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The Systematic Import of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Literature

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ABSTRACT

Scholarly discussions of Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics tend to focus on his philosophy of painting. By contrast, comparatively little attention has been paid to his philosophy of literature. However, he also draws significant conclusions from his work on literary expression. As I will argue, these reflections inform at least two important positions of his later thought. First, Merleau-Ponty's account of "indirect" literary language led him to develop a hybrid view of phenomenological expression, on which expression is both creative and descriptive. Second, a study of literature furnished him with the resources to develop a novel account of phenomenological "essences", which holds that essences are revisable explanations of first-order experience. Both results have been overlooked by commentators. They demonstrate the systematic import of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of literature and language, and amount to a qualified extension of a basic Husserlian position.

1. Introduction

Scholarly discussions of Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics have tended to concentrate on his philosophy of painting.[1] Given his abiding interest in painters like Cézanne and Klee, and the significant conclusions he draws from them about perception, this focus is not unjustified. Comparatively less attention has been paid to his philosophy of literature.[2] However, Merleau-Ponty also draws important systematic conclusions from reflections on literary expression, many of which have remained unexplored. As I will argue, his philosophy of literature informs at least two important positions of his later work.

First, Merleau-Ponty's account of "indirect" literary expression led him to develop a nuanced view of phenomenological description. On this view, descriptions of experience

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[1] For an early example of this tendency, see Kaelin, *An Existentialist Aesthetic*, who stresses the importance of Sartre's philosophy of literature, but largely overlooks Merleau-Ponty's (including material published at the time). Subsequent studies continue this tendency (e.g. Levine, 'Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Art', 441; Grene, 'The Aesthetic Dialogue of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty', 217–19; Burch, 'On the Topic of Art and Truth: Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and the Transcendental Turn', 360; see also the relative absence of discussions of literature in Johnson, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*). While Crowther acknowledges that writing is an important medium for Merleau-Ponty, he still takes a visual approach (Crowther, 'Perception into Art', 141, 146).

[2] There has been a modest recent increase of interest in this topic. See Alloa and Jdey, *Du sensible à l'oeuvre*; Zaccarello, 'La doute de Valéry'; Kristensen, 'Valéry, Proust, et la vérité de l'écriture littéraire'; Robert, 'Proust phénoménologue?'; and earlier work by Simon and Castin, *Merleau-Ponty et le littéraire*.

are more successful when supplemented by non-standard and creative expressions, of the sort typically found in literary works. Second, a study of literature furnished him with the resources to develop a novel account of phenomenological "essences", the structures that Husserl thought were needed to understand the meaning of experience.

I begin with an overview of indirect or "operant" expression (§2). Painting is an important form of indirect expression, but Merleau-Ponty already indicates the relative priority of literature in his early articulations of the theory. In the sections that follow, I work out the implications of this view. While I do not offer a critical appraisal of his reflections on these writers, I briefly consider Merleau-Ponty's reading of Valéry's concept of "the voice" (§3.1), and his understanding of literary description in Proust (§3.2). Valéry shows that phenomenology's descriptive goals can profit from integrating creative expressions, a view further developed in his reading of Proust, and one that becomes a key claim in later writings (§4). This commitment, in turn, also suggests the possibility of developing a novel view of phenomenological essences, on which essences are open and revisable explanations of experience. As I show, Merleau-Ponty's reading of Proust is particularly important for this view (§5). I conclude by noting that the systematic import of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of literature demonstrates the importance of language for his later thought, and suggest that it can be seen as a qualified development of a basic Husserlian position (§6).

2. "Indirect" or "Operant" Expression, and the Limits of the Painting–Writing Analogy

Before turning to Merleau-Ponty's reflections on Proust and Valéry, it will be helpful to review his account of "indirect" or "operant" (*opérant*) expression, often associated with the terms "tacit" (*tacite*) "lateral" (*latéral*) and "speaking" (*parlant*). One of the central goals of this account is to offer a theory of artistic creation that explains how existing artistic traditions are transformed, allowing for new expression in the present. In "Cézanne's Doubt", he claims that like writers, visual artists produce new meanings out of well-established or "sedimented" sense.[3] Like human language, which the *Phenomenology of Perception* claims is ultimately concerned with articulating experience, painting attempts to convert lived experience into a more permanent form, without sacrificing its richer meaning.[4] In this early piece, he claims that "Cézanne's difficulties are those of the first word", drawing a link between language and painting that will be maintained throughout his career. Like an original novel, Cézanne's paintings capture the pre-theoretical meaning of perceptual experience, and show us features that would otherwise remain unnoticed.[5]

The 1950s find Merleau-Ponty further developing this incipient account.[6] Of particular importance is his view of the mode of presentation at work in artistic expression. To take the example of literature, the indirect expressive form is a non-categorial, non-analytical

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[3] For sedimentation see Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (hereafter *PhP*) 222–23/259–60, 363/405, 416–21/ 456–61; Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World* (hereafter *PW*; all translations mine) 141/196; Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity* (hereafter *IP*) and Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology* (hereafter *HLP*). All citations to Merleau-Ponty's texts refer to the most recent English translation (if it exists, and occasionally modified) and the French original, respectively.

[4] Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader* (hereafter *MPR*) 78/35 (see also *PhP* 203/239).

[5] *MPR* 79/36.

