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“The First Man Speaking”: Merleau-Ponty on Expression as the Task of Phenomenology

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This article aims to establish an understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s view of creative expression, and of its phenomenological function, setting out from the intriguing statement in his essay “Cézanne’s Doubt” that the painter (or writer or philosopher) finds himself in the situation of the first human being trying to express herself. Although the importance of primary or creative expression in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is well known, there is no consensus among commentators with respect to how this notion is to be understood, and of its apparently paradoxical relation to experience in his philosophy. On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty seems to presuppose that there is an original meaning pre-given in experience; on the other hand, expression is described as a hazardous enterprise, because the meaning to be expressed does not exist before expression has succeeded. In order to resolve this tension, I explore the significance of the precariousness of creative expression, arguing that it must be related to its other side: the constituted, all too often petrified meaning that we must start out from.

Surely all art is the result of one’s having been in danger, of having gone through an experience all the way to the end, where no one can go any further.

Rainer Maria Rilke¹

In Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s essay “Cézanne’s Doubt” from 1945, we find the striking remark that the artist “speaks as the first man spoke and paints as if no one had ever painted before”, and

¹ Rilke, *Briefe über Cézanne*, 9; Rilke, *Letters on Cézanne*, 4.

further down on the same page, “the artist launches his work just as a man once launched the first word, not knowing whether it will be anything more than a cry”.²

This text deals with artistic expression in the particular context of doubt. In spite of devoting the last 30 years of his life exclusively to painting – to the extent that he did not even attend his beloved mother’s funeral³ – Cézanne questioned his own vocation and talent, and he wondered whether the novelty of his painting was not perhaps due to an accident of his body – his eye troubles, for example. This setting is intriguing because it is not clear what philosophical function this psychological doubt performs. Not many commentators have examined the weight of Cézanne’s doubt, in spite of its being the very title of the essay.⁴

Merleau-Ponty’s interest in the post-impressionist painter Paul Cézanne is well documented, and for someone familiar with the French phenomenologist’s work it is easy to understand his fascination for this painter. Cézanne’s aim was to paint “from nature”, to depict nature as it appeared to him in all its complexity and concreteness.⁵ He called his own method *réalisation*⁶ – to make or to become real – which was translated by Rainer Maria Rilke into German as *Dingwerdung*, the becoming of a thing.⁷

In Merleau-Ponty’s words, Cézanne wanted to paint things as they come into being, “matter as it takes on form”.⁸ This sounds strikingly similar to Merleau-Ponty’s view of the task of phenomenology: to develop a new kind of thinking, which can capture the meaning of the world as it comes into being, à *l’état naissant*.⁹ Thus, commentators have pointed out that Merleau-Ponty’s description of Cézanne’s endeavour in this essay can be read as a characterization of his own philosophy.¹⁰

Cézanne’s efforts to paint from nature would seem to be crucial for an understanding of the issues of expression that Merleau-Ponty was to struggle with for the rest of his life. As we know, for Merleau-Ponty, language and expression in general must be understood as a dialectic between on the one hand a primary, creative, “authentic” form of expression – what he in *Phenomenology of Perception* terms “speaking speech” (*parole parlante*) – and on the other hand a secondary, constituted form – “spoken speech” (*parole parlée*).¹⁰ However, when he compares the artist’s task to that of the first human being speaking, it may look as though, for Merleau-Ponty, creative expression is a

² Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et non-sens* (hereafter SNS), 32. Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* (hereafter AR), 69. The translations quoted have occasionally been altered.

³ This story is told by Émile Bernard in “Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne”, 41.

⁴ Exceptions are G.B. Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty* and Ted Toadvine, “The Art of Doubting”, who both point to the metaphysical – rather than barely psychological – dimension of the doubt. Cf. also Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, 14–15.

⁵ Cf. for example Cézanne’s “Letter to Émile Bernard of 12 May 1904,” 301–02; *Paul Cézanne: Letters*, 297: “The Louvre is a fine place to study, but it must be only a means. The real, the great study is the endless variety of the natural scene.”

⁶ The term *réalisation* appears frequently in Cézanne’s conversations and letters; see for example Bernard, “Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne”, 25, 28.

⁷ Rilke, *Briefe über Cézanne*, 22–23; Rilke, *Letters on Cézanne*, 34.

⁸ SNS 23/AR 63.

⁹ See for example Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (hereafter PP), xvi; Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (hereafter PPT), lxxxv: “grasp the sense of the world [. . .] in its nascent state”. ¹⁰One of the first to make this remark was Forrest Williams in an article from 1954, “Cézanne, Phenomenology, and Merleau-Ponty”. Cf. also Galen Johnson, “Phenomenology and Painting: ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’” in the same volume, 5.

¹⁰ PP 229/PPT 202.

matter of going beneath culturally constituted significations in order to capture a pre-cultural, pre-scientific level of meaning: “nature at its origin”, as he puts it in reference to Cézanne’s painting.¹¹

In this sense, expression would play a role similar to that of Husserl’s epoché, a point of view that has often appeared in the literature: Galen A. Johnson, for example, writes that, for Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne’s work presents us “with a paradigm for prescientific perceptual experience of the natural world”,¹² whereas Isabel Matos Dias claims that Merleau-Ponty’s Cézanne exercises “the epoché, in pushing aside what prevents us from seeing, culture, our habits and our prejudices”.¹³ In a similar vein, Gary Brent Madison contends that in Merleau-Ponty’s reading, Cézanne’s pictures present nature, “not that of civilized man who has surrounded himself with cultural worlds which hide from him the natural world, but that which the first man on earth could have seen”.¹⁴ For Renaud Barbaras, the Husserlian standpoint of Merleau-Ponty’s first two main works is a problem, because “the possibility of a philosophy that allows experience itself to speak is taken for granted”.¹⁵ This is also the view of Yves Thierry, for whom language at this stage remains “essentially determined by a silent [*muet*] thought underlying speech”.¹⁶

It would seem, then, that when Merleau-Ponty writes, “Cézanne’s difficulties are those of the first word (*parole*)”,¹⁷ his statement implies that the aim of the artist – and, by extension, of the phenomenologist – is to capture a level of meaning as yet unsoiled by culture. This interpretation apparently fits well with a passage from Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* §16 that Merleau-Ponty likes to quote as a formula of the task of phenomenology, “It is the pure and, so to speak, still mute experience that we are concerned to lead to the pure expression of its own meaning.”¹⁸

However, in “Cézanne’s Doubt”, as in *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty is also quite explicit about the non-existence of a pre-given meaning, ready to be translated into expression. At one point he writes: “The meaning of what the artist is going to say is *not* anywhere, either in things, which as yet have no meaning, or in the artist himself, in his unformulated life.”¹⁹ And at another: “Before expression, there is nothing but a vague fever, and only the work itself, completed and understood, will prove that there was *something* rather than *nothing* to be found there.”²⁰

Several commentators call attention to a tension or “hesitation” in Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of phenomenology in this regard.²¹ In an article from 1977, Jacques Taminiaux

¹¹ SNS 23/AR 64.

