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POIETIC TRANSSPATIALITY MERLEAU-PONTY, NORMATIVITY, AND THE LATENT *SENS* OF NATURE

In the *Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty tells the readers that the task of philosophy is to draw “the things themselves [...] from the depths of their silence” into expression, to “plunge into the world [...] [to] make it say, finally, what in its silence *it means to say*” (4, 39). These remarks suggest two considerations. First, they indicate that, for Merleau-Ponty, the world, things, and nature, in sum, the sensible, have a sense that, albeit silent or latent, is irreducible to anthropomorphic projections. Second, they suggest that the task of philosophy is to express this latent sense in such a way that the world “speaks” for itself. As the ample literature on the paradox of expression indicates, these two considerations are intimately linked: they yield the seemingly paradoxical task of expressing a latent sense of the sensible that eludes conceptual transparency or positivity (VI 214). That is, the recognition that there is a sense of the sensible (first consideration) calls for expressive modes that are suited to “giving voice” to phenomena that make sense silently—modes that do not model sense on our conceptual posits (second consideration). Because of space and time constraints, in this article, I focus on the first consideration, i.e., on the latent sense of the sensible, and spell out the ontological processes that yield this sense.

In the first and second sections, I trace, in his later thinking, Merleau-Ponty’s shift toward ontology marked by an investigation of the “*being of the relation* [of spatio-temporal individuals]” (Barbaras 2010, 382) and thematized as *flesh*—a spatializing and temporalizing that generates meaningful differences. I suggest that this conceptual shift is fecund for questions of the onto-logy of nature as it introduces a non-dualist or substantial conception of nature that makes visible, in its latency, the sense of the sensible—a sense that is neither “all naked” nor inaccessible, hidden behind “a human mask,” and that dualist accounts and propositional theories of meaning make invisible (VI 131, 136).¹ Merleau-Ponty’s remarks in the opening lines of *Nature* capture these insights: “nature,” he tells us, “is what has meaning, without this meaning being posited by thought: it is the autoproduction of meaning,” which is to say that nature has “an interior, is determined from within” (N 3).

By explicitly attending to *Nature* and taking natural processes as the focus of my inquiry into the sense of the sensible, in the third section, I argue that Merleau-Ponty’s onto-logy of nature suggests that there is a *sens* [meaning

and orientation] of nature whose regulatory principle ought to be found in nature itself. This is to say that there is a *normativity* of nature that, albeit not exclusive of sociocultural-linguistic norms, is irreducible to them. As I argue, this “incarnate principle” (VI 139) is a “transspatializing and transtemporalizing” (N 176): it transverses its carnal manifestations thereby becoming traceable within their visibility while also remaining in-visible in its excess, in its poetic renewing. In this sense, we can speak of a normativity in filigree. In the concluding section, I turn to the question of the “latent sense” of nature and suggest that this sense is not conceptual or propositional, but *intuitive* as in the sense of right and left, a sense that is distributed *across* spatio-temporal individuals and emerges via the play of yet-to-be-determined incarnate manifestations.

I – *Flesh and The Paradoxes of Being*

Weary of any thinking that deploys a *penseé de survol*,² and moved to articulate being from “the midst of itself,” in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty problematizes traditional conceptions of space by articulating it as a dynamic relation between the body-subject and its surroundings (VI 113).³ Although the relation between perceiving body and the perceived is not one of constitution, the space of the *Phenomenology* remains, as Ted Toadvine observes, dependent upon “its intentional bonds with the human perceiver” (2009b, 214). It is not until his later ontology that Merleau-Ponty begins to explore space beyond its anthropological ties, thematizing it as *spatializing* (Toadvine 2009a, 97). Space and time, Merleau-Ponty notes in the *Visible and the Invisible*, extend *beyond* the perceived, the “*where* and the *when*” (VI 140); space and time are inaugurated *by* and *in* depth, “in hiding” (VI 113). But how are we to think about the *invisible* processes that exceed and inaugurate space and time as well as the perceiving body? Merleau-Ponty provides an answer to this question a few lines after, inviting the reader to think of the processes that emit spatio-temporal individuals as a spatializing and temporalizing, a self-differing characteristic of being, thematized as *flesh*.