[6] For earlier remarks about authentic expression see *PhP* 169/204, 188/222–23, 200/236, 203/239.

and non-thetic mode of expression. Literary language is indirect because it does not signify by saying, for example, that "S is p", or through another categorical use of language. Instead, it conveys meaning by implication and suggestion. As Merleau-Ponty sees it, indirect language "gropes around".[7] Expression is not indirect because it always leads us astray, or away from a specific conclusion. Rather, literature and painting are indirect because the meaning of a painting or novel cannot be identified, for example, by probing for an author's intention, by focusing on its received meaning, or by isolating some specific fact about the work. These features *are* important for understanding its meaning, but indirect expression also invites readers or viewers to take up or "transcend" the meanings they initially find in a work, and further develop their view of it. Artistic creation is indirect chiefly because its non-categorical and non-explicit meanings become more determinate through a viewer or reader's interpretive efforts.

According to Merleau-Ponty, indirect expression provides some guidance for how readers are to interpret or "transcend" the meaning of a work. Even if Modern painters and writers (the focus of his attention) "rearrange the prosaic world", they also shape "hollows" in it, or norms for viewers and readers (63/89). These norms guide us as we use artworks to interpret experience in richer, more varied ways (61/85). Artistic works are akin to "matrices": they contain revisable meanings, like a matrix or mould whose constituent parts can be rearranged. This feature entails that our interpretation of artworks is a sort of training for how we might begin to see the world anew (*PW* 89–90/126–27; *cf. S* 77/124–25). By forming a perspective on a novel or a painting, we can acquire a new "style" of seeing and understanding the world (*S* 53/85). These works "provide[] us with symbols whose meaning we shall never finish developing", which can be variously applied to experience. This affinity between language and painting leads Merleau-Ponty to conclude that there is a "language of painting" (*S* 55/88).

Despite their similarities, these early writings already signal the relative priority of literary over visual art. While commentators have stressed the importance of painting for indirect expression, Merleau-Ponty claims that the logic of indirect creation in painting is actually native to language, a priority that has been overlooked.[8] He is clear that "painting as a whole gives itself as an aborted effort to say something that always remains to be said. Here one sees what is proper to language" (*PW* 99/140). He also claims that "the arts of language go much farther toward true creation" (*S* 79/128). Insofar as the important question of sense-transformation is concerned, he holds that nothing equals the "ductility" of speech (80–81/129–30).

One reason for favouring literature is that painting is "mute" (*PW* 110/156). With this claim, Merleau-Ponty means that, all things considered, more effort on our part (or instruction from others) is required to understand the novelty of a painting. While he does not suggest that understanding new meanings in literature is easy, he thinks that the novelty of literary works is in principle more accessible to us. This is largely because literature is built out of a "material", namely, human language, that we are already familiar with (*S* 110/156). This increases the likelihood that readers will grasp a writer's novel contributions, and the new perspectives that issue from them.

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[7] Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (hereafter *S*), 44/71.
[8] For this tendency see Smith, 'Merleau-Ponty's Aesthetics', 202–05, and Grene, 'The Aesthetic Dialogue of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty', who reverses the order of priority between painting and language (229–30).

Still, there is a more important reason for privileging literary expression. From his early articulations of the phenomenological project, Merleau-Ponty holds that, at bottom, phenomenology teaches us to see the world anew (*PhP* lxxxv/21). In this sense, phenomenology is a transformative enterprise. Insofar as this basic goal is concerned, it is on a par with a range of artforms. However, phenomenology does not merely offer us a new way of understanding the world. It is also an account or *logos* of perception: its ability to help us see the world anew depends on the persuasiveness of its descriptions of experience. This signals the central importance of language for phenomenology. The concepts and vocabulary used in phenomenological description are of key consequence, insofar as a choice of philosophical vocabulary can disclose or occlude the structure and meaning of experience, and can enable or inhibit the development of a new perspective.

While I cannot consider the reasons for this shift here, in the mid 1950s Merleau-Ponty argues that phenomenological description must be supplemented with creative expressions characteristic of literary or poetic language.[9] This is partly because he no longer thinks it is possible to adequately describe experience using the concepts he relied on in earlier work. Instead, he contends that phenomenological descriptions must be more creative, allusive and suggestive, i.e. more akin to indirect expression. As a result, the philosophy of literature takes on increased importance for his project. While painting can teach us to see the world anew, literature does this and more: it gives us the tools to express what we see in language. Below, I consider two important influences on this shift.

3. Indirect Expression in Valéry and Proust

Merleau-Ponty's reflections on literary figures in the 1950s demonstrate that creative expressions can rigorously disclose the sense of objects and experience. As I suggest below, for him, creation is no obstacle to describing things as they really are. The influence of Valéry and Proust on this score is especially important. I consider each in turn.

3.1. Valéry and Literary Creation

In the 1953 Collège de France course, *Recherches sur l'usage littéraire du langage*, Merleau-Ponty devotes significant attention to Valéry's work. While he claims that indirect expression is characteristic of all literary or poetic language, he is especially interested in Valéry's concept of "the voice" (*la voix*). In *Tel Quel*, Valéry claims that objects become accessible to us through their linguistic expression, and especially through the voice.[10] His poem *La Pythie* concludes with an ode to Saint Language, its "Wisdom" and "august Voice". According to Merleau-Ponty, "the voice of poetry is a voice of things, the pronunciation of what they want to say … ".[11] The poetic voice is a "manner of deciphering [*déchiffrer*] the object to be with it" (*RULL* 140).[12]

As these remarks suggest, Merleau-Ponty is keenly interested in Valéry's view of how language expresses the meaning of material objects. For him, the voice is a paradigmatic

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[9] See e.g. *PW* 124–25/174–75; *S* 15/28–29.

[10] Valéry, *Tel Quel*, 147.

