

CHAPTER 1



The Remembrance of Nature in the Voice of the Subject

"The whole historical enigma of our existence, the impenetrable darkness of its terminus a quo and its terminus ad quem, is resolved and explained by the first and primal message of the Word made flesh."

—Johann Georg Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*¹

"Listen, rather, my brothers, to the voice of the healthy body: that is a more honest and a purer voice [. . .], and it speaks of the meaning of the earth."

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*²

§1 Invocations of Nature

In the project of writing about what, in the course of more than thirty years, I came to think of as a hermeneutical and phenomenological account of the "emerging body of understanding", the "body" is inseparably both literal and metaphorical; and the "understanding" which is at stake calls for learning what it could possibly mean for us as human beings to be standing on the earth and under the sky.

In a 1946 discussion of his philosophical project, Merleau-Ponty declared it his objective "to find again the bond with the world that precedes thought properly speaking".³ My intention in the following three chapters, is to bring out the implications of this project for the experience and understanding of our relationship to nature, casting these implications very specifically in terms of a phenomenological exposition of the nature of the human voice, the voice gifted, as Aristotle said, with the "logos", the voice, namely, that speaks. As Merleau-Ponty helps us to realize, drawing on the distinction between the prelinguistic "logos endiathetos" and the "logos prothorikos" that carries it forward into speech, there is a "lien natal", a bonding with the world, a bonding in fact with nature, that precedes the "logos" which

thought appropriates, forgetting, in that theoreticism, that presumption of mastery, its humble origination in the realm of nature.⁴ If the voice that enters language must take up into itself the sounds, the sensuous material, that culture has fashioned from nature's vast resources, then the "logos prophorikos" that thought fetishizes is, in an important sense, but an echoing of the voices of nature. I want to find again, by what can only be understood as a paradoxical gift of memory, echoes of that originary bond with nature, that bond of communication prior to thought, prior to the concept, which is still, even though surpassed, carried by the human voice, within which the voices of nature are gathered into their appeal. This, in any case, is how I propose to begin reading two jottings among Merleau-Ponty's late "Notes de Travail", powerfully influenced by a renewed encounter with Heidegger's "deconstruction" of metaphysics:

1. "It is not we who speak, it is the truth that speaks itself in the depths of speech."⁵
2. "That language has us and that it is not we who have language. That it is being that speaks within us and not we who speak of being." (VIF 247, VIE 194)

To be sure, there is much more at stake in these two propositions than my interpretation and consequent narrative will be discussing. In particular, of course, it is their scandalous reversal, their radical overturning of anthropocentrism, of Cartesian egoity, their radical displacement of the speaking subject, hence of the subject-object structure and its ontology, reflected in rules of grammar, and seeming to introduce an unjustifiable metaphysics, around which the critical commentaries swirl. Heidegger himself, as we know, was not spared ridicule and contempt for the displacement of the speaking subject in his later writings on poetry and the "Wesen" of language. However, I will not attempt, here, to defend that metaphysics. I will instead take up for further thought Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of language, concentrating on its implications, still to some extent left unthought in his writings, for a radically different relation to the realm of nature. Thus I would derive an important proposition from the two above: [3] The "truth" that speaks itself in the depths of our speech is that the voice that we, each one of us, call "our own" is a voice that has gathered, and is still gathering into itself, the voices of nature.

Ruthless plundering and exploitation of nature have now set the planet on a course of destruction that might some day be irreversible. The Enlightenment believed that we could overcome our dependency on nature and achieve autonomy by organizing nature according to our projects of rationalization. But the truth that we are gradually compelled to recognize is that relating to nature in the light of this belief is actually self-destructive: in the

final analysis, these projects cannot be separated from economies and technologies of total domination, ending forever our immemorial exposure to natural fate. We need to learn the ways towards some kind of creative reconciliation with nature.

The argument that I want to propose in the three chapters on Merleau-Ponty makes the following claims: [1] That the sounds and voices of nature, sounds and voices coming from nature, are in truth communicating—are summoning us—from within the depths of language, the language that informs our voice. [2] That even before we assign names to the beings of nature, these beings have *already addressed* us, already communicated with us. [3] That consequently, our very first gestures of speech—even the infant’s babbling-songs—*already* constitute, however “originating” they may seem, a *response* to the solicitations borne by these communications of and from nature. [4] That this responsivity constitutes an *implicit acknowledgement* of the indebtedness of the human voice. [5] That this indebtedness constitutes an *imperative summons to take responsibility* for the flourishing of nature. [6] That the alarming devastation of nature calls our attention to the need—and indeed the urgent necessity—for a “remembrance of nature in the subject”. [7] That this remembrance calls for encouragement by an “anamnesis” that is paradoxical, because impossible: a phenomenologically disciplined attentiveness to the voice, attempting to retrieve, from within it, a felt sense of our originary, prelinguistic attunement to the sensible dimension of our language. [8] That this “anamnesis” is paradoxical, not only because the constitution of this attunement by the voices of nature belongs in a past to which we can never actually return, but also because, even if, *per impossibile*, we could somehow return to this moment of constitution, we would be returning to a moment that belongs in a prelinguistic, prepersonal, and pre-egological temporality, and, as such, this moment was consequently never actually present. And finally, [9] that, in attempting to retrieve something of this attunement, we can experience, as if once again—but this time in keener consciousness and despite the subsequent sublation, or rather, repression of the experience through which the voices of nature summoned us—the moral claim in these voices. For at stake is a moral claim to care for nature that is inherent in the voices of nature originally gathered into the forming of this attunement and that persists as long as the voices are still uncannily echoing, as, or through, a felt sense of the *indebted origin* of our voice. Such, in its outlines, will be my argument.⁶

