

---

## Write, neverendingly

### Ontography in Merleau-Ponty

Sébastien Blanc

MERLEAU-PONTY'S ŒUVRE HAS EMERGED once and for all from the philosophical purgatory of the 1960s–1990s. From Renaud Barbaras' masterful volume<sup>1</sup> up to recent research, and thanks as well to the ongoing work of releasing previously unpublished material, the originality of his thought is now recognised and hailed to the point where the concepts »flesh«, »chiasm« or »reversibility« from his final work are philosophical notions which are not only familiar but above all fertile. At the same time, we have to acknowledge that this is very much about the »later Merleau-Ponty«, which is opposed to an »early Merleau-Ponty« of *The Structure of Behaviour* and *The Phenomenology of Perception*. This now widely shared reading no doubt takes its cue from Merleau-Ponty's own reading of his early work, emphasising its oversights or shortcomings. Particular reference is made to a note from July 1959: »The problems posed in *Ph.P* are insoluble because I start there from the ›consciousness←→object‹ distinction.«<sup>2</sup> Imprisoned by the dualist approach and language imposed on it by the framework of a philosophy of the subject and object, *The Phenomenology of Perception* would not therefore be able to develop the ontological meaning of the problems and theses it encounters. At the very least, it leaves this meaning in a latent state, to be revealed by *The Visible and the Invisible*.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Renaud Barbaras: *De l'être du phénomène*, Grenoble 1991; Renaud Barbaras: *The Being of the Phenomenon*. Merleau-Ponty's Ontology, trans. by Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor, Bloomington 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Le Visible et l'invisible*, Paris 1961, p. 250 (henceforth referred to as VI); Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis, Evanston/IL 1968, p. 200 [Translator's note regarding quotations: translations of quotes are taken from the published translations of the work, where available, with publication details and page number provided. In some cases the translation has been modified, which will be indicated in the footnote along with the reason. Where the English translation does not exist or is not available, the translation is made directly from the French given in the text].

<sup>3</sup> »Results of *Ph.P*:—Necessity of bringing them to ontological explicitation«, VI, p. 234 (183) [the number inside parentheses is for the pagination of the English edition].

Such a reading is justified in part. We believe it has its limitations however, for at least two reasons. Firstly, in denouncing the methodological dualism of *The Phenomenology of Perception*, torn between archaeology and teleology, it introduces a new dualism that is even deeper, because it splits Merleau-Ponty's whole œuvre in two—as though it were divided between a phenomenological moment and an ontological moment, between Husserl and Heidegger. Second limitation: Merleau-Ponty's retrospective criticism of his work is addressed in the first place and above all to the limitations of his own terminology, and not the pertinence of the problems and theses encountered in his previous work. What is at issue is still the impotence of certain concepts to be faithful to what is seen. In a sense, from one work to the other, it is not a matter of saying something *different*, but of saying the same thing, *die Sache selbst*, in a *different way*, neverendingly.

Neverendingly, and perhaps even in vain, if Husserl's catch-cry turns out to be a paradoxical injunction: »It is by considering language,« notes Merleau-Ponty, »that we would best see how we are to and how we are not to return to things themselves.«<sup>4</sup> To return to the things themselves—is this not in effect to aspire to coincide with them and, in the case of philosophical speech, to efface oneself in favour of something ineffable, an »inexpressible *quale?*«<sup>5</sup> Because once we speak we are immediately separated from things and what we say drowns out their quiet murmur and puts up a screen of constituted ideations between them and us. To return to things themselves would, strictly speaking, be to say nothing. This is also the analysis presented in the rest of the passage:

»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 ...«<sup>6</sup>

The philosopher is the one who eternally starts over,<sup>7</sup> the one who, when speaking or writing, realises at the same time that what they say or write is destined to miss what they are aiming for. And yet this effort is not absurd, and the »re-«

<sup>4</sup> VI, p. 164 (125).

<sup>5</sup> VI, p. 300 (252).