[11] Merleau-Ponty, *Recherches sur l'usage littéraire du langage* (hereafter *RULL*; all translations mine), 138.

[12] For an overview of this course, see Zaccarello, '"La doute de Valéry" and Kristensen "Valéry, Proust, et la vérite de l'écriture littéraire".'

example of a form of expression that captures the sense of objects without becoming overly abstract or conceptual (75, 106).[13] As he understands Valéry, literary or poetic language is not chiefly concerned with recording veridical statements about experience (even if it does so) (*RULL* 75). For Valéry, the body, the spirit, or any other topic treated by writers, is to be defined as a domain of "non-things" (106). That is, the objects of literary language do not have fixed properties (as a "mere" thing would) that could be captured in a rigid, conceptual language, and whose truth conditions could be rigorously enumerated.

On Merleau-Ponty's reading, the poetic voice expresses the meaning of an object using terms that reflect its distinctive features. However, this attempt requires that an author create a vocabulary that departs from standard expressions. The writer's task is to invent a way of articulating "the silence of the world of non-things" (106). For Valéry, "Poetry is voice, creating [*faire*], not saying [*dire*]" (137). This is not to suggest that the poetic voice is *pure* invention; it still aims to express an object's properties. However, a poetic or literary account of objects is not a one-to-one translation of perceptual qualities into a determinate linguistic form. Nevertheless, the voice manages to faithfully disclose the meaning of objects, but it does so only if it is sufficiently creative, that is, if it does not offer a merely literal transcription, representation, or copy of an object.

Instead, unexpected locutions and expressions reveal features of perceptual objects in a more oblique way. By employing a new-fangled vocabulary, the poetic voice brings hitherto unrecognized features of objects into relief, without categorically stating them (149). As we saw, this is a characteristic feature of indirect expression. Similarly, the voice draws on already-existing linguistic meanings, which it modifies.[14] While directed to objects, Valéry's poetry takes up and further develops the expressive capacities of existing linguistic conventions. Crucially, even if the voice is the result of a poet's creative efforts, Merleau-Ponty still thinks that it expresses meanings that correspond to their objects, and that really are in the world. In other words, he accepts that fiction or creation is no obstacle to capturing the true nature of objects. I return to this claim below.

In addition, Merleau-Ponty's reading of Valéry extends a tenet noted above, namely, the role of interpretation in indirect expression. The voice solicits readers to interpret its presentation of objects, alternatively, to take up the "musicalization" heard when reading a poem or literary work aloud. In "Man and Adversity", Merleau-Ponty claims that for Valéry, "the essence of poetic language" is that it can produce meanings not by means of "words as a result of the lexical significations assigned to them in language", but instead according to the contingent and sometimes accidental ways that readers interpret the structure and claims of a work (*S* 234/382). Readers' interpretations, accordingly, are an important part of determining a work's total meaning, and its novel contributions (if any at all). Creation in indirect expression is not limited to artists. It is also an effect of how we "reread" or interpret the sense of a work. This is possible on the condition that writers employ a non-rigid, indirect expressive form, which underdetermines the meaning of their work, and does not close down further interpretative possibilities. As I

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[13] See also Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (hereafter *VI*), 155/201.

[14] As Crow notes, while the poetic voice is purified from mundane language, 'it is still to the conventions of ordinary language that Valéry will attend for his action of poetic purification, and it is still to the expressive action of speech itself – *la voix en action* – that he will look for stylistic inspiration as that purification takes place' (Crow, *Paul Valéry and the Poetics of Voice*, 49).

show in §4, Merleau-Ponty will claim that these basic characteristics are fundamental for a successful account of phenomenological expression.

3.2. Proust and Literary Description

The view that the meaning of objects can be given by a non-objectifying language (or "voice") that indirectly states them is further developed in Merleau-Ponty's reading of Proust in the 1953–1954 course *Le problème de la parole*.[15] Proust goes one step further, by moving creative expression closer to a description of experience that is more easily accessed and evaluated by other subjects. I now turn to this view.

For Merleau-Ponty, Proust attempts to understand "the transcendence of things", or the appearance of objects in the world.[16] He writes for the sake of "[fixing] this medium where things are born – for us, where we live, and which knowledge surveys" (BNF Ms. Vol. XII 99r/1). Literature takes "the appearance of the world in transcendence as a theme, this structure perspective-reality … " (99r/1). Valéry was also interested in the first-personal quality of experience, and sought to understand material objects. However, Merleau-Ponty thinks that Proust is more interested in offering an account of objects and experience that is more akin to a description. Valéry's writing, on the whole, is closer to poetic creation.

As Merleau-Ponty sees it, Proust's literature aims to "constitute a languagely ensemble [*un ensemble langagier*] of the same sort as the pre-logical unity of our life" (115r/3). This already suggests that fidelity is a more pressing concern for Proust. Unlike other writers, Proust is primarily interested in establishing a structure (or "ensemble") that reflects the meanings encountered in everyday experience. This is not to say that fidelity is privileged to the detriment of creation. Instead, literary creation in Proust serves the purposes of a description of experience.

