# On the Problem of Exupérian Heroism in Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception

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## Abbreviations Used in Text

*Merleau-Ponty :*

| | |
|---|---|
| AD | *Les aventures de la dialectique* [*Adventures of the Dialectic*] |
| CR | "Christianisme et ressentiment" ["Christianity and Ressentiment"] |
| EP | *Leçon Inaugurale* ["In Praise of Philosophy"] |
| HT | *Humanisme et terreur* [*Humanism and Terror*] |
| IN | *Notes inédites de Merleau-Ponty, 1946-1949* |
| PhP | *Phénoménologie de la perception* [*Phenomenology of Perception*] |
| Pros. | "Un inédit de Maurice Merleau-Ponty" ["An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: A Prospectus of His Work"] |
| PrP | "Le primat de la perception" ["The Primacy of Perception"] |
| SC | *La Structure du comportement* [*The Structure of Behaviour*] |
| SNS | *Sens et non-sens* [*Sense and Non-Sense*] |
| TT | "Titres et travaux" |

*Saint-Exupéry :*

| | |
|---|---|
| Carnets | *Carnets, édition intégrale* |
| EG | *Écrits de guerre* |
| PG | *Pilote de guerre* |
| SV | *Un sens à la vie* |
| TH | *Terre des hommes* |

See bibliography for complete bibliographic information.

Where applicable, page references for works by Merleau-Ponty are given in the form 'original/translation'. Translations are, however, frequently modified.

Existing translations of works by Saint-Exupéry are not referred to, as these are often based on substantial textual differences.

## Note on Gender-Exclusive Language

As is conventional, gender-exclusive language in original texts – of which there is an abundance in the works under consideration – is reproduced in quotation. According to the sense, however, it is often also retained in discussion, in order to avoid conveying a misleading impression of inclusivity. For it is precisely the question of the inclusivity of 'humanist universality' that forms the backdrop for the following discussion. Although I do not take up the question directly in this dissertation, I would argue that the masculinist androcentrism that is patent on the surface of Saint-Exupéry's writing actually runs deeply enough as to irredeemably compromise the humanist claims that he makes. That is not a very controversial claim. However, whether Merleau-Ponty's work is likewise compromised by sexist ideology, or else whether it has valuable resources to offer the project of feminist philosophy—this *is* a live and important question. Inasmuch as the present work sheds new light on Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, it can make a contribution to the resolution of this question. But I do not want to prejudge the outcome of this by charitably reading into Merleau-Ponty's work an inclusivity that it has not as yet demonstrated its capacity to support.

## Abstract

In this dissertation I seek to ascertain why Merleau-Ponty concludes his *Phenomenology of Perception* with lines drawn from Saint-Exupéry's *Pilote de guerre*. This ending has received no critical scrutiny in the literature on Merleau-Ponty. Yet it is quite puzzling; for the content of the cited passage is antithetical to the philosophical thrust of Merleau-Ponty's work. And yet, it is linked to the idea of 'the realization of philosophy'. Given that this idea constitutes the guiding impetus of Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology, a comprehensive understanding of Merleau-Ponty's project requires coming to terms with the role of Saint-Exupéry within it.

To this end, I examine the major themes of Saint-Exupéry's work, in particular the 'cosmic humanism' of *Pilote de guerre*, showing that this is based on a spiritual account of self-sacrificial action. I then reconstruct the core of Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology as a 'militant' philosophy, focusing my analysis around the notion of 'human productivity'. On this basis, I provide a detailed reading of Merleau-Ponty's essay "Man, the Hero" in terms of post-Hegelian philosophy of history, and I provide a detailed comparison of Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty with regard to truth and freedom.

This analysis reveals that heroism for Merleau-Ponty is the manifestation of pure human productivity and, as such, is a phenomenally objective purposiveness. Drawing on Kant's third *Critique*, I conclude that the rationale for Merleau-Pontian heroism is to furnish sensory evidence attesting to the possibility of a solution to the human problem. Through the concept of the hero, or of heroic purposiveness, we are able to cognize the potential suitability of the natural world for the realization of human reconciliation. The hero is thus the linchpin of Merleau-Ponty's teleology of consciousness, and of the transcendental project that hinges on this teleology.

# Résumé

Le but de cette thèse consiste à établir la raison pour laquelle Merleau-Ponty conclut sa *Phénoménologie de la perception* avec quelques lignes extraites de *Pilote de guerre*, de Saint-Exupéry. Cette conclusion n'a été l'objet d'aucun examen critique au sein de la littérature sur Merleau-Ponty. Il s'agit pourtant d'une question intriguante, étant donné que le contenu du passage cité va à l'encontre du courant général de la philosophie de Merleau-Ponty. Pourtant, il se trouve lié à l'idée de la « réalisation de la philosophie ». Compte tenu que cette idée constitue la ligne directrice de sa phénoménologie existentielle, une compréhension en profondeur du projet de Merleau-Ponty requiert que l'on prenne acte du rôle qu'y joue Saint-Exupéry.

À cette fin, j'examine les principaux thèmes de l'œuvre de Saint-Exupéry, en particulier l'« humanisme cosmique » de *Pilote de guerre*, dont je démontre qu'il est basé sur un compte rendu spirituel de l'action auto-sacrificielle. Je reconstruis ensuite le noyau de la philosophie existentielle de Merleau-Ponty en tant que « philosophie militante », en concentrant mon analyse sur la notion de « productivité humaine ». En partant de ça, je fournis une explication détaillée du texte « Le Héros, l'Homme », en termes d'une philosophie post-hégélienne de l'histoire, et je mets également la pensée de Merleau-Ponty en comparaison avec celle de Saint-Exupéry en ce qui concerne la vérité et la liberté.

Cette analyse révèle que l'héroïsme, pour Merleau-Ponty, est une manifestation de pure productivité humaine, et qu'en tant que tel, il est une finalité phénoménalement objective. En me basant sur la Troisième *Critique* de Kant, je conclus que la raison qui rend compte de l'héroïsme merleau-pontien consiste à fournir des données sensorielles attestant de la possibilité d'une solution au problème humain. Par le concept de héros, ou de finalité héroïque, nous pouvons appréhender le caractère potentiellement adéquat du monde naturel quant à la réalisation de la réconciliation humaine. Le héros est ainsi le pivot de la téléologie merleau-pontienne de la conscience, et du projet transcendantal qui dépend de cette téléologie.

## Preface : Rereading *Phenomenology of Perception*

This dissertation proposes a new reading of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. Or at least the beginnings of one. Although this text has been studied for sixty years, I am convinced that what makes it so philosophically stimulating, yet at the same time so problematic, remains obscure. I believe that one main reason for this is that two texts which play vital methodological roles in *Phenomenology of Perception* have received very little attention in the literature on Merleau-Ponty. These are Eugen Fink's *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Pilote de guerre*. Although the significance of these intertwine, this dissertation is limited to examining the latter. I thus approach *Phenomenology of Perception* from its end, asking why it culminates with a set of lines drawn from *Pilote de guerre*. Posed generally, this is the question of the 'hero' in Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology. That this question is a rich and meaningful one is attested to by the wide array of issues that arise in the course of trying to answer it. Most importantly, however, it speaks directly to the fundamental issue of the *transcendental* nature of Merleau-Ponty's existential-phenomenological project. The distinctive character of this project rarely comes into view, because its theoretical (philosophical) and practical (political) aspects are typically approached in artificial isolation. By compelling a more unitary approach to his work, an examination of the methodological role of the hero serves to cast fresh light on how Merleau-Ponty initially oriented himself in the transcendental tradition. The following work is thus intended as prolegomenous to a renewed critical interrogation of the Merleau-Pontian *oeuvre*.

# Introduction : Flight from Phenomenology?

As readers of *Phenomenology of Perception* are aware, Merleau-Ponty concluded this work with the following series of enigmatic sentences selectively excerpted from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's 1942 book *Pilote de guerre*:[1]

> Ton fils est pris dans l'incendie, tu le sauveras... Tu vendrais, s'il est un obstacle, ton épaule contre un coup d'épaule. Tu loges dans ton acte même. Ton acte, c'est toi... Tu t'échanges... Ta signification se montre, éblouissante. C'est ton devoir, c'est ta haine, c'est ton amour, c'est ta fidélité, c'est ton invention... L'homme n'est qu'un nœud de relations, les relations comptent seules pour l'homme.
>
> Your son is caught in the fire, you will save him... If there is an obstacle, you would give your shoulder to knock it down. You live in your act itself. Your act *is* you... You give yourself in exchange... Your true significance becomes dazzlingly evident. It is your duty, your hatred, your love, your loyalty, your ingenuity... Man is but a knot of relations; these alone matter to man.[2]

It is, however, a remarkable fact about Merleau-Ponty scholarship that these lines, which come at the very end of his most important work – and which thus occupy, so to speak, the single most prestigious piece of textual real estate in his entire corpus – have received no critical attention whatsoever. Many commentaries on Merleau-Ponty, even those that discuss *Phenomenology of Perception* in detail, simply make no reference to the way the book ends.[3] To be sure, many others do refer to it, albeit usually

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[1] See supplementary note A.

[2] PhP 520/456. See supplementary note B.

[3] For example, none of these major commentaries mention Saint-Exupéry: Alphonse De Waelhens, *Une philosophie de l'ambiguïté: l'existentialisme de Maurice Merleau-Ponty* (Nauwelaerts, 1951); Remy C. Kwant, *The Phenomenological Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty* (Duquesne University Press, 1963); Martin C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (Northwestern University Press, 1988); Renaud Barbaras, *De l'être du phénomène: sur l'ontologie de Merleau-Ponty* (Jérôme Millon, 1991).

only to the final line, i.e., "Man is but a knot of relations; these alone matter to man."[4] But without exception these commentators do so by way of giving to Saint-Exupéry's words an approving Merleau-Pontian gloss.[5] That is, they tacitly assume that over and above simply quoting from *Pilote de guerre*, Merleau-Ponty was agreeing with or otherwise endorsing Saint-Exupéry's words in some more or less significant philosophical sense.[6] The same assumption is standardly made in the literature on Saint-Exupéry whenever Merleau-Ponty's allusion to him is discussed.[7] The idea, as

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[4] Barry Cooper is an exception in that he refers to the entire citation, but he still gives it a Merleau-Pontian reading; see *Merleau-Ponty and Marxism: From Terror to Reform* (University of Toronto, 1979), 20. Others allude to Saint-Exupéry without making reference to the ending of *Phenomenology of Perception* at all. For example, Gary Brent Madison points out some similarities between *Phenomenology of Perception* and *Terre des hommes*; see *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness* (Ohio University Press, 1981), 52, 316n21. While making indirect reference to Saint-Exupéry, Laurie Spurling noted Merleau-Ponty's many "almost mystical" statements about human existence; see *Phenomenology and the Social World: The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty and Its Relation to the Social Sciences* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 133.

[5] Such a reading might appeal to the Preface of *Phenomenology of Perception*, where Merleau-Ponty clearly alludes to Saint-Exupéry in saying, in his own words, that "we are this knot [*nœud*] of relations" (PhP xvi/xx). However, because Merleau-Ponty was predicating it of the plural "we," *this* knot of relations refers to a reality very different from that invoked at the end of the book, which makes the *individual* into a matter of pure relationality ('man is *but* a knot of relations'). This is linked to the usual – though erroneous – translation of Saint-Exupéry's "nœud" as "network"—a translation which *does* work for Merleau-Ponty's use of the term in the Preface. For this takes the term 'man' as the collective noun 'humanity' and thus imparts a much more unproblematic intersubjective meaning to the Exupérian lines than they actually support. In other contexts Saint-Exupéry does refer to humanity as a network [*réseau*], but in the passage in question "man" refers unambiguously to the human individual. Lewis Galantière, who translated *Pilote de guerre* into *Flight to Arras* in close consultation with Saint-Exupéry, rendered the locution "nœud de relations" adjunctively as "a knot, a web, a mesh," not *of* but "*into which* relationships are tied" (*Flight to Arras*, 183, emphasis added).

[6] In *Merleau-Ponty's* Phenomenology of Perception*: A Guide and Commentary* (The Florida State University Press, 1989), Monika M. Langer expresses the conventional wisdom in this way: "As an 'intersubjective field' we are, *as Saint-Exupéry noted*, 'but a network of relationships'," 147 (emphasis added). Although he puts it in terms of temporality, John F. Bannan says as much in *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), 138. Among recent works that make the same sort of assumption are James B. Steeves, *Imagining Bodies: Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Imagination* (Duquesne University Press, 2004), 158; and Jack Reynolds, *Merleau-Ponty and Derrida: Intertwining Embodiment and Alterity* (Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 2004), 24 (although Reynolds actually misquotes by dropping the crucial "but").

[7] See, for example, Jean-Louis Major, *Saint-Exupéry: l'écriture et la pensée* (Éditions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1968), 150, 243, 260f; Barnett DeRamus, *From Juby to Arras:* Engagement *in Saint-Exupéry* (University Press of America, 1990), 134f; André-A. Devaux, *Saint-Exupéry et Dieu*, 2nd edition (Desclée de Brouwer, 1994), 81.

expressed by Colin Smith, is that at the end of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty "allows the author of *Pilote de guerre* to speak for him."[8]

Yet *qua* philosopher, Merleau-Ponty actually fell conspicuously silent here—as he wrote unequivocally, "*c'est ici qu'il faut se taire.*"[9] Taken at his word, then, Merleau-Ponty was not even quoting Saint-Exupéry, because *he* was no longer speaking at all.[10] *A fortiori* he was not being spoken *for*. Rather, Merleau-Ponty *deferred* to Saint-Exupéry *qua* "hero," that is, as someone who "lives to the limit [*jusqu'au bout*] his relation to men and the world" by enacting an affirmative response to the practical question: "Shall I give my freedom to save freedom?"[11] And Merleau-Ponty tied this deference directly to the *realization* of philosophy. Taking his cue from the young Marx,[12] he affirmed that philosophy "realizes itself by destroying itself as separate philosophy,"[13] with the implication that this 'destruction of separateness' is in some sense the work of heroism. Although the precise meaning of this dialectical claim is far from clear, what *is* clear is that on the final page of *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty drew an unmistakable line between philosophy and non-philosophy that is meant to bear directly on nothing less than the success or failure of his philo-

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[8] Colin Smith, "Saint-Exupéry and the Problem of Embodiment," pp261-274 in *Mélanges de littérature française moderne offerts à Garnet Rees*, ed. Cedric E. Pickford (Librairie Minard, 1980), 271. (Smith, of course, was the English translator of *Phenomenology of Perception*.)

[9] From the perspective of Merleau-Ponty's later work, Wayne Froman critically addresses this specific silence in "Merleau-Ponty and the Relation Between the *Logos Prophorikos* and the *Logos Endiathetos*," pp409-416 in *Analecta Husserliana* 88, ed. A.-T. Tymieniecka (Kluwer, 2005).

[10] It is thus immaterial here that "silence is still a modality of the world of sound" (PhP 516/452).

[11] "Donnerai-je ma liberté pour sauver la liberté?" (PhP 520/456).

[12] Specifically, from his claim that "you cannot transcend [*aufheben*] philosophy without realizing [*verwirklichen*] it," and conversely that philosophy cannot be realized without being transcended. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction* [1843-44], trans. R. Livingstone and G. Benton, pp243-57 in *Karl Marx: Early Writings* (Vintage, 1975), 250.

[13] "[...] se realise en se détruisant comme philosophie séparée" (PhP 520/456). Cf. SNS 136, 235/79, 133; NI 99, 108, 123, 174. This remained a recurrent theme for Merleau-Ponty; cf. EP 42/51 (1953); "Philosophie et non-philosophie depuis Hegel," 275, 323, 333 (1960/61).

sophical project. Yet this seems to have passed under the radar of virtually all serious commentary. It is almost as if the book itself has not yet been read *jusqu'au bout.*

This is neither a trivial nor merely pernickety point. The underlying concern can be motivated in this way: *given that a leitmotif of Merleau-Ponty's thought is its opposition to "la pensée de survol"* – literally, "fly-over thinking," but this phrase, which denotes the style of thought that takes itself as de-situated and thus as having an absolute perspective, is customarily translated as "high-altitude thinking"[14] – *is it not rather astonishing that* Phenomenology of Perception *ends with the thoughts of an aerial reconnaissance pilot?* Indeed, an aerial reconnaissance pilot who held that "flying and writing are the same thing," that they form a seamless "total experience,"[15] and whose typical literary construction took the form: 'flying over A, I was thinking of B'.[16] *Qua* hero, *Saint-Exupéry is a paradigmatic case of* la pensée de survol. Surely, then, a comprehensive understanding of *Phenomenology of Perception* requires an answer to this question: why on Earth does it end by deferring to Saint-Exupéry?

This dissertation seeks to provide such an answer. The 'heroic' ending of *Phenomenology of Perception* is long overdue for serious critical scrutiny.[17] As we shall see,

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[14] Sartre attributed this expression to Merleau-Ponty in "Merleau-Ponty vivant" [*Les Temps modernes* (October 1961), reprinted in *Situations IV* (Gallimard, 1964), 191. Merleau-Ponty used the expression frequently in *The Visible and the Invisible*, (an unfinished manuscript not published until 1964), but the idea is certainly already present in *Phenomenology of Perception*. But what exactly it should be taken to mean will be greatly enriched by consideration of Saint-Exupéry.

[15] "Pour moi, voler ou écrire, c'est tout un. [...] C'est encore mal dire que l'un prolonge ou complète l'autre. Il s'agit d'une expérience totale." *Le Figaro littéraire*, (27.V.1939); cited in Sully Bernadie, "Pour moi, voler ou écrire, c'est tout un," *Cahiers Saint-Exupéry 3. Textes réunis et présentés par le Comité de l'Association des Amis d'Antoine de Saint-Exupéry* (Gallimard, 1989), 128, 132.

[16] Cf. Stacy Schiff, *Saint-Exupéry: A Biography* (A. A. Knopf, 1995), x.

[17] Although it is occasionally – albeit rarely – *mentioned*, heroism is, as far as I know, never actually *discussed* in the literature on Merleau-Ponty. The nearest thing to an exception is an obscure article by Robert Campbell, "De l'ambiguïté à l'héroïsme chez Merleau-Ponty," pp273-284 in *Cahiers du Sud* 62, no. 390/391 (1966). But even this article is largely expository, offering virtually nothing in the way of analysis, philosophical or otherwise.

such scrutiny will reveal that there is in fact much more going on here than meets the eye. The deference to Saint-Exupéry is a very dense node into which are woven the practical postulates to which Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology was implicitly committed. In this way, the 'hero' is nothing less than the methodological linchpin of this audacious project.

The analysis proceeds as follows:

- Chapter 1 marshals background material on Saint-Exupéry concerning his work and its reception, in particular with respect to *Pilote de guerre*;
- Chapter 2 explores certain neglected themes in Merleau-Ponty's thought pertaining to sacrifice and politics which, clustering around the idea of 'militant' philosophy, bear directly upon the ending of *Phenomenology of Perception*;
- On that basis, Chapter 3 discusses "Man, the Hero," the short but crucial essay with which Merleau-Ponty concluded *Sense and Non-Sense*;
- Chapter 4 deepens the analysis by exploring the relationship between Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty in terms of the themes of truth and freedom, thus pointing to the methodological significance of Exupérian heroism;
- Finally, by way of conclusion it is argued that the sublimation of heroism is an essential ingredient in the methodological consistency of Merleau-Ponty's reinterpretation of transcendental phenomenology, and that this should be understood as a reprise of the basic problematic of Kant's third *Critique*.

As will become apparent, this analysis is crucial for appreciating and understanding the ending – and thus quite possibly the whole – of *Phenomenology of Perception*.[18]

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[18] And arguably by extension the entire subsequent development of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical thought. For this emerged largely on the basis of his self-critical attempt to resolve certain outstanding problems raised by his postwar formulations of existential phenomenology, fundamentally as concerns the "spontaneity" that makes the realization of concrete universality possible (cf. Pros. 42, 48/7, 11). To this extent, our understanding of Merleau-Ponty's later work will necessarily remain limited by any major lacunae in our understanding of his earlier work, and, as we shall see, the role of heroism in *Phenomenology of Perception* is one such lacuna.

# Chapter 1 : Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900-1944)

Saint-Exupéry[1] was born in 1900 into an aristocracy in decline. Not knowing what to do with himself, he found meaning and fulfillment in the fledgling world of aviation. Beginning in 1926, when he was hired on by the Société d'Aviation Latécoère, which later became the Compagnie Générale Aéropostale (usually known simply as Aéropostale, a forerunner of Air France), Saint-Exupéry flew and helped expand the mail delivery lines along the northwest coast of Africa and in Argentina. And he wrote about his experience, doing so quite successfully. In fact, by 1940, Saint-Exupéry had already become a renowned pilot-writer on the basis of his novels *Courrier sud* (1929), *Vol de nuit* (1931), which won the Prix Fémina, and *Terre des hommes* (1939), winner of the Grand Prix du Roman de l'Académie Française.[2] And, of course, he wrote *Le petit prince*. Saint-Exupéry died in 1944, failing to return from an aerial reconnaissance mission over southern France. He is the most translated author in the French language, and until the conversion to the Euro in 2002, his likeness (along with that of the little prince) appeared on France's fifty-*franc* note.

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That's probably about as much as (if not a fair bit more than) the average reader of Merleau-Ponty knows about the person who was given the final word in *Phenomenology of Perception*. This chapter aims to redress this situation by providing background

[1] Although he did not originally hyphenate his name, it has become entirely conventional to do so.

[2] All published by Gallimard.

material concerning Saint-Exupéry and his work that is crucial for understanding *Pilote de guerre* and thus appreciating the significance of Merleau-Ponty's appeal to Exupérian heroism:

- §1.1 traces the development of Saint-Exupéry's humanistic *Weltanschauung* in as this culminates in *Pilote de guerre*;
- §1.2 situates *Pilote de guerre* in its historical context, in particular with regard to political debates concerning French opposition to German Occupation;
- §1.3 examines the main argument of *Pilote de guerre*, showing that it is based on religious invocations of self-sacrifice;
- §1.4 discusses the death and immediate posthumous legacy of Saint-Exupéry as factors of the context within which Merleau-Ponty's appeal to him occurred.

### 1.1 — Toward a Cosmic Humanism

At a narrative level, the works listed above can be described as 'heroic aviation stories'. In contrast, however, to an earlier heroic literature based on the experience of WWI fighter aces – which, even though it typically presented a sanitized and chivalrous dimension of that conflict, was ineluctably constituted by division and enmity – Saint-Exupéry's writing reflects the pioneering years of *commercial* flight. Its horizons are thus broader and its backdrop more universal, as it vividly evokes the perilous human struggle against nature that this enterprise entailed. In this 'golden age' of aviation, one literally flew 'by the seat of one's pants'.[3] Piloting was an undertaking still fraught with tremendous mortal risk, but one willingly engaged in by individuals such as Jean Mermoz and Henri Guillaumet, legendary men of the air whom Saint-

[3] That is, with minimal instrumentation which, depending on the weather conditions, was often of little use anyway. To fly safely, experienced pilots relied heavily on the actual 'feel' of the airplane as transmitted largely through the seat.

Exupéry knew personally and admired as heroes.[4] These were men who, over and above the adventurous derring-do and camaraderie that Saint-Exupéry made central themes in his writing, felt themselves implicitly duty-bound to participate in the larger project of conquering and domesticating nature's wildest elements – mountains, deserts, oceans – that had previously separated peoples, with the aim of forging closer communicative bonds across the globe. In effect, in piloting "Saint-Exupéry had discovered a last bastion of *noblesse oblige*."[5]

Although pilots flew alone, this calling was anything but individualistic. It was certainly true for Saint-Exupéry that, as André Gide wrote in his Preface to *Vol de nuit*, "man's happiness does not lie in freedom, but in the acceptance of a duty."[6] But for Saint-Exupéry, a pilot's sense of duty included a pronounced submission to the discipline of the profession—the noble virtue of individual pilots only emerges from the context of aviation as a collective *métier*.[7] Fraternity and *esprit de corps* were in this way fundamental Exupérian themes, understood as involving the spiritual communion of those who challengingly transcend themselves through wholehearted participation in a common, existentially trying vocation. Saint-Exupéry believed that human beings

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[4] Mermoz fatally crashed in 1936, Guillaumet was shot down in 1940. To this day, they continue to arouse considerable interest; recent biographies include Emmanuel Chadeau, *Mermoz* (Perrin, 2000); and Marcel Migeo, *Henri Guillaumet, pionnier de l'Aéropostale* (Arthaud, 1999).

[5] Schiff, 140.

[6] "Le bonheur de l'homme n'est pas dans la liberté, mais dans l'acceptation d'un devoir." *Vol de nuit*, 11. Cf. Merleau-Ponty's citation of this in "Faith and Good Faith" (SNS 317/178).

[7] In this Saint-Exupéry's work differed from that of other *engagé* writers from the 1930s with which it is often compared, as it structured his understanding of human action at once as both collective and constructive. Cf. Réal Ouellet, *Les relations humaines dans l'œuvre de Saint-Exupéry* (Paris: Minard, 1971), 195; Serge Losic, *L'idéal humain de Saint-Exupéry* (A. G. Nizet, 1965), 27. For example, it contrasted with Hemingway's usual portrayal of action in individualistic terms; see Josette Smetana, *La philosophie de l'action chez Hemingway et Saint-Exupéry* (La Marjolaine, 1965), 77-129, *passim*; also, Barnett DeRamus, *From Juby to Arras:* Engagement *in Saint-Exupéry* (University Press of America, 1990), 37ff. At the same time, it also differed from Malraux's work, where action tended toward adventure and rebellion; see Pierre-Henri Simon, *L'Homme en procès: Malraux, Sartre, Camus, Saint-Exupéry* (À La Baconnière, 1950), 127ff. The significance of this for Merleau-Ponty will be seen below.

possess a natural propensity toward such comradeship, and that this is what ultimately gives meaning to human life. But he also held that the actualization of this requires a hierarchical and paternalistic structure to organize and uphold the collective project as the appropriate sort of *ordeal*, in the strict sense of the term.

This is how Aéropostale worked, and Saint-Exupéry – nostalgic for authority, and increasingly critical of interwar French society – tended to see this organization as a paradigm for a renewed harmonization of individual fulfillment and collective needs in society as a whole. In the 1930s, he was increasingly concerned, not just about the threats posed by fascism and communism, but also and especially about the spiritual vacuity of liberalism. In line with a wider conservative critique of culture at the time, Saint-Exupéry deplored the growing massification and mechanization of humanity.[8] In his preferred metaphors, the contemporary world was being reduced to a "termitarium" [*termitière*] or a society of "robots."[9] "Robot-man, termite-man, man oscillating between assembly-line work and card games; emasculated of all his creative power, [...] spoon-fed a ready-made, standardized culture, as one feeds hay to cattle. That's what man is today."[10]

In Saint-Exupéry's view, the underlying problem with modern liberal democratic society was that its organization precluded "love," that is, "genuine love" [*l'amour veritable*], understood in social-structural terms as a "network of bonds that fosters

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[8] "There are two hundred million men in Europe whose existence has no meaning and who yearn to be born into life" (SV 177; cf. 179).

[9] Cf. SV 174; PG 222, 232; EG 341, 377. In what must surely be the final thing he wrote (a letter dating from 30 or 31.VII.1944), Saint-Exupéry said: "If I'm shot down, I won't regret anything. The termitarium of the future appals me, and I hate their robot virtues" (EG 516).

[10] EG 380.

becoming."[11] Saint-Exupéry emphasized that such a network must be hierarchical. Human existence can enjoy a vibrant and vital meaningfulness only when interpersonal relationships are not directly horizontal, but are rather mediated by the vertical relationship that each individual has with a common transcendent goal. "We breathe freely only when bound to our brothers by a common and disinterested goal. Experience shows that love does not mean gazing at one another, but looking together in the same direction."[12] Expressing a distressed but also fascinated concern about the rise of fascism in the late-1930s, Saint-Exupéry put it thus: "pilots meet if they are struggling to deliver the same mail; the Nazis, if they are offering their lives to the same Hitler; the team of mountaineers, if they are aiming for the same summit. Men do not unite if they approach each other directly, but only by losing themselves in the same god."[13]

In Saint-Exupéry's view, what was lacking in France was any such "god" or "summit," no recognizable "common goal"—in a word, no love, and thus no genuine becoming. By the time he wrote *Terre des hommes*, Saint-Exupéry's writing had thus increasingly taken on the form and metaphorical style of a parable on the deeper meaning of human action. Pressing the question as to *why* Mermoz and Guillaumet, for example – not to mention himself – would risk their lives to deliver a few sacks of

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[11] "[...] *un réseau de liens qui fait devenir*" (PG 198). "In a world become desert, we thirst for comradeship" (SV 178).

[12] TH 198.

[13] "Il faut donner un sens à la vie des hommes," SV 179, originally in *Paris-Soir* (4.X.1938). Cf. SV 173: "the German finds in Hitler the opportunity to care intensely and to offer himself completely, because everything seems larger than life. *We must understand that the power of any movement rests on the man whom it liberates* [délivre]" (italics added). While Saint-Exupéry thought the attractiveness of National Socialism lay in its offering a *prima facie* way out of the spiritual crisis of the time, he did also think that it exacerbated the problem. "When the Nazi respects only what resembles him, he respects nothing but himself. He rejects the creative contradictions, ruins all hope for ascent, and for the next thousand years replaces man with the robot of the termitarium" (EG 341).

other people's mail;[14] or why, to take another example from Saint-Exupéry, a bookkeeper from Barcelona would become a Republican soldier willing to die in a civil war "that at bottom meant little to [him]"[15] – and asking this amid the growing spiritual decadence that he sensed within interwar French society, Saint-Exupéry adopted an exalted tone of moral edification. Regarding the pilot increasingly as a special illustrative case,[16] he depicted variously engaged, seemingly selfless individuals as inspirational exemplars of self-overcoming.

> It must be understood that the gift of oneself, the risk of one's life, loyalty unto death—these are the actions that have greatly contributed to establishing the nobility of man. If you are searching for a model, you will find it in the pilot who gives his life for the mail, in the doctor who dies on the front line of an epidemic, or in the meharist who, at the head of his Moorish platoon, plunges into destitution and solitude.[17]

In consenting "to die for all men, to be part of something universal,"[18] such individuals "accept a truth which [they] could never translate into words, but whose self-evidence seized hold of [them]."[19] What Saint-Exupéry said of the Barcelonan bookkeeper-turned-soldier, prepared to engage in an absurd attack that would almost certainly cost him his life, applies to all: "owing to an ordeal [...] that stripped you of all that is not intrinsic, you discovered a mysterious character born of yourself [...] A great breath

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[14] "Do not try to explain to a Mermoz who is plunging toward [...] the Andes with victory in his heart that he's mistaken, that no letter – a merchant's perhaps – is worth risking his life for. Mermoz will laugh at you. *Truth is the man that is born in him as he passes over the Andes*" (SV 173, italics added).

[15] SV 140, originally in *Paris-Soir* (3.VII.1937).

[16] Cf. Joseph T. McKeon, "Saint-Exupéry, The Myth of the Pilot," pp1084-1089 in *PMLA* 89:5 (1974), who argues that Saint-Exupéry gradually attenuated the élite character of the pilot as his writing developed, such that by *Pilote de guerre*, "the pilot, in spite of the plot, is present only as an intermediary to plead the cause of mankind," 1087.

[17] SV 173. The meharist whom Saint-Exupéry had in mind was presumably a certain unnamed French officer who had been in charge of a colonial outpost in southern Morocco during the Rif War, and who, on the eve of being attacked by them, honourably repaid ammunition owed to the local Berber forces for once having come to their rescue. The idea is that even in waging war against one another, "we are all march toward the same promised lands" (SV 170).

[18] SV 141.

[19] SV 138.

[*souffle*] swept over you and delivered from its shackles the sleeping prince you sheltered—Man."[20] The apparent selflessness of Saint-Exupéry's exemplars thus in reality manifests a liberating metamorphosis into one's *true* self, whereby one incarnates "Man" [*l'Homme*], the "sovereign truth" [*vérité souveraine*] of human existence.[21]

Man is, in effect, Saint-Exupéry's notion of human nature. This is not so much an objective fact, however, as a latent ideal that implies a moral task. Note that *Terre des hommes* ended on this enigmatic, conditional note: "Only Spirit [*Esprit*], *if* it breathe [*souffle*] upon the clay [i.e., 'raw' humanity], can create Man."[22] As in the case of the pilot or the soldier, this 'spiritual breath' would manifest itself in the form of an ordeal that eliminates from the lived experience of the individual that which is inessential and accidental *from the standpoint of the species*. For example, Saint-Exupéry described the enlistment of the bookkeeper, upon hearing of the death of a friend on the Málaga front, as happening thus: "He was not a friend for whom you would have ever felt you had to lay down your life. Yet that bit of news swept over you, over your narrow little life, like a wind from the sea."[23] Man thus denotes human universality, posited as the as-yet-unrealized "common goal" of humanity, a goal which could – *if* Spirit 'breathes' appropriately – unite a world divided, for example, along political, national, or religious lines. Man signifies the becoming of that specific organization of human coexistence which, transcending any opposition between individuality and totality,

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[20] SV 141.

[21] SV 139.

[22] TH 213, emphasis added. Exactly what this 'spiritual breath' amounts to for Saint-Exupéry is not altogether clear; however, it is linked to freedom, which he appropriately described as being "like a favorable wind" (PG 227).

[23] SV 137f.

would optimize freedom and equality through the actualization of what we might call humanity's 'natural fraternity'.[24]

Significantly, Saint-Exupéry illustrated this sort of coexistence with anthropomorphizing 'analogies' to the animal world. For example, in an extended simile, he pointed to the transformation of domesticated ducks when wild ones fly overhead:

> as if magnetized by the great triangular flight, [...] the call of the wild strikes in them some vestige of savagery. The ducks on the farm are thus transformed for an instant into migrant birds. In those hard little heads, until now filled with humble images of ponds, worms, and henhouses, there develops a sense for continental expanses and seascapes, the taste of the wind on the open sea. Tottering from right to left in its wire enclosure, the duck is gripped by a sudden mysterious passion, and by a far-reaching love whose object is unknown.[25]

Humans, too, have a *natural* tendency to a specific authentic existence. And not unlike these ducks, the overcoming of our own domesticity typically requires some kind of instigating vision. The significance of pilots is that they provide a particularly apt image when they, too, literally rise above the vain mundanity and tedious mediocrity of ordinary everyday life. In this way, they were harbingers of a new humanistic creed.

Of course, the interspecific analogy breaks down when we contrast the respective metamorphoses. Humans are not ducks, and Man is not wild. What characterizes the specific 'sovereign truth' of humanity is not a movement of reversion that in some sense recovers the primordial body, but an ecstatic, projective movement *out of* the body and into social relationships. This is illustrated in one of the most well-known passages from *Terre des hommes*. Here Saint-Exupéry recounted how Guillaumet,

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[24] This was, however, hierarchical—Saint-Exupéry was not an egalitarian nor a democrat; see *Carnets* 67, 187, 228; PG 182, 241. For Saint-Exupéry, neither equality nor democracy was a condition of fraternity. On the contrary, "he thought that fraternity will follow from the establishment of a hierarchy between beings and will be its crowning achievement." Ouellet, *Les relations humaines dans l'œuvre de Saint-Exupéry*, 97.

[25] SV 138. Saint-Exupéry made similar analogies involving "the call of the wild" as experienced by eels (SV 139f) and gazelles (TH 195f).

after crashing in the Andes, walked, *thinking only of others*, for five days out of the freezing mountains, uttering upon his return: "what I did, [...] no animal would ever have done."[26] The idea is that any non-human animal would have welcomed the release of death before instrumentalizing its body in this way and to this extent for invisible symbolic ends.[27] Saint-Exupéry proffered Guillaumet's remark as "the noblest ever spoken," for it "situates and honours man" by re-establishing the "true hierarchies"—humanity's transcendence of animality via the subordination of the body to projects of meaning. This is the kernel of Exupérian humanism.

This view elicited a range of reactions from Merleau-Ponty's generation. Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, who was otherwise fairly positively inclined to Saint-Exupéry on account of the quasi-Heideggerian descriptions he offered of his *métier*,[28] objected to it as a mawkish vestige of an outdated moralism.[29] Conversely, in a short but glowing review of *Terre des hommes* that acknowledged the centrality of that passage, Paul Nizan claimed that Saint-Exupéry had "assessed with the greatest possible precision what is possible or impossible for man to be and to do."[30] Simone de Beauvoir had a more moderate view that struck a sounder balance between these positions. She wrote that "although [Saint-Exupéry] talks drivel [*déconne*] when he's thinking

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[26] TH 52. This episode was the basis for Jean-Jacques Annaud's 1995 movie *Wings of Courage* (*Guillaumet, les ailes du courage*), which *cinéastes* know as the first dramatic feature to be shot in IMAX 3D.

[27] Specifically, Guillaumet was concerned that in the absence of his corpse, his wife would be forced to wait several years before being able to collect on his life insurance.

[28] See *The War Diaries of Jean-Paul Sartre: November 1939/March 1940*, trans. Quintin Hoare (Pantheon Books, New York, 1984), 66, 107, 146f, 327f. Cf. *Cahiers pour une morale* (Gallimard, 1983), 326, 501, 503f.

[29] "I am reading *Terre des hommes* with a certain emotion. Yet I do not like the style very much: somewhat vatic, and in the Barrès, Montherlant tradition. [...] And above all," referring to the passage about Guillaumet, "I don't like that new humanism." *The War Diaries of Jean-Paul Sartre*, 54f (27.XI.1939).

[30] Paul Nizan, *Ce Soir*, 30.III.1939, 2. It would be interesting to consider this in the light of Merleau-Ponty's extended discussion of the contrast between Sartre and Nizan in the introduction to *Signs*.

abstractly and in general," *Terre des hommes* "represents a radical change of scene, so that you feel strongly – so very, very strongly – the general possibility of another life for the human reality in general which each of us is. It's one of those rare books in a long while that has made me dream."[31]

This evocative quality stems from the central motif of Saint-Exupéry's work – namely, that of *le survol* – and the growing recognition that flying provides a perspective that can reveal both the world and humanity in a new light. As he put it, the airplane is an instrument that "has disclosed for us the true face of the earth."[32] Freeing us from well-worn pathways of both movement and thought, it "has taught us to travel as the crow flies." Offering the vantage of "Spirit," it shows that "there is a truth that is higher than the pronouncements of intelligence [*intelligence*]."[33] Whereas the latter takes an external, detached, analytical view of visible objects, the former takes a global, involved, and holistic view that focuses, not on objects as such, but on the invisible relations between them.[34] In this way, flying "plunges [one] directly into the heart of mystery,"[35] revealing *nature* as an indifferent cosmos that forms the backdrop for the "life of Spirit."[36] "Only from the height of our rectilinear trajectories do we discover the essential foundation, the fundament of rock and sand and salt in which, here

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[31] *Letters to Sartre*, trans. Quintin Hoare (Arcade Publishing, 1992), 175 (20.XI.1939), 190 (1.XII.1939). Sartre did actually admit that it made him "feel homesick." Cf. *Witness to My Life: The Letters of Jean-Paul Sartre to Simone de Beauvoir, 1926-1939*, ed. S. de Beauvoir, trans. L. Fahnestock and N. MacAfee (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992), 370 (28.XI.1939).

[32] TH 63. The "geography lesson" Saint-Exupéry received from Guillaumet at the start of *Terre des hommes* (TH 16f) is echoed in Merleau-Ponty's observation that geography is an "abstract and derivative sign-language [...] in relation to the countryside in which we have learned beforehand what a forest, a prairie, or a river is" (PhP iii/ix).

[33] PG 145.

[34] Clearly, there is a strong similarity to the distinction between *Verstand* and *Vernunft*.

[35] TH 79.

[36] TH 61; cf. EG 377.

and there, like a bit of moss in the crevices of ruins, life has occasionally ventured to blossom."[37] In this way, it becomes possible "to judge man in cosmic terms,"[38] that is, in terms of the coming of Man.

This perspective – which André Gascht aptly dubbed Saint-Exupéry's "cosmic humanism"[39] – came to the fore most clearly in *Pilote de guerre*, in the account Saint-Exupéry gave therein of the defeat of France in 1940 in the context of his military role as a reconnaissance pilot. This is the key text for our purposes. Before considering this work textually, I will first situate it in its relevant historical context.

### 1.2 — The Historical Context of *Pilote de guerre*

Following the French defeat and the signing of the Vichy armistice, Saint-Exupéry wrote *Pilote de guerre* primarily as an intervention into the counterproductive and, to his mind, pointless sectarianism that bitterly divided the French opposition to Nazism, both within France as well as abroad. By and large, the French were divided between, on the one hand, those factions who had sympathies or were apologetic for Pétain,[40] and, on the other hand, Resistance factions, which themselves were divided into pro- and anti-Gaullist camps. *Pilote de guerre* was an earnest call for unity that explicitly attempted to position itself above all political and ideological disputes. This is a standpoint to which he was first explicitly drawn while in Spain during the Civil War as a correspondent for *Paris-Soir*. The basic idea is this: "To understand mankind and its

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[37] TH 64.

[38] TH 65.

[39] André Gascht, *L'Humanisme cosmique d'Antoine de Saint-Exupéry* (A. G. Stainforth, 1947).

[40] Marshal Henri Philippe Pétain (1856-1951), a WWI hero, was Head of State of Vichy France from 1940 to 1944; he was convicted and sentenced to death for treason, which was commuted to life imprisonment by Charles de Gaulle.

needs, to know its essential reality, we must never set one man's truth against another's. [...] What's the point of discussing ideologies? If they are all sound, they all cancel each other out, and such discussions lead us to despair of mankind's salvation —whereas everywhere about us men manifest the same needs."[41]

The same, that is, if seen from high above, from the point of view of Spirit. Surveying the *drôle de guerre* in this way, Saint-Exupéry elaborated the idea of Man as the "common denominator" [*commune mesure*] of human reality, the universal human essence underlying the disorder that overwhelmed the perception of those caught up in the débâcle on the ground. According to Saint-Exupéry's account of the defeat, *France had sacrificed itself* for the greater cause of realizing "the community of Man." "France played its part, which consisted in offering itself up to be crushed [...] and to have itself buried for while in silence," and it should be judged by its readiness for sacrifice.[42] He thus sought to establish the "transcendental image" of Man – the *truth* of the otherwise 'phony' war – as a common goal and rallying point for those opposed to Nazism.[43]

Unsurprisingly, within the French exile community, who read the work first, and who took their political differences with the utmost seriousness, this standpoint did not win Saint-Exupéry supporters on any side.[44] The work was simultaneously denounced

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[41] TH 201f.

[42] "Il faut juger la France sur son consentement au sacrifice" (PG 138); "La France a joué son rôle. Il consistait pour elle à se proposer à l'écrasement [...] et à se voir ensevelir pour un temps dans le silence" (PG 140).

[43] In a posthumously published letter Saint-Exupéry wrote: "France needs a common denominator that would enable it to renew its genuine qualities and diverse theories around a transcendental image. One can scarcely formulate this problem without posing the conceptual distinction between Intelligence and Spirit" (*Le Monde*, 29.VII.1950; cited in Losic, *L'idéal humain de Saint-Exupéry*, 86).

[44] Although he had some defenders. For example, André Maurois, "Meditation of a French Aviator," in *The Yale Review* 31:4 (June 1942), 819-821.

from all directions: either for being defeatist, an apology for collaboration, or a treasonous call to arms. "Allying himself with no camp, [Saint-Exupéry] was calumniated by all."[45]

As an attempt to articulate the deeper meaning of the fall of France and of the seemingly futile deaths of its soldiers, Saint-Exupéry also hoped that *Pilote de guerre* – translated as *Flight to Arras* – would boost the sagging prestige of France and help persuade America to look beyond the factional quarrels and to intervene in the war—if not on behalf of France, then on behalf of Man. In this regard, *Pilote de guerre* proved vastly more successful than it was among French émigrés. The reaction from American readers, even among those who had been dubious with respect to Saint-Exupéry's earlier works,[46] was generally laudatory,[47] and the book was regarded as "the single most redeeming piece of propaganda" on behalf of France.[48] In a comment that was endorsed by many others, Edward Weeks opined, "this narrative and Churchill's speeches stand as the best answer the democracies have yet found to *Mein Kampf*."[49]

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[45] Schiff, 350.

[46] For example, in "The Fetish of Duty," a review of *Vol de nuit* in *The Nation* (7.IX.1932), 215f, Clifton Fadiman had written that "This is no mere story of adventure – would that it were! – but a dangerous book. It is dangerous because it celebrates a pernicious idea by disguising it as a romantic emotion." But in "Beyond Defeat," a review of *Pilote de guerre* in *The New Yorker* (21.II.1942), 67f, Fadiman described Saint-Exupéry's book as of unquestionable value, "a truly noble attempt to think out his war experiences as a philosopher would." It was like Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, but subtler and more anguished. *Pilote de guerre* was "an important work composed at a pitch of feeling to which, among those who have written about the war, few have attained." Clifton claimed all this despite thinking that *Pilote de guerre* tended to be "lofty" and "extravagant," and even ultimately sermonistic. For in a sense its lofty extravagance captured the conscience of the struggle against fascism.