<sup>6</sup> VI, p. 164 (125).

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris 1945, p. ix (henceforth referred to as Ph.P); Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith, Routledge 2002, pp. xv–xvi.

of philosophy<sup>8</sup> is not the sign of its impotence, but its very definition. No doubt the paradoxical injunction that marks the programme of a return to things themselves is only made explicit and stated with strength and clarity in the final works of Merleau-Ponty. But we also believe that this tension can be recognised in each page, to the point where it allows us to conceive of the dynamic unity of his work as a whole. Because it seems to us that his texts have always been preoccupied with one and the same project: how do we reconcile, or rather articulate, nature and logos? How do we say what there is to say as faithfully as possible, without giving in to the temptation of silence or of betraying what is seen? There may well be various versions of and ways of expressing this project, but it is always a matter of finding a passage from being to language or from language to being, the place of a possible junction. It can then be readily accepted that Merleau-Ponty's project has never not been an onto-logy, if we also recognise that it is almost reducible to this connecting hyphen, held in this undecidable bond.

*Ontography* is the name I gave, 25 years ago, to this connection. It is less a concept than a programme which, following two paths, takes shape at their intersection: one path which consists in bringing out a logos of the sensible world, and the other which aims to take instituted language back to its fundamental inscription. These paths converge in an intersection or chiasm which is writing: because writing can be understood as trace, archi-text, voice of silence. It is thus the logos of the *Lebenswelt*, the silent speech which rises from the sensible, the not-yet articulated meaning. But it can also be understood as the inscription of human language in this primordial ›there is‹, »in this great mute land which never leaves us.«<sup>9</sup> *Ontography* is thus nothing other than this switching of places: grasping the sensible as language and language as sensible.

## 1. The text of the world

*The Phenomenology of Perception* strives to bring to light a fundamental or operative intentionality which is not that of a constituting consciousness or a pure subject looking down on things but the fact of an embodied existence. The project determines a double movement: a first stage which, against the intellectualist or naturalist approach to perception, conducts a regressive analysis that allows the originating ground of perceptual life to be revealed. This analysis gives way, in a second stage, to a progressive approach which has to account for the constitution

---

<sup>8</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Notes de cours, 1959–1961*, Paris 1996, p. 374.

<sup>9</sup> VI, p. 165 (125) [Translation corrected: published version is »in this great mute land which we never leave«].

of ideations based on the originating ground that has thus been revealed. These two moments draw on the same conceptual spectre or metaphorical network: that of the trace, the text, inscription or decryption. There is no point in listing all the occurrences; a few notable instances will be enough.

Already in the preface, in order to clarify the project of an archaeology of the perceived world which aims to unveil the fundamental intentionality in question, Merleau-Ponty makes use of the image of the text: it is a matter of going back to an antepredicative or natural experience, the one which »furnish[es] the text which our knowledge tries to translate into precise language.«<sup>10</sup> We can see how the image functions here: the perceived world is the first text, which we reach by working backwards from the palimpsest of constituted ideations. This text expresses the source of all signification, the one we must ceaselessly return to and which the empiricist and intellectualist have precisely lost or are unable to decipher.

To be more precise: everything happens as though the text constituted by perception is doubled in both the empirical analysis and the intellectualist analysis. Whether, in the first case, with the supposition of a sort of table of correspondence between nature and mind or, in the second case, by being disregarded and constituted in consciousness. What in fact is presupposed in the first case? »The objective world being given,« its messages »must be registered, then deciphered in such a way as to reproduce in us the original text.«<sup>11</sup> Not only does such an analysis explain nothing, but the constancy hypothesis it supposes between the natural text and its doublet inside us is contradicted by experience. Against this analysis, it would thus be tempting to say that the »text of the external world is not so much copied, as composed.«<sup>12</sup> And yet the intellectualist hypothesis is no more convincing because it substitutes the visible text with significations produced by consciousness.

