

THE ONTOLOGICAL IMAGINARY: DEHISCENCE, SORCERY, AND CREATIVITY IN MERLEAU-PONTY'S PHILOSOPHY

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This paper intends to demonstrate that, beginning with his analyses of dream and hallucination in *Phenomenology of perception* up to his definition of dehiscence as ontological principle in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty holds the audacious assumption that the subject is thrown into a dreamlike and bewitched world and the self is diffracted into many reflections. It is, I will claim, a fundamental thesis in his philosophy inasmuch as it enables him to unveil and even radicalize the modern crisis and to pose a crucial ethical problem: if reason is not guaranteed and has to arise perilously from irrational depths, the self is threatened by inauthenticity, illusion and alienation; the existence is a strange dream which may anytime turn into a nightmare. I will also show that Merleau-Ponty reverses this crisis into an asset: a reality which includes a fundamental dimension of imaginary leaves us free to create new metamorphoses.

Keywords: Phenomenology – Ontology – Crisis – Dream – Reality – Realism – Action

The dimension of violence is often overlooked in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Its alleged quietism has thus been pointed out several times.¹ However Merleau-Ponty's starting point, as demonstrated by *Humanism and Terror* for instance or by *Causeurie 1948* is not only the crisis of modernity, but a radicalized crisis, a crisis that he brought to a possibly unbearable climax. "Nothing is guaranteed" is one of the leitmotifs of the earlier Merleau-Ponty.² The key for such a radicalization of the crisis, is Merleau-Ponty's overcoming of realism, in other words his overcoming of the opposition between reality and the imaginary, or between masks and the original behind them. I would like to show in the following paper that Merleau-Ponty gives a crucial place in his philosophy to an original

¹ See for instance M. Haar, « Proximité et distance vis-à-vis de Heidegger chez le dernier Merleau-Ponty » in *Notes de cours sur L'origine de la géométrie de Husserl*, R. Barbaras ed., Paris, P.U.F., 1998, p.144-145. Let us also mention the famous « the flesh is too tender » in Deleuze and Guattari's *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie*, Paris, Minuit, 1991, p.169, Eng.tr. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, p.179

² See for instance « L'agrégation de philosophie » in *Parcours 1935-1951*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 1997, p. 58 and *Phénoménologie de la perception* (PP), Paris, Gallimard, 1945 p.XV, p.199, p.328, p.340, p.344.

irrationality and that he does so by defining reality as a dream, that is to say, correlatively, as a nightmare (since the latter always lines and haunts the former), which entails the founding of a deeply renewed ethics.

The crisis of Modernity is one of the most fundamental motivations of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, as of Husserl's. In *The world of perception*,³ Merleau-Ponty describes this crisis as a dreadful manifestation of the irrational heart of existence: modern art reveals a changing and unfinished world, psychoanalysis blurs the borders between normal and pathological, science falls off its pedestal, Marx's analyses and the two World Wars throw harsh light on malefic depths in politics and history. Everything is completely enigmatic again.⁴ It is as if man had to undergo again the Dionysian ordeals of Greek mystery plays:⁵ a terrifying but perhaps fertile exaltation of irrational forces of life, madness, loss of the self, ecstasy. My contention in this paper will be that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy brings the modern crisis to its paroxysm by defining the self, its world and each being as carried away into a dreamlike existence where dreams and nightmares morph into each other. One can find in Merleau-Ponty's thought a very unusual elevation of the imaginary: he goes as far as to describe it as "the *Stiftung* (institution) of Being".⁶ *First* we will show how the phenomenological description of experience reveals its oneiric texture and why the latter does constitute a necessary condition of every existence. There must be some kind of a magical communication between things and subjects, more than that: a syncretic sensitive field from which beings stem and where they remain deeply rooted and connected to one another. The ontological revolution conducted by Merleau-Ponty may be defined as requiring us to integrate a fundamental dimension of imaginary into the real and to acknowledge an "oneiric being"⁷ or an anonymous imaginary field as ontologically original. Nonetheless the notion of oneirism must not make us forget the terrifying aspect of such an imaginary origin and this will bring us, *second*, to display the reverse side of maleficence and sorcery that is inseparable from the oneiric dimension of existence. The meaningfulness of the world, the miracles of perception and intersubjectivity are also cursed. Magic might at any time turn into evil spell and dream into nightmare, and possibly vice versa, in a way that cannot be totally clarified by any rational analysis and prevents effective predictability. Thus the surprising elevation of the imaginary that Merleau-Ponty achieves in his work may be, we think, the means for him

³ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Causeries 1948*, Paris Seuil, 2002. Translated by O. Davis, Routledge, 2004

⁴ *Causeries 1948*, op. cit. p.33

⁵ Merleau-Ponty explicitly alludes to Nietzsche *The birth of Tragedy* in *Parcours 1935 – 1951*, op. cit., p. 64. See also *Parcours deux*, p.205 and « Philosophie et non-philosophie depuis Hegel » in Notes de cours 1959-1961, Paris: Gallimard, 1996, p.276-278. We have analyzed in a more detailed way a few connections and differences between Merleau-Ponty's and Nietzsche's philosophies in « Nietzsche et Merleau-Ponty: profondeur des images et pensées de l'éternel retour », in *Chiasmi International*, Vrin, Mimésis, Memphis U.P., Clinamen Press, n°13, 2012.

⁶ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible* (VI), Paris, Gallimard, 1964, p.316

⁷ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Parcours deux*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 2000, « L'œuvre et l'esprit de Freud » (1960), p. 281.

to record in the most striking and appropriate way, the modern crisis and, even more essentially, the underlying insanity that always accompanies reason. *Lastly* we will show that Merleau-Ponty also gives us the key to turn such a distressing condition into an asset, not by breaking away from the imaginary, which is impossible, but by taking advantage of its fecundity. The imaginary dimension of reality assigns to our creative imaginations a crucial ethical role if not to overcome the crisis – which is actually an unavoidably ever-recurring crisis – at least to go through it fruitfully. In a subtle reversal, most precious at a time when we are more than ever convinced to be surrounded by images and trapped in them, Merleau-Ponty taught us how “imagination can save from imagination”.⁸



M. Merleau-Ponty

Merleau-Ponty’s audacious thesis: reality is like a dream

a) Merleau-Ponty’s definition of the essential characteristics of dreams

Merleau-Ponty defines the essential characteristics of dreams in his reflections about Freud’s idea of symbolism in “L’institution, la passivité”.⁹ He asserts that the dream is the archetype of an obscure and protean meaning emerging through a rhapsody of sensations. Merleau-Ponty shows great interest in Freud’s idea of symbolism. According to Merleau-Ponty the purpose of psychoanalysis is in no way to reduce everything to crude sexual urges, but, on the contrary, to show that apparently undignified or simply organic behaviours are straightaway “symbolic matrices”,¹⁰ capable of making themselves the emblems of more complicated relations.¹¹ The Oedipus complex in particular is a relationship with parents which goes well beyond the pursuit of pleasure: what is at stake is affection, exclusive care, love, identification with another, appropriation of another, rivalry... it

will be embodied in many situations, many particular behaviours and relationships. In the

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, « Les philosophes célèbres », *Parcours deux*, p.204 : « Les grecs ont créé une raison qui sait qu’en n’étant qu’elle-même elle ne serait pas la raison, qui laisse parler tout le reste de l’homme, qui consent même au mythe, à condition qu’il soit l’imagination sauvant de l’imagination ».

⁹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *L’institution, la passivité. Notes de cours au Collège de France* (IP), Paris, Belin, 2003, pp. 200-223

¹⁰ IP p. 207, “matrices symboliques”

¹¹ IP p. 212

dream each thing and each character is overdetermined and symbolises many other objects, making it impossible for psychoanalysts to list these references comprehensively. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that symbolism is not a contingent link between a latent meaning and a substitute which is extraneous to it: it would not be understandable that the symbol can fulfil its function as a means of expression or the dream its cathartic function.¹²

There is no clear meaning that consciousness would ignore and the unconscious would clearly know. In other words, the meaning of dream is essentially ambiguous, multiple and embodied in changing disguises; in dreams the objects are not signs denoting many other objects, they become multiple and *are* many other objects: every character and every thing become oddly decentered. Symbolical meaning is essentially protean, diffracted and beyond the distinction between presence and absence; it carries away the dreamer into a vertiginous multiplication of the self and makes him lose his bearings.

