

The Philosopher of Modern Life: Baudelaire, Merleau-Ponty, and the Art of Phenomenological Critique¹

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*For Cynthia Willett and Tyrone Williams,
whose authentic criticism {philosophical and poetic}
continues to inspire*

Abstract: I compare poet Charles Baudelaire and philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty as social critics of modernity from within modern society. I explore Baudelaire's unacknowledged influence upon Merleau-Ponty as a means of re-reading Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. I examine Baudelaire's poetry as well as his essay, *The Painter of Modern Life*. Though the essay claims to be an analysis of the significance of the painter C. Guys, I argue that it can be read as autobiographical – revealing a sense of the poet as social critic of modernity. Likewise, Merleau-Ponty's accounts of artists reveal a great deal about his own view of the role of the philosopher as social critic. One can read Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as an art rather than as a science of sciences. Finally, I explore the political implications of this aesthetic-based phenomenology. I argue that there is an historical depth revealed by this phenomenological *art* of political judgment that would be neglected by any political *science*.

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KeyWords: Charles Baudelaire, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, depth, reversibility, *écart*, correspondences, social critique, art.

Resumo: Comparo o poeta Charles Baudelaire e o filósofo Maurice Merleau-Ponty como críticos sociais da modernidade a partir do interior da sociedade moderna. Exploro a influência não reconhecida de Baudelaire sobre Merleau-Ponty como uma forma de reler a fenomenologia de Merleau-Ponty. Também examino a poesia de Baudelaire assim como seu ensaio “O pintor da vida moderna”. Embora o ensaio afirme ser uma análise da importância do pintor C. Guys, sustento que pode ser lido como autobiográfico – revelando uma consciência do poeta enquanto crítico social da modernidade. Da mesma maneira, as caracterizações de artistas feitas por Merleau-Ponty revelam muito sobre a sua visão do papel do filósofo como crítico social. Pode-se ler a fenomenologia de Merleau-Ponty como uma arte em vez de como uma ciência das ciências. Finalmente, exploro as implicações políticas dessa fenomenologia baseada na estética. Sustento que há uma profundidade histórica revelada por essa arte fenomenológica do julgamento político que seria negligenciada por qualquer ciência política.

Palavras-chave: Arte. Charles Baudelaire. Correspondências. Crítica social. *Écart*. Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Profundidade. Reversibilidade.

There is a spectre haunting Europe – or Paris, at least. That is how I came to make the acquaintance of M. Charles Baudelaire in 1999.² I was hard at work in the *Bibliothèque nationale* in Paris, reading notes and manuscripts of Merleau-Ponty. Because I am not wealthy, usually my stays in Paris are very short and almost every hour of daylight is accounted for in the occidental manuscripts reading room. One trip, however, I was working just a bit ahead of schedule. For ten days, I had been reading the working notes Merleau-Ponty made for his essay, *l’Oeil et l’esprit*. As some of you know personally, deciphering Merleau-Ponty’s handwriting

² [Charles Baudelaire, 1821-1867]

is a formidable task; so my eyes were burning by the time I was finished working with the section I had selected. Since it was a lovely Friday afternoon, since I had completed my task, and since I was to return home the next day, I decided to go visit the *boquinistes* by the Seine and repair to a café on Ile St. Louis, one of my favorite places in Paris.

As is my custom, after crossing onto the island by the bridge near Notre-Dame, I walked slowly along the quays on both sides of the little island, paying my respects to both channels of the Seine, before settling into the café quite close by the bridge I had just come across. Relaxing, I ordered tea, and opened my little bag of newly acquired treasures, which included a cheap copy of Baudelaire's *les Fleurs du mal*. I opened the book and eagerly began to read the poems. That day there were some surprises in store for me.

Now this particular stay in Paris was at the end of a longer trip to various places in Europe – as usual, combined to maximize the opportunities for the expensive [for me] trans-continental flight. I had already been to Italy and to Wales to deliver lectures at conferences before coming to Paris to revisit Merleau-Ponty's manuscripts. So I was five weeks away from my family, tired, and a bit lonely. Perhaps this is not the best mood to read Baudelaire, who can be a little depressing at times. Indeed, he has a way of showing that there is a cloud for every silver lining. After awhile, I abandoned the dark poems momentarily to read the biographical information included in the preface. It was then that I realized that I had just walked by his old home at *l'hôtel Pimodan*. And at that moment I was sitting just down the street from where he used to visit the infamous Jeanne Duval, who inspired many of the poems. How many times had Baudelaire stalked and staggered the stones of this street?

A chill went down my spine. I marveled at the coincidence! Of all the books I might have purchased, and of all the places I might have chosen to sit and read – it was as if M. Baudelaire's spirit had come to the library and summoned me there to his home, to his haunt, his muse. So, then, what did he want to show me?

I remembered that Merleau-Ponty had taught one of his first courses at Lyon on the works of Proust and Baudelaire. Of course, Mauro Carbone and Len Lawlor, among others have rightly devoted serious study to the connections between Merleau-Ponty and Proust.³ Obviously, Merleau-Ponty's published works are saturated with oblique and direct references to Proust. In the posthumously published *Le visible et l'invisible*, Merleau-Ponty even states that "no one has gone further than Proust in the fixation of the rapports between the visible and the invisible..."⁴ And anyone who has even glanced at Merleau-Ponty's unpublished notes has seen that Merleau-Ponty is inspired by Proust throughout most of his career to an even greater degree than his publications indicate.⁵

But enough for now about Proust: whatever happened to Baudelaire's influence? Perhaps Baudelaire's spirit was showing me the answer to this question. I went back to the poems with interest! Lo and behold, there was the poem titled *Réversibilité*.⁶ And these amazing poems were teeming with so many of the metaphors which animate Merleau-Ponty's ontological writings in his later work.