At bottom, a novel like *In Search of Lost Time* attempts "to obtain a presentation of the thing across *Erscheinungsweisen* [modes of appearance] that are not constituted by nature, not given, but which nevertheless render the thing all the more masterfully, since the transposition is more free" (106/7; *cf.* 113/1). The goal of understanding the meaning of appearances is better served by literary invention, because literary accounts of a character's expectations or desires, of places, people, and the objets they encounter, etc., present a more unified version of their experience of these phenomena. A literary account might transform the meaning of objects, places, or persons, but it offers a perspective from which readers might begin to evaluate and appraise these transformations. This is why Merleau-Ponty claims that Proust can "make the thing appear beyond the appearance, by the very organization of appearances". If it is adequately sensitive to lived experience, literature (as represented by a writer like Proust) orders disparate phenomena in a way that allows their deeper meaning to show itself and be scrutinized by readers. The narrator of *In Search of Lost Time* attributes this ability to the painter Elstir. By imposing a form that reflects his understanding of objects, the meaning of things themselves crystallizes

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[15] For Merleau-Ponty's reading of Proust, see Simon, 'Proust et l'architecture du visible', and Robert, 'Proust phénoménologue?'. For an overview of this course, see Kristensen, *Parole et Subjectivité*, Chapter 4.

[16] Merleau-Ponty, *Cours du jeudi: Le problème de la parole* (hereafter BNF Ms. Vol. XII) 94v/5. Citations to these unpublished lecture notes are to the manuscript volume and pagination of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Transcription by Stefan Kristensen; all translations mine.

in Elstir's paintings. Elstir's paintings (like Vinteuil's music, or Proust's writing) create a "language of things" that, by presenting a coherent and permanent view of experience, make it available for others to use as a key for interpreting their own (105v).

While similar results are also achieved by Stendhal, Valéry, Simon and by other writers who employ indirect forms of expression, Merleau-Ponty indicates that Proust's reflections have more direct consequences for phenomenology. He concludes that in Proust, the task of literature is to "reveal the lived world [*le monde vécu*]" and the "mute contact" with objects characteristic of everyday experience (119/7). While he is sensitive to his own experience, Proust writes in a way that resonates with that of others. In fact, Proust's writing is akin to "a quasi-scientific and exhaustive analysis of the 'impression,' i.e. of the world insofar as it is lived – like phenomenology" (111v). While he does not attempt to provide a literal description of experience (he is not a realist), Proust still discloses its meaning in a rigorous way that is open to evaluation by readers. In this sense, Proust's version of indirect expression advances a basic goal of phenomenology, as Merleau-Ponty understands it.

4. Literature and Phenomenology: Creation Plus Description

I have suggested that in the early 1950s, Merleau-Ponty increasingly stresses the points of convergence between literary expression and philosophy. While this move has been noted before in the literature, its distinctively *phenomenological* character has been called into question. Claude Imbert, for example, acknowledges the increasing importance of literature for Merleau-Ponty's thought, and claims that it takes on "the role of a 'philosophy of the sensible'"; but she suggests that this development leads him to "re-evaluate the concept of *phenomenology*".[17] Insofar as a literarily informed philosophy can persuasively disclose the meaning of experience, Merleau-Ponty is happy to break with "ontological naïvetés and transcendental premises", in other words, with a Husserlian or Heideggerian phenomenological heritage.[18] The alleged paucity of references in his later work to the conceptual machinery of classical phenomenology is thought to only confirm this shift. Merleau-Ponty's reading of Valéry and Proust, however, already cast doubt on the plausibility of this evaluation. In this section, I argue that he remains committed to phenomenological description, and show that he thinks it must be supplemented by, and not substituted with, creation. This provides more reason to think that his philosophy of literature serves the goals of a broadly descriptive project.

The need for description to be supplemented with creation is partially motivated by Merleau-Ponty's later view of perceptual experience and intentional objects. According to him, the meaning of perceptual objects is "latent" and "dissimulated" (*VI* 101/135). This is not to say that perceptual meaning is unanalysable. His point is that it cannot be adequately clarified using the kinds of descriptions employed in the *Phenomenology*, which attempted to disclose the properties of the "phenomenal field" using concepts like "motor intentionality", "habit", "motivation" and "ambiguity". His later writings employ more enigmatic and suggestive locutions. For example, he describes the relation

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[17] Imbert, 'L'écrivain, le peintre et le philosophe', 74. Imbert, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, notes the influence of Proust, for example (38), and claims Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of literature directly bears on the new 'ontological' vocabulary he develops (57, 60), but she sees this as a departure from a classical phenomenological focus.
[18] Imbert, 'L'écrivain, le peintre et le philosophe', 75. See also 77.

between perceiver and perceived as a "vortex" (138/179), claims that space and time are "rays" (113–14/150–51), and defines world and subject according to a new concept called "the flesh" (*la chair*).

Despite this significant change in terminology, he continues to observe a principle developed already in *The Structure of Behaviour*. This principle holds that the language used to develop a description of experience must take direction from the objects it attempts to describe: "the properties of the phenomenal field are not expressible in a language that would owe nothing to them … ".[19] Alternatively, descriptions cannot import concepts or formulations that are not plausibly sanctioned by the pre-theoretical meaning of perceptual experience.[20]

It might seem that Merleau-Ponty is largely uninterested in description in his later work, but a number of remarks show that he by no means gives up on earlier descriptive goals.[21] Commentators like Imbert *are* right to note, however, that a markedly different terminology is used to describe perceptual experience. Merleau-Ponty is clear that a basic goal of his later "ontological" work is to develop the terms that will replace classical philosophical concepts, like "subject", "object", "noema", etc. (167/219; see also *S* 15/28–29). This is required because a more standard philosophical terminology, he claims, fore-closes on the concepts needed to understand perceptual objects, and circumscribes the nature of the reflective activity that gives us access to them (*VI* 38/60, 73–74/102–03). For example, by carving up perceptual experience into "subjects" or "noeses" that engage "objects" or "noemata", these standard philosophical categories compel us to analyse perceptual objects as passive recipients of perceivers' intentional activities; but Merleau-Ponty does not think that perceptual experience has this structure. For this reason, classical philosophical terminology is no longer sufficient for understanding the meaning of experience (88/119, 155/201).