In fact, Merleau-Ponty's whole thinking leads to the thesis that the definition of dream is the archetype to correctly define every "reality". Indeed no meaning is *ever* transparent. In order to understand this assumption, I will first explain how Merleau-Ponty discovered that presence and absence, the imaginary and the real always and originally intertwine.

b) The imaginary and reality are originally intertwined

This thesis appears first in the analyses dedicated to dreaming and hallucinations in *Phenomenology of perception*¹³ and in the Sorbonne Lessons entitled "*Structure and conflicts in child consciousness*".¹⁴ According to Merleau-Ponty the imaginary deserves serious attention because its power of persuasion blurs the usual distinctions between being and nothingness, object and subject, presence and absence¹⁵. "If myth, dreaming and illusion are to be possible, the apparent and the real must remain ambiguous in the subject as in the object".¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty reproaches Sartre for having first defined perception as plenitude and the imaginary as unobservable lack. Since the imaginary and the perceived are, in some states of mind, "indistinguishable", since "there is no criterion enabling one to definitely distinguish an image from a perception",¹⁷ then Sartre must, in the end, evoke a "hybrid zone which is the ambiguity zone" where "the indistinctness

¹² IP p.202

¹³ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (PP), Paris, Gallimard, 1945, pp. 324-344 (L'espace), 385-397 (la chose et le monde naturel)

¹⁴ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Psychologie et pédagogie de l'enfant, Cours de Sorbonne 1949-1952* (PPE), Verdier, 2001, pp. 224-234

¹⁵ As a result it is important to specify that "the imaginary" is not first and foremost the product of our imagination as a mental subjective faculty. It is an anonymous source of images, schemes and reveries that may recur across different individuals, epochs and societies. It possesses its own power and obsessions, and it inspires and solicits our imagination. The latter has a broad room for maneuver to take over again these imageries, play with them and interpret them in a creative and original way.

¹⁶ PP p. 340

¹⁷ PPE p. 231

between the real and the imaginary” reigns¹⁸. Likewise the child who perceives his dreams in the real world “must be right in a way (...) if there is to be, for the adult, one same intersubjective world”.¹⁹

Merleau-Ponty strengthened this idea of fundamental intertwining between the imaginary and the perceived with his study of intersubjectivity, and particularly with his reflection about the Mirror Stage in Lacan.²⁰

I and the other are obviously not one and the same, but neither can we be perfect strangers to each other, to the pain of solipsism. The other has to be in some way “constituted” by me. But, while studying Lacan,²¹ Merleau-Ponty shows that, as Husserl also sensed, this is less a matter of fusing the other into me, than of understanding her as scattering my self into a myriad of sparkling reflections and images.

Since encountering the other is possible, there has to be some original fundamental syncretism, which Merleau-Ponty precisely notes as the dominant feature of child psychology.²² The other and I are not originally separated, which is why Lacan is able to assert that to discover oneself into the mirror is an anticipation of the other’s encounter.²³ In some way the other is first a new dimension of my self. Even in adulthood, the other’s thought and personality are not locked inside her body and away from me: she is the other side of her behaviours. Similarly my consciousness is grafted on the world. The other’s behaviour and mine are part of the same system, their gestures shape intentions that my gestures take up again without any necessary reflection. In my perception of the other, my body and her “form a couple, performing some dual action”.²⁴ This syncretism is obviously dominant in the first years of our life: children don’t clearly separate what they feel and what the other feels, their actions and the other’s. Thus there is between the other and I the same natural and fascinating affinity as between my mirror image and I. To be sure the other and I are not as one. Nevertheless it is consequently all the more exact to assert, as Lacan does, that the other is like a picture of me or like my own specular image: this assertion compels us to take into account, in our definition of relations with the others, an essential role of strangeness, possible distortions and the great margin left to imagination. The underlying meaning in gestures and words is always assumed, but never firmly possessed. My resumption of the theme I sense in the other’s gestures may be a misinterpretation, a variation away from his own path. The fundamental syncretism which binds me to the other is a basis for an endless dialogue, not a peaceful fusion. Thus my perception of

