

# Virtuality and Truth. On Literature in Merleau-Ponty's Indirect Ontology

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## Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the importance of literature in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's reflections concerning two strictly connected phenomenological themes: 1) the virtuality of objects and of existence itself; 2) the genesis of truth and the intuition of essences. According to Merleau-Ponty, modern novelists have adopted a phenomenological method: instead of 'explaining' the world through words, they 'show' the lifeworld and its paradoxes indirectly. In his view, and against Jean-Paul Sartre's position, analyzing literature means developing a theory integrating perception and the imagination. Moreover, at the beginning of the 1950's, this perspective led Merleau-Ponty to a deep revision of the Sartrean concepts of spontaneity and engagement in literary practice in favour of a theory of expression as style. As a conclusion, the paper argues for the key-role of literature in Merleau-Ponty's indirect ontology as a way of rediscovering unity and harmony behind the metamorphosis of reality.

**Keywords:** Virtuality, Truth, Literature, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre.

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## Introduction

"Literature has never been as philosophical as it has in the Twentieth Century" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 157). A recurring thesis in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's reflection is that philosophy would benefit from integrating modes of expression traditionally deemed to be non-philosophical – art, literature, and music – as well as contents and methodologies drawn from the Humanities, for instance psychology, ethnology, and linguistics, but also psychoanalysis. From his point of view, this means being consistent

with phenomenology's main task: to investigate expression as sense in a nascent state<sup>1</sup>. Expression is, by definition, an "event" because of its temporal contingency and positive indetermination (Vanzago, 2016: 47). It follows a reformulation of the concept of truth, which is no longer considered to belong to the order of essence and to be describable through concepts; rather, it is deemed to belong to the order of events and to be similar to narration: "Truth is only the memory of all that has been found along the way" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 127). Over the years, a theory of expression as the passage from the silent world of nature to the linguistic world was combined with an indirect ontology, which overcame the traditional ontology referred to objects as stable presences. In this regard, Merleau-Ponty's reflection on language at the beginning of the 1950's played a fundamental role, along with his engagement with Jean-Paul Sartre's stance with regard to literature<sup>2</sup>. They provided the opportunity to rethink writing as a practice or daily exercise, the rhetoric of the author's sincerity and the limits of his political commitment. The recent publication of *Le problème de la parole* (Merleau-Ponty, 2020b), notes for lectures held at the Collège de France in 1953-54, helps further clarify the reciprocal implication between Merleau-Ponty's theory of expression and his indirect ontology<sup>3</sup>. I will discuss them in the last section of this essay.

## 1. Virtuality and truth in modern novels

In the essay *Metaphysics and the Novel*, published in April 1945, and focusing on Simone de Beauvoir's *L'invitée* (English title: *She Came to Stay*), Merleau-Ponty considers the novel a type of expression which allows us to formulate a new kind of metaphysics, intersubjective and non intellectualistic, and capable of illustrating the varied and practical dimension of human life. The modern novel exhibits a metaphysics in act, in place of explaining it by means of ideas. The turning point for both philosophy and literature should be placed at the end of 19th century. Classical metaphysics reduced every question arising from life to an abstract reflection, as if the world could be understood only by concepts. Classical literary language enunciated truths already inscribed in reality, minimizing the author's intervention: "suivre la nature, décrire la nature" with an attitude so-called scientific or objective (Merleau-Ponty, 2013: 70). In Heideggerian terms, this is a traditional conception of truth as the correspondence or conformity of things to the intellect. But this is an illusion, according to Merleau-Ponty: the new metaphysics will distrust the claim that truths can be thematized or directly perceived by intuition. Similarly, modern novelists apply a phenomenological method, since they do not define or directly address philosophical ideas but bring them to life *indirectly* through

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<sup>1</sup> "The beginning is pure and, so to speak, the mute experience, which now it is the issue to bring to the pure expression of its own sense", Husserl, 1960: 38. Cited in Merleau-Ponty, 2012: xxix and Merleau-Ponty, 1959: 157-158. "Votre philosophie aboutit au roman. Ce n'est pas un défaut, mais je crois vraiment qu'elle aboutit à cette suggestion immédiate des réalités telle qu'on la voit dans les oeuvres des romanciers" Émile Brehier had warned him in 1946 (Merleau-Ponty, 1996a: 78).

<sup>2</sup> "Merleau-Ponty seems to think *selon* the modes of artistic creation. This appears even from his philosophical terminology. Some of Merleau-Ponty's most crucial philosophical terms are directly borrowed from literature: "déformation cohérente" from Malraux, "chiasma" from Valéry, and "chair du monde" from Claude Simon", Bernet, 2017: 256. In recent years, some monographic studies examined Merleau-Ponty's reflections on literature: see Johnson, Carbone, de Saint Aubert (eds.), 2020; Apostolopoulos, 2019; Mazis, 2016; Noble, 2014; Landes, 2013; Wiskus, 2013. See also the essays collected in: Simone, Castin (eds.), 1998; Heidsieck, 1993; the 21th issue of *Chiasmi International*, 2019, devoted to the theme of "Merleau-Ponty, literature, and literary language".

