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This is the published version of a paper published in *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Andén, L. (2019)

Literature and the Expressions of Being in Merleau-Ponty's Unpublished Course Notes

Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology, 50(3): 208-219

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00071773.2018.1558939>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

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Literature and the Expressions of Being in Merleau-Ponty's Unpublished Course Notes

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ABSTRACT

In this article I examine Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the relation between literature, being and perception. I focus especially on two of Merleau-Ponty's courses at Collège de France: the first course, *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression*, and the unpublished course *Sur le problème de la parole*. In the former Merleau-Ponty presents a new understanding of perception, according to which being is expressed in perception through the style of movement of the perceived phenomenon. In the latter he advances a notion of literary writing as an expression of the being that is itself expressed to us in perception. Through a reading of Proust's work, he discusses how the literary writer makes his experience expressive by means of a stylization of what is experienced. Hence, literature expresses perception through an enhancement of the expressiveness that it already contains. This capacity of literature will be the main focus of my investigation.

KEYWORDS

Merleau-Ponty;
phenomenology; literature;
aesthetics; language; Proust

Literature as the Language of Perception

Merleau-Ponty's work confronts us with a unique situation, due to the thousands of pages of course notes and drafts left incomplete by the time of his premature death in 1961. Although more than half a century has now passed, new texts are continually being published. In this article, I will focus on the course notes from two of his first courses at Collège de France 1953–1954: the recently published course, *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression*¹ (henceforth *MSME*) and the still unpublished course *Sur le problème de la parole*² (henceforth *PbP*). In *MSME*, Merleau-Ponty presents a new understanding of the relation between being and perception, while in *PbP* a new understanding of the relation between perception, literature and being is advanced.

The course notes from the first courses at Collège de France serve an important exegetical function by elucidating the relation between Merleau-Ponty's early phenomenology and his later ontology. The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty is often divided into three periods: first, his early phenomenological investigations, up to and including *The Phenomenology of Perception*;³ second, his middle existentialist phase, between 1945 and 1954, and

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¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Monde sensible et le monde de l'expression*.

² Merleau-Ponty, *Sur le problème de la parole*.

³ Merleau-Ponty, *La Phénoménologie de la perception; The Phenomenology of Perception*.

a third and final period in which the principal area of concern was around ontological questions, elaborated from 1954 until his death in 1961.⁴ Although the relation between Merleau-Ponty's early and later texts has been widely discussed the question remains enigmatic due to the lack of material from his first years at the Collège de France.⁵

Merleau-Ponty held the position of Chair of philosophy at the Collège de France between 1952 and 1961. During this period he held courses every year, which are all part of the same philosophical endeavour. Those courses start with an auto-critique of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. This auto-critique amounts to, Merleau-Ponty claiming that his earlier work is unable to account for the ontological implications of the phenomenology it presents. The idealistic framework still guiding the *Phenomenology of Perception* supposes a separation between being and appearance that implies a division between phenomenology and ontology.⁶ In the first lecture of the first course at the Collège de France, *MSME*, Merleau-Ponty presents the harshest critique towards his earlier works:

II. Reference to work on perception

We attempted an analysis of the perceived world that brought out its originality in opposition to the universe of the sciences or objective thought.

But this analysis remained all the same ordered by classical concepts such as: perception (in the meaning of the position of an isolatable, determined object considered as the canonical form for our relations to the world), conscience (understanding by this the centrifugal power of *Sinn-gebung* that finds in the things what it already has placed in them), synthesis (which presupposes the elements to reunite)⁷