¹² AR, 7.

¹³ Matos Dias, *Merleau-Ponty. Une poétique du sensible*, 145 (my trans.).

¹⁴ Madison, *The Phenomenology*, 79.

¹⁵ Barbaras, *De l'être du phénomène*, 16, cf. 56; Barbaras, *Being of the Phenomenon*, xxxiv, 38.

¹⁶ Thierry, *Du corps parlant*, 69 (my trans.); cf. also *ibid.*, 60.

¹⁷ SNS 33/AR 69.

¹⁸ This phrase is quoted with approval throughout Merleau-Ponty’s career: see e.g. PP x, 253–54, 338; PPT lxxix, 228, 305; Merleau-Ponty, *La prose du monde* (hereafter PM), 11; Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World* (hereafter PW), 6; Husserl, *Cahiers de Royaumont*, 157–58; Merleau-Ponty, *L’Œil et l’Esprit* (hereafter OE), 87; Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” AR 147; Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l’Invisible* (hereafter VI), 171, 250, 303; Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (hereafter VII), 129, 197, 249.

¹⁹ SNS 32/AR 69.

²⁰ *Ibid.* (emphasis in text).

²¹ Thierry, *Du corps parlant*, for example on 42, identifies a hesitation between an analysis that sees language as intrinsic to all the subject’s relations to its world, and a fundamental position where “an irreducible distance is maintained between a perceived signifying, but silent [*muet*], world, and a universe of discourse [...]”. The tension between expression and a silent [*“silencieuse”*] experience is also an important theme of Mauro Carbone’s study *La Visibilité de l’invisible*, see 15, 79–80. More radically, Bimbenet, *Nature et Humanité*, maintains that Merleau-Ponty’s endeavour to trace rationality back to experience in its state of appearance runs the risk of imprisoning experience in a lived but

gives a fruitful account of this tension, which appears particularly in Merleau-Ponty's repeated citation of "the little phrase" from *Cartesian Meditations* quoted earlier. Taminiaux writes that at the outset, in the preface to *Phenomenology*, "Merleau-Ponty, the philosopher of the body, of the gesture ...",²³ interprets this phrase in a very Husserlian mode, as indicating the secondariness of language with respect to the original level of meaning in consciousness. Yet, in the very same text, the phenomenological method is described as a wonder (*étonnement*) before "the unmotivated springing forth of the world";²⁴ it is not the clarification or reflexion of a being that is already given (*un être préalable*), but "like art, the realisation of a truth", or, in other words, a creative expression.²²

Taminiaux argues that this tension can be traced back to two different conceptions of the relation between experience and expression. One of these perspectives Taminiaux calls *positivist*: in this case, experience is thought to precede expression, the phenomenological reduction is understood as a return to a primordial experience whose meaning is already given, and the aim of expression is to adequately capture the pre-given significations of experience. The other perspective is that of *art*, where "there is no primary signification prior to expression",²³ and the reduction is itself a creation of meaning. In Taminiaux's interpretation, this tension is not recognized as such at the time of *Phenomenology* but becomes explicitly thematized in his later philosophy: here expression – and philosophy – is "creation, but with a support of which it is nevertheless not a reflection".²⁴

If we preliminarily accept Taminiaux's account, there are two intersected themes here and two intersected tensions: the first theme concerns the relation between expression and experience and – as expression in the strong or authentic sense is clearly, for Merleau-Ponty, a way to the phenomenological reduction – there is a tension with regard to what the phenomenological method is supposed to be. The second theme relates to the question of how to understand the phenomenological sense of expression and in what way this primary form relates to what is termed (among other things) "secondary" expression. In both cases, there is a dichotomy looming, particularly threatening for Merleau-Ponty, whose whole philosophy strived to undermine reasoning in dichotomies, or more generally in terms of the bad ambiguities of either–or.

How, then, is the claim that Cézanne's paintings reveal "nature at its origin",²⁵ "the background [*fond*] of inhuman nature",²⁶ "primordial perception",²⁷ "the reserve [*fonds*] of mute and solitary experience on which culture and the exchange of ideas have been built",²⁸ to be reconciled with the idea that there is no meaning "before" expression? After all, must there not be something there that the painter is struggling to express? And how is the dialectic between the two forms of expression to be understood, if we are not to fall back into a simple dichotomy between an expression that translates the meaning of an original, primordial nature, and one that is cultural and therefore secondary?

My aim in this article is to show how these tensions can be resolved in relating the pursuit of primordial experience to the search for creative expression, as a struggle with secondary expression

solitary point of view; see 191. ²³Taminiaux, "L'expérience, l'expression et la forme," 97; Taminiaux, "Experience, Expression, and Form," 138. 24 PP viii/PPT lxxvii.

²² PP xv/PPT lxxxiv.

²³ Taminiaux, 103, 143.

²⁴ Ibid., 107, 146.

²⁵ SNS 23/AR 64.

²⁶ SNS 28/AR 66.

²⁷ SNS 26/AR 65.

²⁸ SNS 32/AR 69; an allusion to the Husserlian passage quoted above.

and its sedimented meanings. I will also argue that the philosophical function of Cézanne's doubt must be understood against this background.

Painting from Nature

Already in his twenties Cézanne had come to believe that nature must be the lodestar of art²⁹ and came at first to be attracted by impressionism: the exact study of the appearances of nature, outdoors, *sur le motif*. Soon, however, he abandoned the impressionist techniques. In Merleau-Ponty's interpretation this happened because impressionism pictured only the instantaneous sensation of the thing – its atmosphere, so to speak – whereas Cézanne wanted to find the solid object behind the atmosphere.³⁰ However, to depict the thing in its “own gravity”³¹ must, in Merleau-Ponty's view, involve a capturing of it in its state of appearing: neither as a collection of impressions, nor as a pure object of thought, but as the thing is being born to our senses.