¹⁸ PPE p. 233

¹⁹ PP p. 408

²⁰ See for instance the Sorbonne Lesson entitled “The child’s relations with Others in ”*Parcours 1935-1951*, pp.147-228 and Lacan, « Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je » (1949), in *Ecrits*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1966, p.93-100. Merleau-Ponty also refers to « Propos sur la causalité psychique » (1946) *Ecrits*, p. 151-193.

²¹ Ibid. p. 202-206

²² Ibid. pp. 218-221

²³ Ibid. p. 203

²⁴ *Parcours 1935-1951*, p.178

the other goes through incessant projections and introjections which all are bold “intentional encroachments”, a phrase Merleau-Ponty borrows from Husserl.²⁵ These are always uncertain attempts, leaps into the void. To me, the other’s presence is a distance, I will never be exactly her, she is *like a ghost haunting me*.²⁶ Her presence includes a part of absence; the perceived and the imaginary here intertwine again. The other “is beyond the objective body like the meaning of a painting is beyond the canvas”.²⁷ Thus the child who recognizes himself in the mirror experiences an inaugural splitting of the self, a mysterious absence from himself: he is swept toward the unknown. My image is not what simply refers to my own body staying blithely in its place; it is not a mere sign that one can ignore exclusively in favor of what it denotes. It is definitely one of my avatars, a new dimension of my self (towards which the child adopts magical behaviours: he talks to it, kisses it...), my mirror image really is myself, but a self in a new light, thrown aloof, objectivized, becoming strange and full of questions. This brings Narcissus’ vertigo, in other words, the birth within the self of a first dehiscence which is going to proliferate.²⁸ Experiencing mirroring is experiencing the delimitation of the self, immediately and paradoxically linked with the diffraction into many reflections of that alienated and open self. All these reflections are germinating “alter egos”, not well-determined persons but indecisive and wandering ghosts speaking to imagination more than to reason.

But it is not only the ego and the other that are in such a way regarded as a collection of indecisive images: Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that no meaning can be clear-cut and crystal-clear. No being can be pure self-identity. Every meaning *requires necessarily* the same part of mystery, unsettledness and metamorphoses as in dreams. *All* meaning – consequently all being – is symbolical, veiled and metamorphic, as in dreams. Merleau-Ponty’s fundamental reference on this point is Saussure’s linguistics.²⁹

Every language is a diacritical system; it is an objective sequence of sounds first taking on, for a child or a foreigner, the opaque appearance of an inarticulate melody. But that melody lets us progressively glimpse that an underlying organisation is governing it. And while I am sensing that organization, at the same time, the signification begins to appear. But that organization implies nothing of an absolutely and clearly determined system, even for those who understand it. Only “magnetic” poles of cross-reference, which Saussure calls “values”, arise and crystallise through resemblance and differentiation relations. A value is not a positively determined, perfectly defined, entity. This is only an open set of singular sounds grouped together by virtue of rough kinship and of their common difference from all others. The gathering of various sounds depends on the rest of the system. This also applies to the “signified”. Each signified occupies the field

²⁵ E. Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge* (Husserliana I) (1929-1931), S. Strasser ed., La Haye, Nijhoff, 1950, §51.

²⁶ M. Merleau-Ponty, *La Prose du monde* (PM), Paris, Gallimard, 1969, p. 186

²⁷ Ibid. p. 263

²⁸ *Parcours 1935-1951* p. 203

²⁹ See for instance PM, pp. 35-37

left by the rest of the system. It is negatively defined, which makes it the theme of an infinite number of possible variations: the meaning thus is always the other side of contingent signs, it requires resummptions and metamorphoses without determining them strictly, and so keeps some measure of obscurity.