The phenomenology of perception remained within an idealistic framework, Merleau-Ponty writes, because the very terms with which he operated presupposed their definitions. As a consequence, the primacy of perception runs the risk of being misunderstood, if not by the writer, then by the reader.⁸ The idealistic tradition maintains clear-cut dichotomies, i.e. body and soul, the sensible and the intelligible world. From within such a framework it becomes impossible to account for the emergence of truth in the perceived world, because the perceived as such is distinguished from our expressions of it. Therefore, his own phenomenological investigations into perception ran the risk of being understood as psychological descriptions of how things appear before us, making no claims as to their being. In order to fully comprehend the ontological dimensions of the phenomenology of perception, Merleau-Ponty argues that we must account for the idealization of the perceived phenomenon in language.⁹ In his subsequent work, it is precisely this task that he sets for himself.¹⁰ All his courses given at the

⁴ This ontological research resulted in the posthumously published manuscript *The Visible and the Invisible* along with thousands of unpublished working notes.

⁵ For example, Renaud Barbaras argues that a rupture can be located at the beginning of the 1950s, when Merleau-Ponty abandons his earlier phenomenology in order to formulate his later ontology. In contrast, Françoise Dastur stresses a continuity in Merleau-Ponty's work from his early up to his later writings (see Barbaras, 69; 86; 98; Dastur 11). In relation to his application to the Collège de France in 1952, Merleau-Ponty writes that the aim of his work at the Collège de France is to supplement the earlier investigations with a fuller account of their ontological implications. Yet, his new research will be informed by the results already achieved in his earlier works (see Merleau-Ponty, 'Un inédit', 404–5). However, he becomes more critical towards his earlier works in his first lecture at the Collège de France. I argue, then, that his first courses give us a fuller account of the relation between the early and late works.

⁶ *MSME*, [35](III3).

⁷ *MSME*, [17](I1).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *MSME*, [36](III4).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Collège de France can be seen as parts of the same project, namely an attempt to think anew perception and being from our expressions of them.

My aim in this paper is to examine literature's capacity to express the being that reveals itself in perception, and how, in doing so, its meaning is revealed to us. If we are to grasp a being that opens itself to us in perception, without placing it in abstract formulae beyond our concrete experience, we need a linguistic expression that can present its meaning without placing it in ready-made categories. It is this kind of expression that Merleau-Ponty finds in literature.¹¹ Literature is first and foremost a language-making of the sensible world or, put otherwise, it is a first inscription of meaning into the perceived.¹² Through a close reading of Proust, he proposes that literature can write forth the being that opens itself to us in perception.¹³

In his first courses at the Collège de France, Merleau-Ponty elaborates an understanding of literary language use as a primary mode of language that can account for the passage from the perceived to the linguistic world. Notions of style and expression are essential, and Merleau-Ponty uses the understanding of these notions he had previously developed in *The Prose of the World*¹⁴ (henceforth *PW*) and *MSME*. In the former work he discusses how literature and painting become expressive through a stylization of the perceived world. In the latter work, he elaborates a notion of how being is expressed in perception. Drawing on the results of *MSME* and *PW*, the relation between literary description and perception is further elaborated in a reading of Proust in the unpublished course *PbP*.¹⁵ In the first section I will account for Merleau-Ponty's new understanding of expression as style in *PW*, and then will move on to examine the new way in which perception is understood in *MSME*. In the third and final section I will discuss his understanding of literary expression in *PbP*.

Expression and Style

Our understanding of language, Merleau-Ponty argues, is the result of a retrospective illusion: the very performance of language hides its own activity so that words appear to antedate their expressions.¹⁶ When we regard the expressions of the past it appears as if the words already contained the expressed, and, as a consequence, that the expressed can be separated from its expression.¹⁷ Hence, we need to approach the acts of expression

¹¹ Even though a field that still remains largely unexplored, Merleau-Ponty's study of literature has attracted greater attention in recent years. Please see: Dimitris Apostolopoulos, 'The Systematic Import of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Literature'; Franck Robert, 'Écriture et vérité'; Jessica Wiskus, *The Rhythm of Thought*; Berndt Sellheim 'Metaphor and Flesh: Poetic Necessity in Merleau-Ponty', and Nicolas Castin and Anne Simon, *Merleau-Ponty et le littéraire*.

