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MERLEAU-PONTY

DE LA NATURE À L'ONTOLOGIE
FROM NATURE TO ONTOLOGY
DALLA NATURA ALL'ONTOLOGIA

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MERLEAU-PONTY'S CONCEPT OF NATURE: PASSAGE, THE ONEIRIC, AND INTERANIMALITY

> Nature as a leaf or stratum of total Being – the ontology of nature as a path towards ontology, – a path one prefers here because the evolution of the concept of nature is a propaedeutic more convincing, showing more clearly the necessity for a change in ontology
> *La Nature*, p. 265.[1]

I. *The Significance of* La Nature *and Merleau-Ponty's Concept of Nature*

After his death, when Merleau-Ponty's unfinished text, called *The Visible and the Invisible* by the editors (choosing among several projected titles) was published and some of his dated "working notes" were included as the second portion of the text, the first note of January, 1959, dramatically declares the presence of "our state of non-philosophy" and states "never has the crisis been so radical." Often cited, this note points to a matter of distress for Merleau-Ponty, a thinker who still believed in the possibility of truth, as another projected title announces ("The Origin of Truth"). Whereas other thinkers who followed him may have exulted in this state of non-philosophy, Merleau-Ponty believed that philosophy could be birthed anew (his answer was clear to the query in the next sentence: "End of philosophy or rebirth?"). Key to this rebirth, for Merleau-Ponty was the articulation, with which he had long struggled, of a new ontology. This new ontology, about which much has been written, usually under the rubric of "the flesh of the world," was to be inseparable from overcoming the subject/object language and dichotomy, a reconsideration of intersubjectivity, and the articulation of a new sense of nature, themes mentioned in this note and throughout his later writings. Philosophy's rebirth was linked with the "question of nature."[2] So, it is very ironic for today's reader to go back and consider Claude Lefort's prophetic words written in his introduction to *The Visible and the Invisible* that "the withdrawal of the things from the world accompanies the withdrawal of him who thinks them" (VI, xiv), for in the decades after Merleau-Ponty's death not only has this new ontology of nature faded from the philosophical scene, but for many, nature itself or certainly "the question of nature" alluded to in the working note withdrew from the concern of much of philosophy. For many, "nature" became an objectionable term by associating it with the transcendental or dualistic or phallocentric traditions for whom it had been a key concept. Merleau-Ponty's task of finding a context and an ontology within which to make sense of nature anew was left unaccomplished.

It is hopeful that the publication a quarter of a century later of Merleau-Ponty's lectures given from 1956-60 on the concept of nature, along with the global ecological crisis and further developments in modern science, will give the "question of Nature" the attention it deserves and bring to fruition the ontological transformation Merleau-Ponty was trying to accomplish and for which the status of nature was a key. At the commencement of this three years of lecturing about nature (1956-8, 1959-60), Merleau-Ponty asked his students whether it was valuable to study the notion of nature, hoping to articulate a special sense of this term, or whether the best one could hope to do is to sift through the history of ideas, cataloguing the way in which this term had been used according to the preferences of past thinkers. Merleau-Ponty, unlike most thinkers of the past few decades, answered his students that there was a unique sense or meaning to nature that could be interrogated. There was a primordiality to nature that outstrips its institution in language and thought, a primordiality, although enigmatic, because we are of it, instead of before it, and that can be expressed, although indirectly (N, 19-20). This position parallels those that Merleau-Ponty had articulated in regard to the body, the sensible world given in perception, and the source of artistic, interpersonal, and linguistic expression: there are levels "below" or "outside" or in "excess" of instituted sign systems that can be fathomed partially, ambiguously, but quite tellingly.

In this essay, I would like to explore where Merleau-Ponty's ideas of a different notion of nature as suggested by the lectures as reproduced in *La Nature* would take us and how these ideas can be read from within the body of Merleau-Ponty's other works, even in his early writings. There is much material in the lectures analyzing the previous philosophical treatments of nature that Merleau-Ponty groups as teleological, Cartesian, humanist, and Romantic perspectives that deserves much study and discussion – even as to the possible interpretations of the significance of how he placed together some of the philosophers he linked – but I will mention these sections only insofar as Merleau-Ponty sometimes approves of ideas discussed in such a way that it is reasonable to suppose he felt that these notions should be part of a perspective of nature that is to be developed with his new ontology. Of the many ideas Merleau-Ponty scrutinizes in the lectures, three emerge, I believe, as distinctly evocative and important for a new concept of nature and a new ontology. These three notions are the fruition of ideas developed by Merleau-Ponty for decades but not fully appreciated by his readers: his notion of "passage" – key to his notion of becoming, overcoming substantialisms, and understanding the temporality of the chiasm, – the "oneiric dimension" of perception, which figures in his recasting the notions of "organism," "instinct," and "environment," and the human-animal intertwining or "interanimality" which deepens his radical treatment of perception, the body, and language.

There are two other important aspects of focusing on these three notions. If we pay attention to them carefully, they give the reader of *La Nature* a way to follow the argument that Merleau-Ponty developed during these three

courses: "passage" is the culminating thought of the first year's work, the "oneiric" of the second, and "interanimality" of both the last year's work and, in some way, of Merleau-Ponty's overarching idea of nature. Not only do these ideas advance the concept of nature and Merleau-Ponty's "indirect ontology," but without them, the sense of Merleau-Ponty's much discussed notion of "flesh" does not take on the sense he intended. I believe that the "flesh of the world" has yet to be seen in its proper relation to perception, matter, and nature, and hopefully the publication of these lecture notes will rectify that misunderstanding. Also, these three notions of passage, the oneiric, and interanimality are already present in the early work in a way that also adds to understanding the radicalism of the indirect ontology of the flesh, if Merleau-Ponty's readers can understand its roots in the more detailed analyses of perception. This tracing out of the development of these themes, reading "backwards" from the last work into the earliest, also awaits full appreciation.

II. *Passage*

In the first year's lecture course during 1956-7, as Merleau-Ponty analyzes the concept of nature in Aristotle, the Stoics, Descartes, Kant, Brunschwicg, Schelling, Bergson and Husserl, a leitmotif running throughout his comments is whether the concept of nature under consideration is either a static one or one that allows for the dynamism and a deeper sense of movement that is necessary to a sense of nature more adequate than rationalism's concept of movement as an object passing through locations in a homogeneous spatial container. Another probe that Merleau-Ponty continually utilizes is whether the concept of nature under consideration allows for meaning within natural processes or whether natural events are cast as meaningless in themselves and take on sense only as the result of judgments about them. Yet another leitmotif is whether the concept of nature at issue allows for some sense of connectivity among its parts or whether this unity has to be supplied from without or is missing. Dynamism, sense, and connectivity are all part of seeing nature as an unfolding, as a process of ongoing transformation that undercuts the dichotomies that Merleau-Ponty sees as destructive to the sense of nature: necessity versus contingency, subject versus object, human versus animal, spirit versus matter, immanence versus transcendence, and mechanism versus vitalism. When towards the end of the course, Merleau-Ponty finally turns to some considerations of classical and modern physics, the notion of space and time, and finally to the work of Whitehead, he can point to the idea of passage as the notion which combines these three interwoven components in a meaningful way that the Western tradition has lacked and that allows for a new approach to nature. I might also add that this notion of passage was a key notion which has been overlooked in its importance in Merleau-Ponty's early *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Merleau-Ponty demonstrates how departing from the idea of direction and meaning within nature as articulated by Aristotle, and of sympathy among the parts of nature seen by the Stoics, Western thought has been mired since the Renaissance in an idea of nature as an externally related set of atomistic parts, whose meaning lies outside itself. The Cartesian struggle to locate the meaning of nature in God ultimately leaves nature's purpose, its sense, as a mere subjective or projective phenomenon. Kant's struggles to make nature something more than a machine are also detailed by Merleau-Ponty, but the same dichotomies of necessity versus contingency, subject versus object, and internal versus external remain unresolved (N, 42, 43, 47). This means that this formulation, too, is essentially static, disconnected, and lacking in unfolding meaning. For Merleau-Ponty, Brunschwieg attempts to surpass the Kantian positivism, and succeeds in portraying a subject-object unity, a "flexible idealism", but falls prey to the need for an underlying foundation or constancy (N, 57-58). As one reads through the three years of lectures, it becomes apparent that for Merleau-Ponty Western positivism and its dichotomy of Being and non-Being, and the recurring foundationalism that accompanies it, are a primary obstruction to articulating an ontology that will yield another sense of space, time, and structure that are key to passage and the ontology of the flesh as becoming.