My topic today is to call forth the Baudelairean spirit haunting Merleau-Ponty's thought, to beckon it to reveal itself and come into the light. This has some intrinsic importance, since Baudelaire's critique of

³ Len Lawlor has done some outstanding work on the different kinds of love in Proust and their manifestations in Merleau-Ponty's thought. Cf. also Mauro Carbone, (2001, pp. 27-83), Carbone brilliantly shows how Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological attitude [as Merleau-Ponty explicitly states in the preface to *Phénoménologie de la perception*] is one of astonishment before the world, and how Merleau-Ponty's interest in modern artists – especially Proust – has to do with the artist's similar attitude of astonishment with regard to cultivating the latency of meaning beyond the visible, beyond the literal, without appealing to a moment of interiority – "the breaking-up of the traditional notion of the subject" (Carbone, 2001, p. 130).

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964b, p. 195). Hereafter, this work is cited as VI. I will have more to say about this passage in the second section of this essay.

⁵ It is also interesting that each time I have visited Mme. Merleau-Ponty, she has had a copy of a journal of Proust studies on the table.

⁶ *Réversibilité* is one of the central concepts in Merleau-Ponty's later ontology.

modernity reveals a depth to Merleau-Ponty's work that has received too little attention – a socio-political horizon to Merleau-Ponty's later work, and shows how we might take Merleau-Ponty's work a little further today. The huge philosophical question lurking in the background is: what role or roles do philosophers and poets play in the critique of modernity?

These two great thinkers were separated by about 100 years as well as by discipline. We will organize our restricted investigation along the axes of *réversibilité* and *écart* [actually *correspondances* in Baudelaire] in the context of their anti-romantic critiques of modernity. More specifically, I pose the following theses. (1) Baudelaire's anti-romantic realism is a striking parallel to Merleau-Ponty's later thought. (2) Merleau-Ponty's later work can be read as an ontological appropriation of Baudelaire's anti-romanticism in his development of *réversibilité* and *écart* in his later work. Finally, (3) recognizing the Baudelairean aspects of Merleau-Ponty's ontological thought reveals its critical (social and political) horizon and has implications for our own critical situation with respect to modernity.

The “Alchemy of Suffering” and the Art of “Secret Science”

*Moesta et errantibunda*⁷ is more than the title of one of Baudelaire's poems – it describes both his own anguished role as a poet in modern urban life as well as his view of the existential state of nineteenth century Europe.⁸ His sorrow at the damned and decadent state of modern society

⁷ Charles Baudelaire, (1857, p. poem # 62). I will cite Baudelaire from the bilingual edition which includes James McGowan's translation. However, as with all texts cited in this essay, all translations are my own unless noted otherwise. McGowan is more sensitive to poetic structure and rhyme than I prefer. For a philosophical appropriation of Baudelaire's work, I think that more emphasis should be placed upon the sense of the text while retaining the original metaphors whenever possible. Charles Baudelaire (1957, p. 128). This work will be cited as FM, with the poem # from the 1861 edition. *Moesta et errantibunda* means “sorrowful and wandering.”

⁸ It would be interesting to contrast this state of wandering with Marcel's hopeful description of the human condition as *Homo Viator*.

flows from every page – his words surging forth in tearful torrents of rage and love. Baudelaire wandered through his Paris as he wandered through much of his life – driven to capture in his anguished verse the alienation he saw and felt so deeply – bemoaning the sickness his society suffered which destroyed his and so many other lives. Whistling past the graveyard, we are sanguine at our accomplishments as we remain obsessed with our petty tasks: “our soul will be spent in subtle schemes.” (FM, *La Mort des artistes*, #123, p. 278: *Nous userons notre âme en de subtils complots*) Our state of being is so wretched that we have no recourse to God for help in dealing with what we have wrought. “O Satan, take pity on my prolonged misery. (FM, pp. 268ff)⁹ Yet Baudelaire’s love was expressed as passionately as his vitriolic disgust. His pride in his abilities figures into his role as a poet, and once again also reflects an existential state; for in his view we ought to love, so long as love remains possible. Perhaps there has never been a more profound and complicated account of alienation, ennui, and disgust at the modern human condition.

We suffer the modern life we inflict upon ourselves. But perhaps Baudelaire shows that the expression of our suffering has a transformative effect, though it is quite distinct from the romantic self-pity of Shelly or Byron. Or at least, he grew out of that sort of romantic self-love. Baudelaire is clearly impressed with his own abilities – whether or not these abilities were recognized sufficiently by his mother, his half-brother, his teachers, his colleagues, his family’s legal and financial advisor, his publishers, his critics, or his readers.¹⁰ But he is also contemptuous of his own

⁹ This is the refrain from the poem “Litanies of Satan,” #120: “*Ô Satan, prends pitié de ma longue misère*”.

¹⁰ Baudelaire’s relationship with his mother is notorious in the secondary literature. His father died when he was only five years old, and his mother remarried the very next year. Baudelaire hated his stepfather throughout his life and never forgave his mother for remarrying, even though she was marrying a very successful man. It is the general consensus that Baudelaire thought that his love for his mother should have been sufficient. At the same time, she was very, very possessive of him, refused to rein him in against the advice of her new husband, her stepson, and the family

limitations, self-imposed afflictions, addictions, diseases, poverty, and perpetual professional and personal plight. And this dimension inspires a powerful anti-romantic realism in his work. Baudelaire, having played the role of the dandy until his funds were cut off, was also always attracted to the sordid underbelly of urban Paris – prostitution, addiction, poverty, and the flouting of conventional morality. He regarded traditional morality as a comfortable hypocrisy, but he also deplored the life of vice as much as the naïve embrace of virtue. I commend to you any of the copious biographies, which often vary wildly in their speculative conclusions. Baudelaire is presented as everything from a bourgeois punk to a drug-addled Satanist, to an austere moralist. And each of these has a grain of truth, though none exhaustively capture his character.