In drawing out implications that Merleau-Ponty left without much elaboration, I want to call attention to a bonding with nature that takes place in and through the medium of the voice: a bonding, or more specifically, a communication, that, already acknowledged by the fact that the voice always emerges and arises in a mode of responsivity, accordingly makes an ethical claim on our responsibilities for the condition of nature. *The “logos” that figures*

in the history of metaphysics must finally, therefore, be recognized as eco-logical. In other words, the voice of the “logos” bears within it a normative ecology: such, I claim, are the implications of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of language for an environmental ethics and politics. Borrowing Heidegger’s idiom, namely, a transformation of the noun “Wesen” into a verb, which Merleau-Ponty also borrowed, I want to say: it is now urgent that the ecology suppressed by the rationalism and empiricism of this “logos” “west”, that is, surge into phenomenological awareness. And the phenomenology I am taking over from Merleau-Ponty with a great sense of indebtedness, must, I believe, bring this ecological responsivity always already affecting the voice—and the responsibility this hetero-affectation entails—into our hearing and speaking insofar as this is possible, turning what would amount to a “practice of the self” into socially responsible action.

At the centre of my discussion of the relation between language, or the human voice, and nature will be two brief phrases, introduced by Merleau-Ponty to characterize this relation. Though seeming to be unproblematic, they are in fact, as I hope to show, neither transparent in meaning nor beyond the pressure of questioning: “chanter le monde” and “célébrer le monde”. In the chapter on language in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty reflects on the sounding of spoken words:

If we consider only the conceptual and delimiting meaning of words, it is true that the verbal form—with the exception of endings—appears arbitrary. But it would no longer appear so if we took into account the emotional content of the word, which we have called above its “gestural” sense. . . . It would then be found that the words, vowels and phonemes are so many ways of singing [or celebrating] the world [*chanter le monde*], and that their function is to represent things not, as the naïve onomatopoetic theory has it, by reason of an objective resemblance, but because they extract, and literally express, their emotional essence. (PPF 218, PPE 187)

This claim about the mimetic intimacy between voice and nature is the very heart and soul of Walter Benjamin’s early reflections (1916–1921) on language. In “On Language as Such and the Speech of Human Beings”, he maintained that it is only in “the bourgeois view of language . . . that the word has an accidental relation to its object, that it is merely a sign for things (or knowledge of them) agreed by some convention. Language never gives *mere* signs.”⁷ The story that he likes to tell is that signs came into existence following the Fall: their necessity in all current languages betrays the fact that in no human language can the proper name, as such and by itself, make the thing itself present. “Night”, “Nacht”, and “nuit” are three different ways of indicating and referring to what in English we call “the night”. But after the expulsion from Paradise, human beings can no longer hear the sublime language, the

pure voice, of the things themselves. We no longer dwell in the world of holy names where words and things are two dimensions of the same ontology. In our world, the night appears to be forever deprived of speech, forever deprived of its essential voice. And yet, like Benjamin, Merleau-Ponty seems to nurse the hope that there might be a way to bring this lost prelapsarian speech, this forgotten voice, back into audibility. In question will be whatever an ecological phenomenology might be able to accomplish.

The argument against an arbitrary relation also has some historically significant support. Wilhelm von Humboldt, for example, wrote that "One must free oneself of the notion that language can be separated from that which it designates," although he followed this remark by making the considerably more controversial claim that even proper names often seem, somehow, to fit the persons they name.⁸ This is a controversial claim, contestable without much difficulty, even when it renounces objectivity; it is, however, usefully provocative, compelling us to attend not only to the material dimension of language, the sensible registers of sense, but also to the *bodily felt* sense, the "emotional tonality", of the words we use. Even if this claim is in some respects problematic, the recuperation of the sensible here, casting to the winds of fate the suppression and betrayal of the sensuous in both intellectualism and empiricism, both guilty of a certain reification, nevertheless makes a contribution the significance of which, as Merleau-Ponty so eloquently argued, cannot—must not—be ignored. It registers a strong departure from rationalism, philosophies that exalt the concept by sacrificing the sensuous, bodily felt dimension of language, the very medium of semblance, and, with equal force, a departure from empiricism, philosophies that submit language to a cold objectivity. Like Schelling before him, Merleau-Ponty sought a way to "rehabilitate the idea of nature in the framework of a reflexive philosophy."⁹ If, as Heidegger argues, Nietzsche merely overturns the metaphysical priority of "the intelligible" in order to redeem "the sensible", Merleau-Ponty's "phenomenology of ambiguity", calling attention to the phenomenon of reversibility, finally erases the very opposition, bringing these two "moments" into the chiasmic differentiations of their intertwining. In the reversibilities of the chiasm, the intertwining, even the opposition between subject and object is deconstructed. With profoundly radical implications for the experience of our relation to both language and nature. Thus, in one of the two readings I propose for consideration, we might try reading "chanter le monde" as an expression of the philosopher's endeavour—in the wake of the disenchantments of the Enlightenment and later modernity, to re-enchant the world, or rather, more precisely, to re-enchant nature by re-thinking the *relation* between language and nature, voice and nature.

