



**HAL**  
open science

## The Alter Ego – Merleau-Ponty

Anne Simon

► **To cite this version:**

Anne Simon. The Alter Ego – Merleau-Ponty. Anna Magdalena Elsner; Tom Stern. The Proustian Mind, 1, , pp.431-442, 2022, Philosophical Minds, 9780367357627. 10.4324/9780429341472 . hal-02908778

**HAL Id: hal-02908778**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02908778>**

Submitted on 29 Jul 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## THE *ALTER EGO*

Merleau-Ponty

*Anne Simon*

Translated from the French by Olga Grlic

Merleau-Ponty had a long-term relationship with Proust<sup>1</sup>. Their association, for that is the appropriate word, was a continuous interaction. It was connected to the evolution of Merleau-Ponty’s own theoretical and written positions and ended up profoundly permeating the philosopher’s arguments with the novelist’s prose to the extent that we can speak of a shared “style of thinking” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 91). There is in Merleau-Ponty a “Proust tone” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 202)<sup>2</sup> which never stops resonating because, between the novel and the philosophical treatise, the “rings” of the former to the “chiasm” of the latter, both authors are moved by a shared project: to develop an aesthetic of *rapport* or *intertwining* (“rapport” or “entrelacs” in French) without invoking the obsolete subject/object duality. His early and continuous immersion in the *Recherche* and passionate reading of *Jean Santeuil* as soon as it appeared in the early 1950s turned Proust into an increasingly important reference point for Merleau-Ponty. The philosopher was particularly fascinated by the transformation of existential duration into a novelistic language, a movement of reciprocal interiorization.

The relation of thought to what Merleau-Ponty calls “operative” language (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 126, 153) – an innovative language capable of expressing our sensible life without loss of meaning – was without doubt one of the questions that Merleau-Ponty never stopped developing; on this level, his reading of Proust was foundational. On this prolonged journey, he was certainly joined by fellow travelers: Montaigne, Stendhal, Valéry, Claudel, Péguy, Saint-Exupéry, Claude Simon, to name but a few. From *The Structure of Behavior* (1942) to the posthumous texts of the sixties, and

---

<sup>1</sup> This text appeared in an extended version in Anne Simon, *Trafics de Proust. Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Deleuze, Barthes*, Paris, Hermann, Coll. Philosophy, 2016, pp. 39–79; I thank the publisher for giving the permission for this translation.

<sup>2</sup> Proust speaks of an “accent de Vinteuil”, see *C*, 288–9; III 760. On the artist’s tone, see Merleau-Ponty 1954: 109’. I am grateful to Franck Robert and Emmanuel de Saint Aubert, who, while preparing the edition with Lovisa Håkansson, gave me access to the transcription of the unpublished text; sheet numbers of this unpublished text are in square brackets; the abbreviations, the elisions and Merleau-Ponty’s punctuation have been retained.

the unpublished texts, which delineate a movement of thought ever more engaged in the ontological expression of the flesh, poetic creation plays a fundamental role in elaborating Merleau-Ponty's thinking and the evolution of his style. Yet, Proust appears to be a permanent recourse, through to the very last remarks and the final pages of *The Visible and the Invisible*. This is because Proust established, in the form of a novel which never stopped writing itself, the inseparability of expression and incarnation – “this indestructible tie between us and hours and places” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 121) which obsessed Proust as much as it obsessed Claudel.

In order to understand how, from Proust to Merleau-Ponty, between voluntary recourse and passive obsession, this circulation of thought and style played out, we must return to a trajectory that gives an ever more essential philosophical role to “the literary use of language” (Merleau-Ponty 1953: [2013]) and to an almost erotic impregnation with another's thinking: others “are not fictions with which I may people my desert, offspring of my spirit, and forever unactualized possibilities — but my twins or the flesh of my flesh” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 15). We will then examine the work of figurative resonance between Proust's novelistic prose and the philosophical treatise by way of the examination of lexical transfers, metaphorical borrowing and contextual variation: a concept can no longer be separated from the constellations of meaning which, far from diluting its relevance, intensify its scope and renew its function. We will also examine how the novelistic use of sensible ideality and silence within poetic expression partakes in Merleau-Ponty's last work.

### **Implications: Volubility of Meaning**

In 1948, Merleau-Ponty drew a clear distinction between literary and philosophical practices: “The function of the novelist is not to state thematically” the philosophical ideas raised by his work, but “to make them exist for us in the way things exist” (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1964: 26). After the ontological turn of the 1950s, when he was ready to “give up [...] notions” that were too cut and dried and “to formulate [his] first concepts in order to avoid classic dead ends” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 137, 158),<sup>3</sup> the distinction between philosophy and literature becomes more complex. Finding himself “at the crossing of the avenues” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 160) when he started drafting *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty freed himself from isolated philosophical ideas in order to move to a global ideality leaning on “obsessions” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 159) and a “secret history” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 119). Philosophical thought finds itself “implicated” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 90), “within the whole which constitutes its latent content” (Ibid.): like a novel, it “makes its own way” (Ibid.) by inscribing itself into a temporality which is the beginning of narrative. From that point on, the

---

<sup>3</sup> See also: “there is no name in traditional philosophy to designate it” (Merleau-Ponty 1968:139). On the ontological turn, see Merleau-Ponty 1968:165.

philosopher's project and the novelist's discoveries become even more intertwined. On the structural level,

we will close the circle after the study of logos and history as Proust closes the circle when he comes to the moment where the narrator decides to write. The end of a philosophy is the account of its beginning.

