



## Article

# Merleau-Ponty's Embodied Ontology and Literature: Gesture, Metaphor, Flesh, and Sensible Ideas

Glen A. Mazis

School of Humanities, Penn State Harrisburg, Middletown, PA 17051, USA; gam7@psu.edu

**Abstract:** This essay traces out the importance of the poetic and creative use of language to Merleau-Ponty's ontology. Why Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment inevitably had to turn towards a poetic use of language and to see the overlap between literature and philosophy in articulating an ontology is examined. The tie between a deeper sense of metaphor and the structure of the flesh of the world is explored. The attempt to articulate the latent background of perception leads to the essential role of what will be called the "physiognomic imagination", which is a different use of imagination than "make-believe" and is key to the unfolding of the depths of perceptual sense. Understanding the efficacy of the literary use of language to the manifestation of further sense also requires an understanding of the temporality of the institution and the ongoing becoming of the real in Merleau-Ponty's ontology. This essay argues that Merleau-Ponty's turn to poetic language was both a source of his insights for ontology and the way that he came to express his own philosophy as a necessary outcome of fidelity to the phenomenology of perception. Given the parallel structure of the flesh of the world and metaphor, the dialogical nature of the perceptual encounter with the "voice of silence", and the increasing importance of physiognomic imaginations, the temporality of institution and "sensible ideas" to his indirect ontology, the literary and poetic use of language had to assume a central role in the articulation of the flesh ontology as well as to the further manifestation of sense. This assertion is meant to rectify the reading and commentaries that fail to see this necessity and instead interpret Merleau-Ponty's increasing use of poetic language as merely a residue of his evolving writing style and not as the necessary outcome of his ontological insights. This essay is also meant to address phenomenologists who fail to turn to literature and the poetic expression of embodied ontology as failing to carry forth Merleau-Ponty's revisioning of philosophy and centrality of perception and embodiment.

**Keywords:** Merleau-Ponty and Literature; metaphor and flesh; physiognomic imagination; Merleau-Ponty and poetic language; embodiment and literature; indirect ontology



**Citation:** Mazis, Glen A.. 2022. Merleau-Ponty's Embodied Ontology and Literature: Gesture, Metaphor, Flesh, and Sensible Ideas. *Humanities* 11: 26. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h11010026>

Received: 17 October 2021

Accepted: 27 January 2022

Published: 11 February 2022

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

The role of poetic language in expressing the depths of sense in perceptual life, although present in Merleau-Ponty's earliest phenomenology, becomes increasingly more central as he develops the ontology of the flesh. His promise after finishing the *Phenomenology of Perception* to explore to a greater degree the phenomenology of imagination and its key role in perception also leads to a greater overlap between his "indirect" ontology and literature. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment (which takes our perceptual experience as our access to the real) leads Merleau-Ponty to several conclusions that are at odds with much of the traditional from which his insights emerged: (1) the philosophical articulation of our embodied enmeshment can only proceed by using another language, a language not of abstract concepts, but of metaphors and other devices of poetic language allied with the endeavors of literature and its use of creative language; (2) metaphor has been misunderstood and must be seen in a differing way that is linked to an embodied ontology; (3) this other sense of metaphor is at the heart of the world's dialogue with us in perception, is inseparable from a new sense of depth, and its structure parallels that

of the flesh; (4) the uncovering of the truth of perception occurs through another sort of imagination than the popular paradigm of the imagined as merely fictive (the continual paradigm of Sartre); and finally, (5) this imaginal brings into manifestation perception's latent meaning within a unique temporal matrix he will call "institution". Merleau-Ponty's debt to Proust, Claudel, Valéry, Simone, Balzac, and other literary figures is discussed by him continually and this fact suggests the fruitful interplay between a phenomenological ontology and a close reading of literary texts. Although Merleau-Ponty's work owes a debt to other arts, such as painting and sculpture, this essay will focus on the kinship of the creative language in the literary arts and embodied phenomenology. More than kinship, however, will be the conclusion drawn by this essay that a truly embodied phenomenology needs to both turn towards literature and express itself through a creative or literary/poetic use of language to do justice to the depths of sense and the ontology to which it leads.

## 2. The World's Gestures in the Prereflective Perceptual Dialogue

Merleau-Ponty's initial work on the dimensionality of perception in *The Structure of Behavior* and the *Phenomenology of Perception* and its articulation of embodiment as enmeshed with the becoming of the world in perception is already an opening to his later ontology of the flesh, although it may not have been initially appreciated as such. As Don Beith concludes at the end of *The Birth of Sense*, rather than a transcendental approach as some scholars interpreted it, *The Structure of Behavior* "takes form to be a dynamic and emergent reality", and "consciousness itself is a developing, vital form of behavior" (Beith 2018, p. 160) with the outcome that a bodily "gesture is something definitively shared" and "all action is symbolic" (Beith 2018, p. 152). From this start, Merleau-Ponty will increasingly articulate the nature of this embodied embeddedness in the world as a shared expression with others and the world whose meaning is primordially experienced in a prereflective apprehension. This apprehension is of a depth of meaning continually transforming from an overlap of fields of sense. This trajectory of discovery leads him to declare in his 1953-1954 notes on his lectures on institution and passivity that "consequently, we must describe, in the order of the perceived . . . not only a sensory field, but ideological, imaginary, mythical, praxical, and symbolic fields—historical surroundings and perception as a reading of these surroundings" (Merleau-Ponty 2010, p. 130). The perceptual field overlaps with these other fields of sense because the world is not *an object* of perception, but rather *an interlocutor*. The object of perception is an interlocutor because it expresses through gestures as well as through what Merleau-Ponty called its "physiognomic expression" and the expressiveness of movement itself, an emergent sense within the experience of perception. Through these dimensions, there is a "co-expression" between the perceiver and the perceived (Merleau-Ponty 2011, p. 183).

