LA CHAIR ET L'IMAGINAIRE: THE DEVELOPING ROLE OF IMAGINATION IN MERLEAU-PONTY'S PHILOSOPHY

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I. Decentering and Imagining

"The magnificent cause of being,
The Imagination, the one reality
In this imagined world..."

— Wallace Stevens, *"Another Weeping Woman"*[1]

To appreciate imagination is to appreciate the complexity of Being. To truly take to heart the imagined is to watch Eleatic logic crumble. The emergent playfulness of the imagined can't be suppressed and invariably leads the enthralled eye to the spectacle of inter-play, to the trailing off of the real and the imaginary into the twisting of the Mobius strip or the circling of the hand-holding dancers who are both within and without the whirling circle, turning inwards at one moment and outwards at the next. Only a philosopher who truly hearkens to the voices of the phenomena will be troubled by such whirligigs or vortices. To describe a reality in which there is the inherent possibility that the imagined is "the one reality in this imagined world" is to attempt to remain so close to "the things themselves" that one becomes displaced even by the fine oscillations that lie frozen within the depths of the categorical. The above lines of Wallace Stevens constitute a startling claim about the power of the Eleatic one or none, so that a maze of many surrounds and undermines the once clearly bounded. Merleau-Ponty was a philosopher who did hearken to the nuances of the phenomena. In this fidelity, he was led from his early avoidance of an encounter with the full power of the imaginary into a thicket of significance from which he declared one could not be extricated, but rather only further enmeshed through ongoing interrogation. However, that is the end of the tale of Merleau-Ponty's sojourn with the imaginary, as evidenced in his last writings. The beginning, on the other hand, leads out from his consideration of the vectors of the perceived world.

When Stevens writes of the imagination as the "magnificent cause of being ... the one reality in this imagined world," he points to the fact that the overmastering potency of the imagined is at the heart of the experience of world. His description will have to be accounted for by the philosopher who starts with the experienced. One is reminded by this poem that imagination *disturbs*. The imagined infiltrates reality in ways one often can't see. It can be the case that one can experience unknowingly an unqualified potency of the imaginary in the midst of one's seemingly more secure existence not only for broken moments of idleness or fancy but even during an entire lifetime: the protagonist of Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, the Sea,* Charles Arrowby, has

spent 40 years in thrall of an imagined relationship with a certain woman. In his imagined reality their love still plagues her. For Charles, this imagined bond stems from the adolescent relationship of more than forty years ago that the reader learns was even then largely the product of his imagination. The reader comes to believe that Charles' supposed lover has never loved him at all, either forty years ago or at the present, and that their love was only a twilight being of the imaginary fueled by his desperate passion. Charles, plagued by these monstrosities of the imagination, which can bedevil all our lives, now finds as the book opens that he is now also plagued by fears about an imaginary sea monster outside his seaside lair.[2] If on these and other levels of experience, one can feel at moments the power of the imaginary to resound and reside at the heart of the nonimaginary, then here is a region of sense that one who claims to be a "philosopher of experience," rather than a "philosopher of explanation," cannot honestly avoid. In this paper, I will argue that as Merleau-Ponty later realized his work in the *Phenomenology of Perception* to be inadequate to articulate a new ontology [p. 200, *The Visible and the Invisible*],[3] he also had to acknowledge a primacy of the imagined that he had largely ignored in his early work.

I agree with Merleau-Ponty's own assessment that the *Phenomenology of Perception* did not yet articulate a sense of being that could dispel the traditional dualistic, reifying descriptions of phenomena and their underlying positivistic ontologies, despite the strides he had made toward this goal. I will attempt to demonstrate that despite the fact that the notion of the gestalt and the almost exclusive primacy given to perception were needed correctives to the tradition in giving a new role to embodiment, contingency, and the contextualized, always incipient unfolding of experience, yet a form of positivistic understanding of the nature of presence remained — which was to be seen in his treatment of the imaginary. I will argue that although Merleau-Ponty sought to articulate a play of presence and absence, a release of experience into "dehiscences," "tears," "fissures," "gaps" in the *Phenomenology,* in the sense that his framework aims at this violence to the tradition,[4] yet it couldn't allow this achievement, given the terms in which it was cast — that notions such as the "phenomenal field" [although an improvement over many traditional formulations] aborted such proliferations. Only after Merleau-Ponty attempts to give voice to the "unity by transgression" *(unité de transgression:* the phrase used in the same "working note" that indicates his perception of the shortcomings of the *Phenomenology of Perception)* by noting events in a new voice outside the "objective conditioning" contained in the distinctions of the vocabulary of the philosophical tradition does the power of the imaginary begin to emerge.