In the minds of Cézanne's contemporaries this was a hopeless, and therefore self-destructive, effort: “His painting would be a paradox: pursuing reality without giving up sensation, [...] without drawing up either the perspective or the picture”.³² Émile Bernard called Cézanne's procedure a “suicide”, writes Merleau-Ponty,³³ in the sense that he refused himself all means to reach the reality he was aiming at³⁴ and believed that the failure of his painting was due to his excessive self-doubts.³⁵

However, what Merleau-Ponty found in Cézanne was a painter who struggled to escape the traditional alternatives of “senses or intellect, the painter who sees and the painter who thinks, nature and composition, primitivism and tradition”.³⁶ In other words, his work – and, of course, Merleau-Ponty's – could be described as a challenge of the dichotomy of, on the one hand, empiricism and realism and, on the other hand, intellectualism and idealism. To paint “matter as it takes on form” is to refuse to make a choice between these alternatives. As a consequence, his painting will appear paradoxical only if we try to apply to it the very dichotomies that Cézanne was calling into question.

In Merleau-Ponty's interpretation, then, Cézanne wanted to paint “nature in its origin”, a primordial world upon which our sciences are constructed.³⁷ Now, it seems that the apprehension of the world that we are familiar with – to wit, what Husserl calls “the natural attitude” – relies upon the very dichotomies that Cézanne's paintings are challenging. As a consequence, the world his paintings present to us will appear unfamiliar and strange: it is a world where one is uncomfortable, *où l'on n'est pas bien*, in Merleau-Ponty's words, as if humans had somehow not yet left their trace there.³⁸ Cézanne's art performs a phenomenological reduction of sorts upon our

²⁹ See for example Cézanne's “Letter of *circa* 19 October 1866 to Émile Zola”, 122f.; *Letters*, 116f.

³⁰ SNS 21/AR 62.

³¹ SNS 20/AR 62.

³² SNS 21/AR 63.

³³ SNS 21/AR 63. Cf. Bernard, “Une conversation avec Cézanne,” 135.

³⁴ Williams has pointed out that this paradoxical approach is precisely what phenomenology is about: to discover in experience intentionally given objective structures: “Cézanne, Phenomenology, and Merleau-Ponty,” 172. Cf. Madison, *The Phenomenology*, 77.

³⁵ As Bernard puts it in his memoir, “Souvenirs,” 26 (my emphasis): “If only he had acted without so many doubts about what might be the best thing, [...] he would have given us some magistral pieces.”

³⁶ SNS 22/AR 63.

³⁷ SNS 23/AR 64.

³⁸ SNS 28/AR 66.

habitual ways of conceiving the world, and this is the sense in which it reveals “the background [fond] of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself”.³⁹

The Question of the Given

When Merleau-Ponty compared the predicament of an artist with that of the first man expressing himself, it suggested as we saw that the difficulties of expression are concerned with representing an original meaning given in nature, independently of the traditionally constituted means of so doing. Notwithstanding, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the weight Cézanne attached to “going to the Louvre” to studying the inherited tradition and its techniques as well as the empirical sciences of nature.⁴⁰ If the difficulties of the artist were comparable to those of the first human being in that they were a matter of inventing entirely new techniques, more suitable – in Madison’s words⁴¹ – for depicting nature “as the first man on earth could have seen it” than the old ones, then it would seem that the artist should run as far from the Louvre as possible and put all his energy into learning how to experience primordially again.

We saw that there was no meaning “before expression” in Merleau-Ponty’s view. The “primordial” experience and the “inhuman nature” in which our culture and science are anchored can be compared to a “vague fever”,⁴² something that “appears in a confused way”.⁴³ only “after expression” can we say what was there – and *whether* there was something there at all.⁴⁴ In other words, the opposition that Merleau-Ponty still admits to, between the spontaneous order of perceived things and the human order of ideas and sciences, must not be placed on a par with a nature–culture dichotomy. When Merleau-Ponty uses the term “nature” in the sense of a level below the cultural, it is within scare quotes, indicating that he distances himself from this notion as traditionally understood.⁴⁵

If there is no meaning to be found before expression, then a formulation such as Madison’s, “as the first man on earth could have seen it”, becomes problematic.⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty does not contend that Cézanne’s paintings represent what the first man on earth could have seen – as if there were such a thing as the first man on earth and what he (she) might have seen. He must not be taken to affirm the existence of a pre-cultural attitude, or of a first, God-like, metaphysical subject.

Neither a not-yet-human, a savage (or an ape, as Bernard framed it⁴⁷) nor a transcendental ego emerging from out of nowhere is equipped to express the world in the state of its appearing. It is only a human being, Merleau-Ponty writes, who can reach right down to the roots of constituted

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ SNS 28–29/AR 67.

⁴¹ Madison, *The Phenomenology*, 77.

⁴² SNS 32/AR 69.

⁴³ SNS 30/AR 68.

⁴⁴ SNS 32/AR 69.

⁴⁵ SNS 23/AR 64: “it is on this foundation of ‘nature’ that we construct sciences”. As we know from VI, *Résumés de cours. Collège de France 1952–1960; Themes From the Lectures at the Collège de France 1952–1960*; and the notes on *La Nature. Notes, Cours du Collège de France (1956–1960)* (hereafter N); *Nature: Course Notes From the Collège de France*, the enquiry into the notion of nature was primordial in Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy.

⁴⁶ On this point, my interpretation is clearly at odds with that of Bimbenet, who claims that for Merleau-Ponty, speech is “nothing more than a sublimation of perceptual silence” (218) and that language should be analysed “on the basis of the theme of the ‘first word’, thus against the background of a natural or prehuman silence which would precede it” (219, my trans.).

⁴⁷ According to Merleau-Ponty, SNS 28/AR 67.

humanity.⁴⁸ In consequence, it must somehow be *by means of* this humanity that its roots can be captured. Somehow, the inherited ideas and techniques have to be learned and then forgotten, or rather, transcended.⁴⁹ As Cézanne himself puts it in a letter, the painter indeed has to “go to the Louvre” and learn from his predecessors, but afterwards he must “hasten out of there” to the close study of nature.⁵⁰

At this point, we have to recall the distinction between primary and secondary expression. In “Cézanne’s Doubt” this distinction is not made explicitly but is presupposed. The essay as a whole can be seen as a study of primary expression, and at one point Merleau-Ponty refers to a secondary painting and a secondary speech as “what is generally meant by culture”: the mere linking of ready-made ideas.⁵¹

To express authentically, on the other hand, is something other than merely putting old ideas together, or repeating what has already been said. It is a hazardous enterprise because, as we have seen, what is expressed does not exist prior to its expression. This is exactly what distinguishes primary and secondary expression. In the latter case, we may very well say that there is a meaning given “before” expression, but only because this meaning is the sedimentation of preceding, originary acts of expression. When it comes to these acts of expression in themselves, however, they take place in a situation comparable to that of “the first man” expressing himself: they have to capture a not-yet meaning, a not-yet clear idea, a “vague fever” or “mute” experience of “viscous”, vibrating, vanishing appearances.⁵²

Thus, only after the expression has been achieved can we see that there was anything there to be expressed at all. Furthermore, the work accomplished does not simply present a picture: it aspires to truth. The artwork actually captured what was somehow there.

