

Introduction

There is nothing about predictability that guards against unpredictability, nothing about it that guarantees the unpredictable will remain quiet. The predictable is not certain and does not exclude the unpredictable. Whereas the unpredictable intervenes in the predictable and interrupts the very scene in which its previous appearance would seem impossible. It ruptures. Referring to the notion formalized by set-theory ontology as the “void set,” Alain Badiou calls this rupture an “event.”¹ An event, he says, is a “pure inconsistent multiplicity.”² It means nothing in itself, but counters in dramatic fashion the existent thing that otherwise presents itself as coherent and unified, what Badiou calls the “count-as-one.”³ If there is an event, in other words, the very conditions of existence, cohesion and unity, have been removed. Normality is perturbed, and a totally new space is opened up to rethink reality.

This is the context in which philosophies of the event are often positioned against phenomenology. The assumption is that phenomenology reorients incoherency to coherency, inconsistency to consistency, nonsense to sense, and therefore also closes itself to the truly abnormal aspect of events. According to Deleuze, though, Sartre comes closest to a philosophy of the event since he wants to think about “an impersonal transcendental field” that has “the form neither of a personal synthetic consciousness nor subjective identity.”⁴ This exception is telling: a philosophy of the event does not exclude the transcendental per se. It does not, for example, exclude the transcendental conceived in terms of nihilation. Only when it is conceived in terms of an intention, whether subjective or bodily, does the transcendental exclude the event. A more acceptable transcendental, one that accords with the event, would be afield from intentionality in general. It would be totally outside the apparent object,

the subject conceived as the person to whom the object appears, and even the bodily situation that conjoins the two aspects of appearing. An event would break from all forms of intentionality so radically that it cannot be an origin, destination, or even a preexisting referent, and its eventfulness would instead be utterly spontaneous.

Whereas, as Deleuze points out, Sartre does not ultimately abandon the idea that the impersonal transcendental field is self-consciousness, in his *Institution and Passivity* lectures, Merleau-Ponty regularly speaks of the “matrix” and matrix events.⁵ Matrix events do not emphasize self-consciousness at the cost of difference. They are, in fact, called matrices because they constellate difference as difference. It will prove noteworthy that, in the institution lectures, one of the initial mentions of a matrix has to do with the “symbolic matrix” Freud locates between human and animal.⁶ A matrix event may be equated with differentiation in several ways: in addition to difference between human and animal, it can refer to the exterior and interior, public and personal, language and speech. A matrix event runs a circuit through these differences. But the loop of matrix events is never closed, and neither are the terms they snap up into them. This is crucial, for unless Merleau-Ponty thinks that, through the event, differences are reduced to an identity, he is not guilty of the typical criticism that befalls phenomenology—that it transforms nonsense into sense and makes what is incoherent coherent. It may be true that in phenomenology the transcendental field has the look of an ideal that excludes difference. This is undoubtedly so, for example, when Husserl calls transcendental consciousness an “absolute sense-bestowing consciousness” from which no other sense escapes. But, according to Merleau-Ponty, even this transcendental consciousness appears absolute by virtue of some alteration that has transpired, unprompted, within it. To the extent that there is some further condition to the transcendental field for him, he has a notion of its event that cannot be reduced to coherence and is not ideological.

Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty at least initially says matrix events are temporal, and the key to understanding them is to trace out their character not reducible to the order of time’s succession. For example, time conceived as a series of equally weighted and distinct instants will not explain the way an “event events” and always succeeds itself. If an event cannot be understood in causal terms, it is because it is instead promiscuous with times other than itself or even “distant from” and “non-coincidental with” itself. An event is not singular but plural. Its plurality, furthermore, prevents the event from being teleological. That there is a temporal character to the matrix event means neither that it is

an origin from which other times succeed nor that it is a destination into which all times lead. The event is neither an origin nor a destination.

Matrix Events and Institution

As Merleau-Ponty would characteristically put it: events are always and only on an “adventure.” These are monumental historical moments like the ones mentioned in the institution lectures—the Industrial Revolution, the invention of planimetric perspective, or Paul Klee’s line. Engaging with the anthropological work of his good friend Claude Lévi-Strauss, Merleau-Ponty points out in those same lectures that monumental historical moments are not simply consequential instants. When Lévi-Strauss argues that all such moments are discrete chance happenings or aleatory, he prevents these moments from being interrelated.⁷ Therefore, he also fails to show how history is *not* teleological. Yet, according to Merleau-Ponty, there are indeed monumental events that do interrelate moments and make history. These alter both our history and our understanding of ourselves within that history. If we conflate merely important historical instants with events that fundamentally reorganize a meaning-field, we will be unable to explicate the latter and how they reorganize this field. When we try to address these events, however, it is nonetheless difficult not to lapse into familiar terminology and presume that they are teleological from the past into the future. To explicate events, then, Merleau-Ponty instead turns to Husserl’s notion of “institution.” The exposition of institution shows how significant events work themselves in and through times other than when they occur. Indeed, institution reveals that matrix events are not merely previous occurrences or happenings but profound alterations with a meaning-field functioning in the present, of which we are ignorant and to which we remain blind.