<sup>3</sup> On the "important exegetical function" of the first course at the Collège de France, see Andén, 2019.

their stories. It is less a matter of explaining the world than of formulating a contact with it which precedes every thought. Stendhal, for instance, makes subjectivity present through his narration, instead of discussing the concept of subjectivity. Let us consider *The Charterhouse of Parma*: as soon as Rassi, the Minister of Justice, enters the stage, he becomes the symbol of a rogue in the reader's mind, concretely translating an abstract idea into a behavioural style. In *The Red and the Black*, Julien Sorel's determination to kill Madame de Renal, after he has learned that she has betrayed him, is not stated through expressions such as "Julien thought" or "Julien wished". Stendhal reveals – but does not explain – Julien's anger to us through his silence, dreamlike journey, and certainty despite the obstacles along the way: "he makes Julien's voyage according to the cadence of cold passion which selects for itself the visible and the invisible, what is to be said and what is to remain unsaid" (Merleau-Ponty, 1973: 88). The writer knows that the desire to kill should not be *said*. It has to be *expressed* in hectic behaviour, since the reader will recognize it as a possible world resonating with his or her own personal experience.

In the *Fifth Cartesian Meditation*, Husserl named "coupling (*Paarung*)" or "pairing" the act of apperception of the other in his or her corporeity in an empathetic experience (Husserl, 1960: 112-113). Merleau-Ponty extended this coupling to the identification realized through language and gave it an ontological foundation (Merleau-Ponty, 1973: 13 and 2020b: 65). We comprehend the intentions behind written words because a coupling arises between 'the reader's I' and 'the writer's imaginary I' thanks to their common belonging to the lifeworld. "There is a universality of feeling – and it is upon this that our identification rests, the generalization of my body, the perception of the other" (Merleau-Ponty, 1973: 137). In this sense, literature realizes a sort of phenomenological reduction: it exhibits the structure of the experience or pre-logical unity of the writer's life, which the reader can spontaneously understand because of the points of contact it shares with his own life. The nature of these points of contacts or "emotional essences" is what needs to be clarified. In *The Eye and the Mind*, we read that the painter paints because "the world has at least once emblazoned in him the cyphers of the visible" (Merleau-Ponty, 1993: 128). Exactly the same occurs to the writer and his reader: it is an exchange between people initiated into the world, that is into the universe of possibilities which naturally belongs to a human body. The first contact with the world is an irreversible "first pleasure" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 151). From this point on, transcendence takes the form of an opening up to alterity or a desire and "satisfaction signifies the reactivation of desire rather than its extinguishment" (Barbaras, 2006: 177). Language itself is a form of transcendence which originates from the desire to get in touch with the other: the child's acquisition of its mother tongue demonstrates that language is a *medium* for affective development, not simply a super-structure acquired by imitation (Merleau-Ponty, 2020b: 101; Merleau-Ponty, 2001).

Alongside the habitual communicative dimension, language develops a conquering (*conquerante*) function as the capacity to express what has never been said before. There is a virtuality or positive indetermination in being – the 'good ambiguity' also present in Beauvoir's philosophy – and modern novelists try to express it in writing. Montaigne was the first to consider truth "verité du vécu qui sera donc vérité à facettes (je me contredis bien moi-même, mais, à la vérité, je ne contredis pas)" (Merleau-Ponty, 2013: 71). A shift towards modernity is to be found in Montaigne's discovery of himself as a "hollow and avid" conscience and his constantly "‘essaying’ or ‘experimenting on’ himself" by means of a written monologue (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 199). It is equally to be found in the kind of literature that tackles the paradoxes of human existence, starting from the fact that the idea of a clear and distinct rationality is merely a pipe dream and that any subject is not even transparent

for himself. “From now on the tasks of literature and philosophy can no longer be separated” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 28). To adopt this logic of truth coherently means experimenting with new methods in which the truth manifests itself indirectly, in the folds of events. This is the case with Stendhal, who relies on “insignificant but authentic facts (*petits faits vrais*)” playing the role of boundary markers in the “labyrinthe d’un soi-même qu’on cherche à être et que donc on n’est pas” (Merleau-Ponty, 2013: 182; Zaccarello, 2013: 43-44). It is less a matter of truth than it is of authenticity or sincerity: a modern author creates a *Lebenswelt* through details which serve as a symbolic matrix of other ideas for the reader. Possible worlds in literature are worlds coherent and consistent in themselves, yet not closed to the real world, with respect to which they preserve a generative and innovative function. This explains Merleau-Ponty’s appreciation for Rimbaud and Mallarmé’s project, and later Breton’s one. Symbolism and Surrealism share the same effort to set terms free from the automatic meanings they have in everyday life and to affirm the heuristic function of language (Merleau-Ponty, 1996: 7-8). In our everyday life, we employ language as a solid instrument, made up by fixed and shared meanings. Literature, especially Surrealistic literature, shows us how illusionary this assumption is. In Merleau-Ponty’s last lectures we also find some references to the works of Joyce, Faulkner, and Hemingway as authors who deliberately mixed ‘I’, the world, and others and obtain as a result an indirect mode of expression (Merleau-Ponty, 1996: 9-10). The point is that we have no permanent truth in meanings and that there is no stable object in perception. We always find adumbrations (*Abschattungen*) in movements: the object ‘coagulates’ around these imperceptible features, caught at the level of latent or operative (*fungierende*) intentionality.