Although Merleau-Ponty's later articulation of what he calls "reversibility", is a more detailed articulation of the co-expression of perceiver and world, this notion was present already in the *Phenomenology of Perception* in the pages wherein he describes the perceptual dialogue with the world. "Reversibility" is articulated in *The Visible and the Invisible* as an "overlapping and encroachment, so that the things pass into us as well as we pass into things" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 23). However, in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, this dialogue is pointed to exploring the silence of perceiving the world. This is a silence that speaks to us in a way captured by Malraux's phrase (that Merleau-Ponty will use as part of the title of an important essay on the nature of language) "the voices of silence". How the world speaks in silence and gestures is described by Merleau-Ponty in the illuminating example of walking out and being confronted by sleet falling:

The word's meaning is not compounded of a certain number of physical characteristics belonging to the object; it is first and foremost the aspect taken on by the object in human experience, for example, my wonder in the face of these hard, then friable, pellets falling ready made from the sky.

Here we have a meeting of the human and the non-human and as it were, a piece of the world's behavior, a certain version of its style, and the generality

of its meaning as well as that of the vocable is not the generality of the concept, but of the world as typical. Thus language presupposes nothing less than a consciousness of language, a silence of consciousness embracing the world of speech in which words first receive a form and a meaning (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 403).

The sense that language brings forth is first apprehended in “a silence of consciousness” in the embodied, prereflective perceptual encounter with objects in the world whose sense does not come from “a certain number of physical characteristics”, but rather from “a piece of the world’s behavior” that, similar to human behavior, gestures forth a certain sense in the encounter of the sleet pelting us. At that moment of sleeting, we meet the world through its harsh and repellent gesture that will never have the same sense, for example, as the mild and comforting sense of walking out into a sunny, temperate spring day. In response to the sleet, we have to steel ourselves as we move into this somewhat aggressive presence of the world as the sleet pours down upon us. In his lecture course of 1953, *Le monde sensible et le monde de l’expression*, Merleau-Ponty says, “The movement of things—the movement of living beings—[are] gestures, languages, ‘traces,’—In all these cases the movement is a trace of a ‘behavior’” (Merleau-Ponty 2011, p. 183). The perception of movement—and movement is continual in the perceptual world—carries with it the tracing of a sense. It is a sense akin to that which we apprehend when we perceive the behavior of others that has an immediate meaning for us which Merleau-Ponty identifies as the person’s *style*. However, as the passage suggests and as Emmanuel Alloa summarizes: “According to Merleau-Ponty, however, style is not produced by a subjectivity: It is a feature of the world as it manifests itself” (Alloa 2017, p. 63). This apprehended sense is not the clear and distinct sense that Descartes found reassuringly in the assertion that one plus one equals two, excluding any ambiguity, but instead has depths of meaning in relation to its context as well as the history and context of the perceiver. It is also not like the Cartesian quest for meaning in that this sense only occurs within a deep background of these varied fields and is an *event*, a beginning of a process in which the latent meaning will come to be more manifest in further articulation. If pursued sensitively, keeping alive the dialogue with the world, as does the artist through his or her capacity in a heightened way, the initial perceived sense will deepen and become transformed. It is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty comes to call this initial sense “instituted” because it is only an opening that has the possibility of becoming more manifest in a depth of meaning.

If it is realized that our primary sense of the world is not reflective, but perceptual and prereflective, then this other register is vital to the expression of the basic meaning of our experience and the encountered Being of the world. Merleau-Ponty expresses this situation in the early pages of *The Visible and the Invisible*: “But it is just as sure that the relation between a thought and its object, between the cogito and the cogitatum, contains neither the whole nor even the essential of our commerce with the world and we have to situate that relation back within a more muted relationship with the world, within an initiation into the world upon which it rests and which is already accomplished when the reflective return intervenes” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, pp. 35–36). Merleau-Ponty continues right after that statement that the attempt to put this meaning into reflective terms will make us “miss that relationship” as well as our primary “openness upon the world (*ouverture au monde*)”. If one returns to this primary level, then another perspective opens as Merleau-Ponty explains in his radio lectures of 1948: “Our relationship with things is not a distant one: each speaks to our body and to the way we live. They are clothed in human characteristics (whether docile, soft, hostile, or resistant) and conversely they dwell within us as emblems of forms of life we either love or hate. Humanity is invested in the things of the world and these are invested in it” (Merleau-Ponty 2004, p. 63). This makes the world of objects something quite different than how our scientific and materialist perspective sees them as mere inert concatenations of matter, and instead we perceive “a world in which every object displays the human face it acquires in a human gaze” (Merleau-Ponty 2004, p. 70). Within the continual dialogue of perceiver and perceived, there is this emergent sense that is sensory,

emotional, imaginative, memorial, and oneiric that is expressed through a gestural and expressive exchange.