If that is the case, then a philosophical terminology that better reflects the less-transparent features of the perceptual field must be developed. To describe the sense of objects defined by "the flesh" and related tenets, philosophy must formulate a more creative vocabulary:

it is a question whether philosophy as reconquest of brute or wild being can be accomplished by the resources of eloquent language, or whether it would not be necessary for philosophy to use language in a way that takes from it its power of immediate or direct signification, in order to equal it with what it wishes all the same to say. (102–03/137)

In order to describe the meaning of pre-theoretical experience (or "brute" being), a version of indirect expression must be adopted. The meanings of standard philosophical concepts do not correspond to the structure of "brute" being. As this passage suggests, this new form of expression will prove more successful for disclosing its deeper meaning.

As a result, the philosophy of literature takes on increased importance for Merleau-Ponty's project. This shift is indicated throughout his later texts: "the language of the artist (as indirect and unconscious) is the means of achieving our common participation

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[19] Merleau-Ponty, *Structure of Behaviour*, 193/208.

[20] In the *Phenomenology*, this view was reflected in arguments to the effect that the terms "effect", "sensation", "cause", or "judgement" misconstrue the meaning of perceptual experience, and inhibit a proper understanding of the "silent" text of perceptual experience (*PhP* 3/25 ff.; 10/33). However, different terms are used to describe perception in later work.

[21] See e.g. *VI* 52/76, 77/107, 87/119, 117/155, 203–04/253–54.

in this Being".[22] He goes as far as to suggest that, for him, "literature is the disclosure [*le dévoilement*] of the visible, speech [about] things" (*NC* 187). He also claims that philosophical expression "is inseparable from literary expression, i.e. from *indirect* expression … " (391), and announces his intent to "[make] an analysis of literature in this sense: as inscription of Being" (*VI* 197/247–48). Likening the writer to the phenomenologist, we read that

> The truth is that the quale appears opaque, inexpressible, as life inspires nothing to [one] who is not a writer. Whereas the sensible is, like life, a treasury ever full of things to say for [one] who is a philosopher (that is, a writer). […] The root of the matter is that the sensible indeed offers nothing one could state if one is not a philosopher or a writer, but that this is not because it would be an ineffable in Itself, but because one does not know how to speak. (252/300)

Like the passages above, this remark clearly shows that a facility with expressive forms that depart from the direct and categorical expressions characteristic of standard philosophical and phenomenological language is a condition for an adequate account of experience (or "the sensible"). In accordance with the basic principle from *Structure*, the enigmatic quality of perceptual experience requires a language that is tailored to it.

The basic means of capturing the enigmatic nature of sensible experience is to infuse descriptions with more creative expressions. Even if "the whole of philosophy … consists in restoring a power to signify, a birth of meaning, … an expression of experience by experience", this effort cannot remain at mere description alone, or "expression of experience by experience" (155/201). The imaginative concept invention characteristic of literature is also needed. In this vein, Merleau-Ponty defines philosophical expression in accordance with Valéry's concept of "*la voix*": "as Valéry said, language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests". As I noted above (§3.1), Merleau-Ponty thinks that Valéry's new-fangled vocabulary and poetic expression of objects can disclose new meanings that really obtain in perception, making them available for further study. A new vocabulary can open features of experience that remained hitherto obstructed by the presuppositions preserved in technical philosophical language.

Some of these remarks might suggest a deference to literature over philosophy, but a closer look confirms that Merleau-Ponty intends to supplement philosophical reflection with literary expression. Philosophical expression is not itself literature, even if its descriptive goals require that it move closer to literary writing. Even if literarily informed philosophical vocabulary is creative, it aims to record and describe, and not simply fabricate, the meaning of being or experience. This view, which brings together insights developed in readings of Proust and Valéry, can be found in a number of passages in Merleau-Ponty's later work. While "[philosophy] is itself a human construction" and a cultural artefact, its inventive vocabulary is supposed to offer a faithful account of perceptual meaning (102/136–37). Merleau-Ponty is clear that literary inventions are not born *ex nihilo*, but begin "from what the writer sees" (*à partir de ce que l'ecrivain voit*) (*NC* 217). Even if it is not a literal transcription, an account of experience must develop concepts whose basic goal is to capture the sense initially contained in perception (*VI* 6/2). Alternatively,

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[22] Merleau-Ponty, *Notes de Cours* (hereafter *NC*), 196.

Merleau-Ponty does not accept an "anything goes" view of literary creation. He privileges terms like the "flesh" because they promise to *reveal* features of experience: creative expressions are "dictated by the structure of vision", and are to be checked against the primacy of intuition (*NC* 218). The meanings disclosed by Valéry and Proust amount to a greater "awakening" of being, that is, they bring out latent properties of objects (392). Insofar as Merleau-Ponty's later view of expression takes direction from both Valéry and Proust, it attempts to combine description and creation, not substitute one for the other. The point could not be put more clearly: "Being … requires creation of us for us to experience it", and "expression of mute experience by itself, is creation" (*VI* 197/247–48).

Terms like "reversibility", "vortex" and "*chiasma*", then, cannot be understood as mere creations. They are deliberately indirect and allusive, but not because they are metaphors or poetic inventions, as has been claimed, or because they mark a break from earlier descriptive aims.[23] Even if these creative terms are indirect, and in this sense are similar to metaphorical expression, Merleau-Ponty claims that they still manage to refer to being or meaning as they really are. He is clear that his creative expressions cannot be understood as a version of metaphorical reference (*VI* 221–22/271). Only an indirect form of expression is adequate to the task of gaining access to and describing what Merleau-Ponty sees as the enigmatic and ambiguous structures of perceptual life. Unsurprisingly, he takes this "indirect method" to define his later work (179/230–31). Its origins in his philosophy of literature confirm the systematic import of this area of research.