The relation between words and things is no longer mimetic but dynamic and plastic: words realize a *mise en forme* – *Gestaltung* in German – of the world they refer to. Two observations are in order. First, words and silences shape the context or *Lebenswelt* as a meta-linguistic field determined by the internal configuration of correlated elements. Second, the *Gestaltung* of an object in a field emphasizes the virtual aspects already present in the object itself. Virtuality in painting is expressed by Paul Cézanne’s choice not to trace just a single outline to represent objects but to trace several light outlines in blue. He intended to manifest the world with its true density and depth, that is the dimension in which things present themselves as being inexhaustible and interrelated. There are no *objects* spread out before us, only *things* touching and surpassing one another in a network of reciprocal references. Against the Sartrean distinction between the real and the imaginary, Merleau-Ponty claims that in perception we always have a lateral relation of complicity between things and bodies (Merleau-Ponty, 2020b: 163). Virtuality should be included in perception, not intentionally constituted by the subject. Stendhal’s “petits faits vrais” act exactly as Cézanne’s light outlines in blue: they are used to present the characters’ appearance in light traits and without any exact contours – which, after all, do not even exist in perception. Virtuality, appearance, and depth are the concepts of a new metaphysics which allows us to think objects’ presence in a non-substantial manner. In an increasingly clear way, from the second half of the 1950’s, Merleau-Ponty searches for a “metaphysics of depth” (Merleau-Ponty, 1993: 137) or dynamic metaphysics, which reconsiders the traditional primacy attributed to being instead of becoming. Truth itself becomes dynamic, since its genesis will be investigated on the basis of experience: as is widely known, one of the possible titles for Merleau-Ponty’s last work is *The Origin of Truth*.

Literature’s contribution lies in its ability to display a new concept of truth as “universalité latérale, non d’implication, mais synthétique, dans la succession des peintres comme dans celle d’écrivains” (Merleau-Ponty, 2013: 75). This “lateral or synthetic universality” is already at work in

*Phenomenology of Perception*. In the chapter bearing the same title, the tacit *Cogito* learns the meanings of words in the context of certain situations. Consider the example of the word ‘sleet’: one day, Merleau-Ponty writes, I grasped this word as one might grasp a gesture. The word has never been inspected or analysed but has been caught and taken up by a power of speech in its overall appearance.

This [the acquisition of language] is an encounter between the human and the non-human and, it is something like a behaviour of the world, a certain inflexion of its style, and the generality of its sense, as much as the generality of the term is not the generality of the concept, but rather of the world as schema [*typique*] (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 425).

The adjective “typical” and the term “typic”, just like “body schema”, indicate the configuration of a field of experience endowed with a global meaning: it is a portion of the *Lebenswelt* to which I assign a coherent meaning according to my experience, or – more precisely – according to my capacity of expression. The body itself is already a language, albeit a silent one, since it answers the call of the perceived world (Waldenfels, 2000: 97-98). The body has the power to decipher the world: the grasping of meaning is not an intellectual act, but a response to a solicitation (Kearney, 2013: 186). In *The Visible and Invisible*’s ontology, this power is explained as a “correct focusing”: “My body *obeys* the pregnancy, it ‘responds’ to it, it is what is suspended on it, flesh responding to flesh” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 209, italics in the original). Evidently, between a “typic” and its meanings there is a motivational nexus, not an inference. When a subject accomplishes the generalization of meanings in everyday language, he does not intuit a concept but understand a “typic”. In the previous example, we understand the global aspect or *eidos* which ‘sleet’ has in human experience: we extract its “emotional essence”, i.e. a noema, since it is graspable, repeatable and generalizable (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 425). We can understand this essence because our body has a natural power of expression, which is to say that it spontaneously adopts a certain behaviour in resonance with the environment and exhibits its sense through gestures and movements: “sense is therefore autochthonous, rooted in a corporeal exchange with the world” (Toadvine, 2004: 275). Indeed, language is the extension of bodily expression and gestures.

As Leonard Lawlor remarks, “emotional essence” does not imply that expression is a *subjective* resemblance (Lawlor, 1998: 26; Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 193; on emotional essences, see also Toadvine, 2004: 276). An emotional essence is a manifestation or effectuation of a style of the world, to which there corresponds a style in our body as the *mise en forme* of perceived data. In Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of painting, the notion of style has served both a categorial and an evaluative function; it is never just a series of techniques (Singer, 1993: 233-235). Let us think here of Cézanne’s landscape: the painter grasps the landscape’s “motif” or “monogram”, making latent traits visible (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 17; Merleau-Ponty, 1993: 139). The painter is at the service of Being, insofar as he displays the power of glancing directly from the interior of Being. Thus, it is misleading to pose the question: is the expression a kind of creation or not? We might say that expression is a transition from a silent *logos* to a spoken *logos*. Consider an organism: virtuality is biological even before it is cultural. The “Praktognosia” is a practical epistemology used to describe a body’s capacity to be potentially open to the systems of equivalences encountered in the world. It identifies the self-awareness of the lived body (*corp vécu*) as practical ‘wisdom’, i.e. a power of metamorphosis that is obviously not unlimited, yet still wide and constantly related to environmental solicitations (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 141). In literature, the same mechanism appears: we are open to a system of equivalences starting from our

experience, which constitutes our reference standard. Every expression has to be considered a deviation or difference with respect to our experience, a “coherent deformation” of reality as André Malraux and the Russian formalists put it (Merleau-Ponty, 1973: 91; Malraux, 1978). Therefore, Being acts as a diacritical system which we are rooted, through our body, and within it we should experience endless paths<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, human expressions are comparable to one another, there is a universality of sense which does not involve concepts. Certainly, there remains at least some untranslatable remnant in the transition from the sensible world to the linguistic expression, as well as from one language to another. The phenomenon of ‘creative expression’ in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy has been widely investigated<sup>5</sup>. We are going to discuss its delayed effect or temporal *après coup* (*Nachträglichkeit*) in Merleau-Ponty’s commentary on *L’invitée*. Bernhard Waldenfels describes this paradox in temporality as a withdrawal of the origin, which presupposes a reverse movement of the truth: “If *something* preceded it, like a prior phase or a fundamental strata of experience, the event of expression would again be reduced to something that it is not. [...] *Present* and *past* do not follow one another but are entangled within one another” (Waldenfels, 2000: 96, italics in the original).