¹² Merleau-Ponty, 'Un inédit de Maurice Merleau-Ponty', 406–7.

¹³ For Merleau-Ponty's reading of Proust, see Mauro Carbone, *An Unprecedented Deformation* and Franck Robert 'Proust phénoménologue?.'

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *La Prose du monde; The Prose of the World*. *The Prose of the World* consists of an unfinished book manuscript, published by Claude Lefort 1969. The text was written in the years 1950–1952. Although Merleau-Ponty abandoned the manuscript, he published one chapter of it in a two-part article in *Les temps modernes* 1952, 'Le langage indirect et les voix du silence'. The article was later republished in *Signs* and I have chosen whenever possible to cite it instead of *PW*, since this is the version that Merleau-Ponty had edited for publication.

¹⁵ In *PbP*, Merleau-Ponty also continues the investigations into the literary language use undertaken in the course *Recherches sur l'usage littéraire du langage*.

¹⁶ *PW* 16/10.

¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty's notion of expression is examined in a number of recent studies, please see, for example: Donald A. Landes, *Merleau-Ponty and the paradoxes of expression*, Jessica Wiskus, *The Rhythm of Thought*, and Véronique M. Fóti, *Tracing Expression in Merleau-Ponty*.

indirectly, through the literary use of language. Literary expression takes us beyond our established patterns of describing things; it thus reveals the operations of language beyond linguistic conventions. This is the reason why Merleau-Ponty investigates the literary use of language in *PW*. With the notion of style in *PW*, Merleau-Ponty elaborates a new understanding of expression, according to which the expressed is inherent in the expression; it is generated through the act of expressing and cannot be separated from it.¹⁸

Merleau-Ponty examines literary expression by way of a comparison with artistic expression in painting. The painter stylizes the perceived world in his painting, submitting it to a “coherent deformation”: a Vermeer, for example, is a Vermeer, not because it has been painted by Vermeer but because “the painting observes the system of equivalences according to which each of its elements, like a hundred pointers on a hundred dials, marks the same deviation – the fact that it speaks the language of Vermeer.”¹⁹ In his elaboration on the notion of style, Merleau-Ponty draws on André Malraux’s investigation into the history of art in *The Voices of Silence*.²⁰ All the while that Merleau-Ponty paraphrases Malraux, their respective understandings of the notion of style are nonetheless essentially different. Although they both describe the style in the context of the museum, Malraux emphasizes the museum as a condition for different styles to appear, whereas Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, argues that the museum signifies a reification of the painter’s style, since it alienates it from its primary meaning-context, namely the painter’s concrete experience.

The phenomenon of style originates, according to Malraux, with the emergence of the museum. Malraux argues that museums change our understanding of art: with the establishment of museums we gain a more abstract relation to art, for it affords the possibility of comparing different epochs with each other.²¹ With the introduction of photography, which makes possible the mass reproduction and circulation of copies of art works, the logic of abstraction is further enhanced: now all art works can be said to participate in one, universal, imaginary museum. But in this imaginary museum a sense of proportionality becomes distorted: small miniatures take up about the same amount of space as large frescos in photo books and reproductions; we are thus led to compare objects that would in reality be hard to place alongside each other. Furthermore, museums themselves divert the art works away from their contexts. Instead of standing before one individual art work at a time, we stand before them all and cannot help but to view them through comparison. Thus, the individual painting is no longer seen as a living painter’s attempt to depict the world, they appear instead as various attempts to produce different styles.

For Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, the style in art is an elaboration of a style that appears already in perception. In contrast to Malraux, Merleau-Ponty stresses how the museum signifies a diversion (*divertissement*) from concrete experience, from out of which art originates:

¹⁸ For further investigations of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of style with regard to art, please see: Linda Singer, ‘Merleau-Ponty on the concept of Style’, 239; Michel Haar, ‘Peinture, perception, affectivité’, 107–8; Jessica Wiskus, *The Rhythm of Thought*, 64; Alphonse De Waelhens, ‘Merleau-Ponty: Philosopher of painting’, 178.