[47] *Pour la victoire* (7.III.1942): "The American press was unanimous in greeting the emergence of the first great book of this war as an unquestionable masterpiece." Cf. EG 229-233.

[48] Schiff, 363f. Cf. Helen Elizabeth Crane, *L'Humanisme dans l'œuvre de Saint-Exupéry* (The Principia Press of Illinois, 1957), 118: "More than any other book at the time, this work by Saint-Exupéry created, in the American public, the desire to aid a country that had offered itself so fully to sacrifice."

[49] *The Atlantic*, April 1942.

Finally, the reception of *Pilote de guerre* in France when it was published there near the end of 1942 was, aside from its many reactionary detractors,[50] certainly more favorable than it had been among the French exile community.[51] The first printing sold out quickly, and there were numerous positive reviews.[52] But owing to the hazards of speaking freely in Occupied France, this response was rather more muted than it had been in America. It was thus the hysterical furor that *Pilote de guerre* provoked among unabashed collaborationists, and the campaign they orchestrated against it, that dominated the book's initial reception until its banning in early 1943.[53] Ironically, perhaps, it was this more than anything that contributed to the book's popularity and reputation, for it served to mitigate certain lingering suspicions of Saint-Exupéry's sympathies for collaboration.[54] Although it is difficult to trace the uptake of the book once it was driven underground, it is safe to say that it was in fact read,[55] and that it resonated well, inasmuch as it was judged less as a failed political intervention than as a sincere expression of solidarity with those living under Nazi occupation and a moral call to arms in the name of their liberation.

*Le mot juste* from among the contemporary reviews of *Pilote de guerre* belonged to Irwin Edman when he judged that Saint-Exupéry wrote like "a soliloquizing

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[50] See supplementary note A.

[51] To some extent, this may well have been due to the fact that, with the landing of American troops in North Africa, Vichy had been dissolved shortly before, thus in effect obviating a key axis of factional disagreement.

[52] See EG 293-298, 312f.

[53] See EG 298-312, 316-322.

[54] Shortly after the defeat, Saint-Exupéry had been named, without his knowing, a member of the National Council, an assembly of notables in Vichy. He vigorously repudiated this, but to some extent the issue continued to dog him. See Schiff, 350.

[55] Cf. EG 324.

angel."[56] This rings no less true of the military call to arms against the Nazi Occupation that Saint-Exupéry issued to all fighting-age Frenchmen abroad at the same time as *Pilote de guerre* appeared in France.[57] For he did this within a broader call for reconciliation and unity against the common enemy, reiterating the standpoint that had informed *Pilote de guerre*. "Our political discussions are the discussions of ghosts [...] Men of France, let us be reconciled in order to serve. [...] It is time to unite, not to divide; to embrace, not to exclude. [...] Let us abandon all party spirit."[58]

This piece made Saint-Exupéry the object of no small amount of ridicule and vilification—not least because in his call to "abandon all party spirit," he seemed content to send French men to war while delegating the "provisional organization of France" to Britain and America.[59] Perhaps the most devastating – and, for present purposes, the most pertinent – response was that by Jacques Maritain.[60] Although not one easily given to polemic, Maritain engaged in it here, accusing Saint-Exupéry's attempt to rise above politics of vagueness, irrealism, and equivocation, in particular with respect to the question of the armistice. Saint-Exupéry's appeals to French unity, Maritain argued, cannot do away with the fact that some French people are partly responsible for the situation and need to be excluded from the movement for liberation. "The men who made the armistice did not have faith in the people of France, nor in the calling of

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[56] Irwin Edman, "A Frenchman Beyond Defeat or Despair," *New York Herald Tribune Books* (22.II.1942).

[57] "D'abord la France" ["An Open Letter to Frenchmen Everywhere"]. Various versions of this document exist. It was read as a radio appeal by Saint-Exupéry at the end of November 1942; an English translation was published in the *New York Times Magazine* (29.XI.1942), and in French in *Le Canada* (30.XI.1942), which was reprinted in newspapers across North Africa. A critical version is included in EG 264-170.

[58] EG 265, 268.

[59] EG 269.

[60] "Il faut parfois juger (À propos d'une lettre ouverte de Saint-Exupéry)," *Pour la victoire*, (12.XII.1942); reprinted in EG 275-281.

France. Their resentment against the people and their political hatreds played an essential role in this event. Saint-Exupéry would be aware of that if he did not close himself off in a biased way from all political considerations." Although Saint-Exupéry did not want to speak about politics, "he broaches it despite himself, and this in a rather regrettable way." According to Maritain, in the conflicts that divide the French, Saint-Exupéry "sees only personal rivalries and ambitions," and not the political grounds for these conflicts. Although he does not want to set himself up as a judge, "despite himself, he cannot not judge, and he does not judge correctly."[61]

This is broadly applicable to *Pilote de guerre* itself. Although this work offered a grandiloquent moral vision of liberation, it was gravely compromised by being utterly detached from political reality. As we shall see, Saint-Exupéry's moral arguments resorted to a religious discourse that "expressed the escape from history into the realm of eschatology."[62] The view of Man developed in *Pilote de guerre*, which makes this work "the highest expression of Exupérian humanism,"[63] can be fairly and accurately described as *la pensée de survol* of a 'soliloquizing angel'.

### 1.3 — The Ahistorical Text of *Pilote de guerre*

Saint-Exupéry's account of the situation in France was ultimately based on a sort of epiphany that he claimed he underwent during an extremely dangerous aerial reconnaissance sortie that he flew over Arras in May 1940, during which his aircraft came

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[61] "Il faut parfois juger...," EG 279f.

[62] Cf. S. Beynon John, "Saint-Exupéry's *Pilote de guerre*: Testimony, Art and Ideology," pp91-105 in *Vichy France and The Resistance: Culture and Ideology*, eds. R. Kedward and R. Austin (Barnes & Noble, 1985), 103.

[63] Ouellet, *Les relations humaines dans l'œuvre de Saint-Exupéry*, 81.

under heavy fire and was very nearly shot down.[64] Saint-Exupéry's recounting of this episode is the centerpiece of *Pilote de guerre*, and it was from here that the sentences with which *Phenomenology of Perception* ends were drawn.

The overriding theme in Saint-Exupéry's account of this experience is that it excluded any concern with his personal physical survival. On this basis he proposed a more general claim to the effect that in those extraordinary situations when existence itself is at stake, "man ceases to be concerned with himself: what matters to him is only that of which he is a part. If he should die, he would not be severed from that, but would rather meld into it. He would not be losing himself, but finding himself."[65]

It is of the greatest significance to recognize that, according to Saint-Exupéry's story, not only was it known that the odds of returning alive from this mission were extremely low, but it was also known that on account of the sorry state of the French forces at the time, there was no chance, even if he and his crew did manage to return alive, that any reconnaissance information could ever be put to use. In other words, *the suicidal mission was objectively useless*. Useless, that is, from the perspective of 'intelligence'. The point that Saint-Exupéry went to great lengths to insist upon was that in wilfully proceeding anyway, far from resigning themselves to a dismal fate, he and his crew had tacitly responded to a higher moral calling, one rooted in Spirit. According to Saint-Exupéry's account, as with this particular flight, so too with the French war effort in general: "Spirit dominated Intelligence."[66]

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[64] The narrative actually merges that sortie (23.V.1940) with another (uneventful) one from 6.VI.1940; see EG 109n1.

[65] "L'homme ne s'intéresse plus à soi. Seul s'impose à lui ce dont il est. Il ne se retranche pas, s'il meurt: il se confond. Il ne se perd pas: il se trouve" (PG 169).

[66] "L'Esprit, chez nous, a dominé l'Intelligence" (PG 139).

In Saint-Exupéry's account of that flight, the theme of the existential primacy of meaning over life that had been brewing in his earlier works came to full fruition as the claim that bodies lack intrinsic worth, that one's body is nothing more than the dispensable instrument for one's acts of transcendence—and that the "essential act," historically neglected by humanism, is *sacrifice*: "a gift of oneself to the Being of which one will claim to form part."[67] More than just a riveting tale, Saint-Exupéry's account of that near-fatal flight, as a *mise en abyme* for the larger national sacrifice, generated a didactic, sermonizing conclusion concerning the spiritual resurrection of France in terms of Man. "The experience of the flight to Arras taught the author of *Pilote du guerre* the mystery of the supreme sacrifice consummated by Jesus and the Christian martyrs: '"To bear the sins of men..." And each bears the sins of all men.'[68] With this claim, the most radical of Exupérian ethics, we are urged to imitate Christ by expiating the lapse of humanity."[69] *Pilote du guerre* thus culminated in a "Credo" that reads like a homily to self-sacrifice in the name of higher collective ends:

> I shall fight for the primacy of Man over the individual, and of the Universal over the particular.
>
> I believe that the veneration [*culte*] of the Universal exalts and builds up [*noue*] the riches of particularity, and that it founds the only true order, which is that of life. [...]
>
> I believe that the primacy of Man founds the only Equality and the only Freedom that possess significance. [...] I shall fight anyone seeking to subject the freedom of Man to an individual or to a mass of individuals.
>
> I believe that what my civilization calls Charity is the sacrifice granted to Man to establish his dominion. Charity is the gift made to Man through the mediocrity of the individual. It founds Man. [...]

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[67] "[...] un don de soi-même à l'Être dont on prétendra se réclamer" (PG 231). Note the future tense; as with Mermoz *et al*, what matters is what Saint-Exupéry becomes through this ordeal. "What ultimately justifies his mission over Arras is neither the War, nor Duty, nor Civilization, but rather the concrete Man that he becomes through this act." Major, *Saint-Exupéry: l'écriture et la pensée*, 140.

[68] Citing PG 212.

[69] Walter Wagner, *La conception de l'amour-amitié dans l'œuvre de Saint-Exupéry* (Peter Lang, 1996), 123.

I shall fight for Man. Against his enemies. But also against myself.[70]

Although Saint-Exupéry's tone in the conclusion is tediously sanctimonious, such that there is a strong temptation to simply dismiss this part of the book,[71] it is crucial to recognize that it is this alone that clinches the philosophical significance of the reconnaissance misadventure in terms of Saint-Exupéry's account of Man. For in these passages, Saint-Exupéry establishes the specific nature of the secularization of the Christian tradition that his account of Man represents. Positing (a) traditional Christian values and (b) their vitiation by rational humanism, Saint-Exupéry then proposed, as a kind of 'negation of a negation', (c) the refoundation of those values in a new, 'cosmic humanism'. "The profession of faith with which *Pilote de guerre* concludes is at once a vibrant tribute to Christianity for founding in God the values of equality, dignity, fraternity, hope, and charity; but it is also a farewell to Christianity and a call to a new religion [*religion*] of Man in which Man will henceforth be the 'common denominator' required to secure the universality of these values, which alone make life liveable."[72] In his own words, the religion of Man proposed by Saint-Exupéry seeks "to found human relations on the worship [*culte*] of Man beyond the individual, in order that the behaviour of each with respect to himself and to others would no longer be blind conformism to the customs of the termitarium, but the free exercise of love."[73]

Saint-Exupéry's main contention in *Pilote de guerre* – and this is why the narrative and the moral cannot be disunited – is that this loving religiosity cannot be based

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[70] PG 240ff.

[71] For example, in "Saint-Exupéry and the Problem of Embodiment," Colin Smith takes the liberty of assuming the existence of a Saint-Exupéry "who is the author of *Pilote de guerre* minus the tiresomely didactic conclusion," 261.

[72] Devaux, *Saint-Exupéry et Dieu*, 78.

[73] PG 221f.

on a passive relation to Spirit, but only on human acts. "It is only through acts that we found within ourselves the Being of which we claim to form part."[74] Meaning is founded by active self-creation. According to Saint-Exupéry, though, traditional rational humanism, based on the individualistic prejudices of intelligence, has failed to take action seriously.[75] In particular, it has neglected what he regarded as the essential act, *viz.*, sacrifice, which he understood as a "gratuitous gift."[76] Yet this is what is required for love, and for the founding of the new "Community of Man," which can only be the "sum of our gifts."[77]

Thus, "the fundamental discovery of *Pilote de guerre* could be defined as the passage from humanism as abstract and 'given' to a concrete and creative [because giv*ing*] humanism. The only Spirit who can create Man is man himself."[78] The conclusion that turns *Pilote de guerre* into a "breviary of humanism"[79] expresses – *codifies*, in fact – this passage as the move from an attitude of passive spectation to one of creative activity in the context of a collective *métier*. Saint-Exupéry called this "participation." As he put it, "the role of spectator or a witness has always disgusted me. What am I, if I do not participate? I have to participate in order to exist."[80] It is

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[74] "On ne fonde en soi l'Être dont on se réclame que par des actes" (PG 230).

[75] PG 231.

[76] EG 209, 460. "And by gratuitous [*gratuit*] I mean that the *useful* [utile] part is useless [*inutile*] (*Carnets* 67).

[77] PG 239. There are unexpected but important affinities between this view and Marcel Mauss' ethnological work on 'potlatch', which showed that the social and economic life of certain human cultures was based on the pre-eminence of anti-utilitarian sumptuary value over exchange value; cf. "Essai sur le don," *L'Année sociologique 1923-24*. In fact, Saint-Exupéry's notion of gift may be closer to Georges Bataille's more radical notion of "expenditure" [*dépense*]; cf. "La notion de dépense," *La critique sociale* 7 (1933), 7-15; reprinted in *Œuvres complètes* 1:302-320. I shall return to this below.

[78] Major, *Saint-Exupéry: l'écriture et la pensée*, 140

[79] Losic, *L'idéal humain de Saint-Exupéry*, 77.

[80] "Le métier de témoin m'a toujours fait horreur. Que suis-je, si je ne participer pas? J'ai besoin, pour être, de participer." (PG 183).

only through effective creative action that *participates* in a larger social endeavor that abstract individuality can be overcome, and it is only in such overcoming that new bonds with others are effectively established. "It is in participation that man makes himself, that his whole being will shed its skin [*muer*] and acquire a new dimension."[81]

Participatory action is a matter of giving oneself; it is ultimately a process of self-sacrifice that is properly justifiable only in terms of the new humanity that comes into being through it. As Saint-Exupéry put it: "the individual is only a path. What matters is Man, who takes that path."[82] One must *become* Man, *see* as Man, as Saint-Exupéry claimed happened to him during the flight over Arras, when Man "took the place" of his self-concerned individuality.[83] Whence the high-altitude thoughts with which *Phenomenology of Perception* concluded.

Thus, to readers familiar with *Pilote de guerre* – and it is scarcely conceivable that anyone in France circa 1945 who would read Merleau-Ponty's book would *not* have been familiar with it – the lines cited by Merleau-Ponty literally aver that the proper fulfillment of human life lies in a kind of self-sacrificial *ekstasis*, whereby corporeality is transmuted back into the intersubjective relationships wherein its subjectivity was originally constituted. Saint-Exupéry referred to this as "*exchange*." This notion was anticipated in *Terre des hommes*, but only elaborated in *Pilote de guerre*. For Saint-Exupéry, *exchange* was effectively synonymous with *sacrifice* in the sense of creative participation,[84] and as such it can be deemed with little controversy to be *the* central

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[81] Ouellet, *Les relations humaines dans l'œuvre de Saint-Exupéry*, 41.

[82] "L'individu n'est qu'une route. L'Homme qui l'emprunte compte seul" (PG 214).

[83] "[...] s'est installé à ma place" (PG 217).

[84] Major, *Saint-Exupéry: l'écriture et la pensée*, 143; Ouellet, *Les relations humaines dans l'œuvre de Saint-Exupéry*, 30; Losic, *L'idéal humain de Saint-Exupéry*, 56.

concept in Exupérian humanism.[85] Key here is that the body is not the ultimate locus of personal existence, but rather a source of alienation, which is to be literally exchanged, up to and including the point of death, against projective meaningfulness. This is precisely what it means when we read at the end of *Phenomenology of Perception*, "you give yourself in exchange."

But as Saint-Exupéry immediately added, (but this fell to Merleau-Ponty's ellipsis), "you do not experience the feeling of loss in the exchange."[86] In an important sense, then, this is not *really* sacrifice. As with the Maussian view of potlatch as ultimately not disinterested,[87] Exupérian exchange is a matter of restitutive equivalency. "*Rien ne se perd.*"[88] Although it *demands* nothing in return, sacrifice does not go uncompensated in the Exupérian economy. "From the moment one consents to sacrifice oneself for one's ideal, one's whole being enlarges to the dimensions of that ideal."[89] "What you give to the community founds the community—and the existence of a community enriches your own substance."[90] And this holds true even of the ultimate sacrifice.[91] "Death, far from severing the knot [*nœud*] that ties the individual to the community of men, gains him a further bond. Through the gift of his life, supreme

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85 It is also central to Merleau-Ponty's account of freedom—more on that below.

86 "Tu t'échanges. Et tu n'éprouves pas le sentiment de perdre à l'échange" (PG 168).

87 "Even pure destruction of wealth does not signify that complete detachment that one might believe to be found in it. Even these acts of greatness are not without egoism" (*The Gift*, 74).

88 SV 174.

89 Ouellet, *Les relations humaines dans l'œuvre de Saint-Exupéry*, 34.

90 EG 209.

91 "If one 'participates' in something wholeheartedly, and with the thought of getting nothing in return [*non-récompense*] – to save one's country, for example – exchange in death will be rewarded." Losic, *L'idéal humain de Saint-Exupéry*, 56f.

measure of his loyalty, [he] seals a pact with the living and the dead; and this bond, founded in blood, more tightly ensures their communion."[92]

Thus, in the Exupérian world, self-sacrificial disincarnation leads to authentic liberation in spiritual communion. Nothing less nor different than this is expressed in the final words of *Phenomenology of Perception* – i.e., those about the "knot of relations" – that have endeared themselves to so many of Merleau-Ponty's latter-day readers. As Saint-Exupéry wrote in the immediately preceding line: "one's essence appears when the body comes undone," that is, when that "knot" is untied through the individual's death. And in the line immediately following: "The body is an old crock that gets left behind."[93]

### 1.4 — The Death of Saint-Exupéry

Perhaps the single most significant detail concerning Saint-Exupéry's life actually concerns his death: the fact that Saint-Exupéry—who, despite being not only one of France's best-known men of letters, but also too old and physically unfit to fly, had publicly insisted on being remobilized and finagled his way back into active military duty—famously disappeared while on a reconnaissance mission over southern France on 31.July 1944. This was just a few weeks before the liberation of Paris, and some time before the completion of *Phenomenology of Perception*.[94] Although it was not

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[92] Ouellet, *Les relations humaines dans l'œuvre de Saint-Exupéry*, 80f.

[93] "Quand le corps se défait, l'essentiel se montre. L'homme n'est qu'un nœud de relations. Les relations comptent seules pour l'homme. ¶ Le corps, vieux cheval, on l'abandonne" (PG 171).

[94] Little is known about precisely when Merleau-Ponty composed this work. Geraets plausibly claimed that the Preface was written after the rest of the text to satisfy Léon Brunschvicg's request for a clear statement from Merleau-Ponty as to what he meant by 'phenomenology'. See *Vers une nouvelle philosophie transcendantale: La genèse de la philosophie de Maurice Merleau-Ponty jusqu'à la Phénoménologie de la perception* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), 3. If true, that would mean that Merleau-Ponty had a fairly complete version by late 1943, since Brunschvicg died in January 1944. Yet it would

immediately known precisely what happened to Saint-Exupéry,[95] such that for a short period of time the possibility was held open that he had been taken prisoner, with the end of the German occupation it grew increasingly apparent that he had perished, leaving behind that 'old crock' that was his body. And although it was not until April 1948 that he was officially declared as having died for his country,[96] by the time *Phenomenology of Perception* was published in 1945 it was generally taken for granted that its final words were those of a dead man, someone who had died "*une mort glorieuse.*"[97] This is directly tied to Merleau-Ponty's pronouncing Saint-Exupéry a hero. In case there is any doubt as to what he meant by 'living one's life to the limit', it suffices to recall that in his contribution to the inaugural issue of *Les temps modernes*,[98] Merleau-Ponty had written, in no uncertain terms, that when it comes to heroism, "the man who is still able to speak does not know what he is talking about."[99]

The fact of Saint-Exupéry's high-profile death – which quickly acquired a legendary, even quasi-hagiographic status – must be borne in mind throughout this discussion. This renown was reinforced by two posthumous publications. First, in December 1944, Saint-Exupéry's *Lettre à un otage* [*Letter to a Hostage*] appeared in France. This short elegiac text – which was originally written in 1942 as a letter to his close friend

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be quite implausible to think that he would have ended it with Saint-Exupéry as a hero in advance of the latter's death. This could only have been added later in 1944.

95 In fact, it was only in April 2004 that the wreck of his plane was located—as it turns out, he crashed in the Mediterranean. See, for example, André Duchesne, "Des morceaux d'épave de l'avion de Saint-Exupéry formellement identifiés," *La Presse* (8.IV.2004).

96 Schiff, 438.

97 Cf. for example, Jean-Gérard Fleury, "Antoine de Saint-Exupéry," *Pour la victoire* (4.VIII.1945); Claude Morgan, "Hommage à Saint-Exupéry," *Les Lettres françaises* 19 (August 1944), 4; Gustave Cohen, "Saint-Exupéry, poète et héros," *Les Lettres françaises* (23.XII.1944), p1; Emmanuel Mounier, "Fidelité de Saint-Exupéry," *Temps présent* (9.II.1945); André Gide, "Saint-Exupéry", *Combat* 4:149, (10.II.1945), 6.

98 "La Guerre a eu lieu" [The War Has Taken Place"], reprinted in SNS 245-269/139-152.

99 SNS 146/258. Hence Merleau-Ponty's silence at the end of *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Léon Werth, a French Jew living under Nazi Occupation[100] – was regarded by some at the time as "the most beautiful text since the Liberation."[101] And in hindsight it is arguably "the most crystalline expression of Saint-Exupéry's thinking."[102] Here Saint-Exupéry pours out his distress over the peril faced by his friend—and by extension himself. For as he wrote in *Terre des hommes*, anticipating the lines of *Pilote de guerre* found at the end of *Phenomenology of Perception*, "there is only one veritable treasure—the treasure of human relations."[103] But Werth was just one of the millions of "hostages" trapped in Occupied France. An ode to friendship, Saint-Exupéry's text is ineluctably an empathic and emphatic paean to France as the living force that sustained his being, and to which he would not hesitate to give his life. "One only dies for that by which one can live."[104] For him, France was "neither an abstract goddess nor a historical concept, but rather a flesh [*chair*] on which I depended, a network [*réseau*] of bonds that governed me, a set of centres that founded the contours of my heart."[105]

More generally, then, *Lettre à un otage* was about Man. Saint-Exupéry offered two important illustrations of this. First, he described the "wordless contentment" that emerged one day in 1939 when he and Werth shared an impromptu Pernod with two bargemen – one German, the other Dutch – at a café in Fleurville overlooking the Saône. Saint-Exupéry was struck by the spontaneous yet profound understanding, solidarity, and sense of human goodwill that this encounter seemed to epitomize. As Saint-

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[100] The original intention was for it to serve as a preface to a book by Werth.

[101] Max-Pol Fouchet, "Le plus court chemin," *Les Lettres françaises* (13.I.1945).

[102] Schiff, 398.

[103] "Il n'est qu'un luxe véritable, et c'est celui des relations humaines" (TH 40). Note that Albert Camus all but quoted Saint-Exupéry in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*: "il n'y a qu'un seul luxe [...] et c'est celui des relations humaines" (Gallimard, 1942), 120.

[104] "On meurt pour cela seul dont on peut vivre" (PG 236).

[105] EG 334.

Exupéry described it, Man is the "substance" of this natural concord—just as it had been earlier in Spain when, captured by Catalan anarchist militiamen, unable to speak their language, and unsure of his fate, Saint-Exupéry broke the dehumanizing distance and tension through the "very discrete miracle" of smiling and bumming a cigarette. This is the second example. The idea is that by betokening a "spiritual certainty" among all those present, this gesture invoked the reciprocity of Man, utterly transforming the relationality of the situation. As Saint-Exupéry touchingly put it: "We meet in the smile that is above language, class, and party politics."[106] These two situations were essentially the same. In Fleurville as in Spain, "our agreement was so complete, so solid and profound, and concerned with a creed which, although inarticulable, was so self-evident in its substance that we would have gladly agreed to [...] die behind machine guns in order to preserve the substance of that agreement."[107]

By the time Saint-Exupéry wrote *Lettre à un otage*, all this lay in tatters and under the boot of fascism. This anguished text thus expresses an unmistakable predisposition to sacrifice that buttressed the legend of Saint-Exupéry's death.

The other posthumous publication that contributed to the Exupérian aura was, of course, *Le Petit Prince*, which was published in France in 1946.[108] This has become by far the best known of Saint-Exupéry's works, despite being – or perhaps because it is – typically classified as a children's book.[109] Sixty years ago, however, this story of a cherubic, cosmic urchin who descends to Earth but who ultimately returns to the heav-

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[106] EG 339f, 342.

[107] EG 336.

[108] Published by Gallimard. The work had been published in both French and English in 1943 by Reynal & Hitchcock in New York.

[109] But there is adult content. For example, see Hans Peter Rickman, "A Philosophic Fairy Tale: Existentialist Themes in St. Exupéry's *The Little Prince*, pp129-141 in *Philosophy in Literature* (Associated University Presses, 1996).

ens, leaving no trace, was read as having eerily and poignantly foreshadowed Saint-Exupéry's own death. It stoked the mystique of saintly self-sacrifice, in the sense of life in *imitatio Christi*, which Saint-Exupéry seemed to represent in the immediate postwar period.

But the hagiography was not to last. In 1948, to the vexation of most of those who were close to Saint-Exupéry, Gallimard published *Citadelle*, a large unfinished manuscript of the ruminations of a desert chieftain passing down paternalistic wisdom to his son. This work is beyond present concerns; suffice it to say that it is a didactic, turgid, repetitive, and disorganized tome that was almost universally panned by critics. This marked the beginning of the end of Saint-Exupéry's apotheosis—his star would henceforth fade considerably.[110] Although something of the legend certainly persists even to this day, his status suffered badly in the following years, when the current image of him as an intellectual lightweight[111] with an outmoded aristocratic, if not fascistic,[112] message was forged. Since the 1950s, there tends to be "either an annexation of Saint-Exupéry," that is, the reduction of his work to some larger, more tractable movement or genre, "or else his total rejection, often motivated by the 'edifying author' interpretation with which he is saddled."[113] Most efforts of 'annexation' tend to follow Sartre's claim, made in "Qu'est-ce que la littérature?" (1947) ["What is Literature?"], that

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[110] Cf. Serge Losic, *L'idéal humain de Saint-Exupéry*, 165: "In our youth we admired the heroism of Saint-Exupéry. Today we no longer believe in it: it over-idealized the man of action."

[111] As Jean-François Revel wrote in 1965: "Saint-Exupéry showed the French that a verbose piece of nonsense becomes profound philosophical truth if one takes it off the ground and raises it to an altitude of seven thousand feet. Idiocy in the cockpit takes on the allure of wisdom, a wisdom that our youth have absorbed with a fierce eagerness" (cited in Major, *Saint-Exupéry: l'écriture et la pensée*, 256).

[112] See Robert H. Price, "Saint-Exupéry and Fascism," *Modern Language Forum* 42:2 (1957), 141-145; Austin Fife, "Saint-Exupéry and Fascism," *The French Review* 32:2 (1959), 174-176; and Price, "Saint-Exupéry and Fascism: A Clarification," *The French Review* 34:1 (1960), 81.

[113] Major, *Saint-Exupéry: l'écriture et la pensée*, 256.

Saint-Exupéry belongs "to our generation," more specifically, that he was an important "*precursor*" of engaged existentialist literature.[114] Thus today, while the "broader reading public warmly but mistakenly regards him as a children's author," critics tend to make of Saint-Exupéry "a footnote to existentialism, and a figure who is otherwise best passed over."[115]

Be that as it may, it is imperative for those interested in Merleau-Ponty to cease simply passing over Saint-Exupéry's role in a *particular* 'footnote to existentialism', namely, that which appears on the final page of *Phenomenology of Perception*. This will allow us to see that, at least with respect to Merleau-Ponty, Saint-Exupéry is a more significant and complex figure than has generally been thought.

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[114] *Situations II*, 326f n9, italics added; cf. 250f, 264.

[115] John R. Harris, *Chaos, Cosmos, and Saint-Exupéry's Pilot-Hero: A Study in Mythopoeia* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 1999), 3.

# Chapter 2 : Toward a Heroic Phenomenology

It is safe to say that most readers of *Phenomenology of Perception* today would be taken aback if the book were to conclude as follows:

> Quand le corps se défait, l'essentiel se montre. L'homme n'est qu'un nœud de relations. Les relations comptent seules pour l'homme.
> Le corps, vieux cheval, on l'abandonne.
>
> One's essence appears when the body comes undone. Man is but a knot of relations; these alone matter to man.
> The body is an old crock that gets left behind.[1]

For the thrust of Merleau-Ponty's work, in its phenomenological rehabilitation of corporeality as the locus of existence, is powerfully opposed to Saint-Exupéry's heroic, self-sacrificial disdain of embodiment. Or so it would seem. But it *is* on a note of such disdain that *Phenomenology of Perception* ends. That Saint-Exupéry is given the final word is quite puzzling. At least at some level, this is inconsistent with the thrust of the work. Why then is he given it? So long as this situation remains unexplained, a serious question mark is left hanging over the work as a whole.

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Readers of *Phenomenology of Perception* will recall that in a pair of linked footnotes in Part I Merleau-Ponty had already appealed to the same section (chapter XXI) of *Pilote de guerre* for a phenomenological illustration of a person's "human" situation fully incorporating his "biological" situation in moments of danger, that is, for his body to "lend itself without reserve [*sans réserve*] to action."

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1 PG 171.

> Thus, Saint-Exupéry, above Arras, with shells bursting all around him, can no longer feel as a thing distinct from him his body which shortly before seemed to escape him: 'It is as if my life were given to me every second, as if my life became every moment more keenly felt. I live. I am alive. I am still alive. I am always alive. I am now nothing but a source of life.'[2]

But as Merleau-Ponty immediately adds, again quoting Saint-Exupéry, this possibility is strictly *momentary*:

> 'But it is true that, in the course of my life, when not in the grip of urgency, when my meaning is not at stake, I see no more serious problems than those raised by my body.'[3]

Granting the appropriateness of these references to Saint-Exupéry to Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the ambiguity of embodiment – even granting for the sake of argument that concerning embodiment, "what Saint-Exupéry is saying is *the same* as what Merleau-Ponty says"[4] – it is not at all obvious why he would return, at the very end of the book, not just to the same episode, but to a *disambiguation* of what it had earlier been used to show.

In fact, the more one probes the ending of *Phenomenology of Perception*, the more one uncovers a trove of seemingly anomalous details. These can be boiled down to the following three points:

1. According to his story, Saint-Exupéry was daydreaming or hallucinating during this episode. (This may be fictionalized, but he was as a matter of fact notorious for his absentmindedness while flying.) Indeed, the whole of *Pilote de guerre* is written in an oneiric tone as set by its opening line: "Sans doute je rêve" ["I must be dreaming"]. The question at hand is thus not just why *Phenomenology of Perception* ends by defer-

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[2] PhP 99n/84n1 (citing PG 174). There are some minor differences in punctuation between the citation in *Phenomenology of Perception* and the Gallimard text.

[3] PhP 100n/84n2 (citing PG 169). In addition to some minor differences in punctuation between Merleau-Ponty's citation and the Gallimard text, Saint-Exupéry had written "conceive" [*conçois*] rather than "see" [*vois*].

[4] Cf. Colin Smith, "Saint-Exupéry and the Problem of Embodiment," 269 (emphasis added).

ring to a paradigmatic case of *la pensée de survol*. It is moreover the question as to why this work ostensibly on perception concludes with a moment of *non*-perception.

This is a point of considerable phenomenological importance that will be taken up below.

2. The episode from which the final lines of *Phenomenology of Perception* were drawn thus did not stem simply and directly from Saint-Exupéry's own close encounter with death. Rather, it involved the recollection of the actual death of his younger brother, François, as a result of heart failure caused by rheumatic fever nearly a quarter-century earlier, when Saint-Exupéry's own life was under no threat at all.[5] It was his brother's words – "*I can't help it, it's my body*" – and the pressing need he felt, shortly before dying, to bequeath to Antoine his worldly goods, to ensure a kind of vicarious survival of that which gave his life meaning, that first implanted in Saint-Exupéry, albeit tacitly, the fundamental insight of Man concerning the alien, contingent character of the body, and the priority of relations. This was later reinforced by Saint-Exupéry's experience in Aéropostale, in particular by Guillaumet's walking adventure in the Andes, an example that Saint-Exupéry himself explicitly followed some years later after crashing in the Libyan desert and having to walk for several days (an episode he described at length in *Terre des hommes*). Here he claimed our striving toward others in this way as a "universal truth," giving his mechanic, Prévot, the key line: "If I were alone in the world, I'd lie down right here."[6]

Thus, even if we grant that for Saint-Exupéry such insights were not fully driven home until the flight over Arras in 1940, the heroic experience in question does not

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[5] PG 170f. François died on 10.VII.1917. Interestingly, Saint-Exupéry wrongly claimed that he was fifteen at the time; rather, he was seventeen, while it was François who was fifteen.

[6] TH 166.

necessarily have the kind of pedigree that might be suggested by Merleau-Ponty's excerption from *Pilote de guerre* at the end of *Phenomenology of Perception.*

3. That may actually be felicitous, however. For whatever may have been the situation in 1944 (when Saint-Exupéry disappeared), according to Merleau-Ponty's own express stipulations, Saint-Exupéry could not possibly have been a 'hero' in 1940. For he did not "meld with history" at that moment,[7] and he was certainly still able to speak—he was even able to write a book about it! There is obviously a paradox in any appeal to heroes, if it is effectively stipulated that they are dead. Merleau-Ponty was more circumspect at the end of the Preface to *Humanism and Terror*, written in 1947, where he said that he was writing "for friends whose names we would gladly inscribe here, *were it permissible to make witnesses of the dead.*"[8]

This is a potentially devastating objection to any construal of the appeal to heroism as philosophically significant in any strong sense, that is, in terms of content. This would suggest, in a way that is entirely consistent with most commentary on *Phenomenology of Perception*, reading the ending as nothing more than a rhetorical flourish or stylistic device that may be freely glossed or modified – or even dismissed altogether – without actually impacting the philosophical content of the work.

At best, however, this can only be an explanation of last resort.[9] For given (a) the utter incongruousness of the allusion with respect to the thrust of the work, and (b) the fact that this incongruousness *would have* been plain to Merleau-Ponty's contemporary

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7 SNS 258/146.

8 HT xlii/xlvi, emphasis added.

9 Or second last—for Denis Hollier has expressed an even less illuminating explanation, to wit, the idea that the ending of *Phenomenology of Perception* was (somehow) "imposed by the postwar agenda." See *The Politics of Prose: Essay on Sartre*, trans. J. Mehlman (University of Minnesota, 1986), 19.

readers,[10] it follows that, *if* the ending were merely rhetorical, then it would have to be judged as a significant authorial blunder. For it could only be seen as extremely obstructive *vis-à-vis* the philosophical content of the book. In fact, it would have to be judged a colossal blunder, given that that content explicitly valorizes effective communication. Although Merleau-Ponty's literary talents did leave some room for improvement, to affirm that he committed such a gross compositional misstep would raise very difficult new questions, the resolution of which, if that is even a possibility, would tell us little of philosophical consequence.

At any rate, the claim that the heroic conclusion of *Phenomenology of Perception* is merely a rhetorical device does not seem sufficiently plausible to warrant suspending the investigation of the possibility that it is in fact a necessary part of the phenom-

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[10] This is a delicate point—I phrase this in the conditional because as a matter of fact it is *not* the case that this incongruousness was plain to Merleau-Ponty's contemporary readers. It would have been if the thrust of *Merleau-Ponty's* own work been immediately transparent. But this was not the case. *Phenomenology of Perception* is a complex and highly original work that drew on sources that were not widely known in France at the time. In fact, it is safe to say that most commentary on this work for nearly twenty years was largely – not entirely, but *largely* – expository. At any rate, this was the case with the earliest French discussions, including: Simone de Beauvoir, "*La Phénoménologie de la perception* de Maurice Merleau-Ponty," in *Les Temps modernes* 2 (1945), 363-367; Roland Caillois, "Note sur l'analyse réflexive et la réflexion phénoménologique. À propos de la *Phénoménologie de la perception* de Maurice Merleau-Ponty," in *Deucalion* 1 (1946), 125-139; Paul Guillaume, review of *La structure du comportement* and *Phénoménologie de la perception* in *Journal de la psychologie normale et pathologique* 39 (1946), 489-494 (which was, admittedly, primarily psychologically oriented); and Ferdinand Alquié, "Une philosophie de l'ambiguïté: L'existentialisme de Maurice Merleau-Ponty," *Fontaine: Revue mensuelle de la poésie et des lettres française* 11:59 (1947), 47-70, which, although it was a critical discussion that did briefly touch on the idea of heroism in the context of the moral implications of Merleau-Pontian existentialism (68), did not relate this to Saint-Exupéry. Not unlike later scholarship, these contemporary discussions of *Phenomenology of Perception* passed over the incongruousness of its ending without comment. But aside from the postwar context of Exupérian hagiography, the reason for this lay in the difficulty of digesting the philosophical content of Merleau-Ponty's work (a process which was slowed by the fact that while *Phenomenology of Perception* was being assimilated, far more attention was directed to *Humanism and Terror*, a work which interested a wider audience, even if they usually misunderstood it). To see the incongruousness implies appreciating both moments, and so the interpretive situation concerning the ending of *Phenomenology of Perception* can be posed in this way: the generation of readers who were still familiar with Saint-Exupéry were still engrossed in coming to terms with Merleau-Ponty's work itself, while subsequent generations of readers, who for a variety of reasons were in a position to have much more profound and searching analyses of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, no longer had any familiarity with or serious interest in Saint-Exupéry. (This could even be said of Aron Gurwitsch's review in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 10: (1950), 442-445.) This is why no one has seriously questioned the ending.

enological project undertaken in that book. For even if its literal content – i.e., what it *says* – is inconsistent with the work as a whole, it may be that this conclusion *does* something, that it is performatively or methodologically connected to the 'realization' of the philosophical content of the work as a whole.

To be sure, even if this turns out to be the case, it would not follow therewith that the conclusion is philosophically defensible. Rather, it may turn out that it signals – and this *in an unexpectedly conspicuous way* – an intrinsic philosophical weakness in Merleau-Ponty's postwar project of existential phenomenology. Either way, it is crucial for those interested in Merleau-Ponty's work to come to terms with this.

❋

To begin to address the question of the philosophical significance of Exupérian heroism in Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology, this chapter will explore certain themes in his thought that have tended to receive short shrift in the literature, but which turn out to be quite relevant to the problem at hand :

- §2.1 deals with the themes of sacrifice and death in Merleau-Ponty's thought;
- §2.2 discusses how Merleau-Ponty construed existential phenomenology as a project of political hermeneutics;
- §2.3 considers this with respect to the Marxist theory of the world-historical revolutionary role of the proletariat as the universal class;
- §2.4 briefly discusses Merleau-Ponty's account of the tacit *cogito* as the basic phenomenon of class consciousness;
- §2.5 draws these considerations together in terms of what Merleau-Ponty calls "human productivity" and relates this to the idea of "militant" philosophy.

## 2.1 — Merleau-Ponty on Sacrifice and Death

Although the themes of sacrifice and death are not treated at length by Merleau-Ponty, and hardly at all in the literature devoted to his work, in the context of his appeal to heroism they turn out to be pivotal. For as we shall see, they bear directly on the 'political' nature of Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology.

### 2.1.1 — Sacrifice

There are two texts prior to *Phenomenology of Perception* that need to be considered with respect to the theme of sacrifice.

First, there is Merleau-Ponty's review of Max Scheler's *Ressentiment* [1912], written a decade before *Phenomenology of Perception*. Here Merleau-Ponty expressed, in Christian terms, a defence of ascetic self-denial that was not altogether dissimilar from Exupérian heroism. Siding with Scheler's defence of Christianity – at least in its "true" form – against the Nietzschean accusation that its aspiration toward the 'Kingdom of God' is based on a resentful "devaluation of the earth," Merleau-Ponty argued that the sacrifice of "natural movement" is not *opposed* to life, but rather signifies merely a certain "spontaneous indifference" to its own biological circumstances. Such a spontaneity occurs immediately in non-human life; "in its naïve force, the life of plants and animals does not obsess over its vital welfare." What Christianity seeks, according to Merleau-Ponty, is to impart to the "clever and tormented intelligence" of humanity "a confidence and a spontaneity" that would be "supernatural" [*surnaturelles*]. "What Christianity proscribes is precisely, and in the strongest sense of the

word, 'a vital debility'."[11] Here, rather than as a system of self-preservation, Merleau-Ponty regarded life as a kind of self-overcoming, as "an expansion or a prodigality," indifference to the particular details of which can indeed have a "vital value."[12]

But this is equivocal—for "the assurance of the Christian is *only analogous* to the vital confidence of natural beings."[13] It is thus not philosophically clear how Christianity can 'back both horses' and simultaneously lay evaluative claim to both natural and supernatural life.[14] Merleau-Ponty's suggestion was that the separation of these can only be maintained on the problematic basis of unfounded philosophical prejudice—in Nietzsche's case, "biological monism." If, however, quoting Scheler, "'a logic of the heart reveals, beyond vital needs, an objective structure of spiritual and religious value, Christianity can no longer be accused of depreciating terrestrial life through the sole fact that it aspires to something else: *transcendence can no longer be the sublimation of a vital weakening*'."[15]



The second text to consider with regard to the theme of sacrifice is *The Structure of Behaviour*, which Merleau-Ponty completed in 1938. Here he no longer upheld a Christian perspective, and his thinking was disencumbered of certain metaphysically unwarranted ideas—in particular, the 'assurance' afforded by an objective structure of values. Merleau-Ponty now links such assurance with 'critical' philosophy's dream of achieving complete individual integration, the absolute self-consciousness of the pure

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11 CR 14/88 (citing Scheler).

12 CR 13/87f.

13 CR 16/89, emphasis added.

14 CR 16/89.

15 CR 23f/93f, emphasis added.

subject whose history "is subordinated to its eternity,"[16] and for whom *death would be rendered meaningless.*[17] It is ultimately the impossibility of precisely this complete individuation that Merleau-Ponty sought to demonstrate in *The Structure of Behaviour.* He maintained instead that genuine lucidity can only come from facing up to our finite historical situation, not by projecting our preferred idealizations into it. There is no absolute: "the contingency of the lived perpetually threatens the eternal significations in which it is believed to be completely expressed."[18] *Death therefore has a meaning that is crucial to the meaningfulness of life.* Merleau-Ponty thus insisted on the need "to assure oneself that the experience of eternity is not the unconsciousness of death."[19] This is no less important than the distinction, which he upheld more firmly than before, between "the love of life" and biological self-preservation. In fact, following Kurt Goldstein, Merleau-Ponty now held that human self-preservation is a 'phenomenon of disease', that it is just a pathologically limited manner of self-actualization.[20] The real essence of human life is to project itself beyond situations—not just biological, but also humanly created ones.[21] It is fundamentally an *orientation to the possible.*[22] "The healthy man proposes to live, to attain certain objects in the world or beyond [*au delà*] the world, and not to preserve himself." This is not to set healthiness in opposition to self-preservation; it is merely to assert that the norms of healthiness

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16 SC 222/206

17 SC 220/204.

18 SC 240/223.

19 SC 240/223.

20 SC 190n1/245n97; cf. Goldstein, *Der Aufbau des Organismus: Einführung in die Biologie unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Erfahrungen am kranken Menschen* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1934), 162; *The Organism: A Holistic Approach to Biology Derived from Pathological Data in Man* (Zone Books, 1995), 337.

21 SC 189/175.

22 SC 190/176.

are existential and thus ultimately independent of biological existence. Thus, as Merleau-Ponty notes, some suicides can be understood as manifesting the primacy of existential over biological norms by showing that "man is capable of situating his proper being, not in biological existence, *but at the level of properly human relations*."[23] It is noteworthy in this regard that Merleau-Ponty drew close links between acts of suicide and acts of revolution: "both presuppose the capacity of rejecting the given milieu and of searching for equilibrium beyond any milieu."[24]

Although the conclusion of *The Structure of Behaviour* can be summed up in terms of the pithy methodological desideratum, expressed in the final paragraph, "to define transcendental philosophy anew in such a way as to integrate with it the very phenomenon of the real,"[25] what this portends is in certain ways more clearly revealed in the claim made in the penultimate paragraph that, given the fulfillment of that desideratum, "*the sacrifice of life will be philosophically impossible*; it will be a question only of 'staking' [*« mettre en jeu »*] one's life, which is a deeper way of living."[26] The philosophical impossibility of sacrifice announced here does not render indefensible the self-denial of which Merleau-Ponty had earlier defended the vital possibility. Nor does it render indefensible revolutionary martyrdom. It just rules out understanding it as self-*sacrifice*, on the grounds that there is no overarching, authoritative framework within which a sacrificial gesture involving one's self could be meaningfully made. It is the metaphysical impossibility of giving one's life *for* some future

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[23] SC 190n1/246n97, emphasis added. In this Merleau-Ponty differs sharply from Kojève's view that "man is not simply *mortal*; he is *death* incarnate; he *is* his own death," such that human existence is essentially "a *suicide*" (*Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, 569).