In fact, Merleau-Ponty relates institution to the “crisis” which, for Husserl, results from the methodological inability to grasp truth claims in terms of their conditions of possibility. These conditions are ultimately not themselves truth claims for Husserl but involve a transcendental logic of their historical development. In his “*La philosophie aujourd’hui*” lecture, for example, Merleau-Ponty says that

the transcendental is no longer immanent consciousness of constituting *Auffassungen* [opinions]. This would be what he calls in the *Vienna Conference* “*einseitige Rationalität*” [unilateral rationality]—there is, furthermore, for example, history which functions in us, not processes, chains of visible events, but intentional or “vertical” history with

Stiftungen [institutions], forgetting which is tradition, reprisals [*reprises*], interiority in exteriority—*Ineinander* of the present in the past. As long as we have not recovered this transcendental, rationality is in crisis.⁸

Here institution (*Stiftung*) has the double sense of instituted and instituting. It is both that which *has been instituted* and that which *does the instituting or institutes*. It refers to the obvious norms of traditional values and practices that assemble a group of human lives in a particular way; and it refers to the more implicit means by which these traditional values and practices are gathered that do not raise to the level of norms. This reciprocity implies that the explication for any instituted norm is something not obvious to it. That every norm is in fact prepared by something not fixed, ongoing, and otherwise. There is no straightforward trajectory of human history here. The instituting is constitutive *within* the instituted and is repressed or “forgotten” therein. Its pastness is noticeable and visible while its insertion into and configurational character for the instituted is not. Because of this, the instituted is in fact doomed not to last and will always be supplanted with some alternate configuration. We might therefore say that institution describes every present epochal norm as both closed and open: though it seems determined, it is impossible for this norm to continue as is and always liable to continue in some other previously unpredictable way. Hence, Merleau-Ponty’s opening sentences of “The Philosopher and His Shadow”: “Establishing a tradition means forgetting its origins, the aging Husserl used to say. Precisely because we owe so much to tradition, we are in no position to see just what belongs to it.”⁹

One could say that the whole direction of Husserl’s phenomenology, from the static to the genetic, is to exhibit the otherwise secret configurational character of the instituting aspect of institution. That would give him, he thinks, a full picture of the historical development of truth claims and the transcendental structures that make them possible. It would be a relief to the crisis. But, in a Working Note to *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the phenomenology institution could go even beyond the relief of this crisis:

The *Einströmen*: a particular case of sedimentation, that is, a secondary passivity, that is, of latent intentionality—it is Péguy’s *historical inscription*—It is the fundamental structure of *Zeitigung*: *Urstiftung* of a point of time—[Through?] this latent intentionality, intentionality ceases to be what it is in Kant: pure actuals, ceases to be a property of consciousness, of its “attitudes” and of its acts, to become intentional life—

It becomes the thread that binds, for example, my present to my past in its temporal place, such as it was (and not such as I reconquer it by an act of evocation) the possibility of this act rests on the primordial structure of retention as an interlocking of the pasts in one another plus a consciousness of this interlocking as a law (cf. the reflective iteration: the reflection reiterated ever anew would give only “always the same thing” *immer wieder*)—Husserl’s error is to have described the interlocking starting point from a *Präsensfeld* considered as without thickness, as immanent consciousness: it is transcendent consciousness, it is being at a distance, it is the double ground of my life of consciousness, and it is what makes there be able to be *Stiftung* not only of an instant but of a whole system of temporal indexes—time (already as time of the body, taximeter time of the corporeal schema) is the model of these symbolic matrices, which are openness upon being.¹⁰

Whereas earlier transcendental philosophy, such as Kantian philosophy, assumes “pure actuals” behind reflexion that are then never themselves subject to reflexion, Husserl’s phenomenology, through an act of suspension, ultimately aims at these and makes them phenomenally available for the first time. By undermining the pure actionality of consciousness, this phenomenology also reveals a movement of consciousness towards a meaning. That is, it reveals a primordial intentional consciousness, and shows nothing less than a co-substantiation of sense (this would be the noetic pole) and meaning (this would be the noematic pole).¹¹ What is more, phenomenology raises this correlation to the dignity of philosophical reflexion and thematizes it as the proper transcendental structure underneath the pure actuals. Yet there is a problem here too: as long as Husserl thinks appearances always appear in the form of an intentional object, it follows that the transcendental structures of intentionality likewise appear in this form. This means that a transcendental ego never shows up in its purported role as the source of all intentions but only retrospectively and as an intentional object. The solution to this for Husserl is not to return to Kant’s “pure actuals” but move away from them further still. Going from a static structure between sense and meaning to a genetic structure between them, what previously looked like co-substantiation is far more complex. There now, in the genetic structure of consciousness, appears to be a lapse between sense and meaning, so that every sense will have a meaning and meanings other to it. These other meanings do not exactly show but they are nonetheless

at a crossroad with the meaning that does and has sense. This intersection is the model of institution: each intention between sense and meaning will have more and other meanings; these remain unsignified and yet configured within the intention so much as to make it available to reflection.