Yet, of course, our sense of the world does not only come from things, but Merleau-Ponty explains how our sense of other persons first emerges on this level of perception: “Other human beings are never pure spirit for me. I only know them through their glances, their gestures, their speech—in other worlds through their bodies . . . a body animated by all sorts of intentions” (Merleau-Ponty 2004, p. 82). As the things around the perceiver, the presence of another person is one that first registers primarily in a sensible way that takes in the rhythm of their actions, their gestures, the tone of their voice, their posture, their movements, the pace of their actions and speech, their facial expressions, their directedness, their myriad immediate expressions in relation to the situation in which we encounter them, and if we already know them in relation to a history—theirs and ours. This gestalt of the expressions of the other is called “style” by Merleau-Ponty and further underlies our subsequent reflective and distant appraisal of others. As Merleau-Ponty continues: “I cannot detach someone from their silhouette, the tone of their voice and its accent. If I see them for even a moment, I can reconnect with them instantaneously and far more thoroughly than if I were to go through a list of everything I know about them from experience or hearsay” (Merleau-Ponty 2004, p. 82). This is what Merleau-Ponty means by a philosophy of embodiment: seeing the world and its reality through the bodily perceptual givens of a “thick perception” that includes many layers of sense: “Another person is, for us, a spirit which haunts a body and we seem to see a whole host of possibilities contained within this body when it appears before us: the body is the very presence of these possibilities” (Merleau-Ponty 2004, pp. 82–83). Merleau-Ponty gives an example of being confronted by an angry person and how this anger is not an inner psychic state that must be deduced by analyzing their behavior and perhaps making an analogy to one’s own states of anger, as so many traditional philosophies have posited, but rather the anger is in their shaking, clenched fist, their quaking and loud speech or “blossoms on the surface of his pale or purple cheeks, his blood-shot eyes, and wheezing voice” and this sense fills the space *between* the interlocutors as sensed (Merleau-Ponty 2004, p. 84).

It is this prereflective level of experience in which things, others, events, and situations are perceived in their implicit sense and this level of meaning can only be sensitively expressed by the use of poetic and creative language, whereas “the moment the reflective effort tries to capture it . . . we will miss that relationship” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 36). In summarizing the import of his 1953–54 course on “The Problem of Speech”, Merleau-Ponty states that the creative writer “takes everyday language and makes it deliver the prelogical participation of landscapes, dwellings, localities, and gestures, of men among themselves and with us . . . a system of signs whose internal articulation reproduces the contours of experience; the reliefs and sweeping lines of these contours in turn generate a syntax in depth . . . ” (Merleau-Ponty 1970, p. 24). Creative and literary language opens us back to the primary level of perceptual experience and its inseparable depths by expressing not generalities and categorical abstractions applied to our experience, but by bringing us back into their presence and opening us to their depths of sense in a participatory way. This use of language does not attempt to capture and reproduce the communicated sense of what is addressed or to represent it, but rather takes the reader back to a “prelogical participation” with what is expressed. In other words, this language use throws the reader back outside of language into the felt encounter in perception with that thing, event, creature, or person. The reader is tied to the literary language but its openness, its announcement of its not fully capturing the sense it expresses, throws the reader beyond the words at the same time. The “throw” is on a certain vector or trajectory shaped by the figures of creative speech.

We must now turn to seeing how literature and poetic language accomplishes this task. As Merleau-Ponty says of the poet in speaking of the power of poetic language: “The poet . . . replaces the usual way of referring to things, which presents them as ‘well known’, with a mode of expression that describes the essential structure of the things and according forces us to enter that thing. To speak of the world poetically is almost to remain silent”

(Merleau-Ponty 2004, p. 100). The literary and poetic use of language throws us outside of language or takes us back to its roots, which Merleau-Ponty says is silence, that is to say, a taking in of a presence with which we commune or enter into an exchange with attentiveness to which the poetic use of language returns us. However, it is not only to this initial sense that the literary and poetic language returns us, but its articulation that allows a becoming of backgrounded depths of sense beyond our usual way of referring to things and others to become manifest.

### 3. The Power of Literary and Poetic Language

In the statement by Merleau-Ponty quoted in the last paragraph declaring the task of the creative writer, there is an imperative given to the creative writer to take “everyday language” and somehow go beyond its normal sense and function. The everyday use of language will be designated the “empirical use” of language or the “language that has been spoken”: “Let’s speak of two languages, the language after the fact, the one which has been acquired, which disappears before the sense which it is conveying,—and the one which creates itself in the moment of expression, which makes me glide from the signs towards the sense—the language that has been spoken and the speaking language” (Merleau-Ponty 1973, p. 10). For Merleau-Ponty, there is an inertness, a static quality, to the language that we normally use to communicate with each other that takes an established meaning, an overall concept of the thing or person or event spoken about and passes it along to others. This idea of language seizes upon Saussure’s insight that language can function as an interplay of signs that basically give sense by referring to each other and, in this way, is a closed system. However, for Merleau-Ponty, this is only the fate of the spoken or empirical language and not that of the literary and creative language. Unlike the everyday use of language, which is meant to function without inspiring hesitation, to be efficient in getting things done and achieving clear communication, the creative use of language is a use that calls attention to itself, to highlight the act of trying to bring forth sense, and in doing so, to throw its users back to the encounter of sense with the world. Additionally, language is a being in motion and transformation like the world of sense to which it expresses. It brings the hearer back into the process of expression, into the unfolding of sense which is never complete or able to achieve closure, except at the price of cutting off access to further depths of sense. For Merleau-Ponty, this is the originary power of language to manifest the sense of the world. It is also its most authentic use, as he states in his essay, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”: “The empirical use [*l’usage empirique*] of already established language [*du langage déjà fait*] should be distinguished from its creative use. Empirical language can only be the result of creative language. Speech in the sense of empirical language—that is, the opportune recollection of a pre-established sign—is not speech in respect of authentic language [*du langage authentique*]” (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, p. 44). Note that Merleau-Ponty’s use of “authentic” here, is not a return to some more essential meaning, but rather is the bringing forth of what was only latently expressed before and only comes to be both present and having been in the past at the moment of expression in the unusual temporality of institution; it is “authentic” not in a *return* to a more real experience, but rather in going forward to give us more depths of sense.