In order to look at the development of the role of the imaginary in Merleau-Ponty's work, a first question should be posed to him: does the "antepredicative world" function as some sort of "touchstone" or "founding" that gives an ongoing presence to one sense of the world in a way that belies our experience? Despite the ongoing, fluctuating, self-correcting ambiguity and evolution of the antepredicative as described by Merleau-Ponty, has a positivity emerged, one which undercuts the necessary contribution of the imagination to experience's "coming-to-be?" Is it the case that in demonstrating that "the real is a closely woven fabric" in order to refute the Cartesian notion that re-

ality is the result of a process of judgement, that Merleau-Ponty has initially woven our experience with too closed a nap? This question seeks to understand in what sense to interpret passages in Merleau-Ponty, such as the following:

> Each fragment of a visible spectacle satisfies an infinite number of conditions, and it is of the nature of the real to compress into each of its instants an infinity of relations.... The imaginary has no depth ... We never have a hold upon it. In every perception, on the other hand, it is the material itself which assumes significance and form....The real is distinguishable from our fictions because in reality the significance encircles and permeates matter [pp. 323-4].

Imagination cast as the non-real, as a negative, as an escape, recurs in the *Phenomenology of Perception* in its limited references to the imagined. Merleau-Ponty might have had other notions of the imaginary, but that such references are the only ones to appear, and even more importantly, that he feels that he can achieve "a phenomenology of perception" without a phenomenology of imagination is quite telling, and is not borne out by the central role of the imaginary in *The Visible and the Invisible* [and also in "Eye and Mind"]. I do not believe that in terms of his later work, in which the phenomenon is played out "among vortices," is dispersed among differing, non-resonant landscapes, among them the imaginary, one could make the same statement as Merleau-Ponty did in the *Phenomenology:* "But I can fly from being only into being; for example, I escape from society into nature, or from the real world into an imaginary one made of broken fragments of reality" [p. 360]. The oppositions of being and non-being (so brilliantly criticized in his assessment of Sartre in *The Visible and the Invisible,* for example) had to be overcome, but were present in the *Phenomenology* in the reference to a centered focus of experience, such as assumed in this description of the imaginary: "Illusory or imaginary feelings are genuinely experienced, but experienced, so to speak, on the outer fringes of ourselves" [p. 379]. The achievement of an integration, and of a centered core of distinctions is not mentioned here as a possibility among others, but functions as a norm, as an abiding axis of reference.

In turning to Merleau-Ponty's movement toward expressing the "unity of transgression," I will try to give some sense of how the imaginary is vital to Merleau-Ponty's notion of "the flesh." The trailing off the meaning of what is apprehended into interplays of differing sensorial registers, regions of concerns, times, places gives Merleau-Ponty's later conception of perception a different latency, one of depths and reverses, and also gives a correlative value to the imaginary to be exemplified and explored as announced in passages such as:

> Being and the imaginary are for Sartre 'objects,' 'entities' —
>
> For me they are 'elements' (in Bachelard's sense) that is, not objects, but fields, subdued beings, non-thetic being, being before being — and moreover involving their auto-inscription — their 'subjective correlate' is a part of them. [p. 267, *The Visible and Invisible*]

Now the imaginary is seen as an "element," as a "field," or in other words a dimension

of what is apprehended, which inscribes itself in the spectacle, as further elongations of meaning. The elemental inscription of the imaginary which does not form a theme, always having taken place before, must be evoked in how it constitutes and transforms itself in intertwining with the other elements that come forth to stand in something as a hidden depth that does not negate reality, but rather gives it a new dimension of meaning. Or to encounter the imaginary in the later writings of Merleau-Ponty, just to turn to one of a myriad of citations, one must come to make sense of passages such as: "Vision reassumes its fundamental power of showing forth more than itself. And since we are told that a bit of ink suffices to make us feel forests and storms, light must have its *imaginaire*" [p. 178, "Eye and Mind," *The Primacy of Perception*][5]. If we can't explain the leaves, the trunks, the winds, the clouds, that may lurk in that inkspot, then I believe we have failed to understand the development in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, and also failed to understand the importance of the imaginary. In this article, through the use of example especially, I will try to express this depth of the imaginary.