Within the work of Schelling, Merleau-Ponty sees the ability to face the abyss, to do justice to facticity, to the lack of externally grounded metaphysical foundation, and a focus on perception as access to Nature. In the prereflective moment, the human and the natural are unified in a state of indivision, which Merleau-Ponty explains is for Schelling a kind of sympathy of the sort that echoes his own use of the term "communion" in *Phenomenology of Perception*, not as some "magical knowledge", but as an internal articulation among the perceived as a "kind of internal life of things," (N, 65). Merleau-Ponty had first articulated this idea in the *Phenomenology of Perception* as the perceptual field's being inhabited by a "plunging into objects" such that we break into a circuit where "every object is a mirror of all others" and "any seeing of the object by me is instantaneously repeated between all those objects in the world which are apprehended as co-existent, because each of them is all that the others 'see' of it."[3] Later, in the last works, Merleau-Ponty referred to this notion as the folding back of the flesh between the perceiving-perceived. For Merleau-Ponty, it is an advance on Schelling's part towards a richer sense of nature to see our insertion within its unfolding, such that there is something like a reversibility of human and nature, perceiver and perceived (N, 68). However, in Schelling, it is one that is too close-circuited. Too much unity and reciprocity are a kind of blindness, whereas to see and to articulate requires a gap, an *écart*. Merleau-Ponty says that for Schelling everything starts its birth through us, but only as Nature lends itself to our perception: "we are the parents of a Nature of whom we are the children" (N, 68). The intuition of Nature which offers this access, however, is one that remains always in a state of indivision not open to reflection, which can only seek to surpass itself (N, 71).

Poetry is a means of articulation, more objective than objectivity in the sense of being less constructed, less idealized, that keeps itself open to this more primordial contact with the world. Its access to the world and to Nature towards some sort of ecstatic experience of this state of indivision gives it an experience related to philosophy, but different. Reflection inevitably breaks this indivision, that it continually seeks to reestablish (N, 72). Merleau-Ponty defends Schelling from the charge that this articulation betrays some sort of absolutism or mysticism, and shows how from within Schelling's perspective, it is Hegel's seeming insistence on articulating the movement of the dialectical unfolding of the world which is really static or "is the movement of the thinker and not of existence." For Schelling, the Hegelian restoring of movement of the object as movement of the Absolute is a "pretended internal movement." Merleau-Ponty believes that Schelling does recognize that "the sole principle of movement is the real world with its contingency and not the concept" (N, 75). However, Merleau-Ponty can see both where Hegelian idealism robs nature of its movement, but also how Schelling's notion of the envelopment of man and nature loses the facticity of the phenomena (N, 76). He finds their agreement on the role of poetry to be a recognition on the part of both thinkers, even if they are inconsistent, that the articulation of nature must recognize its incomplete grasp of what it seeks to articulate, that it is embedded in a history, and that this articulation will not be deductive but open, spontaneous, and creative, which is art's power in a wider sense of objectivity or rationality than is possible for rationalism (N, 76-77).

In the contrast with Schelling who always keeps alive the tension between intuition and dialectic, between a philosophy of the positive and the negative, Bergson is seen by Merleau-Ponty, despite all his contributions to a philosophy of nature, to be a reluctant positivist (N, 79, 94, 102, et al). Bergson's focus of dispensing with both idealism and realism, to insist upon nature as an ensemble of things we perceive and as perception as the fundamental act which installs us among things (N, 81) takes him far into undercutting dualisms to articulate another notion of consciousness as diffuse and dispersed among things. On the one hand, Bergson "in posing a universe of images without spectator wishes to say that only in perception do we apprehend things, and the meaning of this perception is born among things" and not within consciousness (N, 83). Yet, he also says of this world of images coined out in perception that it is grounded in an anterior being (N, 84). Bergson can be seen to oscillate between a materialism and a spiritualism seen in this insistence on the primordiality of perception and at the same time of an underlying idealist ground. For all of Bergson's emphasis on temporal duration, on the movement internal to perception, and in the presentation of things, Merleau-Ponty suggests that this intuition of pure perception does not unfold in time and is strangely immobile (N, 84-85). Merleau-Ponty is willing to say that "Bergson is very nearly a philosopher who would not define life by rest, coincidence itself, but rather by a struggle of self with self about which it can't complain, because it is its way of realization" (N, 92). The notion described here is precisely the way

Merleau-Ponty will come to see passage as key to existence and human being, but it is telling that in Merleau-Ponty's assessment, Bergson is only *near to* arriving at this insight.

Not only does Bergson remain a positivist relying at times upon a ground and defining being as rest as has the Western tradition done repeatedly, but even Husserl for all his strides in articulating nature fails to embrace passage. Husserl's articulation of the thing as function of the moving, perceiving body (N, 106), of *Einfühlung* as operative intentionality of the lived body, of intercorporeity (N, 109), and of the human-animal overlap as dwellers on Earth (N, 110-111) leads in a direction of seeing nature as an encroaching unfolding of living beings and things where its constituents envelope one another, but only across an ineradicable dehiscence or *écart* (N, 112). However, this direction is overshadowed by Husserl's allegiance to a transcendental idealism (N, 112) which colors his phenomenological articulation of the Earth as an *unmoving* ground (N, 104, 110). It is the failure of the tradition of Western philosophy to think about the world dynamically, as an unfolding process which undercuts dualisms, and which objectifies nature by taking the rationalist ideas of identity, causality, succession, and homogenous space as foundational that leads Merleau-Ponty to turn to results of modern science and to the philosophy of Whitehead as interlocutors with his own philosophy of nature. To articulate nature such that its dynamism, its self-articulating becoming in which the preceding moments of process feed back into the unfolding of the process to make ongoing transformation possible, and to come to embrace rhythms of flux and determination where there is an interplay of order and chaos, locality and totality, and interiority and exteriority, Merleau-Ponty has to leave behind the foundationalisms, the static sense of being, and the space and time of linear causality that he has found infects to some degree the philosophies of all these preceding thinkers.

In modern science, Merleau-Ponty finds an openness perhaps lacking within philosophy: a surpassing of Cartesian dualism in order to deal with things in their facticity. It is true that the scientist may not know how he has reconstrued the phenomena, nor can we expect from science a new conceptualization of nature, but science has been forced into a series of self-critical deconstructions of its ontological assumptions in order to proceed with its work. So, it has cleared the ground, even if it has not identified philosophically its new perspective (N, 119-121). Unlike many other philosophers, Merleau-Ponty insists we can't speak of nature without reference to the new terminology of science, that which was known as "cybernetics" (N, 120) when Merleau-Ponty was lecturing, and has been since carried further under other rubrics like systems theory, Bohm's implicate order, chaos theory, etc. In the physics of the past century, Merleau-Ponty finds a notion of nature as the enveloping which moves beyond concepts, deductive thinking, and traditional science to focus on experience and the being-such of things (N, 122). Overturning traditional categories and ontological assumptions, physics has embraced the indeterminacy of things in

"a new logic." In the quantum world, where the appearance of waves or particles is determined by the overall observational system, appearance has a new ontological status (N, 123-7). This, in turn, means that the ideal of a maximum in precision as the way to grasp the totality of being has been surpassed: "There is no longer an individual being within a system. It is only a matter of families of trajectories" (N, 129). Precision belonged to the static and atomistic world of the Cartesian observer who attempted to grasp the in-itself within the confines of consciousness, but now the observer has become implicated in the manifestation of the indeterminate object within a particular act or setting (N, 131). Trajectories are cited in Merleau-Ponty's summary statement as pointing to the sense of motion and unfolding that occurs in ways in which local effects combine in efficacious, yet non-linear ways, such as families who affiliate in some manner which is only partly structurally determinate, partly contingent, and partly a matter of history and being drawn into common propensities.

Merleau-Ponty concludes that science no longer occurs on the basis of some projected ideal perspective, but rather from within the perceptual field, where ambiguity and indeterminacy are not defects, but rather the perceptual norms, as the *Phenomenology of Perception* so well demonstrated. Merleau-Ponty finds that science has come to embrace the perspective of the incarnate subject and realized that "the perceived world is in no fashion an immediate given" (N, 138). This insight hearkens back to Merleau-Ponty's initial declaration in the preface of the *Phenomenology of Perception* that "the phenomenological world is not bringing to explicit expression of a pre-existing being, but the laying down of being" (PP, xx). This flies in the face of the traditional dream of philosophers and scientists to capture reality, and specifically nature, through description and explanation, as if it were static, and they, the observers, were not enmeshed in its unfolding while they brought it to expression. Merleau-Ponty, like Hegel and Schelling turns to artistic expression as his paradigm in the following sentence, but not because of a direct access to a pre-existing logos, but rather in denial of that possibility: "Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being." Art, in any claim to truth, has acknowledged its creative, expressive, and participatory role in articulating the world, and at the beginning of his work as a philosopher, Merleau-Ponty understood phenomenology to be such an expressive project of "laying down being." It could not be otherwise, since nature is always an unfolding, a becoming, and humans are themselves enmeshed in the same unfolding, and their language, thought, and expression offer them no way out of this envelopment. In *La Nature*, instead of turning to art, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates how modern science has come to this understanding of its own articulation.