5. Literature and Essence

In another alleged departure from a broadly phenomenological focus, many commentators argue that Merleau-Ponty rejects the need to develop an account of phenomenological essence.[24] This view is motivated by remarks to the effect that essences present idealized or calcified versions of the objects and experiences they purportedly describe, and that an account adequately sensitive to lived experience would not need them.[25] It is also claimed that Merleau-Ponty's methodology does not take direction from the phenomenological reduction, which Husserl identified as a necessary step for the formulation of essences. As Hansen and Carman argue, his rejection of the reduction also entails a rejection of essences.[26]

While I cannot consider this issue in detail here, there is reason to think that Merleau-Ponty wants to redefine, and not reject, the reduction.[27] More immediately, textual evidence does not support the view that he is opposed to developing an account of essence. On the contrary: despite his reservations about the tenability of Husserl's view of essences, many passages indicate that it is possible to develop a refined account of

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[23] For the first claim, see Vanzago, 'Presenting the Unpresentable', and Sellheim, 'Metaphor and Flesh'.

[24] See e.g. Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon*, 98; Hansen and Carman, 'Introduction'; Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 39–41.

[25] See *VI* 107–12/142–49, 114–17/150–55, 121–22/159–60, 127–28/166–67, 186/237.

[26] Hansen and Carman, 'Introduction', 8–10.

[27] More specifically, he rejects the reduction's *completeness* and *sufficiency*, not its usefulness at all (*PhP* lxxvii/14). Later texts contain multiple positive remarks in favour of the reduction (*VI* 47–48/69, 178/229–30). See Smith, 'Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenological Reduction', on the importance of the reduction.

phenomenological essences.[28] Given that his final work was interrupted, this account remains incomplete. Nevertheless, some of its basic features can be clearly identified. And as I will argue, the philosophy of literature directly informs this incipient account.

Before tracing this line of influence, it will be helpful to briefly consider some basic features of Merleau-Ponty's view essences. An essence is a general account of a fact or a domain of facts. Essences are "explicitations [*explicitations*] of an experience", a definition that Merleau-Ponty claims is consistent with Husserl's earliest understanding of essences in the *Logical Investigations*.[29] Put differently, essences are tasked with explaining the meaning of some lived phenomenon at a higher and more abstract level of generality (*NC* 66). However, they are not so general so as to be divorced from facts or lived experiences (*VI* 51/62). Unlike Husserl, Merleau-Ponty does not accept that there are supra-temporal essences, separated from the empirical: essences are only partially separated from the particular spatio-temporal facts they are supposed to explain. This is not to say that *all* features of essences must remain contingent and in flux. Some will remain unchanged. However, Merleau-Ponty contends that essences lose explanatory power if they are defined solely as *a priori*, atemporal cores of meaning.

On his view, to work out essence of the table in my room, for example, one would point to the fact that the perceptual structure the table (like that of other material objects) is only partially revealed at any particular point in visual experience. That the table is perspectivally given, that it has four legs and that objects are placed on it, are essential features that are unlikely to change. However, unlike for Husserl, a wider set of meanings must be considered in a definition of the table's perceptual essence. This wider domain of facts includes the historical or cultural qualities associated with this particular table (which are liable to change), the applications of its use-value, whatever memories I associate with it, etc. If essences really do serve to clarify the possible permutations or "configurations" of experience (the current meaning of experience and how it could be otherwise), then some of their contents must be revisable and subject to change (*HLP* 51/62).

Essences are also linguistic entities (*PhP* lxxix/16). Put differently, all essences are "verbal" (*VI* 174/226).[30] Given that they fall under the domain of "ideality", or non-perceptual meaning (*la signification*), essences are coextensive with linguistic meanings. Ideal meaning, for Merleau-Ponty, is linguistic.[31] Like all other mental acts, phenomenological reflection (a necessary step for formulating essences) is also linguistic.[32] What is more, the language used to formulate essences is always some natural language. Merleau-Ponty does not think that there is a purified language proper to phenomenological inquiry. Instead of referring to propositional meanings that persist across different natural languages, an essence can only be defined using the resources provided by a natural language. The linguistic character of essences also allows that their meanings can change, in this case, to reflect transformations in the meanings of natural language terms.[33]

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[28] See e.g. *PhP* lxxxviii/15; *VI* 45/68–69, 110/146, 113/149, 115/152, 118/156, 174/226, 203–04/253–54, 220/269, 229/278, 236/285, 255/303, 260/308; *NC* 190, 193, 392.

[29] While the goals of this paper do not allow a more detailed consideration of this issue, there are clearly significant differences between Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's views of essences.

[30] See also *VI* 115/152, 117 n.1/154*, 236/285, 255/303.

[31] See *PhP* lxxix/16; *VI* 115/152, 153/198, 236/285.

[32] See *PhP* 185/219, 188–89/223, 422/461, 425/465; *S* 17–18/32–33; *VI* 224/273.

[33] While I cannot consider its implications here, this view also entails that essences can vary across different natural languages.