The perception of the other and of things is also based on the formation and the apparition of a meaning, therefore Merleau-Ponty extends Saussure's definition of meaning to the whole world. Things and persons take shape between the lines of manifold profiles or behaviours, as shown by Husserl's theory of *Abschattungen*. My perception always has to take hold of the object by getting beyond the part of it which is definitely given to me. "*Abschattungen*" (profiles or adumbrations) are mere sketches, the object transcends them and such a transcendence is precisely the essential requirement for this object to be given as a genuine reality. The wonder of a perceived object is that it is present *leibhaftig*, in its bodily presence, but includes a deep dimension of absence and possible metamorphoses: the unseen, still-to-be-seen, foreseeable or unsuspected and still undecided profiles "are", strictly speaking, not *beings*. The *Abschattungen* horizon is neither pure absence, nor pure presence. The same goes for my life and my thought: always already to the world, to the other and looking for its self through indefinite variations, situations and images of itself. I am the secret axis (non-positive axis) polarizing a flow of countless phenomena.

Thus every meaning and every reality have that ghostly mode of being which also characterizes – only more obviously – dreamlike objects: none of them can be restricted to a well-delimited place or remain within the scope of a finite rational definition. One always has to "find the real by jumping ahead of it, in the imaginary".³⁰ Each thing, each character alludes to others, some from which it differs, some into which it can be metamorphosed. This is the reason why there are, according to Merleau-Ponty "a dreamlike dimension of wide-awake life"³¹ and an "imaginary texture of the real".³² A new situation may be apprehended, unconsciously, through its affinity with a past situation that will, implicitly, communicate to it a part of its signification. More generally every perception includes this dreamlike quality: "There are other things hidden in all things. There is a dreamlike perception".³³ Art exalts this symbolic power which precedes, enlivens and throw all things "off center", and Merleau-Ponty lays stress on the idea that art is not a matter of metaphors conjured up at the artist's whim: it is the disclosure of a reverie already inherent in the real itself.³⁴ The Mont Sainte-Victoire in its very perceptive reality is already the secret axis of many surprising variations in its appearances, so it *itself* can be present in these new variations that are the colours on Cezanne's canvas.³⁵ Variation is absolutely necessary to create meaning, as Merleau-Ponty explains in *The Prose of the*

³⁰ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signes* (S), Paris: Gallimard, 1960, p. 154

³¹ IP p.200, "un onirisme de la veille"

³² M. Merleau-Ponty, *L'Oeil et l'esprit* (OE), Paris: Gallimard, 1964, folio essais p. 24

³³ Unpublished working note, B.N. volume VIII [330] Decembre 1959, quoted by E. de Saint Aubert, *Du lien des êtres aux éléments de l'être*, Paris, Vrin, 2004, p. 258.

³⁴ PM, p.91 et 98

³⁵ OE, p. 35

world:³⁶ stability of structures merely leads to triteness and meaningless absence of depth. Thus both perception and speech are always unexpected distortions, decentrations, and leaps into novelty – an essential prerequisite for meaning to appear. But this also implies a permanent risk of losing meaning. Thus words can “die” if they become trite, but also if they become hermetic. In the same way, each perception is as if it were cursed: it can explode into a myriad of strange appearances and ghosts. Sense arises from nonsense, and either may at any time reverse into the other.

From dream to nightmare: dehiscence and sorcery in Merleau-Ponty.

At first the dreamlike world is for us a source of great insecurity, a permanent threat of nightmares. The diacritical birth of meaning through the opacity of a variable sensitive material is a process that consciousness does not master. The dream is thus the archetype of self dispossession: one is carried away by what Freud calls “the unconscious” and what Merleau-Ponty defines as an anonymous, imminent and obscure meaning. My life’s secret meaning, which has emerged as the other side of my situations, body, experiences and encounters, continues to radiate into my dreams by becoming the inner sense of multiple symbols. There I find myself diffracted into various characters and places, which are the distorting mirrors where my existence is reflected, sometimes revealed but always turned into disconcerting and open questions. The multiplication of the self is the mode of being which commonly defines the imaginary. But Merleau-Ponty shows that this is not an exceptional state: it is normality itself. Every minute I am possessed by the sense weaving itself through sensible profiles. I am grafted on what Merleau-Ponty calls the “still drowsy”³⁷ part of my self: the anonymous life of the senses. I and my consciousness are the polarisation of many “dreamy consciousnesses”³⁸ still scattered throughout the world and the others. “I am never at one with myself”.³⁹