In Whitehead, Merleau-Ponty finds perhaps his closest philosophical comrade in the understanding of nature. For Merleau-Ponty, Whitehead understood that both science and philosophy continually slipped into a forgetting of time, treating it as a parameter that could be eliminated, yet it is

not possible to think of the existing world in a punctal space-time. Rather, it is true that "in the instant, nothing exists" (N, 155). Instead of conceiving of time and space in a homogenous sense and in a linear fashion, in Whitehead's work, time and space can be manifest in different identities and each are of varied types or modes of being given: they are implicated in neighborhoods of phenomena and theyr leave distinctive "traces" or take on certain "roles" within a certain observational frame (N, 156). Again, in Whitehead, Merleau-Ponty finds another thinker who articulates the insight Merleau-Ponty himself has been elaborating for decades: namely, that temporal duration is neither a totality, nor are there localizable minimal temporal units, but rather time always has a certain "thickness" (N, 155-6). Time is not homogeneous, but like space, both are riddled with overlapping and encroaching relations among varied unities of phenomena that do not necessarily follow linear links of cause and effect, but are "actions at a distance." The sense of the "atmosphere of events" which emerges as this unfolding, enfolding, and enveloping of relations is the "ultimate substance of matter" (N, 157). This is a radical departure from the (metaphysical) designation of matter as the inert stratum of existence, moved by external forces in causal links, and substance as the underlying, unchanging substratum of these interactions which is only rationally graspable in its essence.

As Merleau-Ponty states, this is also in distinction to the idea of nature as the "history of matter," as the history of the interactions in these chance external encounters. As the history of matter where matter is understood as the unfolding of events that are related in ways in which parts of the field encroach upon each other and fold parts of themselves back into their continued unfolding, the distinction itself between object and event disappears. Even seemingly inert object like the pyramids, which come as close to human's pretensions to having fashioned stable objects, are, when seen in this perspective, only forces caught in a field of forces which are an unfolding event or process: "the object is the focal property to which one can link up the variations undergone by a field of forces" (N, 158). Like other less slowly transforming objects, the pyramids are an "enjambment" in a time of events. For example, whether certain religious relations with an afterlife help give rise to the pyramids, or whether the pyramids help clarify or extend those beliefs, or whether a certain social organization makes the construction possible, or whether the construction helps solidify the social relations, etc., are questions asked within a linear time frame, instead of one in which effects are causes and causes are sometimes effects, in which multiple relations come together in an over-determined way: in a time of enjambment – of overlapping and promiscuity. Seen as an event, there are relations with other unfolding events, which are "packed into" the identity of that event. If objects are seen as externally related states of affairs, they occur as discrete phenomena that have effects on other objects only in a linear succession of determinate interactions.

It is as embodied beings that perceived events have these links to all parts of the field, to other trajectories in the unfolding event character of being and

to other humans. The inherence of events in one another and the perceivers inherence in this ongoing unfolding is what comprises "the passage of nature": "the passage of nature corresponds to the unity of the perceiving body and therefore to the body itself as an event and constitutes the unity of the body with other observers and with a nature for many" (N, 159). Perception, body, and field are events within which the constituents of nature enter into the same sort of relations as that which the perceiver does with nature. Merleau-Ponty finds in Whitehead someone for whom there is no way to stop the unfolding of nature qua passage in order to observe it, and who in observing is "within" this unfolding: "Nature is for him more essentially 'occurence' which signifies that it is entirely in each of its appearances" (N, 160). There is an opacity to observed phenomena, but not a disjunct of immanence and transcendence, which means nature does not stand in opposition to humans and to culture.

What is of primary importance for Merleau-Ponty about Whitehead is here is a thinker who uniquely understands that matter and nature cannot be understood by reference to an instant of presentation or by a focus on the present moment. The traditionally taken for granted foundationalism of a homogenous and measurable time, "serial time," is only one constructed and fragmented mode of time's manifestation. There is also a time inherent in nature, not imposed upon it, which is inherent in things as unfolding processes, which also embraces us in our openness to the participation in the unfolding of things. Our own subjectivity is woven into this interior life of the temporal unfolding of nature (N, 161). An openness to time reveals it as a occurring in pulsations of nature which move through our own sense of time. There is no means of gaining access to a sense of nature in-itself, nor of ourselves outside of nature. The continual movement of unfolding of nature and of ourselves woven into this process is what we are and this being is inscribed in our bodies through our perceptual, sensorial, openness to the world (N, 162).

The leading clue for making sense of nature and for interpreting the results of modern science as Merleau-Ponty does in the rest of the lectures is to see nature as essentially passage. This means that rather than through a substantialist perspective, it is better to understand nature as a wave phenomenon. Time and space, heterogeneous, dense and intertwined as overlapping simultaneities, are to be understood as constituting a global wave. When Merleau-Ponty had spoken of the "Memory of the world" taken up through perception in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (PP, 70), he did not yet have the terms or framework to articulate what this meant. In *La Nature*, using the perspective of Whitehead and modern science, nature can be seen to encompass the memory of the world in this wave of passage. As Merleau-Ponty ends his first year of lectures, he declares, "It would be the task of a philosophy of nature to describe the modes of passage" (N, 165).

These conclusions help, I hope, readers go back to the *Phenomenology of Perception* and understand the importance of "passage" as articulated there,

and understand why Merleau-Ponty turned to this notion when he arrived at the "space chapter" of the work and was attempting to describe the space of embodied perception. Merleau-Ponty notes that movement is inarticulable in either terms of a realistic rationalism like Zeno's which loses the phenomenon of movement or an idealistic constructivism which loses the facticity of movement and its object. Rather, passage requires an ontological shift away from a substantialist object located in a Cartesian grid towards defining moving being as a kind of becoming: "The something in transit which we have recognized as necessary to the constitution of change is to be defined only in terms of the particular manner of its 'passing'" (PP, 275). In order to exemplify, Merleau-Ponty discusses the phenomenon of observing a bird in flight. The bird so observed is not the bird at rest conjoined with another predicate, is not a substance with different attributes, but rather in flight has become "during the time that it is moving, merely a grayish power of flight." It has become a trajectory, a bird-in-flight modulation in the space and time of Merleau-Ponty's garden, and a focal point in a transformation of the perceptual field, just as in another example, of a stone tossed through the air, its flight "inhabits the stone" (PP, 277).

It is an ontological shift and not a projection of the observer or a judgment about the phenomenon: "It is not I who recognize, in each of its points and instants passed through, the same bird defined by explicit characteristics, it is the bird in flight which constitutes the unity of its movement, which changes its place, it is this flurry of a plumage still here, which is already there in a kind of ubiquity, like the comet with its tail" (PP, 275). The bird at rest who is now a "flurry of plumage" has become an enjambment in time and space, a drawing together of the field of observer-observed, an "action at a distance," and another kind of being, which examined for a moment makes more understandable what Merleau-Ponty asserts in *La Nature*. As perceived, the bird's flight is given at its start, its duration, and its destination, both temporally and spatially as an in-gathering of the field into which the observer is woven: "the parts of space seen as breadth, height or depth, are not juxtaposed, but they co-exist because they are all drawn into the hold that our body takes upon the world. This relation was already elucidated when we showed it is temporal before being spatial." The "ubiquity" of the greyish power of flight, its "action at a distance," is the "piling up" or "packing into" the one phenomenon the different "moments" or "spaces" – as defined by realism – into the perceived passage. Moments or space that would be discrete in a linear laying out of a Cartesian space and time are co-existent in the grayish power of flight, within passage. As Merleau-Ponty is to echo later in *La Nature*, drawing upon more support from modern science: "Things co-exist in space because they are present to the same perceiving subject and enveloped in the same temporal wave." As a temporal wave or "temporal pulsation," as Merleau-Ponty also calls it, "predecessors" and "successors" are co-present (PP, 275). This, of course, is in contrast to "objective time which is made up of successive moments," whereas "the lived present holds

a past and a future within its thickness." This co-presence of incompossibles, which Merleau-Ponty defines as the primordial sense of depth (PP, 264-5), opens the articulation of the interplay between locality and totality, between observer and observed, between time and space, and among temporal and spatial heterogeneous modalities in the notion of passage, which is necessary for articulating nature.