[24] SC 190+n1/175, 245n97.

[25] SC 241/224. I shall return to this below.

[26] SC 240/224, emphasis added.

state of affairs. For there is no eternal Absolute that could serve as the guarantor – the clearinghouse, as it were – of any such economy. This by no means rules out the possibility of giving one's life, nor of holding false beliefs concerning the possibility of doing so sacrificially. But it does aim to render philosophically indefensible any attempt to disburden oneself of the responsibility for one's life, and ultimately for one's death, by ascribing its meaning to the future. If life is in fact a matter of venture-some self-actualization in the absence of eternal truths, then recognition of the meta-physical impossibility of sacrificing it should encourage that non-biological "love of life" that can push the bounds of personal, communal, and historical integration.

The specific significance for philosophy of the metaphysical impossibility of sacrifice claimed by Merleau-Ponty here is the methodological point that transcendent-al insight concerning the *a priori* conditions of lived experience cannot be obtained by an outside spectator, that is, from a standpoint situated outside of human life. Rather, it can only be achieved from within life. It must be the case, then, that transcendental philosophy is a function of human life – this is what Merleau-Ponty meant in saying that it would have to be 'integrated with the very phenomenon of the real'. But lest it illicitly presuppose the apriority that it seeks, it must in some sense suspend it, such as to be, just like any other act of transcendence, '*a matter of staking one's life*'.

### 2.1.2 — Death

In "L'existentialisme chez Hegel,"[27] a short but dense discussion that was ostensibly a critical review of a lecture given by Jean Hyppolite on Hegel's *Phenomenology of*

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[27] SNS 109-121/63-70.

*Spirit*,[28] Merleau-Ponty articulated a view concerning death that is of considerable significance for understanding his existential phenomenology.

In his lecture, Hyppolite had more or less concurred with the Kierkegaardian critique of Hegelianism in general as an abstract systematization of the world that excludes or suppresses existence. With respect to *Phenomenology of Spirit*, however, Hyppolite claimed that although it did ultimately subordinate individual existence to abstract universality, Hegel *had* actually dealt therein with real human existence, "the full scope of human experience."[29] He described Hegel's account of the emergence of self-consciousness through the acquisition of an internalized awareness of the negativity of personal death as the irruption of a new modality of distinctly human being—namely, existence. "The taking consciousness of life is thus something other than life pure and simple, and human existence, like the knowledge of life, is a new way of being which we can well call existence."[30]

Merleau-Ponty was in general agreement with Hyppolite, except in one important respect, to wit: whereas Hyppolite limited the proto-existentialism of Hegel to certain parts of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, on the grounds that Hegel's account of "absolute knowledge" ultimately sewed up the dialectical movement of existence in such a way that the meaning of history would subsume that of individual death (thus legitimating sacrifice), Merleau-Ponty sought to separate the whole of *Phenomenology of Spirit* from Hegel's later "orthodox" idealism as his contribution to existential philosophy. That is, Merleau-Ponty offered a qualified defence of Hegelian absolute knowledge

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[28] Delivered on 16.II.1946, this lecture was entitled "L'existence dans la '*Phénoménologie*' de Hegel." It is reprinted in *Figures de la pensée philosophiques*, v1 (PUF, 1971), 92-103.

[29] "L'existence dans la '*Phénoménologie*' de Hegel," 94.

[30] "L'existence dans la '*Phénoménologie*' de Hegel," 95.

*circa* 1807 against the sort of Kierkegaardian critique of its systematization *circa* 1827 – that is, when Hegel had written his *Encyclopedia* and *Philosophy of Right* – that Hyppolite allowed.

Thus, not unlike Hyppolite, Merleau-Ponty argued that Hegel's thought is existentialist "in the sense that it views man not as being from the start a consciousness in full possession of its own clear thoughts, but as a life which is given to itself [*donnée à elle-même*] and which tries to understand itself." But he adds, "*all* of *Phenomenology of Spirit* describes man's efforts to recover [*ressaisir*] himself."[31] Merleau-Ponty thus interpreted 'absolute knowledge' as "the final stage of the evolution of spirit as phenomenon [*l'esprit-phénomène*] wherein consciousness at last becomes equal to its spontaneous life and regains its self-possession." Crucially, he suggested that this was not so much a philosophy as "a way of living [*une manière de vivre*]." Or, as he also put it, it was a "militant" philosophy.[32] Here Merleau-Ponty was invoking the theological trichotomy between (a) "the Church triumphant,"[33] denoting Christians in heaven, (b) "the Church suffering," denoting Christians in purgatory, and (c) "the Church militant," denoting Christians living on Earth, working to establish the kingdom of God.[34] He explicitly attributed the first to the 'orthodox' Hegel, and the third to the reading of Hegel that he himself was defending as his own view. It is clear that by implication Merleau-Ponty aimed to associate Hyppolite's position – along with virtu-

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[31] SNS 113/65, emphasis added.

[32] SNS 112/64; cf. 237/134. Robert Campbell quoted Merleau-Ponty without reference as saying that philosophy "is not content to be subjected to its historical surroundings, but is inserted in them, riveted, committed, *militant*." See "De l'ambiguïté à l'héroïsme chez Merleau-Ponty," 274.

[33] In the English translation this term [*triomphante*] is somewhat misleadingly rendered as "victorious."

[34] Cf. Merleau-Ponty's review of Scheler where Merleau-Ponty wrote that on account of the "substantial connivance of the 'spiritual person' and sensible consciousness [...] Christianity in all its purity '*militates against*' sin, just as it militates to wrest the poor from their misery" (CR 31/99).

ally all other formulations of existentialism – with what we might appropriately call '*purgatorial existentialism*'.

In contrast to both the pessimism of this view and the optimism of the triumphant view, Merleau-Ponty construed the movement of human existence in 'militant' terms as contingently directed towards a "genuine reconciliation between men."[35] He argued that Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* offered a richer – because thoroughly *intersubjective* – view of human existence than that found in it by Hyppolite, and he thought that this was precisely in virtue of the link between absolute knowledge and death that Hyppolite found objectionable. Merleau-Ponty thus defended the 'deathliness' of Hegelian absolute knowledge as a key facet of a living understanding of intersubjectivity. In his view, Hegel's main philosophical achievement as far as existentialism was concerned was to unmask the role played by the consciousness of death in realizing rationality and achieving mutual understanding.

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The key point for Merleau-Ponty is that "consciousness of life is, in a radical sense, consciousness of death."[36] That is, the awareness we have of life is ultimately *rooted* in our awareness of death, which enjoys a certain priority. The gist of the argument that stands behind this claim is that consciousness, as a kind of nothingness [*néant*] or negation of being, represents a "rupture" with life, where the latter is understood as an anonymous *pre*conscious force that spontaneously expends itself in its action, and which is in itself entirely lacking in self-awareness. And this rupture with life shares the essential features of death. This holds even if, in accordance with Merleau-Ponty's

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35 SNS 112/65.

36 SNS 115/66.

critique of Sartre, consciousness is understood non-dichotomously as only obtaining in a "hollow" [*creux*] as opposed to a "hole" [*trou*] in being.[37] "Life is only thinkable as presented to a consciousness of life which denies it."[38]

This rupture cannot be *completely* like death, though; at least not normally. It is important to recognize that there are two senses of 'life' here that Merleau-Ponty does not distinguish explicitly: on the one hand, there is the sense of life as an anonymous, spontaneous force subsisting below the level of consciousness. This sense has *universal* import, and we may refer to it as *life-as-such*. It was with this that Merleau-Ponty was principally concerned—this is the object of what he calls 'the love of life'. On the other hand, there is the sense of life that refers to the *particular* manifestations of life-as-such—I will refer to these simply as *lives*. Lives are founded on and thus imply life-as-such, but the converse does not hold: life-as-such does not imply any *particular* lives.

To construe consciousness-of-life as ultimately rooted in consciousness-of-death is thus to say three things: first, that the proper object of consciousness-of-life is life-as-such; second, that as a universal awareness this consciousness involves a virtually complete death-like rupture with particular lives, including one's own; and third, that this rupture is self-conscious, and hence consciousness of something essentially like death, because, following Hegel, the experience of death stands at the very origin of self-consciousness.

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[37] SNS 117/68; cf. SC 136/126; PhP 249/215. In the conclusion to *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre had written that the for-itself "is nothing but the pure nihilation of the in-itself; it is like a hole in being at the heart of Being" (617). Cf. Beauvoir's review of *Phenomenology of Perception*, 366f.

[38] SNS 116/67.

Merleau-Ponty thus rendered death and life-as-such epistemologically indistinguishable. Although there is a certain truth in the idea that death individualizes, it is evident that Merleau-Ponty was here distancing himself drastically from Heidegger's notion of *Sein-zum-Tod*. For Merleau-Ponty, what counts – that is, what is *thinkable* – is on the contrary that death *communalizes*. When we seek to think the totality of our existence in terms of death, as Heidegger asks us to do, what we are *really* doing is thinking it in terms of life taken universally. Hence Merleau-Ponty's assertion that "my consciousness of myself as death and nothingness is deceitful [*menteuse*] and contains an affirmation of my being and my life."[39] He appealed to Beauvoir's *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* for a forthright statement concerning the alternative to Heidegger supposedly offered by French existentialism: "Death does not exist for me while I am alive."[40]

At any rate, this is a view that Merleau-Ponty wanted to defend against the surreptitiousness shared by purgatorial and triumphant views of existence. In connection with this, he claimed that there are, broadly speaking, two ways of thinking about death.[41] The first way, which Merleau-Ponty rejects, resentfully sees death as just an incomprehensible and impenetrable end to existence. This view is thus "pathetic and complacent," because it is deceived; blind to the vital significance of death, it is blind to the vital significance of its own life. The underlying problem with this way of approaching death is that it is not self-consciously historical.

In contrast, the second way of thinking about death, which Merleau-Ponty accepts, *is* self-consciously historical. Specifically, it is *militant*. This means – and here

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39 SNS 118/68.

40 SNS 121/70.

41 SNS 116f/67.

Merleau-Ponty was contrasting himself to other readings of Hegel, notably that of Hyppolite, but Sartre's as well – that it recognizes both the abstractness of the universality of life, *and* that this abstractness is the reason for the above deception. "The abstract universal which starts out opposed to life must be made concrete." This approach – characterized by Merleau-Ponty as "dry and resolute" – thus "takes up [*assume*] death and turns it into a more acute awareness of life." It "interiorizes" or "transmutes" death into lives; in this way consciousness of death "goes beyond itself." The negativity of death is deployed in such a way as to promote the concrete realization of the underlying universality of human coexistence, the incarnation of life-as-such.

The point of this is most clearly seen with regard to Merleau-Ponty's claim that "the only experience which brings me close to an authentic awareness of death is the experience of contact with another."[42] Here Merleau-Ponty offers his interpretation of the struggle of consciousnesses as originally described by Hegel. Contrary to the views of Kojève and Sartre, for example, the idea is that scrutiny of the encounter and the ensuing conflict reveals that there must be an underlying common ground. "We cannot be aware of the conflict unless we are aware of our reciprocal relationship and our common humanity. We do not deny each other except by mutual recognition of our consciousness."[43] The experience of objectification, of the death-like stripping away of all particularity, lays bare that "my consciousness of an other as an enemy comprises an affirmation of him as an equal," that is, as an equal participant in life-as-such. Just as I find consciousness-of-life in consciousness-of-death, so too do "I find myself in

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[42] SNS 117/68.

[43] SNS 118/68.

the other." Otherness is thinkable only on the basis of this sameness—recognition of which revivifies my deathly self-awareness. "*If I am negation, then by following the implication of this universal negation to its ultimate conclusion, I will see its self-denial and its transformation into coexistence.*"[44]

Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty, death is integral, not simply to historical life, but to historical progress. At root, this is because history is made through transcendence, the creative capacity of human existence to detach from the repetitiveness of life, to step beyond ourselves, *beyond our lives*, such as to alter the conditions of life. Although necessarily underwritten by life-as-such, transcendence is a matter of the negativity of death, as understood by Merleau-Ponty. Death is a vital part of life-as-such, for it is precisely through it that life-as-such gains self-consciousness. The experience of vulnerability and dependence – whether in the face of death or in the face of the other – decentres my life, dislocates it temporally, drawing me out of myself in a way that elicits productive involvement. The power that is revealed in such an experience is one that "makes us wait with our own being somewhat in abeyance and in this way is a creative power which is not of ourselves but which invites and makes possible our own creative response."[45]

Such a temporal dislocation is central to Merleau-Ponty's reading of the interiorization of death by the Hegelian slave [*Knecht*]. Recall that in the story told by Hegel, what defines a slave is that he chooses life over death. What Merleau-Ponty emphasizes in his interpretation is that the life chosen is life-as-such. The slave "*consents* to live only for others," according to Merleau-Ponty, "but it is still he who *wants* to

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[44] SNS 118/68, italics added.

[45] C. Pax, "Social encounters and Death: Hermeneutical Reflections," pp195-201 in *Phenomenology: Dialogues and Bridges*, eds. R. Bruzina and B. Wilshire (SUNY Press, 1982), 198.

maintain his life at this price"[46] The point in putting it this way is to insist that that there is – or at least there was in the past – vital meaning even in servitude. To be sure, slavish living is unjust; but there is always something that exceeds it, and it is this that accounts for the "love of life" that puts the slave in contact with the "vital foundations" [*assises vitales*] of humanity, giving the slave "the most exact awareness of the human situation."[47] Familiarity with life-as-such is slavery's hidden strength. This is why it is the slave who makes history and who thus ultimately triumphs: "it is he who will finally have the only possible mastery—not at the expense of others, but at the expense of nature."[48]

This is another way of expressing the historical process as the negation of the negation of abstract individuality that culminates in universal reconciliation. The lives of history's slaves attest to the following general point, which is the most important lesson that Merleau-Ponty draws from his reading of Hegel: "Death is the negation of all particular given being, and consciousness of death is synonymous with consciousness of the universal [...] To be aware of death and to think or reason amount to the same thing, since one thinks only by taking leave of the particularities of life [*en quittant les particularités de la vie*] and thus by conceiving death."[49]

This is tied to the realization of philosophy, inasmuch as this is a matter of bringing rationality into being—that is, overcoming the mutual separation of consciousnesses, such that "perspectives meet up, perceptions confirm each other, [and] a

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[46] SNS 119/68f, emphasis added.

[47] SNS 118f/68f.

[48] SNS 119/69.

[49] SNS 115ff/67.

meaning emerges."[50] In other words, overcoming what we might call the '*structural madness*' of an alienated world by bringing forth the underlying commonality and rendering it concretely explicit. Realizing philosophy is thus to redeem what Merleau-Ponty called "the promise of humanity" [*la promesse d'humanité*]: "Learning the truth about death and struggle is the long maturation process by which history overcomes its contradictions and fulfills the promise of humanity—present in the consciousness of death and in the struggle with the other—in the living relationship among men."[51] And this is why, at the end of his discussion of Hegel and death, Merleau-Ponty suggested that existentialism might be *most completely* defined "by the idea of a universality which men affirm or imply by the mere fact of their being and at the very moment of their opposition to each other, in the idea of a reason immanent in madness [*déraison*], of a freedom which comes into being in the act of accepting limits, and to which the least perception, the slightest movement of the heart, the smallest action, bear incontestable witness [*sont les témoignages incontestables*]."[52]

### 2.2 — Thinking the Political

Because the foregoing view of death has consequences for the realization of authentic intersubjectivity, it bears directly upon the sort of political thinking that Merleau-Ponty intended his existential phenomenology to render possible. And this particular political inflection of existentialism provides crucial clues to understanding the nature of Merleau-Ponty's postwar project, including the role of heroism therein.

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50 PhP xv/xix.

51 SNS 119/69.

52 SNS 121/70.

In "La Guerre a eu lieu," written in 1945, Merleau-Ponty argued that French philosophy, traditionally practiced from the isolated standpoint of the Cartesian "meditating ego," (a perspective that Merleau-Ponty tended to assimilate as much to Kantianism as to Cartesianism),[53] had received from the experience of the war an incontrovertible 'wake-up call', so to speak, such that its principal task now was to come to terms with that which for the traditional perspective had been "unthinkable" [*impensable*]—namely, *politics*.[54] "Politics," he wrote, "is impossible from the perspective of consciousness."[55] This is because it has no grasp of the objective consequences of actions, nor of the concrete interconnectivity of the human world. As Merleau-Ponty put it, "this solitary Cartesian thinks—but he does not see his shadow behind him projected onto history as onto a wall, that meaning, that appearance which his actions assume on the outside, that Objective Spirit which *is* him."[56]

The result of this was that many French intellectuals of Merleau-Ponty's generation effectively inhabited an idealized reality, upholding universal humanistic values with an attitude of naïve pacifism. Phenomena that were inconsistent with this universalism – in particular, those based on ascriptions of nationality and 'race' – were dismissed as irrational and ultimately illusory. This is why, according to Merleau-Ponty, the real significance and portent of epochal events in Europe in the 1930s – such as the Anschluß, Guernica, and Kristallnacht – were lost on so many French intellectuals.[57]

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[53] Cf. SNS 180, 257, 298/103, 145, 168; NI 2.

[54] SNS 255/145.

[55] SNS 256/145.

[56] SNS 257/146. Merleau-Ponty was probably alluding less to Plato than to the character Katov in André Malraux's *La condition humaine*, whose shadow cast on the wall as he proceeds to his execution stands as a sombre reminder to his comrades of one's ineluctable mortal involvement in politics.

[57] Cf. NI 22, 27, 32.

"No one's hands are clean,"[58] he thought, because freedom is always ultimately complicit with worldly power.

For Merleau-Ponty, what the defeat of France and the war taught was, above all else, *history*.[59] It was primarily in this way that his *examen de conscience* and its critique of Cartesian rationalism avoided the *ir*rational conclusions to which certain other, superficially similar analyses were led,[60] as well as conclusions of a traditional religious nature.[61] For Merleau-Ponty did not reject the old values. The problem did not lie in those as such, but rather in the fact that they were not concrete. The lesson was that "values remain nominal and indeed have no value without an economic and political infrastructure to make them participate in existence. [...] It is a question not

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[58] SNS 259/147.

[59] SNS 265/150. There may be an interesting comparison to be made between Merleau-Ponty's analysis and historian Marc Bloch's *L'étrange défaite: Témoignage écrit en 1940*. Cf. Jonathan H. King, "Philosophy and Experience: French Intellectuals and the Second World War," pp198-212 in *Journal of European Studies* 1:3 (1971), 199.

[60] For example, the reactionary perspective of Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, *Notes pour comprendre la siècle* (Gallimard, 1941): "France was destroyed by the rationalism to which its spirit had been reduced. Today, rationalism is dead. We can only rejoice in this collapse of rationalism" (171).

[61] For example, the Catholic view of Jacques Maritain as expressed in *A travers le désastre* (Éditions de la Maison Française, 1941)—a work which one historian called the first "breviary" of the Resistance; see Richard Francis Crane, "Maritain's True Humanism," pp17-23 in *First Things* 150 (2005). Maritain contended that France's defeat could be traced to a growing political demoralization, which was the result of politics in France having become literally *de*-moralized—that is, the "unnatural separation" of politics and morality. Maritain characterized this as a "respectable" or "reasonable Machiavellianism" (126), a theoretical standpoint of 'political realism' that was out of touch with the natural Christian virtue embodied, according to Maritain, in the French nation. What was required was a "radical spiritual purification" (32) that would reintegrate this – "the only real realism, that of the Incarnation" – into the political realm. For Maritain, only Christian politics offers an "authentically political politics" (135f), and it was the vocation of France to realize this.

Merleau-Ponty likewise aimed to make political thinking 'genuinely political', and in this he also emphasized incarnation. But he differed from Maritain in that he tried to *intensify*, rather than undo, the Machiavellianism that Maritain deplored. Interestingly, at the end of *A travers le désastre* Maritain illustrated his position with an allusion to Jeanne d'Arc, in which he explicitly invoked the notion of the Church militant: "Jeanne d'Arc called on the Church triumphant as her witness and never doubted the Church militant. And after she was burned to ashes and her virginal heart was cast into the Seine, the Church militant rehabilitated her; and when the terrible threats of our age were raised against France, the Church militant canonized her" (148f). To be sure, this shows an important affinity with Merleau-Ponty. The contrast, however, is more significant, as it was to the militancy of a secular humanism that Merleau-Ponty appealed. As we shall see, with his invocation of Saint-Exupéry, Merleau-Ponty precisely aimed to surpass traditional hagiography and hero-worship altogether.

of giving up our values of 1939 *but of realizing them.*"[62] To this end, philosophy needed to reorient itself so as to render human incarnate coexistence, in all its contingency and complexity, *thinkable* as a historically dynamic confluence of subjectivity and objectivity, of freedom and necessity. It needed to reorient itself to *the present.* That is, it needed to form its ideas "in contact with the present" in order to be able to "accept all truths *and* to take a stand in reality."[63] It is ultimately a matter of grasping "the total intention" of society, "the Idea in the Hegelian sense" in which "everything signifies everything."[64] Thinking the political is thus by no means a specialized philosophical task. As Merleau-Ponty put it – wrapping up "La Guerre a eu lieu" with a direct statement of the sort of gloss conventionally applied to Saint-Exupéry's words at the end of *Phenomenology of Perception* – "*there is nothing outside this unique fulguration of existence.*"[65]

It is important to recognize that, contrary to his own express claim that any imitation of fascist thinking was regrettable and unavoidable,[66] Merleau-Ponty's development of phenomenology as a form of political thinking was to some extent inspired by fascism – and this in a way not unlike Saint-Exupéry's fascination with fascist efficacy, although the upshot differed considerably.

This is evident from a short document entitled "*La Résistance: la France et le monde de demain*, par un philosophe" ["*The Resistance: France and the World of*

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62 SNS 265, 268/150, 152, emphasis added.

63 SNS 273/154, emphasis added.

64 PhP xiii/xviii; SNS 268/152.

65 SNS 269/152, italics added. The metaphor of fulguration, to which Merleau-Ponty resorted at other key points as well, involves a sense of *blindness* that is quite significant with regard to the limits of his existential phenomenology. It is thus of central importance to his project, yet it is notably absent from Jerry H. Gill's otherwise thorough study *Merleau-Ponty and Metaphor* (Humanities Press, 1991). Cf. note 155 below.

66 SNS 268/152.

*Tomorrow*, by a philosopher"].[67] Following discussion with Sartre and Jean-Toussaint Desanti, Merleau-Ponty drafted this document toward the end of 1941.[68] Here he offered a fairly pessimistic description of the French Resistance at the time as suffering a profound spiritual crisis. Aside from its communist and conservative members, "the majority of patriots have an ideology that is confused, hesitant, purely negative, or else concerned solely with individual morality,"[69] a situation that manifested itself in "a kind of laziness and fatalism."[70] In this work, Merleau-Ponty attempted to account for this crisis in philosophical terms. He linked the infirmities of the French to their "analytical spirit," and contrasted this with the "synthetic thinking" that elsewhere gave rise to totalitarianism, in particular National Socialism. Merleau-Ponty commended this kind of thinking, "for it alone permits one to give an account of the diversity and the interaction of situations, whether particular or collective."[71] That is, it enables one to cease treating individuals in isolation and instead as organic parts of the whole. Merleau-Ponty thus thought that to be successful, *the defeat of fascist totalitarianism would also have to assimilate something of it*. Aspects of totalitarian ideology could be used in support of a genuine democracy. To some extent, according to Merleau-Ponty, the war had actually occasioned a spontaneous turn toward a more collectivistic outlook, but this was in deep conflict with the old individualistic ideals. This was the underlying reason for the hesitation: a straightforward communist solution was just as

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[67] Referenced in *Les Écrits de Sartre: Chronologie, bibliographie commentée*, eds. M. Contat and M. Rybalka (Gallimard, 1970), 110f. The document (five large typewritten pages) was originally thought to have been the work of Sartre. The editors make it clear, however, that it was drafted by Merleau-Ponty.

[68] It was apparently slightly revised in 1944 before being sent to representatives of the French provisional government in Algiers. Owing to the nature of resistance activities, all of this was likely done without Merleau-Ponty's knowledge.

[69] Contat and Rybalka, 110.

[70] Cited by Henri Michel, *Les courants de pensée de la Résistance* (PUF, 1962), 421.

[71] Contat and Rybalka, 110.

untenable as a simple return to *status quo ante*. The only solution could be a socialism that takes as its goal to overcome liberalism by concretizing its ideals. This is what Merleau-Ponty recommended as a viable strategy for securing French unity. "Were a government in exile to take stock of the difficult situation in which we are struggling, and to choose for its slogan the realization of concrete freedom through the collectivization of the means of production, it would bring together around itself the majority of the French. It would give to the Resistance a positive faith; a France provided with such a message would regain a politics and a dignity; it would make a new place for itself in the world."[72]

Although nuanced in important ways in light of the outcome of the war, this essentially remained Merleau-Ponty's position *circa* 1945. The key idea concerns the material conditions of liberal values. It is from this standpoint that he issued his critique of the impassive idealism and apolitical neutrality of prewar thinking. This critique clearly had a special pertinence to the particular social sector to which he himself had belonged, to wit, progressively-minded but largely contemplative intellectuals, especially graduates of the *École normale supérieure*. There were exceptions to this, of course – Nizan is a case in point. There is no sense whatsoever in which Communist activists like Nizan (who died in the Battle of Dunkirk in 1940) were guilty of the leisurely philosophical illusions later censured by Merleau-Ponty.

Nevertheless, they may have been guilty of *other* theoretical errors, and Merleau-Ponty's analysis did have something to say about Marxism as well. For, at least in its official forms, Marxist theory was at a deep level surprisingly similar to the Cartesianism that it effectively repudiated in practice. For it, too, ultimately made politics –

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[72] Cited by Contat and Rybalka, 100f.

and the war in particular, which it saw as ultimately only an internecine conflict between capitalist factions – into a matter of mere appearance, in this case, of the class struggle: "what remained real beneath that appearance was the common fate of proletariats of all nations and the profound solidarity of all forms of capitalism through the internal contradictions of the regime."[73] So whereas the naïve Cartesian humanist thought that there were only 'men' and thus could not understand anti-Semitism, for example, because there is no such thing as a 'Jew', the Marxist thought that there were only 'classes' – "no proletarian in uniform can feel *anything but* proletarian"[74] – and thus reduced anti-Semitism to a moronic "capitalistic episode," a social contradiction that was in truth but a node on the path to a classless society. But Merleau-Ponty insisted that historical truth cannot be understood to lie behind events. "There are not two histories, one true and the other empirical; there is only one, in which everything that happens plays a part, *if only one knows how to interpret it*."[75]

For Merleau-Ponty, existentialism offered, at least potentially, the hermeneutical framework required by Marxism and progressive politics in general. It was primarily for this reason that Merleau-Ponty was, as Whiteside aptly put it, an "*indefatigable proponent*" of existentialism in the postwar period.[76] That is, he strove to promote the virtues of existentialism as a *political* philosophy. In his own work, and in his representations of the work of other existentialists – which, while generally sympathetic, were also quite selective[77] – Merleau-Ponty aimed to portray existentialism as an

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[73] SNS 261/148.

[74] SNS 262/148.

[75] SNS 263/149, emphasis added.

[76] Whiteside, *Merleau-Ponty and the Foundation of an Existential Politics*, 36, italics added.

[77] Concerning Merleau-Ponty's relation to other existentialists, Whiteside put it well: "At the heart of [Merleau-Ponty's] project is the belief that his theory is superior particularly in accounting for the

approach uniquely suited to adequately theorize political phenomena, that is, to render them 'thinkable' in all their concrete complexity.

### 2.3 — The Proletarian Question

The themes of sacrifice, death, and politics come together in the problem that lay at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's political thinking, to wit, the status of the proletariat as *the universal class of history*. Merleau-Ponty wanted to save the latter notion from both Hegel and Marx by approaching it otherwise than by way of the contrast between its being-*in*-itself and -*for*-itself. In particular, his aim was to conceptualize class anew in terms of intersubjective coexistence, rather than in terms of objective economic structure, in order to be able to approach the political problem of proletarian class consciousness in terms of *the social*, that "dimension of existence [...] with which we are in contact by the mere fact of existing, and which we carry about inseparably with us prior to any objectification."[78]

Merleau-Ponty regarded Hegel's account of history and the liberation it realizes as incomplete, inasmuch as it merely ushered in a higher stage of exploitation, one in which slaves are so dehumanized, so de-particularized, as to be effectively reduced to life-as-such. Merleau-Ponty thus took up Marx's account of the proletariat as the class whose historical task is to do away with servitude once and for all. Although he had misgivings, Merleau-Ponty recognized as the core of Marxism a theory of the prole-

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political dimension of existence. He thinks that a wide range of 'existentializing' thinkers, including Marcel, Aron, Sartre, Beauvoir, Mounier, Malraux, Scheler, and Heidegger, have gone wrong when it comes to thinking politically. They misformulate their own existential insights in ways that either deprive their theories of political relevance or lead to tragically mistaken political commitments. He then modulates and reformulates their positions to explain how a theory can be both existential and political" (*Merleau-Ponty and the Foundation of an Existential Politics*, 37).

[78] PhP 415/362.

tariat as the latent existence of universal concrete intersubjectivity. "In the name of the proletariat, Marx describes a situation such that those in it, and they alone, have the *full experience* of the freedom and universality which Marx considered the defining characteristics of man."[79] In other words, "the proletariat as Marx conceived it embodied simultaneously the experience of individuality and universality."[80] Proletarians thus embody the truth of the species; but Merleau-Ponty makes this out to be a matter of their lived experience. "The very exercise of life" in their objective situation leads them "to the point of detachment and freedom at which it is possible to be conscious of dependency,"[81] i.e., the interpersonal dependency to which rational idealism is blind. Hence the "inseparability of objective necessity and *the spontaneous movement of the masses*."[82] As the "moving force" [*moteur*] of history, workers have "instincts" for it,[83] such that their collective *praxis* transforms the world "as a spontaneous development in their own lives."[84] For the proletarian, "individuality or self-consciousness and consciousness are absolutely identical."[85] In sum, the working class is universality incarnate: "the condition of the proletarian is such that he can detach himself from special circumstances not just in thought and by means of an abstraction but in reality and through the very process of his life. He alone *is* the universality that he reflects

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79 HT 122/113.
80 HT 155/144.
81 HT 123f/115.
82 HT 17/15.
83 HT 121/113.
84 HT 39/36.
85 HT 124/115.

upon; he alone achieves the self-consciousness that the philosophers have anticipated."[86]

Unlike Hegel's slave, who chooses a life of subservience, the revolutionary task of the proletariat is to reject slavish living altogether. An honorable idea, to be sure. *But this task is, by definition, to be performed from the standpoint of absolute knowledge.* And what the task involves is precisely overcoming that standpoint – overcoming, that is, the *manière de vivre* definitive of the proletariat. This is meant to imply what Lukács called its "self-annihilation" *qua* exploited class.[87] But since that way of living, thus conceived, includes all living particularity, the revolutionary moment would thus imply, as Merleau-Ponty's colleague Trân Dúc Tháo later put it, "an ultimate form of *sacrifice*."[88]

As we have seen, for Merleau-Ponty this was metaphysically indefensible. He thus thought that the formulations of classical Marxism concerning the proletariat had to be rethought. But this was not because the objective composition of the proletariat – that is, its being-in-itself – had changed since Marx's time through some degree of bourgeoisification of the working class and proletarianization of the *petit bourgeoisie*, such that the "intellectual needs" of the "objectively revolutionary class" could no longer be satisfied by Marxism in its orthodox form. Such was Trân's view.[89] But while this may have been true in some sense, it was also the ground of the sacrificial view of revolutionary change. Trân expressed this in the following illuminating way: "if, as accord-

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[86] HT 124f/116.

[87] Cf. AD 65/47.

[88] *Phénoménologie et matérialisme dialectique* (Minh-Tân, 1951), 318. Cf. "Existentialisme et matérialisme dialectique," pp317-329 in *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 54 (1949).

[89] "Marxisme et phénoménologie," pp168-174 in *La Revue internationale* 2 (1946), 173; "Existentialisme et matérialisme dialectique," 328f.

ing to Heidegger's great line, 'Dasein [*la réalité humaine*] chooses its heroes', its choice is the act of a real [*effective*] freedom only if it bears precisely upon the destiny prefigured in its objective situation, if its project is not just any project, but *the very project of its own dereliction.*"[90]

For Merleau-Ponty, the basic problem with Marxist theory as it stood at the time was that it was *fundamentally morbid.* This is not because it thematized death, but rather because it did so *in the wrong way.* Although Merleau-Ponty upheld Marx's insistence on the impossibility of thinking the future,[91] Marxism as it existed effectively denied this. Its overly futural orientation was a kind of triumphant thinking that invoked an 'experience of eternity' that resulted in a certain 'unconsciousness of death' in the present.[92] Its call for revolution thus worked at cross-purposes, inasmuch as the life of the new humanity for which it militated could not be brought into vital connection with the lives of those who would comprise the collective agency of its realization. There was a profound split between end and means in that the communist ideal implied an impossible hiatus from life's 'vital foundations'. The problem for Merleau-Ponty was how to tell the Marxist story of humanity "smashing the given structures of society and acceding through praxis to 'the reign of freedom'," [93] and to do so in terms of living experience, *but without invoking any philosophically indefensible sacrificial imperative.*

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[90] "Marxisme et phénoménologie," 173, citing *Sein und Zeit,* 385 ("das Dasein wählt sich seinen Helden").

[91] EP 41/50f.

[92] Cf. SC 240/223.

[93] SNS 226/128, citing Marx, *Capital* v3.

## 2.4 — The Tacit *Cogito*

In line with the thrust of 'Western Marxism' (a term Merleau-Ponty himself coined ten years later), Merleau-Ponty held that the classical formulations of Marxism were due for a theoretical overhaul in the light of twentieth-century conditions. The point of this overhaul would be to express the fact that with respect to the realization of universal proletarian class consciousness, 'ideological' issues are no less politically real than economic issues. Merleau-Ponty rejected the idea – and claimed that most Marxists did likewise – of any simplistic materialist construal of consciousness in epiphenomenal terms.[94] Marxist analysis is credible only when it does not "suppress the subjective factors of history in favour of objective ones, but rather tie[s] them together."[95] No account of class consciousness as the coming to awareness of an intersubjective situation can do away with individual consciousness, which is to say, Marxism cannot avoid giving an account of the *cogito*. "Every man, even a Marxist, is obliged to agree with Descartes that our knowledge of some outside reality depends on our having apprehended within ourselves that process by which we come to know."[96]

Clearly, though, agreement with this claim is consistent with divergent interpretations of the *cogito*. In particular, it is consistent with the rejection of the traditional Cartesian interpretation. In Merleau-Ponty's view, this interpretation is "false" because it one-sidedly emphasizes the autonomy of consciousness; "it removes itself and shatters our inherence in the world."[97] It sets up the *cogito* as a merely contemplative escape, and thus remains a conceptual expression of "that phase of history where

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94 SNS 135/78.

95 SNS 263/149.

96 SNS 138/79.

97 SNS 235/133.

man's essence and existence are still separated."[98] What was required is "a new conception of consciousness," one that would "found both its autonomy *and its dependence.*"[99] To attain this would require surpassing the Cartesian *cogito* in a way metonymical to the dialectical overcoming of philosophy as a whole. "The only way to do away with [the Cartesian *cogito*] is to *realize* it, that is, to show that it is *eminently contained in interpersonal relations.*"[100]

Merleau-Ponty thought that Marxism, in its discovery of "social existence as the most 'interior' dimension of our life,"[101] implicitly contained an account of the *cogito* that satisfied this desideratum, that is, an account of 'the process by which we come to know' that situates it squarely in the context of intersubjective relations. But it had yet to furnish this with a sound theoretical formulation. This is, I would argue, the principal theoretical task that Merleau-Ponty's account of the "tacit *cogito*," or the "true [*véritable*] *cogito*," was designed to fulfill.[102] The point was to specify the site of contact between thought and being that would be the condition *sine qua non* of human existence and coexistence. A complete review of Merleau-Ponty's treatment of the *cogito* would take the present discussion quite far afield. Nonetheless, a few words are in order.

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Noting the paradoxical nature of relations between Ego and Other, that is, the dialectical mixture of autonomy and dependence, Merleau-Ponty expressed their possibility in

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98 SNS 136/78.

99 SNS 143/82, emphasis added.

100 SNS 235f/133, emphasis added.

101 SNS 142f/82.

102 As developed in particular in PhP 423-468/369-409.

terms of situated corporeality: they are possible only because Ego and Other are "defined by their situation and are not freed from all inherence." That is, they are only possible "provided that at the very moment when I experience [*éprouve*] my existence, *even at the extreme limit of reflection*, I lack the absolute density which would place me outside time, and that I discover within myself a kind of internal weakness standing in the way of my being totally individualized, which exposes me to the gaze of others as a man among men."[103] As Merleau-Ponty pointed out, this is at odds with the traditional understanding of the *cogito*, which identified egoic existence with self-awareness, thus occluding being-for-others. The "true *cogito*" is the result of a "radical reflection" that *is* able to account for being-for-others. It does this by discovering in me "not only my presence to myself, *but also the possibility of an 'outside spectator'*."[104] Radically pursued, reflection attains "an affirmation of myself by myself [*une épreuve de moi par moi*]" that reveals me in a social and historical situation.[105] "The certitude I have of myself here is a real [*véritable*] perception: I grasp myself [...] as a particular thought, as a thought engaged with certain objects, as a thought in act [*une pensée en acte*]."[106] Rather than identifying my existence with my thoughts thereof, radical reflection "recognizes my thought itself as an inalienable fact, and eliminates any kind of idealism in discovering me as 'being toward the world' [« *être au monde* »]."[107]

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[103] PhP vii/xii, emphasis added.

[104] PhP vii/xii, emphasis added.

[105] PhP 462/403; cf. vii/xiii.

[106] PrP 61/22.

[107] PhP viii/xiii.

By focusing on "the presence of oneself to oneself"[108] in this way, this approach to the self-experience of the thinking subject follows an alternative path that is supposed to cut between the wholly constitut*ed* private psyche of objectivism, on the one hand, and subjectivism's wholly constitut*ing* universal thinker, on the other hand. This is the sense in which Merleau-Ponty claims that "the tacit *cogito* [...] is anterior to all philosophy."[109] It is also the case, however, that "the tacit *cogito* is a *cogito* only when it has found expression for itself."[110] It is a matter of reflection "recapturing itself" and acquiring an "awareness of its own dependence on an unreflective life which is its initial, constant, and final situation."[111] This unreflective life is life-as-such, and so in a certain sense, the true *cogito* is *its* thought of me—a thought which "knows itself [*se connaît*]," i.e., gains self-consciousness, "only in those extreme situations in which it is threatened."[112]

Given what we have seen of Merleau-Ponty's view of death and its connection to alterity, it not surprising that the examples he gives of such threatening situations are "the dread of death or of another's gaze upon me."[113] Merleau-Ponty argued that there is a fundamental link between "the reflective recapture [*reprise*] of the unreflective," that is, the openness of my reflection to life-as-such as the unreflective basis of my existence, and "the tension of my experience towards another."[114] Both involve the same apparent paradox. In each case, "it is a matter of knowing how I can break

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[108] PhP 462/404.
[109] PhP 462/404.
[110] PhP 463/404.
[111] PhP ix/xiv.
[112] PhP 462/404.
[113] PhP 462/404.
[114] PhP 413/359.

outside myself [*faire une pointe hors de moi-même*] and have a lived experience of the unreflective as such [*vivre l'irréfléchi comme tel*]."[115] The underlying idea that serves to resolve this is that because life-as-such is universal, the experience of self-givenness can be achieved – in fact, can *only* be achieved – within the intersubjective dynamics of social and historical situations.

This is why for Merleau-Ponty the archetypal instance of the tacit *cogito* lies in the "tacit commitment" with which one comports oneself un-self-consciously with respect to the socio-historical background of a given situation, and which can – in the event that that background becomes foregrounded, i.e., focal – be transformed into a more explicit and possibly collective self-consciousness. As Merleau-Ponty expressed it: "during periods of calm, nation and class are there as stimuli to which I respond only absent-mindedly or confusedly; they are merely latent. A revolutionary situation, or one of national danger, transforms those pre-conscious relationships with class and nation, which were merely lived, into the definite taking of a stand." As with Saint-Exupéry's Barcelonan bookkeeper-turned-soldier, "*the tacit commitment becomes explicit.*"[116]

It is in this context that Merleau-Ponty presented the clearest phenomenological formulation of the problem that gives the tacit *cogito* its meaning, to wit, "how the presence to myself (*Urpräsenz*) which defines me and which conditions every alien presence, is at the same time de-presentation (*Entgegenwärtigung*) and throws me outside myself."[117] As to the significance of this problem, Merleau-Ponty was clear:

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[115] PhP 413/360.

[116] PhP 417/363, emphasis altered.

[117] PhP 417/363, italics removed.

"this double sense of the *cogito* is the basic fact of metaphysics."[118] And this is why, as he put it – with obvious import for the question concerning the ending of *Phenomenology of Perception* – "philosophy does not culminate in a return to the self."[119]

In general, Merleau-Ponty's account of the tacit *cogito* would thus provide the outstanding theoretical grounds for the analysis of "*engagement*" as "the moment when the subjective and objective conditions of history become bound together, how class exists before becoming aware of itself—in short, the status of the social and the phenomenon of coexistence."[120] Specifically, this would enable a viable approach to the intersubjective nature of class consciousness as "a fact-value" [*fait-valeur*] or "incarnated value" [*valeur incarnée*],[121] by approaching it in the context of "absolute history," as that milieu wherein "man no longer appears as a product of his environment nor an absolute legislator but [rather] emerges as a product-producer, the locus where necessity can turn into concrete liberty."[122]

The tacit *cogito* is thus the fulcrum of history, and *a fortiori* of the realization of philosophy. For both philosophy as well as Marxism, inasmuch as it accepts the need to apprehend 'the process by which we come to know', the upshot is clear: "we must not only adopt a reflective attitude, in an irrefutable *cogito*, but also reflect on this reflection, understand the natural situation which it is conscious of succeeding and which is therefore part of its definition." We must "not merely practise philosophy, but also become aware [*nous rendre compte*] of the transformation which it brings with it

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118 SNS 164/93.

119 PhP vi/xii.

120 SNS 140/81.

121 SNS 140/80.

122 SNS 226/128, 237/134.

in the spectacle of the world and in our existence. *Only on this condition can philosophical knowledge cease to be a specialization or a technique* [i.e., cease to be 'separate'] *and become absolute knowledge.*"[123]

### 2.5 — Human Productivity

The central idea in Merleau-Ponty's effort to work out a solution to this problem is that of "human productivity" [*la productivité humaine*].[124] This idea can be seen as an elaboration of the notion of "transcendence" as a response to the need to spell out and elucidate the creative capacity – ostensibly distinctive to human existence, if not the very principle of anthropogenesis – in virtue of which human beings are able to effect a rupture with and overcome the cyclical rhythms of their biological being: how one can, as Merleau-Ponty put it, *faire une pointe hors de soi-même* – and in this way "draw life away from its spontaneous direction [*sens spontané*]."[125]

We need to be wary of Merleau-Ponty's use of the term "spontaneity" and its various cognates, however, at least inasmuch as he applies these to vital phenomena. For they tend to be infected with the same ambiguity found in his usage of the notion of life, *viz.*, that between the generality of life-as-such and the particularity of lived lives. For the sake of clarity, we should reserve the term 'spontaneity' for the sense of passive momentum that pertains to life-as-such, that is, to that which underlies the human body as a "*natural self*, a current of given existence."[126] As for the sense of spontaneity that pertains solely to vital particularity, Merleau-Ponty gave a clear

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123 PhP 75/62, emphasis added.

124 SNS 229/129.

125 PhP 519/455.

126 PhP 199/171.

expression of this when he described it – in a way clearly reminiscent of Sartrean *mauvaise foi* – as "a sort of *escape* [échappement]," but one that involves "a process of mystification" or "equivocation."[127] For short of death, it is not *really* an escape; it remains rooted in life-as-such. Inasmuch as it presumes to escape this, a particular life is engaged in a kind of "metaphysical hypocrisy" which deceives itself, not by concealing this or that aspect of particularity, but rather "through the medium of generality," that is, by plunging into it [*s'y enfoncer*]. This kind of "hypocrisy" is even – or perhaps *especially* – found "in the 'sincere' or 'authentic' man whenever he claims to be something unreservedly [*sans réserves*]."[128]

At its core, the idea of productivity points to a synchronization of these two one-sided forms of activity: on the one hand, the spontaneous vital force that propels life, albeit blindly, which is to say, as a matter of subjective passivity; and on the other hand, the decisiveness of individual 'escape', the nihilating power of consciousness whereby "we tear ourselves away from ourselves."[129] Lacking any independent effectivity, this can only manifest itself negatively, because all it can do is turn that passive vital force against *it*self.[130] But as Merleau-Ponty notes, this "belongs to the human condition" no less than the "natural self" does.[131] The idea of productivity is meant to encompass both aspects in a way that captures the meaning of "the living subject" [*le sujet vivant*] in terms of (a) the transcendence, and (b) the decentred rela-

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127 PhP 199, 201/171f.

