



LUCA VANZAGO

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## Passivity and Time

### On Merleau-Ponty's Lectures on Passivity

Luca Vanzago

Merleau-Ponty's conception of Nature relies on a peculiar understanding of passivity: something which is there without being present, something, furthermore, which is both lost forever and forever present without passing. The particularity of this temporal account of passivity deserves therefore a deepening, as I will show here.

I will follow therefore a double direction, or rather I will consider the double relationship between the two proper objects, or elements, of the inquiry, which are temporality and passivity. Indeed, the proper subject-matter of this paper might be considered duality itself. It is a duality, however, which is neither ambivalence nor ambiguity: that is, it is neither a sharp distinction or opposition, nor the more familiar notion of non-exclusion, or confusion. Rather I would say that the duality implicit in the relationship between temporality and passivity points to a different, more elaborated form of duplicity that Merleau-Ponty was probably trying to uncover when working on *The Visible and the Invisible*. The lecture course on passivity constitutes a decisive step in his ontological project.<sup>1</sup>

It might also be convenient to declare, right at the outset, that this duplicity reflects the relationship between the two sides or folds of the *flesh*, that is, the flesh of the world and the flesh of the incarnated subject. In this respect, while it is common and absolutely right to follow Merleau-Ponty's reiterated attempt at weakening the weight of subjectivity in the direction of a renovated interrogation of Being, I must make clear from the very beginning that here I will rather follow the other path. I will, in other words, try to investigate what place, or status, or even meaning, can the notion of subjectivity still have in Merleau-Ponty's later thinking, and what light can this lecture course shed on this problem. Thus, I will investigate the peculiar temporality involved in the process of self-manifestation of subjectivity, such as it can be ascertained in this new form, different from the one worked out in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, but still present as a problem and as a task in Merleau-Ponty's mind.

In the first place, I will analyze the several reasons to read passivity in its temporal structure. Throughout the whole bulk of notes taken for his course, Merleau-Ponty describes the various phenomena related to

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<sup>1</sup>The text I am referring to is M. Merleau-Ponty, *L'institution, la passivité. Notes de cours au Collège de France, 1954-55*, Paris: Belin 2002. English translation *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France (1954-55)*, trans. by L. Lawlor and H. Massey, Evanston (Ill): Northwestern University Press, 2010. Hereafter referred to as MERLEAU-PONTY 2002 followed by the French original and then the English translation pages.

passivity in terms that can be articulated in a temporal fashion. He often mentions the need to avoid interpreting passivity as the presence of a hidden subject behind the conscious one, by introducing the role of the past as sedimentation, as promiscuity and generality. The present, too, is de-structured in its traditional understanding of a dimensionless point and shown to be built upon “*déchirures*” that provide it with a temporal dimensionality without this being due to the action of consciousness. The future in turn is investigated in particular in its complex articulation with the past and the present, and described in terms that remind the reader of Freud’s notion of *Nachträglichkeit*.

This temporal understanding of passivity is all the more interesting since it is not openly programmed, but seems to emerge, as it were, in the course of the analysis, and as such shows Merleau-Ponty’s deepening of his notion of temporality with respect to what is to be found in the *Phenomenology of perception*. Already at work in his Sorbonne courses on the psychological development of children, this process of revision can be traced with further clarity in these lectures, and grasped in all its relevance for the picture drawn in *The visible and the invisible*.

Thus the role of temporal metaphors in Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of passivity brings to light his way of conceiving of temporality in general, but more particularly his peculiar way of relating temporalization and self-manifestation of the subject.

This deepening and radicalization of this relationship constitute one of the most interesting outcomes of these lectures. In the *Phenomenology of perception* Merleau-Ponty reads Husserl’s notion of self-temporalisation of consciousness in the light of Heidegger’s existential analytic of *Dasein*, thus putting forward a conception of subjectivity as coincident with temporality, that is, neither “within” nor “outside” of time. Already in this early understanding of temporality Merleau-Ponty emphasises the aspect of self-constitution of time as the structure that brings subjectivity to emerge. Yet this account seems somewhat flawed by its residual description in terms of something that possesses an identity to be realized through its outcomes. It is as if a «not yet passive enough» conception of subjectivity undermines the perspective that nevertheless is put forward as the goal of the whole work.