In the everyday use of language, the speakers are referring to the world from a distance that is no longer part of that face-to-face encounter with things, others, and events as “the opportune recollection of a pre-established sign”. It is as though it is taken for granted that such an encounter in perception, and its linked apprehensions, has occurred sufficiently and need not be undertaken by those now using language to describe the world and their experience. It is the reference to a supposed past, which could only have meaning in entering a new act of expression, one that is not undertaken in this taken-for-grantedness. In the radio lectures of 1948, Merleau-Ponty says “poetry is the creation of language, one which cannot be fully translated into ideas”, because as he says in the poem, perception, form, and content are inseparable and “what is being presented cannot be separated from the way in which it presents itself to the gaze”. The poetic use of language points back to



and reenters the encounter of the way the things come to show themselves to the perceiver as a gesturing and communing partner in a dialogue. It is the encounter with another way of being insofar as things themselves are gestural, expressive, and have a face or expression that they turn towards us in perception, that is communicated as we enter this liminal place of literary language. Merleau-Ponty's description of poetic language continues to include all literature as poetic in this joining up with the rhythm and dynamism of the encounter with the unfolding percept when he adds, "a successful novel would thus not consist in a succession of ideas or theses but would have the same kind of existence as an object of the senses or a thing in motion, which must be perceived in its temporal progression by embracing its particular rhythm and which leaves in the memory not a set of ideas but an emblem and the monogram of these ideas" (Merleau-Ponty 2010, pp. 100–1). The work of literature, using creative language, brings the reader back within a process of becoming manifest, a process into which the perceiver enters, as does the reader of the literary text.

Merleau-Ponty's thought was influenced by many literary writers, as stated before, but none more than Proust. He believes that what Proust achieved in his writing reveals the power of literature: "the act of writing . . . only reactivates the original operation of language with the deliberate aim of acquiring and putting into circulation not just the statistical and common aspects of the world, but its very manner of touching and inserting itself into the individual's experience" (Merleau-Ponty 1970, p. 24). This return to the unfolding of perceiving the world means that the empirical language must be displaced and disordered within the literary use of language to express this unique or singular moment of experience and the nuanced aspects of the individuals being evoked. The taken-for-granted assumption of empirical language, that it adequately has captured the general nature of things, people, and events must be undone. This process leads one into a new language of disorder, insofar as the usual uses, syntaxes, references, tonality, and rhythms are shattered or surpassed.

The disorder of everyday language initiated by creative expression is the cause of why some persons feel at sea when they read heavily poetic or literary language. In *Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty declares, " . . . Poetry melts ordinary language. But in the case of works that one likes to see or read again, the disorder is always another order. It is a new system of equivalences that demands this upheaval" (Merleau-Ponty 1973, pp. 63–64). In order to return to the primal encounter of perception and its depths, this upheaval into disorder is necessary to open a path from the empirical language to this ongoing possible experience. In pointing to this power of literary language, Merleau-Ponty borrows a phrase from the writer Ponge, the masterful word painter of ordinary objects that he makes come alive again with his poetic descriptions of them. Merleau-Ponty states, "Words, even in the art of prose, carry the speaker and the hearer into a common universe by drawing both towards a new signification by their power to designate in excess of their accepted definition, through the muffled life they have led and continue to lead in us, and through what Ponge appropriately called their 'semantic thickness' . . . " (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, p. 75). The *semantic thickness* expressed in the mesh of these words brought into new relations resonates to the perceptual thickness of the world which Merleau-Ponty calls "the vertical visible world" in *The Visible and the Invisible*. There he describes how "a spontaneous word contains a whole becoming" and can meet this thickness of sense in "one sole movement" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 236). This is why he also declares, "The philosophy of the sensible as literature" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 252). Literary language can break apart empirical language, so there is a new openness to a more primal experience of the world. Proust writes of this transformation possible for the reader of literature in the passage of *In Search of Lost Time* when he says literary works "seemed to me entrusted with the secret truth and beauty, things half-felt by me, half-incomprehensible, the full understanding of which was the vague but permanent object of my thoughts. Next to this central belief which, while I was reading, would be constantly reaching out from my inner self to the outer world, towards the discovery of truth" (Proust 116). Marcel feels thrown beyond the words into a more immediate and revealing experience of the world. Not only that, but he continues that

in these experiences “came the emotions aroused in me by the action in which I was taking part, for these afternoons were crammed with more dramatic events than occur, often, in a whole lifetime. These were the events taking place in the book I was reading” (Proust 116). The possible experiences awakened by literary language have a depth of feeling and emotion beyond Marcel’s ordinary experience. We will return to Proust’s descriptions of how this occurs later in the essay.

