleau-Ponty responds to the first objection, that psychology is a circumscribed region of our experience and that reason can approach a world of science that is true in itself, by insisting that thought has never been outside the fate of nature and history, and so the demand for an absolute rationality is either a pie in the sky or is actually satisfied only by something like the philosophy Merleau-Ponty is offering. By presenting the primacy of perception, Merleau-Ponty does not mean that “science, reflection, and philosophy are only transformed sensations or that values are deferred and calculated pleasures.” Rather, the experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us; that perception is a nascent *logos*” (*PrP*, 67/25). In other words, perception is to be understood on the logic of expression. To the second objection, that a contradiction has no place at the heart of the intellect, Merleau-Ponty simply challenges this dogmatism by saying that if a contradiction were excluded from philosophical reflection then we would have trouble saving Plato, Kant, Augustine and others. If we find contradiction, then we must own up to it responsibly or discover an error that sent us in the wrong direction. The idealist tradition does not have the objective position to dismiss the paradoxical evidence of perception.

As to the third objection, namely, that the promotion of unreflective experience is a disavowal of reflection and thus of philosophy, Merleau-Ponty answers with the observation that without going back to our lived experience, that that experience passes by without notice, that we do not recognize its “accomplishments” (*PrP*, 56/19). But philosophy does not simply discover a layer of unreflected experience, rather it expresses a certain taking up of that experience, it expresses the “unreflected which is understood and conquered by reflection” (*PrP*, 56/19). Thus, Merleau-Ponty is not suggesting a pure silence, a pure passivity. Rather, he is suggesting that it is the task of philosophy to express this silence. As such, “it is not a question of reducing human knowledge to sensation,” argues

Merleau-Ponty, but of “assisting at the birth of this knowledge, to make it as sensible as the sensible” (*PrP*, 67/25). To not express the movement of rationality is to lose it to the mere living of experience. Now this connects us again with Husserl’s phrase: “The beginning is the pure and, so to speak, still mute experience, which now it is the issue to bring to the pure expression of its own sense.”³⁷¹ (*CM*, 39).

Thus, the objector has inadvertently put his finger on the very problem of philosophy, the paradox of expression. As Merleau-Ponty will write in one of his final lines, “In a sense the whole of philosophy, as Husserl says, consists in restoring a power to signify, a birth of meaning, or a wild meaning, an expression of experience by experience, which in particular clarifies the special domain of language” (*VI*, 201/155). And as we saw in the epigraph to this chapter, Merleau-Ponty assigns the philosopher the task of expressing, failing, and beginning again, in the absurd effort of life that is reflective. The nature of the logic of expression means that it can never be completed, but also that the expressive operations “establish a common situation which is no longer only a community of *being* but a community of *doing*” (*PM*, 195/140). Or again, in the *Préface* to *Signes*: “Speech, as we said, would interrupt this fascination. It would not suppress it; it would put it off, carrying it on forward” (*Préface*, 32/17). In other words, that Merleau-Ponty turns to write a long treatise on expression must be seen as a direct response to the very problem of trying to express his philosophy.

³⁷¹ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 39.

La prose du monde

The debate about the role or status of *La prose du monde* in Merleau-Ponty's work is an important one, but one that can have no definitive conclusion. We know that Merleau-Ponty felt the need to respond to Sartre, that is, to write a new "What is Literature?" We also know that of the two projects indicated in his reports of 1952 link the project of expression as an important demonstration of his other project, *L'Origine de la vérité*. As Claude Lefort notes in his preface to *La prose du monde*, this second project itself underwent significant changes, taking on the new title *Être et Monde* for a period, and ultimately becoming *Le visible et l'invisible*. The courses offered at the *Collège de France* from 1952 until his death interrupted this latter project attest to a movement from "expression" (*Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression* (52-52); *Le problème de la parole* (53-54), etc.) to a deeper engagement with ontological questions in relation to Nature and *Logos*. But that this last terms is so prominent in his "ontological" thought should alert us that expression is not left behind. In fact, the importance of a reflection on language that interrogates speaking and silence, which establishes the logic of expression as an "indirect" language, ground the possibility of a new ontology that rests on "interrogation" and not on "principles." In other words, if we understand Lefort correctly, the shape of Merleau-Ponty's ontology germinates in *La prose du monde*, and that *Le visible et l'invisible* is literally a taking up of the earlier text in the new medium of ontology and with the subsequent discoveries with which the logic of expression is brought into dialogue, namely, reversibility and flesh. In fact, *La prose du monde* is a remarkable treatise in the philosophy expression, and in connection with the more polished version what Lefort publishes as the third chapter, "*Langue indirecte et des voix de silences*," this aborted reflection deserves a special place in this attempt to understand the logic of expression in Merleau-Ponty. As we have indicated, the project is started in response to Merleau-Ponty's worry that he is in possession of a philosophy that cannot be expressed, the problem of expression, its inherent failure to capture the fever, feeling, or silence that it aims at, need to be grounded. This section, then, offers a reading of this important text, with an eye towards the next phase, ontology.

(a) *Deepening the Themes of Phénoménologie de la perception...*

The manuscript of *La prose du monde* begins with the pervasive nature of chatter. "Men have been talking for a long time on earth," writes Merleau-Ponty, "and yet three-quarters of what they say goes unnoticed" (PM, 7/3). The most striking feature of language when we first approach is its absence. An evasive being, language points us towards the things of which it speaks, it effaces itself completely the moment it is working most effectively, in "sweeping us toward the object it designates" (PM, 7/3). In dialogue, it seems that language is at its best when again it disappears, when it succeeds in touching the other, but this is assumed to be accomplished again through a reference to "some *thing*." These observations are hardly striking, but Merleau-Ponty argues that they miss the point. They are based on the classical picture of meaning in which language stands for ideas or perceptions, which exist and are clear in themselves. How could this type of language, however, every teach us more than we already know? "We all secretly venerate," confides Merleau-Ponty, "the ideal of a language which in the last analysis would deliver us from language by delivering us to things" (PM, 8/4).

This idea of a purified language also pervades the sciences. For the propositions of science to do their work of expressing the world without any ambiguity, in an exact and predictable truth, the confused status of natural language needs to be corrected, the sign needs to be given a single task of expressing one idea. If we have a language that is precise, if, that is, we have full access to precise meanings, meanings that are also had by our interlocutor, then we may be "truly responsible" for what we say (PM, 10/5). Such a project, however noble it appears, is a "revolt" against living language, an attempt to "tear speech out of history" (PM, 10/5). Moreover, referring to one of his favorite quotes of an "astonishing" position, La Bruyère says: "Of all the possible expression which might render our thought, there is only one which is best. One does not always come upon it in writing or talking it is nevertheless true that it exists." Echoing Collingwood, the speaker is first silent, "straining towards ... what he is going to say" (PM, 11/6), and that in a sense language contains already what he is going to say. But this pre-existence does not indicate discovery of the word, but rather a creative expression, a negotiation. This notion of "containment" reappears, and as we will see it is much closer to the idea of a metastable source of speaking than an eternally true set of word-idea correspondences. At this point we can see a continuity with the criticisms offered in his earlier work, when Merleau-Ponty criticizes these approaches for claiming that "the word possesses no virtue of its own" (PM, 12/7). Communication gives nothing new, and we live language as if it

were clear and simple translation of ideas. This picture of language, in which two interlocutors are locked in their significations, reproducing each other's ideas through a matching up of ideas to words, is a theory of language in which there is no need for language.

The second chapter, "Science and the Experience of Language," continues to recall and deepen some of the ideas already on the table from *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Merleau-Ponty begins the reflection with the analogy between reading and perception. In reading a book, I am caught up in the story, and may not even be aware of turning the material pages, just as when perceiving I see a person at a distance without having any sense of his "apparent" size. Just as the man "in the distance" has a height that is "like a meaning," but that I could not say what its clear and distinct idea is, so too a "great book, a play, or a poem is in my memory *en bloc*" (PM, 16/9). The point is that what we grasp is a unity, or a meaning, which is not a series of isolated word meanings held together in a proposition, but a weight in my history and a potential for my body. Having caught a glimpse of a man in the distance, on a facing balcony in my courtyard, for instance, I can inspect further, my body will perhaps comport itself differently knowing that I too can be seen, and yet his height is not inferred from signs, it is a meaningful bloc in the whole situation and then in my memory. The material of the expression, as in a book, too disappears, as I remember the book as a meaningful whole, it sediments into my past and my possibilities. And yet,

...while we were reading, it is these words which spoke to us, suspended in the movement of our eyes and our feelings, which they in turn carried and projected unerringly when they rejoined in us the blinded man and the paralytic, when they, thanks to us, and we, thanks to them became speech rather than language, and in the same instant became a voice and an echo. (PM, 17/10)

This passage recalls some of the themes we have already explored in Part I above, and it nicely describes the act of reading. Language in action is living language here is also in the moment of reading, and surely rests upon constituted language, but that in its use it is speech.

Merleau-Ponty suggests that "the book" has an existence, in a sense, that I grasp while reading it and that I hold somehow after having read it. The reader is in a sense the writer as well. But the reader "could not have written the book," because the book is the outcome of another person's trajectory, the expression of a life and a style that is not my own. The book communicates to me because its style is somehow prepared for in my possibilities, and what it means for me is never the "pure idea" the author had while writing it. When the book "catches" fire for me, "my thoughts are ablaze," and,

...the fire feeds off everything I have ever read. I am receiving and giving in the same gesture. I have given my knowledge of the language; I have brought along what I already know about the meaning of the words, the phrases, and the syntax. I have also contributed my whole experience of others and everyday events, with all the questions it left in me—the situations left open and unsettled, as well as those with whose ordinary resolution I am all too familiar. (*PM*, 18/11)

The book does not just point to all of these things that I bring along, all of the forces that weigh upon my reading, it also takes me further, tells me something new, it “makes use of everything I have contributed in order to carry me beyond it” (*PM*, 18/11). The book communicates to me as it communicated to the author first, by expressing, and it is an illusion that its communication is the result of a shared world of constituted meaning. The author presents a different way or style of manipulating language, which is her genius for ambiguity, and this sweeps me up. The book is the source of my ability to take on this other style, to adopt the voice of an author, and thus to in a sense become Stendhal. As Linda Singer writes, “Merleau-Ponty uses style as a way of characterizing that persistent and characteristic manner of appearance that we recognize in things and other people, without having to constitute it explicitly”³⁷²

I do not, then, get fully inside Stendhal’s experience; I still am a different metastable trajectory. The writer has the ability to express in such a way as to leave a book behind, and the book, “that infernal machine,” is a “apparatus for making significations” (*PM*, 20/12). The book takes a hold of me, infects me with its meaning, and plays out a meaning on the sedimented language and personal history that I bring with me. It is the opportunity for my own expression, guided, though still in some sense creative. The expression “is the operation through which a certain arrangement of already available signs and significations alters and then transfigures each of them, so that in the end a new signification is secreted” (*PM*, 20/13). Once I have read the book, it too sediments into my history and becomes a weight in my potential actions. The book transforms me into a new meaningful arrangement, and I believe I could have written it only because the book has made me into a being capable of understanding it. When someone is speaking, they are using a sort of genius that could not be taught or reduced to its causes, a genius for

³⁷² Linda Singer, “Merleau-Ponty on the Concept of Style,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 234.

“touching on these significations already present in us, [and making] them yield strange sounds” (*PM*, 21/13). Reading, then, is an “encounter” between systems of speech, different trajectories, and possible because we are both expressive bodies. I am a “strange expressive organism” that can no longer see marks on a page as mere marks, I see them as words or scribbles, *to be* read. This “expressive organism” adopts “new organs” through reading, takes on new ways of dealing with the world through the sudden reorganization of its potentials, just as everything changes when the blind man begins to feel the world at the point of his cane.

At this point, Merleau-Ponty returns to the objection that we have noted above, that is, the claim that his philosophy suggests a return to lived experience and hence is a disavowal of philosophy itself. In the midst of a reflection on another positive science, linguistics, Merleau-Ponty makes a similar reassessment of philosophy itself related to his claims about psychology. “Philosophy,” he argues, “is not the passage from a confused world to a universe of closed signification” (*PM*, 26/17). Rather, what his reflection on expression has show is that such a “closed” world is in fact impossible. Speech begins from a need to express, an “awareness of the world which consumes and destroys our established significations but also renews and purifies them” (*PM*, 26/17). As such, language is not “an impediment” to thought and philosophy; it is its very possibility. There is no real presence or explicit awareness to be had in the silence of thought. Rather, any understanding at all needs to be expressed, otherwise it passes away as a fleeting lack not fulfilled, and it is through language that we can “renew and recover” ourselves and “unite” with ourselves and with others (*PM*, 26/17). Expression, then, is the possibility of truth, not its preclusion, and “we must learn to reflect on consciousness *in* the hazards of language” (*PM*, 26/17). Thus, even philosophy is an expressive activity.