It is a matter then, as is expressly called for in the next chapter, of returning to »an original text which carries its meaning within itself [...]: this original text is perception itself.«<sup>13</sup> Perception speaks »a mute language« to us, but one that is immediately decipherable by the sensory-motor body which is able to »understand« it by simple »coexistence«. To judge a thing is to directly read the »natural text« which gives me access, without there being any need to appeal to the framework of the laws of association or projection, without the involvement of the understanding. The distance between me and an object can be read from how it looks,

---

<sup>10</sup> Ph.P, p. xiii (xx).

<sup>11</sup> Ph.P, p. 14 (8).

<sup>12</sup> Ph.P, p. 16 (10).

<sup>13</sup> Ph.P, p. 29 (24).

based on the rules of »perceptual syntax« alone,<sup>14</sup> or on the »unspoken transposition« performed spontaneously by the body-subject [*le corps-propre*].<sup>15</sup>

It is not only the empiricist and the intellectualist however who need to translate the text, substitute it or prefer another version to it. There is also the famous Schneider, the patient of Gelb and Goldstein, who Merleau-Ponty took a great interest in. Schneider manifested a very particular problem after an operation he had to undergo: he suffered from figural blindness, a pathology that meant that he, as well, was not able to follow this natural text because he could not draw on »that kind of living system of meanings which makes the concrete essence of the object immediately legible.«<sup>16</sup> Thus, when he is asked to draw something, he »never draws from the model (*nachzeichnen*)«, just as when he repeats a story, »he never does so according to the account given to him (*nacherzählen*)«. Schneider »draws without a model« or repeats stories without a model; he has lost the function of acting according to (*nach*) and needs to »translate« the tasks set for him »via the express meanings of language« in order to execute them. This inability to access the original text, to follow or act according to this text,<sup>17</sup> to extend perception via the expressive gesture it implies or invites, perhaps entitles us to diagnose the empiricist or intellectualist as having a sort of philosophical pathology, a form of blindness to this »primary meaning reached through co-existence.«<sup>18</sup>

The objection may be made that such descriptions work for simple actions and vital behaviour, but no longer apply when it comes to more elaborate activities of the thinking subject. Language may be thought to place us in a universe of ideal meanings and break away from the primordial expression of gesture or mimicry which is read directly in the sensible. The chapter Merleau-Ponty devotes to »The Body as Expression, and Speech,« however, also strives to bring to light the fundamental intentionality that is masked by the sediment of spoken language. The analysis tries to rediscover, beneath instituted language, a »verbal gesticulation« or a »linguistic gesture« which »like all the rest, delineates its own meaning.«<sup>19</sup> In this case as well, ideal meanings are invariably brought back to the »eloquent trace« they are in the first place, because, as Merleau-Ponty clarifies, »thought

<sup>14</sup> Ph.P, p. 45 (42).

<sup>15</sup> Ph.P, p. 196 (195).

<sup>16</sup> Ph.P, p. 153 (151) [Translation modified to reflect context: the original used the term »recognizable« rather than »legible« (for *lisible*)].

<sup>17</sup> We think of course of the distinction made in *L'Œil et l'esprit* between »seeing this« and »seeing according to«. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *L'Œil et l'esprit*, Paris 1964, p. 23; Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Eye and Mind*, trans. by Carleton Dallery, in: Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, Evanston/IL 1964, p. 164.

<sup>18</sup> Ph.P, p. 155 (154).

<sup>19</sup> Ph.P, p. 217 (216).

[cannot] seek expression, unless words are in themselves a comprehensible text.<sup>20</sup> Even poetry, which would seem to take us the furthest away from this originating ground, is not completely untethered: the poem may well be separated from »the gesture which is inseparable from living expression,« but it is »not independent of every material aid, and it would be irrecoverably lost if its text were not preserved down to the last detail. 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.«<sup>21</sup>

*Writing*—and the network of images attached to it—thus occupies a central place in the economy of *The Phenomenology of Perception*, to the point where we could say it is an operative concept. As trace or inscription, it follows an initial archaeological movement which leads ideations back to the originating ground they are liable to forget. As latent meaning or primordial expression, it underwrites a teleological movement because it is the matrix of all signification. A descending movement which leads us back to the ground of antepredicative experience, unveiling the landscape beneath the geography of concepts; an ascending movement that ensures the migration of raw meaning towards articulated speech and higher significations. As though all we had to do was unfold the *text of the world* to find in it the totality of available meanings, as though the whole of language was born there.