*(Merleau-Ponty 1968: 117)*

Stylistically, a Merleau-Pontian metaphor functions as a trope of “participation” unifying “dispersed existence” (Merleau-Ponty 1954: 102, 98), and accounts for the communication or even the “transubstantiation” (Merleau-Ponty 1969: 255) of things and beings. It thus rejoins Proust's original and final schema of superimposition and “transvertebration” (*I*, 10; SW, 11),<sup>4</sup> which at once defines the relation to the world and the relation to style.

For Merleau-Ponty the interweaving of the poetic and the philosophical is inseparable as a more general reflection on language which “takes the form of both a special problem and a problem which contains all the others, including the problem of philosophy” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 93). The reason why there is no crude sense apart from the horizons that shape our relation to the sensible, establishing it as signifying landscape and not as a sum of spatially discontinuous things, is that gestures, attitudes, and sensations are from the start grasped through expression and stylization; and also that we are immersed in language, which forms a field in which our perceptions are both rooted and removed. Sartre also tells us that Merleau-Ponty, were he to write anything other than philosophical essays, would have written, not an autobiography, but “a novel about myself”, which evokes the genre ambiguities of Proust's own novel written in the first person and which allows one to give the only answers that are worthwhile, namely “imaginary answers” (Sartre 1964: 234). This desire for a novel at the core of philosophical questioning can be seen as a modulation of a more general intersubjectivity at work in Merleau-Ponty's reading, and that is generously related to as “fraternity”, “complicity”, and “echo” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 59; Merleau-Ponty 1973: 68, 13, 20).

Merleau-Ponty was of course a reader of philosophers. He read them as closely as possible, “over [their] shoulder” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 30), in order to grasp and discuss their ideas on their own terms. He was also, and above all, a reader of poets and novelists. They open up a direct and intimate access, as Proust had already noted, to a “universe” (*TR*, 254; IV 474)<sup>5</sup> which, compared to ours, is neither quite the same, nor completely another: “as the reader, I feel [...] as though I have written the book from start to finish” (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 11). There is therefore a “ruse” in reading, not because it makes us take for ourselves what comes to us from another, but because what comes

---

<sup>4</sup> See also Simon 2018a: 11–33.

<sup>5</sup> Merleau-Ponty 1954 develops this idea continuously, see 102, 107', 109, 109'.

to us from another actually *becomes* oneself, in this Montaigne-like alchemical cauldron that is the experience of reading, which nourishes the book as much as it is nourished by it: “the fire catches, my thoughts are ablaze [...], the fire feeds off everything I have ever read”, “the meaning of the book is made of [...] the contrast between the fullness of one thought and the hollowness of another” (Ibid).<sup>6</sup> A ruse of intersubjectivity, therefore, which becomes possible because it is really based on a devouring passion, where, between confrontation and “coupling” (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 13) (the term comes from Husserl and Claudel), a vision of the world and a unique access to oneself are created. For Merleau-Ponty, reading is almost sexualized, and its potential violence, caught in the dialectic between what is shared and what isn’t, has to do with desire, cellular and embodied, not with the kind of face value on which Sartre relies. Similar to what Gilles Deleuze calls, after François Mauriac, a “populated solitude”, reading for Proust is a *relationship* (Proust [1906] 1987: 115), in every sense of the term: an internal connection, not least erotic and emotional, between others and myself, but also, because it implants in me “matrices of ideas” (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 90; Merleau-Ponty 1964: 77), the desire for a narrative and linguistic impulse in the sense that Proust defines the only valid form of reading as that which never ends, because it entices one to write, it turns one to a new beginning and a new fulfillment.<sup>7</sup> Creative language opens up “a discussion about things which does not end with it but itself invites research” (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 90) as enthusiastically claimed by Merleau-Ponty, who constantly takes over for himself these love stories or this insertion into the sensible that the *Recherche* brings about.

