

CHAPTER 1

Nature: Variations on the Theme “Why are there several samples of each thing?”

I. NATURE AND ONTOLOGY

The last courses that Merleau-Ponty held at the Collège de France focus on the “concept of Nature” on the one hand, and the “possibility of philosophy today” on the other. Merleau-Ponty brings together under the first heading both the courses of 1956–57 and the courses of 1957–58—of these courses, the latter, centered on “Animality, the Human Body, Transition to Culture,” purport to be the “continuation” of the former. In 1959–60, Merleau-Ponty uses his last complete course to discuss the further issue of “Nature and Logos: the Human Body.” As for Merleau-Ponty’s reflections on “the possibility of philosophy today,” one can trace these not only to the 1958–59 course, where that expression actually appears,¹ but also to other courses: two courses which Merleau-Ponty’s unexpected death left unfinished—“Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Hegel” and “Cartesian Ontology and the Ontology of Today”—and the remaining course of 1959–60, entitled “Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology.”

What is the connection between these two foci of attention toward which Merleau-Ponty’s last reflections converge? Undoubtedly, the connection lies within the problem of what he called “new ontology”: the problem of its configuration and of its philosophical formulation.² Indeed, the preparatory notes for the last course dedicated to the “concept of Nature”—the goal of which is to define the “place of these studies in philosophy” (N, 263/203)—speak of “the ontology of Nature as a way toward ontology—a way that we prefer because the evolution of the concept of Nature is a more convincing propaedeutic, since it more clearly shows the necessity of the ontological mutation” (N, 265/204). Evidently, by retracing the path of what Merleau-Ponty had previously defined as the “philosophical history of the idea of Nature” (N, 117/83), as well as by exploring, with the help of contemporary science, the “problems posited” (ibid.) by this very history, these courses are an effort to show that a particular

relationship operates between humanity and Being. This relationship eludes the modern formula that counterposes subject and object. According to Merleau-Ponty, our epoch has made this relationship more evident, but has not been able to give an explicit philosophical formulation for it, an *onto-logy*. This is most specifically the theme of the lectures on “Cartesian Ontology and the Ontology of Today.”³

I have already mentioned this, but it is still worth emphasizing: Merleau-Ponty’s enquiry concerning Nature is not the kind of enquiry that, because of its ontological orientation, confronts the scientific standpoint with an attitude of denial. Just the opposite: it holds that such a confrontation with the scientific perspective cannot be avoided, and advocates an attitude of critical listening.

Clearly, one should not expect to find in science a fully elaborated ontology capable of taking the place of the modern ontology, according to which Nature is the absolute Object and in which the Subject is *Kosmotheorós* (an equally absolute spectator). As Merleau-Ponty contends, science as such “does not provide an ontology, not even under a negative form. It has only the power to divest pseudo-evidence of its pretension to be evidence” (N, 145/106). Still, the formulation of ontological hypotheses, which is the task of philosophy, ought to be based on the outcomes of scientific inquiries too. In fact, Merleau-Ponty consistently emphasizes the way in which currents of twentieth-century scientific inquiry decisively converge. According to him, they converge in “emptying of evidence” the opposing causalistic and finalistic conceptions of Nature—which he considers “concepts of *artificialism*”—(RC 117/151) along with the idea of the separability of existence and essence⁴ (which he holds to be equally artificial).

II. MELODY AND SPECIES

Merleau-Ponty sees a contribution to this kind of “emptying of evidence” in Jakob von Uexküll’s theories. These theories see biology as an autonomous science inspired by Goethe’s conception of the knowledge of Nature, and consequently as essentially anti-Darwinistic⁵; on this basis, they see the study of the reciprocal action between the organism and its environment as the specific task of biology. Onto his examination of Uexküll’s theories, Merleau-Ponty grafts the ontological hypothesis that he attempts to elaborate. In so doing, he presents his own hypothesis in an especially enlightening way.

Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that the notion of animal environment (*Umwelt*) put forth by Uexküll—and which Merleau-Ponty explicates as “the milieu that the animal gets for itself” (N, 226/172; trans. modified)—is a novel one, and is independent from Kant’s or Schelling’s philosophical framework (despite the fact that, for Merleau-Ponty, Uexküll’s thought sometimes seems to place such a notion there).⁶ According to Merleau-Ponty, the novelty of this notion consists precisely in the way it avoids both causalism and finalism, as well as a Platonistic formulation that would conceive it as an “essence outside of time.”⁷ Merleau-Ponty connects this conception to Marcel Proust’s characterization of melody,

drawing on a metaphor according to which Uexküll (with an explicit reference to the nineteenth-century embryologist Karl Ernst von Baer) states that “the deployment of an *Umwelt* is a melody, a melody which sings itself.”⁸

On the basis of some pages from the first volume of the *Recherche* to which we shall later refer,⁹ Merleau-Ponty explains that Marcel Proust characterizes melody as a “Platonic idea which cannot be seen separately” since “it is impossible to distinguish the means and the end, the essence and the existence in it” (N, 228/174). He alludes to the fact that, for the main character of those pages of the *Recherche*, a peculiar *idea* of love is incarnated in the sound of a melody—the melody of the *petite phrase* of Vinteuil’s sonata—to such an extent that that idea of love becomes inseparable from Vinteuil’s listening.

Merleau-Ponty builds on Uexküll’s and Proust’s conceptions, and sees in the different manifestations of zoological behaviour the variations in which “the theme of the animal melody” (N, 233/178)¹⁰ finds its expression. More generally, he comes to interpret the crucial question of the relation between parts and whole¹¹—be it the relation between the organs and the organism or between the organism and its territory, or for that matter the links between sexes, or those of individuals with one another and with their species—in terms of “a variable thematism that the animal does not seek to realize by the copy of a model, but that haunts its particular realizations” (ibid.; trans. modified), prior therefore to both causalism and finalism.¹² Actually, as Uexküll nicely said by mentioning “a melody which sings itself,” it is even prior to the distinction between activity and passivity, a distinction in which, if we look thoroughly enough, even the preceding opposition between causalism and finalism finds its roots.

Echoing the concluding sentence of the essay “The Philosopher and His Shadow” (a true manifesto for the elaboration of the “new ontology”), we might say, therefore, that in the *thématisation* mentioned above, Merleau-Ponty finds a *sui generis* teleology, “which is written and thought about in parentheses” (S, 228/181).¹³ In the summary of his first course on Nature, Merleau-Ponty underscores how this teleology, unlike the “proper” one, contributes to the characterization of Nature as “oriented and blind productivity.”¹⁴ The aspect of orientation here—as explained in the notes on Uexküll’s framework—should be understood “as something similar to the orientation of our oneiric consciousness toward certain poles that are never seen for themselves, but which are, however, directly the cause for all the elements of a dream” (N, 233/178).

Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that, on this basis, “we shouldn’t see, in the very numerous individualities that life constitutes, corresponding separated absolutes, in relation to which every generality would only represent beings of reason [*êtres de raison*]” (N, 247/189, trans. modified). He explains that, rather, they return “an ontological value back to the notion of species” (ibid.).¹⁵ Yet what does he mean by the “ontological value” of the notion of species? And why does he deem this point so important that he returns to it again and again?¹⁶ Finally, in what sense does returning an ontological value to the notion of species help to delineate the “new ontology” which Merleau-Ponty wants to work out?

III. VOYANCE

We might look for an answer to these questions in the preparatory notes of one of the two courses interrupted by Merleau-Ponty's death. This course bears the title "Cartesian Ontology and the Ontology of Today." The notes for this course discuss how the experiences of contemporary art and literature converge toward delineating a "new ontology," and how they serve to specify the features of this new ontology. From these notes emerge the developing lines that Merleau-Ponty wanted to follow in reconsidering, according to this new ontological perspective, the relation between the sensible and the intelligible, i.e., the relation between existence and essence. (To reiterate, Merleau-Ponty considered these lines of development to be *operating*—even if they are not made philosophically explicit—in contemporary ontology.) The notes are particularly clear in this regard.