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 68/54: “déformation cohérente”; *ibid.* 76/61: “observe le système d’équivalences selon lequel chacun de ses éléments, comme cent aiguilles sur cent cadrans, marque la même déviation, c’est qu’il parle la langue Vermeer”. The expression “déformation cohérente” comes from Malraux, *La Création artistique*, 152.

²⁰ André Malraux, *Les voix du silence; The Voices of Silence*.

²¹ Malraux, *Le musée imaginaire*, 20.

We are well-aware that something has been lost and that this self-communion with the dead [recueillement de nécropole] is not the true milieu of art – that so many joys and sorrows, so much anger, and so many labors were not destined to reflect one day the Museum’s mournful light.²²

The museum, according to Merleau-Ponty, signifies that art has been wrenched from its concrete meaning-context. At the very moment it is lifted away from the artist and his concrete world, something is lost:

Whereas the style of each painter throbbed in his life like his heart beat, and was just what enabled him to recognize every effort which differed from his own, the Museum converts this secret, modest, non-deliberated, involuntary, and, in short, living historicity into official and pompous history.²³

Whereas the museum to Malraux enables the appearance of styles, on Merleau-Ponty’s reading, it distorts the primary style of expression. Merleau-Ponty thus adopts the arguments of Malraux, but takes them out of context, using them instead to address the relation between perception and expression. For Merleau-Ponty the elements of the world are submitted to a style already in perception. A woman who passes on the street is already a certain expression, in the impact that her heel makes on the ground and in her walk, as a “variation of the norm of walking, looking, touching, and speaking”.²⁴ The work of the artist consists in an elaboration of the style already present within perception.

However, although the style in the artwork is continuous with perception, art nonetheless transforms whatever is perceived by enhancing it. The painting signifies a “making-appear”, it signals the emergence of meaning within perception itself: the painting does not reproduce an image of our experience, rather it makes itself pregnant with its meaning. Thereby, it realizes something that was already present in experience; the painting makes visible what we already see, though it does so by taking us beyond our habitual ways of seeing.

From this understanding of style in painting, Merleau-Ponty returns to literature in order to point to the similarities between these two forms of expression. Literary expression is conceived as analogous with artistic expression: just as a painting expresses through a coherent deformation of the visible, the novel expresses also, doing so by way of a coherent deformation of language. This it does by infusing older significations with new meanings.²⁵ Conventional significations are rendered significant anew by virtue of being stylized: i.e. a writer makes something new out of the old and the established, bending them towards new meanings.

Like a painting, a novel expresses tacitly. Its subject, like that of a painting, can be related. But Julien Sorel’s trip to Verrières and his attempt to kill Mme de Rênal after he has learned that

²² Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 78/62: “Nous sentons bien qu’il y a déperdition et que ce recueillement de nécropole n’est pas le milieu vrai de l’art, que tant de joies et de peines, tant de colères, tant de travaux n’étaient pas destinés à refléter un jour la lumière triste du Musée.”

²³ *Ibid.*, 78/62: “Alors que le style en chaque peintre vivait comme la pulsation de son cœur et le rendait justement capable de reconnaître tout autre effort que le sien, - le Musée convertit cette historicité secrète, pudique, non délibérée, involontaire, vivante enfin, en histoire officielle et pompeuse.”

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 67/54.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 97/78: “que comme une déformation cohérente imposée au visible”.

she has betrayed him are not as important as that silence, that dream-like journey, that unthinking certitude, and that eternal resolution which follow the news.²⁶

Hence Merleau-Ponty establishes an analogy between the painter's way of relating to the visible and the writer's relation to language. However, this analogy is ambiguous: does it signify that literature imposes a style on the experience that it describes or is it the case that it imposes a style on the linguistic terms in use? Since the investigations comprising *PW* were interrupted, the analogy between painting and literature is never further elaborated upon. The long investigation into painting concludes with a few remarks, stating that literature functions in a similar way, but neither the similarities nor the differences are ever clarified. Therefore, the question regarding the relation between the perceived and its linguistic expressions is left unanswered.