Merleau-Ponty is careful to emphasize that communication is possible because of the fact of embodiment, and that defects can only be explained through disturbances of the lived body. When communication happens, there is a relation between my body and life and the body and life of the other, and this relation is not an interpretative relation referring back to some pure “I” at the core of my gesture. Communication is, then, a “system of embodied subjects” (*PM*, 28/18). Because I am an expressive and acting body, “I am exposed to the other person” (*PM*, 28/18). Thus Merleau-Ponty wants to stress that in each gesture the body concentrates itself, and that in speaking there is no difference. This, we have tried to say, is the manner in which the body is subject to the weight of the ideal. But this bodily gesture also carries with it the “germ of a depersonalization” (*PM*, 29/19), that is, the manner in which the act of speech is a bringing to expression of a certain silence, and thus is a crystallization of

my being that does not capture my whole being, that becomes an event in my past, and that also overflows its own meaning. I speak for myself and others by transforming myself into language, and thus by spacing myself from myself. The gestures of the body are this spacing, and such a structure is not just reserved for the literary uses of language, but for everyday language as well (*PM*, 30/20).

Up until this point, the discussion has been more or less a more subtle development of many of the themes of the paradox of expression that were present in Merleau-Ponty's first works. There is, however, a different influence that begins to weigh on Merleau-Ponty's description, namely, Saussure. Merleau-Ponty is very much drawn towards the idea that language should be understood both synchronically and diachronically. The diachronic legacies of the past that bring about the meaning of some word are not as important in understanding speech as the synchronic relations between signs. At the present, there must be a "order, a system, a totality without which communication and the linguistic community would be impossible" (*PM*, 34/23). Merleau-Ponty seems sympathetic to the criticism that the two orders cannot be merely juxtaposed, but nonetheless credits Saussure with overcoming historicism, that is, by showing how there can be meaning in the present without it being a mere result of causal trajectories of the past. Indeed, as Silverman notes, in his first encounters with Saussure, Merleau-Ponty "ascribes to him the view that the speaking subject lives in his language."³⁷³ Historicism turns all expressions into a result of mere accidents, but Saussure shows that this cannot be the only approach to understanding language. The fact of the present as being a meaningful system of expression leads us to be able to understand history as more than a mere set of externally related events. "The accidents of history have been absorbed internally," explains Merleau-Ponty, "by an intention to communicate which transforms them into a system of expression" (*PM*, 36/25). Thus, the synchronic system is the taking up into the present of the past, and is thus the truth of the diachronic.

(b) "*Le langage indirect et les voix du silence*"

Extracted from *La prose du monde* and edited and augmented slightly, Merleau-Ponty published the core of this project in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1952 under the title "*Le Langage indirect et les voix du silence.*" As Galen Johnson reminds us in the introduction to its

³⁷³ Silverman, "Merleau-Ponty and the Interrogation of Language," 178.

republishing in English in the *Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, this essay preceded Merleau-Ponty's resignation and definitive break with Jean-Paul Sartre.³⁷⁴ The project having begun as a response to Sartre's *What is Literature?*, the dedication of the article to Sartre is both to be expected and yet surprising. In fact, as Johnson goes on to suggest, this essay is not Merleau-Ponty's subtle theory of literature and painting, it also develops some of the critical themes that Merleau-Ponty will fully articulate in his critique of Sartre's Marxism and existentialism in *Les aventures de la dialectique*. As Johnson notes, the essay is a "rich and turbulent text" (*IMP*, 17) and this section, then, has the opportunity to bring together the logic of expression that we developed in our discussion of politics or history in the previous chapter and his mature theory of the paradox of expression itself.

The essay itself begins with Merleau-Ponty's deepening encounter with Saussure. This latter has taught us, reports Merleau-Ponty, that a sign in itself is meaningless, and that rather each sign marks a difference from all other signs. The difficulty is that "common sense tells us that if term A and term B do not have any meaning at all, it is hard to see how there could be a difference of meaning between them" (*IL*, 63/39). This also seems to suggest the impossibility of communication, since the meaning of a speaker's words implies knowing the entire system. But as Silverman has demonstrated, the role of the inscription of the system in setting up the "communicative situation" was already established by Merleau-Ponty's lectures from 1949 to 1952 at the Sorbonne.³⁷⁵

Just like all the paradoxes we have raised so far, the problem of communication is overcome in the act of speaking. In an image from *La prose du monde* that does not make it to the published essay, Merleau-Ponty quotes Saussure's description of the system as one of equilibrium in a system of gravitation. If, argues Saussure, "one of the planets gravitating around the sun were to change in dimension and weight: this isolated fact would generate general consequences and displace the equilibrium of the entire solar system" (*PM*, 49/34). This is precisely what happens when our expressions go out into the accidental encounters they will have. We cannot know the metastabilities of the systems or situations we interact with fully, and so there is no guarantee to expression. The weight of the expression is not in the power of the speaker, and this only augments the responsibility she or he has for how it alters the fields into which it becomes a new gravitational center. The system at any moment exists as a

³⁷⁴ Galen Johnson, "Introductions to Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Painting," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 17.

³⁷⁵ Silverman, "Merleau-Ponty and the Interrogation of Language," 184.

horizontal relation, and a change to it, learning a new idiom or speaking a metaphor, will cause the system to shift and reestablish an equilibrium. But this also includes the possibilities that remain latent due to the vertical history and trajectory of any sign as well, the diacritical. "What sustains the invention of a new system of expression," concludes Merleau-Ponty, "is the drive of speaking subjects who wish to be understood and who take over as a new mode of speaking the debris produced by another mode of expression" (*PM*, 50/35).³⁷⁶

This point, then, harmonizes with the memorable image employed at the beginning of the essay, namely, the image of the child learning language. The child must have a natural propensity to incorporate a system of differences. Even if it is a first phonetic opposition which is a total system in itself, a "lateral liaison of sign to sign" (*IL*, 65/40). What the child sees around him or herself is some economy of signs in which she has no foothold, and the vague feeling of wanting to express. When the child succeeds in a first phonemic opposition, she literally speaks, and just as sleep comes down to the body that mimics it, a system of differentiation is "caught" by the child and transforms babbling into speech. "The whole of the spoken language surrounding the child," writes Merleau-Ponty, "snaps him up like a whirlwind, tempts him by its internal articulations, and brings him *almost* up to the moment when all this noise begins to mean something" (*IL*, 66/40). The entire linguistic life of the child is contained in this first differentiation, and by being expression in a linguistic community, it also contains the style that will both express this community and express this individual's being. These two aspects will need to be developed. The point is that the language, even at its origin in the child, is a "whole," and yet is historical. The child does not come by language in isolation, but by taking up some key in the noise that surrounds it. And the system itself is more than itself, because it always contains its own possible transformations. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

A language sometimes remains a long time pregnant with transformations which are to come; and the enumeration of the means of expression in a language does not have any meaning, since those which fall into disuse continue to lead a diminished life in the language and since the place of those which are to replace them is sometimes already marked out—even if only in the form of a gap, a need, or tendency. (*IL*, 67/41)

³⁷⁶ Indeed, as Silverman writes, "Merleau-Ponty opens up the field not only of the desire and the possibility to communicate, but also the appropriation of a language which is not direct, not fully explicitated, but which speaks and which *is communication itself*." *Ibid*.

Even if we think a “truth” can be expressed, it is always historical and depends on the system, and thus “meaning is never completed” (*IL*, 67/42).

In fact, Merleau-Ponty’s description of the relational reality of the sign seems perhaps closer to Simondon. Consider the following passage:

Since the sign has meaning only in so far as it is profiled against other signs, its meaning is entirely involved in language. Speech always comes into play against a background of speech; it is always only a fold in the immense fabric of language. To understand it, we do not have to consult some inner lexicon which gives us the pure thoughts covered up by the words or forms we are perceiving; we only have to lend ourselves to its life, to its movement of differentiation and articulation, and to its eloquent gestures. (*IL*, 68/42)

Thus, there is no text or set of ideas that the listener or the speaker finds or uncovers, there is a moving equilibrium that reaches a stable state that was not predictable nor ever fully the final state. As such, Merleau-Ponty says that language is like a “being,” and this is why we are right to put it into the language of individuation. It is a whole at every phase, and yet always carries with it the metastable that will transform it, and since it is this trajectory, never completed, Merleau-Ponty can conclude that “all language is indirect or allusive—that is it is, if you will, silence” (*IL*, 70/43), and its indirect nature is what “prepares the way for speaking, writing, painting, etc.”³⁷⁷ As Silverman stresses, the indirect language is appropriated and also “carries with it... the field of speech before it is spoken.”³⁷⁸

But what kind of silence are we talking about here? To address this question, Merleau-Ponty turns to painting, a silent art, and suggests that in fact the writer’s act of expression is “not very different from the painter’s” (*IL*, 72/45). The painter expresses a style of seeing the world, a style of expressing the world, and has an unformulated power of infecting her audience with the gestures that will link them to the trajectory of this meaning. What is most interesting for us here, however, is just how this is accomplished. Merleau-Ponty discusses how the painting gesture acts as the intersection of at least two dimensions. On the one hand, there is the almost nothing of the point of color on the canvas; on the other hand, there is the effect of the point on the whole which is coming into being. Merleau-Ponty describes Matisse watching a film of his own painting

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 185.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

gesture, focused in on the brush, and played back in slow motion, as follows:

A camera once recorded the work of Matisse in slow motion. The impression was prodigious, so much so that Matisse himself was moved, they say. That same brush which, seen with the naked eye, leaped from one act to another, was seen to meditate in a solemn and expanding time—in the imminence of a world’s creation—to try ten possible movements, dance in front of the canvas, brush it lightly several times, and crash down finally like a lightning stroke upon the one line necessary. (*IL*, 73/45)

What is actually happening here? Matisse would be wrong, argues Merleau-Ponty, if he projected into this analyzed gesture something like a choice being made between explicit options. He did not, in the lived time of the gesture, “have in his mind’s eye all the gestures possible, and in making his choice he did not have to eliminate all but one.” Rather, what happened in the expressive gesture was what we might call the genius for ambiguity, since, “set within human time and vision, [Matisse] looked at the still open whole of his work in progress and brought his brush toward the line which called for it in order that the painting might finally be that which it was in the process of becoming” (*IL*, 73/46). As he explains in the *Nature* course notes, “Matisse threw his brush in as many divers places as possible, and after a certain time, logic appeared.”³⁷⁹ This is exactly what happens in any act of expression, since the language is an open whole in the process of becoming, and so too is any situation, conversation, or personal history. This is why we can say that every gesture is expressive, that every human act is a work of art, since we are always the taking up of the past in the complex and open situation by responding to the needs of the work or meaning that is only here in the process of becoming. There is a choice in Matisse’s gesture, but not one that was reflective. It is a bodily genius that negotiates the unformulated conditions, and in the same way, the body “gropes around a significative intention which is not guided by any text, and which is precisely in the process of writing the text” (*IL*, 73/46). Thus, the background of silence is the metastable that tends towards expression, the real material configuration of all the layers of the weight that guides our action, it is that which gives meaning to any act, that which is between the sounds, and that which also precludes any expression from being finished.

One of the key points to emerge from Merleau-Ponty’s extended engagement with Malraux’s text, *La Création esthétique*, is *style*. We have

³⁷⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, 154.

already begun to see the importance of institution, as in the case above with the original phonemic opposition in which all future speech acts are, in a sense, contained. The point is made here in relation to the manner in which the works of an artist hang together, and in which the early ones are said to contain the seeds of the later ones, or the later ones to contain the echoes of the early ones. The point of expression as we have been outlining it since the beginning, is that the expressive operation is not finished with its expression. Rather, the expressive operation sediments into the totality of the body as a new organ, as opening up a new field of possible movement. There is, as Merleau-Ponty argues, an "excess" of the "to be said" beyond any actual expression, and thus the speaker is always called to go further along the trajectory of expression. The act of expression, then, is the founding of an institution (*IL*, 85/53). But following the analysis of *Phénoménologie*, Merleau-Ponty immediately argues that the new organ founded by expression is not like a new tool at one's disposal. Rather, the expression crystallizes a certain style that is even "diffused throughout all [that the artist] sees" (*IL*, 85/53). Moreover, the style becomes a model for others, especially through the expressions, of a way of seeing the world, and so an entirely latent field of meaning. Thus, "perception already stylizes," perception, that is, is expression (*IL*, 87/54). In the style of a life of expressive being, and in the expressions that are communications, there is "the emblem of a way of inhabiting the world, of handling it, and of interpreting it" (*IL*, 87/54). What the painter shows, then, is the "coherent deformation" of a style of being in the visible (*IL*, 88/55).