But what are we to make of these "ways of singing the world", these "celebrations" of the world? Is this "chanter" merely a figure of speech? I would like to think not; but in any event, the philosopher's scare-quotes around

“singing” suggest that it is not a question of reviving the old metaphysical argument, an argument dear to Romanticism which, though hopelessly vulnerable to objections both empirical and theoretical, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, among others, attempted, as we know, to sustain, to the effect that the true origin of language, the “first” language of mankind, was not speech, not prose, but the pathic and mythopoetic singing of words. Today it must instead be, or anyway become, a question of bodily lived experience. Can skepticism temporarily be silenced—long enough, at least, to lend an ear to the mimetic soundings of language? It is still possible to hear, in all its resonant truth, what Edmond Jabès says of the vowel: “La voyelle est chant mélodieux du matin. . . .”¹⁰ This is the mimetic experience of nature—very different from the “naïve” experience of mere reproduction in Plato and Aristotle—that Merleau-Ponty, like Benjamin and Adorno, hoped to retrieve from a fateful oblivion.

The philosopher’s recognition that the “conceptual and delimiting meaning of words” cannot be included within the purview of his argument is no doubt a wise and prudent caution. The argument that he wants to make instead, exceedingly conscious of the controversy and the risk, continues:

If it were possible, in any vocabulary, to disregard what is attributable to the mechanical laws of phonetics, to the influences of other languages, the rationalizations of grammarians, and assimilatory processes, we should probably discover in the original form of each language a somewhat restricted system of expression, but such as would make it not entirely arbitrary, if we designate night by the word “nuit” and use “lumière” for light. The prominence of vowels in one language, or of consonants in another, and constructional and syntactical systems, do not represent so many arbitrary conventions . . . , but several ways for the human body to sing the world’s praises [*célébrer le monde*] and in the last resort to live it.¹¹

As Charles Johnson puts it in a hermeneutic study concerned with the latent racism inherent in the culturally conditioned uses of words, “connotative meaning clings to sound like ants to a sweet apple”.¹² Now, in this second passage, however, it is not speech, but the body that sings; and now the claim shifts, for it is a question of “singing the world’s praises”: not quite the same thing as “singing the world”—which, in the second of the two of the readings that this latter phrase suggests to me, I would take to mean letting the world sing, giving one’s ear to the multitude of sounds, echoes, voices, reverberations, and tonalities that gather into our sense of the world. The difference between the two phrases may seem insignificant, essentially nothing, I suppose; but this judgement depends on how one takes the introduction of the “praises”, the “celebrations”. If, for instance, one hears in that phrase an ethical or political interpretation, one certainly might want to question the ground for such praises. We shall in fact have cause—reason enough—to return to this

reservation. For now, though, we will explore, with Merleau-Ponty, and drawing on the resources that his phenomenology provides, the experience of the voice in its mimetic relation to the world. So I hear in the little phrase, “célébrer le monde”, both a questionable celebration of the world and an unquestionable affirmation, or celebration, of the sensuous resources that the world—nature—provides for the language that comes to the voice. And it is in this second interpretation that I find the suggestion, or implication, of a relation between language and nature, “logos” and ecology that carries a moral imperative. What we will accordingly be undertaking here is what I should like to think of as an ecological phenomenology—or, equally, a phenomenological ecology, disclosing a relation between language and nature that bears within it, as I shall argue, a categorical moral claim on our responsibility for that nature.¹³ Although ecology does not figure as a significant theme of concern in Merleau-Ponty’s writings, we know that an understanding of our experience of nature and a consequent critique of naturalism were persistent topics for reflection in his lectures.