II. The Role of the Imagination in Merleau-Ponty's Early Work

There are tensions in both the relationship of the actual to the imaginary and among the perceptions of that relationship, as "Another Weeping Woman," Wallace Steven's poem in its entirety, explores:

> Pour the unhappiness out
> From your too bitter heart,
> Which grieving will not sweeten.
>
> Poison grows in this dark.
> It is in the water of tears
> Its black blooms rise.
>
> The magnificent cause of being,
> The imagination, the one reality
> In this imagined world
>
> Leaves you
> With him for whom no phantasy moves,
> And you are pierced by a death.[6]

Is the "weeping woman" of the poem grieved by too much of a sense of the actuality of the perceived? Is this how one grows *too* bitter -- bitter beyond the bounds from which a person should be able to return? Or is it imagining that makes what is present, the actual, too bitter in its presentness? The poet leaves this ambiguity unresolved. In the waters of this bitterness, these tears, the black poison blooms grow, which are certainly the fruits of imagination taking its leave from the world for him whom no fantasy moves, and to whose actuality the black blooms lead her and reveal to her. The black bloom's poisoning is the dismemberment of the previously obscured in the pain of confrontation, revealing new realities, new possibilities. What is revealed to her is that his too actual world is a world slain, that his unmovable actuality pierces her with a truly lethal poison. The real and the imagined co-mingle here in a death grip that is her present reality.

The removal of the power to be moved by the imaginary as a poisoning of the human dimension, as a consigning to oblivion of much of the world's sense, is a theme which is alluded to in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, but it is merely a subplot that indicates future directions in Merleau-Ponty's thought. For the most part, Mer-

leau-Ponty delineates the ways in which the lived body inhabits an evolving social, historical, and natural setting whose sense emerges through an auto-organization that is the person's perceptual response to significant possibilities for action. Since experience emerges in meaningladen gestalts, the phenomenal field can integrate surprising discontinuities, either immediate ones, such as an experimentally manipulated inverted visual field, or ongoing acquisitions, such as the clash between the space of music and ordinary visual space: "Music is not in visible space.... They are united at the very instant they clash" [p. 225]. It is Merleau-Ponty's triumph over the tradition in the *Phenomenology* to preserve both the brute character of certain givens about the human situation, that vision is not homologous with touch, for example, and also to demonstrate that it is these very tensions that are brought into overarching relationships by an embodiment which inhabits its world, and thereby lives by a meaning-seeking perceptual faith that is situating its potential acts in each interpreting perception. This leads Merleau-Ponty to see that "all human functions ... are rigorously unified in one synthesis" [p. 170]; and as a setting for action, the world itself is never in doubt, that "the world has its unity, although the mind may not have succeeded in inter-relating its facets..." [p. 327].

In these descriptions of the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty also succeeds in undermining the traditional rationalizing reconstructions of experience that segregate the knowing subject from its object, especially in memorable passages such as: "As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not *set over against* it as an acosmic subject ... I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it 'thinks itself within me,' ...my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue" [p. 214]. However, despite the fact that the notion of the phenomenal field had undermined the rupture within experience as it had always been described by categorizing philosophers and scientists, the notion of field retained a strand of their positivism in its own vocabulary and conceptualization. This is demonstrated in Merleau-Ponty's treatment in the *Phenomenology* of both memory and imagination. Given the framework of this work, Merleau-Ponty can't articulate the possibilities of a remembered or imagined that is neither strictly present nor strictly absent, but is found in the unreconciled tension of the two, in the midst of those pivots and vortices of the experienced that Merleau-Ponty will later be prepared to detail. It was Merleau-Ponty's achievement in the *Phenomenology* to supplement the traditional significance of the past as absent and revived in recollection by an ongoing sense of the presence of the past in one's body memory. Furthermore, the traditional bugaboo concerning the imagined was resolved: the non-presence of that presented in illusion or of the unreal given with the imaginary was shown to be corrected by ongoing perception's identification of the illusion or image as such against the ever present background of the world.[7] The vocabulary of the *Phenomenology* allowed for ambiguities of *presence*, and it spoke of fragments of *being*, into which the schizophrenic could *retreat:* in other words, the sense of experience in which what was significant was also to be found in the interplays and vortices of the non-integratable was not yet to be articulated. It is noteworthy that in the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty alludes to Husserl in his explanation about both the nature of perception and the nature of the world in stating first: "Perception provides me with a 'field of presence' in the broad

sense, extending in two dimensions: the here-there dimension and the past-present-future dimension" [p. 265], and later that "... the perception of the world is simply an expansion of my field of presence..." [p. 304]. Not only are these bald assertions of a philosophy of presence, but they also rely on precedents that Merleau-Ponty will specifically repudiate later. This stance is most in evidence, too, after Merleau-Ponty discusses variants in perception that partake of the imaginal or illusional, such as when he claims of such a variant: "it always forms round a sensible nucleus, however small, and it is in the sensible that its verification and fullness are found." [p. 293]. These are key statements to keep in mind, because they are directly contradicted in Merleau-Ponty's "working notes" in the *The Visible and the Invisible* at those points at which the importance of the imaginary has forced him to rethink his original notions of the presence of or "phenomenal field" of the perceptual.