#### 4. Poetic Space, Metaphor, and the Flesh of the World

When in his essay, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” (the latter being a phrase of Malraux’s), Merleau-Ponty says the “writer transports us . . . from the world of established meanings to something else” (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, p. 78), it raises the question of where is this somewhere or “something else” other than our usual world? Literary language throws us outside of itself, beyond language, yet the reader is still in its spell, its thrall, moved by its rhythms and jostling meanings and senses. One is still in relation to the expressed words as if suspended by them and yet moving beyond them. One does not coincide with this literary language or become contained by it since it is the case that “like the functioning of the body, that of words or paintings remains obscure to me. The words, lines, and colors which express me come out of me as gestures.” (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, p. 75). The words are similar to gestures and like gestures point to a shared space between interlocutors. The other side of this dialogue is the world as equally gesturing to the creative writer or as Merleau-Ponty says in *Prose of the World*, “A poet has received, once and for all, the task of translating these words, this voice, this accent whose echo is returned to him by each thing and each circumstance” (Merleau-Ponty 1973, p. 64). Like an echo and like an accent, the sense communicated is not clear and distinct but rather is suggestive and moving, calling for its trajectory to be followed further into its latent depths. Yet, also like a nuance or accent, the sense is specific, singular, a sensitive shading among many possible shadings, unlike a more categorical or generalized concept. There has also been a situation built up within the text and within the surrounding context of the reader and the culture that is also brought into the space emanating from the gesturing world and suspended in this dialogical space with the writer or reader. The pull of the situation into the force field of expression in creative language is like the description Merleau-Ponty offers in the *Primacy of Perception* of all expressive gestures: “In a general way expressive gestures . . . have a univocal meaning only with respect to the situation they underline and punctuate” (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, p. 6). Both the singularity and the depth of sense of being possibly explored are added to by the space of the situation being drawn into the forcefield of sense or matrix of the meaning of this space of creative language.

This interactive and liminal space of poetic or literary expression is one that had moved the writer and the reader out of the world as rendered objectively as Cartesian space. Merleau-Ponty describes this in *The Prose of the World*:

We simply do not write in an object-space with an object-hand and an object-body for which each new situation presents problems. We write in a perceived space, where results with the same form are immediately analogous—if we ignore differences of scale—just as the same melody played at different pitches is immediately recognized. The hand with which we write is a hand-spirit [*main-esprit*] which, in the formula of a movement, possesses something like a natural concept of all the particular cases in which it may have to be operative” (Merleau-Ponty 1973, pp. 76–77).

Creative writing has this motive power to move us outside of the objectified space that our reflective constructions impose upon the world and opens us to perceived space, the space of our primordial experience of the world. It should be noted that this space as expressed by the creative writer, however, is not a fictive space, as literary space has often been characterized, even though some creative writing is fantastical. Rather, the unique power of poetic and creative language is not only to return to the space of perception, but also to highlight its differing dimensions and depths. Like the painter’s hand that

Merleau-Ponty equates with the writer's and describes in several essays as being moved into a dialogue with the world in this space of interrelation or of silent voices, so the writer is moved by the particular voices of what is being written about.

In this expressive act of creative writing, there is not a representation or copying of the world, but rather a taking up of a melody and rhythm, a gestural force, which is expressed by a myriad of silent interlocutors. Famously, within the pages of *In Search of Lost Time*, it is the hawthorn blossoms or the notes of the sonata or the sea at Balbec or the Méséglise and Guermantes paths through the countryside and a host of other objects that "speak" or gesture of aspects of life that otherwise would go unnoticed. For example, the hawthorns sitting outside the church express to Marcel a spiritual presence in life that the church services fail to express to him. This is why Merleau-Ponty claims in *The Prose of the World* that "Henceforth everything has a value, and the uses of objects count less than their capacity for composing all together, even in their intimate texture, a valid emblem of the world with which we are confronted" (Merleau-Ponty 1973, p. 64). This emblematic expression, in coming together in a set of interrelations, brings forth a sense that suddenly can confront us, as for example, when we as readers experience with Marcel the power of the hawthorns or the Madelaine. The coming together in an expressed sense of seemingly disparate things, events, or moments is the idea of gestalt, but is also a dynamic gestalt, as coming to be in motion and within a continual process of becoming: "The movement of things—the movement of living beings—[are] gestures, languages, 'traces,'—In all these cases the movement is a trace of a 'behavior' . . . Also, the movement of things is a transition from one gestalt to another gestalt, the transposition of a physiognomy" (Merleau-Ponty 2011, p. 183). As moving, things, events, and people are always gesturing forth sense that is like the expression of faces, eloquent, but having unexplored depths, latencies, and always moving on. Similar to other persons, the world "behaves" or moves in expressive ways. Merleau-Ponty is at pains in the working notes included after the published version of *The Visible and the Invisible* to clarify that the gestalt is not a positivity but rather an "openness" onto a field of senses that is itself "open", that is, "always between the objects" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 189) and not identifiable as just "here" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 205).