## 2. Spontaneity and *praxis*: in dialogue with Beauvoir and Sartre

Merleau-Ponty’s theory of literature is formulated through a constant engagement with Sartre’s and necessarily entails a reconsideration of the role of perception and the imagination, as I have already explained by showing the relation between virtuality and lateral truth. The background to this engagement is well known: in July 1953, the divergences between Merleau-Ponty and Sartre concerned contingent political reasons, but theoretical divergences had emerged long before them and became more and more profound over the years. As early as 1945, in his analysis of *L’invitée*, Merleau-Ponty underlined some points in Beauvoir’s novel which could be read in an anti-Sartrean way (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a). First of all, the story told is appreciated by Merleau-Ponty because it is structurally intersubjective or choral. It describes the development of Françoise and Pierre’s relationship after the arrival of a third element, a young woman called Xavière. Apparently a perfect relationship, it is practically based on a shared yet sterile and lifeless language. Here a third subject comes into play, not assimilable to the couple’s dynamic: Xavère resists this logic, so she proves attractive on account of her ‘wildness’. Beauvoir stages two different modes of communication, both doomed to failure. On the one hand, the constant communication between Françoise and Pierre ends up creating an *intermonde-à-due* as comforting as it is illusory: “Every thought and every event of the day were communicated and shared, every sentiment immediately interpreted and made into dialogue; the we-ness was sustained by all that happened to each one of them” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 30). What we find here is the misunderstanding that language may be transparent for both the speakers and the listeners, a view which reduces it to a series of (supposedly) clear and distinct meanings. This amounts to a failure to take into account the *conquérante* function of language, which, in a couple dynamic like this, acts through silences and hesitations. On the other hand, there is the non-communication of a guest or stranger with respect to the couple, who lives her life at an immediate

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<sup>4</sup> On the notion of ‘diacritical perception’ as key to understand the link between painting, poetry and philosophy, see Kearney, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> On Merleau-Ponty’s theory of expression, see Fóti, 2013; Landes, 2013; Slatman, 2003.

and almost animal level, closed in on herself, without feeling the need to translate her experience into words.

According to Merleau-Ponty, Françoise's life at the beginning of the novel is a continuous self-transcendence through the medium of language: she lives in the deliberate illusion that reality is what she and Pierre are telling each other. In her process of gaining awareness, which entails a deep crisis, the fact of coming to view herself in a new way coincides with the suspension of her everyday attitude. This suspension is accompanied by wonder, which has actually been considered to mark the beginning of philosophy from the Greek tradition onwards. Françoise represents a consciousness awakening to authentic self-knowledge and a genuine experience of the world:

Henceforth, Françoise can no longer know herself from inner evidence alone. She can no longer doubt that, under the glance of that couple, she is truly an object, and through their eyes she sees herself from the outside for the first time. And what is she? A thirty-year-old woman, a mature woman, to whom many things are irrevocably impossible – who, for example, will never be able to dance well. For the first time she has the feeling of being her body, when all long she had thought herself as a consciousness (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 33).

By decentralizing herself thanks to the others' glance, by imagining virtual aspects of herself usually barred to her sight, Françoise discovers 'her' truth: she is not a disembodied soul but a body with desires. Once again, we find the idea of desire as disclosure. She needs the other's gaze to comprehend her wholeness. The intersubjective exchange precedes and grounds the individual's constitution. Meanwhile, Françoise loses the illusion of perfect, unimpeded communication, the myth of the transparency of language, which is actually an opaque exchange. She also affirms the possibility of contradicting herself<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, Beauvoir's characters prove trustworthy precisely because they are not predictable and contradictory: they exhibit their appearance via repeatable, yet not fixed, behaviours. They remain susceptible to partial metamorphosis in the face of new experiences, maintaining both the recognizability of their choices and their freedom of action. A modern novel has psychological depth insofar as it includes this type of virtuality in its characters' behaviour. It is only in this way that the narrative switches from a psychological drama to a metaphysical one. As in Greek tragedy, representation is beyond judgement: without taking any stance for or against this or that character, *L'invitée* encourages us to develop a new moral without victims or guilt.

With regard to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, who had just published his *Phenomenology of Perception*, two aspects of this interpretation stand out: 1) authenticity or self-knowledge is achieved through the re-appropriation of the body and its feelings; 2) the assessment of the authenticity of a feeling requires time, i.e. perspective and distancing. In the final section of *Phenomenology of Perception*, discussing *Being-for-itself* and *Being-in-the-world*, Merleau-Ponty offers the example of a girl who in reading experiences the same feelings as Isolde or Juliet and brings them into her own life. Merleau-Ponty writes that the girl "loses her reality", quoting Sartre: the imaginary process constitutes an *analogon*, that is an equivalent of perception, by isolating an image from the context and by denying its present characteristics. In Sartre, the imaginary testifies to our

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<sup>6</sup> "There is metaphysics and not anthropology because human condition is the monstrous and miraculous place of "problems" which the metaphysic consciousness has to "describe" as many paradoxes and contradictions", Dalissier, 2017: 216 (my trans., italics in the original).

freedom, because as human beings we can always exercise our power to give form to unrealized possibilities in order to create a different reality. Merleau-Ponty criticizes the intentionality of this imaginary process: the girl ‘feels’ imaginary emotions and feelings, but cannot understand the artificial nature of these inner perceptions. She is not aware of how illusory and literary her love is. Thus, she will make this discovery only in the future through experiences: “It is the truth of these future feelings that will bring to light the falsity of her present feelings” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 399). Similarly, in his discussion of Husserl’s *Origin of Geometry*, Merleau-Ponty points out in Bergsonian terms that there is a “truly retrograde movement of the truth (and not only a retroactive effect of the *discovery* of the true” (Merleau-Ponty, 2010: 52, italics in the original). Truth is in itself a regressive movement, i.e. it is another name for sedimentation (Andén, 2018: 198; Waldenfels, 2000: 96).