Traces of this dialogue, begun in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, and culminating in the last pages of *The Visible and the Invisible*,<sup>8</sup> dedicated to Vinteuil’s short musical phrase, appear in almost all of Merleau-Ponty’s work. Think of the preface to *Signs* which develops a chain of texts, including Proust, where ultimately the philosopher aims to return, not to the complex relationships between Sartre and Nizan (and of course between Sartre and himself), but rather to the more general question of time and its intermittences:

As in the things of childhood, it is in the lost comrade that I find plenitude, either because creative faith has dried up within me, or because reality takes shape only in my memory [cf. *SW*, 219; *I* 182]. [...] Perhaps time does not flow from the future or the past. Perhaps it is distance which constitutes the reality another person has for us — above all another person who is lost.

---

<sup>6</sup> On “fire” that catches, see also Merleau-Ponty 2011: 77; Merleau-Ponty 1954: 125’.

<sup>7</sup> On “beautiful books” as “Enticements”, see “Journées de lecture” [1905], *CS*, 176.

<sup>8</sup> See also the section on Proust in “L’ontologie cartésienne et l’ontologie aujourd’hui” in Merleau-Ponty 1996: 191–8.

(Merleau-Ponty 1964: 27)<sup>9</sup>

Beyond the fact that this last sentence could be used by Proust to define Albertine, we are faced indeed by a reading four or five times removed: Sartre reads *Aden, Arabie*, Merleau-Ponty reads Sartre's preface and *Swann's Way* (even, just beneath the surface, *The Fugitive* and *Time Regained*), the reader reads the preface to *Signs* and perhaps rereads Sartre's preface, possibly in order to comment on them... The circle of appropriations and pairings never ceases to expand: the other's words have, just like the sensible, a multiple potentiality of openings, with the reader forging his or her way through unexplored paths.

Yet, quite often, and especially in Merleau-Ponty's last writings, explicit quotations no longer support and relay the philosopher's thoughts. Rather, by means of a germination that takes place throughout his intellectual life, this is carried out through intersections of ideas, repetitions of phrases and forms, flashes of memory, as in these notes from *The Visible and the Invisible*, where in parentheses, as if by a mental spotlight that is dazzling in its suddenness, there emerges the name of the "alter ego" (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 20): the "perceptual world [...] appears as containing everything that will ever be said, and yet leaving us to create it (Proust)" (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 170). Between the novelist and the philosopher, there is indeed an "occult trading of the metaphor" (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 167): initially devoted to the definition of operative language and the gauze of silence that envelops it, this formula seems to me to define the interlacing of philosophy and literature at a time when Merleau-Ponty's prose is evolving towards an ever more advanced attempt to incarnate the idea.

### **Commerce: Lexical and Figural Trafficking**

The notion of trafficking evokes a hint of the illicit, as if the exchange between the novelist and the philosopher played out in the domain of an intimate, secret, or carnal negotiation, where the passage from one to the other happened less under the auspices of an explicit intellectual borrowing than under those of a vital kinship, sometimes even, by definition, clandestine in itself. It is no coincidence that such intrusive terms as "complicity" and "promiscuity"<sup>10</sup> are frequently used from the 1950s on to characterize both the relationship to the other and the relationship to the sensible. Just as the reversibility between the sentient and the sensed is always a promise in process of realization, or that, in perception, a distance prevents any naive coincidence with the thing that would annihilate the perceptive process, likewise, in the stylistic transfer from the novelistic world to the philosophical world, a "movement" (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 125) makes itself known. This revitalization, in the "ego-

---

<sup>9</sup> The Proust quote (*SW*, p. 188) is italicized in the text; it was used already in Merleau-Ponty 1954: 97.

<sup>10</sup> There are innumerable examples, and the term "complicity" explicitly refers to Proust in the lecture, see Merleau-Ponty 1954: [114].

alter ego mirror” (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 20) of dialogue and stylistic transaction, creates in the proper and even mathematical sense a “language to the second power” (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 7):<sup>11</sup> the initial novelistic expression amplifies, shifts, and re-articulates itself in the philosopher’s prose so that the reader must address through its traces and blank spaces. As a result, “it is a lateral or oblique meaning, which runs between the words” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 46)<sup>12</sup> of Proust and Merleau-Ponty, to the point that “it is not possible even in principle to decide at any given moment just what belongs to each” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 159), simply because, as was the case between Montaigne and La Boétie, the operation of recovery is not intended as an illustration of thought. It is not surprising that the term “oblique” — central for the understanding of the functioning of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical prose from the 1950s onwards — is also taken from Proust: in his lecture course on speech at the Collège de France the philosopher quotes “the oblique interior discourse” (*TR*, 247; IV 469) which in *Time Regained* defines lying to oneself and also denial, which matter to us, paradoxically, because they constitute the grounding of “our passionate conversation with ourselves” (Merleau-Ponty 1954: 120, 123).