The phenomenology of institution passes through two dimensions, then: it disrupts Kantian “pure acts” to reveal their transcendental features; it then reveals these features in terms of the unreflexive meanings through which all conscious life streams. Merleau-Ponty says above, however, that even this second dimension does not reduce to an absolute source of all intentions but is in fact a peculiar case of sedimentation. Though at first it seems institution describes an original stream of consciousness, which is defined as the primordial structure of retentions into the past, the reduction applies to it as well. There is, in other words, an unreferenced and unsignified institution that remains configured within and at the crossroads with the institution Husserl recognizes.¹² This matrix between institutions is itself impossible to reduce yet is what allows Husserl to signify institution as the lapse between sense and its alternate meanings.

Merleau-Ponty’s analyses of institution are, as a result, wider in scope than Husserl’s. Beyond human institutions, they also include evolutionary and natural institutions, such as puberty, menstruation, and animal morphology, etc. These biochemical transformations would fall under what Merleau-Ponty describes above as the “secondary passivity” and “latent intentionality” within Husserl’s formulation of institution. Such passivity and intentionality come into view once phenomenology redoubles its efforts and recognizes the difficulty in which it is invariably involved: once it accepts that all reflexion, even reflexion on the primordial structure of institution, sediments whatever it reflects on, phenomenology can no longer demand a return to the things themselves or to the original stream of consciousness. But it has to be open to the organization and event of these themes. The event is, in this context, not spaced apart from or other to reflexion. It is not the simple negative of reflexion. That it is a matrix implies it is unavailable to reflexion from within that same reflexion. In fact, the very method of suspension in phenomenology, which is a deliberate act of disruption, is premised on what resists this act from inside it. One could say here that, if phenomenology relieves a crisis for Husserl, for Merleau-Ponty it discovers that crisis makes it possible. This is the double ground of the life of consciousness that for Merleau-Ponty is basic to institution and is the model of a symbolic matrix.

Sedimentation and Symbolism in Institution

It might seem that such a phenomenology would only form its own circumference and remain a “phenomenology of phenomenology.” To the extent that Merleau-Ponty thinks reflexion sediments and ought to show itself as such, his phenomenology of phenomenology also reveals the phenomena as premised on a kind of resistance to sedimentation. It is no longer only concerned with the movement of consciousness towards its objects and these objects as meant for consciousness. It is no longer only concerned with reflexion and the reflected upon. These relations are instead revealed to be premised on something unsedimented and unthematic that constellates and delimits them. Such delimitation speaks to a primordial passivity that matrixes my capabilities for reflexion and those things I am capable of reflecting on. It is often said that, for Merleau-Ponty, all activity is passivity and all passivity is activity. A primordial passivity is, however, more than the criss-crossing of opposites. To the extent that it constellates both reflexion and the reflected upon, this passivity makes intentionality in all its forms possible and is in fact the formation of significance and thematization. It is for this reason a fundamental non-significance without which significance would be impossible. A primordial passivity is therefore not simply a passive-intentionality. In fact, equivalent to the event of institution, it is without origin and destination. When speaking about primordial passivity, it is thus important to keep in mind that it is not simply the reception of the exterior world into an interior consciousness. If anything, it is also the generativity by which an otherwise exterior world intercepts and intervenes into an otherwise interior consciousness. This is a passivity, as Merleau-Ponty says, “without passivism.”¹³

The question such passivity forces is whether even the most radically reflexive philosophy can uncover the most radically un-reflexive moment before it. Can a reflexive philosophy really capture the very generation of reflexion *and* reveal this generation from its anonymous vantage point? It seems impossible to show a personal consciousness in the milieu of nonpersonal events. It seems impossible, furthermore, to show personal consciousness in the context of events that are public, like the historical matrix events Merleau-Ponty names in his lectures on institution and passivity. Merleau-Ponty is also often accused of being unable to think about symbolic structures, like the symbolic structure of language, which, in quite different terms, could explain the anonymous movement between personal and public. Without some sense of impersonal symbolic structures, for example, we can only assume that a personal

narrative is just an uncritical perspective of someone plunged into the confusion of her present experience, or that history is a study independent of the immediate comprehension of events by those persons who undergo them. Of course, one lecture title in the institution course is, "Institution in Personal and Public History." He certainly wants institution to account for both the personal and the public, and, at least in some ways, turn them into one single problem. He certainly wants phenomenology to capture events that exceed phenomenological reflexion.