But this back-and-forth between genetic analysis and constitutive analysis, this magical transposition from one to the other to which my body has the key,<sup>22</sup> indicates more of a difficulty than a solution. Writing or the text, in their very equivocation, allow this slippage but do not explain it. They are convenient metaphors whose meaning remains partly obscure. The fact that a difficulty persists is indicated in a remark of Merleau-Ponty's:

»It is true that we should never talk about anything if we were limited to talking about those experiences with which we coincide, since speech is already a separation. Moreover there is no experience without speech, as the purely lived-through has no part in the discursive life of man. The fact, remains, however, that the primary meaning of discourse is to be found in that text of experience which it is trying to communicate.«<sup>23</sup>

Does this not, in a lucid but eminently problematic way, formulate the same paradoxical injunction we encountered in *The Visible and the Invisible*, the same imperative and the same impossibility of tracing back to the primary text? If speech

---

<sup>20</sup> Ph.P, p. 212 (211).

<sup>21</sup> Ph.P, p. 176 (174–175).

<sup>22</sup> Ph.P, p. 359 (363).

<sup>23</sup> Ph.P, p. 388 (393).

is separation, if the idea of an experience with which it would coincide makes no sense, how can we understand that we still nevertheless have to go back to this »text of experience which it is trying to communicate«? We have to return to the primary text, to the originating ground, but on the condition that we understand that »the originating breaks up« and philosophical speech »must accompany this break-up, this non-coincidence, this differentiation.«<sup>24</sup>

## 2. Writing as *différance*

This heading assumes an affinity between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida which has always seemed obvious, even though the latter situated his thought »in opposition to« or »without« the former.<sup>25</sup> If, for Derrida, »the problematic of writing is opened by putting into question the value *arkhē*,«<sup>26</sup> if it demands an interrogation of the foundation, the origin, then it seems to us to follow the same path as Merleau-Ponty. The writings that follow *The Phenomenology of Perception* can also be understood as a »putting into question of the value *arkhē*,« such as it is expressed in a still naive or obscure way in the metaphor of the *natural text*.

It is precisely this »unthought« that is interrogated in *The Prose of the World* and the two versions of the article »Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence«. Thanks to the decisive reading of Saussure, the idea of »a prehistoric language spoken in things,« the »myth of a language of things,«<sup>27</sup> is henceforth to be questioned. Linguistics teaches us in effect that meaning takes place nowhere but in words, in their relative difference or divergence, and it dispels »the spectre of a pure language«<sup>28</sup> which still haunts us: »if we rid our minds of the idea that our language is the translation or cipher of an *original text*, we shall see that the idea of *complete* expression is nonsensical and that all language is indirect or allusive—that it is, if you wish, silence.«<sup>29</sup> This primordial silence we must know how to hear is no

<sup>24</sup> VI, p. 163 (124).

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Derrida: *Ponctuations: le temps de la thèse*, in: Jacques Derrida: *Du droit à la philosophie*, Paris 1990, p. 444; Jacques Derrida: *Punctuations: The Time of a Thesis*, in: Jacques Derrida: *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2*, trans. by Jan Plug and others, Stanford/CA 2004, p. 117.

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Derrida: *La différence*, in: Jacques Derrida: *Marges*, Paris 1972, p. 6; Jacques Derrida: *Différance*, in: Jacques Derrida: *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass, Chicago 1982, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *La Prose du monde*, Paris 1969, p. 12; Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *The Prose of the World*, trans. by John O'Neill, Evanston/IL 1973, pp. 6–7.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7 (3).