Caught in the opposition of being and non-being, which doesn't allow for an adequate treatment of the way in which the imaginary intertwines with the perceived, Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology* is also led to oppose the depth of the perceptual with the thinness of the imagined, instead of seeing that the depth of experience is in their intertwining, in their enmeshment in not being able to be synthesized. In the passage mentioned previously in which Merleau-Ponty contrasts the "infinity of relations" packed into each instant of perception as distinct from the paucity of the imagined, part of the same passage cites Sartre's treatment of the imaginary and agrees with him: "In the realm of the imagination, I have no sooner formed the intention of seeing than I already believe that I have seen. The imaginary has no depth, and does not respond to our efforts to vary our points of view ... We never have a hold upon it" [p. 324-5]. This oppositional stance of the real and the unreal, of being and non-being, may have a place in Sartre's philosophy, but that it shouldn't in Merleau-Ponty's in his conception of the imagination is only articulated later, when the very same passages of Sartre's will be criticized and used by Merleau-Ponty to show how his conception of the imaginary is different.

Perhaps the black blooms of the imaginary haunt us. Sartre, in writing of the imaginary, is struck by the need "to invent the heart of things," such as the poet Audiberti's writing of "the secret blackness" within the whiteness of milk. Bachelard, in his attempt to expand upon the power of the imaginary, turns to Sartre's comments on this "secret blackness" at the heart of milk and "finds more reality in what is hidden than in what is visible."[8] Merleau-Ponty, in seeking the hidden or the latent, the invisible of the visible, states that the depth he seeks is accessible only through its whiteness" [p. 151, *VI*]. This imagined blackness at the heart of the white presence of all colors, and within various colors themselves too, the dance of *sens* within the perception of color, gives us a concrete motif to examine both the tensions within Merleau-Ponty's early treatment of the imaginary and his later development.

For a moment, let us return to that expanse of blue, limitless sky cited earlier. It, too, is prey to an experience that is more than a straightforward saturation of pure blue. Merleau-Ponty speaks later in the *Phenomenology* of an altered experience of that sky:

> A schizophrenic patient, in the mountains, stops before the landscape.... There arises within him a

> special intrerest in everything surrounding him. Suddenly the landscape is snatched away from him by some alien force. It is as if a second sky, black and boundless, were penetrating the blue sky of the evening.... The schizophrenic no longer inhabits the common property world ... he dwells in 'the landscape space' ... [p. 287].

For Merleau-Ponty, at this point in his thinking, the suddenly blackened sky signals a movement from the center of one's experience to a fringe, from that which has an inexhaustability to that which has a paucity, from that which is integrated to that which is fragmented, and no one will argue with him that remain under that black sky, one must retreat from one's sunlit existence. However, one might well argue, as Merleau-Ponty will himself late in his thinking, that even for the most "normal," for the most sun-saturated, blue-skied perception, there is a continual juxtaposition with such a doomed imaginal horizon that is part of the clear sky being clear.