Thus it is not by chance that passivity receives a temporal metaphorization in the lectures under scrutiny. Here Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that it is temporality itself that possesses the aspect of passivity that must be regarded as the essence of subjectivity. Hence his repeated efforts to use his conception of perception as a model to describe this “passive consciousness”, or better, this passivity of consciousness, which seems to lead to a substantial integration of Freud’s primary process into the phenomenolog-

ical category of the flesh. While this integration fully takes place in the later writings, in these lectures we can witness one of the most relevant passages to leading to such an achievement. In this respect the lectures allow the reader to integrate a whole lot of working notes of *The visible and the invisible* with the “subplot” that was in Merleau-Ponty’s mind when writing them. Therefore I will consider now the temporale metaphors of passivity.

Already in the introduction of the twin course on institution, to which Merleau-Ponty refers the audience in his lectures on passivity as well, there is an important indication concerning temporality in its functioning as a model or metaphor. As Claude Lefort remarks in his preface, this introduction must be regarded as common to both courses. Here, we find a precious statement concerning temporality as the model for the relationship between activity and passivity. Merleau-Ponty writes:

Time is the very model of institution: passivity-activity, it continues, because it has been instituted, it fuses, it cannot stop being, it is total because it is partial, it is a field.<sup>2</sup>

Now, here we find a number of elements that deserve all our attention, and will be discussed in due course. But in the first place I would like to draw our attention on the notion of model. Time here is playing a modeling function that should not be underestimated. Time, in other words, is used as a means to «make passivity become visible», to be seen. This means, perhaps, that passivity in itself might be invisible.

The statement regarding time as a model, with which the lectures on institution begin, is echoed by a statement at the end of the course on passivity, in which Merleau-Ponty, reflecting on Freud’s unconscious, says that his spatial model should be replaced by a dynamical one. Dynamism, it seems possible to suggest, means that the unconscious, or passivity, has to do, not so much with “being” as something which always is and never changes, but rather with “becoming”, with that which changes and in the first place with that which happens or occurs. Merleau-Ponty writes:

Passivity can be understood only on the basis of *event-based thought*. What is constitutive of it is that the signification is here, not by *Sinngebung*, [...] but welcoming to an event in a situation, situation and event themselves not *known*, but grasped through commitment, perceptually, as configuration, proof of reality, relief on... i.e., by existentialia and not categories.<sup>3</sup>

The intersection of these two passages gives us some clues as to the issue Merleau-Ponty seems to be confronting: passivity needs to be brought to light, for it is not visible as such. And this opaqueness of passivity is

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<sup>2</sup>MERLEAU-PONTY 2002, 36 (7).

<sup>3</sup>MERLEAU-PONTY 2002, 280 (217).

related to the wrong assumption that consciousness consists in casting a light on the object as something that, in itself, that is inert and dark in itself. Thus if we are able to abandon such model (the *Sinngebung*) we will become aware of the fact that activity is never without its own passivity, the two are never actually separated. In order to “see”, we need to substitute an understanding based on spatial models (the unconscious as the bottom layer that is never attainable and yet is there), with one based on the notion of event. The event itself, furthermore, is not simply that which happens, empirically and casually, to the subject, but is rather the index of a structure that is being instituted (*gestiftet*), thus realizing a dimension, an existential difference, a step in the subject’s history. The evenementiality of the event is thus, and perhaps most of all, a way of conceiving of the transcendental itself in terms of time. A transcendental that becomes, in fact, is truly what phenomenology (already with Husserl) discovers and thus what makes the whole difference with Kant.

Time, thus, clearly plays a truly fundamental role. Again with an implicit reference to Kant, we might say that time is a scheme, the scheme being a hybrid being that shares with sensibility as well as with forms and thus permits the two to enter into contact, sharing what they cannot in themselves never share. Already in Kant it is this impossibility that must itself be made possible, and time is the means to bring together what cannot have connection with its “other”. For this reason time is at once the form for every event, the mediating element that composes a subject split into two irreconcilable sides, and thus the “secret” of subjectivity itself, its model.