But is there not a Romantic version of naturalism finding its voice or resonance in Merleau-Ponty’s claim about words the sounds of which echo, or reverberate with—or say register—the body’s felt sense of the things encountered in its world? Is there not, in Merleau-Ponty’s claim about the communicative voicings of the natural world, a Romantic repudiation of the completely disenchanting understanding of language? Indeed, does he not attempt a certain anamnestic “reprise” of these voicings? This question returns us to the debate in Plato’s *Cratylus*, in which rationalism, or essentialism, was set in the most strenuous opposition to conventionalism, or nominalism. Although arguing against both rationalism and naturalism, unwilling to suppose a pre-established affinity or harmony between word and thing, Merleau-Ponty is no less dissatisfied with the sweeping claims of conventionalism, which, in its deafness, can hear only arbitrary, meaningless associations: none of the “Angemessenheit”, the contingent, but emotionally significant affinities that a poetic sensibility would claim to discern.¹⁴

What is perhaps most striking in Merleau-Ponty’s account, an account that in a bold and novel way seems to revive something of Rousseau’s Romantic narrative regarding the natural origination of spoken language, is that, at precisely the moment in the historical self-reflectiveness of modernity when, as exemplified in the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé, an experience with language in which the sovereign autonomy, arbitrariness and contingency of the word—precisely its artificiality and nominalism—asserted its absolute triumph over both metaphysical rationalism and the mortifications of scientific naturalism, we find Merleau-Ponty arguing for something like what Wordsworth once called an “organic sensibility” and attempting to solicit, to revive, our remembrance of a certain *natural* consonance between word and thing, word and world, word and nature: what the early German Romantics

would call a “chemical affinity”.¹⁵ This attempt to set in motion a poetizing or meta-*ph*orical naturalism radically different from the one that has prevailed in the sciences, only confirms, however, the truth of our irrevocable estrangement from nature: it is an acute indication of the extent to which artifice, technology, “*Machenschaft*”, has taken over the modern world, severing all our affective ties with nature. As Herder noted in his *Essay on the Origin of Language*, “the sounds of nature have been dispossessed by the artificial languages of society.”¹⁶ The word can function, can signify, just as Mallarmé, anticipating Derridean deconstruction, says, despite “l’absence de toute rose.” The word can signify, can mean, even when deception severs its connection with the thing—as even Homer’s Odysseus, cleverly outwitting Polyphemous, already understood. That power of conjuration, equally a power to annihilate, seemingly magical, reaching even into the abysses of absence, even creating those abysses, unquestionably demonstrates the word’s incomparable sublimity. The “logos” finally wins its freedom from nature; but in forgetting its ecology, an origination whose echoes it cannot entirely escape, it risks complicity with the forces of nihilism, a will to power that recognizes no limits, no measure outside itself. What would remain to be said, when the wasteland has spread, luxuriant gardens have died, and there are no more roses? That is the catastrophe of an absence that no one, least of all a poet of the most sublime elegies, could possibly desire.

The meaning of the word “nature” is subject to the endless play of differences; and its signifying function in discourse is of course independent of the *presence* of its referent, and for precisely that reason, it releases meaning, releases significance, to the surprises of chance, the aporetics of interpretation, and a finality in endless deferral. But our resolve to reverse the fateful destruction of nature itself, its dying into an irrevocable and eternal absence, cannot be deferred forever. The fact of its dying is not open to endless questioning.

So I want to argue that there is an implicit *echo-ecology* in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, and that, by calling attention to the voices of nature ever echoing in the human voice, his phenomenology brings these voices to an audibility the mere hearing of which constitutes the avowal of a normative moral claim: a summons to respond to the sounds, the voices, that nature has given us for our use in bringing language to voice, recognizing the gift of nature and responding by giving thanks in practices and institutions—ways of dwelling—that show their care for nature. For there is only one possible way to receive the gift of nature: by assuming responsibility for the natural environment.

The word I have introduced here, “echo-ecology”, requires, of course, an explanation—one that, as we proceed, will not only, I believe, assume more clarity, but also acquire greater significance. Perhaps it will suffice to say, for the time being, that what I want to retrieve—the gift, namely, of an attunement by nature, an attunement through which the sounds and voices of nature

become available for the constitution of the human voice—can be retrieved only by a paradoxical memory, since it is a question of a mimetic experience with language that compels its constitution not only [1] as belonging to a past to which, because it is past, we can never return but also [2] as taking place in a past that never has been present. Consequently, what we might retrieve could never be more than the merest echoes of echoes, the merest vestiges of—as I shall argue—a summons to responsibility that already bound the voice in beholdenness to nature from the very moment the voice and the things of its world sought entrance into language. Moreover, because of this originary absence, this withdrawing of the originary moment into an irretrievable past, there can be no memory without entanglement in the fabrications and alembications of the imaginary, for in a certain crucial though paradoxical sense, the attunement, together with the moral claim it makes, having originally preceded the emergence of ego-logical consciousness, is not realized, and does not actually take place, until the belated moment of its reflective recuperation. The “always already” that memory strives to retrieve is inseparable from a “not yet”, a future conjectured in hope.