Central to flesh, to being conceived as processes generative of differences, is its reversibility. In fact, flesh is a process *in* and *through* which the perceiving body and the perceived both emerge “by a sort of coiling up or redoubling” (VI 114). Merleau-Ponty elucidates this redoubling or reversibility of flesh by reference to the touching-touched hand. The touching and the touched are reversible: Via a crisscrossing whereby the touching hand descends into the things that it touches, the touching hand becomes one of them. As David Morris explains, “by virtue of being a being who can touch something I am inherently also a being who can be touched. Being touched is thus an inherent reverse or flip side of touching, it is its lining (*‘doublure’*)” (2011, 165).⁴ The reversibility of flesh is possible because the touching and the touched are

made of the same stuff—"the world," Merleau-Ponty observes in the "Eye and the Mind," "is made of the same stuff" as the body—and without this communion, making sense of the sensible would not be possible (1964b, 163). In this sense, the reversibility of flesh is precisely that through which being *discloses* itself; it is "the sole means I have to go unto the heart of the things" and reach the things themselves "according to their being which is indeed more than their being perceived" (VI 135).⁵ The visible appears as such because the perceiver's gaze envelops it, because the gaze and the visible share the same flesh—that "element" of "my" body (and of the world) that, in its anonymity and generality, sides with the world (and with "my" body) (VI 136).⁶

Yet, this communion or complicity does not elide the difference between the two reducing them to self-identical or indifferentiated sameness. There is never coincidence between touching and touched because reversibility is "always imminent and never realized in fact," because at play in reversibility is an *écart*, "a sort of dehiscence [that] opens my body in two" (VI 147, 123). The imminent reversibility of flesh, then, highlights the "constitutive paradox" of being, its unconcealment-concealment (VI 136): the ambiguous double nature of the touching-touched hand accounts not only for the disclosure of being, but also for its latency—a distance or thickness that effectively *conceals* being *in-visibility*. The touching hand cannot have a full grasp on the world because, as it touches, it is also touched; it *is* also the touched. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, the reversibility of flesh is such that "every relation with being is *simultaneously* a taking and a being taken, the hold is held, it is *inscribed* and inscribed in the same being that it takes hold of," which means that "what there is to be grasped is a *dispossession*" (VI 266).⁷ What the ("active") grasping reveals is its fundamental belonging to the grasped (its "passivity"), which is to say that, as flesh, being is not a plentitude, but a fundamental openness—a "hollow" or "fecund negative" (VI 112, 263).

The paradox of being, then, is this: The thickness of flesh accounts for a strange kind of ontological co-existence "of difference without contradiction" whereby being is present or visible in its absence or invisibility, a unity of impossibles such as the sensing hand's proximity *and* distance from the sensible, communion *and* non-coincidence, visibility *and* invisibility, sameness *and* difference (VI 135).⁸ At once, the touching and the touched are *of* the same flesh, while also maintaining their irreducible difference or divergence from one another. This ontological co-existence of impossibles invites rethinking concepts like "sameness" and "difference." As Merleau-Ponty points out in a working note dated November 1960, the seer and the visible are "the same not in the sense of ideality nor of real identity. The same in the structural sense: same inner framework, same *Gestalthilfe*, the same in the sense of openness of another dimension of the 'same' being," in the sense of "*non-difference*" (VI 260). Perceiver and perceived are the "same" in that they share the same structural imminent reversibility; they are

the other's lining or *doublure*. Thus conceived, this sameness is a process of differentiation whereby *each makes sense* as "the possible of the other" (VI 228). In fact, given their shared flesh, it is possible to think of "their" [the seer's and the visible's] difference as *flesh's own difference*, an irreducibility brought by flesh's own *écart*, or self-divergence.

The implication of this framing is, at least, twofold. First, this means that the spatio-temporal individuals inaugurated by flesh's *écart* are not appearances or inflections of being.⁹ Rather, spatio-temporal individuals *are* being in its sameness (non-difference) *and* difference. The differentiation of spatio-temporal individuals is, in Merleau-Ponty's words, "the advent of difference (on the ground of *resemblance* therefore, on the ground of the *homou ēn panta* [all things alike])" (VI 217).¹⁰ Second, this means leaving behind substance ontology and conceptualizing "things" as "pure wake[s] that [are] not related to no boat" and are inaugurated through processes of self-differentiation (N 176). As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "the things—here, there, now, then—are no longer in themselves, in their own place, in their own time; they exist only at the end of those rays of spatiality and of temporality emitted in the secrecy of my flesh" (VI 114). At this juncture, the contours of Merleau-Ponty's ontology begin to come into view: being is generative processes of differential phenomenalization that are not radically other than their carnal manifestations—features to which I return in section III.

Before attending to the matter of why spatializing and temporalizing matter, it should be noted that, as Merleau-Ponty adamantly stresses, this paradox of imminent reversibility, of which our body is an "*exemplar*," is a "paradox of Being" (VI 135, 136); it is not the human being, a "sensible sentient," that opens being, but, rather, it is being's own movement that opens itself, giving the perceiver access to being "only through an experience which, like it, is wholly outside of itself" (VI 136). While the *Visible and the Invisible* takes up the journey inaugurated by the *Phenomenology* of locating sense beyond the constituting consciousness, it departs from the *Phenomenology* by no longer taking the pre-personal body as the measure of the generality of being and thematizing the anonymous communion of body and world as *flesh* instead. As Merleau-Ponty famously remarked, "there is a relation of the visible with itself that traverses me and constitutes me as seer, this circle that I do not form, which forms me, this coiling over of the visible upon the visible, can traverse, animate other bodies as well as my own" (VI 140). In this sense, as the discussion that follows makes clear, Merleau-Ponty inaugurates a move away from anthropology toward onto-logy. The task at hand, the difficulty of this transition, is grappling with the claim that there is a reversibility *of* being. In fact, while it may be relatively intuitive to claim that the "*doublure*" of the touching is the touched (since the sentient is also always sensible), what does it mean to say that the sensible has, as its reverse, something like a sentient touching, "something that," in Morris's words, "(latently at least) makes sense of