<sup>29</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Le langage indirect et les voix du silence*, in: Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Signes*, Paris 1960, p. 54; Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Indirect Language and the*

longer the one of *The Phenomenology of Perception*, the mute language of things, but in fact the internal work of speech on itself, the »turning and folding back upon itself«<sup>30</sup> through which language signifies.

What has changed, in short? The decisive change is that we can still think of the world as a text, but on the condition that we understand »text« as a diacritical system of signs, as difference, deviation, encroachment and no longer as a full or positive meaning. There is indeed a text, but it is never already traced or written. Similarly, »truly expressive speech [...] gropes around a significative intention which is not guided by any text, and which is precisely in the process of writing the text.«<sup>31</sup> As we have already seen, the equivocation in the idea of a text is that we might think meaning is already fully deployed or constituted there. This is no doubt why Merleau-Ponty prefers the term trace: thus language »bears the meaning of thought as the trace of a footstep signifies the movement and effort of a body.«<sup>32</sup> The trace says something, but in an indirect or allusive way: it reveals a certain absence, a divergence or negative space,<sup>33</sup> it makes a certain invisible visible.

If we want to follow this slippage in meaning from text to trace, we need to read in detail here the lecture at the Collège de France on the subject of »The sensible world and the world of expression.« Merleau-Ponty seeks to clear up the equivocations of his previous works using the concept of expression.<sup>34</sup> *The Phenomenology of Perception* had already, eight years earlier, showed how such a concept led us back to the idea of an embodied meaning prior to explicit acts of signification. And, in order to stress the novelty and irreducibility of such a concept, Merleau-Ponty had already clarified: »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.«<sup>35</sup> The 1953 lecture seeks to shed more light on this

---

Voices of Silence, in: Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Signs, trans. by Richard McCleary, Evanston/IL 1964, p. 43 [The words »original text« are not italicised in the translation]. The recommendation is addressed of course to those who hold that language is just the stand-in or remake of an already-played-out meaning in things or in thought; how can we not also read it as though Merleau-Ponty was addressing it retroactively to himself?

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 58 (46).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 56 (44) [Translation modified to reflect context: the original used the term »footprint« to render *trace d'un pas* rather than the »trace of a footstep«].

<sup>33</sup> »Sensible being is not only things but also everything sketched out there, even virtually, everything which leaves its trace there, everything which figures there, even as divergence and a certain absence«, Ibid., p. 217 (172).

<sup>34</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression*, Genève 2011, p. 47.

<sup>35</sup> Ph.P, p. 194 (192).



reversible relationship between expression and its meaning, a relationship that *The Phenomenology of Perception* anticipated in part. He does this in particular by drawing on the perception of movement and appealing to the idea of the trace and the Saussurean adjective »diacritical«. One passage among others is worthy of attention here:

»The perception of movement can be compared to the comprehension of a sentence. We only understand the start of a sentence by its end. We only see movement by beginning from where it ends. Perception does not follow it place by place. The sentence is an order that spans the linguistic field, a fold in the fabric of language. [...] Like signs in language, the points that a movement passes through only have a diacritical value, they do not each function on their own by foreshadowing a place, like the words of a sentence are the trace of an intention which only shows through them. Language opens up a reorganised field with different contours and different coordinates to those of the »normal« perceptual field.

Consequently: perception, like language, does not directly confront an ob-ject. The ob-ject only speaks to me laterally, i. e. it does not reach me face-on but from the side, by awakening a complicity in me, its power is obsessional because it is exogenous and endogenous. I. e. it »solicits« me (Valéry). It always presents itself to me like a fragment of a world to be reconstituted, as in literary creation a sentence offers itself to me like part of a work to be created. All of this due to a sort of postural infusion which means that I have crystallised a whole order of nascent meanings on this small branch. Thus language builds itself on itself, in a circular way, on a piece of itself, as the perceived world builds itself on a perspective that appears like a piece of... this world.«<sup>36</sup>

