

Field Nocturne 24
Merleau-Ponty and Other Mudflesh

My title seems derogatory. Still, it could be worse. Besides, is it not an attention-getter?! My preferred title would be “The Wild Iris”, thus making reference to the Goddess, to the flower, to the eye, and to “wild being”, a topic of Merleau-Ponty; and also winding round our own topic, **here-what**. But in what way do I wind, might we wind? Later, especially writing of Research in *Field Nocturne 36*, I shall place this reflection on Merleau-Ponty in the larger context of a global winding. Here I would ask you to be content with whispering pointers, to which I add in *Field Nocturne 28*.

Why Merleau-Ponty? Perhaps best to think of this concretely as the sort of thing that does in fact happen in good research. The researcher is trying to stay abreast of the field, the **field**,¹ ranging round for odd-meants.² I have been emphasizing in recent writings that research is done with a mindset which can be called the Standard Model, but it is a mindset that is open and fantasy-bent. In the future that Standard Model, shared by the Tower People, will be a rich remote assembly of Onto-logicians aesthetically astute in keeping in touch with the incomplete field.

But best leave enlarging on that till later and to others.

Why Merleau-Ponty? First, because of unfinished business, already referred to,

¹Lonergan, in *Phenomenology and Logic*, placed great emphasis on his new meaning for field (see the Introduction to the index, and the index under *Field*). I misplaced my notes on his sources here: but now, returning to Merleau-Ponty, I find him using *field* in a novel sense.

²I first used the word *oddment* or *oddmeant* in *Pastkeynes Pastmodern Economics. A Fresh Pragmatism*, Axial Publishing, 2002, pp. 50-52. I enlarge its meaning now to refer to the quest and the findings of functional research. Progressive research in any area is a matter of seeking anomalies, odd-meants that either hint at mistaken directions or positive pointers towards the future. More on this in *Field Nocturne 36*, “Effectively-sophisticated research”.

of Lonergan's *Phenomenology and Logic*.³ But also because he gives a massively rich and problematic context to our next topic: we move from the question, What is hearing? To the question, What is touching? Yes, we have our simple undergraduate text, words and diagrams that invite us - but how? - to appreciate e.g. our hairy or hairless (glabrous) surface: back and front of hand. We have our paragraph, **study**, which longs to be read properly, like the little flower.⁴ Merleau-Ponty seeks to bring together, indeed, in a world's strange flesh, what Sartre bifurcates. "We are dealing with two essentially different orders of reality. To touch and to be touched, to feel that one is touching and to feel that one is touch - these are two species of phenomena which it is useless to try to reunite."⁵

So, Merleau-Ponty pushes forward towards a positive leaving behind of dualism. "What is this prepossession of the visible, this art of interrogating it according to its own wishes, this inspired exegesis? We would perhaps find the answer in the tactile

³There is a great deal of unfinished business in *Phenomenology and Logic*. The lengthy first chapter of my *Lonergan's Standard Model of Effective Global Inquiry* deals incompletely with one of them: Goedel's Incompleteness Theorems. One of our last conversations involved him asking me about it's twists of meaning. Earlier I noted the way in which his lectures end on the issue of "subject-as-subject"(see *Phenomenology and Logic* 214-5, 313-17). It is more a beginning than an ending. He refers in his lectures to Merleau-Ponty's work towards **The Visible and the Invisible** (*Phenomenology and Logic*, 278 and the note there; also see the Introduction, xxiii) and the concluding words of his notes for the lectures could well be taken as a broad comment on the effort of that book: "The argument is: the prior reality is not object as object or subject as object; there remains subject as subject; and this s as s is both reality and discoverable through consciousness. The argument does not prove that in the s as s we shall find the evidence norms invariants principles for a critique of horizons; it proves that unless we find it there, we shall not find it at all" (*Phenomenology and Logic*, 215).

⁴The many meanings of *the little flower* are dealt with in *Lack in the Beingstalk* chapter 3.

⁵*Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel Barnes, New York, Philosophical Library, 1956, 402. A relevant anecdote comes to mind as I add this note. I recall reading *Being and Nothingness* walking round Christ Church Meadow in Oxford in the mid-1960s, and pausing in wonder at the contrast with Lonergan's clarity. But my pause had the peculiarity of a strange musing: If only *Insight* were written thus, obscurely. Lonergan's mudflesh company have the disadvantage of clear and distinct words. More on that as we putter along.

palpitation where the questioner and the questioned are closer, and of which, after all, the palpitation of the eye is a remarkable variant.”⁶ So, replacing dualisms and solipsism there is a strange thesis of reversibility, “The notion of reversibility is modeled on the phenomenon of touch.”⁷ The thesis dances round new meanings of old words, *flesh, chiasm, abyss, wild being*, and others. In this little essay I am not venturing into that dance, but rather hinting at **possibilities that are taken to be vague**.⁸ Flesh? Might there not be some concrete identification of Merleau-Ponty’s struggle with the **herewhat** that he, you and I are?