Insofar as creative language is the opening onto the in-between of the relations among things, the moments in their becoming, and the perceiver and the perceived, Jessica Wiskus in *The Rhythm of Thought* says it is Merleau-Ponty's answer to the puzzling question of "how might one bring silence to speak without destroying silence itself?" (Wiskus 2013, p. 7). She finds in his descriptions "an operative language—a language capable of setting itself up within the gap between sign and signification—a language that would turn back toward this non-coincidence for the movement of its meaning. . . . This operative language, it would seem, would be the language of poetry, the abode of metaphor. Poetry and metaphoric language work precisely according to the principle of noncoincidence; they aim at 'making silence speak, at saying what is not-said, at exploring language beyond its usual destination'" (Wiskus 7). This means poetic language operates in the same dimension as the flesh of the world. In the famous passage in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty gives a concrete example of the meaning of the flesh in which he describes the perception of the red of a dress "a punctuation in the field of red things" and renders the red of the dress a matrix of latent relations among tiles of red rooftops, certain terrains in Aix of Madagascar, the essence of the 1917 Russian revolution, the robes of professors and certain imaginary worlds and so on, listing many more differences played off of in this "straits . . . gaping open", and potentially the list could continue indefinitely. The ontology of the flesh articulates Being as an ongoing matrix of relations that are continually transformed in such a way that the present is the fruition of a past that had never been until this moment. The latent dimension of any perception has depths of sense that can come to be, but only contingently so, requiring a bringing forth to accomplish. This coming to be of a past that had never been until it is realized in a making present is the temporality that Merleau-Ponty comes to later call "institution" but was first articulated in the last sentence of the



“Sense Experience” chapter of the *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 242). This explains why Merleau-Ponty declares that “Being is *what requires creation of us* for us to experience it.” Yet, through poetic language, there is opened the primordial field of perception that is so only in latent depths, the depths that the poetic allows these relations to become manifest. It is for that reason that Merleau-Ponty completes the thought by adding to it: “Make an analysis of literature in this sense: as *inscription of Being*” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 197). Literature uses language in such a way as to bring forth Being understood as flesh, as the matrix of perceived relations that is continually generative of new sense allowing further manifestation. The power of the poetic augments the temporality of institution, the ongoing becoming of sense, and time itself.

Language in its poetic power or in the “occult trading of a metaphor” brings forth the world in such a way that we get beyond “the manifest meaning of each word”, and instead expresses “the lateral relations, the kinships that are implicated in their transfers and exchanges” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 125). Such an idea expressed by Merleau-Ponty in the “Interrogation and Intuition” chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible* brings together the idea of metaphor and that of the chiasm. The flesh emerges as the matrix of these chiasmatic relations, such as that between a spiritual dimension and the hawthorns or the spirit of the Russian revolution and a sense of the color red, such that none of the related characteristics, events, things, or persons have the same sense or coincide in any way epistemologically or ontologically yet are inseparable within the depths of sense as perceived and are mutually transforming while also keeping their status as differing. For Merleau-Ponty, this is key to the sense of metaphor and poetic language: metaphor is not as traditionally understood to be the simple transfer of the sense of one entity to another to bring them into comparison, where each still stands as what it is and what sense it conveys. Rather, in Merleau-Ponty’s sense of metaphor, there is the expression of two beings or events in such a way that there is the reversibility of sense between the two while remaining in the tension of their relationship—each being singular and differing in this moment of expression, yet each and both are transformed by being expressed through the metaphor. In other words, beings are indeterminate in their perceptual inexhaustibility of sense and only have that sense through a depth for relations that continually evolves. This movement is both highlighted and catalyzed through poetic language. It is a movement beyond the traditional sense of words having a determinate reference and of metaphors being a “transfer’ of these references in an aesthetically pleasing comparison. Emmanuel de Saint Aubert in his essay, “Metaphoricity: Carnal Infrastructures and Ontological Horizons”, expresses aptly this interweaving of the becoming of sense and metaphor: “No longer simply a retrospective clarification of the universal by means of a sensible analog, metaphor is a participant in the blossoming of sense, at the very heart of the sensible world. No longer the illustrative accessory of an already established meaning, or the ‘participation in a prior idea,’ but a participant in the institution of meaning itself” (de Saint Aubert 2020, p. 124). Suggested by this statement of Saint Aubert is that metaphor is the coming forth of the latent sense of perception within the temporality of institution, that is the time of what is comes to present has only become manifest as past at that moment.

Given that the ontology of the flesh is Merleau-Ponty’s is the heart of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy and that metaphor in its structure highlights the chiasmatic relations that compose the flesh, we can understand Renaud Barbaras’s claim that “Merleau-Ponty’s reflection is animated in its entirety by the question of metaphor” (Barbaras 2004, p. 194). Barbaras articulates how in the working of the flesh, the perceived is not an object, but only a “node” (to use Merleau-Ponty’s phrase) in a field of ongoing indefinite relations, such that a group of gypsies dressed like hussars who twenty-five years ago gathered at an inn of the Champs-Élysées is embedded in the depths of the perception of the red of a dress. Poetic language and metaphor bring to expression these matrices of relations. Barbaras continues, “The figuration of every thing by every thing reveals the ultimate ontological texture. Things are merged with this figuration, this encroachment; they become themselves only at crossroads . . . of the world. It follows from this that in Merleau-Ponty’s eyes, poetry,

as the work of the metaphor, has an ontological meaning comparable to painting; it leads back to the originary expression in opposition to the cutting up of the world issued from instituted language" (Barbaras 2004, p. 196). As in painting, metaphor draws upon silence, the root of language's expression according to Merleau-Ponty, and even on a more literal level, since its rhythm is a vital part of its expression, this aspect of poetic language allows the reader to reenter the latency of primordial experience in a way intensified from the empirical language (although it is present there, too). As Wiskus points out, "rhythm consists in precisely what is not heard" and these timed intervals give it expressive power (Wiskus 2013, p. 9). She states poetic language dwells in these hollows between words like the notes in music such that "the metaphor discloses the lacuna—the noncoincidence—as generative. This is the work, one could say, of all creative language." (Wiskus 2013, p. 10). This is why Merleau-Ponty talks of originary language instead of an "origin." There is no point of origin to go back to, but rather there is opened up a liminal space in which something may *become* if the latency of perception comes to expression.