The difference between Kant and phenomenology, at least in its Merleau-Pontyan version, seems to me, in this respect, to reside in the structure of time itself. While in Kant time is basically thought of according to the image of the line, Merleau-Ponty’s account of time is right from the start (in the *Structure of Behaviour*) related with an absence that is more present than presence, for it is the very heart of time, understood as that which passes and moves on. This means that Merleau-Ponty has a dialectical conception of time. In the *Phenomenology of Perception* time becomes the emblem of subjectivity itself, and this for several reasons.

In the first place, time is subjectivity itself. Caught in the usual dilemma between an empiricist-realist conception of time as something existing in itself, and an idealist conception of time as that which the subject possesses without being possessed by it, Merleau-Ponty brings together Husserl and Heidegger and thus, as Ricoeur once said, overcomes them by identifying temporality and subjectivity.

This solution however would not suffice, were Merleau-Ponty not able to show in details what its true meaning is. Developing Heidegger’s

conception of the ek-static nature of time as that which temporalizes itself in each ekstasis, (Merleau-Ponty goes as far as to say, unlike Heidegger, that time is *one ekstasis*), and translating this conception into Husserl's notion of temporality as the unfolding of consciousness that affects itself, Merleau-Ponty then can say that temporality is the process by which the (incarnated) subject can become itself, that is, temporality is the process of self-manifestation of subjectivity.

This process of self-manifestation therefore is at once a model and yet not simply a formal tool, for in the process of temporalizing itself, the subject is rather subjected to time than being its author, and this allows Merleau-Ponty to say that this is why the subject is finite: the emergence of subjectivity from its own temporal process makes indeed the fecundity of time, but not as something opposite to the basic mortality that is the mark of (human) time. It is for this reason that time truly *affects* the subject, and is not just a formal feature, no matter how important this might be. The subject finds itself only by confronting itself with its constitutive otherness, for time is always the being-different of the self with itself. But this extraneousness is also at once the subject's secret life, for only in this way can a subject properly be, and be what it is, namely, a subject, and not a thing. A subject is a subject insofar as it recollects itself in a personal history that, no matter how coherent it can become, will always have been exposed to dispersion, and in the last analysis, to a looming end that comes nearer by the day. There is no way to subtract the subject from this situation and make it become "true". Subjectivity *is* this passage that is always trying to recollect itself with no hope to ever really succeed. There is clearly no room for the robust Subject (capital S) of Idealism here!

It is important to stress that this picture is never contested by Merleau-Ponty in his successive writings. Yet it is deepened. A deepening here means that we must go below what is being displayed by this model, under this process that, despite being a constant subtraction of the subject's self-coincidence, and its constant postponement, nevertheless, *in this very self-spacing* realizes the subject, that is, succeeds, is successful. Fecundity in the last analysis wins over opacity and deafness, although only for a while. Absence is still productive, negativity does not negate itself in a synthesis unless it is, Merleau-Ponty says, a transitional synthesis: but this also means that a transition is realized, something changes into something else; in other words, there is no stasis, no arrest.

Before trying to see in what sense and to what extent is Merleau-Ponty able to deepen this question, which is clearly related to a "darker" notion of passivity, another feature of time must however be briefly investigated: its non-linearity. Even in this respect some interesting differences should emerge between the earlier and the later picture.

Already in the analysis of time that we find in *Phenomenology of Perception* there are several reasons to say that, according to Merleau-Ponty, time is not a linear process. Without entering into details, I will just mention two crucial aspects. One proceeds from Merleau-Ponty's own appropriation of Heidegger's conception. If the three dimensions of time are not three places mutually separated, and indeed if one should not even talk of past, present and future, but rather of a unique process of temporalization that constantly "explodes" in the three directions<sup>4</sup> it makes no sense to say that one moment "is" before or after another. This conception of time is rather a derivative one with respect to the existential temporality of *Dasein* which in Merleau-Ponty becomes the openness of the incarnated subject with respect to its past, its present, and its future.

This first aspect of the non-linearity of time is basically repeated in the lectures on institution and on passivity when Merleau-Ponty remarks that it is strictly not possible to say that one event causes another, for the caused is in a way bringing to light its cause as cause, so that we can determine the cause only if the effect is in a way in turn "causing" it by taking place. And conversely, the effect is one possible outcome of a whole array of possibilities, most of which might remain never actualized, so that to be an effect is not to be the necessary outcome of a metaphysical cause, and is not its final end either. *Après coup* and indetermination are thus two features that Merleau-Ponty assigns to time already in *Phenomenology of Perception* (and in *The Structure of Behaviour*) and can be found in these lectures as well.