At the very centre of these lines of development there appears a notion—thematized at last—which had often, but only implicitly, been present in the later texts of Merleau-Ponty (it is formulated only once in *Eye and Mind*).¹⁷ This notion is *central* in reconsidering the relation between the sensible and the intelligible. It is the notion designated by the term *voyance*.¹⁸

Voyance literally indicates "clairvoyance," the "gift of double sight," but, in view of the misunderstandings that might occur if such a notion is given a Platonistic interpretation, we shall continue to use the original French term. In an effort to understand fully the import of this notion, we shall turn to it after briefly reviewing the overall project for the course in which the notion finds its place.

As I have already suggested, the task of this course is to try (in part through a direct contrast with Cartesian ontology) to give a philosophical formulation to contemporary ontology, which—according to Merleau-Ponty—has until now found its expression particularly in art and in literature. The first stop that he envisions for his journey is thus a survey of the landscape of "contemporary ontology," as it is spontaneously and implicitly delineated in art and in literature: "especially in literature" (NC, 391), he emphasizes at a certain point. This remark is worth noting for those who claim that the last phase of Merleau-Ponty's thought refers exclusively to painting. Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the *artistic* domain does indeed concentrate on painting, following the path already traced out in *Eye and Mind*. But when it comes to the recognition of the literary domain, here Merleau-Ponty intends to examine the work of Proust as well as the investigations of Valéry, Claudel, and other authors of the "recent literature" (NC, 191) individuated in Saint-John Perse and in Claude Simon.¹⁹

Although unmentioned in this program, there is another literary reference that assumes a theoretically central position in the definition of the contemporary ontological landscape in Merleau-Ponty's view. This reference is to Arthur Rimbaud's *Lettre du voyant*. Merleau-Ponty arrives at this reference via a statement by Max Ernst that assimilates the present task of the painter to precisely the task that Rimbaud's manifesto assigns to the poet: "Just as the role of the

poet since [Rimbaud's] famous *Lettre du voyant* consists in writing under the dictation of what is being thought, of what articulates itself in him, the painter's role is to circumscribe and project what is making itself seen within himself."²⁰ Both have to bring to expression, as it were,—in terms that inevitably recall Uexküll's notion of “a melody which sings itself”—what following Merleau-Ponty we might call “the passivity of our activity” (VI 274/221), that is the reflexivity of Being itself.

From this perspective, *voyance* ends up baptizing that “new bond between the writer and the visible” (NC, 190), which Merleau-Ponty sees as enforced by the research he calls “modern” (though we were saying that it should be understood as contemporary) and which according to Merleau-Ponty can rediscover the “Renaissance beyond Descartes” (NC, 175). As he explains, “[t]he moderns rediscover the Renaissance through the magical idea of visibility: it is the thing that makes itself seen (outside and inside), over there and here” (NC, 390). While on the one hand Merleau-Ponty contends that “da Vinci vindicates *voyance* against poetry” (NC, 183)—which, unlike painting, da Vinci considers to be “incapable of ‘simultaneity’” (NC, 175)—at the same time Merleau-Ponty notes that “moderns make of poetry also a *voyance*” (NC, 183). Therefore, they show that poetry is indeed “capable of simultaneity.” The frequent effort to bring simultaneity to expression is thus, according to Merleau-Ponty, one of the characteristic traits of contemporary ontology.²¹

At this point Merleau-Ponty departs from Descartes' view of vision. Descartes reduces vision to a kind of *thought*—a kind of thought that is stimulated by images, in just the way that thought is stimulated by signs and words. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty conjectures that the “unveiling of the ‘*voyance*’ in modern art—a *voyance* which is not Cartesian thought—might have [an] analogue in the arts of *speech*” (NC, 182–183; my emphasis). He suggests that “[p]erhaps, we should, instead of reducing vision to a reading of signs by thought, rediscover in speech, conversely, a transcendence of the same type that occurs in vision” (ibid). Indeed, it is precisely to this that he thinks Rimbaud has contributed in a decisive way.