Merleau-Ponty is clear from this early beginning to the end of his work that only by taking up the perspective of embodied perception can these notions emerge, and in explaining passage he explains why this is: "the relation between the moving object and its background passes through our body." This is how Merleau-Ponty can articulate an ontology of nature as "pure passage" without recourse to a foundation. The body provides "points of anchorage" necessary to make sense of the world as a phenomenon of movement and transition without itself requiring a source in rest. The body inhabits or takes up residence as focal points of its directedness through its interests, passions, tasks, etc., and is in relation with the field and parts of the field, but only itself as woven into the further unfolding of the field. Nevertheless, these points of inhabitation give an anchorage and so "the points of anchorage, when we focus on them, are not objects" (PP, 279*). The body as a phenomenon of passage opens us into the passage of the world.* Merleau-Ponty had hoped in these initial descriptions of space, time, and passage, which he states are more highlighted in the phenomenon of motion but are generally the case in the thickness of the temporal and spatial, to "push back the boundaries of what makes sense for us" (PP, 275). In this section of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, he challenges us to reinterpret the world in light of passage: "If we want to take the phenomenon of movement seriously, we shall need to conceive of a world which is not only made up of things, but which also has in it pure transitions." The world is a world not only of movement, but of ceaseless transformation and change, which is not grounded by a static being, but is becoming.

At what became the end of his career, in "Eye and Mind," Merleau-Ponty describes how art articulates a "movement by vibration" or by "radiation" as part of a notion of depth as "the dimension of dimensions" in which there is "an encroachment of everything upon everything." Art makes manifest the interweaving of time, space, and beings as passage and as a kind of depth, which he has now come to designate as *la chair*, the flesh. A substantialist world is a determinate world in a linear time, but this world of encroachment indicates "time as chiasm" in which "the sensible, Nature, transcend the past present distinction, realize from within a passage from one to the other."[4] Art, as revelatory of the flesh, is useful to Merleau-Ponty in working out this world of passage and its articulation. However, in these last years of his work, in *La Nature*, Merleau-Ponty also has the terminology, the changes within science, his mature reading of the history of philosophy, and the clues of Whitehead at his disposal in order to take on "the task of the philosophy of nature ... to describe the modes of passage" (N, 165). Merleau-Ponty's original insight into

radical becoming, the world as passage, could at this point be articulated with new terminologies derived from both the expanded framework of looking at art as he does in "Eye and Mind" and from science in the lectures. In both enterprises, nature remains his interlocutor.

III. *The Oneiric Dimension*

For Cartesianism and for other sorts of rationalisms or objectivisms, probably the dimension of meaning least likely to be seen as site of the development of more complex organization of functions, discernment of the environment, adaptability to changing conditions, and communicative modalities would be the oneiric, yet this is exactly Merleau-Ponty's conclusion in studying modern biology's physiological, developmental, and evolutionary studies of animal functioning and behavior. For science and philosophy emerging from the Enlightenment, the dream represented a flight from the sensible, the rational, the quantifiable, and the categorial – the apprehensions most able to grasp adequately reality – towards a degraded, confused, and almost mad level of disturbed consciousness.[5] The dream represented the fantastic, which is held in opposition to the ordered objective reality. Animals, in this Cartesian perspective, are seen as mere machines, operating in the nexus of determinate objective relations in accord with achieving innate, minimally rational goals subordinate to survival.

Merleau-Ponty in the lectures during 1957-1958 in *La Nature*, demonstrates how this conception of the machine is too limited and misapplied, but more importantly, how animals move across a spectrum of discernment and expression, which is essentially oneiric, except at the lowest levels of animal life, towards symbolic expression. In opposition to a rationalist positivism, Merleau-Ponty articulates in *La Nature*, how increased capacity to learn and respond creatively to the environment among animals, working up to the human level (as a continuous and open-ended unfolding of animality) is a matter of entering ambiguity, plasticity, and multiplicity, rather than clarity, distinctness, and unity. In showing this path of increasing capacity to respond to the environment, Merleau-Ponty articulates a sense of animality which avoids either a reductive materialism of random and mechanical interactions or any sort of vitalism, in which determinate goals are embedded within nature. To get to showing how modern biology can lead us to the unlikely sense of the oneiric dimension of animality, he first uncovers the use of the notions of behavior, pattern, information, and gap in modern biology, and then applies these ideas to the levels of animal life as articulated by it.

The notion of the *Gestalt* was an attempt to mediate this unhelpful dualism of mechanism versus vitalism, as well as articulate the idea of "learning" as a "dialectical" relationship between animal and environment (N, 187), with both seen as constituents of "behavior." Behavior is the motoric thrust into the environment anchored in the body as a dimension of auto-organization (N, 188). In the work of Coghill, on the embryological development of motor functions of the axolotl (a salamander), Merleau-Ponty finds an appreciation that emergent behaviors have a temporal dimension, provide a grip on the environment that refers to the future and roots itself in the body. There are patterns of behavior that build upon themselves to take possession of more of the environment and also of the body as a correlative set of powers geared towards it. It is from the totality that these patterns emerge, from "oblique reactions" (N, 195), not a frontal confrontation of organism and environment, but in the way that new behaviors open up new areas of possibility. Another way to put it would be like Gesell, who Merleau-Ponty interprets as having articulated the body as the "site of behavior" (and then applied this notion to the embryo), such that it is a "sketch" of possible futures, but one that is open, unlike a blueprint. When behaviors are undertaken, it is like a "second body" which comes to be added to the "natural body" to fill in its contours (N, 196-197). Rather than a linear model of development, either self-generated or causally produced, Gesell demonstrates a "spiral of development" in which motor functions geared to the environment give new dimensions to the body, such that there is a "reciprocal enlacement" between them (N, 198).

Passage is important here, for such auto-regulating transformations that envelop organism and environment in this spiral unfolding are possible only by seeing them in a non-substantialist ontology as processes moving by fluctuations through moments of equilibrium and disequilibrium (N, 198-9). Although, there are mechanistic functions of organisms, rather than seeing them as the building blocks of animality, they are secondary developments that stabilize parts of this relationship to the environment (N, 201). By seeing that there are levels of organization of the environment and organism, instead of dividing the environment into discrete parts and the organism into mechanistic reactions to differing conditions, such as differences in chemical gradients, both can be seen as part of an unfolding field in which there is this folding back of one into the other. The image Merleau-Ponty evokes to surpass punctual metaphors is that of the vortex, in which there is a flow phenomenon with a discrete identity and yet this identity is not separable form the way the parts of the environment keep feeding back into themselves (N, 203-204). It is interesting that in the decades since his death, the icon of the vortex in water has come to stand for this new approach of science to turbulence in far from equilibrium states in dynamic processes that proceed in a non-linear fashion.

At this point in the lectures, Merleau-Ponty uses examples familiar to the readers of his early work how perception has a ground in factical conditions that become inscribed into a larger environment in such a way to transform the givens, whether of the perception of a circle, movement, or the way in the film of Matisse painting, each brushstroke seems to evoke further strokes and yet their sense is further transformed by each additional stroke, so they only become what they were through the unfolding of the process (N, 204-206). The point of these sections is to get us to see there is no need for an underlying ground for either animality or world, if we can envision a more global relation

among multiple factors, in which there is not a juxtaposition of being and non-being, but rather the presence of a given lack that gives rise to emergences that provide an evolving, self-regulating sense of structure or form (N, 206-210). The differences among things do not have to disjoin them, but can be the "adhesion" of their being drawn into an interplay to meet a challenge of the environment felt as a lack, but also as a summons. Lack is not only the non-being of something, but it is also the coming into being of that which is called for. This means that there are not "simples" to be assembled by an external engineer or by a pre-given underlying design, but only in the unfolding, where the relations give rise to transforming structures that allow new relations to emerge and develop from constituents which may have had no prior unity.