One of the philosopher’s increasingly more pronounced practices was to avoid mentioning Proust’s name. The point of this unreferenced borrowing was that his name is inserted in passages where it is not necessary to invoke it. Everything happens as if Proustian sentences and formulas intervened like an ‘Open Sesame’ (I’m playing upon the title of Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies*, translated by Proust) to open up certain aspects of thought to expression; on occasion, the assimilation is so complete that the concealment of Proust’s name comes to serve as another alter ego, in an incessant traffic of attributions. Thus, in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”, Merleau-Ponty notes that “Sometimes, life escapes: the body is written off”, or that “more sadly, it is the question spread through the world’s spectacle which is no longer heard. Then the painter is no more or he has become an honorary painter” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 58). We find here, with a poignant emotional intensity that is the mark of the Merleau-Pontian sensibility (as Barthes’s will be pathos, Sartre’s anger, and Deleuze’s speed), passages of the *Recherche* where the *formulation* of self becomes impossible: Bergotte dying, Elstir repeating himself or adoring his models – “when the brain begins to tire, gradually the balance is disturbed” (*BG*, 498; II 207).

It is therefore through Proust that Merleau-Ponty thematizes the importance of otherness in reinventing the stakes of philosophical thought. Proust is also the one who roots philosophical thought in the sexual and sensible world. Examining the visible, Merleau-Ponty explains that the seer “en est [is of it]” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 96, 123, 131), as Bergson or Claudel had done before him, but also

---

<sup>11</sup> See also Merleau-Ponty 1968: 96.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the evocation of “oblique” and “lateral” in the description of Hubert Robert’s water fountain in *SG*, 65; III 56–7.

as Proust had done when describing the social, psychic, and erotic modes of belonging to the “race des tantes [race of queens]”<sup>13</sup> or to the aristocracy. The *Recherche* thus operates less as a reservoir of signs assigned to this or that idea, than as a visual power of meaning, or even a model of global expression of life and experience. To be in tune with the mode of donation of the flesh examined in *The Visible and the Invisible*, meaning must be elaborated laterally, according to an intertextual functioning where, by placing oneself at the margin of novelistic style, philosophical writing can become operative. In this case, the transfer of an expression, “en être” [“to be of it”], denoting in the *Recherche* a way for a character to relate to his equals, for the philosopher characterizes a general way for the human to inhabit the world: erotic, secret, forbidden, strategic.

I will linger on “Eye and Mind” (Merleau-Ponty [1947–1961] 1964) in order to account concretely for the modalities of the stylistic and cognitive encroachment between the novelist and the philosopher. This instance is indeed all the more significant for not being placed in italics (unlike the quote included in the introduction to *Signs* about Sartre and Nizan cited earlier). Merleau-Ponty returns to the phenomenon of incarnation, where the paradox of the indistinctness between the sentient and the sensed is played out and which cannot be assimilated to a total coincidence for the one who perceives:

But, because it moves itself and sees and moves, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or a prolongation of itself, they are incrustated into its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the same stuff as the body.

(Merleau-Ponty [1947–1961] 1964: 163)

This reflection on the modes of donation of the visible naturally leads to a reuse of various passages from the *Recherche*, where both the thematic or eventual novelistic context, which forms the implicit background of the philosophical discourse, and the expression, inasmuch as it contains a power of philosophical reactivation, are equally important. Of course, this excerpt from “Eye and Mind” very obviously recalls the beginning of “Combray”, this description in the form of a “case” (my word) of what happens to us during sleep, “When a man is asleep, he has in a circle around him the chain of the hours, the sequence of the years, the order of the heavenly host” (*SW*, 5; I 5). The “case” can be generalized — is recoverable and reusable for itself — and the *thinking* of one can *lean over* the bedside of the other, precisely because it is generated from a sensible singularity, or even suffering, as the etymology of the word refers to “the one who is lying, fallen” (Worms 2014: 248).<sup>14</sup> In these decidedly original pages, Proust suggests that, in sleep, which he would later compare to an “attack”

---

<sup>13</sup> This is the title Proust gave to one of the first fragments he devoted to homosexuality, see Cahier 6 (n.a.f. 16646), f° 37 r°.

<sup>14</sup> On the wider relation between caring (*le panser/le penser*) and the humanities, see Worms 2014.

or even “amnesia” (*C*, 131; III 628), the world remains our environment and our horizon: our body’s memory, uncertain and laborious as it is, still unfailingly connects us to those things which surround us and which resemble an organic extension of ourselves. In the excerpt from “Eye and Mind”, Merleau-Ponty thus indirectly relates the perceptual process to this permanent removal of the self from the pedestal of the world that Proust so often highlighted, including in sleep where sensations seem to be suspended, but where in reality they continue to create a “system” for a body which is “that which meshes with one of the possibilities like the hook and hole of a belt” (Merleau-Ponty 2003: 275).