128 PhP 190/162f.

129 PhP 489/428.

130 Merleau-Ponty later referred to this as the "hopeless heroism of the I." Cf. AD 276-281/205-209.

131 PhP 190/162f.

tions to alterity that are implicit in the notion of historical development.[132] In this way, it is meant as a *generalization* of the concept of human production that would be able to provide the philosophical ground for Marx's theory of the self-realization of humanity. It would do so by showing that "the living subject," as "the real [*réel*] subject of history"[133] – that is, "the vehicle [*porteur*] of history and the motor [*moteur*] of the dialectic"[134] – is "man *as* productivity" [*l'homme* en tant que *productivité*].[135] This makes it clear that the historical subject cannot be understood in individual terms; rather, it is "man engaged in a certain way of appropriating nature in which the mode of his relationship with other takes shape." In other words, "it is *concrete human intersubjectivity*, the successive and simultaneous community of existences in the process of self-realization, each created by and creating the other."[136]

Although this intersubjectivity is understood to be concrete, which is to say, it is understood on a corporeal basis, it is not taken in *material* terms in any reductive sense. Merleau-Ponty was quite dubious with respect to the materialist basis of historical materialism, in particular with respect to nature. It is important to recognize that Merleau-Ponty thought that the basic reason for the morbidity of Marxist theory was that Marx's "original insight" [*intuition si neuve*][137] had never been given a proper

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[132] Cf. PhP 200/171. As we shall see, this idea of productivity is virtually synonymous with Merleau-Ponty's idea of human freedom, although a more revealing term – one that Merleau-Ponty noted in Husserl's unpublished work (PhP 489/428), but which he himself did not adopt – would be "generativity." On the basis of much more unpublished material than that with which Merleau-Ponty was familiar, this theme has recently been developed by Anthony Steinbock in *Home and Beyond: Generative Phenomenology after Husserl* (Northwestern University Press, 1995); cf. "Spirit and Generativity: The Role and Contribution of the Phenomenologist in Hegel and Husserl," pp163-203 in *Alterity and Facticity*, eds. N. Depraz and D. Zahavi (Kluwer,1998).

[133] PhP 200/171.

[134] SNS 228/129, italics removed.

[135] PhP 200/171, emphasis added.

[136] SNS 228/129, emphasis added.

[137] EP 43/53.

theoretical formulation, and this because it had never been placed on a proper philosophical foundation. According to Merleau-Ponty, this insight amounts to Marx's discovery of "a historical rationality immanent in the life of men," immanent in inter-human *praxis*, in "the meaning [*sens*] which works itself out spontaneously in the inter-twining [*entre-croisement*] of those activities by which man organizes his relations with nature and with other men."[138] Or more simply, that "there is an incarnation of ideas and values."[139] The problem was that this "put into question the usual categories of philosophy" without furnishing the "intellectual reform" that the transcendence of these received categories required.[140] Merleau-Ponty intended his rethinking of Marxism based on the idea of human productivity to furnish the outstanding philosophical foundation of historical materialism, and thereby supply precisely the 'intellectual reform' needed to redeem Marx's 'original insight'.

Following Lukács' criticisms as idealistic, not only of Hegel's application of dialectical categories to nature, but also and in particular of the derivative Engelsian view that the dialectical development of human history is an instance of more general dialectical laws that govern all of reality, including nature,[141] Merleau-Ponty maintained that nature, understood as subsisting *partes extra partes*, can only be conceptualized as an inert backdrop to the dialectical drama of human history.[142] "If nature is

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[138] EP 41/50.

[139] SNS 190/108. Here Merleau-Ponty calls this "the principal thought" [*la pensée principale*] of Marxism.

[140] EP 43/53.

[141] This is a view Engels worked out most fully in his much maligned work *The Dialectics of Nature*, an incomplete manuscript that was written in the late-1870s, and published posthumously in 1935. Here Engels tried to demonstrate the existence in physical nature of Hegel's 'laws' of dialectical development.

[142] Merleau-Ponty later referred to Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* as the "bible" of Western Marxism (AD 12/7).

[...] exterior to us and to itself, it will yield neither the relations nor the quality needed to carry a dialectic." In this way he effectively concurred with Lukács' dismissal of nature as non-amenable to philosophical analysis except as a social category.[143] "If it is dialectical, then we are dealing with that nature perceived by man and inseparable from human action."[144] Merleau-Ponty was thus expressing a structural parameter of Western Marxism, which he saw as a part of the intellectual reform he was attempting, when he said that Marxism is "a philosophy of *history*"[145]—that is, it is a philosophy of history severed from nature.

Merleau-Ponty thus interpreted Marx's materialism in terms of "the idea that all the ideological formations of a given society are synonymous with or complementary to a certain type of *praxis*, that is, the way this society has established its fundamental relationship with nature." As for materialism as traditionally, 'crudely' understood, then, Merleau-Ponty was blunt: "[t]here is no question of any pure [*nue*] matter, exterior to man and in terms of which his behaviour could be explained."[146] In fact, Merleau-Ponty argued – as did Sartre,[147] although to different effect – that the idea of a dialectical materialism is ultimately self-contradictory, inasmuch as matter is self-coincident, hence inert, and thus incapable of carrying "the principle of productivity and novelty [*nouveauté*]" as exhibited in human history. But he also maintained that Marx had already recognized that it would be "the height of subjectivism" to locate the

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[143] Lukács' dualism was given an ontological formulation by Kojève, with whom Merleau-Ponty thus did share some common ground.

[144] SNS 224/126.

[145] SNS 130/231, emphasis added. In fact, Merleau-Ponty anticipated a later claim by Sartre when he wrote that "Marxism is not a philosophy of history; it is *the* philosophy of history" (HT 165/153).

[146] SNS 231/130.

[147] "Matérialisme et révolution," in *Les Temps modernes* 9; reprinted in *Situations III* (Gallimard, 1949).

dialectic of praxis in *things* considered materialistically; according to Merleau-Ponty, what Marx did was to "shift it into men"[148] through the proto-phenomenological "expedient" of "human matter" or "human objects."[149] Merleau-Ponty's solution to the problem of materialism was to suggest that Marx had really only seriously considered matter within "the system of human coexistence,"[150] where it becomes dialectically animated by 'human productivity'. "When Marx speaks of *human* objects, he means that [...] significance adheres to the object as it presents itself in our experience. [...] The spirit of a society is realized, transmitted, and perceived through the cultural objects which it bestows upon itself and in the midst of which it lives."[151]

It is for this reason that one can say, as Merleau-Ponty cited Marx, that the milieu of history is neither natural nor supernatural, but rather "transnatural" [*transnaturel*], where this means that within this environment, "man's *natural* behaviour has become *human* [...] human being has become his *natural* being, [and] his *human nature* has become his nature." In short, that "history is the genuine natural history of man."[152]

And this makes it clear how the idea of human productivity was intended to show that the theoretical development required by Marxism calls for a philosophical union with Husserl's phenomenology of the *Lebenswelt*—which, Merleau-Ponty suggested, had contributed more than anything to "describing consciousness incarnate in an environment of human objects and in a linguistic tradition."[153]



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148 EP 42/52.

149 EP 44/54; SNS 232/131.

150 SNS 229/129.

151 SNS 232/131.

152 SNS 230/130.

153 SNS 239/135.

In comparison with the significance that Merleau-Ponty intended the idea of human productivity to have, it is more difficult to actually pin down exactly what it means. For the time being only a brief account is possible.

Human productivity is that whereby existential transcendence is achieved through *praxis*. It is a matter of a dialectical relation – internal to the context of intersubjective involvement in the world – whereby a certain synchronization of the impulses of vital inherence with the intentions of symbolic thought is achieved. The former represent the indeclinable bases of the living subject, but they are typically dissembled by the latter. Productivity is not a matter of achieving an exact harmonization between these, however; rather, the synchronization in question is a sort of dynamic concordance that ceaselessly *strives* for such a coincidence. It is the means or the manner of individual and collective self-realization that proceeds by taking up a meaning that is being offered by the world and projecting it symbolically through a "series of shifts [*glissements*]."[154] Through interaction and dialogue, the direction in which passive spontaneity evolves is reoriented in such a way that events respond to will. With an immoderate rhetorical flourish even by his own standards, Merleau-Ponty described such moments thusly: "sometimes there is that blaze of fire, that flash of lightening, that moment of victory, [...] that *gloria* that eclipses everything else."[155]

There are two preliminary points that should be made about human productivity at this stage. The first concerns death. I argued above that transcendence depends upon 'the negativity of death'. In this way, death is an aspect of life-as-such. If we put this in terms of self-realization, then we could say that, unless this means something quite

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[154] PhP 519/455.

[155] SNS 330/186; cf. SNS 171/98, "the glory of self-evidence [*gloire de l'évidence*], that of successful communication and dialogue." Cf. note 65 above.

banal, it is a transformative matter of self-overcoming, that is, an overcoming of the given or previously realized self. The suspension of or detachment from the latter that self-realization implies can be described as an adumbration of *suicide*. There is the extreme case of the revolutionary 'self-annihilation of the proletariat', but Merleau-Ponty also notes, for example, what Emile Bernard called "Cézanne's suicide."[156] And we have seen how Merleau-Ponty links death with the universal in thought. The idea is that inasmuch as the process of self-realization is seen as a matter of coinciding with or reappropriating spontaneity, this can only occur on condition of a sacrifice of living particularity.

This is tied to the creative dimension of human productivity. Consider Merleau-Ponty's claim that "the act of the artist or philosopher is free [...] Their freedom resides in the power of equivocation [...] or in the process of escape [...] It consists in taking up a factual situation by giving it a figurative meaning [*sens figuré*] beyond its real meaning [*sens propre*]."[157] In the same way, "the revolutionary movement, like the work of the artist, is an intention which itself creates its instruments and its means of expression."[158] In each case, there is implied "the power to suspend vital communication" with the world, "or at least to limit it."[159] It is by passing through the universal that such projects can transcend the given. However, this is achieved concretely only provided these projects are accompanied by a new existential commitment and are "worked out in interhuman relations."[160] As Merleau-Ponty put it, "it is not enough for

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156 SNS 21/12.

157 PhP 201/172.

158 PhP 508/445.

159 PhP 279/241f.

160 PhP 509/446.

a painter like Cézanne, an artist, or a philosopher, to create and express an idea; they must also awaken the experiences which will make their idea take root in the consciousness of others. A successful work has the strange power to teach its own lesson [*s'enseigner elle-même*]."[161] Ideally, the deathliness of creative escape is contagious—for thereby death is, in a sense, overcome. "I thus live not for death but forever [*à jamais*], and in the same way, not for myself alone but with others."[162]

The second preliminary point concerning human productivity concerns its relationship to time. Merleau-Ponty's idea is that the communion achieved through successful joint escape – that is, through mutual suspension of 'vital communication' with the world and mutual concrete commitment to a common goal – represents the very principle of anthropogenesis. It is thus the basis of history, and *a fortiori* of historical time. In this view, nature is essentially chaotic, and this precisely because it is seen to subsist *partes extra partes*, that is, because it is broken up, as it were, into innumerable incommunicable pieces. Borrowing a phrase from Robert Campbell, it is the "vast, senseless babble of things" [*l'immense murmure insensé des choses*].[163] The human communion that emerges through certain acts of self-sacrifice overcomes our mutual separation, that is, overcomes *senselessness*, and it is precisely in this context that human embodied existence, as Merleau-Ponty put it, "secretes" [*sécrète*] time.[164] That is, "it becomes the location in nature where, for the first time, events, instead of pushing one another into being, project around the present a double horizon of past and

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[161] SNS 33/19.

[162] SNS 121/70.

[163] "De l'ambiguïté à l'héroïsme chez Merleau-Ponty," 284.

[164] PhP 277/239. In choosing the term "secrete" Merleau-Ponty no doubt had in mind to offset Sartre's rather different claim that human freedom is a matter of "secreting" one's own nothingness.

future and receive a historical orientation."[165] It is by being thusly polarized that, for Merleau-Ponty, "*we are the upsurge* [surgissement] *of time.*"[166]

This 'proto-temporalization' is the core meaning of human productivity as an ecstatically transgressive break with nature. But there is temporality and there are *temporalities*. Beyond an initial upsurge, the *glissements*, the projective shifts on which productivity is based, occur through the synergistic intertwining of ecstatic subjectivities. For in general these remain separate. It is important to see that this quasi-natural situation is what Merleau-Ponty refers to as non-sense, that is, the absence of sense; and that he often refers to it as a kind of "madness" [*déraison*]. It is thus no coincidence that Merleau-Ponty found the paradigm of human productivity in the psychotherapeutic context.[167] Drawing on Ludwig Binswanger's account of the therapeutic encounter, Merleau-Ponty wrote that analysis succeeds by "binding the subject to his doctor through new existential relationships," so that the pathological complex in question can be dissolved, not by "a freedom without instruments," but rather by "*a new pulsation* [pulsation] *of time* with its own supports and motives."[168] The effectiveness of this depends on the strength of the new existential commitment,

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[165] PhP 277/239f.

[166] PhP 489/428, italics added.

[167] Merleau-Ponty was clearly influenced by Ludwig Binswanger's article "Über Psychotherapie," pp113-121, 180-189 in *Nervenarzt* 8 (1935) ; reprinted in *Ausgewählte Werke*, Band 3, ed. M. Herzog (Roland Asanger, 1994), 205-230. Merleau-Ponty referred to this article six times in the chapter "Le corps comme être sexué," and endorsed its principal claim, to wit, that "in psychological treatment of any kind, the coming to awareness would remain purely cognitive, the patient would not accept the meaning of his disturbances as revealed to him without the personal relationship formed with the doctor, or without the confidence and friendship felt toward him, and the *change of existence* resulting from this friendship" (PhP 190/163, emphasis added).

[168] PhP 519/455, emphasis added.

and Merleau-Ponty added – significantly – that "the same applies in all cases of coming to awareness" [*il en est de même dans toutes les prises de conscience*].[169]

What he specifically meant by this was the emergence of a transformative political consciousness. Thus, whether it is psychopathological or ideological (a kind of social pathology), equivocal dissemblance of vital reality is overcome through a 'new pulsation of time', where this implies the creative projection of *a new way of seeing the world historically*, and a joint existential commitment to that way of seeing which, in bringing it into the realm of sense, *ipso facto* overcomes intersubjective separation.

We can thus see that the meaning of Merleau-Ponty's idea of human productivity is ultimately *therapeutic*. It manifests itself in the curative effort of phenomenology to "explore the irrational and integrate it into an expanded reason [*raison élargie*]."[170] Philosophy proper is one moment of this. "True philosophy consists in relearning to see the world." "Whether it is a matter of things or of historical situations, philosophy has no other function than to teach us again to see them clearly."[171] Such new ways of seeing involve a vital rupture—philosophy is this a moment of escape. As Merleau-Ponty put it, "we take our fate in our hands, we become responsible for our history through reflection, but equally through a decision whereby we stake our life [*engageons notre vie*], and in both cases it is a matter of a violent act which proves itself in practice [*qui se vérifie en s'exerçant*]."[172]

As we shall see in more detail below, the view of history offered by Merleau-Pontian philosophy proposes a certain paradoxically contingent logic of universality.

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[169] PhP 519/455. I shall return to this below.

[170] SNS 109/63.

[171] PhP xvi/xx, 520/456; cf. NI 139.

[172] PhP xvi/xx.

Its *realization*, that is, the overcoming of *its* separateness that serves to validate it, is an extra-philosophical event, one which requires a "vow [*vœu*] of universality"[173] and the corresponding resolve to actively concretize it. Such commitment is part and parcel of Merleau-Ponty's militant standpoint.

**Excursus : Caillois on Militant Orthodoxy**

It is fitting to conclude this chapter with a brief excursus on Roger Caillois' views on militant thinking, in particular as expressed in an essay entitled "Pour une orthodoxie militante: les tâches immédiates de la pensée moderne" ["For a Militant Orthodoxy: The Immediate Tasks of Modern Thought"].[174] Although this is not identical with Merleau-Ponty's own view, it is nonetheless useful to consider it; for in spelling out in greater detail the general nature of militant thinking, it shows some significant parallels with Merleau-Ponty's own militant standpoint.

In this piece, Caillois sketched out a vision of a radicalized rationalism as a kind of non-conformist intellectual reform that would yield a "a scientific heterodox 'orthodoxy'."[175] This was to be a rigorous yet imaginative science which, as a contemporary counterpart to myth, would integrate lucidity and affect so as to compel intellect and emotion equally, and in this way contribute to revivifying society against its decadent decline and the threat of fascism. It was thus by no means anti-Enlightenment. The point was to recover the radical challenge to social order enunciated by nineteenth-

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[173] NI 4; cf. SNS 214/122.

[174] *Inquisitions: Organe de recherche de la phénoménologie humaine* 1 (June 1936), 6-14. This first issue of *Inquisitions*, which also contained Gaston Bachelard's article "Le Surrationalisme," was also the last. Caillois' article was reprinted as the conclusion to *Le Mythe et l'homme* (Gallimard, 1938), 209-222, under the title "Pour une fonction unitaire de l'esprit."

[175] Claudine Frank, ed., *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader* (Duke University Press, 2003), 130.

century *maudit* poets like Baudelaire and Balzac—but with a twist. For now the problem was the oppressiveness of social *disorder*. This is why Caillois called for a *militant orthodoxy*. On the one hand, this was militant: the proposed intellectual reform had a fundamentally "activist" character, in the sense of being radically opposed to determinism – it aimed to *produce* phenomena, not predict them. Caillois sought "a form of revolutionary thought that would not be restricted to the intellectual sphere, but would open out onto real life,"[176] "a mode of thought that would impress itself upon the real and trigger a whole series of phenomena in the real."[177]

On the other hand, though, this was to be an orthodoxy. For "the adversary must be defeated with its own weapons: through a more rigorous coherence and a tighter systematization – through a construction that both implicates and explicates it, rather than itself being reduced and decomposed by it."[178] This implied an endlessly open-ended process of integration and generalization.[179] The authority of this approach would derive, not only from "the solidity of its principles [and] the rigor of their application," but also from "*the appeal of its demands.*"[180] A militantly orthodox system of knowledge would, at once and in a reciprocal way, be "immune to all methodological criticism" and appear to human sensitivity "*directly in the form of an imperative attraction that is capable of mobilizing it instantly.*"[181] For Caillois, militant systematicity would ultimately rest on a myth of organic human unity. That is, militant orthodoxy is premised on "the *presumption that there exists an ideal unitary undertaking*,

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176 Interview with Gilles Lapouge, June 1970, cited in *The Edge of Surrealism*, 142.

177 Cited in *The Edge of Surrealism*, 131.

178 MH 215.

179 MH 215f.

180 MH 217.

181 MH 220.

that would take as its task to set *the whole of man's being* to work, in such a way as to make its different functions converge in a continuous process of living creation."[182] The aim and orientation of the project is to verify this myth in the sense of *making* it true. There is something of the sorcerer's apprentice in this, but therein lies the difference from both archaic myth and modern science.

As we shall see, in virtue of the parallels between this and Merleau-Ponty's own militant standpoint in terms of being ethically driven, practical, creative projects that ultimately rest on humanistic myth, it would not be inappropriate to regard the political hermeneutics with which Merleau-Ponty sought to reform Marxism as an analogous kind of 'existential orthodoxy'. But the question of heroism will serve to reveal a crucial difference that casts light by way of contrast on Merleau-Ponty's position.

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[182] MH 221.

# Chapter 3 : "Man, the Hero"

*Phenomenology of Perception* is not unique among Merleau-Ponty's works in terms of ending on a note of Exupérian heroism as based on *Pilote de guerre*. While the theme of heroism is, I would argue, implicitly woven into many of his writings from the immediate post-war period,[1] Merleau-Ponty chose to crown the collection of essays that he published in 1948 under the title *Sense and Non-Sense* with a short essay – entitled "Le Héros, l'Homme" ["Man, the Hero"] – which, as its title suggests, took up this theme explicitly.[2] Yet this piece has received negligible scholarly attention.

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This chapter examines this essay closely as a source of important clues as to the meaning of the ending of *Phenomenology of Perception* :

- §3.1 discusses the motivation behind the original publication of this essay;
- §3.2 analyzes Merleau-Ponty's discussion of heroism in this essay in terms of post-Hegelian philosophy of history;
- §3.3 examines Merleau-Ponty's account of what he called "the contemporary hero";
- §3.4 discusses Merleau-Ponty's presentation of this account in the mythic terms of "man," in particular in its contrast with Luciferian and Promethean models.

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1 It did occasionally pierce through, though. For example, in his discussion of the relation between history and 'slavery' in the context of his existential reading of Hegelian absolute knowledge, Merleau-Ponty wrote that "mankind's successive decisions can be concentrated in a single act whereby consciousness regains itself and, if you will, God becomes man or man becomes God" (SNS 119/69).

2 SNS 323-331/182-187.

### 3.1 — The Existential Attitude

"Le Héros, l'Homme" was originally published under the title "Le Culte du héros" ["Hero Worship"] in the pro-PCF (Communist Party of France) weekly *action* [*sic*] in February 1946.[3] Aside from a few words quoted in the editorial preface that accompanied its publication in *action*,[4] no documentary evidence is available to explain exactly why Merleau-Ponty submitted this piece to this particular newspaper. However, a reasonable explanation can be constructed.

First of all, it is safe to say that Merleau-Ponty's submission of this essay to *action* is linked to his political construal of existentialism and formed part of his 'indefatigable' efforts at publicly promoting existentialism as a political philosophy. For *action* was by no means a dogmatic organ of the PCF. In fact, following the end of the war in Europe, *action* had been a forum for debate between Marxism and Sartrean existentialism. In fact, at the end of 1944, Sartre himself had been asked to contribute a defence of his views.[5] He took this opportunity to emphasize that both existentialism and Marxism were philosophies of human self-determination based on freedom and commitment. No less than Marxism, Sartre argued, existentialism was "a humanist philosophy of action, effort, combat, and solidarity." However, this was subsequently rebuked quite harshly by Henri Lefebvre as the product of a 'pathological narcissistic consciousness" that could only pose "the human problem" as an "abstract and theoretical individual question.[6] For present purposes, the point is that, following the war,

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[3] *action* 74 (1.II.1946), 12-13. The bibliographic information given at the end of the English translation of *Sense and Non-Sense*, which claims that "Man, the Hero" was "especially written" for this volume, is false.

[4] See supplementary note C.

[5] "À propos de l'existentialisme: mise au point," *action* 17 (29.XII.1944), 11.

[6] "Existentialisme et Marxisme: réponse à une mise au point," *action* 40 (8.VI.1945), 8.

*action* was an important focal point for public debate over the political credentials of existentialism.[7]

Of special interest to Merleau-Ponty with regard to his existentialist proselytizing were relatively open-minded intellectuals within and around the PCF. As the existentialist thinker in closest contact with such figures during the post-war period, Merleau-Ponty did manage to pull some in the direction of existentialism.[8] Among these, Merleau-Ponty's "privileged interlocutor" was Pierre Hervé, a leading figure in the party who was at the time "at the very centre of a liberalizing movement within the party,"[9] a movement that aimed, as did Merleau-Ponty, for a broad unification of the Left in France.[10] And, most importantly, Hervé was the director of *action*. Thus, in the context of his active promotion of existentialism, the key reason why Merleau-Ponty chose to send his essay on heroism to *action* – *nota bene*, unlike Sartre's earlier contribution, this was *not* solicited by the editors – was because it formed a moment in his on-going political dialogue with the milieu of Marxist thinkers sympathetic to existentialism, centred around Hervé.

The general claim that Merleau-Ponty aimed to establish in this dialogue was that as a practical project of proletarian self-emancipation, Marxism was in principle less a

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[7] Merleau-Ponty later criticized Lefebvre in "La querelle de l'existentialisme," which was published in the second issue of *Les Temps modernes* (XI.1945).

[8] Cf. Sartre, "Merleau-Ponty vivant", *Les Temps modernes* 17 (October 1961); reprinted under the title "Merleau-Ponty" in *Situations IV* (Gallimard, 1964), 199, 221f.

[9] Whiteside, *Merleau-Ponty and the Foundation of an Existential Politics*, 211. Cf. Merleau-Ponty's essay "Faith and Good Faith," also published in February 1946, in which he refers positively to the relative openness and honesty of Hervé's Marxism (SNS 318-321/179ff), although he had criticized Hervé the previous month in his editorial article "Pour la vérité" (SNS 274f/155). (Hervé was expelled from the party ten years later when he published a call – *La Révolution et les fétiches* – for its de-Stalinization shortly before Khrushchev's historic speech to the 20th Congress of the CPSU.)

[10] Mark Poster, *Existential Marxism in Post-War France: From Sartre to Althusser* (Princeton University Press, 1975), 110f.

body of truth than a *method* for interpreting political phenomena,[11] and that at least with respect to subjectivity and consciousness, as we saw above, what its development required could be supplied by existential phenomenology. "A living Marxism should 'save' and integrate existentialist research instead," as was its tendency, "of stifling it."[12] If Marxism is still true, "then we will rediscover it on the path of present-day [*actuelle*] truth and in the analysis of our time."[13]

Existential research and analysis as such, however, are not what the essay on heroism offered. Rather, as Merleau-Ponty stated in the letter that accompanied its original submission to *action*, its task was more specific and fundamental: that is, to define "the existential attitude (as a general phenomenon of our times, and not as a school of thought)," and to do so "positively and on the basis of examples."[14] The essay was to offer an heuristic principle of orientation in the neo-Marxist political hermeneutics he was proposing.

### 3.2 — Heroes and History

Merleau-Ponty defined the "existential attitude" by personifying it in what he called "the contemporary hero." Because he did so by way of a critique of what I will call 'traditional' and 'ideological' views of heroism, I will examine Merleau-Ponty's treat-

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[11] In this Merleau-Ponty was in effect following Lukács, "What is Orthodox Marxism?," in *History and Class Consciousness*. Ironically, Lukács was one of Merleau-Ponty's fiercest polemical critics after 1945; in particular, see *Existentialisme ou Marxisme?*, trans. E. Keleman (Nagel, 1948), 198-252.

[12] SNS 143/82.

[13] SNS 303/171. Cf. NI 153, where with respect to French existentialism Merleau-Ponty said that "we don't have the feeling of doing sectarian work, but of taking up research to the point where it is carried by our time."

[14] Quoted from the editorial preface (see supplementary note C).

ment of these before turning in the next section to the account of the contemporary hero itself.

### 3.2.1 — Traditional Heroism

Merleau-Ponty begins this essay by noting that political discourses of heroism were in the decline as the war receded further into the past. According to Merleau-Ponty, this heralded a re-normalization of society, whereas heroism and hero-worship are phenomena of exceptional circumstances. Merleau-Ponty was certainly not opposed to this, echoing Marcel's distrust of heroism as a concrete political phenomenon. But he expressed discomfort with the distinction, which he attributed to Marcel, between this sort of 'real' heroism and the 'literary' heroism found in the world of letters. For the latter was not similarly in decline. What was the meaning of this? What was one to make of heroic novels, for example, and how is one to respond to them? In particular, what bearing, if any, does literary heroism have on politics? It is not clear that the hero is something that can be simply and safely hived off, without further ado, into the world of literature. "It would be better to know exactly what there is behind this grand word," *hero*.[15]

Merleau-Ponty asserts that 'hero worship' has "always existed" [*est de toujours*], but identifies Hegel as the key turning-point in its history. Previously, he claims, the idea of the hero was essentially that of an "agent of a Providence," the paradigm of which, for Merleau-Ponty, was the Christian saint. Here heroic action is to be understood as self-sacrifice in the name of certain transcendent, other-worldly goals. This changed when Hegel brought heroism down to Earth by conceiving it in terms of "the

[15] SNS 324/182.

individuals of world history."[16] In this view, heroes are particular concrete individuals who gain an inchoate awareness that the social context in which they find themselves "has no future," and who take it upon themselves to intervene in effect on behalf of historical progress. World-historical individuals grasped what History needed and acted accordingly – "they were the new race [*la race nouvelle*] that already existed within the old."[17] They are in essence the state-founding agents of the *Weltgeist*. "They have a presentiment of the future, but of course they have no knowledge of it: they sense it in their tastes, their passions, and their very being rather than see it clearly before them. [...] They forsake happiness and by their deeds and their example create a new law and a moral system in which their time will later recognize its truth."[18]

The Hegelian hero is thus an historical individual who, on the basis of an inchoate presentiment of universal history, acts in accordance with that and thus *against his own time*. Retrospectively, such action can be seen as a matter of historical wisdom. But *only* retrospectively. Such heroes are *not* heroes for their historical contemporaries, at least not all of them. For in general they come too soon to be the true beneficiaries of the world-historical actions in question. "Their heroism resides in their having worked out and won for others, with nothing certain to go on and in the loneliness of subjectivity, what will afterwards seem the only possible future and the very meaning of history."[19]

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[16] Without directly citing it, Merleau-Ponty paraphrases and quotes from the introduction to Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (cf. NI 64). Cf. *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Dover, 1956), 30f.

[17] Quoting Hegel: "die nächste Gattung, die im Innern bereits vorhanden war." [In Sibree's rendering: "the species next in order [...] which was already formed in the womb of time," 30]

[18] SNS 324/183.

[19] SNS 324f/183.

In contrast to this Hegelian view, which dialectically embeds the hero in the unfolding of universal history, Merleau-Ponty also extracts a notion of heroism from Nietzsche's account of the *Übermensch*. The operative idea in this is of being situated without both providence and historical reason; here there is no meaning or logic in history, no non-arbitrary substantive goals to aspire towards. This Nietzschean idea of heroism thus involves a rejection of *any* overarching framework as a condition of historical action. So whereas the Hegelian hero sacrifices happiness and personal well-being for the sake of achieving historical order, the Nietzschean hero "is beyond everything that *has been or is to be done*; he is interested only in power itself."[20] That is, this figure is situated beyond history, and is thus concerned solely with the assertion of pure power *against others*. There can be no constructive exercise of power here, for there is nothing to do: there are no historical tasks to fulfill, and there is no dialectical framework within which the exercise of power could be sublimated as sacrifice and deployed in a transformative way. Conquest in itself, and conquest alone remains meaningful, and in particular the conquest of death, "the most powerful opponent of all." The Nietzschean hero is thus ultimately caught up in the impossible quest for "a life which really integrates death into itself and whose free recognition by others is assured once and for all."[21]

Merleau-Ponty can be seen reverting to Hegelian terminology in his interpretation of Nietzsche. For as he has described it, the Nietzschean hero finds himself precisely in the existential impasse of the Hegelian 'master'; that is, he seeks unreciprocated recognition. The contrast is thus posed in an unexpectedly simple way: the Nietzschean

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[20] SNS 325/183.

[21] SNS 326/184.

hero is the Hegelian 'master' [*Herr*], while the Hegelian hero is the Hegelian 'slave' [*Knecht*], that is, the one who has "chosen life and who works to transform the world in such a way that in the end there is no more room for the master."[22] Somewhat counter-intuitively, by this reckoning Alexander, Caesar, and Napoleon, for example, would be 'slaves' of the *Weltgeist.*

As presented in Merleau-Ponty's short essay, these are not fully serious philosophical interpretations of either Hegel or Nietzsche. Although their contents may well prove defensible, were they to be fleshed out with greater exegetical rigor, that is not Merleau-Ponty's purpose here. In fact, it is very seldom that Merleau-Ponty's published work pursues careful exegesis. Here, as is his tendency, he is primarily interested in outlining certain philosophical tropes that serve his own argumentative purposes. It is in simultaneous contrast to both the so-called Hegelian and Nietzschean figures of heroism that he presents the idea of what he calls the "contemporary hero."

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But we would overlook the significance of what Merleau-Ponty is doing if we fail to recognize that these tropes *do* represent, at root, different philosophical standpoints *vis-à-vis* history. In fact, they represent opposed orientations with respect to *Hegelian* philosophy of history, precisely those among which Merleau-Ponty found himself at the time compelled to negotiate and to stake out an interstitial position. "There are," as he said, "several Hegels," and "interpreting Hegel means taking a stand on all the philosophical, political, and religious problems of our century."[23]

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22 SNS 326/184; cf. SNS 118f/68f.

23 SNS 110/63f.

First, the view he attributes to Hegel himself in this essay, is the 'triumphant' view that effectively holds that there can no longer be heroes because the tasks of universal history have all been fulfilled;[24] this 'Hegel' is more accurately associated with the interpretation of Hegel offered by Alexandre Kojève.[25] According to this interpretation, the 'end of History' had been attained—that is, human consciousness had become the Concept, thus concluding the movement by which it had sought to overcome the opposition between thought and being. We need not enter into the details of this interpretation here.[26] It suffices to point out that the linchpin of Kojève's view is his assertion of the possibility of a "fully self-conscious consciousness." This is what Kojève termed the 'Sage': "the Sage is a man who is capable of answering in a *comprehensible* or satisfactory manner *all* questions that can be asked him concerning his acts, and who is capable of answering in such a way that the *entirety* of his answers forms a *coherent* discourse. Or else, what amounts to the same thing: the Sage who is *fully* and *perfectly self-conscious*."[27] This is crucial because it is only on the basis of the total historical knowledge implied by this that one could legitimately claim of historical heroes, not only that they did in fact attain a partial glimpse of the universal truth, and thus did in fact engage in *bona fide* heroic activity; but also that as a whole they have been rendered obsolete, that is, that History, the domain of the hero, has ended.

But as discussed above, in *The Structure of Behaviour* Merleau-Ponty had already shown that Kojève's Sage is not humanly possible, on the grounds that the integration

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[24] Cf. *Philosophy of Right*, 245.

[25] In his *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, ed. R. Queneau (Gallimard, 1947). See supplementary note D.

[26] See Barry Cooper, *The End of History: An Essay on Modern Hegelianism* (University of Toronto Press, 1984). Francis Fukuyama tried to update Kojève's thesis in his work *The End of History and the Last Man* (The Free Press, 1992).

[27] *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, 271.

constitutive of acquired self-consciousness "is never absolute and it always fails." In fact, the impossibility of "complete integration" – which is to say, of Sagely wisdom – is precisely what Merleau-Ponty aimed to substantiate in that work, by showing that "all integration presupposes the normal functioning of the subordinated forms, *which always demand their own due.*"[28]

Second, with regard to Merleau-Ponty's trope of Nietzschean heroism, one might be tempted to think of Georges Bataille.[29] Bataille was close to Kojève, but was also a major proponent of Nietzschean ideas in France, and this was largely *because* he accepted as valid Kojève's conclusion that human society was entering a terminal stage of universal homogeneity in which human negativity had nothing to do. In his terms, this gave rise to the problem of "unemployed negativity," and in particular to the problem of securing recognition for it as such.[30]

For Bataille, however, the end of History was rolled together with the death of God in such a way that at once opened up and radically undermined the possibility for genuine subjectivity. This yielded the paradoxical or "impossible" situation of "sovereignty" that was central to Bataille's thinking. In this sense, he was not so much a

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[28] SC 227/210, emphasis added.

[29] Merleau-Ponty and Bataille were personally acquainted. For at least a few years, Merleau-Ponty was, like Bataille, a regular attendee at Kojève's lectures; Merleau-Ponty was present at the "Discussion sur le péché" ["Discussion on Sin"], an event at the home of Marcel Moré on 5.III.1944 that centred on a lecture by Bataille, and a response by Jean Daniélou; a revised version of Bataille's lecture later formed part of his work *Sur Nietzsche* (1945), while the transcript of the entire discussion was published in *Dieu vivant* 4 (1945), pp83-133 (reprinted in Bataille, *Œuvres complètes* 6:315-358); Merleau-Ponty is not recorded as contributing. After the war as well, there is evidence of friendly contact. See, for example, Bataille's "Lettre à Merleau-Ponty," *Œuvres complètes* 11:251f. Bataille also refers to an extended conversation between himself, A. J. Ayer, Georges Ambrosino, and Merleau-Ponty in January 1951; *Œuvres complètes* 8:190f.

[30] This is expressed in "Letter to X, Lecturer on Hegel...," an incomplete letter addressed to Kojève dated 6.XII.1937; in *The College of Sociology (1937-1939)*, ed. D. Hollier, trans. B. Wing (University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 89-93; a revised version of this was published as an appendix in Bataille's *Le coupable* (1944).

follower of Nietzsche as someone who aspired to *imitate* Nietzsche. He took up Nietzsche as a sacred "hero" of non-conformism, but this precisely in his tragic, mad solitude – it was a matter, so to speak, of an *imitatio anti-Christi*. This is why, in his works from the war years, Bataille stated that his aim is "to invent a new way to crucify myself."[31] He made of his existence a "combat" that incarnated sacrifice by trying to mimic the sacrifice of God.

Without digressing into a detailed discussion of Bataille, suffice it to say that this effort was the result of his having accepted – and having tried to live out the consequences of – the basic premises of *both* the Hegelian and Nietzschean tropes of heroism. This made Bataille himself the focal point of their underlying conflict. As he colourfully put it, "the fury to sacrifice and the fury of the sacrifice opposed each other in me like gears, if they snag when the drive-shaft starts to turn."[32] Thus, while his uptake of Nietzsche was both explicit and infused with the themes of war and violence, it was primarily directed inwards in a self-destructive, self-annihilating way that does not conform to the model of self-assertive mastery sketched by Merleau-Ponty. So although Bataille may have been one of Merleau-Ponty's covert interlocutors, (he will resurface below), he does not, as we might initially be tempted to think, represent the trope of Nietzschean heroism.

Did anyone? To capture the contrast that Merleau-Ponty wanted to establish with Kojève, our attention should turn to Raymond Aron, someone who was also personally close to Kojève, but at the same time a sharp critic. In fact, in contrast to Kojève, Aron wrote in 1938 that "the traditional philosophy of history is completed in Hegel's sys-

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[31] *Œuvres complètes*, 5:257.

[32] *Œuvres complètes*, 5:250.

tem. *Modern philosophy of history begins with the rejection of Hegelianism.*"[33] He went on to develop a rather sceptical position concerning the limits of historical objectivity, which regarded historiography as inescapably based on subjective *mises en perspective.*[34] To be sure, this view shares a certain measure of common ground with Merleau-Ponty's own disagreement with Kojève. But Merleau-Ponty thought that Aron went too far in the direction of perspectivism.[35] *At least in theory.* Although he does not name him directly, Merleau-Ponty was undoubtedly referring to Aron when he wrote the following in his essay "Pour la vérité": "It has not been sufficiently noted that, after demonstrating the irrationality of history, the sceptic will abruptly abandon his methodological scruples when it comes to drawing practical conclusions. [...] A sceptical politics is obliged to treat, at least implicitly, certain facts as more important than others and to that extent it harbours an embarrassing philosophy of history—one which is lived rather than thought, but which is no less effective."[36] Merleau-Ponty was surely alluding to the increasingly Gaullist and pro-imperialist political views that Aron defended after the war.[37] Merleau-Ponty reasoned that Aron's practical pragmatism stemmed from the fact that his theoretical scepticism was based on an at least tacit acceptance of Kojève's overly strong criteria concerning what would count as histori-

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[33] *Essai sur la théorie de l'histoire dans l'Allemagne contemporaine* (Vrin, 1938); republished as *La philosophie critique de l'histoire. Essai sur une théorie allemande de l'histoire* (Vrin, 1969), 15, emphasis added.

[34] Cf. Aron's *Introduction à la philosophie de l'histoire: Essai sur les limites de l'objectivité historique* (Gallimard, 1938).

[35] Although Merleau-Ponty never names Aron in published work, he does develop an explicit critique of him in his *Notes inédites* from the 1940s. Kerry Whiteside explores this in "Perspectivism and Historical Objectivity: Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Covert Debate with Raymond Aron," pp132-151 in *History and Theory* 25 (1986).

[36] SNS 297/168.

[37] In particular, in works such as *L'Age des empires et l'avenir de la France* (Paris: Défense de la France, 1945); republished in *Chroniques de guerre. La France libre 1940-1945* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990). Cf. Whiteside, "Perspectivism and Historical Objectivity," 147f.

cal objectivity.[38] Correctly rejecting the possibility of this sort of absolute knowledge, he thus wrongly rejected historical objectivity as such, leaving his practical assessments with no principled basis beyond sociological facts. Hence Merleau-Ponty's claim that "historical scepticism is always conservative, although it cannot, in all strictness, exclude anything from its expectations—not even a revolutionary phase of history. Under the pretext of objectivity it freezes the future and eliminates change and the will of men from history."[39]

Although Merleau-Ponty contrasts the so-called Hegelian and Nietzschean heroic figures, we can see that because they are rooted in the same absolute view of historical objectivity – the one accepting it, the other rejecting it – the conceptions of subjectivity they respectively embody actually share a fundamental infirmity: they are each oblivious to concrete historical praxis. What Merleau-Ponty noted of Aron's sceptical position applies equally well to Kojève's post-historical view: he sees "neither true subjectivity, which is never without motives, nor true objectivity, which is never without evaluation, nor the junction of the one with the other in Praxis."[40] This is why neither offers a suitable framework for Marxist hermeneutics.

Significantly, this sort of 'historical apraxia', as it were, is essentially the same condition that Merleau-Ponty diagnosed in the 'good faith' of Christian Catholicism, that is, the worship of the 'interior' God, the "religion of the Father," which is located "in a dimension of eternity where it is invulnerable."[41] In this case, given that truth and meaning are tied to an atemporal, transcendent realm where perfection obtains, it

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38 Cf. NI 103f.

39 SNS 298/168.

40 NI 104.

41 SNS 309/174; cf. 315/177.

follows that in this world "there is, strictly speaking, nothing to do."[42] Nothing to do, that is, on behalf of the universal. This is the essence of a triumphant outlook. In the secular context, the same frame of mind leads to the denial of historical praxis, either on the grounds that all historical tasks have been accomplished (Kojève), or else because there never were any to begin with (Aron). Merleau-Ponty assimilates both of these views to a reading of Catholicism according to which *there is no future to be made*. There are, obviously, mundane things to do; but the present does not germinally contain in predelineated form the future towards which it is oriented, and which can become the object of historical agency. As Merleau-Ponty put it, "the Catholic as Catholic has no sense of the future: he must wait for this future to become part of the past before he can cast his lot with it [*s'y rallier*]."[43]

It is no coincidence that we gain insight into Merleau-Ponty's effort to navigate between Kojève and Aron – two atheist non-Marxists – through a discussion of Christian theology that took as its ostensible point of departure a dispute concerning the progressive political potential of Christianity between the Communist Hervé and the Jesuit philosopher (later cardinal) Jean Daniélou,[44] who was also an important and relatively sympathetic interlocutor of Merleau-Ponty. For Merleau-Ponty conceived the middle ground that he was trying to stake out between the different manifestations of triumphant thinking precisely as *militant* philosophy, which could be aptly regarded as a *theologico-political* concept.

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42 SNS 309/174.

43 SNS 315/177f.

44 This dispute was the basis for "Faith and Good Faith." See supplementary note E.

The fundamental idea subtending Merleau-Ponty's view is that "*the Incarnation is not followed out in all its consequences.*"[45] Catholicism "arrests and freezes" the development of the religion that would be based on "the marriage of Spirit and human history which began with the Incarnation."[46] A vestigial assumption of theocentricity is retained, and this obstructs what we might call the spiritualization of human society, that is, its infusion with the religion of Spirit. "God is not completely with us. Behind the incarnate Spirit there remains that infinite Gaze [*Regard*] which strips us of all secrets, but also of our liberty, our desire, and our future, reducing us to *visible objects.*"[47] This theocentric assumption effectively grants primacy to theoretical reason and its objectifying tendencies. It is because they partake of this same assumption that the upshot of both the Hegelian and Nietzschean accounts of heroic action is a 'triumphantly' conservative, spectative acquiescence in events that is antithetical to historical subjectivity and agency concretely understood. What is fundamentally lacking, according to Merleau-Ponty, is *living contact with the present* as the germinal origins of the future. "Our only recourse lies in a reading of the present which is as full and as faithful as possible, which does not prejudice its meaning, which even recognizes chaos and non-sense where they exist, but which does not refuse to discern a direction and an idea in events where they appear."[48]

This 'reading of the present' is the central plank of Merleau-Ponty's proposed political hermeneutics. In a sense, his is not a philosophy of history, but a *perception* of his-

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45 SNS 313/176, italics added.

46 SNS 314/177.

47 SNS 314/177.

48 SNS 299/169.

torical phenomena that itself poses philosophical problems. "Our time is philosophical because it puts in question philosophies of history."[49] The reform of Marxism that Merleau-Ponty had in mind would thus extract it from all such frameworks. This is the terrain of some of the most important yet unproductive disputes within Marxist theory. The course Merleau-Ponty tried to steer between Kojève and Aron, between abstractly one-sided views of history in either objective or subjective terms, was meant to have its purchase against the background of the tension within Marxist theory between evolutionism and voluntarism.