Let us turn our attention from these general biographical issues to the philosophical implications of two remarkable poems from *Les Fleurs du mal* that I believe typify the style of anti-romantic realism of some of Baudelaire's work that would later influence Merleau-Ponty: *Correspondances* and *Réversibilité*.¹¹ Reading the poems for their philosophical implications is less tendentious than some philosophical appropriations of poetry, since Baudelaire apparently conceived of these implications as well. According to Enid Starkie, Baudelaire said at one point in his career that “philosophy seemed to him now the only thing worthy of the attention of a poet.”¹²

advisors. By 1844 he was spending his inheritance at an unreasonable rate, and she was persuaded to restrict his access to these funds. This disciplinary act notwithstanding, she remained overly protective of her boy even as he grew older, and he reacted by becoming more and more self-destructive. Cf. any of the copious biographies of Baudelaire, such as: Joanna Richardson (1994, pp. 3-219); Enid Starkie (1958, pp. 27-83), Jean-Paul Sartre's work on Baudelaire, etc.

¹¹ I have attached these two poems and my very literal translations as an appendix to this essay.

¹² Starkie, (1958), p. 225. However, she implies that this reflects a turn toward mystical spiritualism as evidence of Baudelaire's maturation. I am not persuaded by this line of argument, as will be clear in a moment.

Correspondances is a powerful poem that reacts to the idealism of Plato as well as the mysticism of Swedenborg.¹³ For Baudelaire, whatever correspondences there may be in life that lend life its sense and value are not those between a particular and a metaphysical ideal, nor are they concerned with perfect symbolization. The visible is no imperfect symbolic aperture upon a perfect and ideal invisible infinite. Their relation is not harmonious and symmetrical – some disguised ideal hidden to the many but revealed to the mystic. Baudelaire delighted in shocking and grotesque images in his poetry that are delicious examples of *dissonance* rather than harmony. For Baudelaire, the world yields “an irresistible allure of the horrible” (p. 10). He stated that for humans, “the unique and supreme delight lies in the certainty of doing evil.” (Baudelaire quoted in Richardson, 1994, p.50. These words bespeak no mystical harmony, no moral world order, and no romantic idealism.

For Baudelaire, correspondences are not simply representations of ideals. They are instead matters of compromise and contingency whe-

¹³ I prefer Jonathan Culler’s interpretation of this poem to Starkie’s, since I believe that she misses the irony. Cf. Jonathan Culler (1990). For the opposing interpretation, there is Starkie’s reading of this poem as presaging Baudelaire’s later conversion to a spiritual moralist at the direct influence of Swedenborg – though she makes a case for the gradual acquaintance with Swedenborg’s symbolic mysticism even from Baudelaire’s work on Poe. Cf. Starkie (op. cit., pp. 225-238). Though I profess no expertise here, it seems to me that Starkie is reading her own preferences for Baudelaire’s later poems into his earlier work such that it either manifests a gradual acquaintance with Swedenborg’s spirituality or else is proto-Swedenborgian. But much further study would be required to support that assertion. Indeed, the correspondences between senses seem as likely the product of Baudelaire’s experiences with hashish as with Swedenborg’s theology. Cf. Charles Baudelaire, (2002, p. 21): “External objects take on monstrous appearances. They reveal themselves to you in shapes hitherto unknown. Then they become distorted, transformed, and finally they enter into your very being, or you enter into them. The strangest equivocations, the most inexplicable transpositions of ideas take place. Sounds have their own colour, colours make music. Musical notes are numbers. . . . You are sitting down, smoking; you think that you are sitting in your pipe, and it’s you that your pipe is smoking; it’s you that you are breathing out in the form of blue-tinged clouds.” Of course, experiences with hashish and Swedenborg need not be mutually exclusive.

rein value appears. Correspondences often are accomplished by shocking, forceful juxtapositions that reveal a disturbing intramundane existence.

Mauro Carbone describes this very well.

[Correspondences are] the repetition of an already lived situation, the rapport which is spontaneously established between different and analogous experiences, the bringing-together of things, beings, or signs that refer [*renvoient*] to other things, to other beings, to other signs, all that seems to bear witness to a “preobjective” accord between the individual and the sensible.... (2001, p. 42)

Perhaps one ought to add that this accord is “presubjective” as well as “preobjective,” and that the accord is dynamic and fragile. It is also unfortunate that Carbone’s focus in this work is almost exclusively upon correspondences in Proust, even though he acknowledges in a few words immediately above this passage that “one can already find [them] in Baudelaire” (2001). To be fair, Carbone is following Merleau-Ponty’s explicit guide here in a passage I referred: “No one has gone further than Proust in the fixation of the rapports between the visible and the invisible, in the description of an idea that is not the contrary of the sensible, that is its double and its depth.” (VI. p. 195)

If Proust went further than anyone, his inspiration, and hence Merleau-Ponty’s – can be found in Baudelaire. It is worth a closer look at Baudelaire to see what can be revealed in Merleau-Ponty’s thought.

Correspondances opens with what at first seems to be a romantic idealization of nature: “Nature is a temple.” However, is soon becomes clear that human beings are part of the temple – its “living pillars” – they lend support yet they say some strange and confusing things. Humans are depicted as wandering in a “forest of symbols” which in turn observe us as symbols – peers. Apparently “*Sprache spricht*” in Baudelaire as well.

The unity that arises in this poem is not given or perfect, but is depicted through the metaphor of “echoes” that are heard from a long way off and hence interweave and interact in new ways. The unity is linked with a productive aural dissonance and immediately described

in visual terms of a clarity that is to be found in darkness rather than in light. It is in these contingent terms that the senses interweave and interact – where “Scents, colors and sounds co-respond.” The encroachment of these senses is expressed in the reflexive verb *se répondre*, rather than *répondre*: they respond together – co-respond – correspond. The unity of correspondence is creative and active rather than static or given *a priori*.

The activity of correspondences is further reflected in the term “*expansion* of infinite things” – where these things are in the process of creating and filling up the expanse, or spreading-out. And what is infinite about these things? Nothing more than the transcendence of embodied sensation – scents and sights and sounds and touches and tastes – that afford rapturous delights or heinous suffering. And ultimately, it is *perception* that grounds the relation of mind and body here: “Which sing the raptures of mind and senses.” Baudelaire is a poet of the body every bit as much as a “spiritual” poet. It is this account of perception and its primacy that is quite similar to what Merleau-Ponty would call a ground in his earlier work, and what he would later call “the soil of the sensible.”