With Merleau-Ponty we can - we could, we might, with days of self-digestion - move, page by elder page, stage by decade’s age, to a viewing of our what-here body as⁹ “this generality of the Sensible in itself, this anonymity innate to Myself that we have previously called flesh, and one knows that there is no name in traditional philosophy to designate it. The flesh is not matter, in the sense of corpuscles of being that would add up or continue on one another to form beings. Nor is the visible (the thing as well as my own body) some ‘psychic’ material that would be - God knows how - brought into being by the things factually existing and acting on my factual body. In general, is it not a fact or a sum of facts ‘material’ or ‘spiritual’. Nor is it a representation for a mind: a mind could not be captured in its own representations; it would rebel against

⁶**The Visible and the Invisible**, 133.

⁷M.C.Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, Indiana University Press, 1988, 157. Part Three of this book (155-244), “The Explicit Ontology of The Visible and the Invisible”, gives a decent introductory familiarity with late searchings of Merleau-Ponty. I refer to this book below as **Dillon**. Add to it the mood given in **The Visible and the Invisible** by Claude Lefort (editor) and Alphonso Lingis (translator). **Mood** is the central **herewhat** concern of the rest of the *Field Nocturnes*.

⁸The phrase, “hinting at possibilities that are taken to be vague”, is a careful popular wording of a precise view of the nature of good functional research. I cannot enlarge on this here, except to suggest the story of the neutrino as a good starting illustration.

⁹I recall again Lonergan’s reflections on “subject as subject” (see the index on *Subject in Phenomenology and Logic*). The meaning of *as* there is curiously non-abstractive.

this insertion into the visible which is essential to the seer. The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term 'element,' in the sense we used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal thing and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being."¹⁰

As researcher I pick out this, and other odd-meants, like a research physicist tracking tracks in the tronic cycles' footprints, and pass the baton on to the non-existent community of interpreters: how they lift it into an adequate context so as to flow its meaning forward explanatorily in a way that would suggest a sublation of its story and our human history: that is a how, and a how-language, for books of the future.¹¹ All that I would hope here now, here new, is that you **whathere** savour its suggestive obscurity. It is a matter of "Listening at the Abyss."¹², where the listening is only metaphorically listening and the abyss is ... is what? Is **whathere**? But here we listen as researchers, or even as outsiders. We can note the more obvious and the more obscure. Burke points us to both. There is the dangerously obvious, the "too prosaic,"¹³ worth quoting at length:

"According to Merleau-Ponty, besides being true of the perceiver, it is also the case that 'the existing world exists in the interrogative mode'¹⁴

What does this mean? What can it mean? If the human exists in the interrogative

¹⁰**The Visible and the Invisible**, 139.

¹¹The title of chapter 2 of *A Brief History of Tongue*, is "How-Language: Works?": it raises proleptic issues, but in a pragmatic context that points to the analogy with normal cyclings of scientific investigation. This, too, was a topic in my discarded Appendix A to *Phenomenology and Logic*, available now as Chapter 5 of *Lack in the Beingstalk*. I return to the topic in *Field Nocturne 30*, "Onwords".

¹²The title of a suggestive and illuminating article by Patrick Burke in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, edited by Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith, Northwestern University Press, 1990, 81-97. Referred to below as **Burke**.

¹³**Burke**, 94: it lies within the quotation to follow.

¹⁴**The Visible and the Invisible**, 103.

mode through his or her wonder, does it mean that wonder not only is what binds the world to the subject, but also the proper mode of being of each and the central dimension of the Being they inhabit? Can we go so far as to say that Being wonders in us and so thus open upon itself? Is wonder, thus understood, no longer merely an act or attitude defining the subject? Does it precede the subject-object distinction? Is it somehow not only the halo of all perception, experience, and thought, not only their motivating power as well, but also their very condition within Being? Is it, perhaps, the halo of being itself, the nimbus it secretes around its savage darkness, the sign of its presence, its openness, the foreshadowing of its future? We say that the human wonders. Perhaps this is too prosaic! Should we not say, rather, that the human is in wonder, that wonder has him or her, is his or her element, that in which he or she originally dwells - that all the acts and attitudes proper to the subject are cut out of the fabric of wonder, which is Being's relation to itself?"¹⁵

Yet there is the obscure, tied in to the serious effort to come to grips with this method of ours or that of Merleau-Ponty, to "examine the implications of this method for Merleau-Ponty's revisioning of ontology in terms of the 'there is' (*il y a*) of abyssal or wild being."¹⁶ Might we stand with Merleau-Ponty's remark that "philosophy is the perceptual faith questioning itself."¹⁷

But what, indeed, could this possibly mean? Nor can we twist comfortably back to Aristotle and Lonergan with those two too familiar names, *an sit* and *quid sit*. "In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty argues that the ontological question about the meaning of Being is not *an sit*. That question is artificial, for in the end it presupposes the very existence that it questions and that still needs elucidation. Likewise it is not the

¹⁵Burke, 94.

¹⁶Burke, 82.

¹⁷**The Visible and the Invisible**, 103.

quid sit insofar as the meaning of Being would be that of a pure essence.”¹⁸ These are strange twistings away from our twistings.