Even in the *Phenomenology*, there are precursors of this differing attitude toward presence and absence, toward the intertwining of imagination and perception, a recognition that without the playing off the imaginary, it is the perceptual which becomes thin, loses its possibilities for *sens*. This insight is not taken up and asserted within Merleau-Ponty's overall framework articulated in the *Phenomenology*, but rather statements to this effect occur in passing, predominently in regard to the Schneider case. Schneider's deficits as a result of his injury help Merleau-Ponty throughout the *Phenomenogy* locate that which is vital to normal perception, but at the end of the sexuality chapter, Merleau-Ponty makes the following observation: "[The normal subject] is not open merely to real situations ... he is open to those verbal and imaginary situations which he can choose for himself or which may be suggested to him..." [p. 108]. It is not the case that this ability to imagine merely pens another sphere of experiences, but rather it is in opposition, in partial overlappings, in intertwinings, with this imagined that the perceived, what Sartre calls "the real," gains its significance, which is what Schneider lacks. Schneider is the extreme case of "him for whom no fantasy moves" of Wallace Steven's poem. The result is not just impoverishment, but also the deathlike pall that is noted in Schneider: "There is in his whole conduct something meticulous and serious which derives from the fact that he is incapable of play-acting. To act is to place oneself for a moment in an imaginary situation...The patient on the other hand cannot enter into a fictitious setting without converting it to a real one..." [p. 135]. Merleau-Ponty concludes about Schneider that "he is tied to actuality, he lacks liberty..." To carry this thought further, one may conclude that language, which articulates and ultimately partially restructures this perceptual experience, not only "sings the world," as Merleau-Ponty phrases it, but also it must sing the imaginary, since another manifestation of Schneider's deficit is: "He never uses language to convey a merely possible situation, and false statements (e.g. the sky is black) are meaningless to him." [p. 196]. Merleau-Ponty here calls "the sky is black" a false statement, and so it is as a report of perceptual significance. As an imaginary designation, this statement may signify much, but for Schneider or for the partner of Wallace Steven's weeping woman, they are unmoved by such landscapes, and pierce the play of significance with a death noted by

the poet. For blackness itself and the blue of the sky, let alone the smiling face one encounters, are not just presences, whose various modes of givenness integrate and form a whole, but rather as Merleau-Ponty acknowledges in one of the most evocative passages in the *Phenomenology:* "... I see it as black under the sun's rays. But this blackness is less the sensible quality of blackness than a sombre power which radiates from the object ... and it is visible only in the sense in which moral blackness is visible." [p. 305]. As Merleau-Ponty will phrase it later, the color perceived sets up a dimension of interplays within which its significance emerges. Part of that play of this sombre power of the sensible quality of blackness perceived grows in the black blooms of the imaginary, this "magnificent cause of being," a dimension of reference which is of the depth of the experienced.[9]

III. THE FLESH AND THE IMAGINARY

The last stanzas of another Wallace Stevens poem, "To the One of Fictive Music," evoke the locus in the shift of Merleau-Ponty's articulation in the *Phenomenology of Perception* of the place of the imaginary to the one expressed in *The Visible and the Invisible* and "Eye and Mind":

> For so retentive of themselves are men
> That music is intensest which proclaims
> The near, the clear, and vaunts the clearest bloom,
> And of all vigils musing the obscure,
> That apprehends the most which sees and names,
> As in your name, an image that is sure,
> Among the arrant spices of the sun,
> O bough and bush and scented vine, in whom
> We give ourselves our likest issuance.
>
> Yet not too like, yet not so like to be
> Too near, too clear, saving a little to endow
> Our feigning with the strange unlike, whence springs
> The difference that heavenly pity brings.
> For this, musician, in your girdle fixed
> Bear other perfumes. On your pale head wear
> A band entwining, set with fatal stones.
> Unreal, give back to us what once you gave:
> The imagination that we spurned and crave.[10]

The body holds its landscapes. With the power of the "I can," one ranges over the perceived, is returned to oneself from distances, and gains the illusion of surety. As Merleau-Ponty demonstrated in the *Phenomenology,* perception in this way is "incipient science," and can lead to the dream that there divergent perspectives can be so ranged over that they yield their complete, omniscient closure. One grasps for the self-validating, and perceives, remembers, imagines, feels, moves, into a fluctuating but ever centering circle that integrates the most disperse, the most shifting, into that which signifies one's identity, one's aspiration, one's direction in experience. However, amid this certainty, there must be the play of difference, of that which is unlike and non-integratable, or that bright sun becomes blinded to the otherness in ex-

perience. Heavenly pity takes the form of a fatality to that which threatens to become too much our likeness, too near and clear, and we must suffer the obstinacy of the stone, the lethal recalcitrant, in images which bear the unlike, which we will always crave, despite our attempts to banish the dark.

To speak of the imaginary is not to use a designation of the "body image," or the "imaginary" limb, nor the "imagined" event as still present in retention or already presented in protention: these dimensions of experience were rightly described by Merleau-Ponty as part of perceptual experience, once perception is understood in it full significance. Rather, the imaginary is the charged irrational *sens* that slips into the interplay with perception, and is at the heart of, elongates and intensifies the human gaze so that it inhabits a significant world of personal and impersonal depths lodged within the landscapes to which the person turns in discovering himself or herself. The *Phenomenology of Perception* stresses repeatedly that perception at all levels is always significant, reaching into actions, motions, slippages of past and future, personal impersonalities, but all this is as yet a tamed vision, a discourse still caught in the meshes of a language of a rationalizing Apollonian vision of the enlightened *homo sapiens*, but the path started led Merleau-Ponty to an experience of Being that was, as he correctly phrased it, "wild."