These features bring us closer to understanding why the philosophy of literature is an important influence on Merleau-Ponty's later view of essences. As in Husserl, essences promise to offer us variations or additional views (for Merleau-Ponty, "configurations") of experience. By taking up a different perspective on experience, we can probe its possible deeper meaning. Recall that the ability to disclose new features of experience is a characteristic virtue of indirect expression (§2). In his reflections on literature, Merleau-Ponty goes one step further: he claims that indirect literary expression shows us how to formulate phenomenological essences.[34]

While Valéry, Stendhal and Simon have also contributed to this goal, Merleau-Ponty claims that Proust has gone the furthest in clarifying the relations between the ideal and the sensible, or between the domain of essence and fact (*VI* 149/193; *NC* 392). This is in part because he is more sensitive to how a subject's private experience (Proust's own, or that of his characters) can be made available for others (*RULL* 149–53). Merleau-Ponty claims that Proust's combination of "testimony" (fidelity to the first-personal perspective) with "expression in the sense of creation" is better able to engineer a non-empirical equivalent of a character's lived experience, allowing it to be understood by others (BNF Ms. Vol. XII 102/4). For this reason, "[l]iterary speech" in Proust creates "an intersubjectivity to the second power, or a super-objectivity [*surobjectivité*]". This lays the groundwork for an account of essence. For even if they are abstracted from a particular subject's experience, essences are general forms that should be capable of explaining a range of similar phenomena encountered by others. While he takes direction from a single character's experience, Proust formulates "limit-forms of a universal experience" that move from the "relative to the absolute", that is, from "subjectivism to essence" (6/133). The development of a more general account out of a single subject's point of view enables "passage to an essence", which promises to develop a more objective (namely, intersubjectively evaluable) account of experience (6/127).

According to Merleau-Ponty, Proust's version of literary essences "restore the lived world" and disclose its "pre-conceptual" or pre-predicative meaning (1/122r). Proust is able to do so because his gradual probing of the structure of memory, for example, continues to be enriched by new perspectives on the experience of remembering, and always retains a link to these experiences:

> That which [Proust] calls "the essence of things" or "the idea," and which, like musical ideas, is nothing but a concentration, a spiritual equivalent of the transcendence of things: [it is] an arrangement of words between which what he calls "the mystery" appears, i.e. the emergence [*le surgissement*] of things of the world and others … (7/119v)

As products of a writer's expressions, whose character becomes more determinate throughout the course of a novel, essences are non-empirical forms or renditions of lived experience. An essence or idea of a piece of music offers readers the opportunity to reinterpret what it means to hear a particular piece, or to hear auditory phenomena in general. This effort will be more successful if the musical essence continues to be informed by actual experiences of hearing music. Instead of being logically necessary, then, essences have an "alogical" (*alogique*) character. From his early work, Merleau-Ponty uses this term to refer to non-propositional meanings (e.g. perceptual sense, or

[34] See e.g. *NC* 190, 193, 217, 392; *VI* 149–53/194–98. BNF Ms. Vol. XII 8/1o7; 12/112; 113/1.

gestalt-type perceptual structures).[35] As dimensions of possible experience, essences would lose explanatory force if particular facts or experiences could not permeate them, and supplement or revise existing accounts of the structure of perception, thought, etc. (*VI* 150/194).

Despite the frequent references to "alogical" (or "carnal") essences, details about their explanatory function and examples of their application are few and far between.[36] A rare example is Merleau-Ponty's suggestive remarks about the *petite phrase*, five notes from a fictional sonata composed by Vinteuil and variously described throughout *In Search of Lost Time* (*VI* 149/193 *ff*.). Like other literary essences, the sonata is constructed from what Proust sees or experiences (*NC* 217). From a formal perspective, the sonata's meaning can be clarified by its notation, progression, etc. However, these merely formal qualities do not exhaust its meaning, or the objects it can explain (*VI* 150/194–95).

Formal qualities are insufficient to define the musical essence because Vinteuil's sonata can take on a range of additional meanings, depending on who is hearing it and under what conditions. The meanings various characters associate with the piece afford them the possibility of gaining insights into their experience. This is why Merleau-Ponty contends that abstracted essences can have a quite specific explanatory application. For example, Swann hears the piece when he is infatuated with Odette, who will later become his wife. In the early stages of their relationship, the piece elicits hope and desire. Over time, however, its meaning changes to reflect the deteriorating state of their relationship. When Odette initially repudiates Swann, the piece motivates feelings of regret for unrealized desire; after their relationship has ended, the piece triggers feelings of resignation. While its notation and progression remain unchanged, the little phrase is associated with a range of different meanings, and serves as a guide for Swann to interpret his desires, hopes, and regrets at different period of his life. The semantically porous nature of the musical idea only strengthens its explanatory power (*VI* 153/198).

This is possible because, for Proust, ideal entities like Vinteuil's sonata retain a connection to lived experience (as Merleau-Ponty claims, the ideal is other side of the sensible) (152/197). If the meaning of the musical idea remained cut off from changing factical conditions, it could not offer a satisfactory account of those conditions, and shed light on Swann's experience at a specific time. The development of an essence amounts to "the establishment of a level in terms of which every other experience will henceforth be situated" (151/196). But the explanatory force of essences depends in large part on their ability to adapt to reflect changing empirical conditions. This feature allows subjects to use essences to develop explanations that are sensitive to more local or contextual meanings. While essences do not offer *complete* explanations of experience, they serve as keys that help us better interpret it.