Voyance—which in the mutual referring of perception and the imaginary, “renders present to us what is absent” (OE, 41/132)—hence characterizes Merleau-Ponty's conception of seeing. As Heidegger reminds us, seeing is not *vorstellen*, i.e., ‘to represent by frontal positioning’ and, by doing so, ‘to subject.’²² Seeing should instead be regarded as ‘complying with’—a verb which expresses the indistinguishability of activity and passivity. With *voyance*, we discover that seeing is a complying with the showing of the sensible universe itself, within which we find ourselves and through which runs the power of analogy.²³ In virtue of this power, bodies and things recall and implicate each other, establish new relations, invent lines of force and of flight, and, in the end, draw what Husserl expressed as a “*logos* of the aesthetical world.”²⁴ This expression of Husserl's is often used by Merleau-Ponty precisely because of the reconsideration it suggests of the relationship between the sensible and the intelligible.

As a result of the fact that it offers this characterization of seeing, *voyance* helps to characterize that “ontological mutation” which—in relation to the concept of Nature—we have seen promoted by Merleau-Ponty’s effort: the “mutation of the relationship between humanity and Being” (*OE*, 63/139, trans. modified) that in *Eye and Mind* he confesses to feeling “when he holds up a universe of classical thought, contrasting it en bloc with the explorations of modern painting” (*ibid.*), the same mutation which a dense working note of *The Visible and the Invisible* finds manifest in “atonal music” (atonal music is in fact assimilated to “paintings without identifiable things, without the *skin* of things, but giving their *flesh*”²⁵), that very mutation which, therefore, consists in a *carnal* configuration of the relationship between humanity and Being. This mutation is obviously not expressible in the language of consciousness, of representation, of the modern frontality between subject and object. This is why Merleau-Ponty judges contemporary literature as linking, with the visible, that “new bond” which might be configurable as *voyance*.

After having examined the conception of language that Descartes expressed with regard to the idea of a universal language,²⁶ and after having seen in this conception “the equivalent of the theory of perspective” (*NC*, 183),²⁷ Merleau-Ponty turns to the contrasting contemporary conception of language, which—according to him—characterizes language “not as an instrument in which thought would be as the pilot in his boat—but as some sort of substantial union of thought and language—Language not governed, but endowed with its own efficacy” (*NC*, 186). The *Lettre du voyant* becomes an emblem of this contemporary conception, since there the autonomy of language is pushed to such a point that poetry is supposed to be *voyance*. This is why Merleau-Ponty considers Rimbaud “a fundamental milestone within a development of literature which began before and continues after him” (*NC*, 187). Echoing that “mutation of the relationship between humanity and Being,” which *Eye and Mind* sees expressed by painting, Merleau-Ponty writes: “It might be the case of a change of the relationship with the Being in the writer starting from Romanticism” (*ibid.*). As we have already seen, the change he has in mind is a change of the relationship between the visibility of the first and the speech of the other, which—instead of aiming at designating meanings²⁸—mixes with things and, just as, for Rimbaud, “the wood which finds itself a violin,” it becomes a sensible emblem of the sensible itself.²⁹