In this context we find the clearest statement of the trajectory of meaning that we have been talking about. Merleau-Ponty talks about the how the style of a painter is a continuous taking up of one's life. The trajectory of line is a continuous elaboration and recapturing of "an accent which has already appeared in the corner of a previous painting or in some instant of his experience." And yet, without "the painter himself ever being able to say ... what comes from him and what comes from things, what the new work adds to the old ones, or what it has taken from the others and what is its own" (*IL*, 94-95/58-59). Thus, every act of expression is short of an "absolute creation," and is rather "a response to what the world, the past, and the completed works demanded. It is accomplishment and brotherhood" (*IL*, 95/59). This notion of fraternity shows us that every act of expression is a joining oneself and one's life with the trajectory of an expression by taking it up, and this is the same for the taking up of one's own past towards one's own future. The "self" is really the trajectory of performances of one's style, and the expressive act is always then one that happens in community. This is "institution," which is not a power of pure conservation, but a new life through the

forgetting of origins (*IL*, 95/59). Now the full importance of our excursion into the *Origin of Geometry* above has come clear, as we see the logic of expression to be the thread that link perception, speaking, and cultural objects. Perception marks “things with the trace of human elaboration” and “the productions of the past, which are the data of our time, themselves once went beyond anterior productions towards a future which we are, and in this sense called for (among others) the metamorphosis which we impose upon them” (*IL*, 96/59). In all cases, and this “among others” is central, expression is the institution of an open field, and our actions join the trajectory of meaning by taking up into the present something that was called for but not formulated in previous expressions — that is, the life of the metastable.

This is the unity of a general trajectory we call painting, a style of being in the world that begins with the first cave sketches and sets the world forth as “‘to be painted’ or ‘to be sketched,’” thereby setting up the metastable structures of the entire future of painting and yet not providing a single necessity of how this ought to be accomplished. And in the reverse direction, it is in this sense that each painting collects together the history of painting and renews it again by lending itself to the trajectory, how each painter “revives, recaptures, and renews the entire undertaking of painting in each new work” (*IL*, 98/60).³⁸⁰ This is precisely the logic of expression as we have developed it, here demonstrating through the history of painting the truth of all historicity as a trajectory.³⁸¹ And no reductive account of the psychological history or the physical conditions of the painter will suffice, because all of these are but factors or motives that will be taken up in the creative expression.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Merleau-Ponty is careful to clarify the role of the body in the logic of expression. In response to Malraux’s attempt to link disparate cultures whose expressions seem to link up via a rational History, something Merleau-Ponty calls an “Hegelian monstrosit[y],” Merleau-Ponty suggests that the apparent convergences in expressive activities are rather the result of a simple fact of a general style of human embodiment and gestures. The gestures of an individual can be recognized across mediums because they are expressions of a “general motor power of formulation capable of the transpositions which constitute the constancy of style” (*IL*, 105-06/65). Merleau-Ponty recognizes that my body must be such that I can grasp the expressive gestures and its traces

³⁸⁰ This is, arguably, the main point of Nancy’s two articles on painting, Nancy, “Le vestige de l’art.”; Nancy, “Peinture dan la grotte.”

³⁸¹ One might worry that this story seems to give too much weight to a “single” trajectory, which of course is the worry also for Merleau-Ponty’s early take on History. Nonetheless, this story does provide the general sketch for expressive operations.

as the vestiges of a human expression. This is because we write, not in objective space, but in “perceived space” (*IL*, 106/66).

Again, we return to the phenomenal world of structures and unities, tools and other people that has been elaborated from his first book onwards. Even the non-human world takes on the style of an expressive action, and the artist is the one who can crystallize this view of the world, this intentionality, into an expression other than her or his body, into, that is, the written. “The movement of the artist tracing his arabesque in infinite matter amplifies, but also prolongs, the simple marvel of oriented locomotion or grasping movements” (*IL*, 108/67). And this is not just the artist’s expression: “But already with our first oriented gesture, *someone’s* infinite relationships to his situation had invaded our mediocre planet and opened an inexhaustible field of behavior. All perception, all action which presupposes it, and in short every human use of the body is already *primordial expression*” (*IL*, 108/67). This is the first act which expresses in the weighty a relation to the ideal, and so makes that ideal exist both for the actor and the audience who can come across the trace and follow its grooves, lend its body to the gesture, and thus give it a new life in a creative repetition. The expression, “far from exhausting itself in the instant at which it occurs ... inaugurates an order and founds an institution or a tradition” (*IL*, 108/67). Attempting to explore this account of progress, Merleau-Ponty considers briefly the idea of “advent” as the promise of further events (*IL*, 112/70).³⁸² All of this is only possible, then, given our

³⁸² It is worth noting here that Merleau-Ponty began to lean more heavily on a concept of “institution” in the mid to late 1950s. This is explicitly presented by Merleau-Ponty as development of his self-critique of his earlier work as preserving a “philosophy of consciousness,” something he seems to worry could be read in the notion of expression and its connection to a constituting consciousness. In the course notes to “*L’institution dans l’histoire personnelle et publique*,” Merleau-Ponty specifically frames institution against “constitution.” This latter is “almost the contrary of instituting: the instituted has sense without me, the constituted has no sense except for me and for the me of this moment... The instituted encroaches upon its future, has its future, its temporality.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L’institution dans l’histoire personnelle et publique & Le problème de la passivité: le sommeil, l’inconscient, la mémoire - Notes de Cours au Collège de France (1954-1955)*, ed. Claude Lefort (Tours, France: Belin, 2003), 37. Translations are my own. It should thus be clear that “institution” is nothing but the paradoxical logic of expression, which always contained the germ of moving beyond a philosophy of consciousness. The expression institutes. Thus, when Merleau-Ponty writes that “what we understand by institution are those events in experience which endow it with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will acquire sense, will form an intelligible series or a history” (*RC*, 61/108-09), we have to hear the very logic of “advent” that Merleau-Ponty names here *expression*. Moreover, we need to recognize that in the later texts, the notion of expression remains, and thus we should not too quickly replace the notion of expression. Indeed, if “institution is neither accidental nor *entelechy*: one never changes and one never remains the same. One is absolutely free and absolutely

corporeality (IL, 108/67), recalling the title of this investigation, and now leaves us with the final question of how this corporeality of expression leads towards an ethics.

And here we start to see Merleau-Ponty fully working out one of the themes I have been drawing on above, the idea of responsibility. If our actions, I have argued, are a creative taking up of the past, then we make ourselves responsible for that past and the future that will result. Each repetition is not merely passive, it is a re-institution. We are not just guilty by association, we are guilty in the sense that we repeat, sustains, and reshape the ideal structures that we play forward through our actions. Consider how Merleau-Ponty puts the point in this context:

By action, I make myself responsible for everything; I accept the aid of external accidents just as I accept their betrayals [...] I claim to be master not only of my intentions, but also of what events are going to make of them. I take the world and others as they are. I take myself as I am and I answer for all. (IL, 72/116)

This series of claims, interspersed with quotes from Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, is not meant to lead to the banal conclusion that we are all guilty, that we all share in the crimes or oppressions of society. Indeed, we might feel equal pull from a response that admits everyone is innocent on this account. What Merleau-Ponty wants to say is certainly not captured by either of these extremes. Merleau-Ponty wants to promote a "unremitting *virtù*" in the face of the contingent nature of action, and thus understands Hegel to be rejecting a judgment by *either* intention or consequences. "A man is judged," then, "by neither intention nor fact but by his success in making his values become facts" (IL, 117/72). In other words, an act is judged by its expression, by the field it opens up, by its being taken up in the community or not. The rule by which to judge action is not whether it was "efficient," but whether it is "fecund" (IL, 117/72). And thus, the logic and movement of expression are a particular understanding of Hegelian dialect as a creative and non-teleological movement that gathers together its own past through its own initiative in order to crystallize again the movement in which its existence depends.

As Merleau-Ponty concludes: "So the Hegelian dialectic is what we call by another name the phenomenon of expression, which gathers itself

pre-figured," Merleau-Ponty, *L'institution...*, 57. We can only understand institution from the logic of expression, so long as we take the lesson of seeing expression as nowhere a mere *making public of the inner*. We can say, with Barbaras, that "[e]xpression does not use history: it makes itself history," Barbaras, *De l'être du phénomène*, 58. The logic of expression and its shared paradoxical movement is what connects painting and history in this very fecund moment of "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence." See further, Barbaras, *De l'être du phénomène*, chapter 4.

up and launches itself again through the mystery of rationality" (*IL*, 118/73). Moreover, Merleau-Ponty also concludes that we have to understand history, then, on the model of the arts and language. Expression in its paradoxical movement is the particular with the universal, the for itself with the in itself, the self with others, and the formation of and response to a situation that will exist only after its own expression. There is no place outside of the movement of history to judge this movement or a particular act. "Others will judge what I have done," writes Merleau-Ponty, "because I painted in the realm of the visible and spoke for those who have ears" (*IL*, 119/73). History is the movement and "conversation" between all gestures and spoken words, and thus the space of judgment is none other than the expressive field of competing, contesting, and repeating gestures. The meaning of history is won within the battle for the expressive field of action, and all of us are responsible for everything. "The words, lines, and colors which express me come out of me as gestures," and in all expression there is some "spontaneity." Words and gestures set up a common field that they also require for their very existence, and this "spontaneity of language which unites us is not a command, and the history which it establishes is not an external idol: it is ourselves, with our roots, our growth, and, as we say, the fruits of our toil" (*IL*, 121-22/75).

(c) "*La perception d'autrui et le langage*" – *Corporealities*

L'écrit parle aux hommes et rejoint à travers eux la vérité. Nous ne comprendrons tout à fait cet enjambement des choses vers leur sens, cette discontinuité du savoir, qui est à son plus haut point dans la parole, que si nous le comprenons comme empiètement de moi sur autrui et d'autrui sur moi...

- Merleau-Ponty³⁸³

The penultimate chapter of *La prose du monde*, "Dialogue and Perception of the Other," crystallizes the themes under investigation here. Merleau-Ponty begins with a discussion of the question of algorithm, which he had addressed in the previous chapter. In that chapter Merleau-Ponty argues that there is no way of reaching the algorithm, in so far as it

³⁸³ "Writing speaks to men and rejoins truth through them. We shall completely understand this trespass of things upon their meaning, this discontinuity of knowledge which is at its highest point in speech, only when we understand it as the trespass of oneself upon the other and of the other upon me...." (*PM*, 185/133)

is presented as a truth outside of language. This is because mathematical thought is itself “creative,” and that the “discovery” of the algorithm is the development of something contained in a style of being towards the world, and thus as something both historical and open. The point is that mathematical thought, just like painting, is a “becoming of meaning” rather than an “objective progression” (*PM*, 178/127). The idea of reaching a truth here cannot be one of grasping an idea in absolute transparency, because there is “no signification which is not surrounded by an horizon of naive beliefs and is thus not in need of other clarifications. There is,” concludes Merleau-Ponty, “no expressive operation that exhausts its object” (*PM*, 179/127).³⁸⁴ There is no purely weightless truth; there is only meaning as the center of a complex set of gravitational forces.

Truth is not an adequation between the expression and the world, but rather “the proper domain of truth is therefore this repetition of the object of thought in its new signification, ... the moment something is acquired, there is a step toward truth, the structure propels itself towards its transformations” (*PM*, 179/128). In other words, truth is the possibility of its repetition and the fecundity of its transformations, and so truth is a “anticipation, repetition, and slippage of meaning” (*PM*, 181/129). We never reach truth, because our only approach is through our body and expression, and this is what Merleau-Ponty must mean when he says earlier “each stage of our knowledge is indeed a truth and will be preserved in the more comprehensive truth of the future” (*IL*, 68/42).

Turning now to the question of dialogue, Merleau-Ponty begins by pointing to how the algorithm presents itself as merely talking about *things* by using a purified language. “Nothing is presupposed upon the part of the ideal interlocutor but a knowledge of definitions. There is no attempt to seduce him and no expectation of complicity on his part” (*PM*, 182/131). The algorithm purports to simply take the listener through some impersonal operations on the definitions already possessed towards some truth. The transformations of the meanings are actually contained in the definitions. Merleau-Ponty argues:

...even in this realm of pure significations and pure signs, new meaning emerges from the old only through a transformation which is made outside of the algorithm and is always presupposed by it, and if mathematical truth appears only to a subject for whom there are structures, situations, and a perspective—with all the more reason should we admit that ‘languaged’ [*langagière*] knowledge arouses transformations in the given significations which were contained in it

³⁸⁴ This is precisely the expressive logic we saw at work back in *La structure du comportement*, when we saw that any proof of a law is actually a proof of a whole system of laws.

only in the way French literature is contained in the French language or a writer's future works in his style. (*PM*, 182/131)

In other words, there is no knowledge outside of language; there is no notion of containment that allows a mere deduction. The movement of expression is that of a creative negotiation of what is contained as a metastable potential, not as a set of facts or a text to be translated. Merleau-Ponty suggests that since this is the case even for the dialogue in the purified realm of mathematics, then we should also define speech as saying more than its parts, as preceding itself, and as always this expressive logic of expression either in accomplishing speech in the other or in expressing paradoxically towards that which I will understand after the expression (*PM*, 183/131).