The second aspect pertains to the peculiar temporal structure of perception. When it occurs, a perception is neither mere copy nor pure creation, but always something that re-arranges the scene, a "vibration" of the whole perceptual field. What is perceived then is prepared but not univocally determined, and while it expresses something, there can be no way to talk of an original already there that the perception simply reproduces. The typical example is the picture used in the perceptive experiments in order to make the Gestalt-switch appear. But Merleau-Ponty generalizes this structure in order to say that the perceptum is, in a sense, a copy without original, a present realization of something that appears "now" as having been "before". This means that this something is a past that was never present. Even in this case, which constitutes a true paradigm for the relationship with raw being as it is described in *The Visible and the Invisible*, we cannot say that the process under description is the linear unfolding from a before to an after, from the object there to be perceived to the perception,

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<sup>4</sup>Heidegger says that the past is not preceding the present, and this in turn is not prior to the future, but they are one unique configuration that articulates itself, and can do it only by being constantly and reciprocally co-determining the three ek-stases themselves.

for the perception does more than perceiving the object: it re-arranges the whole field so as to make it appear as organized in a certain way; which is one important feature of the notion of institution. Needless to say, if perception is the model adopted to understand the temporal field of experience, and thus if the gestaltic model functions as a general metaphor for consciousness, there is no room for any atomistic conception of time as a series of unrelated moments.

As it was easily imaginable, perception plays the role of the general structure of (bodily) intentionality which characterizes Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. In this respect, there is no real difference between *Phenomenology of Perception* and the lecture courses. Perception, as we know, is contact-at-a-distance, it is not the performance of a disembodied Cogito, but rather the carnal bond between the body and the world. As such it takes place before and even despite conscious intentions, and thus in a way dispossesses the subject from its Cartesian role of form- and norm-giver of the world. The subject rather emerges from its network of contacts with the world, and its "self" is a process of never accomplished and always recommencing contacts with itself *through* the world (and the other subjects). But is this form of passivity, or rather this form of the passivity of activity (for Merleau-Ponty says that we are no stones) passive enough?

One reason to doubt about it is represented by an important though rather subtle shift that occurs in the mutual relationship between perception and the unconscious. To put it quickly, while in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty reads the unconscious in terms of perceptive consciousness, here in the lectures he moves towards an inversion of the terms: as one working note in VI will state bluntly, now it appears that it is perception that must be seen in terms of the unconscious. Or better, in the lectures Merleau-Ponty is re-articulating the relations and connections between perceptive and "oneiric" consciousness, often explaining each one with the other, but never indicating univocally which one is the model and the other is the copy as we read for example in the following passage:

The unconscious as perceptual consciousness is the solution sought by Freud, for it is necessary that the truth is there for us, and that it is not possessed. Perceptual consciousness, while offering a seed of truth, an «idea of the truth» (Pascal), offers it only on the horizon, and hides the truth because it shows it. In the perceived, there can be duality of signification which is not the positing of a duality (ambiguous figures, Leonardo's vulture), which is impossible in the pure signified. The perceived saves and it alone saves our duality, the duality to which Freud holds and which he thinks is saved by the idea of the unconscious.<sup>5</sup>

While, on the one hand, here Merleau-Ponty repeats his well-known

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<sup>5</sup>MERLEAU-PONTY 2002, 212-213 (160).

notion of perception, just evoked, on the other he also uses a term that deserves to be retained: duality. Duality is not (simply) ambiguity, as it is usually understood in relation to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. It seems to contain a grain of novelty. In a passage to be found some pages earlier in the notes for the lectures,<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty says that there is an originary symbolism in dreams that is neither identical with, nor however totally different from, the perceptive one. Thus we have a first indication connecting, but not identifying, the dreaming and the perceiving subject. In order to grasp the "unconventional" meaning of dreams, Merleau-Ponty here invents the very happy expression "hermeneutical reverie".<sup>7</sup> This implies that dreams have to do with the imaginary, not so much in terms of what Husserl calls *Bildbewusstsein*, as in the terms of *Phantasie*.