the world” (2010a, 143)? The following sections focus on the transition from anthropology to ontology and make explicit that this shift opens the space for the development of an onto-logy of nature whereby nature is the “autoproduction of meaning” (N 3), which is to say that nature (latently, at least) makes sense of the world.

II – *Why Spatializing and Temporalizing “Matter”*

As scholars have observed (Toadvine 2009a, 2009b, 2008, 2004; Barbaras 2010, 2002, 2001), the years following the *Phenomenology* figure the deepening of ontological considerations, more specifically, as Renaud Barbaras suggests, the taking up of the question of the “*being of the relation*” (2010, 382) of spatio-temporal individuals. This is precisely the question of flesh announced in the preceding section, an inquiry that “passes from the level of the phenomenon, described in terms of a relation between two absolutely united poles, to that of the *being* of the phenomenon as the bedrock of the relation” (Barbaras 2010, 382). While scholars disagree about the extent to which Merleau-Ponty’s earlier thought foreshadows his later ontology, this shift has fundamental implications for the development of a non-anthropomorphic onto-logy, for investigations into the *sens* of being, which is more than “the correlative of my vision” (VI 131).¹¹

While the *Phenomenology*’s attention to the lived body—the corporeal being of perception—challenges what Barbaras calls *transcendental anthropomorphism*, i.e., conceiving of the human being as a transcendental consciousness that constitutes the world as its object and meaning as ideation, it nevertheless results in *ontological anthropomorphism* in that it tends to take the human body as measure of all things, as “provid[ing] the meaning of being of any being” (2002, 19). In the *Phenomenology*, for instance, Merleau-Ponty speaks of the body as “in the world just as the heart is in the organism: it continuously breathes life into the visible spectacle, animates it and nourishes it from within” (PhP 209), thus suggesting, as Bryan Bannon claims, that the sense of being is “only a sense in relation to the perceiving subject” (2011, 35). Furthermore, as Toadvine observes, positing the body as a “primary methodological point of access” also leads Merleau-Ponty, at the end of the chapter on temporality, to equate nature with “that which perception presents to me” (2009b, 214).¹² By clothing consciousness in a carnal disguise, Merleau-Ponty displaces the mind and body dualism to a dualism of humanity and nature whereby nature is either reduced to an objective background against which the perceived world emerges, or is presented as inaccessible, covered over by human projections. Arguably, then, the conceptual and methodological apparatus of the *Phenomenology* stifles the articulation of the “latent sense” of the sensible and, as we will see, of the normativity of nature. Carrying out an onto-logy, opening the space for the articulation of the *sens* of being, requires a conceptual shift

from space and time to *spatializing* and *temporalizing*, from an investigation of phenomena to one concerned with the processes of self-differentiation whereby being phenomenalizes itself as beings, which is to say with flesh.¹³

For those of us familiar with feminist theory, this shift calls to mind Judith Butler's attempt to rethink the materiality of the body. In *Bodies that Matter* (1997), Butler seeks to move beyond a substantial conception of matter that casts the body as a stable and passive substratum awaiting cultural inscriptions, rethinking it instead in its normativity. Matter is thus conceived as the unstable accomplishment of processes of materialization and orchestrated by regulatory norms such as, e.g., dimorphic sex. Once "sex" [...] is understood in its normativity," Butler tells us, "the materiality of the body will not be thinkable apart from the materialization of that regulatory norm" (2).

It is worth pausing to dwell on the resonances between Butler's and Merleau-Ponty's theories. Both thinkers, motivated by the desire to overcome dualisms, challenge substance metaphysics by presenting the sensible as *processes* of phenomenalization or materialization, thus (seemingly, at least) displacing the agential/logical place of the metaphysical subject. Yet, although both thinkers claim to redeem nature from its absorption into culture, from its being posited as "pre-linguistic" or "before" culture, and, as such, as either unintelligible or knowable only once it assumes a socio-linguistic character, it seems to me that Butler's theory of materialization deploys a limited notion of normativity; Butler's theory reduces the regulatory norms that "govern [the matter of bodies] and the signification of those material effects" to cultural or linguistic, in sum, discursive norms (2). "Sex," as Butler explains, is "no longer [...] a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but [...] a *cultural* norm which governs the materialization of bodies" (2–3, emphasis added). This is to say that while Butler's attention to the normativity of matter displaces the agential place of a constituting consciousness, her emphasis on cultural-linguistic norms as *the* regulatory norms reintroduces the agential subject clothed in a collective, contextual, or discursive disguise. As Bonnie Mann puts it, "the *content* of individual consciousness becomes *context* in which the individual is formed" (2006, 121). The outcome is akin to the one of the *Phenomenology* we witnessed earlier: the mind and body dualism is displaced to a dualism of humanity and nature.