The *écart* or gap between and among beings within these fields is essential to its structure, as it is to metaphor, and this aspect of the poetic is also part of its ontological expressiveness. Merleau-Ponty states in a working note of November 1959 that "It is hence because of depth that the things have a flesh" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 219), where depth is defined as the "going together of impossibles" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, pp. 264–66; 1968, p. 228). These gaps and the movement among them are part of the motive power that throws the reader or speaker of poetic speech beyond language and allows the visible to be that which manifests the invisible; they announce the lack of closure in expression and open avenues for further emergence in reopening the encounter. The presence of the invisible, such as the love that is in the flowers in Balzac's novel (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 321) or in the notes of the sonata as heard by Swann in Proust's novel (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 149), to name just two of the many examples discussed by Merleau-Ponty, that can occur only through the visible and yet is nowhere to be found positively in the visible, is the way that language can give us intuitions of a depth of sense that are vital to the meaning of our existence and that reflective concepts can only partially represent in a diminished way. Certainly, the reflective also has this figural sense, this gesturing beyond itself, but it takes its being shaken up or even displaced by poetic language to have the deeper experience that is the embodied apprehension of what Merleau-Ponty calls "sensible ideas" or the invisible.

### 5. Physiognomic Imagination and Sensible Ideas as Expressed in Literature Are Vital to Phenomenology

Even though poetry is mostly focused on this moment of reaching beyond language by means of language, Merleau-Ponty also sees this at play in the creative language of the novel. In discussing Stendhal's novel, *The Red and the Black*, he says: "But Julien Sorel's trip to Verrières and his attempt to kill Mme. de Rênal after he has learned that she has betrayed him are not as important as that silence, that dream-like journey, that unthinking certitude, and that eternal resolution which follow the news. Now these things are nowhere said. There is no need of a 'Julien thought' or a 'Julien wished.'" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, p. 76). Literary language does not describe in concepts or take a distance from what is being expressed on the page to impose upon the reader an assertion of how it should be interpreted (unless used as a postmodern further literary device) or even labeling what is most importantly happening, but instead, Merleau-Ponty continues, "The desire to kill is thus not in words at all. It is between them, in the hollows of space, time, and signification they mark out..." (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, p. 76). It is the gaps between what is said and described, in the tone, rhythm, pacing, gesturing, and how in juxtapositions the words become "symbols whose meaning we never stop developing" as they are "the means of expression of the book enveloped by that halo of signification they owe to their singular arrangement" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, pp. 77–78). This halo of signification is not simply present, but it is not absent either. As Merleau-Ponty says of sensible ideas, "the in-visible is the secret counterpart of the visible, it appears only within it . . . one cannot see it there . . .

but it is in the line of the visible" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 215). Whether it is the hawthorns or the five notes of the sonata in Proust's *In Search for Lost Time*, sensible ideas emerge in the context of all the relations within the novel and in the surrounding culture. Once these sensible ideas are encountered, the depths of their meaning will continue to emerge for the sensitive reader, which is why Merleau-Ponty calls literature's "living language" not an assertion or a description, but rather a "search and acquisition", which "provides us with symbols whose meaning we never stop developing" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, p. 77). The latent sense that poetic language gestures towards are an emergent phenomenon, which is why Merleau-Ponty turns to literature as the inscription of Being.

In the working note of November 1960, Merleau-Ponty declares that it is "incomprehensible . . . a philosophy that *adds* the imaginary to the real" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 262) in contrast to his insight that "vision assumes its fundamental power of showing forth more than itself" only by expressing the imaginary, as he says of the expressive power of art in "Eye and Mind" (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, p. 178). It would require another essay to follow Merleau-Ponty's articulation of how the imaginary is interwoven with the real, such that the latent content of perception can only emerge within the expression of an imaginary that keeps moving from within perception. This is another imaginary than the imaginary that is not grounded in the perception at hand but is fantasy at odds with the perceived, a theme explored at length by Sartre. Merleau-Ponty had promised to develop this aspect of his phenomenology after he completed the *Phenomenology of Perception* and it led him to finally declare: "All ontology is a type of imagination, all imagination is an ontology. There is an imagination which is in no way a nihilation (position of the unreal as unreal) which is a crystallization of being", a statement in his lecture notes for one of his last courses before his sudden death (de Saint Aubert 2006, p. 259). I call this power of imagination that brings forth the latent sense of perception, the sense that is the invisible of the visible, "physiognomic imagination", since it is an imaginative expression that stays with the face of all beings, their physiognomic sense as expressed by them, in their being perceived. This sense continues to deepen through physiognomic imaginations interwovenness with perception and is brought forth into manifestation. This is the work of poetic language, especially metaphor. In its gaps and other means of expression we have explored in this essay, it brings out the thickness of the sense of perceived beings, their latent depths. It does so in such a way that, for example, what was latent in Marcel's perceptions of the hawthorns initially as bearers of spiritual vitality, comes to be in this expression in a way that the past sense of perception only emerges at this moment of the crystallization of sense in the temporality of institution. That is why Saint Aubert adds: "Metaphor is the deepening of the very depths it helps to reveal" (de Saint Aubert 2020, p. 135). The depth of sense expressed itself comes to be in being expressed. This is the folding back on itself of time in institution, and literary and poetic language augment this becoming of sense.