Literature exemplifies a common situation in everyday life. When we adhere totally to our feelings, for instance in the case of falling in love, we are unable to distinguish between an event and the background of our existence, between “the person I believe I am at the moment when I experience it” and myself (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 398). Merleau-Ponty believes that Sartre’s interpretation of feelings and emotions is psychologistic and disputes the unquestionability of immanent or inner perceptions. For Merleau-Ponty, it is unjustified to assume that a feeling is always true once it is felt<sup>7</sup>. Conscience is a lived experience (*Erlebnis*), which is to say a dynamic unity: the subject *is* time, his self-manifestation is time. The paradigm of perfect evidence and presence cannot be applied to the objects of perception or to consciousness. Freedom itself is located in a temporal structure of retentions and protentions: it follows an unpredictable but globally coherent development. Against Sartre, Merleau-Ponty affirms the conception of truth as relative, not absolute spontaneity: as a variation similar to a melody<sup>8</sup>. Everyone has some potential privileged ‘possibles’ in his or her interaction with environment, which are repeated over the course of his or her life to the point of defining a recognizable style.

For Sartre, on the contrary, man is condemned to be free: he is forced to face the void and to stem the temporality that imposes itself as a dissolving force. The subject can only deny temporality through action. The absoluteness of freedom is defined as spontaneity enabling one to escape from psychological determinism and from external conditions: “Spontaneity, since by definition it is *beyond reach* cannot in turn *reach*; it can produce only itself” (Sartre, 1992: 442). Here is where Merleau-Ponty’s critique comes into play: this is an abstract genesis of the action insofar as it requires a kind of freedom that is renewed at every moment, freedom as an absolute meta-temporal act. Interpreting spontaneity as productivity in an absolute way means transferring the power of *creatio ex nihilo* from the divine to the human sphere. Instead, freedom always ‘appears’ against the background of open

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<sup>7</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 397-398: “From the moment that it is felt, a feeling, considered in itself, would always be true. Nevertheless, let us take a closer look. [...] A true love ends when I change or when the loved person has changed; a false love is revealed as false when I return to myself. The difference is intrinsic. But *since it has to do with the place of the feeling in my overall being in the world*, since the false love has to do with the person I believe I am at the moment when I experience it, and *since in order to discern the falseness I would need a knowledge of myself that I will only obtain precisely through disillusionment*, the ambiguity remains, and this is why illusion is possible” (the italics are mine). Furthermore, 399: “Our natural attitude is not to experience our own feelings or to adhere to our own pleasures, but rather to live according to the emotional categories of our milieu”. In Husserlian terms, the question is whether inner perception is more evident than external perception: whether the distinction between the *dubitability* of the transcendental object and the *indubitability* of lived experience is legitimate. The chiasmic structure, later proposed by Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of flesh, aims to go beyond this distinction.

<sup>8</sup> On the melodic structure of life itself, see Toadvine, 2005; Dalissier, 2017: 153.



situations, soliciting decisions on our part. Every stance is voluntary and related to my specific situation but within an intersubjective world or *Urdoxa*, conceived as a “faith” or “primordial opinion” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 359). This is the reason why Merleau-Ponty remains sceptical even about the existential psychoanalysis expounded in the last part of *Being and Nothingness*. It would be contrived to envisage a writer’s work as a whole which reveals an original project, and literature as the outcome of an “existential choice” (Merleau-Ponty, 2020b: 197). In every form of expression, individual, social, and historical conditionings are simultaneously at work that are impossible to define in a comprehensive manner – just as an exhaustive genealogical analysis is impossible by definition.

The comparison becomes even clearer if we look at literature and at the tasks of the contemporary writer. In *What is Literature?*, Sartre argues: “The work of art is a value because it is an appeal” (Sartre, 1949: 49). What he means is an appeal to action as a transformative *praxis* to modify the existing world. The writer has chosen a secondary mode of action, which Sartre defines as “action by revelation (*dévoilement*)”. Every single written word already involves an impulse to action; hence, revealing already means changing reality. The writer calls his reader to face a common responsibility towards existence: “The function of the writer is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it’s all about” (Sartre, 1949: 24). Modern literature should resist its reduction to the status of a consumer good and a form of psychological investigation, in order to reclaim its militant function. In the 1953 course *Recherches sur l’usage littéraire du langage*, Merleau-Ponty presents some reflections about these themes<sup>9</sup>. Firstly, Sartre makes the writer and the reader almost heroic subjects, ready to renew their freedom in the face of reality at every moment. What if the other were not to heed this call to action? (Merleau-Ponty, 2013: 84) Real freedom means leaving the reader free to decide whether to join the world re-created by the writer and his or her proposals for action, or not. Secondly, Sartre does not accept the idea that the truth of a work is to be found in its process of development and that it partly lies beyond the writer’s awareness. A work’s final form is also the result of contingencies and external factors: the work has an open sense or lateral truth, which requires time in order to show its extent. This does not simply mean that the reception of a work may go against the author’s expectations. More deeply, it means that a work of art needs time to exhibit its own ‘truth’, and that consciousness needs time to understand the authenticity of a feeling. A work’s action is oblique or indirect, since its meaning is open or “over-determined (*surdéterminé*)”: it is not a kind of action producing *direct* results in the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2013: 154). The appeal of a work of art lies in the reader’s awakening to the lifeworld and to the comprehension of the intersubjective connection foregoing any reflection or action. Literature’s function is to modify the reader’s vision of the world even before encouraging him or her to act. Besides, this is a preliminary passage if we wish to solicit conscious action. We can find an example of this in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*: a bourgeois man turned worker always remains a-middle-class-man-become-worker, even though he may have repudiated his past (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 413). Small habits as much as his overall behaviour betray his origin. How can he change, then? Through works of art – literature, in this case – because they systematically extend his comprehension: 1) indirectly showing the conditionings which are already at work in his daily behaviour but at an unconscious or unintentional level; 2) providing alternative behaviour patterns for him through other possible worlds,