Albeit brief, this detour into Butler's shortcoming teaches us an important lesson: overcoming dualisms calls for the development of an ontological model able to account for a normativity of nature that is irreducible to (human) discursivity, for a *sens* of nature that is not posited by thought. As the discussion that follows elucidates, Merleau-Ponty's onto-logy of nature deploys a normativity more akin to George Canguilhem's—a *latent normativity* or a *normativity in filigree* that, in its encompassing of regulatory processes that are irreducible to discursive norms and are "autoproduced" by nature itself, provides resources to think nature as non-substantial processes

of phenomenalization (a claim that resonates in Butler's account), while also avoiding the reinstatement of the nature-culture dualism (a move foreclosed in Butler's position).¹⁴ In fact, entailed by Merleau-Ponty's shift toward a conception of being (and, as we will see in the following section, of nature) as spatializing and temporalizing is the acknowledgment that the generation of meaning is not effected exclusively by the (human) body (even when it is encroached upon the visible) or cultural-linguistic norms, but takes place in and through the sensible itself. This is to say that the differences autoproduced by the sensible's self-divergence have a sense that is irreducible to a meaning *for* the embodied subject. Merleau-Ponty gestures toward this insight in a working note dated November 1959, when he says that "this *separation (écart)* which [...] forms meaning [...] is a *natural* negativity, a first institution, always already there" (VI 216).¹⁵

In this sense, we can say that Merleau-Ponty's spatializing and temporalizing, which, as we have seen, are processes of flesh's self-differentiation, *matter*. They matter in the double sense of 1) being crucial to the recognition that the generation of sense is not exclusive to human life but, rather, is an irreducible element of nature's dynamics (a move that helps undermine age-old mind-body, nature-culture dualisms). It also matters in the more literal the more literal sense of 2) being the actual processes whereby spatio-temporal individuals phenomenalize or *materialize*. Importantly, this spatializing and temporalizing evoke and entail a *latent* normativity of nature, a normativity that inaugurates and informs the phenomenalization and signification of spatio-temporal individuals in filigree. This is the "spatiality" or, as the following section makes clear, the "transspatiality" of nature (VI 265, N 176).

III – The Transspatiality and Latent Normativity of Nature

As the concluding remarks of the preceding section suggest, inquiries into the *sens* of the sensible call for the development of a non-anthropomorphic onto-logy of nature. Not surprisingly, these observations echo the opening lines of *Nature*, where Merleau-Ponty observes that "nature is what has meaning, without this meaning being posited by thought: it is the autoproduction of meaning" (N 3). But what kind of meaning is this "primordial meaning" that is not posited by thought but is autoproduced in and by nature (N 7)? Grappling with this question requires attending to Merleau-Ponty's claim that nature has 'an interior, is determined from within' via a movement of self-differentiation, a coiling over that generates its own *sens* (N 3).

In the section on Animality in the Second Course on nature (1957–1958), Merleau-Ponty provides a description of the relationship between the tick and its milieu, concluding that they are not positioned in a simple relation of cause and effect, that we cannot understand it "moment by moment" (N 175). Rather, the relationship is one akin to that between the notes of a melody

whereby “each part of the situation acts only as part of a whole situation; no element of action has a separate utility in fact” (N 175). This is to say that the relation between the tick and its environment is not external, but, to use Morris’s expression, “ontologically *internal* to one another” (2013, 332). Tick and milieu are open to one another, encroaching nodes of the same flesh, like notes of the same melody. Significantly, this openness is predicated upon their sharing the same flesh, their “inherence in the Whole” (N 117). Similarly to how the interplay of notes affects each note and also the whole melody, so the tick-milieu intertwining shapes not only the tick and the milieu, but also their encroachment, “their” shared flesh (or the *being* of “their” relation). In fact, as anticipated in section I, the tick and the milieu *are* flesh without flesh being reducible to the sum of tick and milieu, of sensuous manifestations.

To grasp the structure of this (ontologically internal) relation, we need to keep in mind that, as discussed in section I, the excess and fecundity of being are tied to flesh’s *écart* or differential nature, to the fact that “the tick” and “the milieu” are inaugurated in hiding, in a generality prior to and making possible their becoming the tick and the milieu.¹⁶ In *Nature*, Merleau-Ponty uses the language of “oneiric intentionality” to qualify this generality, explaining that the milieu is not external to the tick like an idea or a goal, but it *haunts* it, thus suggesting a relation of latent interiority or *invisibility*.¹⁷ This means not only that, as we have seen, the relation is ontologically internal, but also that, in generality like in a dream, “the tick” and “the milieu” are latent, i.e., “poles that are never seen for themselves” but that nevertheless call forth their encroachment and emergence (N 178). In this sense, within this ontologically internal and latent relationship, “diversity involves a genesis of differences from differences that are yet to be determined” (Morris 2010b, 188).