I think that Merleau-Ponty’s provocative notion of *écart* – divergence or the spread created by divergence – is prefigured in Baudelaire’s correspondences. Merleau-Ponty begins the chapter on the chiasm in *Le visible et l’invisible* with his ubiquitous rejection of the subject / object dichotomy. For as soon as philosophy starts with a radical ontological distinction between subject and object, between inside and outside, between reflection and coincidence, “it prejudices what it will find” (VI, p.172). So it is necessary to start anew so as to avoid these prejudices, which have become sedimented in the discourse of modern philosophy. Instead of an ontology presupposing a principle of identity, Merleau-Ponty began to develop a new direction in ontology that was based upon differences – differentiation – divergence – *écart*. This new direction in ontology stressed the encroachment [*empiètement*] and interactivity of things, senses, and beings as a process of differentiation very much like Baudelaire’s correspondences.

It is necessary for us to habituate ourselves to think that everything visible is cut from the tangible, all tactile being is in some manner promised to visibility, and that there is encroachment, impingement, not only between the touched and that which touches, but also between the tangible and the visible which is encrusted within it.... (VI, p.177)

It is through this encroachment and interference that the unity of the world is produced. It is as these series of differences that identity emerges – not as a static, given, harmonious unity, but as an implied horizon of differentiation. Indeed the world *worlds* as an implied horizon of differentiation of horizons of differences.

[One sees that] in general some visible thing is not an absolutely hard, indivisible being that is offered all nude to a vision which could only be total or null. Instead it is a kind of always gaping straits between interior horizons and exterior horizons, something that comes to touch lightly and make resound at a distance diverse regions of the colored or visible world , a certain differentiation....the difference between things and colors, a momentary crystallization of the world of color and the visibility. (VI, p.175)

These gaping straits are the spread between emerging from one perspective as discrete identities differing from one another, and from another perspective the process of differentiation itself. Likewise, one word emphasizing the differentiation of these very Baudelairean correspondences in Merleau-Ponty's later work is *écart*. But it goes hand in hand with the word *réversibilité*, which emphasizes the horizon of differentiation – the relations of differences. Let us turn our attention to Baudelaire's poem *Réversibilité* to see how it informs Merleau-Ponty's later work.

Baudelaire writes this exquisite poem in the voice of a lover to another lover, whom he repeatedly characterizes as an “angel.” And although the angel is certainly portrayed in positive terms – i.e., full of happiness, kindness, health, beauty, good-fated happiness, joy, and light, one must not jump to the conclusion that Baudelaire is guilty of

romantic idealization of his lover.¹⁴ There is a great irony in this poem. A quick look at other poems in *Les fleurs du mal* shows us that Baudelaire does not place angels in such high regard. (Cf. *Les litanies de Satan*, where Satan is, of course, described as an angel. FM, poem# 120, pp. 268-273. Furthermore, it is clear that Baudelaire has contempt for one who would be “full of happiness” in the previous poem, *À celle qui est trop gaie* [To One Who is too Happy], Baudelaire fantasizes vivisection and rape of the “angel” (FM, poem # 43a., p.88). Such purity of heart is unbecoming of the human condition.

The relationship is the focus here, along with the quite divergent perspectives of the lovers involved. While the “angel” is happy, healthy, etc., her lover indicts her for what her countenance has wrought in him and in others. While she is full of happiness, he is tossing and turning at night, sobbing, full of dread and remorse, with his heart crushed. While she is full of kindness, she seems oblivious to the hatred that corresponds to her kindness. While she is healthy, there are those who are feverous and driven mad by the conditions that produce her health. While she is beautiful, has she even considered what it will be like to be wrinkled, wretched, and despised? And even though she radiates her happiness, joy, and the light of her well-being, he asks only for her prayers – not to become her.

In the poem *Les Hiboux* [The Owls], Baudelaire describes the ambition of yearning to change place with those who are more fortunate as a useless distraction of those who are “drunk on shadows” (FM, poem #67, p.136). Reversibility is not an act of will, a yearning of the lover to become like his angel, or for her to become like him. It is instead a lesson on the divergent and different perspectives that emerge from this unheal-

¹⁴ Martin C. Dillon has brilliantly illustrated the dangers of romantic love, and shown how Merleau-Ponty’s position can be developed to recognize this problem and avoid it in *Beyond Romance*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2004. He develops this approach in a more general way in the manuscript he was completing at the time of his death, *The Ethics of Particularity*.

thy relationship. Their experiences are interdependent in their divergence.

Nor is reversibility a cognitive exercise in reflective consciousness. For example, the remorse that Baudelaire contrasts to the happiness of the “angel” is a consuming existential state, quite visceral and no mere thought process. In his striking poem, *Spleen (II)*, Baudelaire portrays his remorse with the image of worms “attending to the dearest of my dead” (FM, poem #76, p.146). They crawl, the gnaw, they consume, and the process is slow and inexorable – and a very physical phenomenon.

It hardly bears mentioning that this description of love as reversibility is anti-romantic. Baudelaire points out what horrors comes with this love. This is love for the sick alienated animals we have become in the modern age. Love as an ideal has surely fallen from the sky and been brought down to earth – not unlike Merleau-Ponty intended in the preface to *Phénoménologie de la perception*, where he promises to place essences “back into existence.”