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed introduction to this course, see Zaccarello, 2013.

which have the intrinsic value of being plural, since modern narratives structurally includes many different viewpoints.

Merleau-Ponty's critique sets out from the theory of literature to reach ontological assumptions: for Sartre consciousness is solipsistic, closed in on itself. He lacks a social theory to explain the possible transition from individual's commitment to class consciousness. We find confirmation of this in Merleau-Ponty's reading notes to *Aller et retour*, collected in *Situations I*, in which Sartre discussed Brice Parain's recent book *Recherches sur la nature et les fonctions du langage* (quoted by Merleau-Ponty, 2013: 227-237; Sartre, 1947; Parain, 1942). Merleau-Ponty reproaches Sartre for failing to adequately investigate a preliminary aspect: if language is an already synthesized whole, i.e. something spontaneously understood, then the universalizing synthesis occurs at a passive level and does not only concern individual consciousness. In brief, Merleau-Ponty shifts the focus to the act of writing and to the genesis of meaning, because he is convinced that Sartre flatters himself by believing in the transparency and sincerity of consciousness, both in everyday life and in the practice of writing<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, Sartre cannot understand that nuclei of meanings are already exhibited at the lifeworld level as a sensible *hyle* or "emotional essence" already expressed through gestures and language. Consciousness knows itself only through acts, not through reflection – incidentally, this is the core of the Marxist legacy at work in Merleau-Ponty, who remains faithful to the *11th Thesis on Feuerbach*. The only way in which philosophy can understand the world is by joining history instead of contemplating it. From this point of view, Simone de Beauvoir has a much more disenchanted and realistic view, since she writes: "One only escapes from this [doubt] and reaches "sincerity" by forestalling these scruples and by throwing oneself blindly into the "doing" [*le faire*]" (quoted by Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 402). Any repetitive self-reflection risks becoming artificial and misleading or, worse still, a comedy (Beauvoir, 1943: 232). In *L'invitée*, the characters "think as they act and act as they think" – a source of scandal for a conformist society, inasmuch as there is no regret: they are literally a-moral (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 39).

During a radio interview with Georges Charbonnier in May 1959, Merleau-Ponty affirms that Beauvoir is one of the first persons he met at École normale supérieure and that she had a crucial influence on his attitude towards philosophy, which at that time was too "narrow (*étroite*)". He self-critically examined his beliefs and came to recognize just how conventional they were: in that period, he aspired to a traditional rationalism or a metaphysics as a system of concepts, while Beauvoir already knew that expression could be realized in several ways. In her novels, the young Merleau-Ponty<sup>11</sup> found "un véritable amalgame de philosophie et littérature". This was unsettling but at the same time showed him a wider and deeper way of re-thinking metaphysics (Entretien avec Charbonnier, cited in Noble, 2014: 111-113). There are, thus, specific convergences between Merleau-Ponty's position and Beauvoir's with regard to the possibility of a new metaphysics which makes for a "good ambiguity" (Langer, 2003). This idea of a good ambiguity is a way of describing the ambiguousness of being without implying absurdity or a lack of sense. Merleau-Ponty detects a degree of indeterminacy in the phenomenon of expression, which however does not preclude its comprehensibility: consciousness co-exist, they are interdependent or in lateral communication – as points of view logically

<sup>10</sup> Bernet, 2017, 259: "Against Sartre, Merleau-Ponty claims that the revolutionary power of literature concerns language and not the real world, and that revolutions are processes of transformation rather than acts of an unconditional freedom".

<sup>11</sup> As Emmanuel Alloa's recent researches have shown, Merleau-Ponty most likely wrote a novel at an early age, published under a pseudonym when he was twenty (Alloa, 2019).

“impossible” and yet really united within the flesh, in Merleau-Ponty’s later ontology (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 29, 89, 136, 220). In her review of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Beauvoir appreciates the fact that transcendental subjectivity is considered in a genetic or dynamic manner in the light of latent or operative intentionality. She draws the following comparison: if *Being and Nothingness* emphasizes the opposition between ‘being-for-itself’ and ‘being-in-itself’, Merleau-Ponty focuses more on describing the concrete subject or his authentic existence, which is never a pure ‘being-for-itself’. Once Merleau-Ponty restores the original communication with others and the world, morality “does not ask us to do violence to ourselves; on the contrary, it proposes that we espouse the very movement of life” (Beauvoir, 1945: 363). Merleau-Ponty discovers a sense of intimacy with the world in the spontaneous movement of life. It is quite surprising, therefore, that Beauvoir does not explicitly mention him in her essay *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté*, published in 1947. Moreover, by that time her long-time friend had become the ‘philosopher of ambiguity’ *par excellence* in the French intellectual scene (Langer, 2003: 88).