What is clear is that the investigations in *PW* challenge any idealistic framework that seeks to separate out the expression from the expressed. With the notion of style Merleau-Ponty accounts for a form of expression in which the expressed is inherent in the expression and is only realized through it. Furthermore, he pinpoints a creative expression that does not refer to ready-made definitions, instead it creates its own expressiveness in its act of establishing itself. In the first course at Collège de France he gives a new account of perception: an account that does not refer to a ready-made idea of the perceived, but considers the perceived as that which is expressed through its style of movement. In the next section I will examine this new understanding of perception, which Merleau-Ponty presented at Collège de France.

The Style of Perception

In this section I examine how Merleau-Ponty elaborates a notion of perception as an expression of being in his first course at the Collège de France, *MSME*.²⁷ Through an investigation of the perception of movement, Merleau-Ponty challenges the idealistic framework that refers back to the dichotomy between perception and the perceived. His own *Phenomenology of Perception* succumbs to this idealist temptation, and thus ends up compromising the robustness of the overall analysis presented therein.²⁸ Movement, he argues, requires that we abandon any objectifying understanding of space, time and perception. Furthermore, it must guide us towards a new understanding of them, for there is no movement in a world-in-itself, but only in a world perceived by someone. The phenomenon of movement challenges an objectivist standpoint, because, by objectifying the space within which movement takes place we end up viewing movement as a transposition between different points. In a space that consists of an infinite number of points there can be no movement; whatever is in movement is always somewhere, and the movement itself is either always already performed or is yet to be performed. Instead, Merleau-Ponty argues, the phenomenon of movement must be comprehended as a complete

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 95/76: "Un roman exprime tacitement comme un tableau. On peut raconter le sujet du roman comme celui du tableau. Mais ce qui compte, ce n'est pas tant que Julien Sorel, apprenant qu'il est trahi par Mme de Rênal, aille à Verrières et essaie de la tuer, - c'est, après la nouvelle, ce silence, ce voyage de rêve, cette certitude sans pensées, cette résolution éternelle."

²⁷ For further discussions on how Merleau-Ponty elaborates the notion of expression in order to free himself from an idealistic framework, please see: Barbaras, *De L'être du phénomène*, 87–8.

²⁸ For a more detailed discussion of the critique of *The Phenomenology of Perception*, please see: Saint Aubert 'Introduction', in *MSME*, 8.

phenomenon: it requires a blend of here and there, before and after, my body and the things that I perceive.

Drawing on the experiments of Max Wertheimer, Merleau-Ponty shows that the phenomenon of movement signifies a further development of the figure-ground relation. Movement signifies an emerging figure within the figural field: “the change of place intrudes on the figural characters and vice-versa: movement is the realisation of a figure.”²⁹ In the same way as we apprehend the figure, we apprehend the totality of movement all at once: “The movement \neq process defined by passage points and their traction but a phenomenon to which the whole field contributes and which constitutes one part of the figural organisation”.³⁰ In other words, we don’t see a position, then another position, and then deduce the movement between them; we see the movement all at once as a total phenomenon.

The movement of an airplane along the horizon is different from an insect moving on the pane of a window. The difference, however, is neither due to a calculation where we would compensate for the distance, nor “a calculation that remediates a larger ‘real velocity’ by taking the distance into account”.³¹ Rather, a certain style of movement reveals the difference that separates both airplane and insect. The kinetic properties are related to the being of the appearing phenomenon, in such a way that “the movement reveals being”.³² When we say “it is an airplane”, the meaning is our means of accounting for the style of movement, but, on the other hand, it can only appear through it: when we detect the moving thing, there is an exchange between its meaning and its figural moments. Henceforth, the perception of the airplane does not signify an appearance that represents a meaning behind itself;³³ instead, the being is expressed through the configuration of its appearance.