The shared background of both authors goes far beyond the question of shared “themes”, since chiasm and encroachment, as well as schemas of depth and horizontal structures are discovered at the base of their ontology. But beyond this basic convergence, the potentialities of meaning that are concealed in the *Recherche*’s lexicon and style are also relevant. The *figure* of the carnal circle, less inclusive than dilated, like a hand with straightened fingers ready for grasping, knowing, or caressing, serves here as a link between a narrative, “tacit” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 76, 81) thought, elaborated through stories and individual bodies (including the real body of the reader who is able to slip into the character’s fictional body), and a theoretical thought which, in order to be able to elaborate or renew itself, must take the novel’s vocabulary and the plurality of the worlds to which it opens.

This circle, both encompassing and dilated, welcomes without separating. Far from circumscribing, its moving circumference is the visual measure of our retractions and our impulses. Merleau-Ponty continually questions this figure in *The Visible and the Invisible* in order to define both the emergence of meaning and our insertion into the sensible. To this first implicit reference to Proust’s work, which has just been examined, a second reference is superimposed — unexpected only by those who are not familiar with Merleau-Ponty’s intersecting of desire and knowledge, both related to coupling and incorporation (both in the alimentary and erotic sense):

I could feel [...] her tongue [...] whose secret dewy flame, even when she merely ran it over the surface of my neck or stomach, gave to those caresses of hers, superficial but somehow imparted by the inside of her flesh, externalized like a piece of material reversed to show its lining, as it were the mysterious sweetness of a penetration.

(*F*, 569, *my emphasis*; *IV* 79)

It is not surprising that we find a vocabulary here of “flesh”, “fabric”, “lining”, “interior” that “Eye and Mind” as well as *The Visible and the Invisible* will repeat to infinity (including about Proust). This permanent revival of Proustian vocabulary that has become a trademark of Merleau-Pontian discourse creates an effect where repetition and variation promote an almost musical, intuitive understanding, located between De Certeau’s “chorus” (Certeau 1982: 90) and Deleuze’s “refrain”

(Simon 2016: 117–54). From 1945 onward, Merleau-Ponty recognized that “the novel and metaphysics” (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1964: 30) are connected by a “space of complicity” (Lefort 1982: 101), the latter having to compose with expressive hybridity if it does not want to miss its — fundamentally equivocal — object. In the third and fourth intertexts, we finally find doubly disseminated in Proust’s work those things that in “Eye and Mind” are “an annex or an extension” of the subject: on the one hand, a contrario, in *The Fugitive* when mourning introduces cracks in relation to a world whose concrete and massive presence has become senseless and hostile, and, on the other hand, in the many Proustian reflections on the garment as an “extension [of the] body” (G, 58; II 357)<sup>15</sup> or on a habit that makes the world breathable and transforms furniture and rooms into an “extensions of [our] organs” and an “enlargement of [oneself]” (BG, 283; II 27).

“Vision is style” (Merleau-Ponty 1996: 218):<sup>16</sup> taking stock of lexical reiterations and transfers that allow the philosopher to seed the field of his thought would be meaningless, as they are so numerous, from the “pyramid of time” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 14)<sup>17</sup> turned towards the vertiginous “stilts” (TR, 451; IV 625) on which the aged narrator of *Time Regained* is standing on top of the “furrow” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 58)<sup>18</sup> which makes it impossible for the artist to say “what comes from him and what comes from things, what the new work adds to the old ones, or what it has taken from the others, and what is its own” (Merleau-Ponty [1952] 1964: 59). Merleau-Ponty’s use of the term “sillon [furrow]” is more than an allusion, it is Proust’s palimpsest signature within the philosopher’s writing. It refers to the crucial passage in *Time Regained* that defines vision as an enclosure, and style as based on “rings” which represent a primordial “metaphor” where exterior and interior can no longer function as operators capable of giving an account of our life in the sensible or in the world of language: “The link may be uninteresting, the objects trivial, the style bad, but unless this process has taken place, the description is worthless” (TR, 246; IV 468). One can understand that the philosopher who makes “transgression” and “encroachment” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 248) essential modes of our being-in-the-world has been fascinated by a novelistic style in tune with the relational essence of the lived experience: “to be of it [en être]”, “to keep a circle around oneself” to allow the philosophical discourse to account for enveloping phenomena that would have been missed in conceptual prose focused on semantic univocity.

---

<sup>15</sup> On the “dequalification of the world”, see *F*, 550–1; IV 63–4.

<sup>16</sup> See also *TR*, 254; IV 474: “for style for the writer, no less than colour for the painter, is a question not of technique but of vision [...]”.

<sup>17</sup> This expression refers explicitly to Proust, see Merleau-Ponty 1996: 49, just like the “pyramid of past” in Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1964: 450.

<sup>18</sup> See also Merleau-Ponty 2003: 277, and Merleau-Ponty 1954: 117, 127, 127’ and, in Proust, *SG*, 183–4; III 156; *F*, 719–20; IV 206; *TR*, 248; IV 470.

## Linings: Shadow, Veil, Silence

In Proust, nature itself is

the beginning of art, she who often had allowed me to become aware of the beauty of one thing only in another thing, of the beauty, for instance, of noon at Combray in the sound of its bells, of the mornings at Doncières in the hiccups of our central heating.