Merleau-Ponty writes,

The meaning Cézanne gave to objects and faces in his paintings presented itself to him in the world that appeared to him. Cézanne simply released that meaning: it was the objects and the faces themselves as he saw them that demanded to be painted, and Cézanne simply expressed what they *wanted* to say (“*ce qu’ils voulaient dire*”).⁵³

Merleau-Ponty is here exploiting the literal meaning of the expression *vouloir dire*, which in standard French simply denotes “to mean”. The passage could therefore also be translated: “Cézanne simply expressed what they *meant*.” Thus, the original meaning of appearing things is something that they call for, that they *want* the human being to express.⁵⁴

The expression is, to use a Husserlian term that Merleau-Ponty appropriated, *motivated* by what was to be found, although scattered and vague, in nature. In retrospect, this “joining of the

⁴⁸ SNS 28/AR 67.

⁴⁹ See SNS 29/AR 67.

⁵⁰ Cézanne, 13 Sep 1903 (296/292): “Couture used to tell his students: *Keep good company*, meaning: *Go to the Louvre*. But after seeing the great masters who rest there, one must hasten to leave and to revivify oneself through contact with nature, with the instincts and with the artistic sensations within us.”

⁵¹ SNS 32/AR 69.

⁵² Ibid. Cf. SNS 23/AR 63; SNS 30/AR 68.

⁵³ SNS 35/AR 71.

⁵⁴ Gilmore, “Between Philosophy and Art,” points out that the English word “realization” in itself carries this double meaning of grasping a truth that was already available and of “bringing it into being” (303). This is of course also true of the French term *réalisation*.

wandering hands of nature”,⁵⁵ as Cézanne himself labelled his aim, appears as the truth of nature. In a similar way, the work of an artist is tied to his life by motivation, so that after the fact – in the light of his art – we can determine what it was in the artist’s life that gave rise to this particular art: before expression, his “morbid constitution”⁵⁶ may be the ground of his failure as well as of his success. It is possible that Cézanne “on the occasion of his nervous weaknesses, conceived a form of art which is valid for everyone”.⁵⁷ This meaning can only be determined after the fact of an achieved expression: in the case of Cézanne, his work reveals a “metaphysical meaning of his illness”.⁵⁸

The Cry and the Cliché

Before expression thus, there is a not-yet meaning “scattered” or “wandering” in the world, which calls for expression by a human. Primary expression is motivated both by these vibrating appearances and by the contingencies of the life of the human expressing it. In retrospect, the expression will have been of what the things as well as that particular human being “wanted to say” or meant. If Cézanne’s art discloses a metaphysical significance of his illness, it turns out to have an existential significance, too; in revealing the meaning of the world, Cézanne’s successful expression will also reveal the specific meaning of his life, as “*that work to be done called for that life.*”⁵⁹

We are beginning to see what is at stake in the act of expression, “at what risk [*dans quel risque*]” it is accomplished.⁶⁰ It is the predicament of a human being launching the first word, “not knowing whether it will be anything more than a cry”. In the last section I argued that Merleau-Ponty’s reference to “the first man” and “the first word” ought not to be interpreted as an affirmation of a pure, “savage” form of human existence, preceding the culturally determined form, with a privileged access to primordial experience. Nevertheless, the opposition of “the first word” to a mere cry calls for an explication.

In *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes the cry from a poem in the following way:

[Poetry] is distinguishable from the cry, because the cry makes use of the body as nature gave it to us, i.e. poor in expressive means, whereas the poem uses language, and even a particular language, in such a way that the existential modulation, instead of being dissipated at the very instant of its expression, finds in the poetic apparatus a means of making itself eternal.⁶¹

Merleau-Ponty is here elaborating upon what characterizes an artwork in general, a painting, a piece of music or a poem. Hence, poetry, in the quote above, will be exchangeable for painting. Clearly, “the cry” is not an arbitrary example; rather, it indicates the existential-metaphysical significance of expression. The phrase “not knowing whether it will be anything more than a cry” reminds us that a human cry is an expression of pain, of anguish, or of fear – as when we cry for help or when our

⁵⁵ SNS 29; AR 67. The quotation is originally from Gasquet, *Cézanne*, 235–36.

⁵⁶ SNS 18/AR 61.

⁵⁷ Ibid. This is an example of what Merleau-Ponty later calls, following Henri Bergson, “the retrospective movement of the true”. Cf. *Éloge de la philosophie et autres essais* (hereafter EP), 35; Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy*, 29; and Bergson, *La pensée et le Mouvant*, 14.

⁵⁸ SNS 35/AR 71.

⁵⁹ SNS 35/AR 70 (emphasis in text).

⁶⁰ SNS 8; Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* (hereafter SNST), 3.

⁶¹ PP 176/PPT 152.

existence may be in danger.⁶² But a cry can also be an animal's cry: *un cri*, in French, can be that of a bird, a mouse, a pig – or an ape. In fact, the cry of an animal seems to be precisely what is meant by nothing “more than a cry”, and the word of the first human being that which distinguishes her from the ape. If this is true, then a *mere* cry would in her case have to be a cry in vain: a sound that does not come through as an expression, and thus as a cry for help. It would be what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls an “inarticulate sound”: the futile effort to name a supposedly private experience.⁶³ Only expression will show that there was “*something* rather than *nothing* to be found there”,⁶⁴ and if there was it would no longer be private – it is expression that makes us human.

Now, if the cry “makes use of the body as nature gave it to us: poor in expressive means”, this means that it may sometimes be hard to distinguish a cry of joy from one of pain, for example, but it is still not an animal's cry. Neither does it seem as if the cry is in any literal sense “dissipated at the very instant of its expression” – to the extent that it is an expression, it must be part of some form of language and hence rely upon a “poetic [or linguistic] apparatus”. Rather, the cry that is dispersed at the moment of its utterance is precisely what is meant by the *mere* cry: that which did not come about as a human expression, and vanished as an echo among the mountains.

Expression for Merleau-Ponty is an act with no guarantee. As he puts it in the preface of *Sense and Non-Sense*: “It is like a step taken in the fog, of which no one can say if it is going to lead anywhere.”⁶⁵ Because Cézanne's art is not “what is generally meant by culture”, secondary expression, he has to found culture anew: speak “as the first man spoke” and paint “as if no one had ever painted before”.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, Cézanne must do this *as* a human; he has to rely upon a language – a pictorial apparatus in this case, by means of which the appearance is arrested in its flight. Otherwise, it would merely be an inarticulate patch, like a cry stuck in his throat.