Baudelaire implicates the reader as being in a reversible relationship with him from the start of the book, in his poem *Au lecteur* [To the Reader]. The reader suffers right alongside him, is suffering in the same age, is also limited by the ennui and alienation of the age.¹⁵

In the interest of time, I will restrict myself to a very few words here about reversibility in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. Merleau-Ponty describes reversibility as “ultimate truth” (VI, p. 204). I contend that Merleau-Ponty appropriates Baudelaire’s *réversibilité* as an ontological principle. He contrasts it to the Sartrean dualistic dialectical opposition and instead emphasizes the reversible relation of differentiation. Reversibility is at the heart of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, alongside *écart*, and

¹⁵ FM, pp.4-6. Many Baudelairean metaphors animate *l’Oeil et l’esprit*. Merleau-Ponty is preoccupied with things mute, expressing the silent (p. 13), the limpid (as flaw – Descartes’ lament for consciousness to make all things clear, p.36), “philtres” (p.35), haunting [p.13], fevers (p.30), shadow/twilight/dawn, phantoms (p.30, 33), *renversements* (p.19), dreams/ nightmares, and embodiment throughout. In a longer work, each of these could be explored in greater detail.

expresses the way things achieve their divergent fragile identities through their differentiating actions intertwined with one another. Reversibility is the ability in principle – never complete – to be another being. It is a way of pointing out that the identity we have taken as the basis for modern thought is predicated upon the ability to share existence through differentiating actions.

There is also made clear in the essay *l'Oeil et l'esprit*.

A human body is there when, between seeing and the visible, between touching and touched, between one eye and another, . . . between one hand and the other, between hand and hand a sort of crisscrossing [*recroisement*] takes place . . . (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, p. 20)

And the emphasis here, once again, is on the *event*, the activity, and the process of differentiation. In fact, until the final version of this essay, Merleau-Ponty also included here “an encroachment, a transgression” immediately after this passage (Merleau-Ponty, notes, Vol XIII, cf. 2nd typed version). A nice parallel passage in *Le visible et l'invisible* occurs in the chiasm chapter: “By this crisscrossing within of the touching and the tangible, these very movements are incorporated within the universe that they interrogate . . .” (VI, p.176.). This is how our divergent styles of being emerge. This is how we become who we are.

Merleau-Ponty's essay, *l'Oeil et l'esprit*, is a beautiful critique of modernity, especially the modern world as figured by science. Instead, Merleau-Ponty wants us to attend to a “secret science” of the artist (OE, p.15). He does this by a phenomenological inquiry into the ways and means the artist is attuned to the “soil of the sensible world,” which has been neglected in favor of the “worked-over world” of scientific knowledge (p.12.). And the themes of *réversibilité* and *écart*, developed from Baudelaire's *correspondances* and *réversibilité* are at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's secret science. So we can read M-P's account as he read the artists': the artist at work self-consciously reflecting upon his *praxis* as artist.

For Baudelaire, the praxis of the poet is to “lend grace to things most vile” (FM, poem #87, p.168). He also describes the poet as a “pious

enemy of sleep” who takes to heart the indiscrete tears of the moon, “far from the sun” (FM, poem #65, p.134). So the poet here is an enemy of the enlightenment – one who secrets things; yet the poet does this out of *love*.

Perhaps the most interesting analogy Baudelaire makes about the *praxis* of the poet is in his essay *On Wine and Hashish*, where he compares the poet to a garbage collector.¹⁶

Let’s lower our sights a little. Let’s contemplate one of those mysterious beings, living so to speak off the excrement of great cities; for there are some strange occupations around. There’s a huge number of them.... Here is a man whose task it is to pick p all the rubbish produced one one day in the capital. All that the great city has thrown out, all it has lost, all it has disdained, all it has broken, he catalogues and collects. He consults the archives of debauchery.... He makes a selection, chooses astutely: he picks up, as a miser seizes on treasure, the refuse which, when chewed over by the divinity of Industry, will become objects of use or enjoyment..... He arrives, wagging his head and stumbling over the cobbles like those young poets who spend all their days wandering around in search of rhymes. He is talking to himself; he pours out his soul to the cold night air (Baudelaire, *On Wine and Hashish*, op.cit., p.8).

The poet can create value amidst the alienation of modernity. What can the philosopher do?

Merleau-Ponty’s ontology emerged from his political differences with Sartre. He began to try to develop a new philosophy of history, which led to his exploration of nature, which eventually developed into

¹⁶ It is interesting to contrast Baudelaire’s anti-romantic vision of the poet as the garbage collectors of society with the romantic vision of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Cf. Shelley, Percy Bysshe, “In Defense of Poetry.” Norton Anthology of English Literature, [Volume D: The Romantic Period] Ed. Stephen Greenblatt and M.C.Abrams. 8th ed. New York: Norton, 2005, p. 850: “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” I want to express my gratitude to Mr. Jacob Riley for suggesting this passage to me to help express the contrast between Baudelaire’s work and the older romantics. One of the greatest pleasures of teaching is in learning from outstanding students.

his nascent ontology which he was unable to develop. I do not agree with Sartre that Merleau-Ponty's ontology was a theory set over against *praxis*. I think that by elaborating his ontology in situated terms of the work of the artist, Merleau-Ponty provides us a useful starting place for further thought about the relation between ontology and politics. In my own work, I have begun to explore how an ontology of differences provides the basis for a strong critique of western liberalism. It may be useful to look to Baudelaire's inspiration to see how Merleau-Ponty's ontology differs from others in the phenomenological tradition, and thus why an ontology of differences is more promising for political thought.

Heidegger pointed out that every revealing is also a concealing. Nonetheless, for Heidegger phenomenology is concerned with bringing things to light.¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, drawing upon Baudelaire's gloomy leitmotif, allusively depicts phenomenology as more concerned with shadows, chiaroscuro, and twilight. It is clear that phenomenology, and not only the philosopher, has a shadow. Merleau-Ponty transformed phenomenology to something much more radical.¹⁸ In his working notes to *l'Oeil et l'esprit*, Merleau-Ponty wrote that it was essential to radicalize the notion of light "to make of the work of art a *Seinsgeschichte* (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, notes OE, Vol. XIII, p.148). My friends, it is the darkness that beckons us to wonder.

It is by moving away from the model of phenomenology as science of sciences that Merleau-Ponty engages in his critique of modernity. Or, to put it another way, his critique of science and valorization of the artist makes room for us to conceive of phenomenology as an *art* rather

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, §7, where Heidegger famously discloses the origins of phenomenology in *phō* – light.