Modern biology and science have come to understand materiality in terms of information and interactions in terms of communication. The movement of matter in interaction is "only a particular case of communication" (N, 212). Rather than seeing matter in an atomistic fashion, in which structures degrade entropically, seen as information in passage, matter becomes and transforms. It can not only degrade, but also accrue sense and or be reiterated (N, 210-212). Even the classical idea of mechanism and machines, as grinding away in atomistic isolation and friction, losing energy, resisting entropic forces, and dictated in all their operations by external directions incorporated into their design is an outmoded idea as the sole paradigm of the machine. Many machines, such as the artificial tortoise referred to by Merleau-Ponty (N, 213), to far less elaborate ones, are based on feedback with their environment, such that their continued functioning is self-regulating to meet the further developments encountered in the changing environment. Material conditions are streams of information which communicate within a field. The activity of machines can be open-ended and responsive – to take a simpler and more widespread example than the elaborate tortoise machine – such as how a thermostat regulates the heating of a house turning itself off and on in response to the temperature of its surroundings. Feedback is communication. What such machines lack that animals can embody is the surpassing of a determinate repertoire of possible actions in response to the environment, whereas the repertoire of machines is set. The animal has the ability to transform itself and its world to make unforeseen improvisation possible (N, 215).

The paradigm of a system in which the felt lack not only allows for an openness of feedback or reception of information, but allows for improvisation and therefore full communication, an expression that transforms potentially both parties to an encounter, is that of language. The relationship between machine and environment has been viewed through the paradigm of a code, where the combinations are enumerated ahead of their realization and are determinate (N, 216). Language, however, is not a code in its leeway, its indeterminacy that can become actualized in unforeseen ways, and in its ability to integrate the accidental and even the absurd into its sense. Language is not fully rational, but rather the verbal chain has reliefs and gaps that can come to be filled in ways only the unfolding process will arrive at

within the relations of expression between speaker and environment (N, 215-218). Rather than see language as the product of rationality and opposed to nature, modern science has revealed nature as a kind of language and animality as behavior within an improvisational taking up residence in a field of relations. The "almost" but not complete nature of animality, that it is not a seamless integration within an external set of relations, allows for "the space of discernment" which is space riddled with fissures or gaps, such that life is about finding a way. We could say that animality as this dimension of moving into a world, which for human beings is a mixture of relations, both cultural and natural, is "the animality within subjectivity." In a very memorable phrase Merleau-Ponty suggests that "we could say that animality is the *logos* of the sensible world: an embodied sense" (N, 219).

The tradition of Western thought has described intelligence, learning, and communication according to a positivistic paradigm, as if sheer light would engender vision, pure meaning or coincidence would be intelligible instead of absurd or without meaning, and as if adaptive response were a direct and immediate act rather than a groping, being put off enough to gain the distance of having the space to be moved into new rhythms and directions of encounter and relation. It is the lowest type of mechanical response that is immediate, determinate, and given one transparent meaning. With the perfect fit of the machine, there is no opening up of a dimension like embodied sense, which instead gives animality a space, its recoil, that is a gap in the circuit of unfolding significance which allows perspective.

In the work of von Uexküll in the first third of this century, Merleau-Ponty finds in the notion of *Umwelt* an "intermediary reality" between the objective world of the ideal spectator and the realm of subjectivity. However, it is also valuable in providing a way to reveal differing levels of organization and how consciousness and the machine can be incorporated as variants of these organizational levels (N, 220-221). In starting with the animals of the lowest level, there is the appearance of being a machine in the traditionally determinate conception. An example of this level of organism is the jellyfish, who appears to be barely a living being. Yet, although appearing like a simple machine, it lacks the kind of adherence to a central plan or blueprint that would be consistent with such a mechanism. Rather, what is found is that the animal is not a unity. It almost seems as if there were two animals: one that moves and one that eats (N, 221). Looking at other creatures at this level of organization, like the sea urchin or starfish, the lack of interplay among bodily systems and functions is also true. This lack of unity also means there is an inability to inhabit a unified sense of the exterior world, which is what an *Umwelt* is. The machine nature of these creatures does not unify them with an environment, since the machines are disperse or disjointed functions.

Yet, in looking at an even more basic organism, the ameba, it might be said to be a kind of flow of protoplasm without definite organs, where what function like organs are constantly created and recreated in response to the environment. The ameba is in a state of continual birth and its blueprint is recreated

incessantly (N, 223). Another simple organism, the sea anemone, which has three neural networks and a central nervous system, however only works as a particularized organ might work or as the sum of its components and not as a way of creating a sense of the whole organism, also moves in rhythm with the surrounding waters. What these examples show is that it is not merely changes in structure or function synchronous to fluctuations in the surroundings or a continual fluidity of recreation that constitutes a genuine response to the environment or an adaptive transformation. Simultaneous change is not sufficient for having a sense of the environment and of the organism in its relation to the environment (N, 223-224). These lower animals are locked into a closure with their surroundings like "a baby in its cradle" (N, 224). So, we have lower organisms either lacking a unified response to environment or being too directly synchronized with it to have any sense of it as interlocutor.

The higher animals have a *Gegenwelt*, a world that stands in opposition to them. Instead of being closed within their surroundings seamlessly, there is an opening. In the higher animal the sensorial inputs about the world are coordinated and elaborated, brought into a kind of relation like language in which there is an address which is interpreted against a background of meaning and interpreted. As with language, the nervous system provides "a mirror on the world" (N, 225). Rather than the inferior animal's being the site of a wave of excitation, like a light that is on or off, the superior animal lives in a sensorium as within an atmosphere, and can move into that atmosphere to locate the object of perception that unifies the sensorial givens. In this case, the perceptual and the motoric are one phenomenon of embodiment. The body becomes that power of taking up other positions or attitudes in order to transform the given percept into finer details or an unfolding sense.

Furthermore, in the higher animals, there is a sense of their own bodies, a proprioceptivity, that allows for this positioning in relation to unfolding the surrounding world. In a certain sense control is lessened, or rather, it is not automatic, but rather becomes a task or a project. The animal has an openness in its responses which come to guide its further responses through the environment or is involved in a circle of elaboration, a feedback relation. Von Uexküll sees the higher animal constructing an *Umwelt* by replacing the world as given (the *Merkwelt*) with the world as modulated and elaborated by the animals dispositions, and what is perceived is altered through its behavior (*Wirkwelt*). The *Umwelten* of different species may cross one another, like the rat living among snakes, habitual enemies (N, 226-227) that must react to these lines of force in its own set of relations with the surrounding world or fail to survive.

Merleau-Ponty elaborates on von Uexküll's likening the *Umwelt* to a melody. There is a sense in which the melody sings itself through those that join into it, or, as Merleau-Ponty cites Proust as saying, that the melody descends down into the throat of the singer. To enter into the melody is to enter into a distinctive time, and one in which each note secretes those to follow that resound upon the presence of the prior notes back to the first one. Within the circle of the *Umwelt*, the idea of cause and effect becomes transformed in such

a way that causes give rise to effects which now shape the causes. Merleau-Ponty quotes von Uexküll that the latter understood through his work that a different sense of the world had emerged: "each subject weaves its relations like the threads of a spider web weave the relations of things of the exterior world and constructs with all these threads a solid network to carry out its existence" (N, 230-231). In discussing the overall significance of von Uexküll's work, Merleau-Ponty declares that the notion of *Umwelt* allows one to see the animal in relation to its environment as effect *and* as cause. The *Umwelt*'s presence is neither goal or idea, but rather like the theme of a melody "that haunts consciousness" (N, 233). The way to understand this, says Merleau-Ponty, is to compare it to how the human oneiric consciousness is directed towards certain poles which can never be seen for themselves but still give direction to the elements within the dream. Merleau-Ponty states that this oneiric sense of consciousness suggests better the way that the parts of the organism, or the way the organism and the environment, or the way animals among other animals, enter into relationship (N, 232-233).

In looking at the work of E. S. Russell, Merleau-Ponty finds that this paradigm can be seen in the new way science treats physiology. The workings among cells, tissues, and organs can be seen as a form of behavior towards an internal environment or milieu. Rather than unfailingly moving according to a set design, on varying levels, organic materials have differing possibilities, and it is only in terms of the constellations of activities and interactions with the environment that directions towards maintaining or restoring organic functioning occur (N, 235-238). Again, against the background of being able to see the body and its constituents, not as substances, but as passage, as unfolding and transforming processes, the organism can be seen "as a fluctuation around norms" (N, 239). The process gains structure and ongoing framing by the events which enter into relationships which form around certain absences which are like gravitational pulls within a field (N, 239-240).