No longer to be found in the equilibration of internal and external horizons, the thing in *The Visible and the Invisible* appears in the gaping interplays of presence and absence, of dislocations in space and time, of the theaters of perception, memory, and imagination — in disconnections which are nevertheless connected in playing off one another: "the objects of consciousness are not something positive *in front of* us, but nucleii of signification about which the transcendental life pivots, specified voids — ... that the chiasm, the intentional 'encroachments' are irreducible, which leads to the rejecting of the notion of subject, or to the defining of the subject as a field, as a hierarchized system of structures opened by an inaugural *there is*." [p. 239]. In supplementing the integrations of the thing as described in the *Phenomenology* with the gaps and latencies of the thing as described in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty gives another example of the perception of a color, this time the red of a dress:

> A punctuation in the field of red things, which includes the tiles of roof tops, the flags of gatekeepers and of the Revolution, certain terrains near Aix or in Madagascar. It is also a punctuation in the field of red garments, which includes, along with the dresses of women, robes of professors, bishops and advocate generals, and also in the field of adornments and that of uniforms. And its red literally is not the same as it appears in one constellation or in the other, as the pure essence of the Revolution of 1917 precipitates in it or that of the eternal feminine, or that of the public prosecuter, or that of the gypsies dressed like hussars who reigned twenty-five years ago over an inn on the Champs-Elysées. A certain red is also a fossil drawn up from the depths of imaginary worlds.

These are not associations, but rather the conflicts, the oppositions, the interplays that are the latencies, the depth, the ongoing interrogations, the richness of significance

that are experience and its texture. The blue of the sky is also the blue of my friend's eyes, of a blue whale that I may have never seen, of the mandala in my office, of an indefinite interplay that includes the many blues of different regions of the imaginary in its cascade. Certainly, when I look across into the eyes of that person, their expression unfolds and intertwines into recesses of indefinite scenarios, so many of which are imaginary.

These latencies, however, do not affect our sunlit lives of reflection and judgement. On this sober level, of self-collection, these differing "theaters" are discriminated, and Merleau-Ponty still insists in *The Visible and the Invisible* that one finds the "phantoms" of the imaginary "disappearing before the sun of thought like the mists of dawn" [p. 30]. Yet, for Merleau-Ponty at this point in his thinking, there are experiences to be articulated "in which what we live comes to settle of itself, outside of all criteriological control" [p. 69]. In remaining faithful to the phenomena in this sense, Merleau-Ponty begins to articulate a sense of Being in which double or multiple meanings may move in Heraclitean circles of opposition [p. 91]. This kind of thinking calls for a new beginning, as Merleau-Ponty announced: "Our point of departure shall not be *being is, nothingness is not* nor even *there is only being* — which are formulas of a totalizing thought, a high altitude thought, — but ... there is meaning." [p. 88]. A thinking which can move outside the postivism of such statements as "being is, nothingness is not" can begin to articulate "a negativity that is not nothing," of which paradigm is, according to Merleau-Ponty, "... the secret blackness of milk, of which Valéry spoke, ... accessible only through its whiteness ... their other side or their depth." [p. 150]. Painting has taught Merleau-Ponty that vision has "its inward tapestries, the imaginary texture of the real" [p. 165, *EM*]. There are possibilities lodged in the landscape, of perception, of imagination, of memory, not describable in categories of high altitude thinking, but whose interplay yields dimensions of experience. Charles Arrowby, in *The Sea, The Sea,* stands on the cliffs of Shruff End, a desolate spot with fierce undertows, and sees for a moment the blackness of a sea monster coiling on top of the waves. Perhaps, it takes a character possessed with a jealousy "like a blackness in the eye" which "discolours the world"[11] to see this blackness emerge from the blue of the sea, but certainly these depths are other side of this landscape's significance. For Charles, this is the rare "equivocal moment," as Merleau-Ponty called it, in which the imaginary beckons so strongly, he is thrown into confusion, but surely this is not a new dimension of blackness at the heart of his beloved sea, nor for anyone alive to its differing currents, and is usually just part of the texture of one's experience. Nor is Charles's later moment beyond understanding when in conversing with Rosina, "it was as if her face vanished, became a hole, and through the hole I saw the snake-like head and teeth and pink opening mouth of my sea monster. This lasted a second. I suppose it was not a vision..."[12] Here again, the imaginary intrudes perhaps a bit more forcefully than at most moments of experience, and yet such interplays yield our ordinary vision in becoming enfolded into differing strands, differing resonances, of the face or of the landscape.