The notion of a style of movement presents a new account of how we first perceive the identity of a thing. We apprehend the thing as identical with itself because we perceive a configuration that preserves itself in its movement, i.e. we perceive an appearance that is transferred in a unitary fashion over the perceived field. Merleau-Ponty’s account of the perception of things resembles the constellations of the stars: the internal configuration of a star constellation remains even once it has moved over and around the firmament and all of its stars have changed position relative to the rest of the sky. In a similar way, the identity of the insect or the airplane is due to the fact that there is continuity in their movement. Even when they change with regard to the surrounding field of perception, the relation between the different parts remains the same.

Thus, Merleau-Ponty provides an account for how a configuration is possible, which makes the thing appear as a unity, before we have learned its meaning. This signifies a re-interpretation of Husserl’s understanding of the appearance of a phenomenon. Husserl describes how we perceive a phenomenon such as a chair, because already we have prior knowledge of the meaning of chair, and from this meaning we can perceive

²⁹ *MSME*, [73](VIII1): “empiétement du changement de lieu sur les caractères figuraux et réciproquement: mouvement devenir d’une figure”.

³⁰ *MSME*, [73](VIII1): “Le mouvement \neq processus défini par points de passage et leur tracé mais phénomène auquel collabore tout le champ, et qui est partie dans son organisation figurale.”

³¹ *MSME*, [74] (VIII2): “non seulement par calcul qui restituerait ‘vitesse réelle’ plus grande en tenant compte de distance”.

³² *MSME*, [74] (VIII2): “Le mouvement révèle l’être”.

³³ *MSME*, [82] (IX1).

all chairs as such.³⁴ Thereby, Husserl approaches the phenomenon through the meaning-unity that makes the thing appear as such, and whereupon the abstract meaning antedates the concrete perception. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty stresses the style of movement as the first identity of the thing, an identity that antedates our first attempts to define or even to name it. Thus, the perception does not signify a representation of a meaning beyond it, but the meaning of the perceived is presented in its very appearance. In this Merleau-Ponty turns Husserl's notion around: whereas, for Husserl, the appearance of the phenomenon testifies to a pre-given meaning, Merleau-Ponty finds the original meaning from within the style of movement of *that* perceived phenomenon.

Through an examination of movement, Merleau-Ponty presents an understanding of perception as an expression of being. However, as long as the passage between the perceived world and the linguistic world is not accounted for, this new understanding runs the risk of being compromised by the very idealistic framework it is seeking to challenge. Why? Because, as long as the passage between perception and language is not established, a perceived being runs the risk of being misunderstood as something distinct from the intelligible world. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty promises to elaborate upon the relation between the perceived world and our linguistic formulations of it during the subsequent course *PbP*. Here, literature assumes an essential role. In literary writings in general and the writings of Proust in particular, Merleau-Ponty identifies a primary language: a language of the perceived world, which expresses the being that reveals itself to us in our perception. In the next section, I examine the reading of Proust in *PbP*.

Literature and Perception

In the unpublished course, *PbP*, Merleau-Ponty engages in a close reading of Proust.³⁵ In drawing on the works of Proust, he accounts for the passage from experience to language, terming literature the “language of the perceived world”.³⁶ Throughout *In Search of Lost Time*, Proust describes thoroughly different sensible impressions, scenes and memories, and, returning to these descriptions the narrator discusses in the last novel, *Time Regained*, how literature can express our proper experience. Drawing upon Proust, Merleau-Ponty elucidates how the distinctive style of literary description consists in the fact that elements of the sensible world are presented in and through the writer's experience.