To think this latent determinacy, we need to move beyond ontological localism, and—as Merleau-Ponty suggests—conceptualize nature as an “envelope-phenomenon” that is “between the elements,” which is to say as *transspatial*¹⁸ (N 213). Given the work done in this paper, the meaning of spatiality or spatializing should not be foreign. But what does the “trans” of trans-spatiality suggest? Toward the end of the First Course on *Nature*, in his commentary on Whitehead, Merleau-Ponty speaks of transspatiality to explain the being of an electron that cannot be accounted for in a Parmenidean model of “absolute Being, which is all or nothing,” but that should rather be understood as an “ingredient” that makes an *ingression* “in its own vicinity, it is the hallway of certain ‘traces,’ of certain ‘roles’ observed by the observer” (N 115). We thus can think of nature as an ontological differential play of the “yet-to-be-tick” and the “yet-to-be-milieu” that inaugurates the “fixing” or, to use Butler’s expression, the materializing of tick and milieu.¹⁹ As a transspatial element, nature ingresses or traverses its sensuous manifestations, unfolding them in their relation while always exceeding them, remaining *invisible* through their haunting and tracing.

These considerations return us to the internal determination of nature, reminding us that this transspatial element is present in its absence, at

once invisible *and* visible, and, to use Merleau-Ponty's expression, that it is an "incarnate," "living plan" that norms the visible "not [from] outside its manifest realizations," but from within (VI 139, 178). As we have seen, the tick's encroachment upon its milieu is an intertwining that affects the tick's *and* the milieu's development: each ingresses onto the other, tracing or suggesting the call-and-response between the "yet-to-be-tick" and the "yet-to-be-milieu" that inaugurates the materializing of each. But, by calling flesh a *living* plan, Merleau-Ponty is also stressing that this transspatial element does not, in advance, specify the development of tick and milieu; the developmental norm is not determined in advance. Rather, the tick-milieu encroachment affects the plan itself, which, in this sense, is a *living*, ever-renewing plan that, by virtue of its renewals, remains latent. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty invites us to think of nature's normativity as opaque, as an ought in filigree. Put differently, Merleau-Ponty's appeal to transspatiality reminds us that flesh is sensuous yet not fully determinate, a latency forged from and manifest within concrete dynamics that spread across beings. Thus conceived, nature is *poiesis*, an incarnate process of *self-differentiation* traceable in and through the visible (but that also remains concealed or hidden in and through that same visibility) whereby its phenomenizing entails the continual renewal of being and the sense of the sensible.²⁰

Importantly, as Merleau-Ponty tells us, the encroachment or self-differentiation of "tick" and "milieu" is a "relation of meaning" (N 175), a differential relation whose sense is not *for* a subject, dependent on their determination, but auto-determined. The developmental discriminations of the milieu's stimuli or the tick's response make a difference, matter or have a sense, to both the milieu's and the tick's life. For example, the presence of butyric acid, secreted by the sudoripary glands of mammals, is a difference that matters for the tick's awakening from its dormant state (N 174). In this sense, the sensible (at least latently) makes sense of itself; there is a normativity of nature that is irreducible to cultural-linguistic norms. Furthermore, being's own determination via processes of self-differentiation, of developmental discrimination, suggests that nature's *sens* is the conjugation of meaning and orientation—as the ambiguity of the French *sens* already suggests. In fact, nature's own determination, i.e., this internal process of self-differentiation that orients itself, is effected along with the generation of sense. Hence, while thinking nature as processes of phenomenization regulated by norms, Merleau-Ponty's latent normativity exceeds Butler's, accounting for regulatory processes but also—and importantly—sense that are irreducible to cultural-linguistic norms.

IV – *Latent Sens of Nature*

At this juncture—and in conclusion—we can return to the question of the kind of sense that this sense is. As anticipated above, the orientation of being

at play at this level of generality is more akin to oneiric consciousness, where the “poles” of the relation remain invisible while nevertheless regulating such orientation. Similarly, the sense autoproduced by nature’s self-differing is general and latent—a “silent persuasion” (VI 214)—inaugurated at an incarnate level that is primordial, prior to conceptual or propositional meaning (N 3). Attending to the sense of left and right helps us make sense of the kind of meaning that is at stake here. In fact, similarly to how the imminent reversibility at play in the touching-touched hand is an *exemplar* of the paradox of Being, so the sense of right and left is an *exemplar* of the sense generated via the self-differing of nature. As the discussion of reversibility in the first section made clear, flesh, by virtue of its asymmetrical redoubling, always already indicates its reverse (recall that the touching hand has, as its *doublure*, the visible, and vice-versa). When attempting to explain the sense of right and left, we are confronted with the fact that, while it is possible to establish the *difference* between the two, it is impossible to communicate the *sense* of left and right in purely abstract or ideal language. This implies that the sense of right and left, which more broadly speaks to the sense of nature, is not conceptual or propositional, but *intuitive*—a sense that is suggested by and emerges through their *showing*, their play of incarnate differences/manifestations.