“We live in a world where language is *instituted*”⁶⁷ – we *are* humans, surrounded by the results of previous expressions.⁶⁸ Our plight is not that we have to invent the word “help” when we are in danger, but instead that what we say about our most personal experience is likely to come out as merely a platitude. Therefore, Cézanne certainly has to know the tradition but only in order to forget it again, in favour of the close confrontation with nature.

Thus, it seems that the risk we are running is not that what we are trying to say is too much ours, that it is too private, but rather that it is not ours at all. This aspect of the problem of expression lingers in the background of both “Cézanne's Doubt” and *Phenomenology*. In the chapter on expression and language in the latter work, Merleau-Ponty again refers to “the first man who spoke”, note the scare quotes, confirming that we are not dealing with a historical thesis of sorts but with a statement about the general precariousness of expression.⁶⁹ Alongside the writer and the philosopher as instances of efforts to primary expression – or what he in this chapter calls authentic or originary speech – we find the child who begins to speak as well as the person in love who wants to reveal his feelings. The latter example is particularly telling: the person who wants to express his

⁶² To be sure, a cry can also be one of joy, just as tears can be of happiness.

⁶³ Wittgenstein, § 261.

⁶⁴ SNS 32/AR 69.

⁶⁵ SNS 8/SNST 3.

⁶⁶ SNS 32/AR 69.

⁶⁷ PP 214/PPT 189, emphasis in original.

⁶⁸ For the notion of institution, see Merleau-Ponty's course notes, *L'Institution, Dans l'histoire personnelle et publique. Notes de Cours au Collège de France (1954–1955)* (IP in the following); Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France (1954–1955)*.

⁶⁹ In a footnote on PP 208/PPT 530 and again on PP 217/PPT 193.

sentiments of love for someone does not lack words and phrases. Quite the contrary, he knows far too many and has heard them all too many times before.

To be sure, Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly deal with the issue of expression gone stale, or the cliché. His focus is continuously on the complimentary aspect of expression: the creative effort. There is nothing in his work equivalent to Heidegger's shrill analysis of the everyday chatter of *Dasein* in *Being and Time*. This is all the more surprising as the inevitable conclusion of our previous study is that authentic expression is motivated both by the vibrating appearances desirous to become meaning *and* by the hitherto achieved meanings about to petrify. In particular, Merleau-Ponty's own thought is prompted by the philosophical tradition and its all too solidified propensity to repeat itself.

The Other and the Establishment of Tradition

In his piece "The Unknown Masterpiece", Honoré de Balzac tells the story about the painter Frenhofer and his life work, *La Belle Noiseuse*, which is kept hidden in his studio. Frenhofer appears in this philosophical short story as the master of masters, whose wisdom concerning the arduous task of expression is conveyed to a younger master and an even younger novice. His artistic manifesto is a veritable painting from nature, a seizure of life so consummate that art is transformed into life itself. "You're in presence of a woman, and you're still looking for a picture", Frenhofer exclaims, when his masterpiece *La Belle Noiseuse*, towards the end of the short story, is revealed to his two colleagues and admirers.⁷⁰

However, all the two younger painters can perceive on the canvas is a chaos of undetermined colours and outlandish lines, except in a corner of the painting where a delicious, living foot juts forth, a fragment "escaped from an incredible, slow, and advancing destruction".⁷¹ Frenhofer is convinced of his success, until he overhears the youngest of his colleagues whispering to the other that there is nothing on his canvas. Hearing this comment, Frenhofer bursts out in rage, but finally realizing the truth he begins to cry: "Nothing, nothing! And after working ten years!"⁷²

The story illustrates the momentous role of the other in the act of expression. Frenhofer is no buffoon, but a veritable master, his knowledge about painting is immense and his studio is full of admirable pieces. Nonetheless, he is no authority on his own work, and his masterpiece will only achieve this status when it has been perceived as such by others. An act of authentic expression must, in Merleau-Ponty's language, "come to life for other people"⁷³ in order to *be* an act of expression:

It was from the approval of others that [Cézanne] had to await the proof of his own worth. That is why he questioned the picture emerging beneath his hand, why he hung on the glances other people directed toward his canvas.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Balzac, *La Comédie humaine, Œuvres Complètes*, 304; Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, 39.

⁷¹ Ibid., 305, 341.

⁷² Ibid., 306; 343.

⁷³ SNS 33/AR 70.

⁷⁴ SNS 44/AR 75.

Thus, the possibility that other people understand a picture or a wording seems to be a condition for it being an expression.⁷⁵ Only when it is capable of “[awakening] the experiences which will make their idea take root in the consciousness of others”,⁷⁶ of being communicated, can the act have signification. It can then be part of a general acquisition – a tradition for other humans to depart from. As Merleau-Ponty writes in a later text, “what we call [an *accomplished expression*] is successful communication”.⁷⁷

But even if it is true that it is only from the approval of others that the artist will get the proof of his own worth, this endorsement can be no guarantee. A repetition of petrified meanings may also be understood and is often the only thing that *is* understood: the two men, perceiving nothing but a jumble of bizarre patches in Frenhofer’s painting, might have been Cézanne’s adversaries, leering at what we today believe is a masterpiece. When an artwork is successful, Merleau-Ponty says, “it has the strange power to teach itself”;⁷⁸ when the new form of expression is taken up in another act of expression by another, “on his own account”, as he writes in *Prose of the World*.⁷⁹ When this new language has been acquired, I am transformed: it “has made me capable of understanding it”.⁸⁰ So it is, for example, when Rainer Maria Rilke writes to his wife that Cézanne’s painting has succeeded: “When I remember how confused and insecure one was confronted with the first things [...] And thereafter for a long time nothing, and all of a sudden one has got the proper eyes ...”.⁸¹

Surely, the circuit is always ajar. Expression can never be perfected – only the creation of a Platonic idea would be a fully achieved expression. In the visible world, to the contrary, meaning is incarnated and needs therefore to be assumed yet again, in a new act of expression. The expression that comes closest to being achieved is actually that which is about to congeal and die.