There is also no doubt that Merleau-Ponty is eminently a philosopher of the sensible and that, for him, the sensible is profoundly unreflexive. But he also says above that a phenomenology of institution eventuates in the discovery of "symbolic matrices." In the initial reference to the matrix in the institution lectures, Merleau-Ponty mentions a symbolic "displacement" that, according to Freud, exists between the human and animal, and this displacement, he says, is in fact the "*Stiftung* of a future."¹⁴ It is through the symbolic, in other words, that institution is matrixed between consciousness and nature and between the personal and public, etc.¹⁵ In fact, I think, it is by virtue of the symbolic matrix that consciousness and nature or the personal and public are not theoretical but "natural," that is, nonphilosophical, negations of each other.¹⁶

Such a symbolism is intimated in the lecture on "Artistic Creation as Institution." There, Merleau-Ponty mentions that developments such as the technique of planometric perspective in painting are akin to philosophical ones,

only if philosophies themselves are taken not as statements of ideas, but as inventions of symbolic forms. Shortcoming of Cassirer's philosophy consists in thinking that criticism is the endpoint, that philosophical sense has a directing value even though this sense itself is taken up into sedimentation. Consider criticism itself as a symbolic form and not a philosophy of symbolic forms.¹⁷

It is generally accepted that when the instituting becomes instituted without notice it works in some symbolic way. But, if institution is *equated* with symbolic matrices, this reading does not go far enough. The institution lectures themselves require some notion of symbolic form. Since Merleau-Ponty places institution at the core of philosophy and crisis, I would even go so far as to say that, for him, the symbolic form is configured in thought in general. His last sentence here, "consider criticism itself as a symbolic form and not a philosophy

of symbolic forms,” is sweeping and radical in its proposal to alter both the method and aim of philosophy. If philosophical criticism is itself a symbolic form, this would mean that the grounds for every truth claim in fact enfold a symbolic component. The height of philosophical criticism would then, counterintuitively, eventuate in the symbolic. If so, philosophical criticism becomes absorbed by something very much counter to its usual goals, a form only ever discovered in mutation and that is never itself. The “secondary passivity” and “latent intentionality” that Merleau-Ponty earlier says is uncovered once phenomenology also recognizes itself as sedimentation is this very symbolic form. The form at once accommodates both reflexion and eventfulness. One could say that, like institution itself, the symbolic form is also both closed and open: closed, because on its basis consciousness grasps itself and what appears to it; but, open, because it is nonetheless genuinely impersonal or anonymous and not reducible to consciousness’s grasp except in alteration. It is because of the symbolic form, in other words, that when consciousness grasps itself clearly, this is also a state of crisis.

Merleau-Ponty declares in “In Praise of Philosophy,” his inaugural lecture delivered at the Collège de France in 1953, that, “it is useless to contest that philosophy limps,” and that, “[t]he limping of philosophy is its virtue.”¹⁸ If “critique” belongs to the idea of knowledge and a theory of knowledge, the symbolic form of critique denies that these are on a straightforward march towards objective truth. In view of the symbolic form, in other words, Merleau-Ponty accepts that critique does not fulfill the aim of a theory of knowledge and even that there is no single project or trajectory of philosophy. In fact, he also says in the history portion of “In Praise of Philosophy,”

[b]ut for the tacit symbolism of life [philosophy] substitutes, in principle, a conscious symbolism; for a latent meaning, one that is manifest. It is never content to accept its historical situation (as it is not content to accept its own past). It changes this situation by revealing it to itself and, therefore, by giving it the opportunity of entering into conversation with other times and other places where its truth appears. . . . Philosophical, aesthetic, and literary criticism, therefore have an intrinsic value, and history can never take their place. It is also true, however, that one can always recover from the book the fragments of history on which it has crystalized, and this is really necessary in order to know to what extent it has changed them in their truth. Philosophy turns towards the anonymous symbolic activity from which we emerge, and towards the personal discourse which develops in us, and which, indeed, we are.¹⁹

As soon as Merleau-Ponty proposes to show that philosophical critique is itself a symbolic form, that the symbolic form is the limit of critique itself, he also proposes a transformation of phenomenology. Though phenomenology may still be concerned with the possibility of knowledge, this same concern is now directed to symbolic forms instead of eidetic ones. But the term “directed” is already misleading. To interrogate the symbolic form of philosophical critique, phenomenology becomes the study of how thought raises what it examines to the level of signification and thereby modifies it. This is no longer a phenomenology concerned with the exhibition of some referent behind thought—it is not even concerned with what thought thinks. This is rather a phenomenology that reveals thought as a mutation of the symbolic form, which for its part remains unexhibitable and undisclosable. Even the earlier formulation of phenomenology, which called itself an “archeology of all thought,” would be ignorant of this symbolic form. The “philosophy about the symbolism of philosophical critique” is in effect a transversal slice of philosophy where it meets its own internal and un-thought limit.