These considerations bring attention to two additional features of the meaning at stake here. First, the sense of right and left indicates that *sens* is not localizable—we cannot understand it “moment by moment” (N 175)—but, rather, is distributed *across* the “right” and the “left” hand, a traversing that institutes meaningful differences. Recall that, as Merleau-Ponty reminds us, framing the question of the tick-milieu relationship as one of moment by moment vacates the relationship of its meaning. The latent sense of nature entails an irreducible reciprocity between sense and the differential phenomenalizing of being, which is to say that sense is transspatial and transtemporal. Moreover, as we have seen in section III, the *trans* of transspatiality and transtemporality not only indicates that the sense of right and left emerges through an ingression or a tracing of the sense of the yet-to-be-left into the yet-to-be-right (and vice versa); it also suggests that the genesis of sense, this non-localizable playful haunting, takes place at the level of generality, of a “pre-culture” irreducible to human-posed symbols or propositional meaning (N 176). Note that, in light of the work done in this paper, Merleau-Ponty’s reference to a “pre-culture” should not be taken as a reinstatement of a “surface” or a “raw nature” before and inscribed by cultural significations. Rather, pre-culture should be understood as this “*other dimensionality*” just discussed, a depth that is always already imbued with and generative of sense (VI 236). As Merleau-Ponty puts it, this latent sense is like a “nucle[us] of meaning which [is] in-visible, but which simply [is] not invisible in the sense of the absolute negation (or of the absolute positivity of the ‘intelligible world’), but in the sense of the *other*

dimensionality, as depth hollows itself out behind height and breadth, as time hollows itself out behind space” (VI 236).

These remarks bring us to the second feature of the meaning of right and left. In fact, Merleau-Ponty’s observation that this sense is “present” in its invisibility (that it is, quite literally, in-visibility) indicate that this “pre-cultural” sense is *silent* or *latent*, which means that it is not wholly given in intuition, but is more like a “call to follow, the demand of a future,” as Merleau-Ponty elaborates in the lectures on institution (IP 77). Sense is not offered all naked as either total or null (it is not an object appearing to and graspable by a subject). Rather, it remains latent and general, opaque to conceptual grasping and intuition, even when it is taken up in, e.g., artistic or literary expression. In other words, this sense is an ephemeral and inchoate modulation of this world, something that “comes to touch lightly and makes diverse regions of the ... visible world resound at the distance” (VI 133).²¹ But do not let the “resound” fool you—Merleau-Ponty adamantly stresses that this reorientation is a resounding of beings that speak “in the voices of silence.” As he puts it, the “sensible appearance of the sensible, the silent persuasion of the sensible is Being’s way of manifesting itself without becoming positivity [...] The sensible is that: this possibility to be evident in silence, to be understood implicitly” (VI 214). These remarks open onto the second implication identified in the introduction of this article, i.e., investigations into expressive modes suited to “giving voice” to phenomena that make sense silently. Given the present constraints, I can say no more about this silence.

What I hope to have shown in this paper is that, although we may task philosophy with the articulation of the silent sense of nature via creative acts of expression, the production of sense is not an event of the human subject but an event *of* nature. Moreover, for Merleau-Ponty, the network of forces that regulate the materialization of nature is not exclusively cultural-linguistic, but a normativity that is auto-determined by nature and norms in filigree. Thinking through this normativity is precisely the challenge that Merleau-Ponty poses us when he asks us to consider the paradox of being, i.e., what it would mean for the sensible to have something like a sentient touch, “something that (latently at least) makes sense of the world” (Morris 2010a, 143).

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NOTES:

- 1 As David Morris (2013) points out, the articulation of this ontology of nature, whereby meaning is not exclusive to the human life but is an irreducible element of nature’s dynamics, has important implications for resolving the mind-body dualism.
- 2 In “The Place of Animal Being” (2000), Morris argues that our language, tradition, and bodies predispose us toward substantial and abstract thinking, gearing us to inquire into “what” things are, as if they were substance independent of their place, of “where” they are. He calls this attitude of *pensée de survol* (thinking from above) “transportable thinking,” a thinking that “conceives both itself and its objects as only accidentally modified or determined by position—and that it does so by identifying itself as thinking that is not positioned anywhere in particular angles over all abstract space” (193).
- 3 Note that while in this article I focus more explicitly on space and spacializing, Merleau-Ponty also reworks the concepts of time and temporalizing. For a discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s re-elaboration of the concept of time, see Al-Saji (2007, 2008), Mazis (1992), Morris (2016), and Toadvine (2009b).
- 4 In a working note dated March 1961, Merleau-Ponty writes that “to say that the body is a seer is, curiously enough, not to say anything else than: it is visible” (VI 273). For an insightful treatment of the enigma of reversibility, see Morris, “The Enigma of Reversibility and the Genesis of Sense in Merleau-Ponty” (2010a).
- 5 The experience of, e.g., vision is possible only insofar as the perceiver does not perceive the sensible from the “depths of nothingness, but from the midst of itself” (VI 113). By descending to the thickness of flesh, my hand “opens finally upon the tangible being of which it is also a part” (VI 133).
- 6 Note that Merleau-Ponty transposes the model of the chiasmic relationship between touching-touched to vision and other senses. “He who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is of it*” (VI 134).
- 7 In a working note dated May 1960, Merleau-Ponty sums up this paradox by stating that “To touch *oneself*, to see *oneself*, accordingly, is not to apprehend oneself as an object, it is to be open to oneself, destined to oneself (narcissism)—Nor, therefore,

- is to reach *oneself*, it is on the contrary to escape *oneself*, to be ignorant of *oneself*, the self in question is by divergence (*d'écarter*), is *Unverborghenheit of the Verborghen* as such, which consequently does not cease to be hidden or latent—” (VI 249).
- 8 As Merleau-Ponty observes, “it is that this distance is not contrary to this proximity, it is deeply consonant with it, it is synonymous with it. It is that the thickness of flesh [...] is not an obstacle between them [seer and thing], it is their means of communication” (VI 135).
 - 9 Elaborating on this insight, Morris observes that the conception whereby individuated entities are appearances or inflections of being would imply that being is “a purely invisible substratum that *appears* in one of two forms” (2011, 176 ft. 9).
 - 10 In *The Faith of Place*, Ed Casey refers to this working note to argue that place emerges from the in-congruency of counterparts like the right and the left, from “difference, from ‘the possibility of *discrimination*’” (1997, 237).
 - 11 It should be noted that scholars disagree about the extent to which there is a break in Merleau-Ponty’s thought. In spite of Merleau-Ponty’s own criticism that his earlier work remained bound by a phenomenology of the subject, scholars bring attention to ways in which Merleau-Ponty’s early work prefigures his later ontology. To name a few notable examples: In *Paradoxes of Expression* (2013), Don Landes traces the continuity within Merleau-Ponty’s thought via the concept of expression. In “Time-Things and the Ontology of the World,” Morris finds points of continuity in Merleau-Ponty’s description of color perception in the *Phenomenology* and his later ontology developed in the *Visible and the Invisible* and the “Eye and the Mind.” Morris argues the *Phenomenology*’s three parts should not be read as layers founded upon the first section in which the body is a relatively “closed ‘body-subject’” (2016, 2). Rather, the later sections rework the relation between body and world as “chiasmatically crossing into one another, thereby effecting a radical return to the phenomenal field” (3) and casting the body as radically open to the transcendental field. In “Affect Orientation, Difference, and ‘Overwhelming Proximity’ in Merleau-Ponty’s Account of Pure Depth” (2012), Shiloh Whitney challenges this view, providing a reading of “pure depth” as developed by Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology* in terms of affectivity, and arguing that, thus conceived, depth is a point of continuum with Merleau-Ponty’s later thought.
 - 12 This problem is compounded by the fact that Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of “natural space” in the “Space” chapter of the *Phenomenology* seems to reduce nature to an objective background against which the perceived world emerges (PhP 307), thus vacating it of its own (latent) sense. As Barbaras warns us, the outcome is that “the perceived world, correlative of corporeal existence, is very clearly inscribed in the midst of a nature, which prescribes to it a horizon of objectivity” (2001, 23).
 - 13 Barbaras explains phenomenalization as the process whereby being “carr[ies] within itself the principle of the difference required by all phenomenalization” (2010, 383).
 - 14 Normativity, as Canguilhem tells us in *The Normal and the Pathological* (1991), is the capacity of the organism to adapt or respond to environmental changes and constraints in a manner that secures the flourishing of the organism. Significantly, the organism’s response is not pre-determined or fixed, but, rather, entails processes of sense-formation, the generation of new regulatory norms (Canguilhem 1994, 317–319) that, as Darian Meacham explains, ensues from an “environmentally constrained reserve of latency toward actualized behavior or movement” (2015, 10).
 - 15 Note that this latent sense cannot be reduced to the production of a constituting consciousness, but, rather, silently inheres in the sensible, soliciting the perceiving body and calling for articulation. Merleau-Ponty begins developing the excess of meaning of the sensible in the institution lectures, writing that “the instituted has sense without me” (2010, 36). As Morris explains, “this means that I am not the wholly active constituter of sense, for the institution of sense requires an activity that surpasses me” (2011, 175 ft.4).
 - 16 These remarks should call to mind Merleau-Ponty’s description of the emerges of the color red in the *Visible and the Invisible*, which, he tells us, is inaugurated in and from