Our principal concern will be the implications of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology for an ecologically attuned ethics and politics. My argument, here, formulates an ontological claim grounded in the phenomenological powers of memory and bearing normative significance for our interactions with nature. I am arguing that the human body is an ecological body and the human voice is an ecological organ. But, although body and voice are always already ecologically appropriated and attuned by virtue of our never-ceasing interactions, there is a sense in which the character and extent of our corresponding responsibility for the environment have not yet been adequately recognized. Attending with phenomenological care to our experience of the voice is one of the ways through which a deeper, more adequate, more compelling recognition of this responsibility can be encouraged. At stake, then, is a remembrance of nature in the subject: the phenomenologically reflexive retrieval of a reversible communicative relationship with nature that, in a pre-personal experience prior to the child’s entrance into the language of its community and prior to the emergence of ego-logical consciousness, has always already evoked and attuned the human voice and accordingly charged it with a responsibility for the safekeeping of the natural world.

In “Self-Reliance”, Emerson remarks that, “When a man lives with his God, his voice shall be as sweet as the murmur of the brook and the rustle of the corn.”¹⁷ If, now, not unreasonably, we take his “living with God” to require living in remembrance of nature, we may then be struck—as was Merleau-Ponty—by the thought that the human voice, having originated in the realm of nature, gathers into itself, perhaps mostly in a time prior to consciousness, some of the qualities of the nature it has experienced, and that, by virtue of this remembrance, those qualities, mostly dormant or latent, can be

brought into the actuality of the speaking voice. Whenever this takes place, remembrance realizes the intertwining of the human voice and the realm of nature. Remembrance and avowal are the beginning of responsibility. As Emerson suggests in this same essay: "The swallow over my window should interweave that thread or straw he carries in his bill into my web also."¹⁸

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology reveals that it is possible to hear, reverberating within the human voice, gathered into its registers, the voices of nature; and that it is possible to hear our reversible interconnectedness with nature in the chiasmic intertwining that recalls us to our indeclinable responsibilities: responsibilities for a nature from which the human voice originally emerged and on which we are nevertheless, no matter how extensive our mastery and dominion, permanently dependent.

The ontological rehabilitation of language that Merleau-Ponty attempts to consummate in the final phase of his thought is inseparable from the ontological rehabilitation of the sensible as such.¹⁹ To the extent that the "ontological rehabilitation of the sensible" is at the same time a recuperation of the sensible dimension of language, namely, language as voice, hence the voices of language, it inaugurates a phenomenologically generated redemption of the potential for a relationship with nature that would recognize and make manifest what, in his late work Merleau-Ponty calls "the chiasmic intertwining" of the elemental, the flesh, there where the destinies of the human world and the realm of nature will have been—always already, that is, prior to the emergence of ego-logical consciousness—secretly conjoined. It must accordingly be a question, here in this present book, of drawing out, from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological accounts of language, nature, and the human incarnation, resources for an environmental philosophy—drawing out, from the originary experience of the *logos*, the ontological claim of a certain ecology, and relinquishing the conception of nature as "a multiplicity of events external to each other and bound together by lawful relations of causality."²⁰ Inspired, no doubt, by Husserl's late writings, but also very much by Schelling's philosophy of nature, Merleau-Ponty abandons the conception of nature that figures in Descartes and in Kant's first *Critique*, embracing nature as an organic system that we inhabit and within which we dwell through a chiasmic intertwining.²¹ Thanks to the resources in phenomenology that he drew upon for a critique which challenged not only the "natural attitude", but also both the intellectualism of the philosophical tradition and the reifying naturalism of the sciences, what he argues for, in his later lectures and writings, brings together in the most startling and consequential ways the latest empirical research in the life sciences and the poetic experience of nature expressed in nineteenth century Romanticism.

If philosophical thought always emerges, as the Greek philosophers of antiquity believed, from the experience of wonder, from something essentially enigmatic and wondrous, must we not acknowledge that the voice of

human speech is a phenomenon whose emergence and acquisition are still, even after the sciences have had their say, enigmatic and most wondrous? An awesome phenomenon, not without, however, as history will always remind us, its role in the suppression of voices and the rhetorical reproduction of the monstrous.

In Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, one will find the silent emergence of language from the sounds, the voices of nature eloquently celebrated; but one will also be provoked to question and continue the patient unfolding of an experience with language that can have, precisely because it is an "institution" inhabited by historicity, no reassuring benevolence. Indeed, as I hope to show, in his writings on language, Merleau-Ponty perfectly exemplifies what Nietzsche once wrote about the philosopher:

He tries to permit all the sounds of the world to resonate within himself and to present this total sound outside of himself by means of concepts, expanding himself to the macrocosm while at the same time maintaining reflective circumspection.²²

In these words, one can hear echoes of Emerson, whose transcendental Romanticism shaped for his time and generation the American experience of nature and history. Although Emerson seems as different from Nietzsche as anyone could possibly be, the Emersonian influence on his thinking—like that of Spinoza—must not be underestimated. Moreover, I think it still haunts what might be called the American "collective unconscious". Schelling, Emerson, Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty. What brings these four together is cosmology: a certain metaphysical sense that the universe is a living organic unity; a sense that, despite equally real singularities and multiplicities, there is an encompassing coherence, a comprehensive meaning that, for the appropriate frame of mind, can be deeply yet lucidly experienced. In his *Journals*, Emerson writes:

Upon a mountain-solitude a man instantly feels a sensible exaltation and a better claim to his rights in the universe. He who wanders in the woods perceives how natural it was to pagan imagination to find gods in every deep grove & by each fountain-head. Nature seems to him not to be silent, but to be eager & striving to break out into music. Each tree, flower, and stone, he invests with life and character, and it is impossible that the wind, which breathes so expressive a sound amid the leaves—should mean nothing.²³

Except that, unlike Emerson, Nietzsche would frequently find the temptations, the dangers in nihilism equally irresistible. Emerson, in the end, has not the courage to affirm, to celebrate, whatever shows itself—even the absence of metaphysical meaning, the reduction of life to nothing. Although

there are moments when Emerson approaches the abyssal, finding in that experience all his imagination could bear of the sublime.

Be that as it may, in Emerson's New World transcendentalism, all of nature sings, awakening the human voice and welcoming its response. In "The Poet", marking no mediations, and giving uninhibited expression to a naïve Romanticism that bears a certain resemblance to Benjamin's reflections on language in his essay, "On the Nature of Language and Language as Such", Emerson remarks that:

It is a secret which every intellectual man quickly learns, that, beyond the energy of his possessed and conscious intellect, he is capable of a new energy [. . .], by abandonment to the nature of things; [. . .] then he is caught up into the life of the Universe, his speech is thunder, his thought is law, and his words are universally intelligible as the plants and animals.²⁴

The poet, he adds, "knows that he speaks adequately, then, only when he speaks somewhat wildly, or 'with the flower of the mind', [. . .] with the intellect inebriated by nectar."²⁵ Significantly, Emerson writes "flower of the mind" whereas, learning from his anguished struggle over the translation of Sophocles, Hölderlin, more daringly, writes "flower of the mouth"; but in what follows his phrase, Emerson seems to return the "intellect" to what Merleau-Ponty would call its "pensée sauvage". Thus, for "men of more delicate ear", the language in which such an "intellect" communicates its acquired energy fulfills its essential destiny in gathering and recapitulating the sensuous presencing of nature—for everything in nature is communicative, and it is in the very nature of language, according to Emerson, to be a "transitive" medium.²⁶

A medium not only for the communicative resonances of nature, but also for what Emerson calls "the ground-tone of conventional life", using words that will find their uncanny echo, despite their reference to an ontologically forgetful dimension of experience, in Martin Heidegger's late meditations on language as well as in Benjamin's reflections.

Henry David Thoreau, Emerson's more rustic contemporary, undoubtedly experienced the truth in this Romantic "secret" even more immediately, even more intensely; and in *Walden*, he educed from his experience the imperative warning: "we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor, which alone is copious and standard."²⁷ Is this danger merely imminent, still to come? Or have we not already—and indeed long ago—forgotten? Friedrich Schelling, in the Old World on the other side of the Atlantic, sought to call attention to the lament of nature, implying a forgetfulness of ancient origins, however much the industrialization he was witnessing could be heard to hasten and deepen this estrangement.

What would our lives be like, were this language finally, irrevocably forgotten? Are we now, living lives increasingly mediated by the fabrications of our technology, perhaps drawing nearer to that time of desperate reckoning?

In a poem written in his youth, "I hear things singing", "Die Dinge singen hör' ich so gern", Rainer Maria Rilke gives poignant expression to the experience that Thoreau fears the modern world is fatefully losing:

I am so fearful before human words.
They express everything so lucidly;
and this is called dog and that is called house,
and here is the beginning and the end is over there.

Their very sense also frightens me, their play with banter, mockery.
They know everything that was and will be;
no mountain is to them wonderful any more;
their garden and estate bounded by God.

I will always warn and, resisting, defend: Remain at a distance.
Things singing I hear so gladly. You touch them: they are rigid and mute.
You rob me of all things.²⁸

Attaching words to things, naming them and thereby invoking them, calling them into presencing with their name, is the first of a succession of moments all too frequently ending—not, as is commonly believed, in their enduring remembrance, but rather, as Mallarmé understood, and later, also Blanchot, in their mortification and oblivion. Words frighten the poet because of their awesome power, a power that can become their complicity in an economy of destruction—flowers of evil. So I take the "You" in the last stanza to express an accusation directed against all who abuse this power. And yet, despite the silencing that careless words, the fixation of names, can impose on things, the poet is still granted the privilege of hearing the singing of things. What connection, what affinity, exists between the singing of things and a body of philosophical thought that sings the world's praises and celebrates the voices, the singing of things? If the sublime truth for which, in his later years, Merleau-Ponty sought approximate expression is in the intertwining, in reversibility, then "chanter le monde" cannot name only the singing, or the affective qualities, of human language; it must also name the singing of the things themselves, the sounds and voices in which things in the realm of nature and the realm of our fabrications communicate their condition, their disposition.