Merleau-Ponty goes so far as to define this ek-stasis more generally as the main concept of his ontology in *The Visible and the Invisible*. The first principle of all things is dehiscence⁴⁰. This means that nothing can be fully itself and finished. There must be a distance between profiles of one same thing, between the other and me, between the things and me, and even between me and myself. If, according to the positivist prejudice, each being were plainly itself, pure self coincidence, then I would stay locked up inside myself, without this tiny gap of time which is necessary for self-consciousness. There would be neither objects nor a world, yet only one unchanging Being, made from one piece. Each profile, each being, each person is thus itself and beyond itself, haunted by the things and the others; all of them always remain unfinished.

Consequently dehiscence throws us into alienation. All that I manage to understand

³⁶ PM, p. 51

³⁷ PP p. 196

³⁸ PP p. 399

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ VI, p. 201

may escape me. There can be no absolute certainty any longer, neither about the other, nor about the perceived things or about any scientific concept, because there is no fixed object which could fit a strictly circumscribed idea. There is no finished humanity, no guaranteed reason;⁴¹ consequently there are no longer good grounds for dismissing “children, animals, lunatics and primitives”⁴² as unworthy of notice. The normal adult can rediscover within herself “all sorts of fantasies, daydreams, magical behaviours, obscure phenomena that remain almighty in her private and public life”.⁴³ Indeed my temporality will always prevent me from “getting definitively out of the unauthentic”, namely from “ever reaching the density of an absolute individual”:⁴⁴ I always bet on an uncertain future, in which I may not be true to myself any longer. Because of my body and the other’s co-functioning, grafted on the world, my acts will be taken up again, brought away to success or failure, transfigured in a way I can not control nor even foresee. None of my intentions can claim to be pure, transparent and absolute: they are immanent in particular and contingent variations, whose consequences are beyond me. This is what Merleau-Ponty designates, in *Humanism and Terror* in particular, by the notion of “sorcery” inspired from Marx’s reflections on commodity fetishism.⁴⁵ “There is something like an evil spell cast on living with others”.⁴⁶ Acting is taking on roles already partly outlined by the situation, the institutions and the others; it is thus “wrapping oneself in a great ghost”.⁴⁷ We animate that ghost, but it puts us off center and alienates us, because it is also defined by the situation and what others see in that phantom. There lies “the nightmare of an involuntary responsibility, which already sustained the Oedipus myth”.⁴⁸ Thus the October 1917 Revolution in Russia turns into totalitarianism, “it escapes its own architects (...) they continue without understanding that their venture is changing under their hands”.⁴⁹ “All human action, transforming itself through reality, produces something it does not recognize itself in”,⁵⁰ nevertheless it “cannot disown itself without contradicting itself”,⁵¹ because an action is by definition an attempt to involve ourselves in the heart of world in order to change it: we have to accept in return that our actions should be modified by the world. Universal Flesh therefore suffers gaping wounds,⁵² it has to undergo the ordeal of Dionysian metamorphoses.

Nonetheless that nightmare is ambiguous: without universal dehiscence, meaning

⁴¹ *Causeuses* 1948, p. 35

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 37

⁴⁴ PP p. 489

⁴⁵ K. Marx, *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Part I, chapter, 1, section IV „Der Fetischcharakter der Ware und sein Geheimnis”.

⁴⁶ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Humanisme et terreur* (HT), Paris, Gallimard, 1947, p. XXXIV

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. XXVIII

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. XXXV

⁴⁹ S p. 334

⁵⁰ HT p. 71

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² PM p. 63

would never appear. I owe my existence and its wealth to it. Without my being bogged down in the world and without my intertwining with the other, I would not have a chance of imprinting the mark of my intentions on the real. Fundamental intertwining is self-dispossession and, in some way, violence, but it is also a wonderful magic, a miracle: meaning blooms everywhere in the hollow of the Sensible, *transcendent* objects are given to me *in flesh*, the other's intentions touch me and I can move her spirit from a distance.