This transversal slice lacks a referent in any usual sense. It is not pointed to a precise object, principle, or foundation, and it is in fact not confined to direct signification. Yet Merleau-Ponty does quite explicitly say above that the symbolic matrix is also openness upon being. He also says elsewhere in *The Visible and the Invisible* that the symbolic is not just a model but the very event of phenomenality.²⁰ For Merleau-Ponty, in other words, being does not precede the symbolic matrix or is something to be uncovered by the symbolic form. Rather, being is symbolic and the symbolic is ontological. The symbolic does not, however, mediate or bring beings together with being but opens up and is the very difference between them. It is, in other words, on an adventure and is not a destination end or even a proper origin. It takes or is always on an excursion—between consciousness and unconsciousness, body and world, oneself and another, and the things of the world—while also being no place otherwise. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty can stress that the symbolic is anonymous—in between consciousness, humans, and things—and he may in fact associate it with themes more central to his thought such as flesh and *écart*.

Symbolic Forms and Elemental Being

The symbolic matrix thus proposes a variation in the relation between sense and meaning. While there may be a singular and specific relation between sense and its meaning, this relation is in fact owing to

overdetermined meaning. Such overdetermination is not prohibitive. It may be clear that each sense corresponds directly to a meaning, but in fact this correspondence is due to some mutation and alteration that have transpired within the meaning. This implies that each sense is always open to other meanings and that these meanings in fact configure the otherwise obvious correspondence between sense and meaning. For example, in the theory of the sign: the relation between the signifier and the signified is obvious only because of the interventional character of meaning. Moreover, from the point of view of the relation itself, this interventional character is irreducible to either term and remains silent or mute, always unsignified. The issue is how meaning can mutate in such a way that it is at once both unsignified and integral to signification.

This question automatically demands a new thesis about sense and meaning, which differs from both intentional correlation and ontological difference. For example, if the unsignified configures and intervenes within the relation of signification, this relation cannot intend it. What is unsignified instead delimits both the apparent being and the consciousness to which it appears. It is therefore ontological to the extent that it slips within and pervades all the terms of the relation. In doing so, it makes consciousness and the world both interpenetrable and interpenetrating. That is, it places each term within the other. When taken to its conclusion, this implies a further complication: the symbolic matrix that delimits each term of an intentional correlation also delimits what is in excess of the correlation. It stops being from sinking below its constellation within beings. This is in part the reason Merleau-Ponty uses the phrase “symbolic form” against Cassirer. The symbolic matrix is not what cannot appear, or on the other side of what appears, but is rather the limit of both what appears and what does not. It is, as such, always within visible things and the invisible spaces between them. It is where the contour and shape of one thing meet the contour and shape of another thing so that each may be what it is. In fact, it would be possible, only from inside this matrix, to grasp some difference between the meaning of being as opposed to beings. The symbolic matrix is, in short, an ontological tissue prior to formal ontology. It is inside ontology. It does not, and cannot, close difference but is from where it opens.

While I admit there is no thorough or consistent analysis of anything like an ontological symbolism in Merleau-Ponty, I find suggestions of it in his understanding and references to the elements. My interest in the elements here has to do with Merleau-Ponty’s suggestion that, like the symbolic form itself, the elements also subsume direct intentions and

reveal them in terms of inseparable but nonintended aspects. It is on the basis of these nonintentions that all intentions are in the world and remain concrete. Merleau-Ponty goes so far as to say, for example, that the intentions of perception are not first but rather the “*elements* (water, air), *rays of the world*, things which are dimensions, which are worlds; I slide over these ‘elements,’ and there I am in the *world*.”²¹ I would therefore like to depart from M.C. Dillon’s claim that, for Merleau-Ponty, the elements are determinate and irreducible non-givens in the phenomena and are therefore dogmatic.²² The elements are, to my mind, precisely the opposite: they are by no means determinate, by no means exterior to the explicit phenomenon, and do not oppose it. They are rather within the phenomenon even if they are not themselves phenomenal. They also therefore do not introduce a new reality. The only reason they cannot be located is because they are always differentiated and have no specific locale. If the elements thus refer to nonintentions that intervene within and make possible intentional relations, if they are unsignified within significations, they are also, I think, inextricable from the symbolic matrix—all the more so because they take particular shape and contour, persist in the middle of all phenomena and consciousnesses.

There is certainly a continuity between this work and my previous works, *Art and Institution: Aesthetics in the Late Works of Merleau-Ponty* and *Art, Language, and Figure in Merleau-Ponty: Excursions in Hyper-Dialectics*.²³ I believe, however, that this work is more foundational to the other two since it deals directly with divergence as the symbolic form. If *Art, Language, and Figure* found a place for the language-system in Merleau-Ponty’s diacritical ontology, the present book is about the symbolic form that makes up this system and catches us all into it. Where Saussure argues that analysis of this system does not require discussion of its “ontogenesis,” Merleau-Ponty thinks “ontogenesis” is the means by which language becomes a social phenomenon and therefore cannot be teased from the discussion.²⁴ This argument was intimated in *Art, Language, and Figure* although it received short shrift. There, I was more concerned with how artists such as Paul Klee and Cy Twombly are able to figure the play of language in the sensible world and therefore undermine the notion that they are distinct from each other.²⁵ The present volume is concerned instead with a symbolic matrix that would be the ontological limit of both language and world.