In fact, Merleau-Ponty works out the structure of *empiètement* through expression and dialogue, thus demonstrating how his ontology will be the necessary transgression that is also the possibility of freedom. Consider how he foreshadows this point: "It is speech which accomplishes those anticipations, encroachments, transgressions, those violent operations through which I build within the form and change its operation to make literature and philosophy turn into what they are, to change them into themselves" (*PM*, 183/131-32). Just as the mere addition of a line to a geometric shape only constructs a new shape if someone is there who can see it, so too with the mere physical presence of words must call forth some "operation of meaning" of which those words are but a trace. Moreover, the "containment" of transformations is in the sedimented language only as a "trace or a horizon" (*PM*, 183/132). When the expression is complete, it will seem that the new signification was wholly foreshadowed and contained there, but as a creative expression the "new signification only relights sudden flashes in the depths of past knowledge" (*PM*, 183/132). The past knowledge is invoked by the new meaning, and the new meaning is a "response to and acquiescence in past knowledge" (*PM*, 183/132). When I begin to read, I find words I already know, and yet something is different, and I could not say what. I read along until I get swept up by this new style of handling the world — this weight in my hands becomes a weight in my past and an opportunity for future actions in which I can take it up towards new projects.

The result, according to Merleau-Ponty, is a different sense of truth. The detached and timeless truth of the algorithm doesn't make sense if we cannot have a place outside the trajectories of expression, and so Merleau-Ponty posits a "truth of transparency, recovery, and recollection, in which we participate, not insofar as we think *the same thing* but insofar as we are, each in his own way, moved and touched by it" (*PM*, 184/133). Thus, truth is about *participation* in the trajectory of significations, such that the

expressive acts are shared. Transparency, recovery, and recollection are all open concepts. Someone's words are transparent to me insofar as we are in the same linguistic community, the meaning is true insofar as it can be recovered, and it endures insofar as it can be recollected. And none of this presupposes having the "identical" idea, but of participating in a single trajectory, even if our trajectories only come together for as long as our conversation lasts or as long as you read these vestiges of my expression.

Thus, because "communication" is not transmission of meaning, but rather a participation in the loose trajectory of performance, then the essential form of intersubjectivity is dialogue. Communication is dialogical from the most simple forms of bodily weighing to ideal weighing. In *Phénoménologie de la perception*, we found that the listener's thoughts are accomplished by the orator, a paradigm of *empiètement*, though Merleau-Ponty does not see the violence in that early formulation. We also saw the coming together of personal trajectories in conversation in the "Others and the Cultural World" chapter of that same book, and did begin to recognize something of the threat of relatedness in that Merleau-Ponty emphasized how the meaning of the conversation for the other person and for me can radically alter as we go our separate ways. But there too we saw that the falling back into personal trajectories was the end point of the conversation. Merleau-Ponty here introduces, before all expression and as the background of communication, the "silent relationship with the other—if," that is, "we wish to understand the most essential power of speech" (*PM*, 185/133).

The other, begins Merleau-Ponty, is never truly present *face to face*. The other is not in the violent face, the strained voice, or his or her gesticulations. The body of the other is a "marvelous megaphone" that surely gives "signs of intelligence" (*PM*, 185/133). But the body or the gestures are never really the other, nor is the other "behind" this physical object. The other, suggests Merleau-Ponty, "leads a singular existence, *between* I who think and that body, or rather near me, by my side." The other is not so much a visible body appearing before me as an invisible that "haunts" my surroundings (*PM*, 186/134). The other is present on the margins, *almost* overlapping me completely. The other is "made from my flesh and blood," and yet is not me. The other appears when my gaze is "seized by someone at the other end and sent back to touch me in turn. It is no longer enough for me to feel: I feel that someone feels me, that he feels both my feeling and my feeling the very fact that he feels me..." (*PM*, 187/134-35). From then on, the self is deprived of its central location; it is forever deferred, decentered:

The spectacle begins to furnish itself a spectator who is not I but who is reproduced from me. How is that possible? How can I see some-

thing that begins to see? As we have said, we shall never understand how it is that another can appear to us; what is before us is an object. We must understand that the problem does not lie there but is to understand how I can make myself into two, how I can decenter myself. The experience of the other is always that of a replica of myself, of a response to myself. (*PM*, 187-88/135).

In other words, the problem of the other is solved if I pay attention to the manner in which I am always distant from myself, and this is the paradox of expression. As Merleau-Ponty emphasizes here, it is a relation to the self, as “*self-feeling*” that diffuses to the other. The paradox of expression opens a field of expressivity and meaning, and since the other cannot be in his body or anywhere else, she must be a weight in the field of action that is opened up as that space between me and myself, between my past and my future, and indeed, between my two hands touching. There is then a fundamental reversibility with the other, and this is the foundation of Merleau-Ponty’s emerging ontology. “If I am forever incapable of effectively living the experience of the scorching [of the sun] that the other suffers,” writes Merleau-Ponty, “the bite of the world as I feel it upon my body is [nonetheless] an injury for anyone exposed to it as I am” (*PM*, 190/137). We are in the world together as *corporealities* and yet remain trajectories of meaning; there is a “carnal relation” between the world and the other which allows us to share a world (*PM*, 193/139).

Merleau-Ponty concludes that language “prolongs and transforms” our “silent relation” with the other (*PM*, 193/139). Our “sensitivity to the world, our synchronized relations to it—that is, our body—the thesis underlying all our experiences removes from our existence the density of an absolute and unique act, making a transferable signification of our “corporeality,” creating a “common situation,” and finally yielding a perception of another like ourselves” (*PM*, 194/139). This is just what happens in the dialogue. The other’s speech takes root in our significations, for “we encroach upon one another inasmuch as we belong to the same cultural world, and above all to the same language, and my acts of expression and the other’s derive from the same institution” (*PM*, 194/139). The expressive activity sets up a common situation, because insofar as my expressive activity is a self-clarification and the interlocutor has a similar enough personal history, the understanding of what I say is immediate. Communication happens when we participate in a single trajectory for the duration of the expression. The expression, as a coherent deformation of my metastable structure is a “violent” act that “surpasses all signification” (*PM*, 198/142). There is a violent and productive alteration of passivity and activity, a continuing of a single trajectory together further than either of our personal trajectories could have gone. Moreover,

argues Merleau-Ponty, truth is not a question of contemplation, but rather the manner in which there is a continuity of trajectory:

We say that the true has always been true, but that is a confused way of saying that all preceding expressions revive and receive their place in the expression of the present [...]. The foundation of truth is not outside of time, it is in the opening of each moment of knowledge to those who will resume it and change its sense. What we call speech is nothing but such anticipation and repetition, this touching from a distance, which cannot be grasped in terms of contemplation. (*PM*, 200/144)

What the dialogue reveals is thus the ambiguity of *empiètement*, the necessary violence of relatedness and the necessity of relatedness in the very constitution of a world. In other words, the logic of expression reveals the very foundation of an open ontology of bodies in relations, bodies sharing meaning, that is, *corporealities*.

“L’Œil et l’Esprit”

Le peintre ‘apporte son corps’, dit Valéry. Et, en effet, on ne voit pas comment un Esprit pourrait peindre. C’est en prêtant son corps au monde que le peintre change le monde en peinture.

- Merleau-Ponty³⁸⁵

In July and August of 1960, Merleau-Ponty again took up the question of painting and came to the conclusion that “any theory of painting is a metaphysics” (OE, 42/132). This claim, of course, is a direct connection back to the projection Merleau-Ponty made of the good ambiguity in the phenomenon of expression that “would be metaphysics” (Inédit, 48/11). As Galen Johnson reminds us, this text is very much an ontological treatise in which Merleau-Ponty begins to test out some of the terms he had been developing in his *Le visible et l’invisible*.³⁸⁶ By drawing out some of the themes of this late essay, we can bridge between the explicit work on expression above and the ontological implications that drew Merleau-Ponty away from *La prose du monde* towards putting the urgency of a new ontological foundation at the forefront of his efforts. As we will see, expression is not abandoned, but rather taken up in this new ontological setting.

Although the terms intellectualism and empiricism are left behind, the opening lines of *Eye and Mind* and the first chapter of *Le visible et l’invisible* clearly mark out the same philosophical style that we explored above. As Martin Dillon phrases it, “Merleau-Ponty presents this critique in two phases, the first directed against scientific objectivism (that is, empiricism), and the second directed against idealist subjectivism (that is, intellectualism).”³⁸⁷ Thus, in a treatise on painting that opens with the claim that: “Science manipulates things and gives up living in them” (OE, 9/121), we find Merleau-Ponty’s long-standing critique of “*pensée de*

³⁸⁵ “The painter ‘takes his body with him,’ says Valéry. Indeed we cannot imagine how a mind could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings.” OE, 16/123.

³⁸⁶ Of this manuscript, we can say that *Eye and Mind* was written in the pause between what is published as chapters 1-3 and the most direct statement of the ontology as chapter 4, “Chiasm—The Intertwining.” See Johnson, “IMP,” 36-37.

³⁸⁷ Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 155.

survol” launched this time at scientific thinking (*OE*, 12/122). But what is even more striking is the manner in which Merleau-Ponty shifts from this standard critique into the subject matter of the essay, namely, painting. He, in short, repeats some key gains from the chapter explored above from *La prose du monde*. He enjoins us to return to the “humanly modified world such as it is in our lives and for our bodies,” and particularly our bodies insofar as they stand “silently” at the “command of my words and acts.” Moreover, Merleau-Ponty immediately invokes the other, and not just other bodies in the physical sense, but “associated bodies,” “others who haunt me and whom I haunt; ‘others’ along with whom I haunt a single, present, and actual Being” (*OE*, 13/122-23). These themes establish the continuity of his project, and it is painting, which draws upon “this fabric of brute meaning,” that can help us overcome the operationalism behind objective thought. For the painter, as we quote in the epigraph to this section, can only express by lending her body, as an “intertwining of vision and movement” to this silent world. As Jacques Taminiaux writes, “[t]hinking does not require that one leave the sensible to move to the intellectual, it requires that the individual reflect and retrieve the intertwining structures that are the very ones at work in the sensible.”³⁸⁸

There is another important connection to draw from this chapter as well, namely, *empiètement*. The encroachment of the visible world and the world of my body’s projects leads directly into Merleau-Ponty’s foregrounding of the touching-touched image that grounds his entire late ontology. The “extraordinary overlapping [*empiètement*]” shows how vision is not an operation of thought, of mind, and that “[i]mmersed in the visible by his body, itself visible, the seer does not appropriate what he sees ... he opens onto the world” (*OE*, 17-18/124). On the other hand, my movement is a natural completion of vision, is already nascent in that vision. Perception is the expression of a way of dealing with the world. The result is that the body, as the place of the seeing-seen, touching-touched must be seen as something *like* a “self,” but not a self of transparent thought. This is a self “by confusion, narcissism, inherence of the seer in the seen, the toucher in the touched, the feeler in the felt—a self, then, that is caught up in things, having a front and a back, a past and a future” (*OE*, 19/124). In other words, the body is caught in the fabric of the world, the flesh, and “the world is made of the very stuff of the body” (*OE*, 19/125). Thus, the paradoxical logic of expression is at the very root of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of flesh, and he is quite clear here, this is a result of our corporeality as expressive bodies. This body is not a merely

³⁸⁸ Jacques Taminiaux, “The Thinker and the Painter,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 285.

physical object, but is the spacing between the seer and the visible, where “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 would have sufficed to do...” (OE, 21/125).

Merleau-Ponty goes further, and emphasizes this *empiètement* through the images of echo, implication, or radiation. The things have “an internal equivalent in me,” and their presence arouses in me “a carnal formula” (OE, 22/126). This leads Merleau-Ponty to consider “where” the aesthetic object is. The artwork is not simply in the material of its expression, the figures on the wall of Lascaux are not “on the walls” in the same way that the cracks or dust are. They radiate “about” the wall, “without every breaking their elusive moorings” (OE, 23/126). And the formula Merleau-Ponty uses to try to clarify the situation recalls specifically the logic of expression as it was begun in *Phénoménologie de la perception*: “I see according to it, or with it” (OE, 23/126). Just as the listener thinks according to the words of the other, just as the body is guided through a creative expression in reading, the person looking at the painting is drawn in by the gestures of the painter captured in the almost nothing of the line on a wall. When I see the painting, I do not “have” an image, I perform the gesture that set up this world — the other haunts my landscape in his or her expressions.