¹⁸ And it seems clear to me that he was conscious of this radicalization throughout his career. Perhaps this is most clear in the preface to *Phénoménologie de la perception* [where he contrasts his own direction to Husserl's], in the essay *l'Homme et l'adversité* in *Signes* [where he contrasts phenomenology as *movement* to phenomenology as *method*], and in the working notes to *La visible et l'invisible* [where he contrasts his new insights with his earlier work].

than as a science, thereby transplanting phenomenology back into the rich soil of the sensible world – the world of lived experience.

Phenomenology originally conceived of its wisdom as providing a science of the sciences. There can be no science of wisdom. There might be an *art* of wisdom; for certainly there is wisdom in art.

The Art of Phenomenological Critique

So: what would it cost political criticism if it were approached as an art rather than a science? We propose that there is a style of thinking that is very untimely – and therefore very timely in another sense. That is, we propose that one conceive of a political art rather than a political science – an art of political critique rather than a scientific critique. *We propose a political art that is intrinsically critical and distinctively phenomenological.*

The roles of the *epochē* and reduction in phenomenology would vary between phenomenology as science as opposed to phenomenology as art. In the *epochē*, there is a putting out of play, a parenthesizing, a bracketing whereby phenomenology takes a step back – but never a step away from the world of lived experience. Though Husserl repeatedly claimed that we do not forsake the world of lived experience in his vision of phenomenology as a science of the sciences, I am not convinced he was successful. Contra Husserl, the understanding we gain of the world we live in through the phenomenological reduction cannot lay claim to any sense of purity or eidetic status. I think that we need to follow Merleau-Ponty's direction instead, where we see the task of phenomenology as seeking contingent knowledge through engagement rather than through an apodictic foundation.

Recall that Merleau-Ponty famously departs from Husserl in the Introduction to his *Phenomenology of Perception* when he makes two bold proclamations: (1) “the one thing we can learn from the phenomenological reduction is that no complete reduction is possible” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945); and (2) “Our goal is to put essences back into existence” (1945). The

first says that, since we can never complete the *epochē*, the corresponding phenomenological reduction will never be complete – and hence always call itself into question. This is the basis of political critique, since every interpretation is implicated as subject to critique. Not only is it impossible in practice, it ought not be even our ideal to stand clear of the vicissitudes of human experience and human existence. *For human existence purified of contingency is no longer human existence.* We are, as Merleau-Ponty insisted in that same text, “condemned to meaning” (1945), and that meaning is never pure. It is always open to interpretation, and hence it is always open to critique.

Merleau-Ponty did not explicitly describe his new direction in phenomenology as art, opposing it to science in the manner I am suggesting. But I think that it is appropriate to extend his thought in this way, and indeed I am drawing support from his analysis of art and science in his final essay, *L'oeil et l'esprit*. The point of the essay, in general, seems to be that art rather than science reveals fundamental truths about perception of the world. Science pretends to have objective truth of the world while art is relegated to a mere subjective imitation of that world. Merleau-Ponty clearly disagrees with this. The first line of the essay makes this clear: “Science understands the world at the cost of no longer living in it” (Merleau-Ponty, OE). The enlightened scientist acknowledges that in any empirical scientific inquiry there is always contingency, but this is only seen as error that limits our quest for the objective ideal. The better way is to recognize that this “falling short” is not something to be overcome on the way to an objective ideal. Instead, it is this sort of contingency that is the means to *all* understanding of phenomena. Pure, objective knowledge of the world is not only impossible to attain, it is a goal which takes our attention away from the world we wish to understand – the world in which we live.

Science seeks pure objectivity by its theoretical “step back” from experience, whereas art offers another sort of transcendence altogether. Art disengages in order to allow us to engage in a new way. We do not

have time to examine this in detail, but one can immediately think of many examples of this sort of *epochē* at work: attending to a film, a play, a painting, a piece of music, a dance, etc. But this sort of *epochē* is different from the theoretical step back of science. It involves physical discipline, not some abstract mental attitude that forsakes the body by trying to overcome its contingencies. There is a different kind of transcendence involved in an aesthetic *epochē*. Kurt Vonnegut describes this very well in the recent collection of short stories, *Bagombo Snuff Box*. Vonnegut describes the transcendence involved in reading a short story in a magazine when he was a boy.

Imagine it is 1938 again. I am sixteen again. I come home again from yet another lousy day at Shortridge High School. Mother...says that there is a new *Saturday Evening Post* on the coffee table. It is raining outside, and I am unpopular. But I can't turn on a magazine like a TV set. I have to pick it up, or it will go on lying there, dead as a doornail. An unassisted magazine has no get-up-and-go.

After I pick it up, I have to make all one hundred sixty pounds of male adolescent meat and bones comfortable in an easy chair.... But consider the incredible thing I myself have to do in turn. I turn my brains on!

That isn't the half of it. With my brains all fired up, I do the nearly impossible thing that you are doing now, dear reader. I make sense of idiosyncratic arrangements, in horizontal lines, or nothing but twenty-six phonetic symbols, ten Arabic numerals, and perhaps eight punctuation marks, on a sheet of bleached and flattened wood pulp!

But get this: While I am reading, my pulse and breathing slow down. My high school troubles drop away.... (Kurt, 1999, p. 4)

Vonnegut goes on to playfully describe reading as a kind of meditation, and his own collection of short stories as a collection of "Buddhist catnaps. (Kurt, 1999, p. 5)"

I would like to emphasize a few things from this account. First, that the process **involves the body**. The reader prepares himself or herself for the task by settling into a chair. Respiration and pulse slow down. An attitude must be taken by the body, because it is the body that holds the

story and which makes the sense of it. The *body* achieves transcendence in this aesthetic appreciation.

Second, there is a discipline involved in this preparation. It takes much practice to be able to achieve this kind of transcendence. It involves years of training in language skills, but also in the expectation that there is something of value in engaging in this process. Reading, like all aesthetic transcendence, is a cultivated skill – an acquired taste. This discipline has its own kind of rigor, and this rigor reveals new insights.