Hence nightmare and dream are the wrong side and the right side of one same magic. So, is humanity to rely on chance alone? Merleau-Ponty rejects that conclusion: we have the possibility to take advantage of our dreamlike existence.

From dream and nightmare to creative imagination. Anonymous meaning is capable of any kind of metamorphosis, but its future is not pre-determined: each situation, each event, and each perception is an open question. The error would be to believe they are inflexible reality. Thus illusion and insanity always threaten us, but Merleau-Ponty insists on explaining where the difference lies between those who hallucinate and ourselves. We must specify that point to give a more complete account of Merleau-Ponty's reflections about hallucination in *Phenomenology of perception* with which we began. According to Merleau-Ponty, children and those who hallucinate let themselves become invaded and fascinated by their "perceptions-imaginings". On the contrary rationality is the continuous progress that, from one experience to another, seeks convergences, agrees to reject a perception if new profiles require it, and never takes anything for granted.⁵³

Grasping every event as an open question is accepting our freedom defined as total responsibility. The success of my action or of my perception is not guaranteed but neither is their failure inevitable: in our turn we may actively institute new variations which will bring original inflections to the meaning weaving itself through the world. This idea appears notably in *The Prose of the world* and *Adventures of the Dialectic*. Just as the Mont Sainte-Victoire left Cezanne free to express it in an absolutely original way, similarly our past and historical context do not impose any closed meaning on us.

Therefore we are not bound to remain the playthings of original sorcery, and our responsibility remains absolutely intact:⁵⁴ it is up to us to act by taking the situation into account and in order to institute a meaning liable to be taken up again and supported by others. However this is not a matter of opportunism. Indeed, since what is at stake is the venture of meaning, an act will be judged "less on its efficacy than on its fruitfulness",⁵⁵ that is to say, judged on the meaning it inaugurates well beyond one or another actual and current peculiar consequence. The value of an act has to be sought not in demagogy but in the opening of a far more distant and general future: we have to refer not to an empirical majority, the others as they are, but to others as we would like to institute and form them by our act itself. The latter has to be, above all, an expressive act, an institution. Our acts

⁵³ PP p. 332, 394 et 396

⁵⁴ PM p. 91

⁵⁵ Ibid.

are therefore tested less according to their immediate effects, than through a thorough dialogue with others. There is no question of escaping from the dreamlike world: that would be impossible; each individual has to reckon with the permanent risk of malevolent reversal. Involvement in action remains a wager. We stay in the imaginary unsteady field but there we find the third aspect which complements the pair formed by dream and nightmare, that is to say the margin left to creative resumptions accomplished by an *active* and inventive imagination. Thus, in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, Merleau-Ponty contrasts the Hegelian concept of “Reason of history”, with the concept of “Imagination of history”:⁵⁶ action is not the inexorable achievement of a rational destiny, but an art which always has to come into play again and take risks.

Going through the modern crisis to its ultimate nihilist consequences becomes in Merleau-Ponty’s reflections the way of finding new spiritual resources in imagination; Imagination here is not to be defined as a purely active freedom, it is also the patient art of dialoguing with the specters that make up the world. It also consists in the art of making attempts for instituting new lines of meaning in this dreamy world. Merleau-Ponty thus reverses the modern crisis into the situation ideal for the institution of a new rationality which is more daring but also more valuable than classical reason because it accepts the difficult adventures that will try to construct it on the basis of a fundamental irrationality

The phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty induces us to accept that our existence is less solid than we are taught. We have to admit that everything is “governed” by the metamorphic force of images, which are as potent as we allow them to be. If we simply trust them, we will be torn by their variations. Life is some kind of ironical play, but it is not insignificant: nightmarish metamorphoses are a trade-off for fertile magic and the chance it always offers us to create new rules to play with.

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⁵⁶ *Les Aventures de la dialectique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1955, folio essais, p. 29.