The ontological limit of what appears and does not appear constellates them both. To the extent that it delimits both terms from within them, this limit matrixes them and is their internal possibility. As such, it remains the limit of both beings and being—an ontological limit before

formal ontology. This limit is also called the symbolic matrix. It remains between both language and world. It matrixes them and allows each to oppose the other. To borrow Merleau-Ponty's initial phrase to describe the symbolic matrix in the institution lectures, this is a symbolism that "displaces" language from the world and constellates them as two distinct regions of existence. Ultimately, I want to argue, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology does not just retrace its steps back into some place where language and the world are not yet displaced from one another. The operation of the matrix, neither an origin nor a destination, in fact prevents a return to it. His phenomenology is thus eventful as much as it is recuperative, as much productive as it is unrepressive. The best it can do, in other words, is utilize a language that sets in relief some new displacement between language and the phenomena.

Outline of Chapters

The first chapter of this book, "Matrix Event: Methods and Antecedents" is a non-exhaustive history of diacritical methods in philosophy. The chapter identifies three major moments: the "diaeresis of the diphthong" in Homeric poetry, Plato's method of dividing/collecting as it is articulated in the later dialogues and especially *Sophist*, and Merleau-Ponty's *écart* of the flesh. Not only in this first chapter but throughout the book, it should be evident that Merleau-Ponty's place in the history of thought is unique. I continually place him alongside and against other thinkers—chief among them, Homer, Heraclitus, Plato, Husserl, Heidegger, Ricoeur, Derrida, and Nancy—each of whom engage in some transformation of the philosophical method or other.

In Merleau-Ponty's *écart*, divergence is primary and names the relation between the insensible and the sensible. This means that, for him, the insensible is not merely the "not-presently sensed" but only insensible because it *separates from* the sensible. The same holds true in reverse: the sensible is not simply what was previously insensible but sensible only because it is a *concretion from* the insensible. Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, *écart* describes an insensible *in the hazards of or in* the sensible, a genuine lacuna located between and in sensible things whereby these things become what they are. There is not a further phenomenological moment for Merleau-Ponty that would disclose *that from which* the terms sensible and insensible diverge. Their relation, he would say, is only ever diacritical. If there are identities, it is only because there are first differences. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty explicitly states that the flesh is diacritical and a system of oppositions.²⁶

In the last section of this first chapter, I point to some crucial resonances between Merleau-Ponty and Heraclitus's first fragment. Already in the first fragment, Heraclitus stresses the unresolvable tension and strife between opposing terms and demands to think from within this tension on its own terms. In the comparison with Heraclitean opposites, Merleau-Ponty is at odds with Heidegger and his notion of an ontological difference that may ultimately undermine the first fragment. In effect, this contrast with Heidegger sets Merleau-Ponty in relief as a decidedly non-occidental thinker, which has consequences in his ontology for a role of the symbolic and its association with form and the formation of things.

The second chapter, "Space—Imagination," carries these reflections about opposition through to a discussion about space and imagination in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. For Husserl, phantasy consciousness diverges essential forms from concrete shapes—it makes the difference between essences and particulars. This difference eventuates in the difference between geometrical forms and the shape of concrete bodies. Beyond this, for Merleau-Ponty, the imagination resides in the spaces where concrete bodies diverge from one another. It is this most resourceful "spacing" that Merleau-Ponty's ontology proposes. Consider, for example, this passage from *The Visible and the Invisible* in which he uses and takes aim at Husserl's analyses concerning inner-time consciousness once more:

[A]ll this turns around the problem of an existence that is not a thought of existing—and which Husserl finds again in the heart of the psychological reflection as an absolute retentive flux (but in Husserl there is here the idea of a time of *Empfindung* which is not good: the present in the broad sense is [instead] a symbolic matrix and not only a present that breaks up toward the past—i.e., of a Self-presence that is not an absence from oneself, a contact with Self through the divergence (*écart*) with regard to Self.²⁷

Again, inner-time consciousness for Husserl is "irrelational" to the temporal phenomena. It speaks to a succession only within the immanent horizon of consciousness. This inner-horizon also risks supposing a theory of consciousness that is self-relational, however. This is a critique I explore further in chapter 2. Breaking free of this theory of consciousness means finding in the succession of consciousness a thickness—a distance of consciousness from itself that is not merely towards its retentive past or even merely temporal. The thickness with which

Merleau-Ponty is concerned, where consciousness diverges from itself, is therefore not just a negative relation internal to consciousness but its spatial lapse. This does not just mean that interior consciousness has space, but also that interior consciousness is spatialized and held out into things. In that sense, the divergence of consciousness from itself also turns out to be one of and between things.