Finally, without appealing to any pure, objective meaning, there are better and worse ways to achieve this transcendence. Without foreclosing the variety of possible meanings, there are surely some that are more and less appropriate to the situation.

So: what would it cost us if we adopt an aesthetic model of phenomenology – and of a phenomenological political critique? Not insight, not depth, not truth, not discipline, and not rigor. For there is tremendous discipline in art – both in its production and its appreciation. *Art is disciplined creativity.*

The art of politics, then, must involve both discipline and creativity. Discipline provides the structure; creativity provides the potential for hope, for radical change. Critique must be disciplined if it is political. The *polis* disciplines critique as it manifests the spontaneous exercise of the general will. Indeed, the identity of the *polis* is implicated through its own *praxes*. Discipline leads to the intelligibility of the creativity, which is commensurate with the event of political judgment [the creative aspect of the *praxis* of political critique]. Authentic political critique must be disciplined if it is to be recognizable as radical or creative. This is the paradox that lies at the heart of all genuine political critique. Thus, a phenomenological political critique of the sort I am suggesting affords disciplined creativity.

Merleau-Ponty's account of art in *L'oeil et l'esprit* manifests the aforementioned terms from his ontological work from the same period of his thought: *écart* and *réversibilité*. For the artist, the artwork, and the

interpreter of the artwork are all inextricably linked in reversible relations. Their identities are never absolute or presupposed, but are recognizable only through their divergence. The painter paints with his or her body, which is implicated as *that* painter by the emergence of the artwork – just as the painting is identified as *that* painting as the artist becomes the artist who paints it. The painting has an infinite number of meanings which lie open before it. The interpreters who see the painting invest it with new meaning because they are implicated as who they are by their responses.¹⁹ It is important to see the malleability of divergent identities in these relationships as manifestations of reversibility rather than as unfortunate equivocations of subject and object. Only by recognizing the divergence and reversibility of these situations can we disclose the practical implications. Reversibility bespeaks engagement such that things matter. And the contingency of the situation is, again, not something to be overcome, but the only means whereby things become meaningful. Phenomena call to be interpreted and implicate us as responsible for our interpretations.

The painter of modernity, or the writer of modernity, must never forsake his or her own concrete circumstances to attempt to seek some ideal. Ideality is manifest only in these contingent moments. These contingencies are not a stumbling block to be avoided; they are our only means of *creating* ideality. And the painter or the poet – or the philosopher – is distinguished as having artistic vision recognizing the ideal in the most decadent, the discarded, the refuse and ruins of modernity. One must engage in a critique with a watchful eye, caring for what society destroys.

¹⁹ It is always interesting to compare Merleau-Ponty's early and later thought. One is reminded of an earlier essay, *Marxism and Philosophy*, from the 1940's, where Merleau-Ponty describes historical agents as "product-producers" (1996, p. 163): "For the first time since Hegel, reflects not on subjectivity, but on intersubjectivity." Likewise, this explains how in the same passage Merleau-Ponty speaks of this intersubjectivity as the place where historical necessity "can turn into concrete liberty." One also recalls that in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty described how our actions transform contingency into necessity. The combination of these passages accounts for something like the reversible situation I am presenting for here.

Let us return briefly to Baudelaire – who, as we have seen, is not so far from Merleau-Ponty in many ways. His essay, *The Painter of Modern Life*, is at once homage to the artist, Constantin Guys, as well as an account of the role of the artist in decadent modern society – and hence is also indirectly autobiographical. Baudelaire’s essay is not only an example of *praxis* but also of *parapraxis* insofar as his work involves a projection of his understanding of the virtues and vices related to the role of the modern artist. The analysis of Guys’ work reveals Baudelaire’s own understanding of the work as an artist *through his own artistic work*.

Baudelaire described Guys as a “man of the world” who is not at home in the world. Guys “is an ‘I’ with an insatiable appetite for the ‘non-I’, at every instant rendering and explaining it in pictures more living than life itself. . . .” (1995, p. 10) Guys had a keen eye for relaying the vitality of circumstances, and thus conveying “the rights and privileges offered by the circumstance” (1995, p. 12). If it were not already clear that Baudelaire is reflecting upon his own position as an artist engaged in the critique of modernity, it is obvious when he praises Guys for being able “to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of the *poetry* of history” (1995, p. 12). He praises Guys for being “bold and imaginative to seize upon nobility wherever it was to be found, even in the mire” (1995, p. 38). And he remarks that in art one finds “the special beauty of evil, the beautiful amid the horrible” and a “moral fecundity” that the modern artist creates to challenge the mores of his or her day (1995). One final passage from this fine essay will suffice to indicate the critical role Baudelaire sees Guys – and himself – to be playing in modern society.

He has everywhere sought after the fugitive, fleeting beauty of present-day life, the distinguishing character of that quality we have called ‘modernity’. Often weird, violent and excessive, he has contrived to concentrate in his drawings the acrid or heady bouquet of the wine of life. (1995, p. 41)

It might be interesting to do a thoroughgoing historical investigation into the direct influence of Baudelaire upon Merleau-Ponty’s work.

That would be another study. For our purposes, let us simply bracket the historical question of causality, and examine their cases as parallels. Consider Baudelaire's situation within the arts as he offered critique of the arts and of modern society. Likewise, consider Merleau-Ponty's situation within phenomenology as he offered a critique of phenomenology and of modern society.²⁰ The convergence of these parallel lines, as in a painting, is a matter of perspective. That is, the best way to indicate *depth* while portraying two infinitely parallel lines, like rails of a train track, is to present their convergence. So we cultivate the convergence of these parallels here and now in our own situation within modernity.

It is important to remember that, as Merleau-Ponty pointed out in his analysis of painting, depth is not subordinate or incidental, but the *primary* dimension. Likewise, the historical depth that emerges here and now for us regarding Baudelaire's and Merleau-Ponty's situations as critics is not the error of historicism, but lies at the heart of understanding, fundamentally evental, and the very hope we have to offer critique today. Merleau-Ponty offers us a hint of this *evental* dimension of history and its practical value, though he did not explore it in detail in *Eye and Mind*.