Rather than quote from Sartre's work on the imaginary as he did in the *Phenomenology,* Merleau-Ponty is at pains in *The Visible and the Invisible* to distinguish his view of the imaginary from Sartre's:

> For Sartre it is the negation of a negation, *an order in which nihilation is applied to itself*, and consequently counts as a positing of being although it would absolutely not be its equivalent, and although the least fragment of true, transcendent being immediately reduces the imaginary. This assumes then a bipartite analysis: perception as observation, a close-woven fabric, without any gaps, locus of simple of immediate nihilation... [p. 266].

The "closely woven fabric" of the real of the *Phenomenology* has been rent, destructured, in an attempt to describe more faithfully "the way in which things come to be." The perceptual faith of the lived body still preserves our fluctuating hold on the real as distinguished from the imaginary, which our judgements expand, but this does not annihilate the fact, as articulated by Merleau-Ponty in January 1960, in the "Working Notes" that "this unique possible which our world is not in its very fabric, made of actuality" [p. 228]. In this light, the positive contribution of Sartre to the description of the imaginary is preserved, but its conclusions are denied by Merleau-Ponty's new ontology: "When we say that — on the contrary — the phantasm is not observable, that it is empty, non-being, the contrast with the sensible is not absolute. The senses are apparatus to form concretions of the inexhaustible... — But, conversely, there is a precipitation or crystallization of the imaginary, of the existentials, of the symbolic matrices —" [p. 192]. Merleau-Ponty states that his philosophy is to be distinguished from one that "adds the imaginary to the real" and sees the imaginary as a nihilation, but rather now he seeks to "understand the imaginary sphere through the imaginary sphere of the body ... as the true *Stiftung* of Being" [p. 245]. As might be expected, Merleau-Ponty has been led at least partially to this insight and to this difference with Sartre on the status of the imaginary by taking intersubjectivity to heart. The imaginary is the "halo of visibility" around each part of the other's body without which "the fact of the other's presence would itself not be possible": "But this visibility not actually seen is not the Sartrean *imaginary:* present to the absent or of the absent. It is a presence of the imminent, the latent, or the hidden — Cf. Bachelard saying that each sense has its own imaginary." [p. 245]. For Bachelard and for Merleau-Ponty, each sense has prolongations, dehiscences, unexplored depths, which take one into the imaginary, whether it be into the imagined red of the devil or of bloody massacres or of the inside of the another's open mouth if one were suddenly to kiss, or whether it be into the blackness at the heart of the white of milk, of the pure blue of the sky or of the turbulent blue of the sea. Behind your eyes, I imagine the scenes that I imagine you are imagining as we talk. The folds of experience, of the way things are given, are myriad, and the imaginary is chief among them.

It is for this reason, I believe, that in projecting the content of the *Origin of Truth*, in the "Working Notes" [February, 1959], Merleau-Ponty stated that after repeating his analyses of the body, he would have to do analyses of memory and of the imaginary, and *from there* [put in emphasis by Merleau-Ponty] pass onto the problems of temporality, the cogito, and intersubjectivity [p. 173]. Considering both the imaginary and memory has led Merleau-Ponty to reconsider the philosophy of presence of the *Phenomenology*. It is not accidental that the same note asserting the priority of examining the imaginary and memory contains this

criticism of Husserl: "Husserl's error is to have described the interlocking starting from a *Präsenfeld* considered as without thickness..." [p. 173]. The interlocking of the facets of experience, for Merleau-Ponty, is no longer in the integration of a field of presence, nor do significations have a grounding in a positivity of intention and meaning: "And the 'visibles' themselves, in the last analysis, they too are only centered on a nucleus of absence —." [p. 229]. Merleau-Ponty had realized that to overcome the traditional dualisms of mind/body, subject/object, self/other, and the other distorting dichotomies of the tradition, one had to overcome the monopoly of an ontology of presence and of actuality.