The issue for effective functional collaboration is the fullest pragmatic diagnosis of such odd-meants that would bring, literally, into play, in ten thousand villages, the good, and discourages there the ungood, that is pointed forward towards in such oddmeants. The fullest pragmatic diagnosis might bring the canon of complete explanation¹⁹ to mind - I bring it to mind anyway! - and that is part of the future operative good. But the “bringing to mind” must emerge so so slowly as the **brought to herewhat mind** within the Standard Model, an upmerging of wild being that is a task of this next millennium. What is needed, on the way there, is a pragmatic diagnostic of the mudflesh - which we all are - that pretends, that forms schools and side-line commentators, rather than listening to the abyss. To the characters of that diagnostic I shall turn in the remainder of these *Field Nocturnes*.

This, certainly, is an unfinished business of *Phenomenology and Logic*, as it is an unfinished business in **Neuroscience**. Indeed, it is the business of cosmopolis, a business project of wild being that Lonergan identified in the concluding section of chapter 7 of *Insight*, and that he identified in pragmatic prognosis within “the abyss of himself”²⁰ as he edged past sixty years of age. Was he being laconic when he identified it for, to - but not in - his audience during those lectures on logic and existentialism of 1957? “The point can be summarized in the phrase: the existential gap. The existential gap consists

¹⁸**Burke**, 87.

¹⁹The Canon of Complete Explanation is one of the canons of empirical science, usually thought of in terms of physics but we must later push its relevance in biological and human studies. The Canon of Explanation of *Insight*, chapter 17, is an altogether trickier topic regarding future sets of operations distributed over the functional specialties.

²⁰I am quoting, as I remember, from a letter of W.B. Yeats, the full quote being “Why should we honour those who die on the field of battle? A man can show as reckless a courage entering into the abyss of himself.” (See Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, Dutton, New York, 1948, 5)

in the fact that the reality of the subject lies beyond his horizon To say that the reality of the subject lies in whole or in part beyond his own horizon is to say that he suffers from an *indocta ignorantia* with regard to himself."²¹ There is the paradox of his lecturing on logic to male clerics who had done perhaps six weeks of the techniques of logic, and the high point of identifying the particular related gap when he picked up on Husserl's condemnation of "*the Drift to the Criterion of Technical Competence*": that was so soundly operative in his audience.

But my interest is not in meanly lamenting local and discomfoting receptions of Lonergan's genius, but in pointing to the possibility of a *docta ignorantia* in a future collaborative solution to the problem of history that he raised, "the real catch."²² Mudflesh learns the techniques of talk and learned discourse. "You have the technique; you obviously know how to do it; you know the literature in that subject; and that is all there is to it: the technique."²³ Getting beyond technique, that is the world of slow sweating serious focused women and men, playing out their lives within a search for self in history. Seven billion of us can only dream of swinging a racket in Wimbledon: what, then, is with this present swinging racket, the democracy of minding?

So, yes, we have to admire Aristotle,²⁴ and we have to admire Merleau-Ponty, the handicapped searcher. The devoted editor of the half-written *The Visible and the Invisible* and its fragments begins his Foreword with the sentence, "However expected it may sometimes be, the death of a relative or a friend opens an abyss before us."²⁵ Indeed. But death is an ambiguous passing-on, still caught in most cultures in mythic minding.

²¹*Phenomenology and Logic*, 281-2.

²²B.Lonergan, *Topics in Education*, 236.

²³*Phenomenology and Logic*, 281.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 325, note 4.

²⁵Claude Lefort, at the beginning of his Editor's Foreword to **The Visible and the Invisible**.

It is mysteriously an integral passing on, a cosmic twining in ongoing surprise, that is also a passing on of the wild being of words, calling to and in the abyss that is fleshed, **herewhat**. To this we return in *Field Nocturne 28*. Meantime, we turn quietly to Helen Keller, whose flesh touched water in a way that certainly can call us into wild being.

“We leave Merleau-Ponty ‘*posed* on the visible, like a bird, clinging to the visible,’²⁶ as in a Japanese painting a blackbird perched over an abyss, listening. There is (*il y a*) a bridge across the abyss, it is signified by the letter ‘Y’. To cross it requires a descent to that point where reversibility occurs, that pivot which is the eternal dehiscence, ‘*il y a*,’ so as to join that movement of wonder, of transcendence towards that which may not, in fact or in principle, be given in experience, a *Hoheit* beyond the visible, a sublime, a Silence.”²⁷

²⁶**The Visible and the Invisible**, 261. *Posed* is in italics in the original, but not in **Burke**. Merleau-Ponty continues there, in a way that helps us towards Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller, “activity and passivity coupled”: “like a bird, clinging to the visible, not *in* it. And yet in chiasm with it - - / So also the touched-touching. This structure exists in one sole organ - the flesh of my fingers + each of them is phenomenal finger and objective finger, outside and inside of the finger in reciprocity, in chiasm, activity and passivity coupled”.

²⁷Burke, 97. *Dehiscence* is perhaps an unfamiliar word meaning **a bursting or splitting open, as of a pod discharging its contents**. In *Field Nocturne 30*, we shall follow up the twists of this quotation towards a **whathere** glimpse that is not posed on the visible but poised in the invisible.