Moving now to an account of expression that definitely breaks with the idea of the *simple* making public of the inner, Merleau-Ponty concludes that the image, the expression, is “the inside on the outside *and* the outside on the inside” (OE, 23/126). Expression is that which spreads over the whole world its inner lining of the imaginary, and this is the enigma of the visible. Consider Merleau-Ponty’s description here, which shows the depth of the logic of expression in the ontology of the world:

The eye sees the world, and [sees] what it would need to be a painting, sees what keeps a painting from being itself, sees—on the palette—the colors awaited by the painting, and sees, once it is done, the painting that answers to all of these inadequacies just as it sees the paintings of others as other answers to other inadequacies. (OE, 27/127)

The inadequacies are the “I feel... I don’t know what I feel,” the strange fever which the artist catches, whose only remedy is expression. And through our embodied nature and presence in a world of flesh, the expression spreads to the whole world, and it is the real world with its lining of the imaginary that is the open and urgent situation of expression. There is no pure inside expressed on the outside. The lack of the outside is on my inside. I am wholly spread across the outside through my style of

being towards it. The artwork is neither in me nor in the world, it is the spacing of which must be caught prior to there be a separation. And this is why Silverman can rightly stress that what guides this entire reflection is the logic of self-portraiture.³⁸⁹

Thus, the world encroaches upon me and I upon it, and this silent and fecund encroachment must be the basis for an open ontology that responds to the urgent need to express in the face of the predestined failure of every expression to capture its object. That is, a philosophy that is "interrogation" (*OE*, 28/128). There is no way to distinguish between creation and response; expression is always indiscernibly "action and passion" (*OE*, 32/129). Ending the second section of his text with the following passage, Merleau-Ponty in effect summarizes the ontology of the flesh that results from the logic of expression: "Essence and existence, imaginary and real, visible and invisible—painting scrambles all of our categories, spreading out before us its oneiric universe of carnal essences, actualized resemblances, mute meanings" (*OE*, 35/130).

After the critique of Descartes' attempt to create a vision in thought rather than in the world, which I discussed above, Merleau-Ponty again takes up the question of history. Historical events happen in "the flesh of contingency," and are thus open to the necessary plurality of interpretations. And here we can add another layer to the thesis of "containment" that we discussed above, namely, that the excess of any event or expression, that which we have called the metastable, is not a set of compatible terms. The possibilities are contained together in their status as possible, but would be incompatible in reality. Moreover, looking closer at the event in the past is not to uncover something about it that is hidden there, but to create a "new representation of it" (*OE*, 62/139). But, paradoxically, in these changes and shifts, so long as they are in contact with it, the event or the work of art also "change it only into itself" (*OE*, 62/130).

After exploring the role of color, line, and depth in painting, Merleau-Ponty suggests that we can now understand just how much metaphysics is hidden in the little word "see." (*OE*, 81/146). Against the Cartesian, seeing is not to be understood a type of thought or self-presence, we cannot replace the eye with the mind.³⁹⁰ Rather, seeing "is

³⁸⁹ For this interesting reading of this text, see Hugh J. Silverman, "Between Merleau-Ponty and Postmodernism," in *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics, and Postmodernism*, ed. Thomas W. Busch and Shaun Gallagher (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), particularly 262-64 and 76-77. In fact, this invocation of self-portraiture could be interestingly extended to the aesthetic work of Jean-Luc Nancy, where the tracing is always the ex-scription of the body and world of the painter.

³⁹⁰ For an intriguing discussion of Merleau-Ponty's investment in vision/painting, see Mikel Dufrenne, "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 260-61.

the means given me for being absent from myself, for being present from within at the fission of Being" (*OE*, 81/146). In other words, vision is that by which I open up onto *that which is not me*, and this spacing is what happens in the logic of expression. From being the mute silence calling for expression, I break this silence in an attempt to speak it, and fail. But only by breaking it does this silence gain any foothold, felt experience itself would be nothing, weightless in my past. "Through vision," writes Merleau-Ponty, "the painter touches both extremities" of that which comes to the eye directly and that which come with it, indirectly, the invisible layer of everything we see. The body, as both visible and seen, is engulfed by this chiasm. "Vision is the meeting, as at a crossroads, of all the aspects of Being" (*OE*, 86/147). In the initiation of visibility, a "between" has crystallized that contains, in Merleau-Ponty's fecund sense of this word, all the expressions that will come to try and reconcile and bridge the opening of experience as the decentering of the subject.³⁹¹ In this circuit, there is no way of distinguishing "where nature ends and the human being or expression begins." And connecting us now most explicitly to the logic of expression through his favorite Husserl formulation, this time modified into his own voice and hence taken up into his own effort: "It is, then, silent Being that itself comes to show forth its own meaning" (*OE*, 87/147). Let us end this section with the final words Merleau-Ponty ever sent for print, in which we unmistakably find the logic of expression in one of its most clear formulations:

If no painting completes painting, if no work is itself ever absolutely completed, still, each creation changes, alters, clarifies, deepens, confirms, exalts, re-creates, or creates by anticipation all the others. If creations are not permanent acquisitions, it is not just that, like all things, they pass away: it is also that they have almost their entire lives before them. (*OE*, 92-93/149).

³⁹¹ For an excellent account of how Merleau-Ponty's *L'Œil et L'Esprit* engages with a post-modern account of subjectivity and merges with an account of the Sublime, see: Hugh J. Silverman, "Traces of the Sublime: Visibility, Expressivity, and the Unconscious," in *Merleau-Ponty: Difference, Materiality, Painting*, ed. Véronique M. Foti (Amherst, NY: Humanities Books, 2000). In particular, Silverman's discussion of a Lyotardian notion of Desire in relation to Merleau-Ponty's account of expression and "brute being" is particularly relevant to this relationship between expression and ontology. Reconciling the claims "the subject is chiasm" and the "subject is sublime" (130), towards which Silverman offers the first steps in this paper, seems to me a key to understanding the continuity of Merleau-Ponty's work and the post-modern approach to subjectivity.

Part III, Chapter 6

Expression and the Invisible: The Performance of Responsibility

Comme il y a une réflexivité du toucher, de la vue et du système toucher-vision, il y a une réflexivité des mouvements de phonation et de l'ouïe, ils ont leur inscription sonore, les vociférations ont en moi leur écho moteur. Cette nouvelle réversibilité et l'émergence de la chair comme expression sont le point d'insertion du parler et du penser dans le monde du silence.

- Merleau-Ponty³⁹²

Le visible et l'invisible is a tragic text. Interrupted by the sudden death of Merleau-Ponty on May 3, 1961, it remains forever in a nascent state. Supplemented by pages of working notes which offer contradictory plans for the layout of the text, which sometimes clarify and sometimes confuse the points from the more or less coherent chapters that do exist, what emerges clearly from the text is an attempt to express an ontology of silence.³⁹³ As I have argued, this project, sparked by the criticisms received for his earlier attempt to return to lived experience, becomes the search for a philosophy that is up to the task of expressing an open ontology in the face of the inherent failure of expression. Thus, the enigma of *Le visible et*

³⁹² "As there is 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, the vociferations have in me their motor echo. This new reversibility and the emergence of the flesh as expression are the point of insertion of speaking and thinking in the world of silence." VI, 188/145.

³⁹³ For an intriguing attempt to reconstruct this project from the fragments, notes, and lectures from 1952-1961, see Douglas Low, *Merleau-Ponty's Last Vision* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000). Indeed, Low contends that the extensive work on *Nature* and *Logos* come together through these late works in a manner quite consistent with the position so far sketched here. Of course, properly accounting for the intricacies of the *Nature* lectures is a large project in itself, and we will only note this connection below.

l'invisible is no different from that of any expression, and indeed, as we have just said, no expression according to Merleau-Ponty could be complete. The trajectory of Merleau-Ponty's thought thus remains to be explored, though I do not pretend to know just where he was going. I can, however, attempt to complete the account of the logic of expression, to clarify the philosophy of interrogation and an ontology of the chiasm, the "absurd effort" of trying to state our contact with Being, its inevitable failure, and the need to continuously begin again (VI, 164/125). In other words, it seems that for Merleau-Ponty, philosophy itself is expression, for expression is never complete, always historical, and always calling to be taken up again. A philosophy that attempts to state Being without closing down or fixing that being — without laying claim to the entire field of truth — is a performance of *responsibility*.

Le visible et l'invisible begins with a return to perception: "We see the things themselves, the world is what we see" (VI, 17/3). This begins an interrogative reflection on what Merleau-Ponty calls throughout this work the "perceptual faith," the commitment to the world we see as existing in itself, over there. When we try to express this faith in the terms of traditional metaphysics, however, we end up with a "labyrinth of difficulties and contradictions" (VI, 17/3). Perception is like time, we live it without any sense of mystery until someone demands that we try to explain it. We have found that the phenomenon of expression is of the same order, that we all live it unproblematically until we try to explain it. This shows again the deep consequences of the paradoxical logic of expression: the attempt to explain perception or time fails because it is expression, and because expression is forever incomplete. If it is the phenomenon of expression that we attempt to express, our path is doubly threatened — and this is the treacherous path of *Le visible et l'invisible*: "Ceaselessly the philosopher finds himself obliged to reinspect and redefine the most well-grounded notions, to create new ones, with new words to designate them, to undertake a true reform of the understanding" (VI, 17/3). This need is not because of the failure of having grasped the phenomenon in question, nor of having not yet found just the right vocabulary that will end the search.

The philosopher, rather, has set herself on an impossible path: "It is the things themselves, from the depth of their silence, that it wishes to bring to expression" (VI, 18/4). She knows perfectly well what she is looking for, but only as the impulse for expression that I have continuously returned to above. "I feel... I don't know what I feel." The enigma of the world is continuously renewed in the philosopher's lived experience. She does not replace being with a certain "perhaps," a certain negation, embodied by Sartre. She opens an interrogation that is a hyper-dialectic, a dialectic that has no synthesis. Rather, the philosopher's questioning is:

...the only way to conform itself with the vision we have in fact, to correspond with what, in that vision, provides for thought, with the paradoxes of which that vision is made, the only way to adjust itself to those figured enigmas, the thing and the world, whose massive being and truth teem with impossible details. (VI, 19/4).

In other words, philosophical interrogation is an attempt to correspond with the teeming field of weight, the world, and the ideal that shapes our place and that are shaped by our gestures.

Merleau-Ponty attempts to rethink the description of vision by articulating an expressive relation that he calls the flesh. We can see the logic of expression in his descriptions of vision when he says, "in perception we witness the miracle of a totality that surpasses what one thinks to be its conditions or its parts" (VI, 23/8). Further, the perception of the other again becomes a key to the opening of our experience, and is it the fundamental spacing that allows for all *empiètement*. Thus, the reversibility of my touching hands and the reversibility of myself and the other are the same fundamental structure of encroachment and possibility. The moment I feel one hand touching the other, I cease to feel the other one touching. This failure is not to be explained away, and it "does not drain all truth from that presentiment I had of being able to touch myself touching" (VI, 24/9). This is precisely the failure of expression, the presentiment, the vague fever, that is crystallized in the expression is always a failure to coincide with that which one is trying to express, and this neither negates that which it aimed at nor satisfies the attempt. The incessant call to express is the inherent desire sparked by the world the "moment I open my eyes" (VI, 17/3), that is, the moment there is the spacing out and sharing of *empiètement*.

Thus, argues Merleau-Ponty, "the visible and the philosophical explicitation of the visible are not side by side as two sets of signs, as a text and its version in another tongue" (VI, 57/36). The point is that vision is given to us, and must be so, if we are to compare it with the philosopher's attempt to explain it. But the philosopher's attempt to translate this naive experience into words will always be "more and less than a translation." It is more than a mere translation because "it alone" can tell us what the visible "means;" it is less than a translation because it doesn't remove the need for the original (VI, 57/36). The paradoxical logic of expression here reveals that the expression of experience is both necessary and destined to be incomplete. There would have to be, for philosophy to be responsible interrogation, a sort of "hyper-reflection" that takes "itself and the

changes it introduces into the spectacle into account" (VI, 59-60/39).³⁹⁴ In order to do this, it must "plunge into the world instead of surveying it, it must descend toward ... [i]t must question the world ... it must make it say, finally, what in its silence *it means to say...*" (VI, 60/39). The philosopher must leap with faith into the very world in which she is trying to understand the very obscurity of which she is the introduction, and this leap is the only responsible act. There is no escape to a pure thought; there is no question of reflection discovering a truth of "what I always was" (VI, 73/49). In other words, philosophical expression is both responsive and creative, and it is "motivated by the intertwining of my life with the other lives, of my body with the visible thing" (VI, 73/49). As we have already said, there is no question of my being an inside and the world being an outside. I am on the outside, and the world is on my inside. This is what it is to be an expressive body.

Now, in addition to this hyper-reflection, Merleau-Ponty also introduces a "hyper-dialectic" as a remedy for a closed dialectic, whether it be Hegel (from who he gets the formulation just stated above) or from Sartre. This second chapter is a difficult one, and we will leave much to the side here. The point of the hyper-dialectic, however, or the "good" dialectic, is that dialectical thinking errs when it assumes the possibility of an absolute or positive new position. This is what Merleau-Ponty means by a "dialectic without synthesis" (VI, 127/94-95).³⁹⁵ "In thought and in history as in life," writes Merleau-Ponty, "the only surpassings we know are concrete, partial, encumbered with survivals, saddled with deficits" (VI, 127/95). In other words, there is no movement from a less to a more real state, and there is no break that doesn't carry with it its past. The weight of the past cannot be jettisoned in a final truth or in an existential

³⁹⁴ For a discussion of the relationship of hyper-reflection as a radical repetition of the phenomenological gesture, see Ted Toadvine, "Phenomenology and "Hyper-Reflection," in *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*, ed. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008), especially, 28.