Perhaps, it was from painting that Merleau-Ponty learned the path to carry out the original project of the *Phenomenology* that was thwarted, although his sudden death didn't allow him to follow it to its conclusion. Wallace Stevens claims humans are drawn perilously close to losing the "heavenly pity" of vision, of the images numbered among the gifts of the sun, in seeking too like an issuance. We can forget the otherness dancing in the imaginary unless this project of clarity suffers certain deaths: the black blooms of the first poems, of the power of death in the imagined, also give life. From painting, Merleau-Ponty saw the need to rekindle "a total visibility which liberates the phantoms captive in it" [p. 167, *EM*]. There, he saw a "mixing of categories," including "essence and existence, imaginary and real, visible and invisible" [p. 169, *EM*]. As the poem of Wallace Stevens states, the band entwines, and despite being fatal in some senses, there is the difference, the power of the unreal to give back to us a dimension of meaning we may have spurned, but crave. I think the words of Merleau-Ponty to be remembered last on the power of the imaginary should be those from "Eye and Mind" dedicated to this sense of expansion that the imaginary gives us and is always part of one's experience:

> We must take literally what vision teaches us: namely, that through it we come in contact with the sun and the stars, that we are everywhere all at once, and that even our power to imagine ourselves elsewhere — "I am in Petersburg in my bed, in Paris, my eyes see the sun" or to intend [*viser*] real beings wherever they are, borrows from vision and employs means we owe to it [p. 187].

ENDNOTES

1. Wallace Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 55.
2. Iris Murdoch, *The Sea, the Sea* (New York: Viking, 1978).
3. The note starts: "The problems posed in the *Ph. P. [Phenomenology of Perception]* are insoluble because I start there from the consciousness – object distinction —". All references in this paper will be made to the English translation: *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968) [a translation of *Le visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964)]. After this, all references to this work will be included in the body of the text in brackets, or in cases in which the work cited is not obvious by the context, with brackets and the identification "*VI*" following the page number.
4. Among the many contexts in the *Phenomenology* in which this direction emerges is Merleau-Ponty's treatment of the depth of experience: "This being simultaneously present in experiences which are nevertheless mutually exclusive, this implication of one another, this contraction into one perceptual act of a whole possible process, constitute the originality of depth. It is in the dimension in which things or elements of things envelope each other, whereas breadth and height are the dimensions in which they are juxtaposed" [pp. 264-5]. In this passage, depth envelopes that which is whole by the gestalt formation of seemingly disperate parts, whose

very fissures define their unity, which is unshakeable as a whole, but always requiring reachievement. Most pertinent to the topic of this paper is also to note the following passage from the *Phenomenology* which points to the future direction of both overcoming a philosophy of presence and the role that imagination will take in that overcoming: "The world is still the vague theater of all experiences. It takes in without discrimination real objects on the one hand and individual and momentary phantasms on the other — because it is an individual which embraces everything and not a collection of objects linked by causal relations. To have hallucinations and more generally to imagine, is to exploit this tolerance on the part of the antepredicative world, and our bewildering proximity to the whole of being in syncretic experience" [p. 343]. All references in this paper will be made to the English translation: *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans Colin Smith (New York: Humanities Press, 1962) [a translation of *Phenomenologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).] After this, all references to this work will be included in the body of the text in brackets, or in cases in which the work cited is not obvious by the context, with brackets and the identification "PP" following the page number.

5. All references in this paper will be made to the English translation: "Eye and Mind," trans. Carleton Dallery in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964) [a translation of "L'Oeil et l'esprit," *Les Temps Modernes*, 17: 184-5, 1961]. After this, all references to this work will be included in the body of the text in brackets, or in cases in which the work cited is not obvious by the context, with brackets and the identification *"EM"* following the page number.
6. Stevens, p. 55.
7. "In the very moment of illusion this possibility of correction was presented to me" [*PP*, p. 297].
8. Gaston Bachelard, *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie: Selections form the Works of Gaston Bachelard*, trans. Colette Gaudin (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p. 8.
9. Reading a passage from the *Phenomenology* such as, "We can now say of temporality what we said earlier about sexuality and spatiality, for example: existence can have no external or contingent attribute. It cannot be anything — spatial, sexual, temporal — without being so in its entirety, without taking up and carrying forward its 'attributes' and making them into so many dimensions of its being..." [p. 410], one can see how the inclusion of the contribution of the imaginary to the sense of the perceptual might follow from Merleau-Ponty's descriptions, except for his not yet having broken fully from a philosophy of presence that seeks to articulate the integratable, the mutually implicatory.
10. Stevens, p. 83.
11. Murdoch, p. 84.
12. Murdoch, p. 85.

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