The Philosophical Function of the Doubt

Merleau-Ponty relates Bernard’s story about how Cézanne, upon hearing about the painter Frenhofer at a dinner, stood up from the table agitatedly pointing at himself. Cézanne was moved to tears and declared that he was Frenhofer.⁸² Rilke comments in his letters on this event: “Zola had understood nothing; it was Balzac who had foreseen or forefelt that in painting you can suddenly come upon something so huge [*Übergroßem*] that no one can deal with it.”⁸³

Balzac’s short story is not about a clown who mistakenly believes he can paint, but about the hazardous demands of expression. In a similar way, Merleau-Ponty’s reference to the first human being expressing herself does not, as I argued, affirm the possibility of a pre-cultural form of experience. Rather, the phrase rhetorically exposes the human predicament as such: torn between

⁷⁵ In EP, Merleau-Ponty writes (36/30): “Expression presupposes someone who expresses, a truth which he expresses, and the others before whom he expresses himself.”

⁷⁶ SNS 33/AR 70.

⁷⁷ PM 41/PW 28, emphasis in original.

⁷⁸ SNS 33/AR 70.

⁷⁹ PM 41/PW 28–29.

⁸⁰ PM 20/PW 13.

⁸¹ Rilke, 26/43.

⁸² SNS 31/AR 68. Bernard “Souvenirs,” 41f.

⁸³ Rilke, 24/38.

the hollowness of the clichés and the doubtfulness of the expression aimed at, we are striving to give our life and the world meaning.

Against this background, the initially puzzling significance of Cézanne's self-doubt becomes discernible. Far from being simply a peculiar and perhaps pathological trait of his personality, his radical doubt dramatizes human existence. It has a metaphysical dimension, in that it functions like an emblem of the precarious relation between the contingencies of the world and its necessary, meaningful structures.

Jean-François Lyotard has written that "Merleau-Ponty certainly would not have been a great commentator on Cézanne if 'Cézanne's doubt' hadn't been his own",⁸⁴ without further commenting on what kind of doubt it would be. Obviously the title of the essay resonates with another wellknown doubt: Descartes' methodological doubt in the *Meditations on First Philosophy*.⁸⁵ In Merleau-Ponty's view, the results of Descartes' metaphysical doubt are not tenable: it is no less difficult for me to know whether I have perceived something than to know whether there is something there. The seeing of a thing – what Descartes calls the thought of seeing – is no more certain than the existence of the thing.⁸⁶

Yet, we are inclined to believe that our experiences are more certain than that which they are experiences of, because we are deluded by what Merleau-Ponty calls "objective thought": the prejudice of a world whose objects are completely achieved and determined, an absolute exteriority, "without folds".⁸⁷ When we reflect upon our experiences of these objects, we have a tendency to transfer the categories of objectivity to them, and the subject is correspondingly posited as pure, self-transparent interiority.⁸⁸

This is why a new kind of thinking is needed, a *radical* reflection in contrast to the "analytical" reflection of objective thought, or what he later terms *la pensée de survol*: a thinking which "looks on from above".⁸⁹ Radical reflection does not take the already constituted meanings of objective thought for granted and hence does not betray the unreflected experience which is its presupposition. It is a reflection that strives to capture the primordial, "mute" experience that objective thinking originates from.

This originary level of experience is thus the world in its state of appearing; it is not a layer of immaculate nature whose meaning we could simply contemplate and then represent in appropriate words or colours. In fact, we can distinguish also between a primary and secondary form of *perception*, where the latter is our everyday, empirical perception that takes the acquired significations of finished objects for granted and, therefore, obscures the primordial form of perception.⁹⁰ In order to capture the fundamental level of experience – the "'world's instant' that Cézanne wanted to paint"⁹¹ – we need to use some form of language. In other words, its contemplation is not mute but a form of expression.

⁸⁴ In "Philosophy and Painting in the Age of Experimentation: Contribution to an Idea of Postmodernity", AR 329.

⁸⁵ In his "Conversation", Bernard repeatedly compares Cézanne to Descartes, "Vous êtes un nouveau Descartes," 99; cf. 110.

⁸⁶ PP 430–31/PPT 394–95.

⁸⁷ PP 231/PPT 204.

⁸⁸ For a more thorough discussion of Merleau-Ponty's notion of objective thought, see my "Language and the Gendered Body: Butler's Early Reading of Merleau-Ponty", 769f.

⁸⁹ For example in OE 12/AR 122 and VI 99/VIT 69.

⁹⁰ See for example PP 53–54/PPT 45.

⁹¹ OE 35/AR 130.

It seems that the language with which Merleau-Ponty contrasts the originary form of experience is secondary, acquired language with its congealed meanings, not language in general. Indeed, to claim that primordial experience makes up a layer of silent meaning, which it is merely a question of properly putting into words, would be again to conflate the categories of that which is constituted and achieved with that which is not yet constituted, but in the process of “being born”. Primordial experience is mute precisely because we cannot speak about it in the concepts of objective thought. On that account, the tension that we encountered earlier, between what Taminiaux called a “positivist” and an artistic view of the phenomenological method and of the relation between expression and experience in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, is not so great after all: in his earlier work, too, philosophy can be described as “creation, but with a support of which it is nevertheless not a reflection”.⁹²

Thus, if reflection is to become radical and avoid being caught in the categories of objective thinking, it must be a second-order reflection, an act that takes itself into consideration as something that participates in the unreflected *as an act*. We saw that Cézanne wanted to paint things as they appear to us in their original meaning, beyond the conventional distinctions: neither our impression of things, nor the extended objects of analytical reflection, but the solid, factual, undeniable things. Just as Descartes’ doubt was a form of thought, Cézanne’s metaphysical doubt – and Merleau-Ponty’s own – is a form of reflection. Merleau-Ponty at several places characterizes radical reflection as a creative act. It seems then that reflection, in order not to be analytical, must be *expression*. Merleau-Ponty’s effort to describe meaning as it first bursts forth before us involves “forging [*forger*]” the concepts needed.⁹³ Those concepts must themselves be used in expressive acts if they are to make sense.

Now, does this mean that the original expressive operation is ultimately veiled in mystery? Merleau-Ponty does not hesitate to admit this when he speaks about “this intrinsically obscure operation whereby we have eternalised within ourselves a moment of fleeting life”.⁹⁴ This is for internal reasons: in order to capture the process of expression we cannot perform a selftransparent reflection outside of time – the reflection must itself be an act of expression. At the same time, the expressive operation can itself be the object of radical reflection, and the hammering out of new concepts concern this process itself.