Merleau-Ponty sees another manifestation of this change (while claiming that this very manifestation entails a sketch of a non-Platonistic theory of ideas as I have already noted in the introduction³⁰) in the pages of the first volume of the *Recherche*, pages to which he returns again and again throughout the course of his reflections and to which we have already seen him connect Uexküll’s metaphor of melody. These pages are those in which Proust distinguishes “musical ideas”—as well as literary ones, and also “our notions of light, of sound, of perspective, of physical pleasure, the rich possessions wherewith our inner temple is diversified and adorned”—from the “ideas of the intelligence.” The former

are “veiled in shadows” and therefore “impenetrable to the human mind, but none the less perfectly distinct from one another, unequal among themselves in value and significance.”³¹

Thus, the preparatory notes we are considering have an additional point of interest, insofar as, by newly examining just those pages of the *Recherche* that *The Visible and the Invisible* was commenting on when it was interrupted by its author’s sudden death,³² they suggest what the developments of that commentary might have been.

The Visible and the Invisible defines as “sensibles” the ideas described by Proust,³³ for they appear to be inseparable from their sensible presentation (as we have seen even when Merleau-Ponty connects them to Uexküll’s melody metaphor). It is to our sensible finitude, therefore, that they are offered.

The course notes proceed to consider, in their own right, the grounds on which such ideas had been assimilated by Proust to the notion of light in particular. In fact, as Merleau-Ponty explains, the encounter with these ideas, just like the one with light—“visible light” (NC, 194), he specifies—and just like the one with the sensible, is an “initiation to a *world*, to a small eternity, to a dimension which is by now inalienable—Universality through singularity” (NC, 196).

Moreover, the notes continue, “here just as there, in light just as in the musical idea, we have an idea which is not *what* we see, but is behind it” (ibid.). If, on the one hand, this transcendence restrains us from possessing such ideas—from conceptually grasping them, as light is likewise ungraspable—, on the other hand, it compels them to show themselves (again just as light does) in what they illuminate. Something similar happens to the idea of love in the *petite phrase* of the Vinteuil’s *sonata* that had once been the “national anthem” of Swann and Odette’s love.

Therefore, it is toward such transcendence that the sensible finitude is an opening: that very “transcendence of the same type that occurs in vision” which, as we have seen, Merleau-Ponty holds that we should rediscover in speech and which he recognizes in Rimbaud’s poetics of *voyance*. It is, precisely, the transcendence of *voyance*: not a “second sight” directed to the intelligible, but rather a vision that sees the invisible in the visible and thus allows us to find, within the very veil of music or of literary speech, the invisible of the idea that shines through—as Proust has taught us.

IV. “GENERALITY OF THINGS”

We find here an explanation for why Merleau-Ponty insists on the importance of returning an ontological value to the notion of species. More generally, the notion of *voyance* has the merit of making clear the sense of the question—at first glance a surprising one—that appears in a working note of *The Visible and the Invisible* dated November, 1959: “Generality of things: why are there several samples of each thing?” (VI 273/220; trans. modified). Judging by what we have said up to now, the sentence that immediately precedes this

question seems to provide an answer: “the things are Essences at the level of Nature” (ibid.).

In other words, each thing as generality is a sensible idea. Likewise with each species.³⁴ Hence, returning an ontological value to the notion of species means to recognize this notion as a sensible idea, rather than to consider it merely as a “being of reason.” It certainly is not an idea in the Platonistic sense, which—as Merleau-Ponty emphasized—would remain “outside of time” as well as outside space: an idea which would be presupposed as an *origin* by its samples. On the other hand, neither is it an empiricist inductive generalization,³⁵ which inevitably would take place *a posteriori* with respect to the samples. Rather, as we have seen, it is a generality that, as a “transtemporal and transspatial element” (N, 230/176), shines through (“*trans*”) its samples. In fact, these samples are what provide us with the *initiation*, “that is—as Merleau-Ponty explains in *The Visible and the Invisible*, commenting on Proust’s thought—, not the positing of a content, but the opening of a dimension that can never again be closed, the establishment of a level in terms of which every other experience will henceforth be situated. The idea is this level, this dimension. It is therefore . . . the invisible of this world, . . . the Being of this being” (VI, 198/151).