(*TR*, 246; *IV* 468)<sup>19</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's ontology will retain this principal enjambement, ending up by "defining Being by the metaphorical movement itself" (Barbaras 1998: 284), and subsuming under the terms "sensible" or "flesh" this permanent coming and going between realms of reality that classical philosophy has traditionally disjointed: nature and art, sensation and reflection, visible and invisible. He noticed this chiasm that operates at the heart of the sensible as well as at the heart of thought in Proust, especially in that "idea of church" (*BG*, 340; *II* 75) which, from *Jean Santeuil* to the *Recherche*, is visible only through the moving ivy that covers it, veiling it at the precise moment when it is revealed. Beginning with "The Problem of Speech", Merleau-Ponty found in it a support for his own thinking, intertwining quotations from *Jean Santeuil* in his meditation on the emulation between art and nature: the "intertwining" of Virginia creeper and ivy on the church, where Proust specifies their simultaneous "natural abandonment and decorative intentions" (*JS*: 513) that "seem to understand 'the need to respect intervals and to bend at a curve' (*Jean Santeuil* II, 260), to replay artistic intention while only following their determinism" (Merleau-Ponty 1954: 96).<sup>20</sup> The sculptural idea, like the literary and musical ideas that monopolized Merleau-Ponty's attention in his later work, but also like the "articulations of light" or "modes of exhibiting sound and touch", are indeed "sensible ideas" inseparable from the process of their presentation:

The idea is this level, this dimension. It is therefore not a de facto invisible, like an object hidden behind another, and not an absolute invisible, which would have nothing to do with the visible. Rather it is the invisible of this world, that which inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible, its own and interior possibility, the Being of this being.

(*Merleau-Ponty* 1968: 151)

Going beyond Proust's description of Vinteuil's little phrase, Merleau-Ponty asserts that the idea cannot be seen "without veils", simply because, ontologically, "there is no vision without a screen" (*Ibid.*). We do not feel, we do not think despite our body, but with and in it, and the thickness as well

---

<sup>19</sup> On the expression of the sensible, see Simon 2018b.

<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty read the edition of *Jean Santeuil* in three volumes edited by Bernard de Fallois in 1952 for Gallimard.

as the “*lacunae*” (Merleau-Ponty 2011: 175) of things and beings are the very modes that make grasping them possible. Proust thus intervenes in this fundamental vein of *The Visible and the Invisible* which is the end of the chapter on interlacing which cements Merleau-Ponty’s turn towards a radical renovation of philosophy and its language:

We touch here the most difficult point, that is, the bond between the flesh and the idea, between the visible and the interior armature which it manifests and which it conceals. No one has gone further than Proust in fixing the relations between the visible and the invisible, in describing an idea that is not the contrary of the sensible, that is its lining and its depth.

(Merleau-Ponty 1968: 149)

Proust’s style, which gives rise to the sense of silence, reinforces this fundamental chiasm and answers the call of those “mute things” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 125)<sup>21</sup> that fascinated him as much as they did Husserl or Merleau-Ponty. We understand that he guided the latter in his earliest research as well as in his final linguistic endeavors. Both in the case of the novelist and the philosopher who wrote that “the language is expressive *as much through what is between the words as through the words themselves*, and through what it does not say than by what it says” (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 43), and who knew that the novelist’s thought lies “between the descriptions” (Merleau-Ponty 1996:50) we are dealing with a dynamic recovery, in which a writing practice is at play which, according to Proust, Nerval had already taken up without thematizing it:

It is only the inexpressible, the thing one believes one cannot succeed in getting into a book that remains in it. [...] But it is not in the words, it is not said, it is all in among the words, like the morning mist in Chantilly.

(CSB, 153)

Merleau-Ponty’s course “The Problem of Speech” makes an explicit link with Proust’s philosophical-literary practice: “‘his philosophy’ [...] is precisely *the correlative experience of the silence of things and the appearance of speech.*” And the silence of things “calls our speech so that they do not become lost in themselves” (Merleau-Ponty 1954: [94], [96]).