These insights help explain why literature was so important to Merleau-Ponty in arriving at his indirect ontology of the flesh. To fully fathom perception, which is to fully fathom what being an embodied being whose access to beings is through perception, is to explore how perception itself is expressive, is a "laying down of being" as Merleau-Ponty realized in the Preface of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. However, this laying down of being or inscription is an expression that happens only through bringing forth the latent through a creative act, a poetic act (here used in the wider sense of the making of art), that is a drawing out of the invisible of the visible in an endeavor where the sensible and the imaginal are inseparably interwoven. Saint Aubert expresses this crystallization of perceptual sense in saying: "Perceptual recognition is more a realization than pure recognition . . . In the work of expression, the real and the imaginary are so intertwined as to form a single fabric, the fabric of realization" (de Saint Aubert 2020, p. 146). Although Merleau-Ponty saw all the arts, and especially the visual arts, as part of the expression of the invisible of the visible, poetic language was singularly vital to this process. As Saint Aubert adds, "Metaphor itself is essentially a realizing and co-nascent crystallization" of the becoming of sense in Merleau-Ponty's rendering of literature (de Saint Aubert 2020,

p. 135). Within this embodied ontology, metaphor brings further sense into being. It is a birthing of the latent meaning that was pregnant within the perceptual taking in of the world. This leaves us with a parallel between Marcel, the narrator of *In Search of Lost Time*, and the philosopher of Merleau-Ponty's ilk. As Patricia Locke says when meditating on Marcel and the hawthorns: "Marcel displays an inchoate longing for chiasmatic experience, where 'every relation with being is simultaneously a taking and being taken', as Merleau-Ponty states" (Locke 2008, p. 102). In other words, as portrayed by Proust, Marcel has allowed the power of the reversibility of the perceptual dialogue to take him into its depths, so that the invisible sense of the hawthorns is gestured to him eloquently. This is also what a philosophy of embodiment like Merleau-Ponty's seeks to do: "Philosophers can look to art as a locus of truths, not to derive abstract ideas from literature, or to explain the world, but to reclaim a prereflective contact with the world" (Locke 2008, p. 106). Merleau-Ponty asserts the 'fundamental narcissism of all vision,' noting that one discovers oneself as existing as seen by the world as much as by actively interpreting it" For Merleau-Ponty, the object of philosophy as he stated was to achieve again this primal perceptual contact with the world that would let it speak to us, and this led him to realize the key role that literature allows to the philosopher to enter this dialogue. Poetic and literary language assumes different importance once one follows the trajectory of an embodied phenomenology. They are essential to the philosopher's midwifing of perception's own expressiveness in a further articulation as the "laying down of being" as given as the goal for phenomenology in that passage of the Preface of the *Phenomenology of Perception*; it follows the logic of embodiment that this event occurs within that strange temporality also first mentioned in the *Phenomenology* of how a past comes to be that had never been until that moment of expression.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

- Alloa, Emmanuel. 2017. *Resistance of the Sensible World: An Introduction to Merleau-Ponty*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Barbaras, Renaud. 2004. *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*. Translated by Ted Toadvine, and Leonard Lawlor. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Beith, Don. 2018. *The Birth of Sense: Generative Passivity in Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- de Saint Aubert, Emmanuel. 2006. *Du lien des êtres aux éléments d'être: Merleau-Ponty au tournant des années 1945–1951*. [My Translations]. Paris: Vrin.
- de Saint Aubert, Emmanuel. 2020. Emmanuel de. Metaphoricity: Carnal Infrastructures and Ontological Horizons. In *Merleau-Ponty's Poetic of the World*. New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 121–58.
- Locke, Patricia. 2008. Among the Hawthorns. In *Intertwinings: Interdisciplinary Encounters with Merleau-Ponty*. Edited by Gail Weiss. Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 99–110.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. New York: The Humanities Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1964a. Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence. In *Signs*. Translated by Richard McCleary. Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, pp. 39–83.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1964b. *The Primacy of Perception*. Translated by Carleton Dallery. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1968. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1970. *Themes from the Lectures at the College de France 1952–1960*. Translated by John O'Neill. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1973. *The Prose of the World*. Translated by John O'Neill. Evanston: Northwest Univ. Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2004. *The World of Perception*. Translated by Routledge. New York: Routledge.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2010. *Intuition and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France*. Translated by Len Lawlor, and Helen Massey. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2011. *Le Monde Sensible et le Monde de l'expression: Cours au Collège de France Notes 1953*. [My Translations]. Geneva: Métis Presses.
- Wiskus, Jessica. 2013. *The Rhythm of Thought: Art, Literature, and Music after Merleau-Ponty*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.