Where Husserl's phantasy consciousness remains at the level of an immanent horizon, the imagination for Merleau-Ponty is how consciousness comes to itself and grasps geometrical forms from concrete shapes but is also more profoundly within the spaces and separation between those concrete bodies and shapes. Merleau-Ponty again uses the phrase "symbolic matrix" here to refer to these spaces of separation. The symbolic matrix is, in other words, not simply the "not-presently visible" of the visible but also the insensible in the hazards of or in the sensible, making things sensible. These divergences of the sensible would be the most basic kind of symbolic form; they would be symbolic formation itself. The second chapter ends with two more discussions. It discusses the sculptural texture of things, the way sculpted shapes and contours play between light and dark. This play is not simply about sense-vision but the texture of a space in formation that Merleau-Ponty equates with symbolism. This is followed with a discussion of Merleau-Ponty's references to Schelling in the nature lectures. There, light is called a "quasi-concept" and "element" rather than a source of illumination.²⁸ This quasi-concept, Merleau-Ponty notes, is a "primordial symbolism of knowing" that constellates both what appears and what does not.²⁹ In other words, there is a symbolism that acts on what is lit up, keeping it from becoming an absolutely positive term, and what is dark, keeping it from becoming an absolute negation. One could say, then, that this primordial symbolism is not non-being itself but what in fact matrixes being and non-being.

The third chapter, "Light—Dark/Awake—Asleep," moves the play between light and dark in shapes into a discussion of the elements. This brings up the same contrast with Heidegger's reading of Heraclitus discussed the first chapter. In the same way that Heidegger reads Heraclitean opposites in terms of an ontological difference between particular beings that appear and the self-identical being that does not, he reads the opposition between light and dark in terms of particular phenomena and a fundamental recessed light source. This opposition is especially found in the seminars dealing with Heraclitus's fragments on waking, dreaming and sleeping. While waking and dreaming concern appearances for Heidegger, sleep concerns a covering over of appearances that

is itself covered over—this is, in his view, why we cannot experience our own sleep. Whereas in waking and dreaming there is some structure of phenomenality and illumination between the human and sense or dream perception, sleep is an “open-standing” in a light event—the recession of the sun. For Heraclitus the first material principle is indeed the element of fire (e.g., the sun-fire that illuminates particulars). But, reading the concerning fragments, I see no need to turn this sun-fire into a unified source of illumination opposite to the particular things illuminated. Neither do I find that sense and dream perceptions are founded on a sleep, which does not appear because of its kinship with the unity of this recessed source. Heraclitus provides only the insight that sleep is a non-visible event and akin to the recession of the sun-fire. This darkness is itself the tension between waking and dreaming—it is in the middle of them—so that it can provide a movement between them. Merleau-Ponty also helps us think through how fire and the source of illumination may at the same time recess. Fire is of course also a touchstone for him in “Eye and Mind.” An inspection of the passages where it is mentioned reveals that fire has no integrity of its own but is rather a non-luminescent “spark” that lights up the phenomena, both the things that we sense and our sensing of those things.³⁰ The elemental is in this way in the middle of these different points of view and is thus a sort of texture. It is in fact in all significations. Because this is so, however, the elemental is itself an unsignified event. As such, it is neither an origin nor a destination. Expanding from the previous chapter, I also propose to equate the elemental with a symbolic matrix that constellates the phenomenon.

In his passivity lectures, Merleau-Ponty also gives an analysis of sleep. There he shows that sleep is the deprivation of the phenomena that remains in the hazards of both waking and dreaming. Merleau-Ponty makes clear, for example, that sleep is not equivalent to dreams and the free ability of consciousness to present images and their non-being to itself. He also makes clear that sleep is not a simple passivity where the body is submitted to some external object or where it unifies with the external world and becomes a death. Thus, Merleau-Ponty calls sleep “being in the divergence.”³¹ It is not itself intentional except as the divergence between dreaming and sense intentions. It is, in other words, a limit that allows me to distinguish between my most interior life and the external world to which I am directed. Echoing the nature lectures, Merleau-Ponty in fact calls this limit a “primordial symbolism.”³² In this context, the primordial symbolism not only constellates and delimits the apparent and nonapparent but also the real and the fictive. It is, in other words, the limit between my waking and dreaming lives and is what

allows me to take a stance on both aspects and know them as different. But, to equate sleep with a primordial symbolism, implies that even my own sleeping body is a limit of me and is not my limit. It is sleep, in other words, that prohibits and constricts me from gaining the properties of an absolute source of illumination, capable of illuminating my waking and dreaming lives, and indeed everything included in their difference, all at once. The phenomenology of sleep thus becomes a phenomenology of the non-signification, which makes all significations possible. As such, it becomes a phenomenology of the most profound, and concrete, symbolic matrix between me and the limit of all thought.