However, Proust was accused of being a verbose or even chatty author. To accept that would be to forget that he continuously asserted the role of silence in his style, uniquely capable of rendering the “lateral presentation, from profile” (Ibid., [95]) of the sensible which, for him, grounds the perceptive process as much as the relation to others — be they beloved, lying and elusive women, or

---

<sup>21</sup> Cf. “celtic belief” in Proust: “in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate object”, are “lost to us until the day [...] they call us by our name [...] they [...] return to share our life”, *SW*, 51; I 44.

those many characters who, beyond the exposure to which the inquisitive prose of the *Recherche* submits, retain an irreducible core of secrecy and unpredictability. *Time Regained* thus criticizes a literature of labels which displays its theories, affirming that “authentic art has no use for proclamations of this kind, it accomplishes its work in silence” (*TR*, 236; IV 460). *Signs*, where Stendhal, Balzac and Marx are mentioned, but not Proust, though he is implicitly present, takes up this distinction between “the novel as a report [...], as an announcement of ideas, theses or conclusions”<sup>22</sup> and “the novel as inauguration of a style, an oblique or latent meaning” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 77). The “statement” versus the “oblique meaning”: what is at play here is the ability of novelistic writing to restore our primordial relationship to the world, which is constituted in the perception as well as in the memory of the in-between, or an ellipse that is not an absence. Merleau-Ponty therefore gives ontological value to a style that does not so much express the muteness of things as express what it is in them that resists the suffocating plenitude of speech (Merleau-Ponty [1952–1960] 1968: 23). Sartre seeks to *exhaust* the real by means of a saturated, galloping prose; Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, does not conversely advocate a retracted, transparent writing: his taste for Proust shows that metaphorical profusion, as well as the dialectic between “additions” (*CS*, 213–14) and syntactic excavations, have to do with a silence that is not a subtraction, a *less-than-saying*, but a way to integrate different temporalities in the same sentence (for example by inserting parentheses and interpolations), to express the invisible of the visible or the gap in perception that stops us from losing ourselves, in a deathly fusion. Proust allows the philosopher to conceive a thought containing zones of latency, a thought that is not clouded (etymologically obscured) by meaning, an unveiling that is accomplished through the veil.

Indeed, the words in themselves are not the opposite of silence, but a way of using them:

In already acquired expressions there is a direct meaning, which corresponds point for point to figures, forms, and established words. Apparently, there are no gaps or expressive silences here. But the meaning of expressions which are in the process of being accomplished cannot be of this sort [...].

(Merleau-Ponty [1952] 1964: 46)

We understand that the Proustian overprint, at once stylistic and thematic, haunted the philosopher for whom the sensible depth could be expressed solely through a writing which has muteness and the latent invisibility of things at its heart, just like the cognitive scope of the affect — especially sorrow<sup>22</sup> and jealousy. Only a complex syntactic structure, made of insertions and interpolations, ellipses and misunderstandings, and which can be accused of illegibility, can account for the ideal, multi-temporal,

---

<sup>22</sup> We find this passage again in Merleau-Ponty 1973: 125 – Merleau-Ponty thus really cared about it. The term “oblique” (*TR*, 247; IV 469) functions as a Proustian connection from 1952–1953 onwards.

and phantasmatic levels that turn the sensible into something other than a purely perceptual surface. Proustian truth is thus a truth “*which transpires through ‘velours’ [“velvet”], which has been ‘re-created’* [cf. TR, 257; IV 477], *which has been reached only through ‘depths’; in principle the style has several ‘layers’ (Bergotte’s death) like Vermeer’s yellow wall*” (Merleau-Ponty 1954:124).<sup>23</sup>

What Merleau-Ponty has retained from his commerce with Proust is the need to establish a philosophical form capable of integrating silence and depth in its process. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, he specifies that he must “replace the notions of concept, idea, mind, representation by the notions of *dimensions*, articulation, level, hinges, pivots, configuration” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 244). When acted upon or used in a narrative, these notions become Elstir’s ways of painting, making the enjambment into the constituting principle of landscape in *Harbor at Carquethuit*,<sup>2425</sup> Proust’s ways of writing, whether in using what Ricoeur was to name “the living metaphor” or a syntax based on articulation, interpolation, and palimpsest. “He tries to penetrate the thing by approaching it several times [...]”, Merleau-Ponty insists in reference to *Jean Santeuil* (Merleau-Ponty 1954: [96]).

For both authors, silence is, therefore, the very opposite of the vertigo of the blank page: it is not endured, it does not proceed the writing, it conquers itself, as the goal of the work and the condition of its ontological effectiveness. Overload, overstuffing, overfeeding, length are all characteristics of writing in the *Recherche*, but also in the drafts of *The Visible and the Invisible*. Far from being obstacles or antonyms of silence, they become the very means that allow, as Proust urges us, to restore the role of “shadow” in “the indication [...] of the depth of a work” (TR, 257; IV 476). It is therefore necessary to produce a superimpressive writing that leads the reader to adopt a participative and creative attitude: “Never let the words and images that have been drawn for you stop you, but look ‘through’” (Plantevignes 1971: 179–80). This active crossing of language can only be produced by an aesthetics of the “*sous-entendu*” (“implied”) — in the literal sense, by hearing or understanding what is underneath words and sentences — that Merleau-Ponty will assign not only to literature but also to philosophy and its history, since it is a matter of “consider[ing] language, even philosophical language, not as sum of statements or ‘solutions’, but as a veil lifted, a verbal chain woven...” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 199).<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Cf. “Ideas come to us as the substitutes for griefs” TR, 268; IV 485.