A related virtue of essences is that their explanatory reach extends beyond a single subject's experience. An example is provided in *The Prisoner*. By "approaching the sonata from another point of view", the narrator is brought back to his time at Combray.[37] The narrator's experience of the sonata leads him to discover new layers in his past: "

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[35] See Merleau-Ponty, *Structure of Behaviour*, 214/231; *PhP* 214/231; *IP* 195/254; BNF Ms. Vol. XII 12/112–1/113. This concept was likely adopted from Scheler (see Scheler, *Formalism and Non-Formal Ethics of Values*, 254). See also remarks about the 'carnal' nature of literary essences (*NC* 392; *VI* 117 n.1/154*).

[36] As Merleau-Ponty suggests, this is due, in part, to the incomplete nature of his research (*VI* 153/198).

[37] Proust, *In Search of Lost Time: Volume V*, 204.

… sometimes our attention throws a different light upon things which we have known for a long time and we remark in them what we have never seen before".[38] The ability to help us see new meanings in experience, to "[help] [one] descend into [oneself], to discover new things … ", is a characteristic virtue of the ideal entities generated by great artists.[39] This quality, no doubt, attracts Merleau-Ponty to Proust. His descriptions of the formulation and application of ideal entities demonstrate that essences can be general enough to explain a wide variety of phenomena, and apply to a range of subjects, while maintaining their sensitivity to more specific conditions. The more lasting contributions of artists like Proust is their ability to preserve "the song of a bird, the call of a hunter's horn, the air that a shepherd plays upon his pipe", while "always respecting their original nature, as a carpenter respects the grain, the peculiar essence of the wood he is carving".[40]

These features are directly supported by the form of expression used to formulate essences. For Merleau-Ponty, essences are "operative": they depend on a form of operative or indirect linguistic expression (*VI* 47–48/69, 153/198). Like indirect expression, they are revisable, open to interpretation and contextually sensitive (§2). Merleau-Ponty accepts that on his view, the meaning of an essence remains incomplete, and its explanations are likely only provisionally adequate. However, these qualities, he thinks, reflect the nature of experience itself. Following Proust, he accepts that essences "partake of that quality of being – albeit marvellously – always incomplete … ".[41] We maintain a merely partial grasp on the meaning of experience, and there is "progress toward essence, but never a total explicitation; [an] essence is always a 'figure'" (BNF Ms. Vol. XII 1/91r). Given the richness of perceptual life, an essence is best understood as an outline of experience, which must be filled in to reflect our gradual disclosure of lived meaning. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of literature, and especially his reading of Proust, leads him to conclude that phenomenology requires an account that "does not entirely disengage its essences from the world [but] maintains them under the jurisdiction of facts, which can tomorrow call for another elaboration" (*VI* 108/142). From a more classical, Husserlian perspective, this might disqualify him from offering an account of essence. However, as I have argued, he is clearly committed to a modified version of this goal, even if his untimely death prevented him from offering a more developed theory.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of literature has direct systematic import: it motivates him to develop a novel view of phenomenological essences, and provides the resources for a nuanced, hybrid account of philosophical expression. These tenets, I have shown, are central for his later thought and are supported (but not supplemented) by his philosophy of literature. The important role that the philosophy of literature plays for the development of his later work does not justify the widespread view that painting should be the privileged art form in discussions of his aesthetics. These findings also point to two broader consequences.

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[38] Ibid., 205–06.
[39] Ibid., 206.
[40] Ibid., 207.
[41] Ibid., 207; see also 332, 340–41.

First, the importance of indirect expression can clarify Merleau-Ponty's frequent references to the philosophical centrality of language in his later writings. For example, he claims that "what is lived is lived-spoken", that "language is … the most valuable witness to Being", that "*logos* … is the theme of philosophy" and even that "Philosophy itself is language" (*VI* 126/165). On my reading, he identifies philosophy with "operative language" largely because, whatever its other goals might be, his later work attempts to articulate the meaning of experience. As his study of literary language shows, a large part of phenomenology's success will depend on how it goes about expressing the meaning of first-order objects. To generate a persuasive account of objects that can also reveal their unexplored features, significant attention must be devoted to the development of linguistic expressions that are adequate to this task. Accordingly, the philosophy of language has a central methodological and conceptual importance, which is confirmed throughout Merleau-Ponty's later writings.

Second, while Merleau-Ponty often criticizes Husserl's "idealized" view of essences, he advances a view that remains largely undeveloped in Husserl's work. In *Ideas* I, Husserl draws a tight connection between phenomenology and literature: "Extraordinary profit [can] be drawn from … what art and, in particular literature, have to offer".[42] According to Husserl, studying artworks can train us to engage in the sort of imaginative construction needed to intuit essences. He concludes that

> if one loves paradoxical talk, one can actually say, … that "*fiction*" ["Fiktion"] *makes up the vital element of phenomenology, as it does of all eidetic science,* that fiction is the source from which knowledge of the "eternal truths" draws its nourishment.

Talk of "eternal truths" would certainly give Merleau-Ponty pause. And he also rejects the atemporal and *a priori* status of Husserlian essences, but the evidence above suggests a deeper point of convergence: by offering a more concrete account of how literature can aid the configuration of phenomenological essences, Merleau-Ponty's later work develops a connection that Husserl first identified as central for the success of the phenomenological project.[43] Despite his reservations about Husserl, fundamental commitments in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of literature suggest that it can be situated within a broadly classical phenomenological aesthetics.

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[42] Husserl, *Ideas*, 132. Despite the importance these remarks accord to literature, Husserl's engagements with literature are rare. For some recent studies see Huemer, 'Phenomenological Reduction and Aesthetic Experience'; Lories, 'Remarks on Aesthetic Intentionality'; Katz, 'Toward a Husserlian Foundation of Aesthetics'.

[43] On this point, see Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, xlviii n.2, liv *passim*, 129.

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