For Merleau-Ponty, throughout his lectures, it is a matter of dispensing with a reductively rationalistic and mechanistic perspective that would impose order from the outside upon nature according to some interpretation of efficient functioning. Even the outward appearance of animals in relationship to their environment, their way of copying or echoing environmental features has been understood within this reductive paradigm. Instead, could allow that "life is not only an organization for survival, but also a prodigious fluorescence of forms" (N, 243). Merleau-Ponty discusses the sense of indivision, of a kind of magic of kinship, that can exist between the animal and the world and how animals too can take up their materiality in both a sensibility of vitality which includes joy, as well as in a movement to be expressive. It is not only on the level just discussed of creating both a space and a kind of atmospheric interrelatedness that makes the *Umwelt* possible (as a separating-yet-embedding) that the sense of the oneiric holds sway, but also beyond this to the taking up of appearance or of the use of sexual movements for expressive gestures. In higher animals, sexual behaviors still serve a utilitarian function, "but transformed: they take

on an expressive value" (N, 245) or, in another kind of example, the same facial muscle that in lower animals has a utilitarian function, such as the eye muscles closing the lids to protect the eye, takes on an expressive function in the higher animals. Rather than exclusively focusing on utilitarian purpose, much behavior can be understood to be about "an existential value of manifestation, of presentation." In this dimension, animals "manifest something like that which resembles our oneiric life" (N, 246). Merleau-Ponty states we must recognize that animals live a world of sense, in which expression and relation are part of the atmosphere of their lives, a sense of being "surrounded" and "in the midst of" better represented by the vortex of a dream rather than the sense of objects arrayed in a Cartesian space.

One consequence of this view of animality articulated by Merleau-Ponty is to see that behavior should be seen as layered. There are patterns of behavior that are part of the species. However, even instinctive behavior, which has been cited by traditional science and philosophy as proof of determinate mechanistic action and innate design, has to be understood differently in terms of how a species makes use of its body and its manner of behaving (N, 248-249). Instinctive actions are not some sort of behavioral substrate or foundation of simple mechanism for more free activity. Instinctive actions are not acts oriented towards a certain goal, nor are they a rigid set of determinate actions, but rather they are "a way capable of resolving a tension" when an object in the environment presents an obstacle to the animals continuing with its melody. Instinctive actions are actually marked by being "objectless" and are rather the "manifestation of a certain style" (N, 251). A way of moving or acting or responding is played out without any specific means to end present. Rather than being impelled towards a certain goal, the behaviors of instinctive action "are an activity of pleasure" (N, 250 and 251, repeated exact declaration). There is no one to one correspondence between the environment and instinctive actions. Events may evoke instinctive behavior, but are not causally related to these actions which could better be articulated as "a sort of reference towards the virtual, towards the oneiric life" (N, 251). To consider what Merleau-Ponty is asserting, we might think how humans live their lives embedded in an oneiric existence that we can never fathom, but is a backdrop, an immersion in pushes and pulls whose precise sense eludes us, and they remain ever mysterious and omnipresent in the shadows, in the depths, and around the edges of our consciousness. In the thrall of the dream or even just the dreamlike, we undertake actions which seem to have absorbed all sense into the fabric of their occurrence: they happen and we are impelled into them, but not as the purposive agent of our everyday tasks, but as swimming within a pregnant current whose depths and eddies we can't sound.

Merleau-Ponty continues to describe how the stimulus of the instinctive action is like "a lure that exercises on the animal a certain fascination. There is a sort of fetishism of the instinct, something of the compulsive phenomenon" (N, 252). As Merleau-Ponty points out, this aspect of instinct makes it possible to fool the animal since the animal, seized by its percept,

like the butterflies copulating with a glass rod covered by female secretions or the bird "entranced" by the red throat of the female, is "out of its mind," and able to be fooled by artificial red patches, when it is capable of such fine perceptual discernment otherwise. Within the instinctive world, "there is an oneiric character, absolute and sacred, of the instinct." Rather than Cartesian machines, animals are immersed in a level of perception that is like "hallucinatory conduct" in which tensions are experienced with a need to be relieved, in which there is a turning towards things and a turning away, a kind of inertia, and in a kind of liminal zone which is neither of the real or the unreal (N, 252). The animal is itself and is not itself, in thrall, in the hold of some aspect of the environment and some internal compulsion which makes its action come from another sort of depth than many of its everyday actions. We, too, as oneiric creatures act out dramas that are ourselves and are not.

There is a resonance of internal compulsion and rapport with the external world. It is a kind of "drama" and a "combination of vision and passion" (N, 253). In the ontological sense which emerges for Merleau-Ponty, having drawn on many scientific sources for these insights, there is a coming together in instinct of the internal unfolding and the external unfolding in a passage of the oneiric which doesn't follow the law of all or nothing, being or non-being. (N, 254). Given this unfolding of many layered and transforming enlacements of animality and world, perception and image, dream and totality of the environment, Merleau-Ponty does not see the traditional chasm between the animal and the symbolically communicative. The instinctive, as this realm of fascination and dream, can easily give way to the symbolic, since behavior so tied to features of the surrounding world can themselves become ways of signifying these aspects of the world, not as an intellectual operation but within the oneiric dimension (N, 254-256). Again, to think of what Merleau-Ponty is saying, think of how in dream, there are significations in which objects absorb behaviors and or behaviors come to embody the presence of an object or event. Then to undertake parts of this behavior with emphasis or expression can become a way to symbolically express that aspect of the situation: the gesture or the behavior becomes a "gesture-toward" or a "behavior-toward," a kind of pointer.

Merleau-Ponty states that the touchstone of Cartesianism is often the claim that animals are automata (N, 259). He sees that scientists, even some like Lorenz, whose descriptions could lead in new directions, are hesitant to break this reductive boundary that has been placed around animality. Yet Merleau-Ponty has demonstrated that this reductionism acts as safeguard for dualisms and for the claim of the human superiority to nature. What Merleau-Ponty doesn't explicitly state at the end of the lecture course is the converse, but has tellingly articulated nevertheless, that nature seen as modalities of passage and made manifest in an oneiric context (which can be made more determinate or mechanistic in parts, and after an initial more indeterminate experience) is an unfolding of things, animals, and humans such that what is most expressive, what is most responsive, and what is most revealingly

creative about humans stems from a shared dimension that indicates the abandonment of the isolation of the human from the rest of nature and animality. It is on this note that he begins the final year of the course, a year and half later, continuing this thought with the notion of "flesh" he is at that time developing: "it is my body [...] in a circuit with the world – *Einfühlung* with the world, with things, with animals, with other bodies" (N, 271). Humans are not of a distinct level of being, but part of a circuit or circulation within the unfolding of nature.

IV. *Interanimality*

Hopefully, now, readers of Merleau-Ponty can see more pointedly the place of the oneiric when he asserted decades before in the *Phenomenology of Perception* in articulating the sense of space seen from an embodied perspective: "The phantasms of dreams reveal still more effectively that general spatiality within which clear space and observable objects are embedded" (PP, 284). The more deliberate and rationalized orientation within the environment is placed within this larger context of fascinations and repulsions, of desires and fears, which move through the environmental unfolding as part of its rhythm or as layers of its current. When Merleau-Ponty, in the passage quoted before summing up the oneiric, states that animals see according to the seen, in terms of their inner bodily relations, with things, and among other animals that have a specular relationship of mirroring among themselves, he concludes that the ontological weight of this notion of space is that animality can't exist as a separable phenomenon, there can only be interanimality (N, 247). All perceivers, including human perceivers, emerge from within this space of internal relations. This theme which has long been suggested by Merleau-Ponty's work becomes explicit in the last lecture course which seeks to see humans "at the point of emergence from within nature," from "within the *Ineinander* with animality and nature," and in its "being-body ... emerging as another thread, not as another substance, as inter-being" with animality and nature (N 269-70).

To be a body is to be part of an emergence of things, animals and humans in which the perceptual sense is not static or atomized, but part of a circuit. If perceiving occurs only in a moving, perceiving body such that the things seen and touched also make their presence known in the encounter, and are revealing as much as they are revealed, this kind of reflexivity of the body opens the circuit of which we are part. This doubling back is what is meant by flesh. However, as Merleau-Ponty has demonstrated, this sense of *Umwelt* – as place of identity and difference – is also what is meant by animality, at least in the higher reaches, in which there is a gap or space which allows for recoil and reflexivity as well as inclusion. The different vectors of sense and possible location and action riddle the landscape spaces in which human, animal, and thing are all inscribed. For example, the sky is an openness and place of flight

in which the buoyant sense of air, gulls gliding, jets traveling, the sun shining, kites soaring, clouds floating, falcons circling, seeds wafting, homing pigeons returning, gods surveying, butterflies flitting, satellites orbiting, locusts migrating, and so forth, indefinitely stretches above our upright perceiving bodies. The sky, too, is always in passage, transforming moment by moment, oneiric in its vortex of sense, and a site of interanimality in which animals, humans, things, nature and culture, fact and myth, etc., stream in transformation and stretch above our upright perceiving bodies. For humans, animals as perceivers, lost and found in transition and dream, we are indefinitely both detoured and drawn in, oriented and groping.