Merleau-Ponty credits Freud with this important discovery: as he writes,

Freud discovered this positive symbolism: this meaning beyond the meaning has a double sense. One usually retains only the two separate meanings from it: manifest meaning and latent meaning. The latter [would be] reinstitution of an original meaning which was then repressed, buried in memory, by censorship. [...] However, that is not his discovery. If the latent content were truly buried, dreams would not provide any relief from the desire. It is necessary that the latent content be accessible to him in some manner; that the one who dreams and the one who sees to the bottom of the dream are the same, and that there are not truly two persons (the unconscious and the censor, the id and the ego) but communication between them. The censor presupposes a pre-notion of what is censored. But this pre-notion is not a notion.<sup>8</sup>

Merleau-Ponty then goes on to say that, in this doing, Freud touches upon the structure of "oneiric thought", which is symbolism. This symbolism is neither coming from repression as such (even though it retains an important connection with repression), nor does it explain repression, for these two errors suppose the priority of conventional thinking, based on identity, which characterizes Sartre and Politzer.<sup>9</sup>

The problem is, however, how to understand, in Merleau-Ponty's own terms, this primordial symbolism, whose analysis Freud had initiated, but which must be brought forward. One clue is provided by a remark in which Merleau-Ponty says that the «problem of the imaginary and the real» is to find out how to, at once, avoid distinguishing them absolutely, and identifying them. Awake life and oneiric life, as he also defines the two registers, are not one the foundation of the other. Neither one should

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<sup>6</sup>MERLEAU-PONTY 2002, 201 (151-2).

<sup>7</sup>MERLEAU-PONTY 2002, 204 (154).

<sup>8</sup>MERLEAU-PONTY 2002, 201-201 (152).

<sup>9</sup>MERLEAU-PONTY 2002, 202-3 (153).

be subordinated to the other. Then Merleau-Ponty writes that what can link them together is desire. Desire is a relation, and what is more, it is what presides over waking life as well as over the dream, although perhaps not in the same way. It seems possible to say, for the moment, that the two registers run parallel to one another, which means not excluding their possible, indeed their constant exchange. But if consciousness and what can still be provisionally called the unconscious parallel each other, and even communicate without being confused nor coincident, and if on the other hand neither one explains the other, then the process of self-manifestation which is dealt with in *Phenomenology of Perception* should be revised, to say the least. For it does not seem to be able to account for this duplicity. On the contrary, it seems to imply that one layer, the anonymous unfolding of the corporeal life, brings about the other, the conscious life of the ego, while undermining the latter's traditional claim to constitute the truth of subjectivity. In these lectures, instead, Merleau-Ponty is probably suggesting that there is not so much emergence of subjectivity, the self-manifestation, as rather another kind of relationship.

What kind of relationship? In order to account for it, Merleau-Ponty must solve the problem of negation. Negation might mean separation, but in this case one would either fall back into Sartre's dualism or into that bad reading of Freud which ascribes to the founder of psychoanalysis the notion of a subject below the subject, both subjects being however fully determined. Negation, furthermore, might serve a dialectical purpose, and already in these lectures Merleau-Ponty clearly wants to avoid such solution as delusional. Where to look at, then? It seems useful to develop a suggestion articulated into three layers,<sup>10</sup> according to which the distinction between the imaginary and the real is:

- First, to think the imaginary in terms of an absence of the "real" (between brackets in the text);
- Second, to think of the dream in terms of a regression to "mythical consciousness";
- Third, the idea that symbolism is the imaginary, that the unconscious, now equated to mythical consciousness, consists in a relationship to the world and the others not in terms of objects (this term seemingly meaning the outcomes of "normal" consciousness), but as "instances". The rule, adds then Merleau-Ponty, is in this case the indistinction, and differentiation is the exception.<sup>11</sup>

We know that in *The Visible and the Invisible* there is a similar assertion. If we compose the three layers, we can suggest the possibility that the

<sup>10</sup>MERLEAU-PONTY 2002, 204 (154).