Although Merleau-Ponty associated this approach with Marx, he only did so inasmuch as Marx could be read in conformity with the young Hegel, that is, in accordance with Merleau-Ponty's (idiosyncratic) reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.[50] This reading rejects the theoretical or gnosiological understanding of absolute knowledge that forms the reference point for both Kojève and Aron. Merleau-Ponty's account of the 'contemporary hero', as the embodiment of 'the existentialist attitude', aims to bring about a synthesis (in the sense of *Aufhebung*) of the Hegelian and Nietzschean tropes in order to be able to account at once for what is held artificially separate in this distinction, namely, objective historical progress as an agentive possibility and the subjective motivation to pursue it. It is thus meant to flesh out an alternative view of absolute knowledge, understood, as we have seen, as the "way of living" in which "consciousness at last becomes equal to its spontaneous life and regains its self-possession."[51]

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[49] NI 107; cf. 105.

[50] "There can be no definitive understanding of the whole import of Marxist politics without going back to Hegel's description of the fundamental relations between men" (HT 110/101f).

[51] SNS 112/64.

As traditionally understood, of course, this is not really a matter of knowledge or knowing at all. But that is because the tradition does not recognize knowledge as a normative practice of embodied perception in which objectivity is *phenomenal objectivity*. This means that truthful awareness of objects involves approaching them circumspectly as privileged optima of perceptual articulation and completeness.[52] For Merleau-Ponty, this is fundamentally a motor process wherein epistemological corrigibility is a matter of shifting perspectives that offer varyingly good "holds" on the object. "I perceive correctly when my body has a precise hold [*prise*] on the spectacle."[53] This applies to the phenomena of history no less than to anything else, from which it follows that *historical objectivity is a phenomenal objectivity*, a matter of an optimal grip on historical spectacles and, in general, on the on-going spectacle of history as such. In the absence of "metaphysical guarantees," historical objectivity thus ultimately rests on practical participation in the project of realizing the latent universality of human coexistence by *making* "the logic of history prevail over its contingency."[54] Merleau-Ponty thus thought that concrete historical involvement could be accorded a certain epistemological privilege. Citing the perspicacity of Leon Trotsky's analysis of the Russian Revolution, Merleau-Ponty thought that "the greatest objectivity is often the subjectivity of he who lived it."[55] The point is not that lived experience as such is somehow to be deemed objective; rather, it is that the object of an individual's lived experience *can* be the "the total intention" of society, "the Idea in the

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[52] PhP 348, 367/302, 317f. In particular, Merleau-Ponty drew on Wilhelm Schapp's 1910 dissertation *Beiträge zur Phänomenologie der Wahrnehmung* (B. Heymann, 1976).

[53] PhP 343/297.

[54] SNS 142/82.

[55] NI 6; cf. Whiteside, *Merleau-Ponty and the Foundation of an Existential Politics*, 122..

Hegelian sense." Although it cannot be captured discursively, historical truth exists in the sense that there is an optimal practical stance and orientation toward it.

Merleau-Ponty's general point was that this possibility could undergird a common framework within which the various perspectives of those actively engaged in history as the process of transforming unreason into reason, of fulfilling 'the promise of humanity', could be reconciled. Even perspectives as contrary as those of Hervé and Daniélou. For what ultimately holds them apart is nothing more than their unreflective allegiance to the same theoretical biases as instanced, albeit more purely, by Kojève and by Aron. That people like Hervé and Daniélou cannot agree substantively is not because of their ideological (political and theological) disagreements. Rather, they cannot agree substantively because they partake in a formal epistemological agreement concerning objectivity which stipulates what would *count* as substantive agreement in a way that actually renders it impossible. In fact, this is reflected in the very fact of ideological disagreement. For in occluding the living present, this common theoretical prejudice prevents them from seeing that inasmuch as they are truly, i.e., concretely, engaged in history, what ultimately motivates what they do, and what motivated their heroes, whoever they might be, is not a matter of ideological profession.

### 3.2.2 — Marxist Ideological Heroism

Concerning historical action, Merleau-Ponty was gripped by the same phenomenon of uncompromising engagement that had so impressed Saint-Exupéry in the context of aviation. He was particularly interested in those cases of Marxist political engagement where there was little or no expectation that the goals pursued would be realized and enjoyed during the agent's own lifetime. I shall call this 'Marxist ideological hero-

ism'.[56] In contrast to the traditional Hegelian hero, whose vision of human universality is inchoate and whose projects contribute to it only inadvertently, the Marxist hero imagines the universal very clearly and sees that there is an unfulfilled historical objectivity, on behalf of which he acts self-consciously. But Merleau-Ponty did not think that this offered a viable model for political agency. In "Man, the Hero," where he hinges his discussion on certain literary examples, his *modus operandi* seems to be to parlay a critique of the ideological *roman à thèse* as a "self-defeating genre"[57] into a broader critique of political ideology as a motivating force. The basic problem with the *roman à thèse* is that its political didacticism necessarily involves a closed teleology—heroes are modeled on pre-given prototypes, with the result either that the political message is delivered ventriloquially, or else that it is actually overshadowed by individual characters' subjective deviations from orthodoxy.[58] Either way, heroic action remains an abstract idea that is not brought into *living* connection with particular individuals.

Merleau-Ponty poses the problem of ideological motivation by way of certain literary figures of communist political action. For instance, he considers the case of Hemingway's Robert Jordan (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 1940) – the idealistic American college professor who volunteers to fight for the Loyalist cause against the fascists in the Spanish Civil War, and who ultimately gives his life in doing so. Unlike Hemingway's earlier protagonists, who tend to be rather detached and individualistic,

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[56] Merleau-Ponty refers to communist heroism during the Resistance as "the unforgettable grandeur of communism"(HT xvii/xxi).

[57] Peter D. Tane, *The Ideological Hero: The Novels of Robert Brasillach, Roger Vailland, and André Malraux* (Peter Lang, 1998), 11.

[58] Tane, *The Ideological Hero*, 453.

Jordan is strongly socially-oriented and concerned with communion and fraternity.[59] Nonetheless, as Merleau-Ponty notes, in risking his life for the cause, for the "interests of humanity,"[60] "Jordan cannot manage to make the society of the future the sole motive for his sacrifice. This is desirable to him only as the probable guarantee, for himself and for others, of the freedom he is exercising at that very moment."[61]

Turning to Malraux's Kyo Gisors (*La condition humaine*, 1933), a leader of a failed socialist insurrection in Shanghai, Merleau-Ponty notes that here the same question is confronted "at the *very core of Marxism*." The problem is that with respect to political action, in principle there cannot be any *a priori* determination of when to cede to the objective momentum of history and when to subjectively 'force its hand', as it were. Either way, it seems to be an inescapably subjective decision. Merleau-Ponty draws the same conclusion concerning the "paradoxes of liberty" from Roger Vailland's *Drôle de jeu* (1945).[62] The idea is that Communist discipline results from a free choice to limit free choice for the sake of effective collective action, but that this basic choice itself cannot be objectively determined.

The problem that concerned Merleau-Ponty was to show how this basic 'choice' should not be understood as merely subjective, that is, not as a cognitive decision, but rather in terms of *existential style*. Merleau-Ponty used the example of Hemingway's Jordan to illustrate this. Wounded behind enemy lines, and having urged his comrades to go on, Jordan remains with them in spirit, prepared until the very end to do what he

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[59] Cf. Josette Smetana, *La philosophie de l'action chez Hemingway et Saint-Exupéry* (La Marjolaine, 1965), 124ff.

[60] *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 11.

[61] SNS 327/184.

[62] Cf. Christopher Lloyd, *Collaboration and Resistance in Occupied France: Representing Treason and Sacrifice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 165f.

could to protect them (by sniping the approaching enemy, for example). As he says, "*there is something to do yet.*"[63] But does Jordan truly believe the ideological rationale he gives himself for his actions, and is this what actually motivates him? Is it the case that "right up to the end [*jusqu'au bout*], he will satisfy the highest demand: 'uphold through action the honour of being a man, and do something *useful* for the others'"?[64] Is heroism a matter of *service* to the 'interests of humanity'?

Merleau-Ponty answers in the negative. According to his interpretation of Hemingway's Jordan, "the man who is still living has no other resource – *but this is sovereign* – than to keep on acting like a living man [*homme vivant*]."[65] In continuing to act, in particular, by not simply taking his own life, Jordan was just living out his existential style – *just being himself.* He was wounded, but alive, and so, however short it might be, there was still a future to be made to which he would belong. In Merleau-Ponty's view, this evinces *sovereignty*, not service. This is why it is not the society of the future that is the key to understanding Jordan, but rather "the freedom he is exercising at that very moment." And this is why it does not matter that he was shot before being able to actually do anything for this others.

Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, heroic action is not ultimately a self-sacrificial matter of one's reflective ideological commitments tragically piloting one's body into a lethal situation. That is to say, in the terms of the first chapter of Part I of *Phenomenology of Perception*, the context in which Merleau-Ponty first alludes to Saint-Exupéry, it is not a matter of a temporal dislocation in which *le corps actuel* fatally detaches itself from

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[63] *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 470, italics added.

[64] Smetana, *La philosophie de l'action chez Hemingway et Saint-Exupéry*, 126, citing G.-A. Astre, *Hemingway par lui-même* (Editions du Seuil, 1959), 153, emphasis added.

[65] SNS 329/186, emphasis added.

*le corps habituel*. If such is the typical understanding, then that would just show that heroes are typically misunderstood, and that they might even misunderstand themselves. For Merleau-Ponty, to say that heroic action is a matter of existential style is to affirm that *the locus of heroic action is the habitual body*. And so inasmuch as ideology informs heroism, it only does so as a kind of corporeal sedimentation. But this does not mean that heroic action is a matter of sedimented ideological commitment fatally compromising *le corps actuel*. Rather, Merleau-Ponty's view is that heroic action precisely instances the fusion of *le corps actuel* with *le corps habituel*. This is absolute knowledge, "the point at which consciousness finally becomes equal to its spontaneous life and regains its self-possession."[66]

To clarify this, Merleau-Ponty turns to Saint-Exupéry, who, significantly, was a real person, not a fictional character (even if his stories are highly stylized).

### 3.3 — The Contemporary Hero

The idea behind the contemporary hero is that "our time," as Merleau-Ponty frequently put it, is a time neither of faith nor of reason, but rather of chaos, of a world out of joint. It is a time when "duties and tasks are unclear," and there are no absolute external reference points for historical action. *Not even utility*. Merleau-Ponty seizes on the fact that the flight in *Pilote de guerre* was, as Saint-Exupéry emphasized, objectively useless. "What sense did it make" to fly that mission? "How is [Saint-Exupéry] to serve if service is useless?"[67]

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[66] SNS 64/112.

[67] SNS 328/185.

The answer, of course, is that he was not *serving* anything. Like Jordan, Saint-Exupéry was "sovereign" *because* his action was useless, *because it made no sense*, that is, because it was not intelligible according to existing parameters of rationality.[68] But Merleau-Ponty added that this was not a demonstration of a morbid fascination with death or a cavalier contempt for it in the manner, for example, of Henry de Montherlant's *Service inutile* (1935). "It is not death that I love, said Saint-Exupéry, but life."[69] Rather, Merleau-Ponty interpreted Saint-Exupéry in this way:

> Saint-Exupéry throws himself [*se jette*] into his mission because it is an intimate part of himself, the consequences of his thoughts, wishes and decisions, because he would be nothing if he were to back out. He recovers his own being to the extent to which he runs into danger. Over Arras, in the fire of anti-aircraft guns, when every second of continuing life is as miraculous as birth, he feels invulnerable because he is *in* things at last; he has left his inner nothingness behind, and death, if it comes, will reach him right in the thick of the world.[70]

It is a kind of fusion with the world that Saint-Exupéry instantiates. Eschewing all circumstantial compromise, he represents the achievement of the organically complete agentive integrity described above: heroes are those who "really were outwardly what they inwardly wished to be," and thus "became one with history at the moment when it claimed their lives."[71]

As we saw above, Merleau-Ponty's hero is someone who "lives to the limit [*jusqu'au bout*] his relation to men and the world" by enacting an affirmative response to the question: "Shall I give my freedom to save freedom?" Subjectively, the hero is fully invested in the realization of freedom, *understood in universal terms*. Owing to

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[68] Cf. Bataille, "A sovereignty which serves no purpose is at once the coming apart and the completion of the human being," *Œuvres complètes* 8:651n.

[69] SNS 330/186. Merleau-Ponty does not reference this. He may have been referring to TH 176: "It is not danger that I love. I know what I love. It is life." This line was also referenced by Merleau-Ponty's friend Georges Gusdorf in *L'Expérience humaine du sacrifice* (PUF, 1948), 247.

[70] SNS 328/185.

[71] SNS 258/146.

his tacit, vital acceptance that true freedom knows no singularity, the hero gives the appearance of a wholehearted readiness for personal sacrifice. This just means that heroic living embodies an uncompromising commitment to life-as-such—the hero is an individual who lives out his vital particularity as human specific universality. The hero is thus an exemplary *vivant*, or living person,[72] whose thinking and acting are fully saturated with that 'love of life' that is irreducible to biological existence. This fulfills Merleau-Ponty's earlier claim that "man is capable of situating his proper being, not in biological existence, but at the level of properly human relations."[73]

In this sense, the hero is – paradoxically – pathologically alive. Merleau-Ponty endorsed Hegel's idea that human beings are "sick animals."[74] That is, *normal* human existence is constitutively 'sick' on account of the schizoidal duality of being-in-itself and -for-itself to which anthropogenetic reflective self-consciousness leads. Through his complete internalization of the negativity of death, the hero in effect *heals* this split by achieving a self-coincidence that amounts to a condition of pathological health.[75] Subjectively, this fits the account of the proletarian according to the classical Marxist view. The hero is thus likewise an agent of the species, de-humanized, which is to say, de-particularized in a way analogous to the proletarian, *but without the external objective social conditions*.

The example of Saint-Exupéry thus addressed the motivational problem of how human universality can be concretely realized without sacrifice. His final flight, the heroic act itself, was the revolutionary moment writ small. For Merleau-Ponty, *Saint-*

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72 SNS 328f/185f; cf. HT xli/xlv.

73 SC 190n1/246n97.

74 Cf. SNS 116/67.

75 Perhaps something like the "perverse health" of Harold Bloom's strong poet; see *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd edition (Oxford UP, 1997), p105.

*Exupéry incarnated pure human productivity.* And this because, as Merleau-Ponty put it, his self-giving resulted, not from pursuing this or that ideological goal, but rather from living out the "loyalty to the *natural* movement that throws us toward things and toward others,"[76] something Merleau-Ponty implied is equivalent in the hero's case to remaining "poised in the direction of his *chosen* ends."[77]

What were those ends? Merleau-Ponty suggested that they were simply to leave "his inner nothingness behind" and to "recover his own being." That was in 1940, but Merleau-Ponty presumes the same holds for Saint-Exupéry at the end of July 1944. Whatever his real military contribution may have been, what *he* was doing was living out his subjectivity, 'recovering his being', and this by making his own – '*enowning*', as it were – the centrifugal thrust of natural spontaneity. Attaining the condition of sovereignty, the hero becomes a kind of *natural purposiveness*, a living embodiment of humanity's being its own highest end.

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Against triumphant historical thinking, Merleau-Ponty argued that it is not by transcending it through knowledge, but rather "by *living* my time" [*en* vivant *mon temps*], "by *plunging into* [*m'enfonçant*] the present and the world [...] that I am able to understand other times."[78] It is because he did exactly this that Saint-Exupéry was given the last word in *Phenomenology of Perception.*

For Merleau-Ponty, the heroic achievement is to have *lived his time.* Unlike the Hegelian hero, who, in working *against* his time, suffered a pronounced dislocation

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[76] SNS 330/186, emphasis added.

[77] SNS 330/185, emphasis added.

[78] PhP 520/456, emphasis added.

between habitual body and *corps actuel*, the contemporary hero simply and precisely lives his time; that is, he subjectively lives his habitual body as a sedimented prototype of his social and historical milieu. The idea is that whereas during the historical process as accounted for by Hegel universality was in the making, (brought about through the sort of heroic dislocation discussed above), Merleau-Ponty thought it was now the case that human universality does truly obtain, albeit latently.

Thus, *on the surface* our time is one of disorder. The rationality of history appears to be shattered and events exhibit no clear overarching pattern. In particular, the schemata of Marxism seem to be unable to account for the trends of contemporary history. "Marx's nice, simple guideline, 'Workers of the world, unite', is no longer available to help [one] to judge everything in politics and know what to do in every case."[79] This was true even in the elementary case of whether the USSR was to be judged a historical step forward or a diversion. "Never before have men had such good evidence that the course of events is full of twists and turns, that much is asked of daring and that they are alone in the world and before one another."[80]

But Merleau-Ponty believed that latent within the contingency there lay a "logic of history" that could be resumed and fully realized, if taken up. By a 'logic of history' Merleau-Ponty meant (a) that history is an integral whole, "a single drama" in which all events have a human significance; and (b) that the phases of this drama do not follow an arbitrary order, "but move toward a completion and conclusion."[81] The distinctive feature of a Marxist view, according to Merleau-Ponty, is that it makes the

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[79] "The national, geographical, and psychological factors which intersect the class struggle and which blur the broad Marxist lines of history [...] have not been reabsorbed by the factors considered essential" (SNS 288/162f); cf. also SNS 216f/123.

[80] SNS 330/186.

[81] SNS 212/121.

completion of history dependent upon contingent acts of revolutionary agency; it "admit[s] that history is both logical and contingent, that nothing is absolutely fortuitous but also that nothing is absolutely necessary."[82] In other words, for Marxism the logic of history is just one possibility among others.[83] Its necessity thus paradoxically depends on that agentive contingency. But that in turn seems to reduce it to the conjured product of revolutionary faith. What happens, then, when the class struggle has waned from view? In a world of disorder, can there be any evidential basis for believing in the Marxist logic of history?

For Merleau-Ponty, the hero provides such evidence. It is important to recognize that although the hero incarnates a historical period that is to all appearances one of disorder, the hero himself, his *manière de vivre*, is not at all disordered. "Today's hero is not sceptical, dilettantish, or decadent," in the way one might expect in a period of chaos, "at a time when duties and tasks are unclear." Rather, "it is simply the case that he has experienced chance, disorder, and failure—in 1936, during the Spanish Civil War, and in June of 1940. [...] He [thus] has a better experience than anyone has ever had of the contingency of the future and the freedom of man."[84] The hero thus sees the theoretical failure of abstract discourses of history. Committed to universality and accepting that freedom knows no singularity, the practical lesson that he draws from this experience is to detach from freedom in its given forms and to sink the pilings of his commitment into a deeper, transhistorical level of being. The hero thus withdraws from chaos to the sovereignty of absolute knowledge – a move which, through a trans-

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82 SNS 211f/120.

83 SNS 213/121.

84 SNS 330/186.

gression of rationality such as it is, places the hero in the extra-historical realm of *non-sense*. While this makes of the contemporary hero, not unlike the Hegelian hero, a "junction of madness [*déraison*] and reason [*raison*],"[85] it is precisely in virtue of this departure from history that the hero is able to play an evidentiary role with respect to its Marxist logic. As Merleau-Ponty said, "the highest form of reason borders on madness [*déraison*]."[86]

The contemporary hero evinces a Marxist logic of history – that is, evinces history as a dramatic, teleological whole driven by contingent human agency – by giving it microcosmic phenomenal form. As an incarnation of human productivity, the self-realization of the hero is a *mise en abyme* of the heroic self-realization of humanity. If we believe the account of Saint-Exupéry's death that Merleau-Ponty offers, then we find ourselves with grounds on which to believe that there is a natural spontaneity in harmony with our aspirations to the realization of concrete universality. This backs up with some measure of reason the deep-seated desire to rank the possibility of the Marxist prognosis as not just one among many. The hero allows us to see that the faith on which those fulgurant moments of miraculous '*gloria*' are based is at root "that very movement which unites us with others, our present with our past, and by means of which we make everything have meaning."[87] This is what Merleau-Ponty later described as the "spontaneity which gathers together the plurality of monads, the past and the present, nature and culture into a single whole," and which thus "accomplishes what appeared to be impossible when we observed only the separate elements."[88] To

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85 SNS 324f/183.

86 SNS 9/4.

87 SNS 330/186.

88 Pros. 47f/10.

be clear, heroic action as such, like that of Saint-Exupéry, being extra-historical, does not itself directly effect any such militant accomplishments. Rather, its significance lies in its isolating and manifesting as a spectacle – bringing to phenomenological self-givenness – the natural teleological purposiveness that stands behind them. In this way, the contemporary hero motivates and rationally substantiates the militant faith of Marxist historical praxis.

This militant faith is what Merleau-Ponty meant by 'the existential attitude'. To renew Marxism, which is weakest "when faced with concrete events taken moment by moment,"[89] Merleau-Ponty wanted to reconstruct a militant logic of history from the *Lebenswelt* up – to trace the emergence of transformative political consciousness as a molecular process. This would be based on heroism as providing the irrefragable touchstone of humanity's latent universal purposiveness. But in this the hero is merely a mythic symbol: "the idea of the healthy [*sain*] man is a myth".[90] It thus has no direct analytical value. The theoretical value of the heroic myth is hermeneutic – it enables us to perceive that purposiveness across the human field as a whole. We can see this if we recall Merleau-Ponty's suggestion to define existentialism "by the idea of a universality which men affirm or imply by the mere fact of their being and at the very moment of their opposition to each other, in the idea of a reason immanent in madness [*déraison*], of a freedom which comes into being in the act of accepting limits, and to which the least perception, the slightest movement of the heart, the smallest action, bear incontestable witness [*sont les témoignages incontestables*]."[91] Not unlike Saint-

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89 SNS 217/123.

90 Cf. SNS 116/67.

91 SNS 121/70.

Exupéry's bummed cigarette or riverside Pernod, the idea is that the evidentiary role of Merleau-Ponty's humanist myth of heroism is to bring us to see elements of universal historical meaning in what otherwise would appear to be insignificant gestures of everyday life. To say that the hero is human productivity is to say that there is a little heroism in us all.

**Excursus: Saint-Exupéry and Schn.**

Before considering Merleau-Ponty's myth of man, though, it is fitting to briefly consider his existential interpretation of Adhémar Gelb and Kurt Goldstein's analyses of their patient "Schn." (Johann Schneider). As is well known, Schn. suffered a major occipetal injury during WWI that resulted in his being diagnosed by Gelb and Goldstein with a manifold of psychosomatic disorders, central to which, however, was apperceptive visual agnosia.[92]

Merleau-Ponty portrayed Schn. as having lost the ability to use his body to freely project around himself a situation into which he could proceed. While his intellectual

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[92] The classic article is "Psychologische Analysen hirnpathologischer Fälle auf Grund von Untersuchungen Hirnverletzer," pp1-142 in *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Neurologie und Psychiatrie* 41 (1918). However, it is noteworthy that beginning shortly after the publication of *Phenomenology of Perception*, serious doubts began to be cast on this case. On the basis of re-examination of the patient, the diagnosis of visual agnosia was questioned by E. Bay, O. Lauenstein, and P. Cibis, "Ein Beitrag zur Frage der Seelenblindheit—der fall Schn. von Gelb und Goldstein," pp73-91 in *Psychiatrie, Neurologie und medizinische Psychologie* 1 (1949); cf. in the same issue C. Jung, "Über eine Nachuntersuchung des Falles Schn. von Goldstein und Gelb," pp353-362. And in general, it has been contended that Goldstein and Gelb exaggerated or simply misread the symptomatology of the case; see E. Bay, "Disturbances of Visual Perception and their Examination," pp515-530 in *Brain* 76 (1953); H. L. Tauber, "Kurt Goldstein's Role in the Development of Neuropsychology," pp299-310 in *Neuropsychologia* 4 (1966). In "Goldstein and Gelb's Case Schn: A Classic Case in Neuropsychology?," pp281-300 in *Classic Cases in Neuropsychology*, v2, eds. C. Code *et al* (Psychology Press, 2003), Georg Goldenberg argued that in their eagerness to substantiate their Gestalt theories, Goldstein and Gelb significantly embellished their findings, and that Schn. "learned how to be an ideal case study." Cf. J. J. Marotta and M. Behrmann, "Patient Schn: Has Goldstein and Gelb's Case Withstood the Test of Time?," pp633-638 in *Neuropsychologia* 42 (2004). This is significant in that unlike other philosophical interpreters of the case – Gurwitsch and Cassirer, for example – Merleau-Ponty never had direct contact with Schn.

capacities were sound, he had lost the power of imagination, and so he lived in a world without possibility; he is tied to actuality and totally absorbed in the present. His experience appears to him as self-evident and self-sufficient. Unable to project himself into imaginary situations, Schn. lacks "living thought."[93] He is incapable of any act of authentic expression (including political opinion)—he cannot create an 'opening' in being because his own being is so thoroughly closed. Based on his inability to put himself into a situation, he lacks freedom;[94] this is primarily because he lacks the power of apprehending simultaneous wholes and of cognitively shifting from wholes to parts—that is, as Merleau-Ponty put it, what Schn. cannot do is *survoler* the objects of his experience.[95] In an important sense, Schn.'s core problem is a total *lack* of 'high-altitude thinking'.

According to Merleau-Ponty, we could say that Schn. was a model of immanence, in that his habitual body had virtually collapsed onto his *corps actuel*, such that his subjective existence was entirely inscribed by his objective being. He thus has a kind of agentive integrity; but it is inverted such as to imprison him in the actuality of a drastically shrunk lived world. Merleau-Ponty portrayed Schn. as a kind of 'perfect' Cartesian—what we would all be like if created according to Cartesian principles. As living negative proof that the capacity to project and competently communicate meaning is not just an intellectual exercise, but rather depends upon corporeal processes of signification and intentionality, Schn. offers a refutation of the Cartesian dualist account of human existence.

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93 PhP 149/128.

94 PhP 158/135.

95 PhP 147, 157f/127, 135.

The subjective transcendence of Merleau-Ponty's hero and the universal scope of his world stand at the opposite end of the existential spectrum from the objective immanence of Gelb and Goldstein's patient. Saint-Exupéry and Schn. thus provide Merleau-Ponty with the limiting cases of human *être-au-monde*. In them we have the two extremes of dualistic bodily style – deanimated body and disembodied spirit – two pathological poles of uncommunicative, disengaged, and ahistorical solitude between which unfolds that "third kind of existence," which characterizes the intercorporeal co-existence of the overwhelming majority of human beings.

> [T]o be completely a man, it is necessary to be a little more and a little less than man.[96]

### 3.4 — The Myth of Man

Merleau-Ponty ends "Man, the Hero" by identifying the contemporary hero with "man" in the following way: "the contemporary hero is not Lucifer; he is not even Prometheus; he is man."[97] What is the meaning of this?

First of all, it is striking that the contemporary hero is no longer being contrasted with human beings, but rather mythological figures: an archangel and a Titan. This is tied to Merleau-Ponty's claim that "the very movement which unites us with others, our present with our past, and by means of which we make everything have meaning" is faith, "*stripped of its illusions*."[98] "Man" as the contemporary hero is thus a kind of *urdoxic* myth—such is how it would serve as a principle of orientation in Merleau-

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[96] EP 51/63f.

[97] SNS 331/187.

[98] SNS 330/186f, emphasis added.

Ponty's neo-Marxist hermeneutics. But what precisely is the significance of distinguishing "man" in this particular way?

Prometheus and Lucifer have, at least in modern times, often been seen as closely allied, the latter (often as Satan) being portrayed as a kind of Christianized version of the former. This is especially the case in much recognizably Romantic literature (for example, Milton, Marlowe, Byron, Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley, and Blake), but it is found elsewhere as well (for example, Goethe, Baudelaire). The general sense shared by these Promethean and Luciferian figures is that of a spirit who liberates humanity from ignorance, one that seeks to enlighten humanity against the wishes of the prevailing powers to maintain humanity in a state of servile enthrallment.

But Merleau-Ponty evidently discerned a noteworthy difference between Lucifer and Prometheus, one that was relevant to his account of heroism. It is difficult to ascertain exactly what Merleau-Ponty had in mind, as he offers us virtually no clues. Nonetheless, a sound account can be pieced together.



Concerning Lucifer, although the theme surfaces in other relevant ways,[99] I would submit that what we are dealing with was primarily an allusion to Roger Caillois. In connection with his idea of militant orthodoxy, Caillois was not only the leading proponent of Luciferian thinking at the time, but he also happened to have a particular interest in Saint-Exupéry.

In line with his call for a militant orthodoxy, Caillois presented Lucifer as a mythic prototype of knowing, "the incarnation of a new epistemological spirit," the

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[99] For example, *Lucifer* was the original working title of Sartre's *Les Chemins de la liberté* (cf. Contat and Rybalka, *Les Écrits de Sartre*, 27).

figure of an "aggressive" and "conquering" vision of knowledge.[100] As the "demon or angel of lucidity," Caillois "viewed Lucifer as the truly effective rebel."[101] In this way, Lucifer superceded nineteenth-century Romantic Satanism—here Caillois made a clear distinction. For Satanism was ultimately ineffectual with respect to dealing with the sources of the alienation to which it was opposed. "Satanic rebels emanating from Romanticism foresee no recourse other than ongoing profanation or an inevitable identification with other marginal or disenfranchised groups."[102] In contrast, the figure of Lucifer represented a more transgressive, albeit elitist, individualism which, based on scientific and Nietzschean self-mastery, is able to maintain the critical demands of Romantic Satanism, but with an intensified lucidity and practical consequence.

> [Lucifer] accepted that force was the law of the world; he took stock of the rules of the game and, in adhering to them, became an adversary who was all the more formidable in that he thus remained less open to attack. Calculating and conquering, he did not believe that revolt was sufficient in and of itself, nor that bursts of instinct always led to victory. His lucidity, which he viewed as his primary and most powerful weapon, gave him a coolly detached and sometimes cynical indifference, which made him an accurate accountant of reality.[103]

In this way, "Lucifer is entirely focused on what is possible and undertakes it without delay. He is Satan in action; an intelligent Satan; and, in a certain sense, a courageous Satan."[104]

This movement from the Satanic to the Luciferian "supposes a certain education of our sense of rebellion, that would take it from riotousness to a broadly imperialist

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[100] Stéphane Massonet, "Lucifer en 1938: incandescence et mal à l'œuvre chez Bataille, Klossowski et Caillois," pp67-75 in *Le Mal dans l'imaginaire littéraire français (1850-1950)*, eds. M. Watthee-Delmotte and M. Zupančič (Éditions L'Harmattan, 1998), 74.

[101] Cited in *The Edge of Surrealism*, 166, 144.

[102] Michèle Richman, "Myth, Power, and the Sacred: Anti-Utilitarianism in the Collège de Sociologie, 1937-39," pp29-47 in *Economy and Society* 32:1 (2003), 36.

[103] Caillois, "La naissance de Lucifer," *Verve* (Paris) 1 (Dec 1937), 150-171; cited in *The Edge of Surrealism*, 171.

[104] "La naissance de Lucifer," 171.

attitude and would persuade it to subordinate its impulsive, unruly reactions to the necessity for discipline, calculation, and patience."[105] In "Paris, mythe moderne," Caillois asserted that "the Luciferian spirit" corresponds "to the moment in which rebellion turns into a will for power and, losing none of its passionate and subversive character, attributes to intelligence, to the cynical and lucid vision of reality, a role of prime importance for the realization of its plans. It is the passage from *agitation* to *action*."[106]

The key to this passage from agitation to action is the movement from empty profanation to concrete sacralization, to founding or institutive acts of *making sacred.* This was a preoccupation of much post-Durkheimian sociological thinking in France, including the sacred sociology to which Caillois contributed. And it was arguably in effect what Exupérian humanism offered. Concerning postal delivery, for example, Saint-Exupéry stated his real view thus: "I do not admire men for serving the postal line, but I uphold the myth of the postal line because it forms such men."[107] Indeed, "Saint-Exupéry, as writer and aviator, *best conveyed Caillois' new cult of individual heroism.*"[108] As Caillois later put it, as a literary man of action, Saint-Exupéry represented the post-Satanic, mythic hero who "conquers and brings order to a domain of nascent and still feeble civilization."[109]

Despite the explicit Nietzschean inspirations, there are some clear similarities between Caillois' view of the Luciferian hero and the Hegelian view of 'world-histori-

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[105] Caillois, "The Winter Wind," in *The College of Sociology*, 36.

[106] MH 199.

[107] *Carnets*, 69.

[108] Frank, *The Edge of Surrealism*, 37, emphasis added. Cf. Caillois, "Grandeur de Saint-Exupéry," in *Valeurs* (Jan 1946), 24-28; "Grandeur de l'homme," in *Confluences* 12-14 (1947), 244-251.

[109] "Un instrument de civilisation," Preface to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Œuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953); reprinted in *Les critiques de notre temps et Saint-Exupéry*, ed. Bruno Vercier (Éditions Garnier Frères, 1971), 42-50.

cal individuals'. In each case it is a matter of establishing order in the world; as we saw earlier, Caillois' main concern was with the oppressiveness and alienation wrought by social disorder. A crucial difference from the Hegelian view, however, is that what Caillois describes is ultimately arbitrary; there is no sense in which the civilization to which the transgressive rebellion and institutive sacralization characteristic of Lucifer leads is in any way part of a larger rational scheme. In other words, there can be no transcendental justification for it.

While Saint-Exupéry may be interpretable in terms of Luciferian praxis,[110] Merleau-Ponty clearly did not see him in this way. Although in specific political contexts he too might valorize the Luciferian traits of cool aplomb, cerebral lucidity, and calculated practical intervention, what attracted Merleau-Ponty to Exupérian heroism was the wholesale absence of these traits; specifically, the fact that Saint-Exupéry was so *un*-Luciferian that he directly manifested the *Urdoxa* of universality in terms of which political situations – in particular, situations of alienation and oppression – are perceived as such in the first place. This is the sense in which Merleau-Ponty placed the heroic act outside history. Like Caillois, Merleau-Ponty had a militant concern with bringing order out of disorder. But is his view, these are not states of affairs that can be objectively manipulated from above, but are rather intersubjective phenomena of human relationality, to which historical productivity is internal. "Communication" as the overcoming of social disorder understood as a "multiple

[110] "For Saint-Exupéry, myth represented an attractive compromise between the opposing realist and romantic tendencies of his work. Since the mythic sequence happens one time only at the beginning of a cosmos or culture, its lawgiving conquest of chaos can never again be equaled: it remains one of the original wonders of the world, and the mythic hero will forever be as remote from ordinary mortal imitators as the Byronic outcast. On the other hand, the myth endures as a cosmic limit. All who live after the hero will honor him and, in a weak sense, mimic him by dwelling where his huge arm cleared a space. If the hero is tragically alone, his audience is cosmically raised and united in his cult." Harris, *Chaos, Cosmos, and Saint-Exupéry's Pilot-Hero*, 31f.

solipsism," for example, also occurs *through* "communication" – there is no disjunction between ends and means, sociality is not radically distinct from its founding moment. In this way, Merleau-Ponty takes more seriously Caillois' militant postulate of "an ideal *unitary* undertaking, that would take as its task to set the *whole* of man's being to work, in such a way as to make its different functions converge in a *continuous* process of living creation."[111]



Caillois' contrasting Lucifer with Satan in terms of a kind of constructiveness that goes beyond merely disruptive insubordination – a view with which Merleau-Ponty was in implicit agreement – did not merely have a historical meaning. To a significant extent, Caillois' disagreements with Bataille, especially during the years immediately prior to the war (the time of the Collège de Sociologie), could be resolved into this same distinction. In fact, Caillois' "La naissance de Lucifer" was published alongside a piece by Bataille entitled "Van Gogh Prométhée."[112] Strange as it may seem, a brief consideration of Bataille's view of Vincent Van Gogh provides a useful segue to a consideration of Merleau-Ponty's view of Prometheus.

Bataille related contemporary cases of self-mutilation, in particular that of Van Gogh (his amputating his ear), to human-divine relationships in archaic religion, which he took to be mediated by sacrificial mutilation. Such acts, he thought, represented "the desire to resemble perfectly an ideal term, generally characterized in mythology

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[111] MH 221, italics altered.

[112] Reprinted in *Œuvres complètes* 1, ed. Denis Hollier (Gallimard, 1970), 497-500. Cf. "La mutilation sacrificielle et l'oreille coupée de Vincent Van Gogh," pp10-20 in *Documents* 8 (1930); reprinted in *Œuvres complètes*, 1:258-70; "Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. A. Stoekl *et al* (University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 61-72.

as a solar god who tears and rips out his own organs."[113] Citing the work of Mauss and Henri Hubert,[114] Bataille noted that unlike many acts of sacrifice performed by humans, which make use of animal avatars, "the god who sacrifices himself gives himself irrevocably. [...] The god, who is at the same time the sacrifier, is one with the victim and sometimes even with the sacrificer. All the differing elements that enter into ordinary sacrifice here enter into each other and become mixed together."[115] Bataille argued, however, that Mauss and Hubert wrongly assumed that this was "only possible for mythical, that is ideal, beings." In his view, in cases of human self-mutilation, even in pathological cases, there remain vestiges of this precisely divine phenomenon. "There is [...] no reason to separate Van Gogh's ear [...] from Prometheus' famous liver."[116] "If one accepts the interpretation that identifies the purveying eagle (the *aetos prometheus* of the Greeks) with the god who stole fire from the wheel of the sun, then the tearing out of the liver presents a theme in conformity with the various legends of the 'sacrifice of the god'."[117] That is, Prometheus and the eagle form a single system of self-mutilation, and in this way manifest the deepest significance of the spirit of sacrifice, to wit, "throwing oneself or something of oneself *out of oneself*." At root, this is not a matter of expiation or propitiation, but simply of the "radical *alteration*" of the person; self-mutilation epitomizes personal transformation that disrupts the social context. The key idea is that it has "the power to liberate heterogeneous elements and to break the habitual homogeneity of the individual, in the

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[113] *Visions of Excess*, 66.

[114] *Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice*, in *Mélanges d'histoire des religions* (1909); *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*, trans. W. D. Halls (The University of Chicago Press, 1964).

[115] *Visions of Excess*, 69f.

[116] *Visions of Excess*, 70.

[117] *Visions of Excess*, 70.

same way that vomiting would be opposed to its opposite, the communal eating of food. *Sacrifice considered in its essential phase would only be the rejection of what had been appropriated by a person or by a group.*"[118]

Thus, for Bataille, Van Gogh is an instance of the sovereign Promethean gesture of self-transcendence, the unity of sacrificer and sacrificed. His self-mutilation is interpreted by Bataille as an expression of the sacrificial impulse at the root of human religiosity in general, the aim of which is to overcome individuality by mimicking the self-immolation of 'the solar god'. Bataille thus rejected the Durkheimian view of sacrificial ritual as primarily reasonable and useful with respect to social order and unity, emphasizing instead its irrational, purposeless, and unassimilably destructive qualities. Whereas for Durkheim, sacrifice forged bonds of social integration, for Bataille it was primarily a matter of disintegration through insubordination, refusal, revolt; it was a subversive, self-divinizing act whereby a disenchanted individual *amputated* himself from the established social order and its values.[119]

But Bataille did think that sacrifice thus understood could have a communally unifying function. Through this violent rupture of her empirical wholeness, the self-mutilator can also experience an ecstatic union with the whole. He can, that is, "come to embody and reflect the larger community, just as Durkheim's person does when [he] engages in sacrificial ritual."[120] For Bataille, sacrifice can generate the affective power of "communication," which achieves a kind blurred interpenetration between

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[118] *Visions of Excess*, 70, emphasis added.

[119] Cf. *Œuvres complètes* 1:275f.

[120] Allan Stoekl, *Agonies of the Intellectual: Commitment, Subjectivity, and the Performative in the Twentieth-Century French Tradition* (Univ of Nebraska Press, 1992), 51f.

self and other, such that, as he put it in *Le coupable*, "the different separate beings [acquire] life by losing themselves in *communication* with one another."[121]

Notwithstanding such gestures in the direction of re-establishing order, Bataille's account of sacrifice as the route of social resistance and re-sacralization remained, in Caillois' view, precisely the kind of Romantic Satanism which he thought was properly superceded by the Luciferian spirit.[122] Fundamentally, this meant that Bataille had an overly deathly view of the sacred, to which Lucifer offered a more vivacious alternative. Caillois' position "does not call for crime, transgression, or sacrifice; as the basis of sacred community, he highlights not death but a *reason to live*."[123] In this way, "the cerebral Luciferian self-mastery" championed by Caillois offered "a radical antithesis to the solar, ecstatic self-sacrifice of Van Gogh's life and work" that Bataille held up as a paradigm of Promethean self-overcoming.[124]



The significance of Bataille's view of self-mutilation is that it shows very clearly the link between Promethean thinking and self-sacrifice. Merleau-Ponty did not accept Bataille's view, the upshot of which would be to analogize the proletariat and Van Gogh in terms of the need for self-directed violence. In fact, Merleau-Ponty always disinclined from the Promethean myth.[125] Yet it remains the case that Bataille's account of communication has certain affinities with Merleau-Ponty's own view. It is

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[121] *Œuvres complètes* 5:263; cf. 5:37.

[122] Cf. *The Edge of Surrealism*, 27, 31, 167.

[123] *The Edge of Surrealism*, 27.

[124] *The Edge of Surrealism*, 168.

[125] In his 1935 review of Scheler, Merleau-Ponty wrote that Promethean humanism is based in hatred, "the hatred of the wisdom and goodness of God. [...] Nature immediately loses in value since man has worth only inasmuch as he separates himself from nature and distances himself from it" (CR 27f/96; cf. EP 36/43).

just that whereas Bataille speaks of death, Merleau-Ponty speaks of life-as-such. This puts Merleau-Ponty closer to Caillois, who also sought a more life-affirming approach. But at the same time, Merleau-Ponty rejected the arbitrariness of the Luciferian solution; it really was to a militant orthodoxy that he aspired. From this perspective, Caillois was ultimately not so different from Bataille. The arbitrary violence that the latter internalized in the individual was, for Caillois, simply played impersonally at the level of history. Here, too, then, it is Merleau-Ponty's postulate of life-as-such that distinguishes his position. Whereas both Caillois and Bataille invoke an institutive rupture, Merleau-Ponty's founding gesture is one of *faith*. In this way, he can posit heroic death as an extra-historical manifestation of life, in the face of which vital communication can become the stuff of historical agency.

Bataille aside, Merleau-Ponty's reference to Prometheus surely involved some allusion to Marx. It is well-known that Marx greatly admired Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, and that he regarded Prometheus as a revolutionary figure of Greek mythology, ending the Foreword to his doctoral dissertation thusly: "Prometheus is the most eminent saint and martyr in the philosophical calendar."[126] Following others, including the Romantics but in particular many figures of German Idealism,[127] Marx appealed to Prometheus as a symbol for human divinity and revolt against sacred powers beyond man. "Marx believed in the unlimited powers of man for self-emancipation. Prometheus, the fire-bringer, is a symbol for such self-divinization."[128]

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[126] Marx, *Collected Works*, v1 (Progress Publishers, 1975), 31. Cf. Lewis Feuer, *Marx and the Intellectuals* (Garden City, New York, 1969).

[127] Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prometheus: Studien zur Geschichte des deutschen Idealismus* (Heidelberg: Kerle, 1947).

[128] Leonard P. Wessell, Jr., *Prometheus Bound: The Mythic Structure of Karl Marx's Scientific Thinking* (Baton Rouge, London: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 62.

It is often raised as a criticism of Marxism that, at bottom, it is just an extended expression of a problematic Promethean motif. Leszek Kolakowski makes an argument to this effect. For Marx, according to Kolakowski, "man is wholly defined in purely social terms; the physical limits of his being are scarcely noticed. [...] Marx's ignoring of the body and physical death, sex and aggression, geography and human fertility – all of which he turns into purely social realities – is one of the most characteristic yet most neglected features of his Utopia."[129] Anthony Giddens is similarly critical of Marx's "Promethean attitude,"[130] and many others, usually with 'ecological' intent, have since echoed the general point.[131]

Kolakowski argued that in addition to the Promethean, there were two other principal motifs in Marx's thought: a romantic aversion to capitalist-industrial society, and a rational adherence to enlightened explanation of society. It was actually Wessell who extended the argument to the point of claiming that these other motifs are *fundamentally rooted* in Marx's Prometheanism. "Prometheus is more than a mythopoetic symbol in Marx's thinking. Prometheus bound, suffering, striving for redemption, indeed, rebelling, furnishes the *root metaphor* used to generate the categorical self-system Marx used in his scientific thinking."[132] Wessell argued that Prometheus is the "salvational archetype" that provides the "mythico-ontological root metaphor" for historical materialism. "The 'myth' of the fall, suffering, and ultimate self-redemption

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[129] Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 412ff.

[130] Anthony Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 59f.

[131] See Walt Sheasby, "Anti-Prometheus, Post-Marx: The Real and the Myth in Green Theory," pp5-44 in *Organization & Environment* 12:1 (1999), 5f.

[132] Wessell, *Prometheus Bound*, 62.

of Prometheus constitutes the dramatic model underlying and informing Marx's Marxism."[133]

The pertinent upshot of this analysis is that because of its dual role in the soteriological myth as Prometheus both bound and unbound, the "ontological form of the proletariat is *to be* a self-abolishing tension."[134] Irrespective of the extent to which Merleau-Ponty may have seen it in these terms, this is the main problem that he saw with classical Marxism. This could be expressed in this way: the Promethean mythos is the transcendental aesthetic of classical Marxism. It provides the pre-predicative organization of the sensuous reality with which Marxism engages.