Primary and Secondary Expression

In order to fully understand the function of creative expression in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, I believe one would need to disentangle all the interrelated terms that Merleau-Ponty coins on the subject during his career. I can only give the outline of such an examination here. There is, in *Phenomenology* and contemporary texts, a primary, authentic or originary level of expression, speaking speech, where a meaning is formulated for the first time and where signification inhabits the sign: sometimes he talks about living, gestural or emotional meaning at this level. On the other hand, there is secondary, constituted or empirical expression and the corresponding levels of meaning or signification: notional, conceptual, intellectual. Here, the sign is related to its signification in an external way; the expressions are conventional – sedimented acts of speaking speech⁹⁵ – and may

⁹² Cf. *supra*, note 27.

⁹³ PP 121/PPT 106.

⁹⁴ PP 446/PPT 409.

⁹⁵ PP 229/PPT 202.

be called a simple translation of thought.⁹⁶ However, because expression is our way of getting access to the originary level of experience, one can also, as we saw earlier, speak of primary or authentic and secondary or empirical *perception*.⁹⁷

In the beginning of the 1950s, when Merleau-Ponty more explicitly examines different forms of language and expression, he often uses the notions speaking and spoken, constituting and constituted language (*langage*),⁹⁸ creative use of language and empirical use of already established (*déjà fait*) language,⁹⁹ and sometimes simply speech (*parole*) and language (*langue*), as well as indirect or lateral versus direct language or signification.¹⁰⁰ Yet, as with the former distinctions, this is a dialectical one, and the opposition between direct and indirect signification must not be understood as mutually exclusive.¹⁰¹ Even though there is a sense in which we have an acquired language at our disposition, with signs and their corresponding significations, it is never fully achieved, and one does not choose a sign for a signification “the way one searches for a hammer to drive in a nail or pincers to pull one out”.¹⁰² The idea of “an absolutely transparent expression” is an illusion.¹⁰³ On the other hand, speaking, living language is always a “gesture of taking up [*reprise*] and recovering [*recupération*]”¹⁰⁴ of spoken language, which bends “the resources of constituted language to an unprecedented usage”.¹⁰⁵ It is

the operation through which a certain arrangement of the already available signs and significations comes to alter, then to transfigure each of them and finally to secrete a new signification [...]¹⁰⁶

In his later work, a distinction is made in terms of the *logos endiathetos* – “meaning before logic”,¹⁰⁷ the “brute [*brut*] or wild Being”, “the ‘amorphous’ perceptual world”¹⁰⁸ – and *logos prophorikos*: “the ‘Logic’ that we produce”,¹⁰⁹ that is “uttered”,¹¹³ the description of this perceptual logos.¹¹⁰ This distinction is the point of departure for Jenny Slatman’s analysis of the phenomenon of expression also in Merleau-Ponty’s earlier work, and she sees it as a development of that between speaking and spoken speech or language.¹¹¹ However, this distinction is made at another level than that of

⁹⁶ PP 193/PPT 169.

⁹⁷ Perception itself has a history, a tradition. See also for example Merleau-Ponty, 178/133, and of course OE.

⁹⁸ See e.g. PM 17, 22, 123, 127/PW 10, 14, 87, 90.

⁹⁹ For example, S 56/AR 82.

¹⁰⁰ PM 64f./PW 46 and of course the essay “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” in particular, Signes (hereafter S), 54, 94/AR 80, 112. Increasingly, Merleau-Ponty also makes use of the term *institution*, in particular from the mid-50s; see IP.

¹⁰¹ No more than that between the visible and the invisible, so important for the later work. Cf. S 30/ Signes, 21: “It would be better to speak of the visible and the invisible, pointing out that they are not contradictory [...]”.

¹⁰² PM 64/PW 45.

¹⁰³ PM 156/PW 110. Cf. S 58/46: “Apparently, there are no gaps, no speaking silences here.”

¹⁰⁴ PM 26/PW 17.

¹⁰⁵ PP 446/PPT 409.

¹⁰⁶ PM 20/PW 13.

¹⁰⁷ VI 222/VIT 169.

¹⁰⁸ VI 223/VIT 170.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 113

N 274/NT 212.

¹¹⁰ VI 233/VIT 179.

¹¹¹ Slatman, *L'Expression au-delà de la représentation*, 125f. Slatman traces this distinction back to Plutarch’s *Moralia*. See also *ibid.* 153.

language in the sense of a human production: it concerns the relation between the meaning of the world that “proposed itself” to be described by the painter or the philosopher – for example, the “prehuman world” that Cézanne wanted to paint – and the meaning produced in this description.¹¹² The *logos prophorikos* is characterized by Merleau-Ponty as “*Gebilde*” (structure, shape, image), the “‘logic’ that we produce”, a creation that is not self-sufficient but a response to the demand of the *logos endiathetos*. For this reason, the very opposition between authentic expression and constituted, empirical expression seems to be built into this latter notion of the uttered logos, if it is to adequately capture the logos of the perceived world. Moreover, the distinction between speaking and spoken speech is not abandoned in the last work.¹¹³

Even though the distinction between primary expression –“speaking speech”– and secondary expression – “spoken speech” – is brought up by virtually all commentators upon Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of expression, their exact relation to one another, and to their corresponding levels of meaning, has, to my knowledge, not yet been thoroughly examined.¹¹⁴ Most commentators agree that these forms of expression are mutually dependent upon one another – as Bernard Waldenfels puts it, expression always takes place in between the “extremes of pure innovation and pure repetition, but cannot reach either of them”.¹¹⁵ According to Françoise Dastur, speaking and spoken speech are “two modalities of speech”,¹¹⁶ in Étienne Bimbenet’s words, they are “intertwined”,¹¹⁷ whereas Lawrence Hass puts their relation in terms of “an interwoven duality”.¹¹⁸

In a more elucidatory way, Slatman emphasizes the analytical character of the distinction between speaking and spoken speech, as two moments of language that are in fact intermingled and “contaminate” one another.¹¹⁹ Notwithstanding, in bringing the peculiar feature of expression back to the idea of repetition, understood as a Derridean *différance* of sorts, Slatman tends to gloss over this important insight and forget precisely what is distinctive about creative expression, namely, its precariousness. If creative expression was a matter of simply repeating earlier acts of expression, therewith displacing and transforming their meaning, it is hard to see why the painter or the writer would have to “communicate at risk [*dans le risque*]”.¹²⁰ It is not obvious why the

¹¹² VI 223–24/VIT 170. The notion of *logos endiathetos* is arguably not absent from *Phenomenology of Perception* either, as can be noticed in passages such as PP 367–68/PPT 333: “The unfolding of sensible givens beneath our gaze or beneath our hands is like a language that would teach itself [...]”.

¹¹³ See e.g. VI 168/VIT 126, where Merleau-Ponty speaks of “ready-made language [*le langage tout fait*]” versus “speaking speech [*la parole parlante*]” and “operative language [*langage opérant*]”, or VI 201/VIT 153, where “conquering, active, creative language” is contrasted with “acquired, available, honorary ideas” in a manner similar to the earlier philosophy.