If instinct in animals is not a mechanism, but rather a "plasticity," a kind of pleasure in the experiencing of perception that leads animality to be fascinated and drawn in movement and action for its own sake, then it should not surprise us that Merleau-Ponty finds in human perception a dimension of pleasure proliferating in the extent of the perceptual world. It is not that *eros* or *libido* is a force of impulsion or attraction focused on a certain object and then displaced onto others, but rather that to be a body, a perceiver, is to be rooted in an intercorporeality with the world that it itself a pleasure and a kind of longing for the place among the circulation among the other things and creatures of the world. There are pains and pleasures that are part of this open-ended sense of embodiment, but the desire to be beyond oneself in the circulation is both a kind of pleasure and *the transcendence we are as bodies – as a lateral movement among others* (N, 272-3). Transcendence is not detachment and going beyond, but plunging within and becoming circulated and dispersed, flowing and then gathered together again momentarily.

This sense of the natural world means that "the human-animal relation is not a simple hierarchy founded upon an addition" (N, 276-277). It is not as though there is some basic animal organization and organism, to which reason is added as another and higher level of being for humans. The human, insofar as it is different from the animal, is different as a different embodied structuration of the world, one in which both its body and reason are implicated as a unitary phenomenon (N, 277). The myths of various cultures have described better the linkage among animals and humans and the sense of belonging to a common world, noted by Merleau-Ponty after this long study of Western philosophy and science, and the reader can't help feeling that this mythic sense was the one towards which Merleau-Ponty was trying to move Western philosophy. However, to do this, Merleau-Ponty reiterates, nature must be studied as perceived nature, this is the key, and not studied as brute being. The "I think" is not the route to arrive at nature, only perception yields the *Ineinander* (N, 278). Only then, too, can matter be understood, not as some inert, oppositional mass, but as part of the circuit inside of which we are as humans. Matter can be seen as a gauge of things surrounding when we see matter is open also, is only part of a circuit or circulation with the world (N, 279-280). The carnal body is interpolated within the open circuit of the things of the world, which are internally related, as this movement of perceiving-perceived.

In much of the rest of this last lecture, Merleau-Ponty articulates the philosophy of the flesh, here using the science he has introduced, and also delivers on what he has suggested is possible, a kind of psychoanalysis of nature as a libidinal field, one delivered from the anthropocentrism of classical psychoanalysis – both fascinating topics, but outside the focus of this essay. Merleau-Ponty does approach again the sense of human interanimality from the perspective of evolution to assert that given his analysis, even in evolutionary terms, the intertwining of human and animal in the perceiving body means that humans are not a rupture with the past or a new kind of being. We are not in a hierarchical relationship with animals in an evolutionary sense either, but rather in a lateral relationship, where human attributes are a transformation of other animal ones. There is a metamorphosis, but not a new beginning. The human "spirit" is not separable from corporeal structure and our bodies are enmeshed in an intercorporeality with animality. Our aesthesiological and erotic embodiment is one that is of the biosphere itself (N, 334-335).

To arrive at this perspective, it is necessary to overcome both substantialism and dualism. This invisible being we supposedly bring to the word, the world of ideas and mental substance, is only the "other side" of the perceived, the sense of what the material means as entering into this circulation of perception into which we are enfolded (N, 338). However, this folding into each other is not intelligible where bodies are fragments of space on a Cartesian grid, but only if they are a groping forward, a way of behavior as response to cradling and confronting, or a moving into rhythms unfolding (N, 338-339), like the image of the melody Merleau-Ponty used to describe the life of the animal. The world as a world of passage, of transitions which nevertheless have their own identities as process itself, folding into one another in a sense which is fundamentally a plastic relationality of fascinations, repulsions, and not fully fathomable reflexivities, like the dream, whose pleasure is it open-endedness, is one in which human being and animal being and even the extended life of things are in one another as the ongoing birth of sense.

Glen A. Mazis

NOTES

1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La Nature*, ed. Dominique Séglard (Paris; Editions du Seuil, 1995), my translations throughout. Any further references within this essay to this text will be indicated by – "N," followed by the page number placed within parentheses.

2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 165. Any further references within this essay to this text will be indicated "VI," followed by the page number placed within parentheses.

3 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Humanities, 1962), p. 68. Any further references within this essay to this text will be indicated by the page number placed within parentheses, or if the context does not make clear that it is the *Phenomenology* that is being discussed, the page number will be included within parentheses and followed by "*PP*."

4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," trans. by Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 267. Any further references within this essay to this text will be indicated by "EM," followed by the page number placed within parentheses. For an extended discussion of how the temporality of reversibility must itself be chiasmatic see my essay, "Merleau-Ponty and the 'Backward Flow' of Time: The Reversibility of Temporality and the Temporality of Reversibility," in *Merleau-Ponty: Hermeneutics and Postmodernism*, ed. Busch and Gallagher (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 53-68.

5 For an extended discussion of how the oneiric is central to Merleau-Ponty's ideas of perception, how this combats the Cartesian tradition, and how this gives rise to an "oneiric materialism" (a theme that should be developed in terms of *La Nature*, but space does not permit here), see my essay "Matter, Dream, and the Murmurs among Things," in *Difference, Materiality, Painting* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1996), pp. 72-90.

Le concept de nature chez Merleau-Ponty : le passage, l'onirique et l'interanimalité

Parmi les nombreuses idées que Merleau-Ponty examine dans ses cours, il y en a trois qui émergent, à mon avis, de manière particulièrement évocatrice et importante pour un nouveau concept de nature et une nouvelle ontologie. Ces trois notions sont le fruit d'idées développées par Merleau-Ponty depuis des dizaines d'années, mais dont l'importance n'a pas été réellement mesurée par ses lecteurs: sa notion de "passage" – clé de son concept du devenir, qui dépasse les substantialismes et permet de comprendre la temporalité du chiasme, – la "dimension onirique" de la perception, qui figure dans sa refonte des notions d'"organisme", d'"instinct" et d'"environnement", et, enfin, l'entrelacement humain-animal ou "interanimalité", qui approfondit son traitement radical de la perception, du corps et du langage. Ces trois notions donnent au lecteur de *La Nature* un moyen de suivre l'argumentation que Merleau-Ponty développe au long de ces trois cours : le "passage" est la pensée culminante de la première année de travail, l'"onirique" de la seconde, et l'"interanimalité" de la dernière, ainsi que, d'une certaine manière, de la conception générale de la nature chez Merleau-Ponty. Non seulement ces idées développent le concept de nature et l'"ontologie indirecte" de Merleau-Ponty, mais sans elles, sa notion très discutée de "chair" n'acquiérerait pas le sens qu'il visait. Ces trois notions du passage, de l'onirique et de l'interanimalité sont déjà présentes dans ses premiers travaux, d'une manière qui enrichit notre compréhension de la radicalité de son ontologie indirecte de la chair, si l'on lit "à reculons" à partir des travaux les plus récents jusqu'aux plus anciens.

Dans les cours de la première année, datant de 1956-57, lorsque Merleau-Ponty analyse le concept de nature chez Aristote, les Stoïciens, Descartes, Kant, Brunschwieg, Schelling, Bergson et Husserl, les concepts directeurs que l'on retrouve tout au long de son commentaire sont: 1) la question de savoir si le concept de nature étudié est statique, ou s'il admet le dynamisme et un sens plus profond du mouvement, qui est nécessaire à un sens de la nature plus adéquat que le concept rationaliste de mouvement comme objet passant à travers des lieux dans un milieu spatial homogène, 2) la question de savoir si le concept de nature considéré a une signification dans le cadre des processus naturels, ou si les événements naturels sont écartés comme sans signification par eux-mêmes et n'acquièrent un sens qu'à travers les jugements les concernant, et 3) la question de savoir si le concept de nature en question admet un certain sens de connectivité de ses parties, ou bien si cette unité doit être reconstituée de l'extérieur, à moins qu'elle manque tout simplement. Dynamisme, sens et connectivité font tous partie intégrante d'un regard sur la nature en tant qu'elle se déroule, en tant que processus de transformation qui dissout les dichotomies que Merleau-Ponty considère comme détruisant le sens de la nature: nécessité contre contingence, sujet contre objet, humain contre animal, esprit contre matière, immanence contre transcendence et mécanisme contre vitalisme. Quand, vers la fin du cours, Merleau-Ponty revient à des considérations qui relèvent de la physique classique et moderne, à leur notion d'espace et de

temps et, finalement, aux travaux de Whitehead, il peut désigner la notion de passage comme étant celle qui combine ces trois éléments entremêlés, d'une manière significative qui a fait défaut à la tradition occidentale.