For Merleau-Ponty, the point of Marxist theory is to "decipher events, discover in them a common meaning and thereby grasp a leading thread which, without dispensing us from fresh analysis at every stage, allows us to orient ourselves toward events." Far from any utopianism or dogmatic philosophy of history, it aims "to offer men a *per-ception of history* which would continuously clarify the lines of force and vectors of the present."[135] But to posit as a given fact the objectively agonistic existence of the proletariat is to structure the perceptual field in ways that lead to misperception of political phenomena. The proletariat, understood in terms of its ostensible historical role as the universal class, is not a given – neither in terms of its composition nor even of its possibility. Its emergence is, or should be, the phenomenon of fundamental concern; but this is shrouded by the Promethean aesthetic.

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[133] Wessell, *Prometheus Bound*, 64; cf. 22, 38f, 189.

[134] Wessell, *Prometheus Bound*, 187. The proletariat contains "an absolute agonal tension."

[135] HT 104f/98.

The myth of man, through which Merleau-Ponty sought to define the existential attitude, was meant to play the same sort of transcendental aesthetic role with respect to Marxist analysis. It was at this level that Merleau-Ponty sought to reform Marxism, by reconstituting the perceptual field as the human world, the world of human life. For it is, as he often put it, a matter of learning, or re-learning, how to see. This makes all the difference. "To perceive is to engage in a single stroke a whole future of experiences in a present that never strictly guarantees it; it is to believe in a world."[136] I shall develop this below; but the basic idea is that the world of militant faith is specifically underwritten by the transcendental aesthetic dimensionality of human universality.[137] In other words, the pre-existent logos of the world *just is* the mythos of man. To believe that Saint-Exupéry was a hero – neither a fool, nor a madman, nor a suicide – is to believe that this is a *possibility*.

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[136] PhP 343f/297.

[137] This would be related as much to Binswanger's account of *Bedeutungsrichtungen* in *Traum und Existenz*, for example, as to Lenin's "Marxist 'perception' of situations," the practical conclusions of which Merleau-Ponty thought could be extended "onto the theoretical plane" (SNS 217n/123n).

> The realism of psychic becoming needs ethereal lessons. It even seems that, without aerial discipline, without apprenticeship in lightness, the human psyche cannot evolve. [...] Establishing a future always requires the values of flight.[1]

## Chapter 4 : Heroism and Incarnation

Merleau-Ponty's essay on heroism, "Man, the Hero," and particularly the central significance he accorded in that essay to Saint-Exupéry in preference to recognizably communist heroes, met with a hostile reaction from the readership of *action*.[2] In fact, this reaction was clearly prefigured in the frosty, dismissive editorial preface, signed by Francis Ponge,[3] that preceded the essay itself.[4] It is difficult to know the extent to which this surprised Merleau-Ponty. In any event, his attempt to define "the existential attitude" specifically failed to draw Hervé any closer to existentialism. A fortnight later Hervé responded quite harshly to the editorial claims Merleau-Ponty had made in the previous issue of *Les Temps modernes*[5] to the effect that classical Marxism – and in particular the politics of *action* – "no longer has a grip on the facts."[6] Significantly,

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1 Gaston Bachelard, *L'Air et les songes. Essai sur l'imagination du mouvement* (José Corti, 1943).

2 In the first issue of *Cahiers d'action*, which was founded in part to offset the rising influence of existentialism, there was a flurry of hostile reaction, although this was undoubtedly selective. See "Correspondance à propos d'un article de Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'Le Culte du Héros'," *Cahiers d'action* 1 (May 1946), 55-61.

3 Ponge had become the literary editor of *action* after the Liberation, but resigned later in 1946, and left the Party in the following year on account of its dogmatism, in particular with respect to aesthetic issues. Interestingly enough, Ponge's "Notes premières de l'Homme," a series of notes from 1943-44 for a projected (but never completed) work on 'Man', was published in the inaugural issue of *Les Temps modernes* (pp67-75, immediately after Merleau-Ponty's "La Guerre a eu lieu").

4 See supplementary note C.

5 "For the Truth" ["Pour la vérité"] in *Les Temps modernes* 4 (I.1946); SNS 271-303/153-171.

6 SNS 299/169.

in a way reminiscent of Maritain's criticism of Saint-Exupéry, Hervé accused Merleau-Ponty of being disengaged and non-committal, a "solitary spectator" [*spectateur solitaire*] hovering indecisively "above the fray" [*au-dessus de la mêlée*].[7]

And Hervé did not do so without grounds. Consider how Merleau-Ponty expressed his approach to political phenomena at the time: "It is up to us to *observe* the world during these years when it begins to breathe again [...] *If* the class struggle once again becomes the motivating force of history and, definitely, *if* the alternative of socialism or chaos becomes clearer, then it is up to us to choose a proletarian socialism."[8] And even more tellingly, Merleau-Ponty admitted that "to speak of humanism without being on the side of 'humanist socialism' in the Anglo-American way, to 'understand' the Communists without being a Communist, is to set oneself very high [*se placer bien haut*], at any rate, above the fray [*au-dessus de la mêlée*]."[9]

Is this not plainly inconsistent with the militant standpoint described above? It can certainly appear that way. Thus, expressing what many Communist critics thought of Merleau-Ponty's "policy of waiting [*politique d'attente*], without illusion,"[10] Hervé argued that "the attitude of a solitary, spectative consciousness that would consist in withdrawing from the game [*se mettre hors du jeu*], without making any concession to tactics, is a pathetic utopia." Contrary to Merleau-Ponty's own express aim, Hervé regarded his position as "less a matter of political thinking than of a fascination exerted by the gestures and language of a bygone era."[11]

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7 Hervé, "Sommes-nous tous des coquins?," *action* (15.II.1946), 3.

8 SNS 218/124, emphasis added.

9 HT 203/185-6.

10 SNS 303/171. This is often referred to as *attentisme*.

11 Hervé, "Sommes-nous tous des coquins?," 3.

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In theoretical terms, Hervé's criticism seemed to effectively place Merleau-Ponty in the same boat as Saint-Exupéry. Is this a sound judgment? This is the intricate question that we must now take up. Having looked at Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty in the preceding chapters, this chapter seeks to ascertain precisely what, if anything, is Exupérian about Merleau-Pontian existential phenomenology:

- §4.1 takes stock of the relation between Merleau-Ponty and Saint-Exupéry in terms of their points of convergence and divergence;
- §4.2 explores the complicated relationship between Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty more closely, by comparing and contrasting their respective views concerning truth and freedom;
- Finally, drawing the preceding considerations together against the backdrop of the contemporaneous response to Merleau-Ponty's essay on heroism, §4.3 articulates the dialectical nature of his philosophical standpoint, thus pointing to the specific methodological significance of Exupérian heroism for Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological project.

### 4.1 — Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty

Saint-Exupéry was at best a philosophical dilettante. As Beauvoir put it, he "talks drivel when he's thinking abstractly and in general." Even Colin Smith, who dedicated the final chapter of his 1964 book on contemporary French philosophy to him, admitted that Saint-Exupéry's reputation was not based on the philosophical value of his work, and that in this regard he did have "a tendency to say things of incredible inanity."[12] Nonetheless, there are some significant common themes that join the *Weltan-*

[12] Colin Smith, *Contemporary French Philosophy: A Study in Norms and Values* (Methuen & Co., 1964), 243.

*schauungen* of Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty (although many of these themes are by no means unique to either of them). It is against this background that their differences can be most clearly understood.

An inventory of the key commonalities between Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty would include the following considerations:

1. Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty were both critical of the cultural condition of contemporary capitalist society, in particular of secular humanism as an outgrowth of abstract rationalism and liberal individualism.[13] Although Merleau-Ponty did not directly resort to the more disparaging metaphors – "termites," "cattle," "robots" – through which Saint-Exupéry expressed himself, he did speak in like terms of a degenerate form of human animality that would signify the (not irrevocable) loss of the living capacity of historical agency. This would be a pathological reversion to an ahistorical unconsciousness of death consequent to the stabilization – through the imposition of tyrannical oppression or traumatic repression – of the restless negativity, the *Unruhe*, definitive of human existence.[14] To the extent that he thought people

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[13] In this they expressed "a pervasive hostility to parliamentary democracy, scientific rationalism, and materialist bourgeois civilization" that was "expressed in a social atmosphere of profound anxiety and exaggerated hopes for social renewal." Christopher Lawrence and George Weisz, *Greater than the Parts, Holism in Biomedicine, 1920-1950* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 10.

[14] SNS 114/66. This is significant with respect to Merleau-Ponty's rejection of Kojève's views concerning the end of History (see also supplementary note D). Kojève had maintained that while the end of history marks the disappearance of humanity *qua* 'subject *opposed* to the object', humans would remain alive in a time of peace and consensus, filled with "art, love, play [...] in short, everything that makes Man *happy*," and he portrayed this as equivalent to the 'realm of freedom' envisioned by Marx at the end of the third volume of *Capital* (*Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, 434f n1). Following Marx, Merleau-Ponty held the contrary view that 'human' history would *begin* with communism, i.e., would follow the end of diremptive *pre*-history, and – lest it amount to a reversion to animality – would be a dynamic and open process admitting of no final synthesis. It is noteworthy that the only addition Kojève made to the second edition of the published form of his lectures on Hegel was to concede this point, which was clearly directed against him (he wrote that he rethought this around 1948). Here we read that "after the end of History, men would construct their edifices and works of art as birds build their nests and spiders spin their webs, would perform musical concerts after the fashion of frogs and cicadas, would play like young animals, and would indulge in love like adult beasts" (*ibid.*, 436f n).

needed to be reawakened to their own historicity, Merleau-Ponty's view of them tended in this direction.

In the context of Cartesianism, animals and robots are not so far apart. Specifically, it was to the general the idea of mechanism – the hegemony of the 'machine-man'[15] and the alienated and alienating 'machine-society' based upon it[16] – that Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty were opposed.[17] Against this they both envisioned an organically holistic sort of sociality as a way to recover universality and therewith intersubjective relations that would be more 'authentic'.[18] Although Saint-Exupéry tended to put this in terms of 'love', whereas Merleau-Ponty preferred idioms such as that of 'communication' and 'reconciliation', their views do not differ fundamentally. At root, both are simply concerned with the creation of human bonds [*liens*] between persons.[19]

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[15] The term descends from Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709–51), *L'homme machine* (1748).

[16] Cf. Anne Harrington, *Reenchanted Science: Holism in German Culture From Wilhelm II to Hitler* (Princeton University Press, 1996), xvi-xvii, 19ff. .

[17] It is thus not a coincidence that the discussion of embodiment that first alludes to Saint-Exupéry in *Phenomenology of Perception* occurs in the first chapter of Part I, "The Body as Object and Mechanistic Physiology," in the context of Merleau-Ponty's critique of mechanism.

[18] To be sure, this had certain limited affinities with fascism; as we have seen, both Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty recognized the need for some degree of imitation here (but they did not seek to imitate the same aspects). But it is hardly the case that the discourses of holism and authenticity were intrinsically tied to fascist thinking. And it should not be overlooked that this was a fairly widespread phenomenon among those critical of bourgeois liberalism in France, applying as much to surrealism, sacred sociology, and even Christian personalism as movements seeking spiritual-social renewal. As expressed by Saint-Exupéry, the common idea is that "politics is only meaningful when it serves a spiritual certainty" [*une politique n'a de sens qu'à condition d'être au service d'une évidence spirituelle*] (EG 342). This may be true; but the question is how to assess that 'spiritual certainty'.

[19] See Mary Rose Barral, "Self and Other: Communication and Love," pp155-180 in *Merleau-Ponty and Psychology*, ed. Keith Hoeller (Humanities Press, 1993). "Love is the growth of two consciousnesses building together a new reality, a new world" (165). This is entirely consistent with Binswanger's *Daseinsanalyse*, which is centred on an account of encounter [*Begegnung*] as based in love [*Liebe*]. Moreover, it could be productively related to recent research that has brought to light the significance of the notion of love in Husserl's work, including R. P. Buckley, "Husserl's Rational '*Liebesgemeinschaft*'," pp116-29 in *Research in Phenomenology* 26 (1996); and Ullrich Melle, "Edmund Husserl: From Reason to Love," pp229-248 in *Phenomenological Approaches to Moral Philosophy: A Handbook*, eds. J. J. Drummond and L. Embree (Kluwer, 2002).

2. Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty both advocated a new humanism that aimed to spiritualize – or *re-enchant* – human coexistence on the basis of a secular faith in a myth of human divinity. Although both purported to go beyond Christianity, in each case the project was informed in a profound way by the Christian myth of the God-man, the Word become Flesh. Prioritizing active engagement, both held that universality was to be attained through humanity's self-creation or autonomous self-realization. And, construing it against the backdrop of nature's cosmic indifference, both saw this self-realization as a matter of self-*overcoming* that entailed a certain staking of one's life, a mortal suspension of the particularities of one's given empirical individuality. Although this is more spectacular in the case of Saint-Exupéry, in each case there is a crucial, if paradoxical, *dis*engagement implied at the heart of this sort of self-transformative engagement. Exupérian aerial takeoff [*envol*] is in this way non-trivially analogous to the general idea of a phenomenological reduction, "the universal meditation which cuts the philosopher off from his nation, his friendships, his prejudices, his empirical being, in short, from the world, and which seems to leave him in complete isolation."[20] Either way, such separation and departure from the *sens* of rational intellect is to be redeemed through reintegration into the context of an "expanded reason."[21] As one of the first reviewers of *Terre des hommes* disapprovingly recognized: "this World of Men is a World of the Hero, but of the Hero alone; despite the common dangers and the camaraderie, it is a World of Solitude."[22] However, he also noted that

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[20] PhP 414/361.

[21] SNS 109/63; cf. PhP xiii/xviii. See Major, *Saint-Exupéry: l'écriture et la pensée*, 63-105, especially 92, where Saint-Exupéry's notion of "Esprit" is explicitly linked to Merleau-Ponty's invocation of the idea of a "raison élargie."

[22] Robert Brasillach, in *L'Action française* 16.III.1939; in *Les critiques de notre temps et Saint-Exupéry* (Éditions Garnier Frères, 1971), 67f, italics removed. Cf. EG 585. Brasillach was a literary

"this solitude has a slightly barbaric greatness [*a sa grandeur un peu barbare*] that a healthy [*saine*] philosophy will endeavor to preserve intact [*ne pas mutiler*] and to incorporate into a vaster and purer reason."[23]

3. Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty both linked this expanded reason with a new vision, a new way of seeing the world – "a mode of perception that is at once more intimate and broader" than analytical intelligence, a new "attitude of consciousness that reaches beings in their existential and affective context."[24] The high-altitude view of the Exupérian pilot is analogous to that of the Merleau-Pontian phenomenologist, and this precisely in terms of the practice of *survoler*. For Merleau-Ponty, to perceive is fundamentally to perform a Gestalt operation of picking out a figure against a given background. Inasmuch as perceptual acuity is a function of the breadth and inclusiveness of the relevant background, this operation implies a certain distance and leeway, which can be described as the power to *survoler* lacked by Schn. Humanity mechanically reduced to a "machine for swinging a sledgehammer or a pickaxe,"[25] as Saint-Exupéry put it, is epitomized by the pathological Schn. Or at least this is the case in Merleau-Ponty's portrayal of Schn., where the patient's symptoms not only corroborate the mechanistic threat posited by the spiritual-holistic critique,[26] "but also the pre-

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fascist who, on account of his editorship (until 1943) of the rabidly anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi Parisian newspaper *Je suis partout*, was tried for collaboration after the war (a one-day trial on 19.I.1945 that Merleau-Ponty, among others, attended) and executed on 6.II.1945. For a recent treatment of his case, see Alice Kaplan, *The Collaborator: The Trial and Execution of Robert Brasillach* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). Needless to say, Brasillach did not think that *Pilote de guerre* moved in the direction of 'a healthy philosophy'.

[23] Brasillach, in *L'Action française* 16.III.1939; in *Les critiques de notre temps et Saint-Exupéry* (Éditions Garnier Frères, 1971), 67f.

[24] Major, *Saint-Exupéry: l'écriture et la pensée*, 63, 90.

[25] TH 211.

[26] This is not to align Merleau-Ponty nor Saint-Exupéry with the nefarious Nazi rhetoric, especially of Karl Kötschau, of "machine-people" [*Maschinenmenschen*], those who could not survive without medical technology and outside institutions. But the broad affinities are noteworthy. For example, this

sumption that holistic insight into the essence of experience is itself the highest mental faculty of man."[27] On this basis, both Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty keenly claimed to discern the germs of universality in the smallest concrete phenomena—in "the least perception, the slightest movement of the heart, the smallest action,"[28] or "the simplest dialogue."[29] Like Saint-Exupéry's smiling over a bummed cigarette with Spanish anarchists, the riverside drink, or the mere act of flying, such an awareness embraces the human world in its contrast with nature—it "contains indivisibly all the order and disorder of the world."[30] "In a completely explicated human perception we would find all the originalities of human life."[31]

4. Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty were both anti-ideologues, and were reticent about taking sides in ideological disputes, which they tended to regard as superficial. (Merleau-Ponty's *Humanism and Terror* met a similar fate as *Pilote de guerre*, in that it was denounced from all sides.)[32] Both strove to surmount ideological disagreement, and the phenomena of 'multiple solipsism' in general, through the disclosure, in the lived present, of a common universal terrain and a commitment to its realization. The self-decentring occasioned by mortal risk that we saw emphasized by Merleau-Ponty is also for Saint-Exupéry a key means of this disclosure. "We make out way for years

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statement from Kötschau: "Our time does not need externally controlled machine-people, but rather self-controlled people who have developed their own powers schooled in battles with a healthy Nature. *Our time needs the heroic man, the man who is up to the challenges of the time, and who does not have to rely on the doubtful protection of an all too artificial environment*" (cited in Harrington, *Reenchanted Science*, 186).

27 Goldenberg, "Goldstein and Gelb's Case Schn.," 298.

28 "[...] la moindre perception, le moindre mouvement du cœur, la moindre action" (SNS 121/70).

29 HT 206/189.

30 HT 206/189.

31 PrP 99/40 (reply to Hyppolite).

32 Robert Campbell, "M. Merleau-Ponty et ses lecteurs," *Paru* 37 (December, 1947), 49ff; Cooper, *Merleau-Ponty and Marxism*, 77ff; Poster, *Existential Marxism in Post-War France*, 157.

side by side, each enclosed in his own silence, or else exchanging words that convey nothing. But at the moment of danger, then we stand shoulder to shoulder. We discover that we belong to the same community. We are broadened by the discovery of other consciousnesses. We look at each other and smile."[33] However schmaltzy this may seem in the context of Saint-Exupéry's prose, it is precisely in the self-evidence betokened by such a 'smile' that Merleau-Ponty located the "glory" of successful dialogue and communication, that which can be taken as an indication of "the community of fate [*la communauté du sort*] among men," and of the "agreement" [*accord*] that runs deeper than even biological specificity.[34]

Ultimately, what the respective projects of both Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty aimed to do was to participate in giving meaning and direction – *sens* – to human life by disclosing its transcendental, universal basis. For both, there is a certain 'love of life' which alone can lead to a genuine 'life of love'.



These commonalities, however, by no means exhaust the relationship between Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty. If we examine the cosmic nature of humanism and its practical consequences more closely, we discover the following countervailing considerations:

1. While Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty can be seen as agreeing that modern, rational humanism was problematic, and that this was tied to its vitiation of Christian themes of egalitarian community and, more generally, its state of spiritual disenchantment, their views of this situation differed significantly. We can pose this in terms of

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[33] TH 42; cf. PhP 417/363.

[34] "[...] non pas selon la ressemblance biologique, mais en ce qu'ils ont de plus propre" (SNS 171/98).

the modern ideals of equality, freedom, and fraternity. At least as they are conventionally understood, Saint-Exupéry regarded these ideals as fundamentally incompossible. "These words [*liberté, egalité, fraternité*] once comprised a fertile seed. The tree grew, but it died. [...] We need a new seed."[35] He saw freedom in its modern guise of individual autonomy as the negation of communitarian equality, and posed the fraternity symbolized in Man as the negation of that negation. Taking Aéropostale as an organizational paradigm for the communal reconciliation of personal fulfillment with societal needs, Saint-Exupéry effectively promoted a conservative reprise of the organically hierarchical social order of pastoral France as a way to recast freedom and equality. "I believe," he said in the Credo of *Pilote de guerre*, "that the primacy of Man founds the only meaningful Equality and Freedom."[36] This view implies a secularization of traditional religious community that re-situates it cosmically, thereby refounding it on its own dynamic activity. But this is hierarchical and thus historically retrograde in the sense that it views modern individual autonomy as a deviant development in need of retraction. "By assigning to each a well-defined place in the order of human relations, the hierarchy confers on the individual a unique and irreplaceable character that attributes an inestimable value to him."[37] Even if it is entirely this-worldly, the Exupérian social ideal remains, if not an expression of anti-modern reaction, then at the very least an exceedingly illiberal attitude.

Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, regarded the apparent incompossibility of the ideals of equality, freedom, and fraternity as an indication that at the social level they

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35 EG 184.

36 PG 241.

37 Ouellet, *Les relations humaines dans l'œuvre de Saint-Exupéry*, 97.

remained abstract. The task was to make them concrete by "realizing" them, in particular by further developing, not sacrificing, freedom. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty did not think that modernity was fully unfolded, or at any rate that its anomies were irredeemable. Focusing on the intersubjective dynamics of historical becoming, he held that the ostensible ideals of modern society, as lived out in interpersonal relations, were not only *not* fundamentally incompatible, but that they themselves portended the positive supersession of their apparent incompossibility. Merleau-Ponty resisted the essentialization and historical stasis (or even *un*becoming) entailed by the encapsulation of the truth of humanity as 'Man'. Whereas Saint-Exupéry in effect hypostatised the latter as a truth transcendent to human lived reality,[38] Merleau-Ponty let human existence speak for itself. This was a leitmotif of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology that he drew from Husserl: "it is a matter of leading experience that is still silent to the pure expression of its own meaning."[39] For Merleau-Ponty, the fulguration of evidentiary "glory" is not a prefigurative glimpse of the achieved universality of natural fraternity, but an indication of human productivity in action; it is the effervescence, not of the transcendence of contradictions, but of the creative confluence of them as contradictions. The difference between Exupérian 'Man' and Merleau-Pontian 'man' is thus the difference between a 'top-down' approach to the phenomena of human coexistence, and one that proceeds 'from below' (*von unten*, as Husserl would say); the latter is, at least in theory, more amenable to concrete political analysis – in particular, to the task

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[38] "[...] l'Homme de ma civilisation ne se définit pas à partir des hommes. Ce sont les hommes qui se définissent par lui" (PG 219).

[39] "C'est l'expérience [...] muette encore qu'il s'agit d'amener à l'expression pure de son propre sens." PhP x/xv. In the Peiffer and Levinas translation, the complete sentence reads: "Le début, c'est l'expérience pure et, pour ainsi dire muette encore, qu'il s'agit d'amener à l'expression pure de son propre sens." *Méditations cartésiennes*, 33; cf. PhP 253f/219. In Cairns' translation of the Husserliana edition: "Its beginning is the pure—and, so to speak, still dumb—psychological experience, which must now be made to utter its own sense with no adulteration" (38f).

of discriminating between the phenomena of democracy and democratization (which may *appear* to be chaotic) and those of genuine chaos.

2. Notwithstanding the fact that both Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty strove to surmount ideological disagreement, there is the patent difference that Saint-Exupéry did so by effectively eschewing altogether that which Merleau-Ponty explicitly sought to cultivate, namely, political thinking. Saint-Exupéry aspired to have "no political agenda whatsoever."[40] Although in the mid-1930s he travelled as a correspondent for *Paris-Soir* in the USSR,[41] before going to Spain, he resisted taking sides on the basic political questions of the day. He "neither advocated nor denounced,"[42] upholding instead the sovereignty of Man through an equivocal mixture of aristocratic individualism and nostalgia for authority. This had certain affinities with reactionary anti-modernism. In fact, rather than for de Gaulle, Saint-Exupéry's stated neutrality during the war did harbour much greater sympathies for Pétain, whom he did not publicly criticize and whom he tended to defend from disparagement. But as suggested by Maritain's critique, even the neutrality of *Pilote de guerre* could not be easily justified politically. Given the conditions of occupation in terms of despoliation and persecution at the time of publication, "it hardly helps to be told that 'le culte de l'Universel exalte et noue les richesses particulières' [...] or that the 'primacy of Man' is the only proper foundation for liberty and equality [...] Confronted with the cruel realities of 1942, these vague

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[40] Citing Schiff, 350.

[41] See SV 35-79.

[42] Schiff, 230. In his dispatches from the USSR he did not use the word 'communism', and likewise with the word 'fascism' in writing about Spain.

gestures in the direction of spirituality strike one as the last remnants of an archaic and discredited rhetoric."[43]

The apolitical "neutrality" of Saint-Exupéry's thought expresses his view that within the context of modernism, all sides are in the wrong. "Saint-Exupéry rejects fascism and communism, he rebuffs capitalism and socialism equally. He withdraws from or is frightened by the modern world, its termitaria, its crowds, its mass production. [...] He dreads democracy, unable to find in it the source of legitimate power."[44] What ultimately underwrote his attempt to rise above political divisions was his antipathy to what he constructed as a vaguely defined, indiscriminate totalitarianism. "*I hate this age*, where, under a universal totalitarianism, people become docile, polite, and placid cattle."[45] Saint-Exupéry turned to Man because, in short, he had "no faith in man."[46]

However vaguely defined that view might be, though, it clearly placed Saint-Exupéry quite far from Merleau-Ponty. For as we saw above, at around the same time as Saint-Exupéry was composing *Pilote de guerre*, Merleau-Ponty argued that certain aspects of totalitarian thinking had to be appropriated for victory, both in the war and more generally for democracy. His embrace of Marxism was antipodal to Saint-

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[43] Cf. S. Beynon John, "Saint-Exupéry's *Pilote de guerre*: Testimony, Art and Ideology," pp91-105 in *Vichy France and The Resistance: Culture and Ideology*, eds. R. Kedward and R. Austin (Barnes & Noble, 1985), 103f.

[44] Emmanuel d'Astier de la Vigerie, "Écrivain engagé ou combattant solitaire?," pp103-14 in *Les critiques de notre temps et Saint-Exupéry*, edited by Bruno Vercier (Éditions Garnier Frères, 1971), 109.

[45] SV 229, emphasis added.

[46] Emmanuel d'Astier de la Vigerie, "Écrivain engagé ou combattant solitaire?," 109.

Exupéry's blunt rejection of it: "what I hate about Marxism is the totalitarianism to which it leads."[47]

This statement may, however, be something of an exaggeration. For in another posthumously published text,[48] Saint-Exupéry tempered his opposition to Marxism somewhat. He did so by distinguishing between the method of Marxism and its specific empirical claims, and by noting that the former can retain its value even if the latter are mistaken or outdated. "The only mistake of the Marxists is to rely on a fixed bible of truths set forth by Marx, the currency of which, like that of all truths, is obviously momentary – instead of nourishing it by recreating these truths in accordance with the evolution of this society using the method which itself can always remain valid."[49] What Saint-Exupéry objected to in general was any sort of social science that claimed strong predictive power.[50] On Saint-Exupéry's view, as carried out by most if not all of those who professed it, Marxism seemed to be especially guilty of this sort of sophism, in that it painted a very specific picture of the future. Against this, Saint-Exupéry argued that "I can claim only one thing, and that is to think the world of today. [...] It is absolutely vain to claim that [social-scientific thinking] enables one to think the world of tomorrow."[51] In methodological terms, "Marxism itself is opposed

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[47] "Lettre au Général 'X' [René Chambe] (July 1943); published posthumously in *Le Figaro littéraire* (10.IV.1948); in EG 380 (also SV 229).

[48] But not one to which Merleau-Ponty could have had access, as it was published in 1981.

[49] "Le marxisme anti-marxiste," pp11-21 in *Cahiers Saint-Exupéry 2. Textes réunis et présentés par le Comité de l'Association des Amis d'Antoine de Saint-Exupéry* (1981), 12.

[50] Cf. *Carnets*, 173f.

[51] "Le marxisme anti-marxiste," 19f.

to finalism,"[52] and so, in Saint-Exupéry's estimation, "Marxism as it is understood by the Marxists is profoundly anti-Marxist."[53]

As far as it goes, this is quite consistent with Merleau-Ponty's own view, which also emphasized the unthinkability of the future as a key tenet of Marx's thought.[54] "One can only validly think what one has in some way lived, the rest being nothing but imagination."[55] Any pretension to being able to think the future would subvert what he regarded as Marx's "original insight," that "historical meaning is immanent in the interhuman event, and is no less fragile."[56] Marxism properly dwells in the present, without reliance upon representations of a transcendent future. For "to live and die for a future projected by the will, rather than live and act in the present, is precisely what Marxists have always considered utopianism."[57]

But the import of this particular concurrence does not go very far. It certainly did not alter Saint-Exupéry basic criticism of Marxism, a view which constituted, for him, sufficient grounds to reject it, namely, that Marxism crudely reduced human beings to producers and consumers. More importantly, though, there is at best only a verbal agreement between Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty concerning the need to focus attention on the present. The reason why Saint-Exupéry thought that Marxism effected that illicit reduction, why he found it "absolutely impossible to understand what the historical mission of the proletariat could mean,"[58] and more generally, why the

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52 *Carnets*, 174.

53 "Le marxisme anti-marxiste," 20.

54 EP 41/50f.

55 HT 136/127.

56 EP 42/51.

57 HT 85f/80.

58 "Le marxisme anti-marxiste," 18; cf. *Carnets*, 73, 103, 173ff.

present as he saw it was populated by cattle, termites, robots, etc., is because he did not have a view of the present in its historical depth—he did not see what Merleau-Ponty called the "living present."[59] It is true to say that "there is in Saint-Exupéry an unshakeable refusal to go beyond immediate existence."[60] But Saint-Exupéry uncritically accepted as given the fragmentation that characterized the surface of modern social phenomena, and contrasted this with the ideal of Man. Even granting that he could see bonds of love when they emerged against this backdrop, he was blind to their emergence itself. That is, his purview occluded the ambiguous "lines of force and vectors"[61] which in the present make it such that the future, while nowise determined, "is not any empty zone in which we can construct unmotivated projects," but rather that "it is sketched before us like the end of the day underway—*and this outline is ourselves.*"[62] For Merleau-Ponty, the sense in which the proletariat could be said to have an historical mission is that universal human recognition is delineated by its spontaneous existence in the given historical constellation of forces and vectors, such that the realization of that recognition is achieved through the "prolongation and fulfillment" of that existence.[63]

3. In this way, the Marxism proposed by Merleau-Ponty aimed to offer a "perception of history" through which an individual could relearn to see the world in a truer way in terms of its historical emergence.[64] It was thus that Merleau-Ponty sought to

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[59] Cf. PhP 384/333, 495/433. (This notion is clearly similar to, but not to be confused with, Husserl's notion of *der lebendige Gegenwart*—Merleau-Ponty's notion is consequent to his intersubjective reinterpretation of transcendental subjectivity).

[60] Major, *Saint-Exupéry: l'écriture et la pensée*, 222.

[61] HT 104f/98.

[62] HT 102/95, emphasis added.

[63] HT 120, 125f/111, 116f.

[64] HT 117/98.

help 'give' meaning (*sens*) to human life. As at the level of intentional consciousness, it is not a simple matter of *Sinn-Gebung*. *Sens* is already there – indeed, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that "we are present [*assistons*] at every moment" at its emergence[65] – it is just matter of rendering it visible. The fundamental problem of modern capitalist society was systemic misperception – a structurally endemic case of 'apperceptive historical agnosia' – the remedy for which lay at the level of a new transcendental aesthetic that reaffirmed the full dimensionality of the field of human historical experience.

Whereas Merleau-Ponty wanted in this way to be a *teacher*, Saint-Exupéry set himself up as more of an inspiring *preacher*, a giver of meaning to those without. As Jean-Louis Major contrasted Saint-Exupéry to Merleau-Ponty, "it is less a matter of describing perception than of proposing a more human mode of knowledge—his [Saint-Exupéry's] intention is consequently of the ethical order"[66] However, inasmuch as Merleau-Ponty did not simply describe perception, and since it is hardly the case that his position was devoid of ethical significance, it would be more accurate to say that Saint-Exupéry's position was *strictly* ethical, i.e., purely normative. Which is to say that in an important sense his account lacks motivation, and its prescriptions are, at root, arbitrary. In the context of senseless disorder, this can be a matter of the *instauration* of an ethical order, the heroic imposition of normative bearings for action where there are none—a kind of foundational *Sinn-Gebung*. As we saw above, such was Caillois' view, although he was not alone in regarding Saint-Exupéry along the lines of

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[65] PhP xvi/xx.

[66] *Saint-Exupéry: l'écriture et la pensée*, 71n23.

"a creator, a builder, a maker of laws."[67] There is an element of secular messianism in such heroism—precisely what Merleau-Ponty sought to avoid in arguing that the consequences of the Incarnation itself have still not yet been fully worked out.[68] The completion of that project is the historical mission of the proletariat. In contrast, institutive acts of signification are not predelineated, and there can be no discursive account of their historical genesis, thus no rational justification. This is the sense in which "[t]he work of Saint-Exupéry is not an argument. It is an example. It is made up of events which are recounted to inspire, not to persuade."[69] What is at issue there is a kind of pure action outside of truth. "Yesterday's truth is dead, and that of tomorrow has yet to be built."[70]

For Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, even this position of sovereignty is regulated by the primordial truth of the world and of our "participation" in it. "'Being-in-the-truth' [*« être-à-la-vérité »*] is indistinguishable from *être-au-monde.*"[71] "We are in the truth,"[72] "we are *true* through and through [*de part en part*]."[73] Through exploration of the 'living present' we can discover the irrepressible core of history's existential meaning, the existential project of which we are a part. And this – contrary to the eternalness of Exupérian Man and to Saint-Exupéry's hatred of "this age" – can "make us love our time."[74]

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67 "[...] un réalisateur, un bâtisseur, un faiseur des lois" (Simon, *L'Homme en process*, 129).

68 Cf. SNS 313/176.

69 Everett W. Knight, *Literature Considered As Philosophy: The French Example* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), 181.

70 "La vérité d'hier est morte, celle de demain est encore à bâtir" (EG 341).

71 PhP 452/395.

72 PhP xi/xvi.

73 PhP 520/456.

74 HT 206/189.

## 4.2 — Truth and Freedom

The preponderance of the foregoing balance-sheet of the convergences and divergences between Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty suggests a net divergence. But it is not entirely clear how this can be formulated. We can approach this problem by examining more closely the respective views of Saint-Exupéry and Merleau-Ponty concerning truth and freedom.

### 4.2.1 — Saint-Exupéry on Truth

We have already glimpsed the activistic attitude of Saint-Exupéry's account of truth, the basic claim of which is that "*truth is not discovered; it is created.*"[75] Truth is the anthropocentric expression of human self-realization as an overcoming of nature. Exemplary here is the case of Mermoz, where "truth is the man that is born in him as he passes over the Andes."[76] The touchstone of Exupérian truth thus does not lie in the external world as such, but neither is it internal. Rather, for Saint-Exupéry truth emerges precisely "in the active encounter between the world and the man who fulfills himself there [*s'y accomplit*]."[77]

Even for a dilettante like Saint-Exupéry, however, not just any arbitrary creation or fulfillment can count as truth. His more general point is that "truth for man is what makes of him a man."[78] Mermoz, for example, or Saint-Exupéry himself over Arras, are sites of truth because they are sites of the emergence into being of a prior ground, namely Man. The Exupérian view of truth can thus be glossed as stating that what is

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75 *Carnets*, 47, italics added; cf. 119, 126.

76 SV 173.

77 Major, *Saint-Exupéry: l'écriture et la pensée*, 104.

78 "La vérité, pour l'homme, c'est ce qui fait de lui un homme" (SV 172; cf. TH 200).

true is Man – that is, man breathed upon by Spirit – as the ground of *bona fide* human existence, and that this ground is progressively brought into being and disclosed in its trueness through the creative activity of individual self-realization (which is ultimately sacrifice). In this way, truth is both universal and essentially relative; for that to which it is relative is the self-realization of Man, *l'Homme en se faisant.*

This is why there is no rigorous distinction in Saint-Exupéry's thought between truth as a created product and truth as a creative process. But this blurring is clearly problematic, inasmuch as that original spiritual inspiration is unfathomable. Man as the ground of creativity is only manifested in the results. Here again Saint-Exupéry turns to an organic analogy: "If orange trees develop strong roots and bear plentiful fruit in this soil and not that one, then this soil is the truth of the orange trees. If a particular religion, or culture, or scale of values, or one form of activity rather than another, promotes the same sort of plenitude in man, if it liberates a great prince inside, bringing him to self-awareness, then that scale of values, that culture, that form of activity constitute the truth of man."[79]

For Saint-Exupéry, truth is what *simplifies* or 'decomplicates' [*décomplique*] the world, what begets human order out of chaos.[80] It is fundamentally a matter of the creative force of Spirit that resolves social contradiction, yielding (indeterminately) well-adjusted human fruit. The latter are the unique manifestations of that force, which itself is strictly "invisible" and indemonstrable—in principle, Spirit does not admit of the theoretical self-evidence recognized by intelligence.[81] As the fox said to the little

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[79] TH 186f; cf. SV 141.

[80] TH 202, SV 156.

[81] EG 436; *Carnets*, 76, 78; TH 202.

prince, "one sees clearly only with the heart. What is essential is invisible to the eyes."[82] Truth is thus not amenable to direct discursive expression. Saint-Exupéry consequently emphasized expression's perlocutionary contribution to the project of simplification: "truth does not lie in the text, but in the 'topography' of the text."[83] True discourse does not *enunciate* the universal but rather "releases" [*dégage*] it[84]—not demonstratively, but through conversion.[85]

Although he never fully worked out what we could seriously call a theory, Saint-Exupéry did have a coherent view of truth—in fact, it was a radically *coherentist* view. "Knowledge is not the possession of truths, but of a coherent language."[86] Different languages or discourses – for example, those of Nazism and communism, but also various religions and philosophical schools – offered so many competing syntheses purporting to best capture the elusive truth of humanity. Such discourses are built around key (mythical) "guiding concepts" [*concepts directeurs*][87] – for example, the "Aryan concept" or that of the proletariat.[88] These appeal to humanity's strong "taste [*goût*] for coherence," whose basic adjudicative criteria are simplicity and order, that is, "the extent to which [a discourse] resolves antinomies."[89] Saint-Exupéry's aim was for a maximally comprehensive discourse that would fully decomplicate the world. This would be based on "the attainment of a point of view that unifies the universe"

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82 "On ne voit bien qu'avec le cœur. L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux." *Le petit prince* (Gallimard, 1946), 72.

83 *Carnets*, 25.

84 TH 201.

85 Cf. *Carnets*, 44, 76, 108, 158.

86 *Carnets*, 211; cf. 12.

87 *Carnets*, 42.

88 *Carnets*, 16; cf. 110.

89 *Carnets*, 108.

and *eo ipso* overcomes "the dispute [*litige*] between the universe and me."[90] Specifically, this point of view – which he called "beatitude" – would yield possession of "the sovereign concept."[91] For Saint-Exupéry, this is Man. This concept is not a matter of cognitive insight, but of principle of ordering. The cosmic humanism of *Pilote de guerre* as centred on Man is an attempt to surpass ideological discourse by articulating a more attractive – because more coherent and simpler, and therefore *truer* – language of human coexistence.

Saint-Exupéry's account of truth is not very philosophically rigorous. Perhaps more troubling, however, is that in political terms it seems to be wildly uncritical and hopelessly naïve. For it engaged in a dangerous game of mythological one-upmanship outside the scope of any regulation or verification—indeed, the very point of which was to lay the grounds for any regime of truth.

### 4.2.2 — Merleau-Ponty on Truth

In philosophical terms, the notion of truth contained in Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology is a fair bit more sophisticated than Saint-Exupéry's view. But this should not prevent us from seeing that, *to a certain extent*, it is still fundamentally in league with it. For the general idea remains *creative*: truth is not simply given, but is *to be made* [à faire]. For Merleau-Ponty, "philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth but, like art, the *realization* of a truth."[92] This is captured in the distinction concerning historical becoming that Merleau-Ponty later explicitly drew between, on

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90 *Carnets*, 211, italics removed.

91 *Carnets*, 211.

92 PhP xv/xx, emphasis added.

the one hand, "une vérité toute faite," "a ready-made truth," which designates the view he rejects; and on the other hand, the view he defends, which he describes as "une vérité qui se fait" or "[une] vérité à faire."[93] This is the unrealized potential for a world of communication and reconciliation, the realization of which, because it is for Merleau-Ponty always already underway, is tied to a very different view of creativity than that represented by Saint-Exupéry.

The meaning of Merleau-Ponty's notion of "vérité à faire" can be brought to light by considering his phenomenological account of perception and, in particular, his thesis of the primacy of perception. But here it is important to recognize that in a crucial sense this account, including *Phenomenology of Perception*, is not directly about perception as standardly understood.[94] It is indeed the case, as Gary Madison has argued, that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception contains no *theory* of perception as such.[95] However, *pace* Madison, this is not because for Merleau-Ponty 'perception' names "a non-concept," such that his phenomenological account of perception amounts to a "counter-philosophical" deconstruction of it.[96] It is true, as Merleau-Ponty himself later put it, that "the study of perception could only teach us a

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[93] AD 206, 269/153,200. Bernhard Waldenfels took this up with respect to Merleau-Ponty's later work in "Vérité à faire: Merleau-Ponty's Question concerning Truth," pp185-194 in *Philosophy Today* 35:2 (1991).

[94] In part, this work carries the title it does simply because Merleau-Ponty had long since registered the theme of his *thèse de doctorat* in 1934 (27.VI) as "The Problem of Perception in Phenomenology and in 'Gestalt Psychology'," having earlier (3.II.1934) registered the theme of what would become *The Structure of Behaviour* as "The Nature of Perception." See Geraets, *Vers une nouvelle philosophie transcendantale*, 8, 12. Between 1934 and the publication of *Phenomenology of Perception* in 1945, Merleau-Ponty's ideas evolved considerably, but at the time it was expected that *thèses* would address recognized scientific problems. This normative pressure produced a disjunction between the form and content of the work that is still liable to mislead.

[95] Gary Brent Madison, "Did Merleau-Ponty Have a Theory of Perception?," in *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics, and Postmodernism*, eds. Thomas W. Busch and Shaun Gallagher (State University of New York Press, 1992). Madison argued that "the notion of perception was not one of Merleau-Ponty's guiding concepts" and that it "plays no role whatsoever in [...] *Phenomenology of Perception*," 83ff.

[96] Madison, "Did Merleau-Ponty Have a Theory of Perception?," 92.

'bad ambiguity' [« *mauvaise ambiguïté* »],"[97] a capricious mixture of interiority and exteriority bordering on idealism which is entirely vulnerable to the sort of deconstruction Madison proposes. But this is because it is artificially abstracted from the questions of history and culture with which it is intricately interconnected.[98] This is why Merleau-Ponty stressed that *Phenomenology of Perception* was only a preliminary work.[99] It is thus critical to recognize that although Merleau-Ponty did not arrive at a theoretical resolution of the problem of perception in that work, *this was not the result of a failed attempt to do so.* Fundamentally, *Phenomenology of Perception* is a treatise on method. As Merleau-Ponty asserted, the aim of this work was to "define a method for getting closer to present and living reality."[100] This is surely one of the most underrated and misunderstood statements in the entire Merleau-Pontian corpus.[101] Merleau-Ponty did not purport to offer a theory but rather a *practice* of perception—as he repeatedly said, it is a matter of "relearning to see." In notes for a lecture series delivered in Mexico City (1948/49), Merleau-Ponty wrote that "there is no theory of perception other than seeing, since there is no resolution of the antinomies other than the act of vision."[102] To offer a theory of perception would be to presuppose the rationality of the world, when the problem at hand is to substantiate it. "The question of our time is precisely to know if the world [of tomorrow] will be rational."[103]

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97 Pros. 48/11.

98 "Our study of perception is an abstraction" (NI 165).

99 PrP 68/25; NI 132; TT 22ff; Pros. 41/6; cf. SNS 165n1/94n13.

100 PrP 68/25.

101 The primary reason for this is the neglect in Merleau-Ponty scholarship of the role of Eugen Fink's *Sixth Cartesian Meditation* in the development of Merleau-Ponty's account of phenomenological method. The present work originated alongside such an investigation of Merleau-Ponty's relation to Fink, but space considerations prevent me from including this here.

102 NI 139.

103 "Or justement la question de notre temps est de savoir si le monde sera rationnel" (NI 31).

The most basic goal of Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology is to do this in a non-question-begging way, to wit, by disclosing irresistible, perceivable self-evidence [*évidence*] of the rationality of human history. For this reason, it would not be amiss to see his phenomenology of perception as primarily a phenomenological account of human productivity.