<sup>11</sup>MERLEAU-PONTY 2002, 205 (155).

unconscious as imaginary (what in Husserlian terms is *Phantasia*, not *Bildbewusstsein*) consists in the absence of a relationship with the real, which then provokes a “regression” (which is a temporal expression) into mythical consciousness, in turn understood in terms of greater indistinction.<sup>12</sup> Distinctions are the outcome of progressive institutions. The institutions are in their turn the effect of events that inscribe themselves on the subject’s process and thus generate existential dimensionalities. The regression taking place in (for example) sleep, then, seems to undo what the encounter with the world has produced on the subject, the world loses its grip over the subject, and thus another subject, maybe still to be called anonymous, but for different reasons, becomes free, at least for a while, to run its life based on “unconventional thinking”.

The problem is that this unconventional subject, if I am permitted to use this expression, permeates conscious life as well. It is and at the same time it is not there. In turn, conscious life, as Merleau-Ponty explains at a certain length, permeates the world of the unconscious as well, for dreams are never pure fantasies deprived of any relation whatsoever with reality. Freud himself gives a great number of examples illustrating this point.

Thus the relationship between the two registers is neither total separation nor total communication. They can communicate, although they speak different, but then again not totally different, languages. One seems to be a parody of the other. One resembles the other without coinciding with it, but certainly also without being truly different. They seem to entertain that kind of relationship that one has with one’s own mirror double.

At this stage of Merleau-Ponty’s meditation, therefore, one can no longer say that he explains the unconscious with perceptive consciousness, although a number of examples and reflections still go in that direction. Nor, however, is one entitled to state that it is perceptive consciousness to be seen in terms of the unconscious. Perception still presides over the process of progressive (in a neutral meaning of the term) institutions that build up a subject’s life-history. It is important to stress that this process has to do with the real, that is, it is not illusory. Life is no dream, according to Merleau-Ponty, and this has important, not only ontological, but also ethical and political implications. At the same time, however, perception can never totally overcome this oneiric aura that surrounds it because it resembles it, because it seems to work in a similar way, adopting similar means, at times cooperating, other times conflicting. This is perhaps what Merleau-Ponty actually means when speaking of the productivity of the

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<sup>12</sup> A similar account of a progressive disarticulation of acquired structures, which can be called dis-evolutive, can be found in Freud’s study *On aphasia* (English translation International Universities Press, 1953; the essay was originally published in 1891). According to this essay, in case of aphasia the linguistic structures that are lost at first are the most complex and therefore most recently acquired ones, which shows that the mind has different layers and a history.

unconscious. This position in my opinion is still in progress at this stage. It can be found in later analyses as well, and here I would like to mention at least the very important, detailed reading of Claude Simon's work given by Merleau-Ponty in the lectures on Cartesian and contemporary ontology.

What is, then, the temporality proper to this double, mythical and imaginary life that is not present without being absent? The answer to this question can perhaps be attained by reflecting on a very important passage, where Merleau-Ponty writes:

The description of the oneiric structure (impossibility of expressing, dictatorship of figuration, condensation as sole means of expression) would attribute the disguise of latent thoughts as much to the condition of the dream as to [the] censor-repressed struggle – Consequently, latent content not to be represented as thought in the depth of ourselves in the mode of conventional thought, as an absolute observer would represent it. The unconsciousness of the unconscious [is the] unknown; but not known by someone in the depth of ourselves. The unconscious [is the] abandonment of the norms of wakeful expression, i.e., of the symbolic as symbolic of self, direct language, which presupposes distance and participation in the category. But this unconscious is not distant, it is quite near, as ambivalence. The “affective content” is not even unconscious or repressed, i.e., the unconscious as pulsation of desire is not behind our back – [...] [The] unconscious [is] the implex, [the] animal, not only of words, but of events, of symbolic emblems. [The] unconscious [is] unknown acting and organizing dream and life, principle of crystallization [...] not behind us, [but] fully within our field, but pre-objective, like the principle of segregation of “things”.<sup>13</sup>

To which Merleau-Ponty adds in a note:

This makes truth transcendent to the I think (desiring, seeing is not the thought of desiring [or] of seeing) without our being transformed into objects of an absolute thinker.<sup>14</sup>

To avoid assuming the place of the absolute spectator is clearly crucial in order to grasp the specificity of this analysis. Merleau-Ponty is charging Freud, in his more official position regarding the relationship between consciousness and the unconscious, for adopting such a standpoint. This means, it seems to me, that the split between the two sides of the mind can be maintained only as long as one adopts a “static” rather than a dynamic perspective. The adoption of a point of view in which temporality (in its broadest sense, from the process of development of the Ego to phylogenesis) plays its true role, shows that this split is not the contrary of communication. In passing, I mention the fact that this means that Freud's

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<sup>13</sup>MERLEAU-PONTY 2002, 210-211 (158-159).