³⁹⁵ For an important aspect of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of negation, the reader is referred to his "Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Hegel," particularly page 52. As we have noted before, this course notes from 1960-61 rejoin many of the themes of this study, and in relation to this point Merleau-Ponty explores the "good" ambiguity which is not a negation or fixing of experience, but rather an entering into the thickness of experience, an embracing of the absolute which is "between" knowledge and experience "The very formulation," argues Merleau-Ponty, "of this living 'ambiguity' makes experience disappear" (53), that is, the absurd effort to express silence again reappearing here in Merleau-Ponty's very understanding of the dialectic of philosophy and non-philosophy. [My appreciation to Professor Silverman and Professor Lawlor for encouraging me to consult this course during the public defense of this dissertation.]

decision, and thus the negation of the self is not a “nothing,” but rather an overcharge of meaning, a metastable.³⁹⁶

As Merleau-Ponty draws towards the end of the following chapter, the ontology of the flesh comes more and more into focus. We find a vibrant discussion, for instance, of the manner in which the seer/seen doubling reveals the spacing at the heart of flesh that is our being. That is, this ontology is an ontology of weight:

I the seer am also visible. What makes the *weight*, the thickness, 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 homogeneous with them. (VI, 150-51/113-14, emphasis added)

There is a “coiling up or redoubling” of the visible upon itself in the always abortive attempt to coincide with itself, which is thus the place of the massive and latent content of the past of ideality inscribed in the world (VI, 151/114). The ideas, concludes Merleau-Ponty, are “encrusted” in the joints, pivots, and axes of my body and the world, and each manner of being this hinge is a certain style and a certain historicity. In order to understand this description, Merleau-Ponty invokes language. “Like the flesh of the visible,” argues Merleau-Ponty, “speech is a relation to Being through a being” (VI, 156-57/118). In other words, speech too is an expressive being, and it comes into being against a background that it itself creates; it is a self-arrival, just as the visible is a self-arrival of vision in a world that will never be fully seen. Speech is weight. “As the world is behind my body,” explains Merleau-Ponty, “the operative essence is behind the operative speech also” (VI, 156/118). Thought, if it is to be considered “an ideality,” must be something that *fails* to satisfy my hunger, an ideality is an expression that will be taken up again by myself, by others, or if written, by “every possible reader,” but only insofar as it responds to the desire to express and yet does not complete this desire (VI, 156/118-19). This is what we get in the dialogue; words have meaning insofar as they convey the urgency that they *must* be taken further. This is the fecundity of a style, mute and yet always producing noise. And this is precisely the task of philosophy, which is “that language that can be

³⁹⁶ As Barbaras argues, the approach to ontology through the perceptual faith helps Merleau-Ponty to present a philosophy of “something,” which is not a positive thing. The original *for itself* is derived from an originary *écart*, that of sensible presence through reversibility. As such, the “subject” is understood as the “not nothing” of this spacing, and this is Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of “difference.” See Barbaras, “Perception and Movement: The End of the Metaphysical Approach,” 81.

known only from within, through its exercise, is open to the things, called forth by the voices of silence, and continues an effort of articulation which is the Being of every being" (VI, 166/127). In other words, philosophy is the forever abortive attempt to bring "still mute experience" to the "pure expression of its own meaning" (VI, 169/129).

The logic of expression again appears to drive the rich final chapter of *Le visible et l'invisible*. We have already given a sense for the philosophy of the flesh and the importance of reversibility. This final chapter shows a marked shift from vision to touch, and it seems to us that this shift is one called for by the logic of expression. In the experience of touch, as Dillon has argued,³⁹⁷ there is much less a danger of thinking of vision as "having" the object at a distance. For Merleau-Ponty, touch helps to clarify how vision neither envelops nor is enveloped by the visible.³⁹⁸ In touch, there is contact and spacing, and the logic of the flesh, although equally applicable in the realm of vision, is best clarified by the experience of touch. "We must," argues Merleau-Ponty, "habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out 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

³⁹⁷ For this argument, and the relation to vision, see, Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 157-60.

³⁹⁸ The enveloping/enveloped schema also appears in Merleau-Ponty's intriguing course notes on *Nature* from the late 1950s [Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*]. As has been recognized, these courses provide an important insight into Merleau-Ponty's late ontology. In the courses, Merleau-Ponty argues that although the concept Nature is intertwined with history, it is also that which always outstrips history. This first emerges in his discussion of Schelling, who recognizes in Nature a "weight of Being behind freedom" that both restricts freedom but that also makes it possible (48). Or again, Merleau-Ponty criticizes Marx for failing to see Nature as a productive "weight or inertia," something his own early reading of Marxism clearly overlooked as well. The logic of weight again is used in reference to Husserl, "[t]he unreflected in Husserl is neither maintained as such nor suppressed: it remains a weight and a springboard for consciousness. It plays the role of founding and founded" (72). As such, "everything is Nature" (73), and is why "the concept of Nature is always the expression of an ontology—and its privileged expression" (204). Thus, nature becomes the wild logos. But this is not a meaning in itself, the metastable can come to expression, and it is precisely from the several years devoted in his teaching on "language" that Merleau-Ponty finds he arrives again at Nature and ontology (220). Thus, the study of nature is precisely the study of expressive ontology, for every attempt to speak an ontology is just one leaf of a single "being in which we already are at the moment we speak, and which can be globally defined as what is not nothing.—Nature, life, man, and so *Ineinander*" (220). Although we cannot go off into the complex relationship between Nature and Logos, between these courses and "The Intertwining—The Chiasm," this initial sketch demonstrates the direction a future project could follow. In addition, Merleau-Ponty's reading of nature should be put into conversation with Simondon's philosophy of ontogenesis as well.

and the visible" (VI, 175/134). The point is that the encroachments of the dimensions of being are part of the same trajectory, and are expressed in my body and its style as a manner of taking up a place in the flesh. And in every taking up, there is a massive invisible involved, past experiences, horizons of experience, future experiences, all play in any moment of visibility. What is opened by "the reversibility of the visible and the tangible, is — if not yet the intercorporeal — at least an intercorporeal being" (VI, 185/143). In other words, what we have discovered through the paradoxical logic of expression of expressive corporeality is *intercorporeality* — from the very nature of expressive perception, as a style of taking up the world, we are already *together* in that world, sharing it as we sustain it and take it up together.

"This flesh," argues Merleau-Ponty, "that one sees and touches is not all there is to flesh, nor this massive corporeity all there is to the body" (VI, 187/144). The structure of reversibility happens not just between my body touching itself and my body touching other bodies.³⁹⁹ It also happens in a fields in which "it is even incomparably more agile there and capable of weaving relations between bodies that this time will not only enlarge, but will pass definitively beyond the circle of the visible" (VI, 187/144). This is of course Merleau-Ponty's taking up of the strange movements of my body that go nowhere, in a sense, the contractions of my vocal apparatus that make up my voice and my cry. I am sonorous, I know it from the inside, and I seem to also hear the other's voice inside me too. There is a reversibility between "phonation and hearing," there is a "sonorous inscription" (VI, 188/144). My body is the place of a "new reversibility and the emergence of the flesh as expression," which "are the point of insertion of speaking and thinking in the world of silence" (VI, 188/145). The voice has a strange power of seeming to erase corporeality. But the voice is still an inscription in the world; the voice is still a vibration through my head (VI, 192/148). There is always, even here, an incessant failure to capture meaning in its totality. "This is not a failure," writes Merleau-Ponty,

...[f]or these experiences never exactly overlap, if they slip away at the very moment they are about to rejoin, if there is always a 'shift,' a 'spread,' between them, this is precisely because my two hands are part of the same body, because it moves itself in the world, because I hear myself both from within and from without. (VI, 192/148)⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁹ For an excellent discussion on the centrality to "reversibility," see Dillon's discussion in Chapter 9 in Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*.

⁴⁰⁰ This is the focus of Barbaras' chapter "The Last Chiasm," in which he discusses the fundamental notion of *dimensionality*. Most importantly for our project, however, is how

Thus, although “the bond between the flesh and the idea” is the “most difficult point,” it nonetheless confirms my reading of weight. As Barbaras writes, “[e]xperience envelops and appropriates what surpasses it, closes itself around the hollows that break it, comes to weigh down with its depth that which breathes transparency into it.”⁴⁰¹ For Merleau-Ponty, the visible is inhabited by the invisible, an invisible that sustains and renders the visible world possible (VI, 196/151). The ideas or meanings of a word or phrase are precisely an invisible, and this is an invisible that weighs upon us and every expression that paradoxically sustains the visible and fails to reach it. “The performer is no longer producing or reproducing the sonata,” argues Merleau-Ponty, “he *feels himself*, and the others feel him to be at the service of the sonata, the sonata sings through him or cries out suddenly that he must “dash on his bow” to follow it” (VI, 196/151). Our bodies are subject to the weight of the ideal because we *feel* its questions and understand tacitly just how to respond, just as Matisse grasped what was at stake in the next stroke, and had the genius to modulate with the ambiguity of an expression that was still in the process of becoming, lending his body to aid in the birth of that which was coming to be before his eyes. An expression can never exhaust the metastable that each performance carries forward, that “never-finished differentiation, that openness ever to be re-opened between the sign and the sign, as the flesh is ...the dehiscence of the seeing into the visible and of the visible into the seeing” (VI, 199/153). The arrival of speech changes the structure of the world for vision and yet is inscribed there itself, it is a creative taking up of the past of mute perception towards a future of truth that will never be complete and that will never coincide with mute experience. Once we have ears to hear, the “whole landscape is overrun with words... is henceforth but a variant of speech before our eyes” (VI, 201/155), and, following Husserl, the “whole of philosophy ... consists in restoring a power to signify, a birth of meaning, or a wild meaning, an expression of experience by experience” (VI, 201/155). And as we have seen, this absurd effort is as much our inescapable task as it is the source of our infinite responsibility.

he concludes: “Experience is the expression of Being, but because in this expression the expressed undoes all attempts at appropriation, it is just as much the experience of a world.” Barbaras, *De l’être du phénomène*, 354/09, and generally chapter 17.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 354/08.

Conclusion

Responsibility and the Ethics of the Metastable

La vraie morale ne consiste pas à suivre des règles extérieures ni à respecter des valeurs objectives : il n'y a pas de moyens d'être juste et d'être sauvé. ... Elle consiste à être activement ce que nous sommes par hasard, à établir cette communication avec autrui et avec nous-mêmes dont notre structure temporelle nous offre la chance et dont notre liberté n'est que l'ébauche.

- Merleau-Ponty⁴⁰²

This passage is drawn from what is perhaps Merleau-Ponty's most explicit attempt to discuss the moral implications of his philosophical reflection. The context is an engagement with Simone de Beauvoir's novel, *L'invitée* (1943), in which we might say that Merleau-Ponty discovers both the truth *and* the impossibility of dialogue and intersubjectivity. That is, he discovers the truth of what I have been calling *trajectory*. Discussing the principle characters of the novel, Merleau-Ponty writes that "Françoise and Pierre have established such sincerity between them, have constructed such a machine of language, that they are together even when living apart from each other and can remain free in their union... the *wenness* [*l'être à deux*] was sustained by all that happened to each one of them" (MN, 52/30). Yet even in the heroic attempt to construct a world *à deux*, an attempt to join two trajectories so perfectly so as to leave no remainder, there are always "fissures," breakdowns, and "[e]lsewhere' and the 'other' have not been eliminated; they have merely been repressed" (MN, 52/30). One expressive being can join with the trajectory of

⁴⁰² "True morality does not consist in following exterior rules or in respecting objective values: there are no ways to *be* just or to *be* saved. ... It consists of actively being what we are by chance, of establishing that communication with others and with ourselves for which our temporal structure gives us the opportunity and of which our liberty is only the rough outline." MN, 71/40.

another through dialogue or through reading. The nature of communication as gearing into and performing the traces of expression allows us to be in a world haunted with others, to co-create a dialogue, to leave behind solipsism. None of these openings can break definitively away from our status as a trajectory, a process of individuation, and a carrier of a personal metastable structure. Even if I co-create the dialogue, even if I give myself over to the orator such that the end of the speech “will be the lifting of a spell,” at the end of the speech or when I part ways with my interlocutor I take up that past into *my* history and *my* gestures, my entire life to come will shift and deflect its meaning. It becomes a certain weight in my life, and thus its meaning is shaped by all other events and simultaneously reshapes them in return. Moreover, I relinquish any control over what the dialogue means for the other, as she continues the same process of incessant expressive movement and sedimentation as well. Nothing, and certainly not the world *à deux*, is ever *irrevocably accomplished*.