In summary, the notion of good ambiguity is introduced to guarantee the positive indeterminateness of consciousness, displayed in the modern novel. This does not amount to the total absence of criteria to guide our actions, either for Beauvoir or for Merleau-Ponty. On the contrary, it represents an awareness of the fact that every moral foundation is to be pursued in the lifeworld, while we continue acting. The preliminary assumption in Descartes’ provisional morality, in the third section of his *Discours de la méthode*, affirms exactly the same thing: as we are trying to build a solid moral structure, we must find a temporary shelter. We can never shrink from decision-making and action, even though phenomena are structurally undetermined, which is to say neither clear nor distinct. Good ambiguity means that *every* morality is bound to be provisional, since *praxis* demands the urgency to make decisions.

### 3. Exercises in style: the writer and the weaver

In 1948-49, when drafting *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty outlined an articulated program to investigate the mutual relations between philosophy and literature, featuring a discussion of Montaigne, Stendhal, Proust, Breton, and Artaud (Lefort in Merleau-Ponty, 1973: XVI). This extensive project was never completed. However, Merleau-Ponty further developed his analysis of language through the first courses he held at the Collège de France, where he traced the problem back to the broader issue of the transition from the sensible world to the world of expression. The phenomenology of language developed by Merleau-Ponty is neither a deconstruction of language nor a semiotic, but a phenomenology of signs always faithful to a certain embodied presence (Kearney, 2013: 184; about ‘carnal hermeneutics’, see also Kearney, 2015), so-called emotional essences or sensible *hyle*.

As is well known, Merleau-Ponty held the Chair of philosophy at the Collège de France between 1952 and 1961, the year he died. In front of an audience broader than the Sorbonne one, he deliberately chose a topic investigated at that time by Sartre in *What is Literature?*, as well as in his essays on Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Jean Genet, published between 1947 and 1952. Merleau-Ponty’s focus was on the writer’s practice and the passage from life to writing: he was interested in reconstructing the moment when individual experience has been fixed in written words, becoming a universal work of art, a cultural and historical heritage. The following courses were devoted to the theme of institutions in relation to individual and collective history. In the early 1950’s, however, Merleau-Ponty held

courses on *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression* (1952), *Recherches sur l'usage littéraire du langage* (1952-53) and *Le problème de la parole* (1953-54), discussing Stendhal, Valéry, and Proust. We should note that in his analysis of Stendhal he refers to Valéry's interpretation in the *Essai sur Stendhal*, which criticized the myth of spontaneous writing. Agreeing with Valéry, Merleau-Ponty repeatedly underlines that writer's sincerity lies in what he do, not what he says (Merleau-Ponty, 2013: 78, 86). He does not intend to accuse writers of being impostors, tricksters or masks. Instead, he argues that each writer finds his voice through constant exercise: expression is an effort requiring an almost daily practice to gradually modify a collective institution with its consolidated meanings. Each writer imposes his 'cypher' on language, which is recognizable from that moment onwards for his readers. In a page of his *Private Diaries*, Stendhal compares the search for his own style to listening to a sound: "Ce son est dans moi, il faut apprendre à l'entendre 1°, 2° à le produire" (Merleau-Ponty, 2013: 174). "We have to develop an optic", said Cézanne, i.e. to find our own expressive modality starting from nature, and to realize an artistic composition that is original yet comprehensible to the audience (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 13). For a painter, and for a writer, the development of a style constitutes "the actualization of the possibility of expression": style is an option exactly because there is no preestablished way of describing the world (Singer, 1993: 236-239). The rhetoric of creative spontaneity and romantic inspiration should be replaced by 'cynicism' as repeated exercise. Stendhal's behaviour is cynical – in Merleau-Ponty's sens – when in a famous letter of October, 30th 1840, he writes to Balzac: "En composant *La Chartreuse*, pour prendre le ton, je lisais de temps en temps quelques pages du code civil" (Merleau-Ponty, 2013: 66). Merleau-Ponty draws upon Stendhal to demonstrate, against Sartre, that the act of writing implies the writer's engagement but in an indirect or latent way. In brief, not explicitly. A writer's position towards a story is revealed by the adoption of a certain tone and not by explicit adherence to a thesis. Political commitment is not a deliberate choice: it would be better to say that a writer covers topics in which he is interested and issues in which he is involved (Merleau-Ponty, 2020b: 184-185). Against Sartre's claim that literature is the consciousness of a society engaged in a permanent revolution, Merleau-Ponty asks: Where is this society in a permanent revolution? These are 'literature' and 'society' seen as abstract categories by intellectuals. Politics is as out of context in a novel as "un coup de pistole au milieu d'un concert" (Stendhal, 2006: 494; cit. in Merleau-Ponty, 2013: 152). The writer's work has different goals from direct political action: it is a cultural action, understood as a recovery or reprise (*Nachdenken*) of history and a comprehension of otherness.