La capacité accrue d'apprendre et de répondre de manière créative à l'environnement, qui est propre aux animaux, tout en se développant vers le niveau humain (en tant que déploiement continu et ouvert de l'animalité), est une manière d'entrer dans l'ambiguité, la plasticité, et la multiplicité, plutôt que la clarté, la distinction, et l'unité. Il y a une dimension onirique de l'animalité. Merleau-Ponty montre que l'utilisation des notions de comportement, de modèle, d'information et d'écart dans la biologie moderne mènent à l'onirique. Plutôt que de considérer les fonctions mécaniques des organismes comme des matériaux de construction de l'animalité, il faut les voir comme des développements secondaires qui stabilisent des secteurs de la relation avec l'environnement. Le mouvement de la matière en interaction n'est qu'un "cas particulier de communication". Plutôt que de voir la matière comme ce dont les structures ne peuvent que se dégrader par entropie, le passage de la matière accroît également le sens ou peut être réitéré. Le *feedback* est communication. Les animaux dépassent un répertoire déterminé d'actions possibles en réponse à l'environnement et sont mieux compris non pas en tant que répondant à travers des codes, mais plutôt sur un mode similaire au langage. L'apparence, le comportement sexuel et l'instinct sont vus comme immergés dans un niveau de perception – comparable à une "conduite hallucinatoire", dans laquelle les tensions sont vécues comme ayant besoin d'être déchargées, dans laquelle on se tourne vers les choses et on se détourne, par une espèce d'inertie – dans une sorte de zone liminaire qui n'appartient ni au réel ni à l'irréel. L'animal est lui-même et n'est pas lui-même, en esclavage.

Les différents vecteurs de sens, comme de lieu et d'action possibles, criblent les paysages dans lesquels humains, animaux et choses sont tous inscrits. En tant qu'humains et animaux percevant, se perdant et se retrouvant dans la transition et le rêve, nous sommes indéfiniment détournés et aspirés à la fois, orientés et tâtonnants. L'interanimalité est au coeur de la subjectivité. Ce sens du monde naturel signifie que "la relation humain-animal n'est pas une simple hiérarchie fondée sur une addition." Le corps charnel est interpolé à l'intérieur du circuit ouvert des choses du monde, qui sont reliées de l'intérieur, en tant que mouvement du percevant-perçu. Les êtres humains sont empêtrés dans une intercorporéité avec l'animalité. Notre incarnation esthéologique et érotique est du domaine de la biosphère même.

Il concetto di natura di Merleau-Ponty. Il passaggio, l'onirico e l'interanimalità

Delle molte idee che Merleau-Ponty esamina nei suoi corsi, ne emergono tre, io credo, che risultano chiaramente evocative ed importanti per un nuovo concetto di natura ed una nuova ontologia. Queste tre nozioni sono la realizzazione di idee sviluppate da Merleau-Ponty per decenni ma non adeguatamente valutate dai suoi lettori: la nozione di "passaggio" – chiave per la sua nozione di divenire, che supera il sostanzialismo e sottintende la temporalità del chiasma –, la "dimensione onirica" della percezione, che compare nella sua rifondazione delle nozioni di "organismo", "istinto" e "ambiente", nonché l'intreccio umano-animale o "interanimalità", che approfondisce il suo radicale trattamento della percezione, del corpo e del linguaggio. Esse danno modo al lettore de *La Nature* di seguire la riflessione che Merleau-Ponty sviluppa durante questi tre corsi: il "passaggio" è il pensiero culminante del lavoro del primo anno, l'"onirico" di quello del secondo e l'"interanimalità" sia del lavoro dell'ultimo anno sia, in qualche modo, dell'idea generale di natura di Merleau-Ponty. Non solo queste idee perfezionano il concetto di natura e l'"ontologia indiretta" di Merleau-Ponty, ma senza di esse la molto discussa nozione di "carne" di Merleau-Ponty non assume il senso che egli intendeva. Inoltre, queste tre nozioni di passaggio, di onirico e di interanimalità sono già presenti nei suoi primi lavori in un modo che aiuta anche a comprendere il radicalismo dell'ontologia indiretta della carne, se si legge "retrospettivamente" dall'ultima produzione alla prima.

Nel primo anno di corso (1956-57), in cui Merleau-Ponty analizza il concetto di natura in

Aristotele, negli Stoici, in Cartesio, Kant, Brunschvicg, Schelling, Bergson e Husserl, i concetti guida che percorrono i suoi commenti riguardano 1) se il concetto di natura in questione sia statico o tale da permettere il dinamismo nonché un più profondo senso del movimento, a sua volta necessario ad un senso della natura più adeguato rispetto al concetto razionalistico di movimento inteso come attraversamento di posizioni da parte di un oggetto in un contenitore spaziale omogeneo; 2) se il concetto di natura in questione tenga conto del significato interno ai processi naturali o se gli eventi naturali siano posti come in se stessi sprovvisti di significato e assumano senso solo come risultato di giudizi su di essi; 3) se il concetto di natura in discussione tenga conto di un certo senso di connessione tra le sue parti o se questa unità debba essere fornita dal di fuori o sia mancante. Dinamismo, senso e connessione fanno parte di una visione della natura come dispiegamento, come processo di continua trasformazione che interseca le dicotomie che Merleau-Ponty considera distruttive per il senso della natura: necessità *versus* contingenza, soggetto *versus* oggetto, umano *versus* animale, spirito *versus* materia, immanenza *versus* trascendenza e meccanismo *versus* vitalismo. Quando, verso la fine del corso, Merleau-Ponty si rivolge ad alcune considerazioni di fisica classica e moderna, alle loro nozioni di spazio e di tempo e infine all'opera di Whitehead, egli può indicare l'idea di passaggio come la nozione che combina queste tre componenti intrecciate in un modo significativo che la tradizione occidentale ha mancato.

La crescente capacità degli animali di apprendere e rispondere creativamente all'ambiente, che prepara il livello umano (in quanto continuo ed aperto dispiegamento dell'animalità) è una maniera di entrare nell'ambiguità, plasticità e molteplicità piuttosto che nella chiarezza, distinzione ed unità. C'è una dimensione onirica dell'animalità. L'uso delle nozioni di comportamento, *pattern*, informazione e scarto nella biologia moderna mostra come esse conducano all'onirico. Le funzioni meccaniche degli organismi, piuttosto che materiali da costruzione dell'animalità, sono sviluppi secondari che stabilizzano parti di questa relazione con l'ambiente. Il movimento della materia in interazione è "solo un caso particolare di comunicazione". Piuttosto che considerare la materia in un modo in cui le strutture non fanno che degradare per entropia, il passaggio della materia accresce anche il senso o può essere reiterato. Il *feedback* è comunicazione. Gli animali sorpassano un repertorio determinato di possibili azioni in risposta all'ambiente e sono meglio compresi non come rispondenti secondo codici, ma similmente al linguaggio. L'apparenza, il comportamento sessuale e l'istinto sono considerati immersi in un livello di percezione che è come la "condotta allucinatoria", in cui le tensioni sono esperite con un bisogno di venire sfogate, in cui c'è un volgersi verso le cose ed uno stornarsi da esse, una sorta di inerzia, ed in una specie di zona liminale che non appartiene né al reale né all'irreale. L'animale è se stesso e non è se stesso, prigioniero.

I differenti vettori di senso nonché di collocazione e azione possibili perforano gli spazi del paesaggio in cui l'umano, l'animale e la cosa sono tutti inscritti. Come umani e come animali che percepiscono, perduti e ritrovati nel mutamento e nel sogno, noi siamo indefinitamente distolti e insieme attratti, orientati e brancolanti. L'interanimalità è al cuore della soggettività. Questo senso del mondo naturale significa che "il rapporto animale-uomo non corrisponderà a una semplice gerarchia fondata su una addizione". Il corpo di carne è interpolato, in quanto percipiente-percepito, all'interno del circuito aperto delle cose del mondo, che risultano intimamente imparentate. Gli umani sono inviluppati intercorporeamente con l'animalità. La nostra incarnazione estesiologica ed erotica è una sola, ossia quella della biosfera stessa.