Proust understands literature to be a paradoxical realization of experience: on the one hand, literary description reproduces experience, and yet on the other it produces the depicted experience. Literary writing is both a creative act as well as a response to the way in which the world appears before the writer: “Thus: it is given, spontaneous, - but it is yet to preform through an effort”.³⁷ How is this productive reproduction performed? How can literature both reflect and actualize our proper experiences? Merleau-Ponty accounts for this problem by way of an examination of the notion of style, drawing on both Proust's discussions on style and, furthermore, on his own investigations of style

³⁴ See Edmund Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen*, 51–2.

³⁵ Merleau-Ponty's references to Proust are numerous, and date from his first up to his very last writings, from *The Phenomenology of Perception*, *Causeries 1948*, ‘Man and Adversity’, and *The Visible and the Invisible*. For an examination of Merleau-Ponty's reading of Proust in his later texts, please see: Mauro Carbone, *An Unprecedented Deformation*.

³⁶ *PbP*, [114](2): “Voyons ce qu'est le langage du monde perçu i. e. la littérature.”

³⁷ *PbP*, [115]v(3): “Donc: c'est donné, spontané, – et à faire, par travail. Ce ne sont pas des idées et pourtant cela exige une élaboration.”

in *PW* and *MSME*. Merleau-Ponty points to some passages from Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve* in which Proust discusses Flaubert's style:

In Flaubert's style, for example, all the elements of reality are converted into the one substance, whose vast surfaces have a monotonous shimmer. No impurity remains. The surfaces have become reflective. Everything is depicted in them, but as a reflection, without this homogeneous substance being impaired. Whatever was different has been converted and absorbed.³⁸

The style changes the way in which things appear, making all of them lean towards the same meaning. The things themselves deviate in a homogenous way, such that a new signification appears through all of them. Thus, the style permeates the whole; and while meaning reveals itself through the different parts that were not previously present in any of them, retroactively it becomes impossible to separate out the meaning from them. Any language that is too straightforward does not contain a style, since it leaves nothing unpronounced. It leaves no reliefs between speech and silence where a tacit meaning can appear. It is in this latter sense that Proust describes how Balzac, in contrast to Flaubert, wants style. Merleau-Ponty cites Proust's text:

In Balzac, on the contrary, all the elements of a style to come, which does not yet exist, coexist undigested, as yet untransformed. This style does not suggest, it does not reflect, it explains. It explains moreover with the help of the most arresting images that do not blend in with the rest, but that bring out his intended meaning, as it may be brought out in conversation when one has an inspired conversation, with no concern for the harmony of the whole or about not interjecting.³⁹

According to Proust, Balzac is deprived of style because he presents too much information to the reader. When he explains or argues, or writes out the reflections his words inspire, he remains within a conventional, non-creative relation to language: it is a language in which everything is written out, where nothing is only glimpsed. What Balzac loses is the very possibility of showing forth the way in which the world appears before us, or to express the tacit content as that which is conceded rather than given, implied rather than pronounced.

Style is the opposite of one's personal manner: the writer himself cannot see what he writes, due to the fact that it is his own life that constitutes the ground. It is "the totality of means through which we transform the texture of our experience into a language, or in other words, making it possible to communicate".⁴⁰ Therefore, style is not something the writer can create intentionally even if he wanted to. He describes an experience that is given to him, and yet he creates it before the reader by expressing it.

³⁸ *PbP*, [123]v(2): "toutes les parties de la réalité sont converties en une même substance, aux vastes surfaces, d'un miroitement monotone. Aucune impureté n'est restée. Les surfaces sont devenues réfléchissantes. Toutes les choses s'y peignent, mais par reflet, sans en altérer la substance homogène. Tout ce qui était différent a été converti et absorbé." Merleau-Ponty cites Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, pp. 269-270; trans. as *Against Saint-Beuve*, 62.