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The standard view of perception is that ascribed to it by what Merleau-Ponty refers to as "objective thinking" [*la pensée objective*], the metatheoretical view that subtends both empiricism and idealism (what Merleau-Ponty often calls intellectualism), inasmuch as these derive from the common sense of the natural attitude. According to this standard view, perception is an external relation between subject and object whereby a self-enclosed knowing subject is able to form representations of objects existing in the external world *partes extra partes*. Of course, how empiricism and idealism specifically construe perception differs: one prioritizes the causal properties of the object, while the other prioritizes the constitutive properties of the subject. However, in each case the achievement of knowledge is effectively taken for granted by virtue of the tacit assumption of an absolute epistemological standpoint corresponding to "a universe perfectly explicit in itself."[104] This is a "ready-made truth" "une vérité toute faite" *par excellence*.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the purview of objective thinking – be it empiricism or idealism – is limited to what he calls "second-order" perception.[105] It overlooks the "primordial" experience of perception, the phenomenon of the original emergence into

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[104] PhP 51/41.

[105] Or "empirical" (PhP 53/43); he also uses the terms "actual" or "analytical" perception (PhP 24/17; cf. 339/293).

being of the perceived as such.[106] This is what Merleau-Ponty sometimes specified as "natural" perception, and this is what lies at the core of his phenomenological account of perception. Opening us to "a *privileged* realm of experience" because it is here that "the perceived object is *present and living*,"[107] natural perception denotes an act of pre-objective cognition which "at one stroke cuts through all possible doubts to place itself in the fullness of truth [*en pleine vérité*],"[108] thereby providing our "initiation to the world."[109] It is the mode of immediate, corporeal engagement with the world; "to perceive is to render something present to oneself with the help of the body,"[110] "the whole body all at once,"[111] that is, synaesthetically.[112] "Natural perception is not a science, it does not posit its objects, it does not distance itself from them for the purpose of observation; [rather] it lives with them" in an intersensorial world.[113]

It is with natural perception and its object – which, in the most general terms, is the non-human thing, or "natural state of affairs" [*donné naturel*] – that Merleau-Ponty is primarily concerned in *Phenomenology of Perception*. This is the unreflective [*irréfléchi*] situation out of which reflection emerges, but with respect to which it is typically oblivious. Merleau-Ponty was under no illusion that reflection could ever *return* to immediate unreflective experience; "there is no pure and absolutely unexpressed life in man; the unreflective only begins to exist for us through reflec-

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106 PrP 68/25; cf. PhP 254/219.
107 PrP 68/25, emphasis added.
108 PhP 50/40.
109 PhP 297/257.
110 PrP 104/42.
111 PhP 260f/225.
112 PhP 260-266/225-230.
113 PhP 371/321; cf. 261/225.

tion."[114] The unreflective only becomes an issue in the context of reflection's effort to comprehend its real origins in order to *justify* itself.[115] The unreflective is thus a feature of "radical reflection." The attempt to give expression to the unreflective belongs to the attempt to understand the natural situation in which reflection is rooted, "and which is therefore part of its definition,"[116] and to incorporate it into the "enlargement" [*agrandissement*] of reason.[117]

Natural perception is thus not a putatively 'wild' encounter with a radical natural alterity. Rather, it is a formulation of reflection's experience of "'wonder' [« *étonnement* »] before the world,"[118] its quasi-oneiric experience of the world as "strange and paradoxical" when our complicity with it is suspended.[119] In the simplest terms, it is the experience, not of nature, but of *non-sens*. In other words, the experience of a "natural state of affairs" is the experience of something that exceeds the given conceptual schemata of reason. Natural perception is thus the setting of the experience of the emergence of *sens* out of *non-sens*. It is our presence at the birth of

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[114] PrP 77f/30 (in response to Bréhier).

[115] "If reflection is to justify itself as reflection, that is to say, as progress toward the truth, it must not limit itself to replacing one view of the world with another, it must show us how the naïve view of the world is included in and transcended by the reflective view. Reflection must elucidate the unreflective view which it supersedes, and show the possibility of the latter, in order to comprehend itself as a beginning" (PhP 247/213).

[116] PhP 75/62.

[117] PrP 77/30.

[118] PhP viii/xiii; cf. 341f/295. Merleau-Ponty was citing Fink, "Die phänomenologische Philosophie Husserls in der gegenwärtigen Kritik," pp319-83 in *Kant-Studien* 38 (1933); reprinted as pp79-156 in *Studien zur Phänomenologie, 1930-1939* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1966). But the references differ. In the first, (to 331ff in the original), there is no discussion of wonder (96ff). It is only in the second (to 350 in the original) that Fink discusses the suspension of the natural attitude in terms of "the awakening of an immeasurable astonishment over the mysteriousness" [*das Erwachen einer maßlosen Verwunderung über die Rätselhaftigkeit*] of the world (115f). Merleau-Ponty surely also had in mind Fink's later article, "Das Problem der Phänomenologie Edmund Husserls," pp226-70 in *Revue internationale de Philosophie* 1 (1939); reprinted as pp179-223 in *Studien zur Phänomenologie, 1930-1939*. Here Fink was more explicit: "The origin of philosophical problems is *wonder* [Verwunderung] (182), although he develops this in terms of "astonishment" [*das Staunen*] (182-5).

[119] Cf. PhP 249/215: "All sensation germinally involves a dream or de-personalization such as we experience in the sort of astonishment [*stupeur*] it places us in when we truly live at its level."

meaning. This is not to grant the objects of natural perception an ontological priority over the ideal or cultural world. We saw above that, for Merleau-Ponty, nature is human nature. Radical reflection as an effort of reflective self-understanding does entail positing the cultural world as "a second level above perceptual experience," where the latter is understood as "the indispensable fundamental basis."[120] But this is not therefore *outside*. It is, rather, the *transcendental condition* of the cultural world. This just means that natural perception is that which "reveals the permanent data [*données permanentes*] of the problem that culture tries to resolve."[121]

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This problem is "the human problem," the problem of establishing human relations among men."[122] That this *is* a problem is because of the fact that, as a whole, human conscious experience is parceled out into uniquely situated individual bodies, and thus forms a system of separated, opposed perspectives. Along with the thing itself, these perspectives are the "permanent data" of the human problem.[123] There are no metaphysical guarantees that this situation of disorder can be harmonized or reconciled—Merleau-Ponty firmly refused to make optimistic assumptions about the possibility of anything like Saint-Exupéry's 'natural fraternity'.

'The human problem' is bound up in an essential way with Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the primacy of perception. Merleau-Ponty's most explicit statement of this thesis claims the following: that "the experience of [natural] perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values [*biens*] are constituted for us; that it gives us a

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120 PrP 85/33; cf. 88/35.

121 PrP 68/25.

122 HT xi/xv.

123 HT 203f/186; cf. 110/102.

nascent *logos*; that it teaches us, outside all dogmatism, the true conditions of objectivity itself; [and] that it summons us to the tasks of knowledge and action."[124] The upshot of this thesis is that all consciousness, including intellective consciousness and self-consciousness, is ultimately founded upon perception and thus is, "to some extent,"[125] perceptual—there is a sort of "organic bond" between intellection and the corporeal situatedness that characterizes perception.[126] However, this does not mean that intellection, for example, is *like* perception. Indeed, as is clear, it is in many ways very much unlike perception. But it is the case, according to Merleau-Ponty, that intellective certainty is ultimately founded upon and derived from the certainty experienced in perception.[127] This has the corollary consequence of dissolving the classical distinction between truths of reason and truths of fact. For there is no truth of fact that does not retain an at least minimal significance in the historical development of reason, and there is no truth of reason that does retain a 'coefficient of facticity'. Hence, "every truth of fact is a truth of reason, and every truth of reason is a truth of fact."[128] This is not to debase or impugn the notion of truth. It is not that all is relative; rather, all is absolute.[129] All is true, and therefore, as Merleau-Ponty later cited Alain (Émile Chartier), "truth is momentary [...] It belongs to a situation [...] it is necessary to see it, to say it, to do it at this very moment."[130]

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[124] PrP 67/25.
[125] PhP 452/395.
[126] PrP 58/20.
[127] PrP 42/13.
[128] PhP 451/394.
[129] Cf. HT 102/95.
[130] EP 50f/62f.

I shall return to this below. For now, it is important to note that the fundamental meaning of the primacy of perception is that the disorder definitive of the situation of natural perception is the crux of truth and thus the crucible of culture. In other words, *establishing the objectivity of the natural (non-human) thing is the focal point of the solution to the human problem.*



How does that objectivity emerge? This is not straightforward, inasmuch as Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception represents an extended elaboration of the consequences of rejecting the 'constancy hypothesis',[131] that is, the claim that there is, in principle, "a one-to-one correspondence and constant connection between the stimulus and the elementary perception."[132] But there remains the *phenomenon* of perceptual constancy, as well as that of appearance. Merleau-Ponty's account of the genesis of objectivity is first of all based on a phenomenological description of the perceptual experience of the self-evidence or reality of the natural thing *in the 'natural attitude'*. The salient points of this may be recapitulated as follows:

Perceptual experience is corporeally-situated and thus insuperably perspectival—it is "a reference to a whole which can in principle only be grasped through certain of its parts or aspects."[133] For Merleau-Ponty, "[a]n appearance is *merely* an appearance by virtue of a perceptual power that reaches beyond it toward the object itself."[134] What is perceived is thus in a sense always "deformed"—but this is the price of its being

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[131] Cf. PhP 62n1/50n1.

[132] PhP 14/7.

[133] PrP 49/16.

[134] Henry Pietersma, *Phenomenological Epistemology* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 138, emphasis added.

'real'.[135] As the experience of my openness out onto a world that exceeds me, perception intrinsically involves a paradoxical junction of immanence and transcendence: "immanence, because the perceived object cannot be foreign to the one perceiving; transcendence, because it always involves something more than what is actually given."[136] This paradoxical situation arises from the fact that the only means of access to perceptual reality is through an embodied perspective. It is on the basis of "a primordial contract and [...] a gift of nature,"[137] that is, it is in virtue of my being, *qua* embodied percipient, connatural with the world, that my body's sensory and motor capacities establish a linkage between the appearances of a thing and its ostensible reality, such that "I am able [...] to find a sense in certain aspects of being without having given it to them myself through a constitutive operation."[138]

Perceptual synthesis occurs through the adjustment and modulation of my embodied point of view, and constitutes the object as a presumptive synthesis. "The perceived thing [...] is a totality open to a horizon of an indefinite number of perspectival views which blend with one another according to a given style, which defines the object in question."[139] Perception is a movement of active transcendence in the living present that is teleologically oriented toward increasingly optimal or "privileged" perceptions.[140] This is the experience of the goodness of one's "grip" or "hold" [*prise*] on a thing in terms of the perceptual norms of distance, angle, and articulacy. "There is one culminating point [*point de maturité*] of my perception which simultaneously

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135 PrP 48/16.
136 PrP 49/16.
137 PhP 251/216.
138 PhP 251/217.
139 PrP 49/16.
140 PhP 348/302.

satisfies these three norms, and towards which the whole perceptual process tends."[141] The thing is experienced as real when the body, as a comprehensive synthesis of intersensory powers, has an optimal hold on it as an intersensory object. "It is not the epistemological subject who brings about the synthesis, but the body, when it escapes from dispersion, pulls itself together and tends by all means in its power towards one single goal of its activity, and when one single intention is formed in it through the phenomenon of synergy."[142] In this sense, the real object is the "terminus of a bodily teleology."[143]

The experience of objectivity thus emerges through the crystallization of discrete normative foci expressive of the concrete dialectical relationship between my body and the perceptual field. This can be seen as an expression of what Goldstein called the organism's "*Auseinandersetzung*" or "coming to terms" with the world, which he posed as the "basic biological law" [*das biologische Grundgesetz*] of organismic self-realization.[144] This is a matter of forming an environment that is "adequate" to its needs and capacities. But to understand something, not "through any intellectual operation of subsumption, but by taking up *on our own account* [à notre compte] the mode of existence which the *observable* signs adumbrate before *us*,"[145] relativizes *what is* as being-for-us (or even just being-for-*me*). It results in the unity of the object

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[141] PhP 349/303.

[142] PhP 269/232.

[143] PhP 373/322.

[144] *The Organism*, 76/102.

[145] PhP 369/319, emphasis added.

being held together by symbolic, existential meaning,[146] such that reality is "overlaid with anthropological predicates."[147]

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This preliminary descriptive account of objectivity thus does not supply Merleau-Ponty's considered view of truth. If it did, then this view would ultimately amount to little more than a philosophically refined version of Exupérian coherentism, a radicalization of the natural attitude from within, which is to say, a radicalization of perception's obliviousness *vis-à-vis* itself and its origins.[148] But that would be unfaithful to our experience of the difference between the real and the unreal, that is, to our experience of the progressive self-correction *of* our intramundane experience. "*What is given* is [...] an experience which clarifies and rectifies itself."[149] In other words, the view described above would be untrue to our experience of truth as something toward which we strive by gradually working out falsity and error.[150] Even in the natural attitude, we experience a much deeper normative orientation toward truth than that implied in the 'bodily teleologies' of organismic adequacy.

The transcendental task for Merleau-Ponty is to account for this, how it is that things are *not merely* correlatives of our corporeal existence, but rather that our anthropological predication of them is subtended by a more fundamental reality. This is a philosophical rather than psychological task, in that it requires paying to things a

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[146] It is constituted by a certain "symbolism [*symbolique*] [...] which links each sensible quality to the rest" (PhP 368/319).

[147] PhP 369/320. "The perceived world is not only a system of symbols [*une symbolique*] of each sense in terms of the other senses, but also a set of symbols of human life" (PhP 369n/319n).

[148] Cf. PhP 71/58; PrP 56/19: "Left to itself, perception forgets itself and is ignorant of its own accomplishments."

[149] PrP 59/21, emphasis added.

[150] Cf. PhP 341-344/294-298.

"metaphysical and disinterested attention."[151] This reveals a genuine "in-itself-for-us" [*en-soi-pour-nous*], "a background of inhuman nature" that is open to us but which is ultimately "hostile and alien."[152] "For our existence, the thing is much less a pole of attraction than a pole of repulsion. *We do not recognize ourselves in it, and this is precisely what makes it a thing.*"[153]

The problem is thus to understand how things are at once correlative yet alien. Merleau-Ponty argues that an optimal perceptual grip on a thing is rooted in the body *as a comprehensive hold on the world.*[154] Things appear to me by way of a primordial bond between my body and the world. "There is a logic of the world to which my body in its entirety conforms, and through which things of intersensory significance become possible."[155] The thing is a particular "concretion" of the general structures of the natural world as I carry them in my habitual body. Our perceptual schemata derive from the world, and such worldliness is essential to our corporeality. That with which it is crucial to come to terms, then, is "our originary comprehension of the world."[156]

According to Merleau-Ponty, this comprehension is fundamentally based on natural perception as a kind of perceptual *faith*. "To perceive [...] is to believe in a world."[157] "To ask oneself whether the world is real is to fail to understand what one is

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[151] PhP 372/322.

[152] PhP 372ff/322ff.

[153] PhP 374/324, italics added. Note that the italicized sentence is omitted from the English translation [*Nous nous ignorons en elle, et c'est justement ce qui en fait une chose*].

[154] "My body is tuned into the world when my perception presents me with a spectacle as varied and as clearly articulated as possible, and when my motor intentions, as they unfold, receive the responses they expect from the world. This maximum sharpness [*netteté*] in perception and action defines a perceptual *ground* [sol], a basis for my life, a general setting in which my body can co-exist with the world" (PhP 289f/250).

[155] PhP 377/326.

[156] PhP 377/326f.

[157] PhP 343f/297.

saying."[158] Natural perception "is the 'opinion' or the 'primary faith' which binds us to the world as to our native land [*patrie*], and the being of what is perceived is the antepredicative being towards which our whole existence is polarized."[159] Natural perception thus embodies the doxastic conviction that the world is real. Merleau-Ponty puts this in terms of Husserl's notion of *Urdoxa* or *Urglaube*, taking this as a tacit form of active transcendence, "the movement that carries us beyond subjectivity, which gives us our place in the world prior to any science and any verification."[160] This faith is what makes it irrefragably the case that 'there is something, rather than nothing'. To express the same point, Merleau-Ponty cited an anti-Cartesian dictum from Spinoza's *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*: "*habemus ideam veram*," *we have a true idea*.[161] Although nothing in particular is certain, there is a certainty of the world in general.[162] *This* is the certainty in virtue of which perception has epistemological priority over intellection; for it is in virtue of this that it is able to make a pre-objective cognitive distinction between appearance and reality. "We know that there are errors only because we possess truth, in the name of which we correct errors and recognize them as errors."[163] The primordial belief in the world is the "deeper function" of perception in virtue of which things are experienced as real (a function that is revealingly debilitated in certain psychopathological conditions such as

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158 PhP 396/344.

159 PhP 371f/321f.

160 PhP 395/343.

161 PhP 453/395; cf. 49/39. In "Merleau-Ponty and Spinoza," *International Studies in Philosophy* 20:3 (1988), Henry Pietersma has suggested that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology has a "fundamental kinship" with Spinoza's monistic metaphysics.

162 PhP 344/297.

163 PhP 341/295.

schizophrenia). This is why human *être-au-monde* is normally indistinguishable from *être-à-la-vérité*.[164]

The primacy of perception is thus ultimately no less a function of natural perceptual faith than of the encounter with antepredicative being.[165] The latter encounter distinguishes perception from objective thought, while the former faith distinguishes it from subjective dream. (I shall take oneiric experience as exemplary of non-perception, e.g., illusion, hallucination, myth, etc.) Merleau-Ponty ultimately founds truth in perception because of the way this differs structurally, that is, with respect to 'style', from non-perception with respect to the certainty of the natural or antepredicative world as "the background from which all acts stand out."[166] It is not in terms of *phenomenal content* that it differs fundamentally from non-perception—it is precisely the status of antepredicative experience (as real or unreal) that is at issue. At the antepredicative level, appearance is "pregnant" with its meaning in real and oneiric experience alike; even "the phantasms of dreaming [...] truly contain their meaning [*sens*]."[167] Merleau-Ponty makes a subtle but crucial distinction here in claiming that this meaning is "a direction of our existence." Although he normally stressed the

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[164] Cf. PhP 452/395.

[165] Cf. Geraets' distinction of two senses of the primacy of perception in "The Return to Perceptual Experience and the Meaning of the Primacy of Perception," in *Merleau-Ponty: Critical Essays*, ed. Henry Pietersma (Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology, University Press of America, 1989), 40. This ambiguity is why Merleau-Ponty's thesis has been the subject of wildly divergent interpretations. Compare, for example, Raymond Herbenick, "Merleau-Ponty and the Primacy of Reflection," in *The Horizons of the Flesh: Critical Perspectives on the Thought of Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Garth Gillan (Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), and E. T. Gendlin, "The Primacy of the Body, Not the Primacy of Perception," *Man and World* 25 (1992).

[166] PhP v/xi; cf. 381/330: "The natural world is the horizon of all horizons [...] which guarantees for my experiences a given, not a willed, unity underlying all the ruptures of my personal and historical life. Its correlate within me is the given, general, and pre-personal existence of my sensory functions in which we have discovered the definition of the body."

[167] PhP 329/285.

polysemy of the term 'sens',[168] this does not quite hold here. Oneiric meaning is an empty dimension of existence, whereas the "miracle" [*merveille*] that distinguishes the real world from the oneiric is that "in it meaning [*sens*] *and existence* are one."[169] Oneiric meaning is not situated; rather, it involves what Binswanger called "directions of significance" [*Bedeutungsrichtungen*].[170] These are primordial vectors of existential meaning or directionality that underlie subjective and objective movement equally. "The phantasms of dreams reveal [...] that *general spatiality* within which clear space and observable objects are embedded."[171] The generality of this spatiality is with respect to 'objective space', to which it adds a subjective dimension. Thus, while the dream lacks concrete existential depth and fullness,[172] it does reveal the vertical dimensionality – rising and falling, ascent and descent – that characterizes such depth. That is, although the dream is not situated in reality, it does serve to reveal what it means to be thusly situated. "The movement upwards as a direction in physical space, and that of desire towards its objective are mutually symbolical, because they both express the same essential structure of our being as *being situated in relation to a milieu*."[173] In the oneiric, we glimpse "a determining of up and down, and in general of place [*lieu*], which precedes 'perception'."[174]

The example discussed by Merleau-Ponty in this regard is germane to the question of Saint-Exupéry: "the image of a great bird hovering [*plane*], which, hit by a shot,

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168 Cf. PhP 512/448f.

169 PhP 374/323, emphasis added.

170 Cf. PhP 329/284f, where Merleau-Ponty cites Binswanger's "Traum und Existenz" (1930).

171 PhP 328/284, emphasis added.

172 Cf. PhP 391/339.

173 PhP 329/284, italics added.

174 PhP 330/285.

falls and is reduced to a small heap of charred paper."[175] The significance of this experience lies in how the flight and the fall serve to disclose the existential conditioning of lived space in terms of its dimensionality and scope, and its priority *vis-à-vis* physical space. The bird "rises and falls with the existential tide running through it; or again, it is the pulsation of my existence, its systole and diastole."[176] This account is not meant to be merely metaphorical. For at the antepredicative level, the distinction between the metaphorical and the literal does not yet obtain. This is why Merleau-Ponty's thinking and writing "literally wallow in metaphor."[177] Images of flight and fall, for example, are not decorative representations of phenomenological claims; rather, they are constitutive of them—in this case, depth. Taken "with all their existential implications," the generalized spatial dimensionality determined by these and other *Bedeutungsrichtungen* comprises an expanded transcendental aesthetic that forms the content of the *Urdoxa* at the root of perception.

Saint-Exupéry has lost this faith. This is why he lost his faith in man, and why he expressed such abhorrence at the world around him. And it is why, as we have seen, he does not really perceive. His cosmic humanism is not based on perceptual contact with the living present. It is solitary dream—recall how *Pilote de guerre* opens: "*Sans doute je rêve.*" Lacking any perceptual grip on the world, Saint-Exupéry's experience is devoid of living meaning and truth. Over Arras he may achieve "absolute contact" with himself as he dreams of his childhood home and the security offered by his governess. But the epistemological significance of this is not *for him*. Rather, as in

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[175] PhP 329/284.

[176] PhP 329f/285.

[177] Jerry H. Gill, *Merleau-Ponty and Metaphor* (Humanities Press, 1991), 137.

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, it is *for us* [*für uns*]. In effect, he represents virtually a 'complete' phenomenological reduction, the unreserved recovery and explicitation of his corporeally sedimented existence. This is not inconsistent with Merleau-Ponty's claim that the most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of performing it completely.[178] On the contrary, the self-destruction of the hero *shows* that this is the case.

Saint-Exupéry instantiates Merleau-Ponty's claim that the experience of absolute self-evidence and of absurdity are "equivalent" – that they "mutually implicatory, and even indistinguishable."[179] But this only occurs in cases of existential pathology where perceptual faith is absent. Where this faith is intact, what is fundamentally given to experience, what Merleau-Ponty calls "the primary phenomenon," is "a truth seen against the background of absurdity, an absurdity which the teleology of consciousness presumes to be able to convert into truth."[180]

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This notion of a "teleology of consciousness" is central to how Merleau-Ponty addresses the problem of reflection's self-justification and, more generally, the human problem.[181] The idea is that human existence is not just oriented toward intramundane things on the basis of corporeal teleologies, but that these are encompassed in a broader project that points back to antepredicative reality as ground. Intentional analysis reveals that consciousness is intrinsically oriented to truth and objectivity, and hence to the world. Our existence thus finds itself in the midst of the on-going realiza-

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178 PhP viii/x.

179 PhP 342/295f.

180 PhP 342/296.

181 Cf. PhP 340/294, 456/398.

tion of the primary *Urdoxa* as the intersubjective gearing together of mine and others' perspectives into, ideally, "a single world" [*un seul monde*] as "the universal style of all possible perceptions."[182] (That there already obtains "a single world" is asserted by the "préjugé *du* monde" that defines the natural attitude.) This realization possesses an open historical logic, the contingency of which, grounded in perceptual faith, "forms the basis once and for all for our ideas of truth."[183] This makes of perception a strongly normative concept of intersubjective coexistence, as it relates directly to overcoming situations of subjective dreaming, and the mutual alienation and incomprehension that is consequent thereto. In this way, perception could be described as denoting *an inter-subjectively normative state of wakefulness* that is ultimately underwritten by the singleness of the world. In short, the teleology of consciousness expresses the idea of an open and endless (and not irreversible) progression from lesser to greater truth, increasingly comprehensive systems of rationality of which the historical world is the concrete expression.

Merleau-Ponty borrowed the notion of the teleology of consciousness from Husserl's *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, where Husserl argued that "consciousness has an *all-pervasive teleological structure.*"[184] It is, however, rather different from Husserl's view, according to which "consciousness is teleologically oriented to the achievement of the intuitive presence both of particular objects and of the world as the totality of objects of experience."[185] This posits a well-defined endpoint of the teleol-

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[182] PrP 50/16; cf. PhP 405/353.

[183] PhP 456/398.

[184] *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, 160. The idea, however, is present in Husserl's account of conscious life from much earlier.

[185] Bernard Dauenhauer, "The Teleology of Consciousness: Husserl and Merleau-Ponty," pp149-68 in *Analecta Husserliana* IX, ed. A.-M. Tymieniecka (D. Reidel, 1979), 161.

ogy, even if it is infinite and thus unattainable, namely, the bringing of transcendental subjectivity's world constitution to phenomenological self-givenness. For Merleau-Ponty, that is not possible in principle. The teleology of consciousness he proposes is an open-ended, a teleology without a telos. (Saint-Exupéry offered a telos without a teleology.)

This is tied to the curious way that Merleau-Ponty introduced the notion, stating that "Husserl takes up the *Critique of Judgment* when he talks about a teleology of consciousness."[186] Merleau-Ponty offered no textual support for this claim, and this is because there is none.[187] He was simply offering – somewhat deviously, given that many of his readers would not have been all that familiar with Husserl – an interpretation of part of Husserl's project in *Formal and Transcendental Logic.*

Although Husserl was certainly critical of Kant, holding that his transcendental philosophy ultimately remained naïve and failed to grasp the true sense of the correlation between subjective cognition and its objective content, he did consider himself to be in fundamental agreement with the spirit of Kant's Copernican revolution, which he did regard as revolutionary.[188] However, as he argued in *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, Husserl thought that the principal shortcoming of Kant's position is that it cannot accommodate any constitutional analysis of pre-scientific nature, and is thus barred from critically scrutinizing the syntheses on which the operations of scientific

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[186] PhP xii/xvii.

[187] There is no mention of the *Critique of Judgment* in Iso Kern authoritative study, *Husserl und Kant: Eine Untersuchung über Husserls Verhältnis zu Kant und zum Neukantianismus* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1964).

[188] See "Kant und die Idee der Transzendentalphilosophie," pp230-287 in Edmund Husserl, *Erste Philosophie (1923/24), Erster Teil*, ed. R.Boehm (Martinus Nijhoff, 1956).

experience are founded.[189] What is needed, according to Husserl, is a radically enlarged "transcendental aesthetic,"[190] by which to undertake regressive intentional analysis of the pregivenness of the world.

Merleau-Ponty took this up and interpreted it in terms of Husserl's theory of intentionality. Against Sartre and Gurwitsch, for example, Merleau-Ponty did not regard the theory of intentionality as such – i.e., thetic intentionality, or "intentionality of act" – as Husserl's principal innovation. For Merleau-Ponty, this would not take us beyond the level of the first *Critique*. Rather, in his view the key to Husserlian phenomenology lies in its tying the notion of intentionality to the unity of the pre-given, antepredicative world of lived experience. Husserl's innovation, then, is the "broadened notion of intentionality" that bases thetic intentionality on pre-personal "operative" [*fungierende*] intentionality—that which, according to Merleau-Ponty, *produces* that unity.[191] It is in virtue of this enlarged account of intentionality that "phenomenological 'comprehension'" is able to thematize the "origins" of the world and thus achieve a decisive advance over the dogmatic world-immanence of Critical philosophy.

Such is the transcendental project that Merleau-Ponty took up from Husserl, and which he tried to fulfill by radicalizing it existentially. Seeing Husserl's work as still afflicted by the problematic dualism represented by Kant's first two *Critiques*, Merleau-Ponty thus appealed to the third,[192] suggesting that the account of reflecting

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189 *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, 257-266.

190 *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, 291f.

191 PhP xiii/xviii.

192 This appeal was foreshadowed in *The Structure of Behavior* when Merleau-Ponty, drawing the conclusion that his analysis leads to the transcendental attitude, immediately distanced himself from the Critical tradition. However, he added in a footnote that "we are thinking of a philosophy like that of

judgment developed therein has epistemological priority over theoretical reason. By drawing – rather freely, to be sure – from both the aesthetic and the teleological parts of this text, Merleau-Ponty tried to substantiate the claim, attributed to Husserl, that phenomenology provides its own foundation.[193] Thus, ironically perhaps, in order to fulfill Husserl's phenomenological radicalization of Kant, it is to Kant himself that Merleau-Ponty turns.[194]



The solution to the human problem is, in a word, rationality. This is the "marvel [*prodige*] of the connection of experiences."[195] "To say that there exists rationality is to say that perspectives intersect, perceptions confirm each other, a meaning [*sens*] emerges."[196] As the experience of the primordial emergence of *sens* from *non-sens*, natural perception amounts to the "consciousness of rationality" itself. This awareness is lost when achieved rationality is taken for granted, as it is by objective thinking.

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L[éon] Brunschvicg and not of Kantian philosophy, which, particularly in the *Critique of Judgment*, contains essential indications concerning the problems that are in question here" (SC 223n1/206, 248n41).

[193] PhP xvi/xx-xxi [*die Rückbeziehung der Phänomenologie auf sich selbst*].

[194] This goes against the grain of the received wisdom with respect to Merleau-Ponty's relation to Kant, according to which his radicalization of Husserl's project placed him at a further remove from Kant. Certainly, Merleau-Ponty himself was generally quite critical of Kant, and he criticized Husserl whenever he appeared to be in league with him. And he often expressed views suggesting that phenomenology is nothing if not a clearly and distinctly *post*-Kantian project. It is perhaps for this reason that the secondary literature on Merleau-Ponty contains little in the way of detailed examination of his relationship to Kant. However, important exceptions include Diana Coole, "The Aesthetic Realm and the Lifeworld: Kant and Merleau-Ponty," *History of Political Thought* 5:3 (1984); Martin C. Dillon, "Apriority in Kant and Merleau-Ponty," *Kant-Studien* 78:4 (1987); and Mauro Carbone, "Le sensible et l'excédent: Merleau-Ponty et Kant," in *Notes de cours sur "L'origine de la géométrie" de Husserl, suivi de Recherches sur la phénoménologie de Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Renaud Barbaras (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998).

[195] PhP xvi/xx.

[196] PhP xv/xix.

Merleau-Ponty wanted to rediscover it "by making it appear against the background of inhuman [*inhumaine*] nature."[197]

This is a Gestalt switch that is exactly analogous to – rather, that is the general, *cosmic* form of – that which Merleau-Ponty performed with respect to violence and political order in *Humanism and Terror*. There he tried to show that instead of judging violence as aberrational against the background of political order, a better grip on matters is attained if one approaches political order in general as emerging from a background of violence. By establishing that all political order originates in violence, Merleau-Ponty was concerned in particular with restructuring the moral optics of liberalism, in order to make it at least possible to perceive violence as progressive with respect to advancing the cause of human reconciliation. Merleau-Ponty thought that Marxist political analysis of the present "deciphers events, discovers in them a common meaning and thereby grasps a leading thread which, without dispensing us from fresh analysis at every stage, allows us to orient ourselves toward events."[198] He was prepared to defend a "perception of history" supportive of judgments calling for violence to realize the human universality that liberalism takes for granted.[199] This would be legitimate and defensible, he thought, to the extent that it could be reasonably expected to help "bring reason out of madness [*déraison*],"[200] that is, help bring about a world of non-violence, solve the human problem.

The key point, though, is that the human problem is not a 'geometrical' problem in the sense that the solution is simply a determinate unknown that is related to the givens

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197 PrP 67f/25.

198 HT 105/98.

199 Cf. HT 38n1/35n11.

200 HT 105/98.

of the problem according to a rule of deduction or subsumption.[201] This is what Merleau-Ponty meant when he emphasized that "rationality is not a *problem*."[202] Because we are not spectators of a closed history, and we cannot imagine a consciousness without a future,[203] judgments concerning the future historical development of rationality as the solution to the current state of the human problem cannot be what Kant described as "determining" [*bestimmend*] judgments, which work through the subsumption of a particular under a concept that is fully adequate in the sense that it can identify particular instance of it. Rather, they must be what Kant described as "reflecting" [*reflectierend*] judgments, that is, judgments that work without an adequate concept, yet which are no less objective.[204]

Merleau-Ponty did not develop this very explicitly. However, as mentioned above, Merleau-Ponty did suggest that Kant's account of aesthetic reflecting judgment in the third *Critique* has epistemological priority over theoretical reason. He argued that if there can be an awareness of "a harmony between the sensible and the concept, between myself and others, which is itself without any concept," and if the subject of this awareness is not a universal thinker but an embodied perceiver, then "the hidden art of the imagination must condition categorial activity. It is no longer merely aesthetic judgment, but knowledge as well which rests upon this art, an art which forms the basis of the unity of consciousness and of consciousnesses."[205] Merleau-Ponty was making the same general point when he claimed that "the understanding

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201 HT 203/186.

202 PhP xv/xx.

203 HT 99/92.

204 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:179; cf. 20: 211.

205 PhP xii/xvii.

[...] needs to be redefined, since the general connective function ultimately attributed to it by Kantianism [i.e., in the first *Critique*] is now spread over the whole intentional life and no longer suffices to distinguish it."[206]

This 'art' hidden in the human soul is what Merleau-Ponty assimilated to the Husserlian notion of "operative intentionality" [*fungierende Intentionalität*], in order to take this up as the basis for an expanded, phenomenological reinterpretation of the transcendental aesthetic—'the Logos of the aesthetic world'.[207] This is the phenomenological world as the unique "pre-existent Logos,"[208] which is "more fundamental than that of objective thought."[209] Like any art, however, this too is "aware of itself [*se connaît*] only in its results." As it is with Cézanne's painting, for example, "'conception' cannot precede 'execution'." There is no conceptual way to determine in advance whether one will hit upon sense, or is caught up in a subjective dream: "only the work itself, completed and understood, is proof that there was *something* rather than *nothing* to be said."[210]

The upshot is that rationality is established through praxis, "by an act of initiative which has no guarantee in being, its justification resting entirely on the effective power which it confers on us of taking our own history upon ourselves."[211] For Merleau-Ponty, militant philosophy offers a perception of history that launches us into uncharted territory, in the "unfinished world of the revolutionary,"[212] "never knowing

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206 PhP 65/53.

207 PhP xii-xiii/xvii-xviii, 491/429.

208 PhP xv/xx.

209 PhP 419/365.

210 SNS 32/19.

211 PhP xv/xx.

212 HT 104/97.

where it is going."[213] As we saw above, in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty put this quite dramatically: "we take our fate in our hands, we become responsible for our history through reflection, but equally through a decision whereby we stake our life,[214] and in both cases it is a matter of a violent act which proves itself in practice."[215]

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This 'violence' is presumptive, in the sense that our perceptual grip on things is always an imposition that claims more than it knows. But Merleau-Ponty was not just speaking metaphorically about the violence we do to errors, say, by correcting them. The issue is that, according to his account, to perceive is to be committed to a certain perceptual background, and thus to be committed, however tacitly, to the future realization of a certain world as a system of rationality and truth. "To perceive is to engage all at once *a whole future of experiences* in a present that never strictly guarantees it."[216] But on account of the 'permanent data' of the human problem, this is a site of conflict and contestation. The teleology of consciousness is not worked out easily. That we coexist against a backdrop of nature, and that the future is open beyond any conceptual subsumption, all of this is conditioned by the subjectivity of perception. "This is the price of there being things and 'others' for us, not through an illusion, but through a violent act which is perception itself."[217]

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213 Cf. PhP xvi/xxi.

214 Cf. HT 39/36: "Everything depends on a fundamental decision not just to understand the world but to change it."

215 PhP xvi/xx.

216 PhP 343f/297, emphasis added.

217 PhP 415/361.

There are two key illustrations of what Merleau-Ponty had in mind here. The first concerns Lenin and Trotsky as leaders of the Russian Revolution, an event that was still a major point of historical reference for Merleau-Ponty. What is at issue here is political judgment in the absence of objective criteria. Merleau-Ponty saw Trotsky and Lenin as keen situationalists.[218] Contrary to certain images of scientific socialism as issuing solely in determining judgments, Merleau-Ponty cited Lenin to the effect that one must "put one's own mind to work to find one's bearing in each particular case."[219] It is a matter of reading history, trying to decipher its tendencies, and ultimately all that one has "to guide him is *his own* view of events."[220] This view can be better or worse, but only the unfolding of events will say. A good appraisal of concrete political situations "requires a certain Marxist flair or a Marxist perception of the local and world situation which is on the level of talent or genius."[221] Merleau-Ponty was under no illusions about the evident dangerousness of this. But he accepted the general idea that "the ways of history are [ultimately] unfathomable."[222] Lacking an overarching rational structure, all historical action is adventurous, and one cannot avoid using a certain degree of cunning [*ruser*].[223] But Merleau-Ponty was not Aron. He did not see any justification for giving up the attempt to understand history. He thus looked to what he called Lenin's "Marxist 'perception' of situations," articulated

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218 Needless to say, Merleau-Ponty's discussion of them is *highly* selective.

219 SNS 293/165.

220 SNS 293f/166.

221 SNS 293/165.

222 SNS 290/164.

223 SNS 294f/166.

in numerous practically oriented writings, as implicitly containing "a theory of contingency in history" that could be extended "onto the theoretical plane."[224]

Merleau-Ponty's regard for Trotsky's analysis of the Russian Revolution was cited above as an instance of phenomenal or "true" objectivity, in that it gleaned the "total intention" of the society in question. Essentially, this means that, rather than attempting to deduce concrete political judgments from the outlines of Marxist theory, a perception is attained of the "lines of force and vectors" in the present that takes into account the complex 'subjective' dimensions of the situation. "The problem is to recognize the proletarian spirit *in each of its momentary guises*."[225] Merleau-Ponty commented that there is something "sublime" about those who gain such living insight into the milieu they inhabit.[226] This is viewed in hindsight, of course, and it appears that way only to the extent that the perception was borne out by events. For Merleau-Ponty, historical judgments admit of no other proof.

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The second – and, I think, more important – illustration of militant praxis comes from Binswanger. It is highly instructive to read *Phenomenology of Perception* in the light of Binswanger's 1935 article "Über Psychotherapie."[227] Based around a case of an ostensibly successful cure of an aphonic hysteric, this article presents an account of existential psychotherapy that emphasizes not only the importance of the "inner life history" of the patient, but also and especially the uniqueness and *artistic creativity* of the therapeutic intervention itself, and the necessity of deep existential bonds between

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[224] SNS 217n/123n.

[225] SNS 291/164.

[226] HT 85/80.

[227] "Über Psychotherapie," pp205-30 in *Ausgewählte Werke* v3, ed. M. Herzog (Roland Asanger 1994). Merleau-Ponty referred to this article six times in the chapter "Le corps comme être sexué."

patient and therapist, in order for the treatment to succeed. Here we find what may well be the most important inspiration for Merleau-Ponty's claim that phenomenology is 'like art'. Binswanger described his therapeutic intervention not as a theoretically derived procedure, but as an "artful response" based on an impulsive, confident daring [*Wagemut*].[228] Binswanger presented psychotherapy as a kind of art, that doctors performed according to their particular styles. He saw psychotherapeutic cure as coming about through the establishment of an original existential relationship between the doctor and patient, a relationship involving "an independent communicative novelty, a new linking of fate—and this not only regarding the patient-doctor relationship, but also and above all regarding the pure fellow-being relationship in the sense of a genuine '*with-another*'."[229]

According to Binswanger, successful therapy is a matter of establishing new intersubjective bonds that overcome the patient's "detachment from life," thus freeing her from captivation in/by her subjective realm. In this sense, the therapist is a link between individual idiosyncrasy and the shared intelligibility of the public world. His task is thus "to awaken or kindle the 'godly spark', which only in genuine communication of existence is to be awakened and kindled, and whose brightness and warmth alone is actually capable of freeing the person from out of blind isolation, out of the *idios cosmos*, as Heraclitus says, from out of mere existence in one's body, one's dreams, one's private tendencies, one's pride and wantonness, and to illuminate and

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[228] "Über Psychotherapie," 209.

[229] "Über Psychotherapie," 215.

make free for the ability to share in the *koinos cosmos*, in the life of genuine commonality or community."[230]

Binswanger's account of the therapeutic encounter is significant for two reasons. The first has to do with the way in which Merleau-Ponty, after taking it up earlier,[231] implicitly (but unmistakeably) alludes to it at the end of *Phenomenology of Perception*, claiming that analysis succeeds by "binding the subject to his doctor through new existential relationships," so that the complex can be dissolved, not by "a freedom without instruments," but rather by "*a new pulsation of time* with its own supports and motives."[232] The effectiveness of this depends on the strength of the new existential commitment, and as we saw above, Merleau-Ponty adds, with class consciousness clearly in mind, that "the same applies in all cases of coming to awareness."

Second, the patient manifested various symptoms, and Binswanger's treatment included a variety of techniques. In particular, when the patient was suffering a violent attack of hiccoughing, Binswanger reported the following intervention: "I remember now how the idea, or if you will, the inspiration suddenly came to me, to quietly approach the patient lying in bed, to lay the fingers of my right hand across her throat, and to compress her trachea so firmly that she had difficulty breathing and tried to resist the grasp, and as the pressure decreased for a moment, a strong act of swallowing occurred."[233] Other such interventions were performed, although they did not all

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230 "Über Psychotherapie," 215f; cf. "Traum und Existenz," 114f.

231 He wrote that "in psychological treatment of any kind, the coming to awareness would remain purely cognitive, the patient would not accept the meaning of his disturbances as revealed to him without the personal relationship formed with the doctor, or without the confidence and friendship felt toward him, *and the change of existence resulting from this friendship*." PhP 190/163, emphasis added.

232 PhP 519/455, emphasis added.

233 "Über Psychotherapie," 209f.

figure in Binswanger's article.[234] Nonetheless, such treatment figured relatively prominently in the account, as Binswanger used the contrast precisely as a way to emphasize the importance of strong existential bonds.[235] This is significant for Merleau-Ponty, in that it shows in a very concrete way how reflecting judgment can be enacted, not just with respect to history writ large, but at the individual level as well. And it provides an example of the possibility for violence to be liberating.

In this way, Binswanger's account sheds light on Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the 'realization of philosophy'. This is supposed to occur dialectically through its destruction insofar as it is 'separate'. At root, this separateness has to do with the mutual isolation of discrete theatres of subjective intuition—from this angle, the philosopher and the psychopathological patient are essentially in the same situation. Significantly, Merleau-Ponty interprets the loss of speech in Binswanger's patient as a "refusal of coexistence," a withdrawal from the lived situation, such that the task was to have her regain her voice.[236] What Binswanger helps us to see is that, for Merleau-Ponty, at a certain level the realization of philosophy is a matter of integrating the philosopher's silent '*idios cosmos*' into the concrete intersubjective horizons of discursive experience—that it is a matter of moving from the *non-sens* of a 'multiple solipsism' to a self-consciously historical intersubjective community.

Binswanger is key here because, as Merleau-Ponty recognized, existential encounter in the psychotherapeutic context engages with the problem of alterity in the most

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[234] See Susan Lanzoni, "Existential Encounter in the Asylum: Ludwig Binswanger's 1935 Case of Hysteria," pp285-304 in *History of Psychiatry* 15:3 (2004).

[235] Lanzoni reports that archival records actually call into question Binswanger's view of just how much trust there really was on the part of the patient in this relationship.

[236] Cf. PhP 187/160. Recall that for Merleau-Ponty, the philosopher is the one "who wakes up and speaks" (EP 51/63).

general way because it engages with the problem of mutual senselessness *in its most acute form*. What the original temporalization in the therapeutic encounter exhibits in paradigmatic form is the molecular structure of achieved universality. From out of the dyadic situation a restructured historical perception emerges, such that time is newly 'secreted' from a joint and convergent 'upsurge'. It shows the intersubjective character of human productivity at work in the emergence of *sens* and the expansion of reason. This represents, in germinal form, the philosophical militancy advanced by Merleau-Ponty. The shared and mutually transformative understanding that results through such an encounter – whether in the clinical, quotidian, political, or philosophical context – prefigures the objectivity and truth of which authentic intersubjectivity would be the living embodiment.[237]

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Despite some points in common, Merleau-Ponty's view of truth is thus considerably different from Saint-Exupéry's. The latter's coherentism does not hold up to much critical scrutiny. And his ideal of Man is just a vague transcendental signifier floating above the world, without any rationally defensible way to insinuate itself into human lives. These are just so many expressions of the blindness and/or antipathy of his position toward the present. For Saint-Exupéry, truth is a kind of redemption, something that needs to be recovered. It involves a return, and this gives rise to a powerful aspiration to immanence and fusion with the world.