A writer cannot determine his or her style or tone, since it is a personal vision taking shape through exercise, until he or she becomes able to improvise and not only to compose (see Andén, 2019: 215; Singer, 1993: 236). Style coincides with the set of resources by which a writer or more generally an artist 'makes something appear': in literature, the style includes composition, syntax, and the narrative rhythm. Modern authors have abandoned the mimetic illusion of reflecting the world, choosing instead to present their object through its modes of apparition (*Erscheinungsweisen*). Consequently, each writer must refer to his own "typic" or standard, i.e. to the way in which he or she organizes the experience of the world in the mute contact of perception<sup>12</sup>. The artist's task is to constitute spiritual

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<sup>12</sup> In the obituary he wrote for Merleau-Ponty, Sartre tells the following anecdote: "Je voudrai" me dit (Merleau-Ponty) un jour, "écrire un roman sur moi". "Pourquoi pas", demandai-je, "une autobiographie?". "Il y a trop de questions sans

counterparts to impression. The “true essences” have to be found in the chiaroscuro of existence: the writer builds them within his own life and brings them to expression in his works (Merleau-Ponty, 2020b: 179). Here Merleau-Ponty seems to be claiming that the essence, as the unchanging nucleus of the eidetic variation, requires words in order to be expressed:

Le style, pour l'écrivain, aussi bien que la couleur pour le peintre, est une question, non de technique, mais de vision. Il est la révélation, qui serait impossible par de moyens directs et conscients, de la différence qualitative qu'il y a dans la façon dont nous apparaît le monde, différence qui, s'il n'y avait pas l'art, resterait le secret éternel de chacun (Proust, 1989: 474, cit. in Merleau-Ponty, 2020b: 175).

Style shows us the variation or qualitative difference and, at the same time, allows us to grasp the invariant nuclei of meanings in the lifeworld (Robert, 2008: 155-156). So, the essence lies in “defined separations (*écarts*)”: meaning is what remains despite individual deformations (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 238). In viewing the world created by Proust, for instance, we experience a difference in terms of immanence, because the world in which he lived is the same as ours but it is described from an unusual angle, which makes us lose our centre. In his 1953-54 course held at the Collège de France, *Le problème de la parole*, Merleau-Ponty developed an accurate analysis of Proust's vision, a discussion of which exceeds the scope of the present essay. However, we should note the Proustian attempt to complete the perceptive synthesis by means of memory: the horizon within which things themselves are set only appears at a distance. Proust applies the phenomenological thesis according to which in the present the things perceived are only traces, something allusive and not ‘fullnesses’. Existence itself is a continuous dispersal and this is the reason why only memory can retrospectively fix essences. In *The Visible and Invisible*'s ontology, the point at issue is not so much perspectivism as the promiscuity of glances. Undoubtedly, Being can be seen from different perspectives and gains depth depending on the point of view. This happens, however, because Being itself is a polymorphic matrix on which endless glances could simultaneously be directed, in a continuous metamorphosis. The indeterminateness of the phenomenon is now assigned to Being itself. At this point, if we do not wish to lose ourselves in an endless game of references, we have to base our intersubjective agreement about essences on language: “Show that there is no eidetic variation without *speech*; show this starting from the *imaginary* as support of the eidetic variation, and speech as support of the imaginary” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 236).

The flesh is a sort of multi-dimensional universe which hosts simultaneous expressions without any coordination, like monads without a preestablished harmony theory, that is without God's point of view. In the flesh, harmony becomes communicability by means of “the relation of reciprocal expression of the perspectives taken on the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 222). This occurs because monads are cut out of a common frame, something like a ‘tissue’; they are not isolated points fluctuating without links. Harmony should be understood as the convergence of many point of views towards essences: “it is what we see in perception, to be taken as such instead of *explaining* it” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 223). It is a harmony reconstructed *ex post*, not in the sense that it is artificial or forced, but in the sense that it only emerges as a reprise (*Nachdenken*), although evidently from the

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réponses. Dans un roman, je pourrais leur donner des solutions imaginaires. Que ce recours à l'imagination ne trompe pas: je rappelle ici le rôle que la phénoménologie lui attribue dans le mouvement complexe qui s'achève par l'intuition d'une essence” (Sartre, 1961: 337).

very beginning it was inscribed in the tissue of the sensible. In this respect, harmony will always be found anew, just as Proust's time is re-gained.

The role of literature is to rediscover the harmony as "unity across the metamorphosis of appearances" (Merleau-Ponty, 2020b: 153). In the text of the late 1950's and early 1960's, "what philosophy and the arts have in common is now qualified in terms of an intimate complicity rather than of a mere complementarity" (Bernet, 2017: 255). Literature expresses the imaginary as the other side of perceptive experience, which supports reality as an internal membrane. If perceptive experience is a tissue, the imaginary is its "liner" or "reverse" (Merleau-Ponty, 2020b: 182; 1964b: 45). "Like the weaver, the writer works on the wrong side of his material" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 45). Embodied intersubjectivity is expressed, then, at the language level: language is the instrument of a metaphysical consciousness which tends to experience its life and problems as a functional identity (Dalissier, 2016: 200). What is more complex to explain – from a practical and political perspective – is how we can move from the level of individual freedom to the collective level where the various attempts will be harmonized so as to produce an effective change in human history. This question is indeed only sketched in *The Visible and Invisible* and in Merleau-Ponty's last courses at the Collège de France. His indirect ontology presents certain shortcomings, being an incomplete project. Nevertheless, one point clearly stands out: in the history of Western philosophy, the crisis highlighted by Husserl is unessential according to Merleau-Ponty. It concerns only that kind of Western rationality which has excluded forms of expressions that are seen as non-rational, such as poetry, literature, and painting. By finally overcoming all these distinctions between philosophy and non-philosophy, indirect ontology claims for itself an all-encompassing and metaphysical role, insofar as it is an overall questioning of the sense of Being, of the world, and of human life: "la vraie philosophie se moque de la philosophie, est aphilosophie" (Merleau-Ponty, 1996b: 275).

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