What I want to argue here, invoking Kant's first and third *Critiques* and Adorno's profoundly radical reception of them, is that Merleau-Ponty's writings in the phenomenology of language register and affirm, with the singular force that phenomenological method bestows, the voices of the non-identical: what *cannot* be subsumed and contained—that is to say, kept and limited—by the "sober", tone-deaf concepts produced by our strictly

“rational” understanding. His writings are an attempt to give the voices of nature—whatever is received and registered in what Kant calls “the manifold of intuition”—a hearing in excess of, or say beyond, our concepts for grasping and comprehending them; a hearing impossible within the ontologies codified by both rationalism and empiricism, both of which enshrine in reification the structure that positions a subjective interiority opposite an objective exteriority. It is this structure that Rilke, like Merleau-Ponty, will attempt patiently, and with the finest sobriety, to deconstruct:

“Turning-Point”:
 Animals trustingly stepped
 into his open gaze, grazing ones,
 even the captive lions
 stared in, as though into incomprehensible freedom;
 birds flew through it unswerving,
 it that could feel them; and flowers
 met and returned his gaze,
 great as children.²⁹

The voices of nature vibrate and resonate, becoming the singing of things—but only when released from the old dualisms. Their communication will sing only when, in poetry and poetizing thought, they cannot be captured by the determinate concepts of a rationality complicit in domination. Attempting to open language to the voices of nature that have for too long suffered from our deafness, our denial, our exclusion of their siren-call to freedom, the poet and the philosopher are daringly welcoming the return of the repressed. And celebrating the acknowledgement of this experience of connection, celebrating the intelligibility of the sensuous, audible once again within the human voice—but as if for the first time, marking its indebtedness to a nature virtually lost to all remembrance.

In *Water and Dreams*, Gaston Bachelard, an important figure for Merleau-Ponty’s thought, boldly extends the implications of this experience of connection—of interconnection, observing:

That the language of waters is a direct poetic reality; that murmuring waters teach birds and men to sing, speak, recount, and that there is, in short, a continuity between the speech of water and the speech of man.³⁰

This astonishing thought, which the sciences of language will immediately dismiss as “mere poetizing”, but which I take to indicate a truth of experience whose significance and implications have still not been fully realized by philosophical thought, is at the heart of the argument for the sake of which this book has been written.

In beautifully simple verse, Octavio Paz expressed a part of this argument when he wrote: "It flowed/ At my body's edge/ Among the unbound elements."³¹ In what he calls "the looms of language", he weaves his body into the elemental flesh of the world, returning it in a metaphors that assigns the voices of language itself to the elemental intertwining—precisely there where the continuity that Bachelard invites us to experience takes place.

As we shall see, Merleau-Ponty's reflections on language—on the voice in particular, elaborate with phenomenological discipline the experience that, in "La Pythie", Paul Valéry commends to our attention with a descriptiveness that is already as precise as it is contracted:

[. . .] this solemn Voice/ Which knows itself when it sounds/ To be no longer the voice of anyone/ As much as the voice of the waves and the forests.³²

Our language is greatly impoverished when, as we could when we were children, we can no longer hear, and can no longer welcome, gathering into our own voices, the voices of nature—the warbling of song-birds, the sighs of the wind, the creaking of trees in the freeze of winter, the laughter of streams meandering through the woods. To hear again this gathering is to hear the sense in which language is essentially ecological. Once upon a time, our voices belonged—and they still do—to a deep ecology. But of course the phrase "once upon a time" bespeaks what the early German Romantics called a "mythology of Reason"—and it cannot disguise the difficulty in sustaining a remembrance of what, beyond all measure, has been forever lost.

The child's desire to learn speech is solicited and awakened not only by the voices of other human beings—parents, teachers, friends, but also by the sounds of our artifacts, our machines, and by the sounds and voices of nature. One must listen to Fragment B50, attributed to Herakleitos, the philosopher who declared that nature loves to hide. One of the places where nature loves to hide is in the sensible flesh of language. Within the philosopher's responsive words, almost obliterating them with their supernatural force, can be heard the eerie voices of a roaring, howling, furious wind, a terrible, frightening, violent wind coming from the abysses of being: dreadful sounds, made audible through the sounding of the words, a wind swirling and echoing, finally dying away, returning to the silence that accompanies all. Let us listen to the sound of the philosopher's words:

Ouk emou alla tou logou akousantas
homologeïn sophon estin hen panta.

The words say: "Listening not to me, but to the primordial Logos [another name for the being of beings, the word without which no beings would be], it

is wise to be in attunement with the thought that all things are one." This fragment concerns the thought of being. But at the same time, the words that the philosopher uses, reiterating the long "ou" sound, conjures the wind into presence and lets us actually hear the resounding echoes of this primordial speech. This wind, the very sound of the presencing of being, the very voice of the "Logos", is an extraordinary gift that the thinker has bequeathed. But it is almost too dreadful, too monstrous for us to hear.