For Merleau-Ponty, truth is a matter of historical becoming. In a sense, it amounts to a historically achieved consensus. But as an open-ended, infinite project, it is

[237] A thorough comparative analysis of Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology with Binswanger's, in particular his *Grundformen und Erkenntnis menschlichen Daseins*, is in order.

difficult to reify it in any way. Merleau-Ponty was concerned about the problem of relativism, and he dealt with this by making truth entirely a matter of its own genesis. At root, truth is the working out, and re-working out, of the questions posed by the present.

> To seek harmony with ourselves and others, in a word, truth, not only in *a priori* reflection and solitary thought but through the experience of concrete situations and in a living dialogue with others apart from which internal evidence cannot validate its universal right, is the exact contrary of irrationalism, since it accepts our incoherence and conflict with others as constants but assumes we are able to minimize them. It rules out the inevitability of reason as well as that of chaos.[238]

To express this view in terms of Merleau-Ponty's account of the tacit *cogito*: I am a thought which recaptures itself "in action" [*à l'œuvre*], as "already possessing an ideal of truth [...] which is the horizon of its operations."[239] "This thought, which feels itself [*se touche*] rather than sees itself [*se voit*], which searches for clarity rather than possesses it, and which makes [*fait*] truth rather than finds it," was, according to Merleau-Ponty, described by Alain's teacher, Jules Lagneau (1851-1894). In his name Merleau-Ponty articulated a practical response to the question "should we suffer life or make it?" [*Faut-il subir la vie ou la faire?*].[240] The question "does not pertain to the understanding [*l'intelligence*]," that is, it is not a theoretical matter. To answer in favor of suffering life would be to make the self and the world unintelligible – it would be to decree chaos; but "chaos is nothing." Still citing Lagneau, Merleau-Ponty thus emphasizes the practical import of existentialism: "To be or not to be, the self and all things, we must choose."[241] Here Merleau-Ponty found "the idea – sometimes considered

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238 HT 204f/187.

239 PrP 61f/22.

240 PrP 62/22.

241 Citing Lagneau, *Célèbres leçons* (Nîmes: Imprimerie Coopérative La Laborieuse, 1928).

barbarous [*barbare*] – of a thought which remembers it began in time, recaptures itself sovereignly, and in which fact, reason, and freedom coincide."[242]

### 4.2.3 — Saint-Exupéry on Freedom

In Saint-Exupéry's thought, the ideal of freedom is seen as positively related to constraint—here the discipline of the *métier* is paradigmatic. Saint-Exupéry was very much opposed to the modern ideal of individual autonomy. To his mind, this is just an expression of fleeing from the world and from the possibility of authentic, responsible existence. For Saint-Exupéry, "true freedom" is a fundamental mode of becoming that "is found only in the creative process."[243] It obtains only in and through participation with the world and with others. Saint-Exupéry "proposes a freedom that resides in acts rather than in rights or in ideas, and which is realized in concrete relationships rather than in escapism or detachment from bonds [*liens*]."[244] In the form of these *liens* necessity is interpreted positively with regard to self-realization, and there is a richer sense of self-conscious, self-assured autonomy that Saint-Exupéry valorized. "If I look for the example of a genuine freedom," he once wrote, "I will find it only in a monastery, where men have a choice between different impulses in the richness of their interior life."[245]

This is a telling example, in that Saint-Exupéry's view of freedom does in many ways seem to amount to a secularized version of Christian freedom, substituting Man for God—recall that "that the primacy of Man founds the only meaningful Equality

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242 PrP 62/22.

243 EG 182.

244 Major, *Saint-Exupéry: l'écriture et la pensée*, 167.

245 EG 182.

and Freedom."[246] *It is only in this way that freedom as a mode of becoming can take the form of vital exchange.* It is the metabolic condition of human growth and creative self-realization. For Saint-Exupéry, true freedom is "that which promotes the ascent of man to the most perfect expression of himself."[247] Closely related to the image of truth as soil, Saint-Exupéry describes this freedom as "the freedom of the growth of the tree in the force field of its seed. It is the clime for the ascension of Man. It is like a favorable wind."[248] This is meant to supply an image of man as a living organic tension with the environing world, at once rooted belonging and upward becoming.

### 4.2.4 — Merleau-Ponty on Freedom

It is remarkable how much of what can be said of the Exupérian notion of freedom also applies to Merleau-Ponty's view. For example, in his own no less than Saint-Exupéry's thinking, freedom and necessity are two sides of a single coin. Thus Merleau-Ponty defined existentialism partly in terms of a freedom "which becomes what it is by giving itself bonds [*liens*]."[249] In both views, one can detect a distinct mistrust with respect to the liberal idea of 'negative' freedom, understood in terms of deracination and alienability. Both opposed this as a kind of inauthentic escapism, and did so in terms of a notion of freedom as 'exchange'. In particular, Merleau-Ponty's treatment of freedom is largely posed as a critique of Sartre's account of freedom as a nihilating end in itself, and Saint-Exupéry's own view can likewise be approached as

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[246] PG 241.

[247] Ouellet, *Les relations humaines dans l'œuvre de Saint-Exupéry*, 110.

[248] PG 227. Tree images are ubiquitous in Saint-Exupéry's writing, including at least a dozen in *Pilote de guerre.*

[249] SNS 121/70.

offering "a conception of freedom exactly opposite to that of Sartre."[250] It may be that Merleau-Ponty borrowed the notion of 'exchange' from Saint-Exupéry as a way of framing his own alternative to the Sartrean view.

Whereas Sartre conceived freedom in individual terms as an essentially centrifugal process of signification and commitment, Merleau-Ponty argued that true – that is, "concrete" – freedom is necessarily rooted in a pregiven field of intersubjective meaning. It is a question for Merleau-Ponty of according proper weight to the historical situation of the world as a field of possibilities for meaningful action. Freedom needs to be enabled by existing structures, in the sense of truly *having something to do* – in general, it obtains when we take up "open situations calling for a certain completion."[251] Whereas for Sartre, freedom creates meaning, for Merleau-Ponty, it presupposes meaning; and whereas Sartre claimed that we are condemned to freedom, for Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, we are "condemned to meaning."[252]

This results in a view of freedom that emphasizes centripetal appropriation over centrifugal nihilation—it is primarily a matter of taking up the "autochthonous meaning [*sens*] of the world" and making agentive decisions on that basis.[253] This does not necessarily diminish the sense of autonomous commitment contained in freedom. Rather, the idea is that we – the plural pronoun is crucial, in particular with respect to the contrast with Sartre – are always already committed, albeit in an ambiguous and pre-reflective way, to a more basic project concerning the world and our *être-au-monde*. This is the "tacit commitment" discussed earlier. To take up the "autochtho-

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[250] Simon, *L'Homme en process*, 150f; also Ouellet, *Les relations humaines dans l'œuvre de Saint-Exupéry*, 106f; but cf. Major, *Saint-Exupéry: l'écriture et la pensée*, 169n108.

[251] PhP 500/438.

[252] PhP xiv/xix.

[253] PhP 503/441.

nous meaning of the world" is thus to take up "a *spontaneous* meaning [*sens*] of my life."[254] "It is I who give a direction [*sens*] and a future to my life," it is just that this does not originate with me as a thinking subject. Rather, that direction and future "spring from my present and past, and in particular from my present and past mode of coexistence."[255] It is a matter of the existential style of my life, that is, its orientation as an existential project toward a certain "determinate-indeterminate" goal that is not mine alone.[256] Consequently, "our freedom does not destroy our situation, but gears itself [*s'engrène*] to it,"[257] just as there is a "gearing together" [*engrenage*] of our respective experiences,[258] the locus of which constitutes the phenomenological world. In this way, freedom is ultimately an expression of dialectical reciprocity within the synergic system of self-others-world.

In comparison with the Sartrean account, this view of freedom could be described as much more *organic*, concerned with human self-realization as *growth*. It is here that Merleau-Ponty tends to emphasize continuity with the "natural self" and its "terrestrial situation." Even the phenomenological metaphor of 'field' can, in this context, itself be seen in this way (reminiscent of 'soil'). All of this is consistent with the view of Saint-Exupéry. Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty once even cited Scheler to the effect that "action must work itself out vitally in the depths of the person, like the fruit on a tree."[259] Did he still retain such a view in 1945?

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254 PhP 511/447, emphasis added.
255 PhP 510/447.
256 PhP 509/446.
257 PhP 505/442.
258 PhP xv/xx.
259 CR 16/89.

It is in terms of "exchange" that Merleau-Ponty describes free action as involving both centripetal and centrifugal aspects: "there is an exchange between generalized and individual existence in which each receives and gives."[260] The claim is that concrete freedom as an event of human productivity occurs when a meaning [*sens*] that was adumbrated in the realm of anonymous intersubjective generality [*l'On*], "and which was nothing but an insubstantial possibility threatened by the contingency of history, is taken up by an individual."[261] There is a reciprocal exchange of real significance and concrete actuality that occurs through an appropriative "shift" [*glissement*] that is made in the living present. This is not a matter of a mixture of determinism and absolute choice, but a rather a shifting and reconfiguration of tacit and focal commitments.

This conception of freedom as exchange can be approached in terms of embodiment, which is ultimately the ambiguous locus of both freedom and servitude. In this context, when Merleau-Ponty speaks about the "natural self," what he has in mind is the habitual body, in particular, the habitual body as an "inborn complex" that does not differ essentially from repressed experience.[262] Freedom as exchange is concerned with overcoming repressive complexes. This entails dissolving certain of the sedimented structures that one carries within oneself and that one enacts in the style of his *être-au-monde*, in order to thereby increase the "tolerance" of the "bodily and institutional data" of one's life.[263] As usual, Merleau-Ponty's chief example is class, which he describes as being lived as an "obsessive [*obsédante*] presence."[264] In such ways as

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[260] PhP 513/450; cf. 501/439, 517/453.

[261] PhP 513/450.

[262] PhP 99/84. Such is how Merleau-Ponty put it in the discussion of embodiment where he first alluded to Saint-Exupéry.

[263] PhP 518/454.

[264] PhP 509f/446.

this, the body *is* problematic; for it restricts individuals, and powerfully isolates them. Freedom as exchange is about overcoming this kind of mutual isolation – awakening from one's *idios cosmos*, as Binswanger would put it – in order to tap the productivity of coexistence in the service of overcoming repression. In this way, the scope of effective action is enhanced; in particular, one gains a surer grip on one's own life-history.[265]

Although Saint-Exupéry moralized *ad nauseam* about creating bonds, his position fails to articulate the means of achieving this. Turned away from the living present, he "[can]not offer us so much as a single example of a pilot successfully reintegrated into one of those villages over which he flies so patronizingly."[266] It remains a dream. It becomes an aspiration to immanence that effectively surrenders to the complex. Exchange thus occurs between the individual and the social whole, in the sacrificial ways discussed above. Clearly, this is not the case for Merleau-Ponty, for whom exchange occurs first and foremost within the structure of my body.

### 4.3 — Strategic Detachment

An important extension of what Merleau-Ponty meant by exchange was his idealization of a Marxist political party. According to this view, the Party is the site of inter-subjective exchange in the form of "a vital communication between individual judgment and historical reality."[267] Its democratic-centralist organization would serve the epistemological function of generating optimal historical perceptions of the present

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[265] Cf. Binswanger, "Traum und Existenz," 118.

[266] Harris, *Chaos, Cosmos, and Saint-Exupéry's Pilot-Hero*, 33.

[267] SNS 320/180.

and the soundest political judgments of the reflecting kind. That is, its intersubjective structure would compensate for the absence of absolute criteria, and would allow individuals to participate collectively in history on the larger stage. In this way, the Party could be seen as playing a therapeutic role.

Commenting on his exchanges with Hervé in *Humanism and Terror*, Merleau-Ponty argued that Hervé himself was incapable of maintaining the dialectical tension between the party and the class it claimed to represent, and that, granting priority to the former, he effectively assumed "the standpoint of a God who comprehends Universal History."[268] This is precisely one of the forms of *non*-political thinking that Merleau-Ponty sought to overcome; for it is ultimately inconsistent with what it means to be a living human being. As Merleau-Ponty later put it, a key tenet of Marx's thought is that we cannot *think* the future.[269] To pretend to do so would subvert what he regarded as Marx's "original insight" that "historical meaning is immanent in the interhuman event." It would thus deny "the human meaning and *raison d'être* of communism," which is for humanity to democratically "take their history into their own hands."[270]

This is why Merleau-Ponty took up the young Marx's claim against Hegel about the realization of philosophy involving its transcendence [*Aufhebung*],[271] its ceasing to be 'separate'.[272] The idea is that "rationality passes from the concept to the heart of

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[268] HT 155/143f.

[269] EP 41/50f.

[270] HT 158/147.

[271] Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction*, 250. Cf. p257: "Philosophy cannot realize itself without the transcendence [*Aufhebung*] of the proletariat, and the proletariat cannot transcend itself without the realization [*Verwirklichung*] of philosophy."

[272] It is important to note that although the separateness of philosophy is to be overcome, it has to first of all be separate. Merleau-Ponty was not doing away with philosophy; just assigning it a certain role.

interhuman praxis."[273] As Merleau-Ponty put it: if, unlike Hervé, for example, the philosopher "forsakes the illusion of contemplating the totality of completed history and feels caught up in it like all other men and confronted by a future *to be made*, then philosophy fulfills itself by doing away with itself as separate philosophy. This concrete thinking, which Marx calls 'critique' to distinguish it from speculative philosophy, is what others" – i.e., Merleau-Ponty himself – "propound under the name existential philosophy."[274] Although Marx had centred this 'critique' on the proletariat understood in terms of a certain relation to the means of production, Merleau-Ponty saw that this view had become outdated and need to be contemporised by means of existential phenomenology. But he aimed to do this, if not on the same grounds, then certainly in the same spirit.

It is thus ironic that Hervé accused Merleau-Ponty of being enthralled by "the gestures and language of a bygone era." For it was precisely Merleau-Ponty's claim that political debates at the time were "still using the political vocabulary of the nineteenth century,"[275] in particular that contemporary Marxists tended to accept the classical account of the proletariat uncritically as an article of faith. Hence *they* were the utopians, even by their own standards; for "to live and die for a future projected by desire rather than live and act in the present is precisely what Marxists have always considered utopianism."[276]

Perhaps Hervé failed to see that Merleau-Ponty had not invoked the standpoint of Stendhalian "sincerity" in order to resuscitate and endorse it. Rather, it was to cast into

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[273] EP 42/51.

[274] SNS 236f/133.

[275] SNS 284/160.

[276] HT 85f/80.

relief the fact that such a standpoint was as a matter of fact no longer a real possibility. Merleau-Ponty had said that "we are all knaves [*coquins*] *in Stendhal's sense.*"[277] By this he meant that "in the absence of a political thinking that would be capable both of taking in all truths and of taking a stand in the real," all political forces in France at the time were playing a "double game" that would run afoul of nineteenth-century republican sincerity. But his argument was that the ubiquitous political duplicity and 'knavery' was grounded in the "vital situation" of the world.[278] *Our time* was "an ambiguous moment in history."[279] Was there an alternative to playing a double game? Merleau-Ponty thought so, and this is why he placed himself *au-dessus de la mêlée.* "In reality, it is simply *a refusal to commit oneself within confusion and outside of the truth.*"[280]

> Our task is to clarify the ideological situation, to underline, beyond the paradoxes and contingencies of contemporary history, the true terms of the human problem, to recall Marxists to their humanist inspiration, to remind the democracies of their fundamental hypocrisy, and to keep intact against propaganda the chances that might still be left for history to become enlightened once again.[281]
>
> We must preserve liberty while waiting for a fresh historical impulse which may allow us to engage it in a popular movement without ambiguity.[282]

The philosophical task in this situation was "to define a practical stance of comprehension," a "political consciousness" that would be commensurate with Marx's 'original insight'.[283] For Merleau-Ponty, this was the "existential attitude" he sought to define in his essay on heroism. Although his original intervention concerning heroism in *action*

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277 SNS 273/154, emphasis added.
278 SNS 287/162.
279 SNS 285/160.
280 HT 203/185-6.
281 HT 196/179.
282 HT xix/xxiii.
283 HT 159f/148.

may not have had the immediate political effects he wanted, it is clear, given the pride of place that he later accorded it in *Sense and Non-Sense* (at a time when Saint-Exupéry's reputation was declining),[284] this response did not diminish Merleau-Ponty's own estimation of the views he expressed there concerning the "practical stance of comprehension" that he made central to his existential-phenomenological project.

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We are offered an interesting elaboration of this position from an unexpected source, namely, English poet Stephen Spender. Merleau-Ponty and Spender became friends at (if not before) the first *Rencontres Internationales* in Geneva in September 1946, largely on the basis of their broadly congruent political sympathies.[285] They surely met again over the years,[286] but there is little record of their relationship. However, "One More New Botched Beginning," one of Spender's most important poems,[287] which recalls the memory of various friends, actually begins with a touching recollection of Merleau-Ponty.[288] Although it is ultimately immaterial for the present argument, it

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[284] *Sense and Non-Sense* appeared in the same year as *Citadelle*, a work which presented Saint-Exupéry's conservative moralism of 'exchange' virtually unencumbered by narrative. Reviewing *Citadelle* in *Les temps modernes* (II.1948), Jean-H. Roy was critical, not only of the book's poor organization, but also of the hierarchical, repressive monarchist model of society that it seemed to recommend. For Saint-Exupéry's sake, he regretted its publication. This effectively refutes Hollier's suggestion that Merleau-Ponty's turn to Saint-Exupéry was somehow determined by postwar circumstances. (Note, however, that Merleau-Ponty never otherwise mentioned Saint-Exupéry again.)

[285] Although they did disagree somewhat about the successfulness of this event, concerning which Merleau-Ponty was much more favourable. Compare Spender's "Meeting at Geneva," in *Time & Tide* 27:42-43 (19/26.X.1946) and Merleau-Ponty's "Pour les Rencontres Internationales," *Les temps modernes* 19 (April 1947).

[286] Certainly in March 1956 at the Rencontre Est-Ouest in Venice. It was apparently based on this that Spender, in his satirical novella *Engaged in Writing* (Hamish Hamilton, 1958), caricatured Sartre and Merleau-Ponty as the disputative French philosophers 'Sarret' and 'Marteau'. Cf. Hugh David, *Stephen Spender: A Portrait with Background* (Heinemann, 1992), 264.

[287] David Leeming, *Stephen Spender: A Life in Modernism* (Henry Holt & Co., 1999), 210.

[288] See supplementary note F.

may be justifiably asserted that there was some significant link between the Merleau-Ponty and Spender.

The source of the elaboration of Merleau-Ponty's position comes from a piece of prose by Spender that appeared in translation in *Les temps modernes* in October 1946.[289] (At this time, Merleau-Ponty was the managing and political editor of *Les temps modernes*.) Merleau-Ponty may have arranged for this piece at the *Rencontres Internationales*, or possibly during an earlier visit by Spender to France.[290] Given what we have seen about the controversy over Saint-Exupéry, both philosophically and politically, one cannot fail to be struck by the significance of this work by Spender, beginning with its title: "Pensées dans un avion au-dessus de l'Europe" ["Thoughts in an Airplane over Europe"]. What we have here on the part of Merleau-Ponty, I contend, is a deliberate partial antidote to Exupérian 'high-altitude thinking' from a critical, non-dogmatic leftist perspective. There are no independent grounds for claiming that Merleau-Ponty fully endorsed everything that Spender had to say. But the main lines of his reasoning do have their clear counterparts in Merleau-Ponty's own work, and so this can be cautiously read as an elaboration of certain basic elements of Merleau-Ponty's political thinking.

Flying over France, Spender's basic observation concerning contemporary society echoes Merleau-Ponty's claim about the situation of the world itself being one of duplicity: "whatever you do is wrong [...] because you are either involved in the

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[289] "Pensées dans un avion au-dessus de l'Europe," trans. Marcelle Sibon, *Les temps modernes* 13 (October 1946), 65-78. This actually preceded its publication in English: "Thoughts in an Aeroplane over Europe," pp55-67 in *Polemic: A Magazine of Philosophy, Psychology, and Aesthetics*, no. 8 (n.d. – but this issue, the magazine's last, appeared between April and September 1947).

[290] Cf. Spender's *European Witness* (London: H. Hamilton, 1946).

systems of the modern societies, or you are not involved in them."[291] Inside or outside, one cannot do right. Nevertheless, one must choose. What to do? What can one do?

"You can enlarge your consciousness to include humanity. [...] The world, aware of itself as a single vibrating existence in which every part acts on every other part at the same moment, is unable to integrate such an awareness into the idea of a single personality." How? "By enlarging your personality to understand the nature of all the different parts. By creating within yourself the personality of this divided humanity. By humanizing this inhuman humanity."[292]

This expresses Merleau-Ponty's ideal of 'accepting all truths *and* taking a stand in reality'. What Spender was calling for was the recognition of all political realities without overlooking the concrete effects. That is, as complete a view as possible of the present situation. What is needed is "an internationalism of those who care for civilization, who believe in charity and have a passion for humanity."[293]

There are certainly shades of Saint-Exupéry in this. But there is a key difference. As Spender described it, the shadow of the airplane, which was separate throughout the flight, "merged into the substance of the airplane" upon landing. This is the key moment that is missing from Saint-Exupéry, for whom "landing is disappointing" [*l'atterrissage est décevant*].[294] The view offered by Spender is that of overcoming the 'separation' of philosophy—of first ascensionally withdrawing, but then also descend-

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[291] "Pensées dans un avion au-dessus de l'Europe," 66.

[292] "Pensées dans un avion au-dessus de l'Europe," 77.

[293] *Time & Tide* (26.October 1946).

[294] SV 21.

ing and successfully re-integrating.[295] As Merleau-Ponty later put it, "the philosopher must bear his shadow."[296]

The key question for philosophy, and for phenomenology in particular, is not so much how to gain philosophical insight, but how to *realize* it in the world—how to awaken from the dream. "Is it not the distinctive trait of humanism to encompass all things from a certain altitude that enlarges the field of its vision and expands its outlook [*regard*]?"[297] As Merleau-Ponty himself later observed, "at the conclusion of a reflection which at first isolates him, the philosopher, in order to experience more fully the ties of truth which bind him to the world and history, finds neither the depth of himself nor absolute knowledge, but a renewed image of the world and of himself placed within it among others."[298]

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[295] This ultimately speaks to the methodological problem of the "mundanization" or "enworlding" [*Verweltlichung*] of phenomenology, which is the central concern of Fink's *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*—a work to which *Phenomenology of Perception* offered a critical response.

[296] *Signs*, 225/178.

[297] André Gascht, *L'Humanisme cosmique d'Antoine de Saint-Exupéry*, 39. This was partly by way of response to an article in *l'Humanité* by Elian J. Finbert that reproached Saint-Exupéry "for considering things from the point of view of Sirius, because in his philosophical construction of the world he refused to grant primacy [*prépondérance*] to the workers who has built his airplane."

[298] EP 51/63.

If the man of the air had flown to the sky to
discover the World of Man?
Such would be the paradox of Icarus.[1]

## Conclusion : Heroic Sublimation

Based on the preceding considerations, what answer can be given to the question as to why *Phenomenology of Perception* ends the way it does?

Merleau-Ponty's hero instantiates the claim that "man is capable of situating his proper being, not in biological existence, but at the level of properly human relations."[2] Heroism is a matter of de-particularized, disindividuated, disincarnation. The disincarnation of the hero is the manifestation of pure human productivity. Further, owing to its sovereign uselessness, heroism is intrinsically and, in a phenomenological sense, objectively purposive. It is thus a matter of the *pure* practical interest of reason.

In theoretical terms, then, as suggested above, Merleau-Ponty's hero performs a complete phenomenological reduction. The 'impossibility' of this lies in the fact that it amounts to a one-way trip to the transcendental abyss, so to speak. However pathological it may be, Merleau-Ponty does not deny that someone could project her entire being toward gaining absolute knowledge in this way. He can rule out that anyone can attain it and live to tell about it, since the lethal degree of violence that one would have to apply to one's self to attain this 'sovereign' position rules out that the experience

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1 Luc Estang, *Saint-Exupéry par lui-même* (Éditions du Seuil, 1961), 47.

2 SC 190n1/246n97.

could ever be communicated. But he cannot rule out that someone might privately enjoy a final moment of absolute insight. In fact, though, on practical grounds he *requires* that this be possible. For he requires the possibility of experiencing absolute knowing phenomenologically, which is to say, as a phenomenon of 'non-knowledge' that betokens the limit of theoretical cognition.

That the hero does not establish any sort of epistemological ideal, nor even simply make a legitimate phenomenological claim, is clear: phenomenology as a human enterprise is based on certain existential commitments; and questions concerning these commitments, as Merleau-Ponty states explicitly, admit of "no theoretical reply."[3] So whereas triumphant Hegelian thought ultimately *attains* absolute knowledge – as does Kojève's Sage, for example – in Merleau-Ponty's militant phenomenology one ultimately *witnesses* ~~absolute knowledge~~, as it were; that is, the failure or impossibility of absolute knowledge, its indistinguishability from the absurd.

It is in practical terms, though, that we can grasp what is really going on at the end of *Phenomenology is Perception*. The basic idea is that of Kant's third *Critique*, namely, that the power of judgment is able to provide palpable experiences of purposiveness that can serve to confirm the reality of the abstract ideas of practical reason:

> the power of judgment provides the mediating concept between the concepts of nature and the concept of freedom, which makes possible the transition from the purely theoretical to the purely practical, from lawfulness in accordance with the former to the final end in accordance with the latter, in the concept of a *purposiveness* of nature; for thereby is the possibility of the final end, which can become actual only in nature and in accord with its laws, cognized.[4]

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3 PhP 520/456.

4 *Critique of Judgment*, 5:195f.

*Merleau-Ponty's hero is meant to furnish sensory evidence attesting to the possibility of a solution to the human problem. Through the concept of the hero, or of heroic purposiveness, we are able to "cognize" the potential suitability of the natural world for the realization of human reconciliation.* In *our time*, as Merleau-Ponty understood this, that is, a period when the logic of history is obscure, such evidence is particularly important. Merleau-Ponty thus sought to construct a new Marxist hermeneutics for mid-twentieth-century conditions based on a phenomenological treatment of "the dimensions of history."[5] This project rested on the 'existential attitude' that Merleau-Ponty sought to define. In turn, this attitude was based on a basic political judgment that amounted to an interpretation of the purposiveness of Exupérian heroism. This serves to show that the human world itself, the realm of intercorporeal involvement, is a purposive system. The hero is thus the methodological linchpin of the teleology of consciousness, and the transcendental project that hinges on that teleology. The experience of heroism is dynamically sublime, involving a play between the fearful contrapurposiveness of useless death and a higher purposiveness based on the idea of freedom, *living freedom*, which is the true object of the experience.[6] The "ultimate end" in Merleau-Ponty's view is thus not the hero as such, but rather humanity.[7]

Heroism, and all that it represents, is sacrificially sublimated into the system of phenomenological reason. This is the fundamental way that philosophy places "our relationship with the world [...] once more before our eyes and present it for our affirmation [*constatation*]."[8] Merleau-Ponty reported that his aim in *Phenomenology of*

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5 PhP xiii/xviii.

6 Cf. *Critique of Judgment*, §28.

7 Cf. 109 above.

8 PhP xiii/xviii.

*Perception* was to bring rationality and the absolute "down to earth" [*les faire descendre sur la terre*].[9] Ultimately, because he can be seen as having done precisely this, Saint-Exupéry gets the final word.

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As prolegomena to a general reassessment of the Merleau-Pontian *oeuvre*, the preceding considerations have aimed to problematize and to account for the Exupérian ending of *Phenomenology of Perception*. In sum, this appeal to heroism serves as the methodological linchpin of Merleau-Ponty's existential reinterpretation of Husserlian transcendental phenomenology by providing the final piece of evidence for the claim that phenomenology offers a coherent and exhaustive programme of philosophical investigation—that is, it clinches the claim, as Merleau-Ponty put it, that "if we rediscover time beneath the subject, and if we relate to the paradox of time those of the body, of the world, of the thing, and of the other, then we will understand that *beyond these there is nothing to understand*,"[10] i.e., that "*there is nothing outside this unique fulguration of existence*."[11] The claim is asserted in defence of phenomenology as an 'intuitive science', the concrete intentional explications of which can in fact yield what Husserl deemed an "*ultimate* understanding of the world," that is, an understanding behind which "there is nothing more that can be sensefully inquired for, *nothing more to understand*."[12]

It belongs to a subsequent work to fully ascertain the philosophical defensibleness of this position. As it stands, it certainly appears to indulge somewhat unguardedly, if

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9 PrP 43/13.

10 PhP 419/365, emphasis added.

11 SNS 269/152, italics added.

12 Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, 242, emphasis added.

not recklessly, in the worst excesses of existential humanism. Although to some extent this judgment will no doubt hold, it ought to be held in check pending a careful comparison with the 'phenomenology of phenomenology' proposed by Eugen Fink in his *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, a copy of which Merleau-Ponty was able to read in 1942.[13] This work provided a tremendously important foil for Merleau-Ponty's own methodological thinking, in particular the proposals Fink made toward a "constructive phenomenology," something to which Merleau-Ponty alluded dismissively on the very first page of *Phenomenology of Perception*. At issue is how phenomenology is to provide its own foundation, in particular, how it is to deal with the *limits* of intuitional givenness, the "external horizons" within which phenomena can be experienced, but which are not themselves given. Broadly speaking, there are two ways to address this: either reject the primacy of intuition by subordinating evidence to a principle of metaphysical speculation; or else uphold the primacy of intuition by phenomenalizing the limits of intuitional givenness. What is at stake, in other words, is nothing less than the methodological rectitude of Husserl's "principle of all principles."[14] Fink pursues the first alternative, which rejects this principle, while Merleau-Ponty takes up the second alternative, which defends it. Merleau-Ponty's own 'phenomenology of phenomenology' culminates in the spectacle of heroic death – of the abject failure of a 'complete reduction' – because this substantiates his deflationary argument against Fink to the effect that meaningful being is co-extensive with concrete human intersubjectivity, and thus that the methodological resources adequate to the maximally complete realization

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[13] Merleau-Ponty read the copy that Fink had lent to Gaston Berger in 1934, presumably learning of its existence from Berger's 1941 book, *Le* Cogito *dans la philosophie de Husserl* (Aubier), where it was mentioned for the first time; see Merleau-Ponty's letter (1.X.42) to Van Breda (1962: 421-2).

[14] Cf. *Ideas on a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book*, §24.

of transcendental phenomenology do not exceed human perceptual powers.

At a more general level, what is at stake is whether phenomenology *completes* Kant 'Copernican Revolution', or whether it *goes beyond* it. Fink holds to the latter, whereas Merleau-Ponty, as shown in the strategic appeals to the third *Critique*, directs his reinterpretation of Husserl toward the fulfillment of the critical project. His effort to retain the intuitional basis of phenomenological cognition works by regulatively locating all philosophical problems squarely within the phenomenal realm. This in turn works because Merleau-Ponty places firm limits on theoretical reason – phenomenology is based on certain existential commitments, questions concerning which, as Merleau-Ponty states explicitly, admit of "no theoretical reply"[15] – and because he retains a positive, heuristic role for transcendental illusions of reason. Or rather, because he displaces the 'illusion of transcendental solipsism' (that so bedevilled Husserl) with that of the hero. Although Merleau-Ponty drew practical conclusions of Marxist inspiration, Kant's own words ring true of the end of *Phenomenology of Perception*: "this illusion (which we can, after all, prevent from deceiving us) is indispensably necessary [if] we want to direct the understanding beyond every given experience (as part of the entirety of possible experience), and hence also to direct it to its greatest possible and utmost expansion."[16]

Notwithstanding that many readers *have* been deceived, it is the philosophical defensibleness of this *audacious but well-motivated* gambit, made in the defence of the phenomenological project itself, that needs to be carefully assessed before definitive judgment can be passed on *Phenomenology of Perception*.

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[15] PhP 520/456.

[16] *Critique of Pure Reason*, A645/B673.

# Supplementary Notes

A. Saint Exupéry wrote *Pilote de guerre* while in 'exile' in New York City, and that is where it was first published. Parts of the English translation first appeared in three monthly instalments in *The Atlantic* at the start of 1942. The book was published simultaneously in English and French (20.II.1942): *Flight to Arras*, trans. L. Galantière (Reynal & Hitchcock, 1942); *Pilote de guerre* (Éditions de la Maison Française, 1942). Although substantially the same, there are numerous minor differences between these texts, including the organization and division of chapters. Gallimard published *Pilote de guerre* in the Occupied Zone later that year (27.XI.1942), after submitting it to the Propagandastaffel, which passed it after censoring one line about Hitler, which would have appeared on page 32 (this line has not been reintroduced into the text); it appears on page 34 of the Éditions de la Maison Française edition in the following passage:

> Ils sont tous des imbeciles. Celui qui ne sait pas trouver mes gants. {Hitler qui a déclenché cette guerre démente.} Et l'autre, de l'État-Major, avec son idée fixe de mission à basse altitude.
>
> They are all idiots. The one who doesn't know where my gloves are. {Hitler, who unleashed this mad war.} And that fellow on the General Staff, and his obsession with low-altitude sorties.

The limited print-run of 2100 copies sold out within a week, but the book was subsequently banned (8.II.1943) at the instigation of French anti-Semites, notably Pierre-Antoine Cousteau and others associated with the collaborationist journal *Je suis partout*. They were offended by Saint-Exupéry's having extolled the bravery of a Jewish comrade named Jean Israël. The head of the Propagandastaffel, Gerhard Heller, was reprimanded for this oversight.* Gallimard was also not permitted to reprint Saint-Exupéry's earlier works. Clandestine versions of *Pilote de guerre* subsequently appeared in Lyon in December 1943 (Imprimerie Nouvelle Lyonnaise) and in Lille in 1944 (S.I.L.C.). See

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* EG 299f; cf. Heller, *Un Allemand à Paris* (Éditions de Seuil, 1981), 134.

Fernand Rude, "Éditions clandestines," *Icare: Revue de l'aviation française* 84 (1978), pp130-139.

B. There are some minor textual discrepancies between Merleau-Ponty's citation and the Gallimard edition of Saint-Exupéry's text, where they appear as follows:

> Ton fils est pris dans l'incendie? Tu le sauveras! [...] Tu vendrais, s'il est un obstacle, ton épaule pour le luxe d'un coup d'épaule! Tu loges dans ton acte même. Ton acte, c'est toi. [...] Tu t'échanges. [...] Ta signification se montre, éblouissante. C'est ton devoir, c'est ta haine, c'est ton amour, c'est ta fidélité, c'est ton invention. [...] L'homme n'est qu'un nœud de relations. Les relations comptent seules pour l'homme.
>
> Your son is caught in the fire? You will save him! [...] If there is resistance, you would give your shoulder for the luxury of setting it to action! You live in your act itself. Your act *is* you. [...] You give yourself in exchange. [...] Your true significance becomes dazzlingly evident. It is your duty, your hate, your love, your loyalty, your ingenuity. [...] Man is but a knot of relations; these alone matter to man.

While these differences could have been deliberate (although that would be difficult to fathom), it could also be that Merleau-Ponty was working from a clandestine edition that contained typographical inaccuracies. (Note that Merleau-Ponty did not list *Pilote de guerre* in the bibliography of *Phenomenology of Perception*.) But that is unlikely, as the clandestine editions differed considerably with respect to pagination (the Lyon version, for example, was not even half the length.) In all probability, then, the textual differences simply stem from oversight and citational nonchalance.

In terms of pagination, Merleau-Ponty cited pages 171 and 174, whereas in the Gallimard edition the lines appear on pages 168f and 171 (it is the final line that comes from a different paragraph). However, Merleau-Ponty had earlier referred to a passage at page 174 that is in fact at page 174 in the Gallimard edition (see PhP 99n/84n1); likewise for page 169 (see PhP 100n/84n2). So the pagination is tightly correlated; thus the final reference is almost certainly just a mix-up. It is, however, a mystery as to why Colin Smith's translation refers to pages 171, 174, and 176. Perhaps he consulted the Éditions de la Maison Française edition, where the lines in question appear on pages 173f and 176. In any event, this simply compounds the original error.

C. The following is the text and translation of the preface which, signed by Francis Ponge, preceded Merleau-Ponty's essay "Le Culte du héros" in *action* 74 (1.II.1946), p12 (all footnotes have been added):

> Maurice Merleau-Ponty est, avec Jean-Paul Sartre et Simone de Beauvoir, l'un des principaux représentants en France de la philosophie existentielle. Il a voulu remettre à *action* l'article qu'on va lire, dans lequel—selon les termes de sa lettre d'envoi—"l'attitude existentialiste (comme phénomène général de notre temps, et non comme attitude d'école) se trouve définie positivement et sur des exemples."
>
> Nous apprécions cette marque d'estime, et comme nous n'avons pas l'habitude de traiter dédaigneusement les problèmes qui intéressent authentiquement bon nombre de jeunes Français certainement sincères et certainement estimables, nous le publions aussitôt.
>
> Mais nous devons dire tout aussitôt que nous ne pouvons souscrire à ses conclusions. Sans vouloir longuement préluder aux réponses qu'une telle prise de position provoquera sans doute, affirmons déjà que beaucoup parmi nos lecteurs apercevront immédiatement et jugeront inadmissible le procédé (rhétorique) qui consiste à déclarer sans autre preuve—seulement parce que plusieurs héros de romans récents sont ainsi faits—que le "héros contemporain" "vit dans un tel chaos... qu'il ne peut apercevoir clairement ses devoirs et ses tâches... ni... conserver la certitude d'accomplir ce que l'histoire veut."
>
> Gabriel Péri, à ce titre, et tous les héros marxistes ne devront-ils plus être comptés parmi les héros contemporains, eux qui n'ont pas cessé d'y voir clair, plus clair que jamais, dans le prétendu chaos de l'histoire contemporaine—et qui ont pris parti, ont combattu, ont défié la mort avec la même allégresse, sachant qu'ils agissaient dans le sens de l'histoire... et mouraient donc (puisqu'il fallait mourir) en entonnant les chants de l'espérance, mouraient certains, mouraient victorieux.

> Along with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty is one of the principal representatives of existential philosophy in France. He wanted the following article—in which, according to his cover letter, "the existential attitude (as a general phenomenon of our times, and not as a school of thought) is defined positively and on the basis of examples"—to be published in *action*.
>
> We value this sign of respect. And as we are not in the habit of treating with contempt the problems that genuinely concern large numbers of young French people whose honesty and worthiness are not in doubt, we are publishing it immediately.
>
> But we must also make clear that we cannot subscribe to its conclusions. Without wanting to give a lengthy anticipation of the responses that such a position will no doubt provoke,* let us just assert that many of our readers will immediately notice and judge as unacceptable the (rhetorical) device that consists in declaring without further proof—solely because many heroes of recent novels are constructed in this way—that the "contemporary hero" "lives in such a chaos... that he cannot see his duties and his tasks clearly... nor... maintain the certainty of carrying out what history wants."†
>
> On this account, Gabriel Péri,‡ and all Marxist heroes must no longer be counted as contemporary heroes—for they did not cease to see clearly, more clearly than ever, in

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* See "Correspondance à propos d'un article de Maurice Merleau-Ponty: "Le Culte du Héros'," pp55-61 in *Cahiers d'action* 1 (May 1946).

† This text is presumably quoted from Merleau-Ponty's letter, for it does not appear as such in the essay itself.

‡ Gabriel Péri was a journalist and the Communist Deputy of Argenteuil in the French National Assembly from 1932. In virtue of his strong antifascist convictions, Péri was a leading figure in the

> the alleged chaos of contemporary history. They took a stand, they fought, and they braved death with the same elation, knowing that they were acting on the side of history... They thus died (for they had to die) singing the songs of hope; they died sure of themselves, they died victorious.

D. In the literature on Merleau-Ponty, there is a widespread misconception that Merleau-Ponty was strongly and positively influenced by Kojève. Although he was not the origin of the idea, Barry Cooper was the main source of its legitimation. In particular, his article, "Hegelian Elements in Merleau-Ponty's *La structure du comportement*," pp411-23 in *International Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (1975) contrives – unsuccessfully, in my view – to show that Merleau-Ponty's first work bears the impress of Kojève lectures. Cooper used this as a basis to argue that Merleau-Ponty's postwar political views, in particular as presented in *Humanism and Terror*, "float in a Hegelian ether" of Kojèvean extraction, and that they essentially express a "theoretical commitment to humanism learned at the feet of Kojève." See *Merleau-Ponty and Marxism: From Terror to Reform*, 25; cf. 16f, 72f, 44; cf. Cooper's "Hegel and the Genesis of Merleau-Ponty's Atheism," pp665-71 in *Studies in Religion* 6 (1976). It would take much more than a supplementary note to refute Cooper's arguments in detail. However, the key point is stated above, to wit, that in *The Structure of Behaviour* Merleau-Ponty precisely shows the human impossibility of the Kojèvean Sage. In his sole written reference to Kojève, Merleau-Ponty confirmed this in saying that his account of the end of history "is an idealization of death and could not possibly convey Hegel's core thought" (AD 277/206).

It is thus worthwhile to note that Herbert Spiegelberg's claim (*The Phenomenological Movement*, 548) that there were "close personal contacts" between Merleau-Ponty and Kojève are groundless. Spiegelberg had based this claim solely on that made by Rudolf Meyer to the effect that there were "close relations" [*enge Beziehungen*] between the two men; see "Merleau-Ponty und das Schicksal des französischen Existentialismus," pp129-165 in *Philosophische Rundschau* 3 (1955), 138; cf. Spiegelberg, 582n20. But Meyer himself had based this on an earlier article by Iring Fetscher, "Der Marxismus im Spiegel der französischen Philosophie," pp173-213 in *Marxismus-Studien* 1 (1954). Spiegelberg

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PCF, especially among its militants. In 1941, he was denounced, arrested, and ultimately shot by the Nazis. In part due to Aragon's poetic tribute in "La légende de Gabriel Péri," at the time of the Liberation he became a mythological figure of resistance and martyrdom.

evidently did not read this. Had he done so, he would have seen that no claim of 'personal contacts' is made, beyond reporting Merleau-Ponty's attendance at Kojève's lectures (Meyer referred to p183, but misidentified it as p181). But the point is that even this seemingly mundane disclosure broke new ground at the time, for it had not been previously known that Merleau-Ponty had attended Kojève's lectures. (That this was the case is borne out by earlier reviews, which make no mention of it, even while jointly discussing the postwar works of Merleau-Ponty and Kojève. See, for example, H. B. Acton, "Philosophy in France," pp77-81 in *Philosophy* 24 (1949); and Alfred Duhrssen, "Some French Hegelians," pp323-37 in *The Review of Metaphysics* 7:2 (1953).) Thus, in a footnote (138n19), Meyer wrote: "Es ist das große Verdienst Fetschers, auf die engen Beziehungen zwischen Kojève und Merleau-Ponty erstmals hingewiesen zu haben" [It is Fetscher's great merit to have first pointed out the close relations between Kojève and Merleau-Ponty]. This is what Spiegelberg must have read; but because he took Merleau-Ponty's attendance at Kojève's lectures as a given, he inadvertently misinterpreted Meyer's statement as implying something much more substantial.

E. There is some dispute over the identity of the "young Catholic" to whom Merleau-Ponty refers in the first paragraph of "Foi et bonne foi." Although Kwant (*The Phenomenological Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, 139) suggests that this is Hervé, it seems far more likely that it is simply Merleau-Ponty himself. This fits well with what is known of his intellectual development: the suppression in Austria to which he refers occurred in 1934, and the magazine he refers to is no doubt *Esprit*, founded by Emmanuel Mounier in 1932. This was a progressive, left-leaning, "personalist" Christian journal, and it protested the Austrian government's actions (March 1934). Merleau-Ponty was quite close to this organization for a few years beginning around that time. The other religious order he refers to is no doubt the Dominicans; the priest ("the Father") was probably Augustin Maydieu, who was responsible for soliciting the review articles that Merleau-Ponty published in *La vie intellectuelle* in 1935 (on Scheler) and 1936 (on Marcel), and who went on to be an important figure in the Resistance (hence the claim: "a bold and generous man, as was seen later"). All this makes for a coherent picture of Merleau-Ponty's increasing distance from Christianity during the 1930s. So even if what he says also

applies to Hervé, it was probably to himself that Merleau-Ponty was referring at the beginning of this article.

F. The following is the opening stanza of Spender's poem "One More New Botched Beginning." This was originally published in the *New Yorker* magazine, and was included as the final poem in Spender's *Selected Poems* (Random House, 1964), 80f:

> Their voices heard, I stumble suddenly,
> Choking in undergrowth. I'm torn
> Mouth pressed against the thorns,
> remembering
> Ten years ago here in Geneva,
>
> I walked with Merleau-Ponty by the lake.
> Upon his face I saw his intellect.
> The energy of the sun-interweaving
> Waves, electric, danced on him. His eyes
> Smiled with their gay logic through
> Black coins thrown down from leaves. He who
> Was Merleau-Ponty that day is no more
> Irrevocable than the I that day who was
> Beside him—I'm still living!

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