The interactions between the characters in *L'invitée* also reveal, according to Merleau-Ponty, that mineness over we-ness is never pure either. “All action,” writes Merleau-Ponty, “is a response to a factual situation which we have not chosen,” and so there is “no absolute innocence and – for the same reasons – no absolute guilt” (*MN*, 66/37). This opposite point also reveals the logic of expression. We are never able to express *ex nihilo*, we always find ourselves implicated in systems or institutions that preexist us and outlast us. “Everywhere,” writes Merleau-Ponty, “there are meanings, dimensions, and forms in excess of what each ‘consciousness’ could have produced; and yet it is men who speak and think and see. We are in the field of history as we are in the field of language or existence” (*Préface*, 37/20). There is no experience, no history, except for a subject situated within metastable networks from which action springs. These fields can never be made explicit and are both larger than us and sustained by our actions. As we saw as early as *Phénoménologie de la perception*, this atmosphere, which is the other side of the operative intentionality of our bodies, spreads out from us “like an odor or like a sound,” or is the “individual haze through which we perceive the world” (*PhP*, 207/195). History and the sedimenting expressions of others silently prepare the motivations and limitations of my action.

The paradoxical logic of expression, then, reaches to the very core of our being. We can never be fully alone and we can never be fully together. Our actions bridge this paradox; we accomplish this paradoxical being through our expressive nature, by being both a repetition and a creation of meaning. I take up these sedimentations that make my actions possible and I launch myself towards a future that paradoxically calls for me to create its very existence. Thus, our actions are a coherent deformation of the traditions they repeat and they are also a setting into motion of

meaning that does not stop at the tip of my pen: actions “change their meaning as they issue and spread out from us” (MN, 66/38). Our lives and our gestures are fundamentally contingent upon how they will be taken up, and so we must act in a world in which our most noble gestures could quickly *become* the very opposite of our intentions, given the accidental configurations they encounter. Our actions take up a history that we did not choose and create a future that is beyond our control.

But Merleau-Ponty refuses to conclude from these facts that all action is merely absurd or that everything is meaningless. Such a conclusion is only possible if one begins from a *pensée de survol*, or from a naïve existentialism that leans too far towards skepticism (MN, 69/39). One must rather seek the middle ground, a place from within the concrete situation, a place from which to view the paradoxical logic of expression as it is accomplishing “what appeared to be impossible when we observed only the separate elements, a spontaneity which gathers together the plurality of monads, the past and the present, nature and culture into a single whole” (*Inédit*, 48/11): “that other miracle, the fact that, in an absurd world, language and actions do have meaning for those who speak and act” (MN, 69/39). We must seek responsibility in the concrete relation to the other and seek meaning in the world as it comes into being. Expression is the negotiation of a complex field of real and ideal forces – only here, from within a proper accounting of expression, can one speak of responsibility, for “confronted with the folly of action,” “one may be tempted to conclude with equal justice that there are only the guilty ... and only the innocent” (IL, 116/72). As Merleau-Ponty writes, “[b]y action I make myself responsible for everything; I accept the aid of external accidents just as I accept their betrayals” (IL, 116/72). Our actions must not be judged based solely on intentions nor based merely on their consequences, but rather on our competence in the face of contingency and ambiguity. Thus, what we have discovered in the paradoxical logic of expression and the ontology of expressive bodies in communication is a nascent ethics of responsibility. But before I offer a final sketch of just how this picture provides what Merleau-Ponty called the “principle of an ethics,” and what this resulting ethics might look like, let me return briefly to the pathway that has led to this point.

* * *

Part I explored the phenomenological disruptions to be found in the experience of expression. By returning to the actual act of expression, the experience of the accomplishment of speaking or communication, we saw that one could not rely upon the conviction that expression was the

straightforward making public of the inner thought, complete and transparent for itself. I suggested that expression should be understood as “any action subject to the weight of the ideal,” and began to problematize just how we need to understand “weight” and the “ideal.” Then, I shifted focus to Collingwood’s theory of art, and particularly the relation between his strong claim that every human gesture is a work of art and his polemic against the “corruption of consciousness.” For Collingwood, expression begins with a certain feeling, an “I feel... I don’t know what I feel,” a *strange fever*, that is only given meaning retroactively by its successful expression. Expression, happening in the material into which it arrives indicates that the artist and the audience have a similar relation to the work of art, that the work is a self-clarification, and that its trace remains for anyone who has ears to hear. Such a notion of communication implies the idea that the reader “performs” the work of art, and that communication is a joining together of my life with the trajectory of performances of the trace of the work of art, beginning with a first performance by the artist. Collingwood argues that there is a responsibility for this action of self-clarification that is shared by the community, and that although the artist’s intervention may be “prophetic,” the task of avoiding the corruption of consciousness falls to all the members of the community. However, moving beyond Collingwood’s idealism required drawing out the operative concepts of the logic of expression with Bernard Waldenfels. In addition to *écart*, *après coup*, translation, and excess, I added the concepts of weight and of the metastable. In order to clarify the role of the metastable as the tensed system of potentials and as implying a reality of relations and a trajectory of non-causal expressions, I offered a brief survey of some key concepts from the work of Gilbert Simondon.

In Part II, I turned to a more direct analysis of the paradoxical logic of expression with the exploration of three examples of weight: (1) The weight of the past in action; (2) the weight of our bodies as expressive beings and of written language in our expressive fields; and (3) the weight of meaning as trajectory in metaphor. In the first chapter of Part II, I argued that there is a similar structure between Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of expression and Bergson’s account of the past in his writings on memory and habit. Certain bodies are subject to non-physical forces that nonetheless weigh upon how they move, and this amounts to a theory of the taking up of the past through a sort of bodily genius that recognizes the present situation as calling to these powers towards a future. This “taking up” is understood to imply a situated responsibility in that each action that could have been otherwise involves some choice, however determined. In the second chapter, I turned to Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Husserl’s *Origin of Geometry*. Here I examined the role of the written as the paradigmatic form of communication and the importance of our bodies as

having the ability to express or speak out [*aussprechen*]. As the trace or vestige of an expressive act, the written offers the properly situated expressive body the opportunity to re-trace the expression, to bring it again to life by lending its body to the trace. I argued that this would always introduce a difference in the meaning since the meaning will be the outcome of the performance or production in relation to the layers of experience that we bring to the our performance of the written trace. The ideal is not ideal in any classical sense, but is the metastable source of all action that, although never contained by any consciousness, it owes its very being to the existence of the real bodies that hold it as potentially meaningful acts. By joining my life to the trace, I take it up and make myself responsible for the movement of its meaning, for as Dufrenne says, the reader weighs down the work with his own sedimentation, and he exposes the work to the dangers of objectification.⁴⁰³

This notion of the trajectory of meaning through the many performances of the trace provided the basis of the theory of metaphor as presented in Chapter 3 of Part II. Merleau-Ponty, I argue, leaves no room for metaphor in the classical sense, but does seem to hold that metaphor is, in a sense, *everywhere*. The trace is the opportunity for a life or a trajectory *à plusieurs*. As the other side of the expressive act, the death of the author, and the possibility for rebirth, the trace is the locus of communication and community. The study of metaphor reveals a fundamental *empiètement* that is exscribed, not inscribed, in the metaphor, and thus a fundamental intertwining of speakers and things. But since what is exscribed is a *metastable* set of indeterminate potentials, one has to be careful not to populate the ideal with a set of complete ideas. Thus, all of our initiatives are born in the hollows of Being, and each performance is both a repetition and a creation of a meaning that never exhausts what it was seeking to express. The absurd effort of expression is the engine of the theory of meaning as trajectory. Thus, meaning is a function of a reading, a performance, a phase in the evolving history of the trace.

In Part III, I turned to the careful study of Merleau-Ponty's whole corpus of writings in order to establish that the paradoxical logic of expression is actually his fundamental philosophical gesture. I presented a

⁴⁰³ For this point, see in particular: Dufrenne, "Literary Criticism and Phenomenology," 245. Dufrenne's discussion of the justified pride felt by the reader, for her or his role in promoting "the work to its true being" as an artwork is interestingly connected with Blanchot's suggestion that every reading must be airy, innocent, and in some way *irresponsable*. Dufrenne's conclusion, that "irresponsibility is the true way of assuming responsibility without ostentation" reveals the true ethical paradox at the heart of expression. Although I would part ways with Dufrenne on several points, here he captures something essential to the relation between art and ethics. See, Dufrenne, "Literary Criticism and Phenomenology," 244-47.

nascent expressive logic in his earliest engagements with Descartes, Scheler, and Marcel, and demonstrated an implicit logic of expression across his first book, *La structure du comportement*. Finding the expression to be the guiding gesture of *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Merleau-Ponty fully articulated the idea of an expressive and embodied subjectivity as the accomplishment of temporality and freedom. In Merleau-Ponty's political thought, the logic of expression reappears through his understanding of political action and the idea of responsibility in the face of contingency. Here he came to fully articulate the role of *empiètement* as a fact of expressive embodiment. This fundamental paradox of expression was then worked out explicitly through his texts on expression in *La prose du monde* and other essays on language and aesthetics. Speaking was seen as a way of spacing myself from myself and of trying to bring to expression that metastable pre-linguistic silence that both initiates and always escapes expression. This logic of metastability can be seen in the figure of containment as explored by Merleau-Ponty, which grounds the notion of an open trajectory of meaning. Expression is public, though not a making public of the inner in the classical sense, and reveals our fundamental reality as *corporealities*, that is, expressive embodiment in communication with each other and with the world, as *empiètement*. Finally, in the posthumously published *Le visible et l'invisible*, Merleau-Ponty developed an ontology of the flesh. I have demonstrated the continuity of Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy with his attempt to answer the critiques of his early work through the identification of philosophy as the absurd attempt to express one's contact with Being, to bring to expression that which is a charged and metastable silence that both overflows us and requires us as the spacing in which it can be opened. The ontology of the flesh, then, is guided directly by the paradox of expression. This later account of "flesh" did not negate the earlier work, but rather helped to clarify how each of us is intertwined with the world, how we are the stuff of the world, and hence chiasmatically always on the outside and inside of each other.

* * *

Although Merleau-Ponty surely worried about the role a "philosophy of consciousness" played in his earlier work, he never ceased looking for an account of our experience, as we can now say, as the locus of the metastable. Our experience of acting within the field of ideal weight is the ground of his philosophical anthropology and his humanism. What is revealed in his deepening logic of expression is that we are expressive bodies *essentially* in communication. Once we give up the idea of a pure mind coding or decoding thoughts and signs, once we commit to the idea

of meaning as performance, we can see that as expressive bodies, “we” are inherently intersubjective.⁴⁰⁴ For Merleau-Ponty, I am open to the world, my fundamental capacity is that of being infected by meaning, and – from the moment I am swept up by the buzzing world into the linguistic one that has already made a place for my body amongst its ideal configurations – I am forever caught in the game of taking up and sustaining that which precedes me and yet which needs me. Through our words, our traces, and our gestures we are together in the world, and our expressive being allows us to join together in communication, to share meaning, and yet precludes our ever joining definitively.

What Merleau-Ponty has discovered, then, is the fundamental *empiètement* of human being. Through my being as a certain trajectory of meaning, as an accumulation of sedimentations and possibilities, I am already in communication; I *am* communication. My current gestures express the past, my grasp on the landscape, my place in the culture, and my expectations for the future. My body is not punctual, it is the place of a trajectory, my whole life has sedimented into my posture and my possibilities, and I am subject to the weight of the ideal. I am the crystallization of a field of forces, the placing into communication of dimensions that were not previously connected, and the creation of myself and the milieu in which I stand. Since expression is public, the other is not an absolute Other. We already contaminate each other. We already shape and haunt the landscape together. Not as pure minds who transmit messages across the thickness of the world, but as bodies who weigh upon each other’s possibilities, whose gestures sketch out the world together and turn it into the world *for anyone*, whose traces offer each other the material that a body needs to gear into another manner of being in the world. Others are already on the inside of my gestures, of my being as an expressive body, exscribed as the invisible of my own visibility, and “[a]ll those we have loved, detested, known, or simply glimpsed speak through our voice” (*Préface*, 36/19). Human being is the general capacity to be infected by meaning and to be the expression of a world. In our being *as* communication we “draw the other by invisible threads like those who hold the marionettes—*making* the other speak, *think*, and become what he is but never would have been by himself.” “Our traces mix and intermingle; they make up a single wake of ‘public durations’” (*Préface*, 36/19). In other words, the paradoxical logic reveals that expressive embodiment is fun-

⁴⁰⁴ [My thanks to Professor Silverman who, during the public defense of this thesis, emphasized the importance of the plurality of such formulations. He indicated that there is a notable tendency in this dissertation to leave open the account so as to allow something of a singular plural, that is, something of the post-deconstructive ontologies explored by Jean-Luc Nancy.]

damentally an *empiètement* and that communication both *makes* us what we are and turns us into something we could not have been in isolation. Thus, it requires a metastable that *includes* the reality of relations, an open ontology of bodies essentially in relation and responding to the weight of an ideal that shapes them and yet owes its existence to their very configuration.