¹¹⁴ I am thinking here in particular of the profusion of intermingled terms that Merleau-Ponty relies upon to formulate his thoughts on expression and language, summarized above, and the question of how they are interrelated: “primary” versus “secondary”, “transcendental” versus “empirical” speech, “constituting”, “operating”, “conquering” or “instituting” language versus “constituted”, “acquired” or “instituted” language; “primordial”, “gestural” or “emotional” meaning or signification, “living” or “incarnated” or “indirect”, “lateral” meaning versus “notional”, “conceptual” or “intellectual” meaning or signification, “common”, “conventional”, “already available”, “direct” meaning, and so on.

¹¹⁵ Waldenfels, “The Paradox of Expression”, 92.

¹¹⁶ Dastur, *Chair et Langage*, 55.

¹¹⁷ Bimbenet, *Nature et Humanité*, 140.

¹¹⁸ Hass, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy*, 191.

¹¹⁹ Slatman, 132. Thomas Baldwin constitutes an exception in this respect, claiming in a recent article that Merleau-Ponty with this distinction only reformulates the old subject–object dichotomy, “Speaking and Spoken Speech,” 88, 93. Yet, it is quite clear from the texts that the notions of speaking and spoken speech do not refer to ontologically separate categories.

¹²⁰ “Un inédit” (1952), in Merleau-Ponty, *Parcours deux. 1951–1961*, 45; “An Unpublished Text by Merleau-Ponty: A Prospectus of His Work,” in Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 9.

distinction between primary and secondary expression, speaking and spoken speech, would be needed in the first place. Even though the idea of a continuous alteration of the meanings of language – or what Bimbenet calls a “play of language with itself”¹²¹ – is not incompatible with Merleau-Ponty’s writings on expression, the institution of meaning in art, literature and philosophy is of an order where the access to an originary appearing of meaning is dependent on a transformation of given expressions that is radically new.

Cézanne and the Deflagration of Being

In his last published essay “Eye and Mind”, Merleau-Ponty returns to Cézanne and to the idea of an existing, “brute” world that art in general and the painter in particular draws upon, no longer in an effort to “seize” its meaning but rather to “transform it into painting”.¹²² It is a world “almost mad”, since the “light, lighting, shadows, reflections, colour” have “like ghosts” only visual existence and only exist “at the threshold of profane vision, they are not ordinarily seen”.¹²³ In this text, painting is described as “a ‘visible’ to the second power”, an “icon” of the first visible,¹²⁴ and the contrast is mainly between “profane” vision and the “voracious vision” of painting.

Merleau-Ponty is here not explicitly looking for expression’s achievement and authenticity, but it is “mute [*muet*] Being that itself comes to show forth its own meaning”.¹²⁵ Painting becomes a figure of the relation between the living body and the world or, more precisely, of how something such as vision can appear in the world: a vision that is a means “for being present from within at the fission of Being”.¹²⁶ The world that Cézanne searches for is precisely “this deflagration of Being”¹²⁷ – in contrast with the dominated world of “flying over” thought.

Whereas in “Cézanne’s Doubt” the painter picks up and transfigures into painting something that “would without him, remain walled up in the separate life of each consciousness: the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things”,¹²⁸ in “Eye and Mind” the gestures of the painter that are “most proper to him [...] seem to emanate from the things themselves, like figures from the constellations”.¹²⁹ At the same time, even in the earlier text, the meaning of things “offered itself” to the painter, and his expression of it was “what they *wanted* to say”.¹³⁰ The difference is then not so much that between a persisting belief that the meaning of experience is given independently of every effort to express it, and the mature insight that the expression of an original experience will always be productive of meaning. There is rather a change of focus; from the endeavour in the earlier philosophy to subvert the categories of objective thought,¹³¹ via the more thoroughgoing

¹²¹ Bimbenet, *Nature et Humanité*, 214. In a similar fashion, Kristensen refers to the operation of speech that “in every moment invents new significations”, *Parole et Subjectivité*, 128 (my trans.).

¹²² OE 16/AR 123; cf. OE 13/AR 123.

¹²³ OE 26/AR 127.

¹²⁴ OE 22/AR 126. For a discussion of the role of the icon in Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics, see Slatman, “Phenomenology of the Icon,” 197–219.

¹²⁵ OE 87/AR 147. Cf. Taminiaux, 112/151.

¹²⁶ OE 81/AR 146.

¹²⁷ OE 65/AR 140.

¹²⁸ DC 30/AR 68.

¹²⁹ OE 31/AR 129.

¹³⁰ SNS 35/AR 71 (emphasis in original).

¹³¹ An endeavour that certain scholars have characterized as mainly negative; see e.g. Madison, “Did Merleau-Ponty Have a Theory of Perception?”

examination of expression and language in the middle period, he enters into the domain opened up by this study: the *logos endiathetos* that he undertakes to formulate in adequate terms.

The painter, the writer, the philosopher and all of us who want to express something new – the child, or the person in love who wants to express his feelings – share the predicament of the first human being who does not know whether her expression is going to be anything more than a cry. Before the new meaning has been expressed, there are only the already constituted meanings scattered around the world, and there is nothing inside us that can help us: what we tend to call the “inner”, our thoughts and emotions, does not become what it is until it has been expressed.¹³²

Even though Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the productive side of expression and language, his whole philosophy can be seen – in exemplifying the creative effort – as a struggle with the complimentary aspect of expression: the self-defeating tradition we may be trapped in, the empty truism. After all, the predicament of the lover expressing his feelings is not, as we have seen, really the predicament of the first human being. Rather, it is the predicament of someone with a long tradition behind him, who has heard all these platitudes about love in his life and wants to say something else, something new – or something that, in his mind, might be closer to a cry.

The risk Merleau-Ponty runs, and the risk he is aware of running, is that of *not* transcending objective thought, and hence being stuck in the bad ambiguities of the either–or. His philosophy as expression cannot simply invent a new terminology for itself but must take up an already constituted meaning and assume it in a new gesture of expression that, if it succeeds, transforms this meaning.

Furthermore, as we for the most part live our lives under the spell of objective thought, the world “in its stage of appearance” – on the hither side of objectivism’s petrified categories – will seem unfamiliar to us. It is a world *où l’on n’est pas bien*, where our being is not at ease; a world close to madness.

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¹³² Even the Cogito, as Merleau-Ponty writes in PP 463/PPT 426: “The tacit *Cogito* is a *Cogito* only when it has expressed itself.”

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