<sup>24</sup> On the “velvet” of style, see TR, 354; IV 551: un objet matériel, si je le retrouvais au bout de quelques années dans mon souvenir, je voyais que la vie n’avait pas cessé de tisser autour de lui des fils différents qui finissaient par le feutrer de ce beau velours pareil à celui qui, dans les vieux parcs, enveloppe une simple conduite d’eau d’un fourreau d’émeraude. [a physical object, I perceived that life all this while had been weaving round person or thing a tissue of diverse threads which ended by covering them with the beautiful and inimitable velvety patina of the years, just as in an old park a simple runnel of water comes with the passage of time to be enveloped in a sheath of emerald.]

<sup>25</sup> “the reflections had almost more solidity and reality than the floating hulls, vaporised by an effect of the sunlight and made to overlap one another by the perspective” (BG, 482; II 193); this ekphrasis is analyzed in Merleau-Ponty 1954: [104].

<sup>26</sup> See also the note of October 27, 1959: “The sensible is that: this possibility to be evident in silence, to

From one reading to another, from one style to another, or from one thought to the other: we see, we speak, we read through a body that is never here or there, posted in a single, mental “sentry box” (*SW* 98, my translation; I, 83), but always behind or in front of it, with the aim of bringing us back to ourselves at the precise moment when it transports us towards things, towards others, towards meaning, as Proust expresses so well when he describes reading in the garden in “Combray” and Merleau-Ponty when he mentions those “cracks” that books by others create in his “private universe” in order to create “a rupture” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 235).

## Bibliography

Barbaras, Renaud. 1998. *Le Tournant de l'expérience. Recherches sur la philosophie de Merleau-Ponty*. Paris, Vrin.

De Certeau, Michel. June 1982. “La folie de la vision,” *Esprit*, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” no. 66, 90.

Lefort, Claude. 1982. “Philosophie et non-philosophie,” *Esprit*, June 1982, 101.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1954. “*Le problème de la parole*” (*cours du jeudi, Collège de France, janvier-mai 1954*), preparatory notes, vol. XII, 172 sheets, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1964. *Signs: Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy*. Trans. By Richard C. McCleary. Evanston, Northwestern University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. [1945] 1964. *Sense and Non-sense*. Trans. by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus. Evanston, Northwestern University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. [1947–1961] 1964. *The Primacy of Perception and other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*. Trans. by William Cobb. Ed. by James M. Edie. Evanston, Northwestern University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1968. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Trans. by Alphonso Lingis. Ed. by Claude Lefort. Evanston, Northwestern University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. [1952–1960] 1968. *Résumés de cours. Collège de France, 1952–1960*. Paris, Gallimard.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1969. *The Essential Writings of Merleau-Ponty*. Ed. by Alden L. Fisher, Evanston, New York, Harcourt Brace.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1973. *The Prose of the World: Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy*. Trans. by John O’Neill. Ed. by Claude Lefort. Evanston, Northwestern University Press.

---

be understood implicitly” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 214).

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. [1945] 1992. *Phénoménologie de la Perception*. Paris, Gallimard, coll. "Tel".

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1996. *Notes de cours (1959–1961)*. Ed. by Nathalie Ménasé. Paris, Gallimard.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2003. *L'Institution. La Passivité. Notes de cours au Collège de France (1954–1955)*. Ed. by Dominique Darmaillacq, Claude Lefort and Stéphanie Ménasé. Paris, Belin.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. [1953] 2011. *Le Monde sensible et le Monde de l'expression. Cours au Collège de France. Notes*. Ed. by Emmanuel de Saint Aubert and Stefan Kristensen. Geneva, MētisPresses.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. [1953] 2013. *Recherches sur l'usage littéraire du langage. Cours au Collège de France. Notes*. Ed. by Benedetta Zaccarello and Emmanuel de Saint Aubert. Geneva, MētisPresses.

Plantevignes, Marcel, 1971. *Avec Marcel Proust. Causeries-Souvenirs sur Cabourg et le Boulevard Haussmann*, Paris, Nizet.

Proust, Marcel in John Ruskin, 1987. *Sésame et les Lys précédé de Sur la lecture de Marcel Proust* [1906], préface, traduction et notes de Marcel Proust, ed. Antoine Compagnon, Paris, Éditions Complexe.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1964. *Situations IV*. Paris, Gallimard.

Simon, Anne. 2016. *Trafics de Proust. Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Deleuze, Barthes*. Paris, Hermann.

Simon, Anne. 2018a. *La Rumeur des distances traversées. Proust, une esthétique de la surimpression*. Paris, Classiques Garnier.

Simon, Anne. [PUF, 2001] 2018b. *Proust ou le réel retrouvé*, 2nd ed., Paris, Champion.

Worms, Frédéric, 2014. *Penser à quelqu'un*, Paris, Flammarion.