But even if this notion of the fundamental expressive nature of human beings reveals the simultaneous violence of *empiètement*, even if the *fact* of our expressive embodiment is violent intersubjectivity, how, one might wonder, will we be able to move to the claim that we have responsibility for the outcomes of our action or that this entails a notion of ethics. "From the moment I exist," writes Merleau-Ponty, "I act, I seduce, I encroach [*j'empiète*] upon the liberty of the other" (*ESA1*, 64). But this fact does not tell me *why* I ought to act in any particular way – the fact of my encroachment does not immediately imply a value, an ethics. Is there a good reason to understand our invocations of *responsibility* as a question of morality over causality? To answer this question will require another extended study, but we are at least in a position to sketch an initial response. For Merleau-Ponty, there is no *outside* of the concrete movements of embodied being. There is no eternal realm that could offer a guarantee for ethical claims. The fundamental intertwining of expressive bodies, that is, an ontology of *corporealities*, seems hardly able to provide an ethical critique of particular actions. Considering the structure of expression again, it seems one can glimpse such an ethics.

As I have argued, expression is the taking up, sustaining, and reshaping of a certain manner of treating the world. Every expression is accomplished in the weighty, responds to a felt urgency, and thus every gesture is public, is already in communication with those who have ears to hear. Each expression "remains as an exemplary type and will survive in other situations in another form. It opens a field" (*IL*, 116/72). Just as reading a book is to take on a responsibility for the trajectory of its meaning and to forever its future claim on my voice, so too is every gesture and every expression a claim on the whole community. Every action is thus political.

Why would one manner of expressing be ethical while another one is not? As I have argued, Merleau-Ponty's understanding of violence is quite broad. If the fundamental nature of human being is to be open and expressive, then our being as intersubjective *empiètement* is violent. Our mere presence in the other's landscape reshapes the very metastable potentials of which she is the carrier; our gestures and our words reshape the configuration of her ideal and her real world. The very possibilities of my freedom depend upon this situation. The world can only be meaning in and for community. Since meaning is not something I have, but is

rather something produced in the movement and traces of a community, the worst violence would seem to be the one that denies the other the freedom to be an expressive body, that does not allow others to take up and negotiate the world as they see fit. That is, a violent act that fails to treat other expressive bodies as ends in themselves, although here for non-Kantian reasons.⁴⁰⁵

And so if we are all necessarily expressive trajectories, and expression happens in community, the logic of expression sketches out an ethics of bodies. The very meaning of our words and our gestures is determined not by our intentions, but by how they are taken up in the community. The goal of an expression is self-clarification, and the paradoxical logic of expression indicates that no expression can be complete. Thus, the unethical expression is the one that attempts to shut down the history of meaning or the expressive potentials of others, the attempt to speak like God, to close the effort of moving towards the truth. And the "truth" is never something one could reach on one's own. The *empiètement* that shuts down the expressive potentials is not just violence to the other, but *to oneself* insofar as the other is part of the real metastabilities of my being and of my community's movement towards a more complete expression. Expression is not about responding to values outside the world, but, as William Hamrick says, it is the effort at "establishing communicative relationships and creating and recreating values by working to change the world such that values may really be instantiated. ... Moral artistry in the sense that the agent works within the limits of her materials to concretize a certain vision."⁴⁰⁶ Thus, one could conclude that Merleau-Ponty's account of expression leads to the claim that expression is responsible when it is "fecund," when it increases the expressive potential of the metastable field, when it enables a community to reach a greater self-clarification and self-expression without thereby shutting down expression. In other words, responsible expression is the answer to Collingwood's call to stand against the corruption of consciousness.

Such a position could not be offered by a traditional ethics. The paradoxical logic of expression has demonstrated the impossibility of defining values outside of the concrete movement of being together in community and it has revealed the fundamental *empiètement* that makes something like a Kantian ethics of the rational subject impossible as well. Ethics, it seems, can be neither about pure intentions nor preferred out-

⁴⁰⁵ For an excellent discussion of how Merleau-Ponty's philosophy displaces the Kantian moral subject and yet remains importantly ethics, see William S. Hamrick, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'Ethics' as an Ambiguous, Embodied Logos," in *Merleau-Ponty: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, ed. Ted Toadvine (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 143-44.

comes. Ethics would have to be about the development of a responsible character in community as an open and expressive project. There are no “means to *be* just and no means to *be* saved” (MN, 71/40). From within the concrete reality of the metastable situation, I must act, I must negotiate the competing and irreconcilable demands, I must *encroach*, and there is no decision-making procedure that can guarantee that I find the right path. As such, “moral decision-making is much closer to artistic expression.”⁴⁰⁷ This notion of encroachment, generalized from artistic practice and political intersubjectivity points toward a “virtue ethics” of responsible expression – for the ethical would be that which develops the potential for expressive action, which is to be found in *character*. Every action is a negotiation of the weight of the ideal and of the real situation, and the virtuous person is the one who tries to cultivate a field of lesser violence and to institute a sedimentation that opens a more expressive future. Given the existential side of Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of expression, and given the reality of relations and the centrality of the notion of field, a Merleau-Pontian notion of “virtue ethics” would have to remain open in terms of content, in that there could be no eternal list of virtues that could alleviate us of the exacting task of expression, of taking up the past towards an open and contingent future.

* * *

Because we are expressive bodies that can be infected with meaning, we are born into an ethical situation and its purchase upon us is universal and total. We have the peculiar quality of being able to glimpse our potentials, to test out our metastabilities, and to reshape our future through our present action. Thus, do we not also have the responsibility to cultivate our metastable fields for the *potential* violence it carries forward? This is just another way of working out the logic of style or containment we saw above: the virtuous person is the one who develops the art of expressive being that leads to a lesser violence. There is no “withdrawal” from *empiètement*. Language, community, and values only exist intersubjectively, we can only be free together, and we necessarily *encroach*, we are necessarily together as soon as we can say “we,” to speak with Jean-Luc Nancy. Thus, the virtuous person would be the one who navigates this structural ambiguity *responsibly* with a respect for the freedom of others. What that means in terms of action is always unclear. We never have control or full information, and yet we must act. That is why there is no answer to what “a virtuous person would do in situation X,” because

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 145.

virtue is an embodied historical competence for a certain type of ambiguity, not an abstract value or rule that can be applied in a thought experiment. Virtue is an art, not a technique, and the paradoxical logic of expression opens up the urgent call for an embodied and intersubjective “virtue ethics” that is itself a rethinking of the very concept of virtue.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁸ [I would like to thank Professors Casey and Lawlor for suggesting the importance of the link between virtues and the virtual that seems to be at work in my argument. This will be pursued in a future work. I should also thank Professor Alia Al-Saji, McGill University, for a very helpful discussion that influenced the conclusion of the this dissertation.]

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APPENDIX

Abbreviations⁴⁰⁹

- AD Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Les aventures de la dialectique*. Paris: Gallimard, 1955. [Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Adventures of the Dialectic*. Translated by Joseph Bien. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973.]
- C Aaron Ridley. *Collingwood*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- CA Claude Lefort. *Sur une colonne absente. Écrits autour de Merleau-Ponty*. Paris: Gallimard, 1978. [Excerpts from sections considered in Part III, Chapter 4 translated as: Claude Lefort. "Thinking Politics." In *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, edited by Taylor Carman and Mark B. Hansen, 352-80. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.]
- CAL Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "La conscience et l'acquisition du langage." In *Psychologie et pédagogie de l'enfant. Cours de Sorbonne, 1949-1952*, 9-87. Paris: Verdier, 2001. [Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*. Translated by Hugh J. Silverman. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973.]
- CR Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Christianisme et ressentiment." In *Parcours: 1935-1951*, 9-33. Paris: Verdier, 1997. [Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Christianity and ressentiment (1935)." In *Texts and Dialogues: On Philosophy, Politics, and Culture*, edited by Hugh J. Silverman and James Barry. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1992.]
- DC Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "La doute de Cézanne." In *Sens et non-sens*. Paris: Nagel, 1948. [Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Cézanne's Doubt." In *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, edited by Galen Johnson, 59-75. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996.]
- EA2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Être et Avoir. Compte rendu de l'ouvrage de Gabriel Marcel." In *Parcours: 1935-1951*. Paris: Verdier, 1997. [Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Being and Having (1936)." In *Texts and Dialogues: On Philosophy, Politics, and Culture*, edited by Hugh J. Silverman and James Barry, 101-07. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1992.]
- ESA1 Emmanuel de Saint Aubert. *Du lien des êtres aux éléments de l'être. Merleau-Ponty au tournant des années 1945-1951*. Paris: J. Vrin, 2004.

⁴⁰⁹ In all citations, if two page references are given, the first will always indicate the original language publication. For example: (PhP, 30/40) indicates page 30 in the cited French edition of *Phénoménologie de la perception*, and page 40 in the cited English version.

- ESA2 Emmanuel de Saint Aubert. *Le scénario cartésien. Recherches sur la formation et la cohérence de l'intention philosophique de Merleau-Ponty*. Paris: J. Vrin, 2005.
- ESA3 Emmanuel de Saint Aubert. *Vers une ontologie indirecte: Sources et enjeux critiques de l'appel à l'ontologie chez Merleau-Ponty*. Paris: J. Vrin, 2006.
- Ex Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "La philosophie de l'existence." In *Parcours deux: 1951-1961*, 247-66. Paris: Verdier, 2000. [Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "The Philosophy of Existence." In *Texts and Dialogues: On Philosophy, Politics, and Culture*, edited by Hugh J. Silverman and James Barry. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1992.]
- GL Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "La guerre a eu lieu." In *Sens et non-sens*, 245-69. Paris: Éditions Nagel, 1948. [Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "The War Has Taken Place." In *Sense and Non-Sense*, 139-52. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964.]
- HLP Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Husserl aux limites de la phénoménologie." In *Notes de cours sur L'origine de la géométrie de Husserl. Suivi de Recherches sur la phénoménologie de Merleau-Ponty*, edited by Renaud Barbaras, 11-92. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998. [Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*. Translated by Leonard Lawlor. Edited by Bettina Bergo and Leonard Lawlor. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002.]
- HT Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Humanisme et terreur*. Paris: Gallimard, 1947. [Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Humanism and Terror*. Translated by John O'Neill. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000.]
- IL Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Le langage indirect et les voix du silence." In *Signes*, 63-135. Paris: Gallimard, 2003. [Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence." In *Signs*, 39-83. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964.]
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- Inédit Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Un inédit de Maurice Merleau-Ponty." In *Parcours Deux: 1951-1961*, 36-48. Lagrasse, France: Verdier, 2000. [Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: A Prospectus of His Work." In *The Primacy of Perception*, edited by James M. Edie. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964.]
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- MN Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Le roman et la métaphysique." In *Sens et non-sens*, 45-71. Paris: Nagel, 1948. [Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Metaphysics and the Novel." In *Sense and Non-Sense*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968.]
- MP Taylor Carman. *Merleau-Ponty*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- NH Étienne Bimbenet. *Nature et Humanité. Le problème anthropologique dans l'oeuvre de Merleau-Ponty*. Edited by Jean-François Courtine, Bibliothèque d'histoire de la philosophie. Paris: J. Vrin, 2004.

- Note Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Note on Machiavelli." In *Signs*, 211-23. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964.
- OE Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *L'Œil et l'Esprit*. Paris: Gallimard, 1964. [Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Eye and Mind." In *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, edited by Galen Johnson. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993.]
- OG Edmund Husserl. "The Origin of Geometry." In *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, edited by Leonard Lawlor and Bettina Bergo, 93-115. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002.
- OPL Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Sur la phénoménologie du langage." In *Signes*, 136-58. Paris: Gallimard, 2003. [Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "On the Phenomenology of Language." In *Signs*, 84-97. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964.]
- PArt R.G. Collingwood. *The Principles of Art*. London: Oxford University Press, 1958.
- PEx Bernard Waldenfels. "The Paradox of Expression." In *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*, edited by Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor, 89-102. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.
- PhP Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard, 2006. [Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. New York: Routledge Classics, 2002.]
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- RC Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Résumés de cours: Collège de France - 1952-1960*. Paris: Gallimard, 1968. [Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology*. Translated by James M. Edie and John Wild. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970.]
- RM Paul Ricœur. *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*. Translated by Robert Czerny. London: Routledge Classics, 2003.
- SC Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *La structure du comportement*. Paris: Quadrige, Presses Universitaires de France, 1990. [Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *The Structure of Behavior*. Translated by Alden L. Fisher. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1963.]
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- VI Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Le visible et l'invisible*. Paris: Gallimard, 2004. [Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Translated by Alphonso Lingus. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000.]