The sensible idea is, therefore, a “dimension” which opens up simultaneously with our encounter with its samples, thus offering to us an anticipation of knowledge which “can never again be closed.” The sensible idea thus turns out to be marked by a temporality—to which also the term “initiation” refers—which is similar to the one that marks the rhythm of a melody. In discussing Uexküll’s metaphor, in fact, Merleau-Ponty reminds us that “in a melody, a reciprocal influence between the first and the last note takes place, and we have to say that the first note is possible only because of the last, and vice versa” (N, 228/174).³⁶

In Merleau-Ponty’s view, it is this very temporal structure that seems to allow Uexküll’s notion of *Umwelt* to escape the opposing “concepts of *artificialism*,” i.e., causalism and finalism. The notion of *Umwelt* does not claim to be outside of time, nor is it subjected to the law of temporal succession. Consequently, it avoids the separation between the sensible and the intelligible, existence and essence, variations and theme.³⁷ Thus, the (animal) theme only exists *together* with the variations which on the one hand deny it—being variations—but which by this very negation indirectly affirm it.

Hence, mediated by the description given by Proust of the musical idea, Uexküll’s perspective seems to characterize the theme as the *absent* which only its own variations can indirectly make present,³⁸ and which is therefore *inseparable* from and *simultaneous* with them. The variations themselves constitute the theme, without however exhausting it: they constitute it as their own excess,³⁹ as it were. By connecting the conceptions of Uexküll and Proust we are brought back to what Merleau-Ponty already reminded us of in his first work: “in the melody each [note] is demanded by the context and contributes its part in expressing *something which is not contained in any one of them and which binds them together internally*” (SC, 96/87).

It is in this light that the sensible idea itself, in relation to its own samples, finds its definition. The notion of *voyance*, which for Merleau-Ponty asserts its rhythm in simultaneity, allows us to rethink the relation between the sensible and the intelligible: in our vision, the particular, while offering itself as such, *contemporaneously* dimensionalizes itself and becomes a universal, like “a note that becomes tonality.”⁴⁰ In other words, the particular becomes an “element” to which we are *initiated*. Thus, the *voyance* enables us to trace the genesis of the sensible idea—or, in other words, the sensible genesis of the idea, which is, after all, the empirical genesis of the transcendental, as I will explain in the next chapter—in the vision of the individualities *amongst* which the generality takes its shape, and—like “something which is not contained in any one of them and which binds them together internally”—it radiates throughout these very individualities, eliciting the glimmering of an anticipation of knowledge.⁴¹

The sensible idea, then, should not be conceived as an abstract substitute for what is perceived, as though it were its imprint and, as such, separable and therefore graspable. Rather, it should be understood—as I mentioned above—in terms of an *absence*, which is for this reason always *missed* in every attempt to grasp it.⁴² It is an absence indirectly presented by its samples, which refer back to it in a convergent manner.

The *voyance*—which, on the analysis that I have so far proposed, sees in a given entity the shaping of its own Being, and which therefore cannot separate existence and essence—comes to manifest itself as *Wesensschau*. However, it does not consist in the operation of a Subject which is *Kosmotheorós* in a modern sense, but rather in a thought that is one with that sensible seeing which I have proposed to define as ‘*complying with*’, *from within*, the showing of the sensible itself. This is thus a thought that works through a *carnal Wesensschau*⁴³ which, precisely for this reason, is a *synaesthetic* one.⁴⁴ To use the telling expression from the title of Paul Claudel’s book (to which Merleau-Ponty refers in his lectures on “the ontology of today”⁴⁵), we might say that this is the *Wesensschau* of a *listening eye*: an expression which, synaesthetically, refuses any analytical separation between the sensory fields and more particularly between the presupposed activity of seeing and the presupposed passivity of listening. By conferring a mature philosophical formulation to the operation of this eye, we might perhaps reach the “new ontology” that Merleau-Ponty hoped to elaborate.