It is also important to note that the elements are likewise a limit to thought. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, for example, Merleau-Ponty says the being of flesh has no name in the history of philosophy except to designate it as an “element.”³³ The element of light, for example, resists and is the ontological limit to thought; but the issue is whether even this element is concrete enough that it also intervenes into my individual life and allows me to tell the difference between my dreaming and waking lives. The fourth chapter is titled “Philosophy—Symbolism” and is initially concerned again with sleep and its connection to dreaming and sense perceptions. Merleau-Ponty describes the symbolic form of passivity as both a “censor” and “positive.”³⁴ It is both positive and censorious, for example, when it delimits my dream perceptions from my sense perceptions. It is positive in the sense that it produces the distinction that I recognize. But it is also censorious because, from this very distinction, I cannot recognize the form that produces it. Inasmuch as the symbolic form produces and effaces itself in what I recognize, Merleau-Ponty also says it is “primordial”: a nonpersonal and anonymous limit in personal thought. One could certainly say it is the delimitation of the personal from the public. But, to the extent that it does this, it also introduces the question of a limit to philosophy itself. To study this limit, phenomenology would become a sort of psychoanalysis of philosophy.

Note, then, that though the symbolic form is the censor of philosophy, it also produces philosophy—which is also to say that philosophy is at once both a repression and an expression of the form. A phenomenology of the symbolic form of philosophical critique cannot therefore treat this form as merely the repressed content of critique; it cannot trace this critique back to the original event of its expression. It is instead an analysis of a matrixed relation between repression and expression; and can no longer premise itself on the phenomenalizing and direct signification of the repressed symbolic form. In other words, an indirect ontology will also be the method of the symbolic form.

This is something Merleau-Ponty alludes to in *The Visible and the Invisible* and in the very recently published lecture notes on the literary usages of language. In one concerning passage from *The Visible and the Invisible*, for example, Merleau-Ponty speaks about the methodological adoption of an “eloquent language” in philosophy.³⁵ The point is to call into question a philosophical use of language that categorizes in language and yet takes itself to refer to real events. Precisely because it fails to interrogate its own language, this conceptual use of language is incapable of articulating the symbolism that evented it. Whereas, I think Merleau-Ponty ultimately demands that we notice the matrices between conceptual and literary language.

In chapter I, I already note Merleau-Ponty’s phrase in *The Visible and the Invisible*, “*Ursprungsklärung*” and his idea that we must start thinking “from behind [the] point” of philosophy.³⁶ Doing so entails thinking from behind an ontological difference and instead from within the “polymorphic matrix”³⁷ between being and beings. The point is neither to separate being from beings nor to meditate on their sameness. In fact, and even more radically, to think from behind the point of philosophy is to provide an ontology without origins. Here, difference and differentiation replace identity, and there is no room for some irreducible and self-related ground to beings. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty’s ontology concerns the symbolic rather than ideal or fixed limit of beings. If this ontological matrix is a symbolic one, this does not mean it clarifies a symbol in-itself somehow distinct from its modes of symbolization. Finally, then, to show that philosophical critique is itself a symbolic form does not mean elucidating what philosophical critique is so much as showing its limits. This is, in a sense, a critique of critique. When Merleau-Ponty writes the literary language into conceptual language, I argue he allows for the recognition of such a radical critique. Here, one could say, Merleau-Ponty wants his phenomenology to counterbalance the sedimenting effect of reflexion.

I develop this argument in the fifth and final chapter, “Philosophical Language -Literary Language.” There is no question that Merleau-Ponty often employs a literary style in his philosophical writings. This is not so much an obfuscation of some otherwise lucid thought but an invitation for lucidity to operate a transversal slice of itself and catch a glimpse of its symbolic formation which still remains unsedimented. In this sense, I think, his phenomenology is eventful. It forces us to recognize the “ontogenetic” power of language itself.³⁸ If language is ontogenetic, it betrays neither a non-linguistic intentional object nor fundamental being but is the generation of meaning “as on the first day.”³⁹ There is, in other

words, no meaning before language, but language produces meaning and only then seems to refer it. This also means, as Merleau-Ponty says, the limit of language is “savage” and can never be signified because it intersects and is always inside language. The impossibility of reducing language, he thus also notes, *is its reduction*.⁴⁰

In the end, the method most appropriate to this ontological symbolism involves an *exercise* of some medial language, between philosophy and literature, which reveals language in general in terms of the un sedimented meaning it produces. Such an exercise does not assume a philosophy of symbolic form – it does not concern an already theoretical and formalist symbolism. It is also not critical in the old sense of a systematic philosophy of reflection. But it is not uncritical. Still concerned with limits, it remains a phenomenology which shows the symbolic form of philosophical critique. Merleau-Ponty calls such an interrogation of the limits of philosophical critique a “hermeneutical reverie,” and he finds this method in Proust.⁴¹