- a general redness (VI 131).
- 17 For a discussion of oneiric intentionality, see Mazis, “Merleau-Ponty’s Concept of Nature” (2000).
 - 18 As Merleau-Ponty observes, “[w]e must admit in the very fabric of physical elements a transtemporal and transspatial element” (N 176). Transtemporality and transspatiality are clear precursors to the spatializing and temporalizing pulp invoked in the *Visible and the Invisible*.
 - 19 Note that this differential play should *not* be taken to be temporally (in the sense of a developmentally linear unfolding) or structurally (in the sense of a fundamental ontology) prior to the inauguration of the spatio-temporal individuals. Rather, nature as a transspatial and transtemporal element is immanent to its manifestations.
 - 20 In a working note, reflecting on evolution, Merleau-Ponty states that, “for me it is no longer a question of origins, nor limits, nor of a series of events going to a first cause, but one sole explosion of Being which is forever” (VI 265).
 - 21 In fact, as Merleau-Ponty reminds us in *Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence*, “all language is indirect or allusive—that is, if you will, silence” (1964a, 80).

Poietic Transspatiality **Merleau-Ponty, Normativity and the Latent *Sens* of Nature**

In this paper, I attend to the ontological shift in Merleau-Ponty's later writing and suggest that this conceptual turn opens the space for questions of the latent sense of the sensible foreclosed by dualist accounts and propositional theories of meaning. By attending to the *Nature Lectures*, I claim that there is a *sens* [meaning and orientation] of nature whose regulatory principle ought to be found in nature itself. This is to say that there is a *normativity* of nature that, albeit not exclusive of sociocultural-linguistic norms, is irreducible to them. As I argue, this normativity is a "transspatializing and transtemporalizing": it transverses its carnal manifestations, thereby inaugurating and becoming traceable within their materialization while remaining *invisible* in its excess or poietic renewing. I conclude by attending to the question of the "latent sense" of nature, suggesting that this sense is not conceptual or propositional, but *intuitive* as in the sense of right and left, a sense that is distributed *across* spatio-temporal individuals and emerges via the play of yet-to-be-determined incarnate manifestations.

Trans-spatialité poïétique **Merleau-Ponty, la normativité et le sens latent de la nature**

Dans cet article, j'aborde le tournant ontologique du dernier Merleau-Ponty et je suggère qu'il implique une interrogation sur le sens latent du sensible, exclu par les approches dualistes ainsi que par les théories propositionnelles de la signification. En analysant les cours sur la *Nature*, je vise à montrer qu'il y a un sens [signification et direction] de la nature, dont le principe régulateur est à chercher dans la nature elle-même. Cela revient à dire qu'il y a une *normativité* de la nature qui, bien qu'elle n'exclue pas les normes socio-culturelles-linguistiques, ne leur est pas pour autant réductible. Une telle normativité est « trans-spatiale et trans-temporelle » : elle traverse ses manifestations charnelles, en inaugurant ainsi et en devenant traçable dans ses matérialisations, tout en demeurant *invisible* dans son excès et dans son renouvellement poïétique. Je termine en abordant la question du « sens latent » de la nature, en suggérant que ce sens n'est ni conceptuel ni propositionnel, mais *intuitif*, tout comme l'est le sens de la droite et de la gauche, c'est-à-dire un sens qui est distribué à travers les individus spatio-temporels et qui émerge dans le jeu des manifestations incarnées encore-à-déterminer.

Trans-spazialità poietica **Merleau-ponty, la normatività e il senso latente della natura**

In questo articolo intendo esaminare la svolta ontologica degli ultimi scritti di Merleau-Ponty per suggerire come questa apra ad un'interrogazione sul senso latente del sensibile, che rimane escluso dagli approcci dualistici e dalle teorie proposizionali del significato. Analizzando i corsi sulla *Natura*, vorrei mostrare come vi sia un *sensò* [significato e orientamento] della natura il cui principio regolatore deve essere rintracciato nella natura stessa. Ciò significa che vi è una *normatività* della natura che, benché non esclusiva delle norme socioculturali-linguistiche, è irriducibile ad esse. Questa normatività è "trans-spaziale e trans-temporale": essa attraversa le sue manifestazioni carnali, inaugurando e divenendo tracciabile nelle sue materializzazioni,

pur rimanendo *invisibile* nella sua eccedenza o rinnovamento poetico. Concludo soffermandomi sulla questione del “senso latente” della natura, suggerendo che questo senso non è concettuale o proposizionale, ma *intuitivo* al modo del senso della destra e della sinistra, un senso che è distribuito *attraverso* gli individui spazio-temporali e che emerge nel gioco delle manifestazioni incarnate ancora-da-determinare.