³⁹ *PbP*, [123]v(2) f: "Dans Balzac au contraire coexistent, non digérés, non encore transformés, tous les éléments d'un style à venir qui n'existe pas. Ce style ne suggère pas, ne reflète pas: il explique. Il explique d'ailleurs à l'aide des images les plus saisissantes, mais non fondues avec le reste, qui font comprendre ce qu'il veut dire comme on le fait comprendre dans la conversation si on a une conversation géniale, mais sans se préoccuper de l'harmonie du tout et de ne pas intervenir." Merleau-Ponty cites Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, pp. 269; trans. as *Against Saint-Beuve*, 62.

⁴⁰ *PbP*, [124]v(3): "l'ensemble des moyens par lesquels nous transformons en langage, c'est-à-dire nous rendons communicable, la texture de notre expérience".

- The style in this meaning 'is a question, not of technique, but of vision' (TR II43). It is a carrier of the things and the being's mode of appearing, and the manner, not the writer's manner, but the manner in which the things appear, is here the material.⁴¹

As the writer gives expression to the world, he conquers the experience he already lives. With words borrowed from Proust, Merleau-Ponty describes the endeavour of literature by way of an analogy with the sciences: "The impression is to the writer what the experiment is to the scientist' (TR II 24)".⁴² He continues Proust's analogy, adding that we need to conquer the mute contact with the world through words: "A very precise idea of a quasi-scientific work of this kind: to make the mute contact accessible to others".⁴³ Through this analogy, the paradoxes of literature are resumed: the experience is both known and unknown, carrying a meaning that we sense, and yet it is one that we need to explicate. The making-appear of the world performed by literature signifies a capacity to re-formulate the world, and, ultimately, it signifies a way of making us experience it anew. In the act of expressing the world we already experience, literature brings us closer to the being that reveals itself in our perception. It brings us closer to the being that we otherwise over-write with conventional significations, and that thus requires an interruptive labour to write forth.

Conclusion

The first courses at Collège de France elucidate the relation between Merleau-Ponty's early phenomenology of perception and his later ontological investigations. The aim of these courses is to account for the ontological consequences of the phenomenology of perception.

Through an examination of literary expression, Merleau-Ponty extricates himself from the idealistic framework that had otherwise compromised *The Phenomenology of Perception*. In *PW*, he shows how literary expression becomes expressive by means of a certain stylization of the perceived. Furthermore, in his first course at Collège de France, he presents a new understanding of perception, according to which being is expressed in perception through its style of movement. The perceived phenomenon is not an appearance "of" something defined beforehand, but a being that expresses itself through its appearance. Here, he turns the Husserlian notion around: the phenomenon does not appear to us as such or such because of a pre-given meaning, but instead it is expressed through its appearance.

However, in order for the new understanding of perception not to be understood in idealistic terms, according to which a separation between the perceived world and the linguistic world is maintained, Merleau-Ponty examines the passage from perception to language. In literature in general and in Proust's work in particular, he describes the primary language-making of the perceived world. On the one hand, literature expresses the perception we already see, on the other, it realizes the perceived by expressing it

⁴¹ *PbP*, [123]v(2): "Le style en ce sens 'est une question, non de technique, mais de vision' (TR II 43). Il est porteur du mode d'apparition des choses et des êtres, et la manière, non pas la manière de l'écrivain, mais la manière d'apparaître des choses, est ici la matière." Merleau-Ponty cites Proust's *Le Temps retrouvé*, in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. IV, 474.

⁴² *PbP*, [119]v(7): "L'impression est pour l'écrivain ce qu'est l'expérimentation pour le savant' (TR II 24)" Merleau-Ponty cites Proust's *Le Temps retrouvé*, 459.

⁴³ *PbP*, [94]v(5): "Besoin de fixer, conquérir par les mots le contact muet. Idée très précise d'un travail quasi scientifique de ce genre: rendre accessible aux autres cela même qui est muet."

before us. In this endeavour, it makes it possible for us to reach for a being that is present in our perception and to explicate in language what is implicated in the sensible world. Literary writing is thus understood as a language use that constantly creates and recreates a passage from the perceived world to the world of language.

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