There are, in the flesh of contingency, a structure of the event and a virtue peculiar to the scenario. These do not prevent the plurality of interpretations but, in fact, are the deepest reasons for this plurality. They make the event into a durable theme of historical life and have a right to philosophical status. (1995, pp. 61-62)

This historical depth, again, is in no way illusory, but the evental structure of historical phenomena. This depth is what allows history to *matter*. It is literally the making of differences that "makes a difference" to us. Furthermore, historical depth implicates us as historical agents who are responsible for the meaning of our historical situation, and who are

²⁰ I have examined Merleau-Ponty's political philosophy and especially his relation to Marxism in several of my works. A discussion of this is quite relevant here, but we do not have time to enter into that discussion in the context of this essay.

responsible for creative responses within our historical situations. And these responses, like any interpretations, call for critique.

It is with this in mind that I condemn the closed-minded dogmatism of my country's current leaders. They strive to absolve themselves from critique for the safeguarding of their warped ideals. There is something fundamentally ironic that our President says that "only history will judge my actions," as if history were a long way off. But the history that affords the possibility of critique is alive, here and now – not that idealistic surd President Bush invoked – something like what Merleau-Ponty called a "Hegelian Monstrosity." And so, to make a practical application of this notion of historical depth intrinsic to genuine political critique, I say *Depth to* Presidente George Bush! *Depth to Vice-President dick Cheney!* *Depth to their imperialistic agenda!* They really need to attend to the historical depth of engaging within history rather than appealing to an idealistic abstract history to forestall critique. But this is, in my opinion, unlikely to happen. On the other hand, President Bush may already have his wish, even if he fails to recognize it: history *is* already judging his administration. Of that, we can be sure.

But let us not be too happy in our condemnation. Our specific engagement within history implicates *us* as colonial. The very languages we use mark us as colonized and colonizers.²¹ Our intentions to engage in genuine political critique fail to divest us of our imperial heritages. This pretense is the mistake liberals in the United States sometimes adopt to feel good about the very limited critical work they do, describing themselves as leftists when they are, alas, vulgar centrists – a political orientation that is less red than sanguine.

²¹ Please do not see this phenomenological account as an impertinent proclamation concerning Brazilian politics. I realize that these days one might tend to see it this way when someone from the United States starts talking about politics. Nor do I mean to imply that Brazilian politics must turn solely to French theorists for the possibility of genuine critique. Columbia might be turning to France for its leadership soon [Mme. Bettancourt], but Brazil has its own situation.

Today, we must avoid the allure of the false ideals of scientific political critique. We must engage in the *art* of political critique to achieve our freedom. Political freedom is freedom of the *polis* and can only be achieved through collaborative labor within the *polis*, no matter how vile or decadent it may be. We offer phenomenological descriptions of an inhumane world in the hope of transforming it. Our work, and our hope, lie nowhere else than in the critique of imperialism within the ruins of empires. This is the *praxis* of the philosopher of modern life.

Correspondances

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants,
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,
– Et d'autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,

Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies,
Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens,
Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens

Correspondences

Nature is a temple where living pillars
Sometimes let slip confused speech;
People pass there through forests of symbols
Who observe them with familiar eye
As long echoes which converge from far away
In a dark and profound unity

Vast like the night and like the light,
Scents, colors and sounds co-respond

There are scents fresh as babys' skin
Sweet as the oboe, green as the prairies,
– and others, corrupted, the rich and triumphant,

Having the expansion of infinite things
Like ambergris, musk, benjamin and incense,
Which sing the raptures of mind and senses

Réversibilité

Ange plein de gaieté, connaissez-vous l'angoisse,
La honte, les remords, les sanglots, les ennuis,
Et les vagues terreurs de ces affreuses nuits
Qui compriment le coeur comme un papier qu'on froisse?
Ange plein de gaieté, connaissez-vous l'angoisse?

Ange plein de bonté, connaissez-vous la haine,
Les poings crispés dans l'ombre et les larmes de fiel,
Quand la Vengeance bat son infernal rappel,
Et de nos facultés se fait le capitaine?
Ange plein de bonté, connaissez-vous la haine?

Ange plein de santé, connaissez-vous les Fièvres,
Qui, le long, des grands murs de l'hospice blafard,
Comme des exilés, s'en vont d'un pied traînard,
Cherchant le soleil rare et remuant les lèvres?
Ange plein de santé, connaissez-vous les Fièvres?

Ange plein de beauté, connaissez-vous les rides,
Et la peur de vieillir, et ce hideux tourment
De lire la secrète horreur du dévouement
Dans des yeux où longtemps burent nos yeux avides?
Ange plein de beauté, connaissez-vous les rides?

Ange plein de bonheur, de joie et de lumières,
David mourant aurait demandé la santé
Aux émanations de ton corps enchanté;

Mais de toi je n'implore, ange, que tes prières,
Ange plein de bonheur, de joie et de lumières!

Reversibility

Angel full of happiness, do you know the anguish,
The shame, the remorse, the sobs the ennui,
And the vague terrors of these frightful nights
That compress the heart like a paper one wads up?
Angel full of happiness, do you know the anguish?

Angel full of kindness, do you know the hatred,
The clenched fists in the shadow and the tears of bitterness,
When Vengeance beats its infernal call to arms,
And makes itself the captain of our faculties?
Angel full of kindness, do you know the hatred?

Angel full of health, do you know the Feverous,
Who, the length of the pallid asylum's great walls,
Like exiles, dragging themselves along,
Searching for the rare sun, and moving their lips?
Angel full of health, do you know the Feverous?

Angel full of beauty, do you know the wrinkles,
And the fear of growing old, and this hideous torment
To read the secret horror of devotion
In eyes our avid eyes had drunk-in for ages?
Angel full of beauty, do you know the wrinkles?

Angel full of happiness, joy, and light,
The dying David would have asked for the health
That emanates from your enchanted body;
But from you, angel, I implore only your prayers
Angel full of fortune, joy, and lights!

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