<sup>14</sup>MERLEAU-PONTY 2002, 211 (241). I slightly changed the English translation in order to accord it with the original French, which reads as follows: «Ceci fait vérité transcendante au je pense (désirer, voir n'est pas pensée de désirer [ou de] voir) sans nous transformer en objets d'un penseur absolu».

*Spaltung* comes closer to Husserl's *Zwiespältigkeit* than one might think at first sight. At any rate, the question remains of understanding Merleau-Ponty's own proposal. Obviously, this problem has far wider implications than those present, implicitly or explicitly, in these lectures just evoking the problem of nature and of animality which can only be glimpsed at in these dense lines.

A possible step to take is to develop the indications given by Merleau-Ponty just before writing the notes reported above. In this connection he poses the problem of the temporality of the dream.<sup>15</sup> The dream is ubiquitous, we read, thanks to the symbolic matrices. Thus the dream is also trans-temporal. The oneiric consciousness is at all times at once, since it does not imply a splitting (*clivage*). The dream begins in wakeful consciousness, and is present in filigree throughout it. As such it is called a "shadow", a germinative production, active sedimentation of the acts of consciousness, and represents the unconscious itself in its triple aspect: 1 the underlying implication of psychical life not entirely engaged in the present act, 2 the imaginary foyer, and 3 the lyrical knot of humanity (Merleau-Ponty here quotes Henri Ey). Thus, there is an "I dream", which is not the origin of the "I live" and the "I think" for the latter is produced by segregation and even rupture, but at the same time must be accounted for.

With the expression "I dream" and its correlative "oneiric intentionality" we touch, I believe, the real core of passivity. Clearly, this is not a total passivity, for we already know that Merleau-Ponty explicitly excludes this hypothesis as meaningless in relation to living, not to mention thinking, beings. But at the same time, this kind of intentionality is not under the control of consciousness, for it hollows out consciousness itself, it interacts with it, both in the sense of nourishing it and interfering with it (to the point of hallucination). There is no possibility to fully integrate this kind of passivity in the process of self-manifestation of subjectivity adopted in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. For at least two reasons: oneiric intentionality "blurs" conscious intentionality (*bougé*), and its process is not progressive. On the contrary, the temporality of the unconscious, if it is omnipervasive, at the same time is stubborn. The monumental past mentioned several times in VI is one example. The most relevant one, however, is the time of the repressed, which brings about the problem of memory and oblivion.

Merleau-Ponty states in the passage quoted above that, in dreams, there is no splitting. Whence, then, does the splitting derive? And how to conceive of it? I believe that this is the question Merleau-Ponty does not really answer. But there are reasons for this lack. One is his refusal of Hegelian dialectic and (which is crucial) his parallel search for a different form of dialectical thinking, a hyper-dialectical perspective. In other words,

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<sup>15</sup>MERLEAU-PONTY 2002, 208-9 (157-158).

Merleau-Ponty is afraid of adopting a notion of negation that then imposes itself and distorts the whole picture.

The alternative can be found in a term that, despite its Hegelian halo, in my opinion possesses a different meaning in Merleau-Ponty's view: *Erinnerung*. This term appears once in the lectures on passivity, but it is crucial. In that text we can read, in relation to Proust's novel:

The reference of the surroundings to the body which inhabits them and of the past body to the present: they are variations of one another and the surroundings are an explication of each. But of course, the body is substituted here for consciousness only as the place of our eruption into the world. As empirical body, it is no less determined than determining (it "turns" in the course of the search) – We consider it as a vinculum of the temporal and spatial distance, and transformer of space into time: *Erinnerung*.<sup>16</sup>