Human speech retains vestiges of the voices of nature that summoned us in a time before we were able to speak the language of our community. I will show how, in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty was already laying out in a hermeneutical phenomenology the prelinguistic dimension of our experience with language—he will call it there the "prepersonal"—that is not yet "the voice of anyone", so much as it is an appropriation of, or rather by, the voices of the things that compose our world. It is worth noting here, however, that whilst both poet and philosopher invoke the voices of nature—the waves, the winds, the forests, they ignore the sounds of industry, the sounds of our cities—sounds that assumed the greatest significance for the poet, Charles Baudelaire, recording the "shocks" of life played out in the modern city of his time.

In a characteristically generous gesture towards his teacher, Merleau-Ponty states that, "in a sense the whole of philosophy, as Husserl says, consists in restoring a power to signify, a birth of meaning, or a wild meaning, an expression of experience by experience. . . ." ³³ And the key to this *restitutio in integrum* will be the "ultimate truth" of the intertwining and its chiasmic irreversibility: a truth to be redeemed, in part, by the remembrance of nature in the subject (VIF 203–04; VIE 155).

For Emerson, likewise concerned about a restitution, a life, indeed a society, dwelling in attunement with nature, it is a matter of deepest faith that, as he puts it in "Two Rivers," a poem reminiscent of Homer's narration of Odysseus's encounter with the song of the Sirens, but inspired by the sounds—the song—of the Musketaquit: "they lose their grief who hear this song."³⁴ They lose it because what the poet's song retrieves or recovers from the river, namely, its "singing", returns them to the whole of nature—the glorious presence, one might say, of the divine.

Thus, as Emerson remarks in "Self-Reliance", "When a man lives with God, his voice shall be as sweet as the murmur of the brook and the rustle of the corn."³⁵ Now, if "living with God" may be taken to mean caring for nature and preserving it as God's creation, could one then say that this "sweet" attunement of the voice corresponds to—is moreover an expression of—the caring and preserving, not only a gift bestowed by virtue of that relationship to nature, but also part of what must be involved in that caring and preserving, involved, that is, in imparting it?

But how, as the possibility of a relation, a correspondence or attunement to nature, is this "restitution", this experience with language—that is, with

the voice—to be thought? Recapitulating Theodor Adorno's critical reflections on utopia in his late work, *Negative Dialectics*, one is compelled to recognize that for the actualization of freedom in relation to the world, to all that is its other, the subject must eventually learn to live by the dialectical principle of "nonidentity", transcending rigid ego-logical boundaries. Merleau-Ponty, likewise a dialectical thinker, would, echoing Schelling, invoke an identity that is "the identity of difference" (VIF 318, VIE 264). This dialectical principle serves the imagination of a utopia radically different from those represented in the discourses of the French and British Enlightenment, where the sovereignty of the subject required the subjugation of nature and where the voice of Reason, deaf to the voices of nature, proclaimed its authority to subordinate the silent realm of stone, plant and animal to its regulation and reckoning. Any "restitution" would require a radical transformation in the very character of the subject, the one who speaks.

In the reading of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology into which we will be venturing, it is precisely these rigid ego-logical boundaries, boundaries constitutive of character, legacy of Cartesian and Kantian idealism, that are called into question, subjected to the reversibilities of an intertwining of subject and object that deconstructs the dualistic, antagonistic structure, opening language—opening the speaking voice—as it has been represented by the philosophical tradition to the infinite registers of alterity, the non-identical, all the possibilities for good and for ill that a world of sounds and voices can communicate. What I take Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to be suggesting is that, if we listen and speak with chiasmic attunement, our words, our "logoi", may escape their ego-logical instrumentality: they may become, in fine, ecological, letting the voices of nature be heard, echoing, resonating, within their human register. And if we hear these echoes, these reverberations, we cannot—we must not—avoid the responsibility to which they are summoning us.

Thus, in the representation of selfhood and language that his phenomenology generates, there is a profound alteration in the experience of nature. No doubt inspired by Thoreau's questioning in *Walden*, John Seed nicely expresses the logical, or grammatical structure of this displacement, this shift, in the disposition of consciousness: "I am protecting the forest" develops into "I am part of the rainforest protecting myself." I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into thinking.³⁶ Reformulating Husserl's concept of intentionality, I suggest that I am, or have, roots, tendrils, and branches that intertwine me into the world.

Arguing that we need, today perhaps more than ever, a much deeper sense of our belonging to the realm we call "nature", a much deeper understanding of our interdependencies, our participation in all of its processes, Arne Naess maintains that the cultivation of a "deep, intense inner life"—not at all the same as the ego's self-indulgent absorption in itself and its interests—is actually conducive to a caring relationship with nature, because it