The analogy formulated here, perhaps for the first time, is constantly developed and refined up to the last notes of *The Visible and Invisible*.<sup>37</sup> It allows the sensible to be understood as a diacritical field, which is to say made up of deviations, pivots, decenterings or gaps, and not a positive or objective field of things in themselves. Reciprocally, it makes the speaking or reading subject not a pure constituting consciousness, but a being who inhabits the field of language and who constructs or decipheres an indefinite meaning from the inside. In both cases, it is the same movement of transcendence and not possession, *a text in the process of being written*, and »ontology is concerned with this black and white, it examines its upstrokes, and downstrokes.«<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Merleau-Ponty: *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression* (as note 34), p. 207.

<sup>37</sup> See in particular VI, p. 251 (201), p. 256 (205), p. 263 (213) and p. 273 (224).

<sup>38</sup> Merleau-Ponty in an interview with Madeleine Chapsal, in: *Les écrivains en personne*, reproduced in: *Envoyez la petite musique*, Paris 1984, pp. 94–95. The interview took place 17 February 1958.

### 3. Towards an ontography

If Merleau-Ponty's ontology is an ontography, it is precisely because it does not seek to express Being in a direct way, but always through its traces, which are so many signs of an absence which »counts in the world.«<sup>39</sup> Being is not a text that we could simply read or alternatively cross out: it is a »thread« or a »branch« that has to be extended. The lecture on the *Problem of Speech* in 1953/54 draws out the consequences: no one better than Proust understood »the vicious circle or prodigy of speech, that to speak or to write is truly to *translate* an experience which, without the word that it inspires, would not become a text. The book of unknown signs within me (signs in relief it seemed, for my attention, as it explored my unconscious in its search, struck against them, circled around them like a diver sounding) no one could help me read by any rule, for its reading consists in an act of creation in which no one can take our place and in which no one can collaborate.«<sup>40</sup>

An even more precise commentary on this passage can be found in the unpublished notes used to prepare the lecture:

»Interpretation: to write is to put together an ensemble of articulated language which expresses a certain »internal book«, i. e. the experience of the world and other people in so far as it forms a text, a fabric, inside us, where there are elements that stand in for others, symbolise them, summarise them, order them, without us knowing how to define their strict meaning. To constitute a linguistic ensemble in the same form as the pre-logical unity of our life. In one sense the book is made by this intertwining, all we have to do is »translate« it, »discover« it. In another everything is still to be made, because we are unaware of the rupture of our experience, and we have to make it the principle of a language, the new principle of traditional language.«<sup>41</sup>

The privilege of literary speech is that it highlights the paradox of all genuine expression, which is inseparably both copy *and* creation. This is why the book is at once made and still to be made, why the text is already there and yet only revealed by its translation, why there is, following the beautiful formula of *The Visible and*

<sup>39</sup> VI, p. 277 (228). See also VI, p. 219 (p. 167).

<sup>40</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Le problème de la parole*, in: Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Résumés de cours*, Paris 1968, p. 41; Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *The Problem of Speech*, in: Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France 1952–1960*, trans. by John O'Neill, Evanston/IL 1970, p. 26. Merleau-Ponty is quoting here from *In Search of Lost Time*.

<sup>41</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Le problème de la parole*, in: Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Cours au Collège de France, 1953–1954, cours du jeudi et cours du lundi »Matériel pour une théorie de l'histoire«*, (Volume xii), unpublished, p. 159.

*the Invisible*, a »germination of what *will have been* understood«<sup>42</sup>: the meaning of the movement-expression, whether gesture or sentence, never appears before its ending, but this meaning had already to be there.