As Merleau-Ponty shows in another text, and as it is clear from this one, here *Erinnerung* means, literally, not memory, as it usually means in German, but interiorization. That is, it means that something external and exterior turns itself into interiority. We can thus suppose that the body, the flesh, is an exteriority that is able to interiorize itself, folding back onto itself without becoming other than what it constantly is and remains. This exteriority remaining such, while at the same time interiorizing itself means that neither is exteriority dialectically overcome and thus cancelled, nor however can it be thought of as a mere opacity. The two sides remain separated while entering into contact with each other. The form of negativity that exteriority represents with respect to interiority (but the reciprocal holds as well, we might add) then is neither pure opposition nor direct passage. It rather seems a form of communication, but distorted and reversed. Once again it is the mirror image that comes to mind. *Per speculum et in aenigmate*. Indeed, the enigma is the symbol of symbolism. Symbolism means something, but it is not clear what. It conceals but shows this concealment. It alludes without either remaining silent or speaking clearly enough. Which is why this symbolism has to do with desire.

Desire clearly points to the relationship between subjects. According to Merleau-Ponty, the system I-the others is a network, a structure where the relations are in a certain sense prior to the *relata*. It is within this "field", which can also be called intercorporeity, that the unconscious must be properly placed in order to be correctly accounted for. In this perspective, it becomes possible to understand the psychological phenomenon of projection. This means that negation can be explained as a form of position: the position of the other, as a translation of the self into a mask. This masked self perceives itself as "other" thus enacting the censorship which apparently is directed to otherness but in fact it is still related to itself. In

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<sup>16</sup>MERLEAU-PONTY 2002, 254 (195).

this way Merleau-Ponty thinks it possible to explain the unconscious; as he writes,

See in these cases what the unconscious consists of, if our notion is enough – and [the] passive-active relationship. Here we will truly see that oneirism is not non-being of the imagining consciousness, but just beneath the surface of perceptual consciousness; that is it is not lie, but truly a struggle of oneself against oneself, repression, censorship consisting in the refusal of our passivity and its great supplier: sexuality. The body as metaphysical being.<sup>17</sup>

From these lines it seems possible to draw the, obviously provisional, conclusion, according to which passivity characterizes the structure of intercorporeity in which each bodily subject is always already placed. Consciousness is in this sense the refusal of this passivity and the reversion of it into an independent subject that, however, cannot really undo the knots that tie it to the *intercorporeal* world from which it emerges. The emergence of consciousness has to do with a break which consists, no so much in a cancellation of what precedes it, and even less in a process of becoming-true of the subject, as in a process of institution of dimensions which is at the same time a process of “reduction” of the ambivalence proper to intercorporeity. Differentiation is in Merleau-Ponty’s perspective the realization of a coherent story which, however, can never really overcome the incoherence of that fecund excess which characterizes the perceptive life of intercorporeity. An excess that can come back in various forms, some of which are more disturbing and unexpected than others.

This passivity that underlies active consciousness is thus affecting the temporal process of self-manifestation itself. Be it the return of the repressed, the presence of the others in the form of negative hallucination, or the projection of one’s own fears and desires into other selves, this process does not lend itself to be peacefully accounted for in the model suggested in *Phenomenology of Perception*. It displays a deeper form of passivity, affecting temporality itself, which points to the substitution of a splitting subject with a plurality of poles never totally controllable.

The separation (which is never an unsurpassable wall but always something more porous) between consciousness and Merleau-Ponty’s version of the unconscious seems then to be granted by perceptive consciousness, which shares something with both. But what is important to notice is that the fracture between the two comes from below and not from above. It is not consciousness that represses something and then pushes it down, but it is rather the very carnal self that works out the transformation. This poses perhaps a final problem to Merleau-Ponty’s model? Why does this happen, and how to explain it within this framework? There is not final answer,

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<sup>17</sup>MERLEAU-PONTY 2002, 213 (161).

it seems to me, to this problem, but a possible solution should be found in the direction of the question of the network of relationships instituted in the realm of intercorporeity, along the lines of a conflict suggested by Merleau-Ponty himself, but not fully developed, neither in these lectures, nor actually anywhere else.

*Luca Vanzago*

Università degli Studi di Pavia  
Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici  
luca.vanzago@unipv.it

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