It will come as no surprise to say that the philosophical text precisely shares the tensions of literary speech, if »to understand is to translate into usable significations a meaning first held captive in the thing and in the world itself.« But, Merleau-Ponty continues,

»this translation aims to convey the text; or rather 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. If it were a text, it would be a strange text, which is directly given to us all, so that we are not restricted to the philosopher's translation and can compare the two. And philosophy for its part is more and less than a translation: more, since it alone tells us what the text means; less, since it is useless if one does not have the text at one's disposal.«<sup>43</sup>

To say that the sensible is a directly accessible and legible text would be to negate the very meaning of literary or philosophical work. And in effect, »the sensible indeed offers nothing one could state if one is not a philosopher or a writer.«<sup>44</sup> But what does this privilege reside in? No doubt not some extra-lucid perspective, some extraordinary disposition that would make the writer-philosopher a modern Opheus, a new Seer, but in a form of attention and patience in relation to life and the visible which reveals its treasures and secrets. To »render« the text is »more« than translating it, which is to say copying it over, saying it again, because it is a matter of deploying the intentions of the sensible, bringing it to the expression of its meaning. But it is also »less«, because neither the philosopher nor the writer say anything other than what is there, what awaits in the text of the world or in the interior book of thoughts. How can we not think of Proust again and the epigraph to *Jean Santeuil*, quoted by Merleau-Ponty in his 1954 lecture on speech? »Can I call this book a novel? It is perhaps less and much more, the very essence of my life gathered together without anything else mixed in, in these hours of heartbreak where it flows. This book was never created, it was harvested.«<sup>45</sup> In

<sup>42</sup> VI, p. 240 (189).

<sup>43</sup> VI, p. 57 (36) [Translation has been modified: the original translation begins »to understand is to translate into disposable significations ...« »Disposable« (*disponible*) has been changed to »usable« to clarify that the meaning here is that the significations are ones that can be used rather than thrown away.]

<sup>44</sup> VI, p. 300 (252).

<sup>45</sup> Marcel Proust: epigraph to *Jean Santeuil*, quoted in Merleau-Ponty: *Le problème de la parole* (as note 41), p. 119.

philosophy as well, it is always a matter of harvesting: picking and processing, collecting and creating.

Both literature and philosophy are defined as a certain relationship to Being contained in its rupture or corporeal texture, a Being in outline.<sup>46</sup> They are held in the visible that they articulate, they derive from it at the same time as they shape it.<sup>47</sup> What they say or write is nothing other than what they have seen, but what there is to see is only given through the work of saying it.

Ontography is thus the inscription of Being, on the condition that we understand this term as result and action, inscription made and to be made. This is also precisely what is said by:

»[...] the idea of *chiasm*, that is: every relationship with being is *simultaneously* a taking and a being taken, the hold is held, it is *inscribed* and inscribed in the same being that it takes hold of. Starting from there, elaborate an idea of philosophy: [...] It is the simultaneous experience of the holding and the held in all orders. *What* it says, its *significations*, are not absolutely invisible: it shows by words. Like all literature. It does not install itself in the reverse of the visible: it is on both sides.«<sup>48</sup>

To write, then, neverendingly, since »what there is to be grasped is a dispossession,«<sup>49</sup> since the path that leads to Being is already traced, because it must be followed but also invented. »Your philosophy results in a novel«<sup>50</sup> said a vexed Émile Brehier on the occasion of Merleau-Ponty's presentation of his work to the Société Française de Philosophie. Did he not very rightly highlight not a flaw but the considered and accepted ambition of Merleau-Ponty's work?

---

<sup>46</sup> See VI, p. 265 (215) and p. 271 (222) [The published translation uses ›in filigree‹ rather than ›in outline‹].

<sup>47</sup> When Claude Simon tells us »the visible is infinite and literature is infinite [...] does he mean: copy of what is? Doubling of what is? For the writer: what he says is what he has seen—but the thing seen is polymorphous or amorphous. To see is not to think. To write *what one has seen* is in reality to shape it.« Merleau-Ponty: Notes de cours, 1959–1961 (as note 8), pp. 217–218.

<sup>48</sup> VI, p. 313 (266).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Le Primat de la perception*, Grenoble 1989, p. 97; Merleau-Ponty: *The Primacy of Perception* (as note 17), p. 30.