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"The Historicity of Life"*

On Diachronic and Sociogenetic Account of Meaning Institution and Preservation in Merleau-Ponty's Theory of Expression

Introduction. What Expression?

This paper explores some intriguing yet somewhat underexamined aspects of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of expression and rationality and their historical progression. Expression is crucial in Merleau-Ponty's account because it allows truth contents to be *instituted* and subsequently reinterpreted by an unlimited number of interpreters. Expression's meaning and value especially live on through this *diachronic* and *sociogenetic* reworking, which this paper aims to shed new light on. Here, I will illustrate how this occurs in Merleau-Ponty's texts. By expression, I initially refer to a broad range of meanings and applications evident in Merleau-Ponty's works. I will briefly outline these aspects before reviewing the research questions and central theoretical framework of this paper. For Merleau-Ponty, expression primarily signifies the i) speaker's ability to create meaningful utterances, words or even complex sentences or speeches. This faculty eventually emerges during the ordinary course of infant development, as Merleau-Ponty discusses in his lectures on Piaget, Vygotsky, Skinner and other developmental psychologists whose texts were frequently read at his time¹.

Again, as it manifestly appears in the academic course *The Sensible World and the World of Expression*, expression generally concerns ii) "space and movement"², i.e., the natural body expressivity and ability to convey significance to actions it is primarily capable of.

* M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, tr. R.C. McCleary, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1964, p. 63.

¹ Merleau-Ponty deals with this subject especially in Id., *Child Psychology and Pedagogy. The Sorbonne Lectures 1949-1952*, tr. T. Welsh, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2010.

² B. Smith, *Translator's Introduction*, in M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Sensible World and the World of Expression. Course Notes from the Collège de France, 1953*, tr. B. Smith, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2020, p. xvii.

Moreover, expression, in its higher and more sophisticated forms, equally encompasses iii) “visual art”, such as painting and cinema, and, most importantly, “language”, such as simple conversations, literature and poetry, or even the progressive formation of “history, rationality and truth”³ taking body in it.

Indeed, these latter represent the most ambitious object of the academic courses Merleau-Ponty taught during the Fifties at the Collège de France, i.e., *Research on the Literary Use of Language*⁴, *The Problem of the Word*⁵ – unfortunately, the two are not translated into English yet – *Institution in Personal and Public History* and *The Problem of Passivity: Sleep, the Unconscious, Memory*⁶, before considering the broad study of *Nature*⁷ and ultimately, in the final period of his career and before his sudden death, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*⁸ and *The Possibility of Philosophy*⁹. Indeed, most scholars believe that during these years, Merleau-Ponty gradually reached that stage of scientific maturity that would enable him to transition from the phenomenology of perception to the ontology of flesh¹⁰. This opening was implemented, in his words, in

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Recherches sur l'usage littéraire du langage. Cours au Collège de France. Notes 1953*, a cura di E. de Saint-Aubert, B. Zaccarello, MetisPresses, Genève 2013.

⁵ Id., *Le problème de la parole. Cours au Collège de France. Notes 1953-1954*, a cura di F. Robert, L. Andén, E. de Saint-Aubert, MetisPresses, Genève 2020. When I quote passages from these or other French-language texts, I will be concerned with providing an English translation that respects the original meaning as much as possible. Similarly, should I find the consistent English translation of Merleau-Ponty's work inadequate, I will also quote references to the most recent French edition.

⁶ Id., *Institution and Passivity. Course Notes from Collège de France (1954-1955)*, tr. L. Lawlor, H. Massey, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2010.

⁷ Id., *Nature. Course Notes from the Collège de France*, tr. R. Vallier, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2003. This volume contains the notes' transcriptions of the courses Merleau-Ponty gave on this complex theme, i.e., *The Concept of Nature, 1956-1957; The Concept of Nature, 1957-1958: Animality, the Human Body, and the Passage to Culture*; and *The Concept of Nature, 1959-1960: Nature and Logos: The Human Body*.

⁸ Id., *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology. Including Texts by Edmund Husserl*, tr. L. Lawlor, B. Bergo, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2001.

⁹ Id., *The Possibility of Philosophy. Course Notes from the Collège de France, 1959-1961*, tr. K. Whitmoyer, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2022. This volume collects the transcripts of the last courses taught by Merleau-Ponty at the College de France, i.e., *The Possibility of Philosophy Today* (1959); *Cartesian Ontology and Ontology Today* (1960); *Philosophy and Nonphilosophy since Hegel* (1961).

¹⁰ I here explicitly mean two of the most significant books of Merleau-Ponty, i.e. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. C. Smith, London-New York, Routledge 2002, and Id., *The Visible and the Invisible. Followed by Working Notes*, tr. A. Lingis, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1968. To glimpse who these scholars are and their different interpretations, please see S. De Carlo, *L'inflessione dello sguardo. L'ontologia di Maurice Merleau-Ponty attraverso l'interrogazione sulla natura*, Il Melangolo, Genova 2012, p. 53.

the repudiation of any residue of idealism from his philosophical vocabulary, which he believed was still present in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, as well as in the accentuation of the aspect of temporal and historical evolution that affects the very nature of experience in its genetic account¹¹. Thus, in these courses, Merleau-Ponty is believed to distance himself from a sheer and too limiting 'philosophy of the subject' toward an appreciation of the conditions that he deems indeed structuring and, therefore, transcendental, concerning the latter's aesthetical appraisal. I will try to elaborate more on this in the following.

1. The Institutionalisation of Knowledge. Toward the *Rationality of Investigation*

Accordingly, this study highlights how a different view of rationality, i.e., the ultimate foundation of knowledge and scientific comprehension, according to the third sense of Merleau-Ponty's theory of expression, gradually makes its way into these abovementioned works. In particular, I will try to clarify how such rationality evolves and constantly modifies itself, thus recognising a positive and foundational value to time in the wake of Bergson and reversing an ancient Platonic and Aristotelian stylistic motive about the undisputed superiority of eternity over time flowing¹². I will prove that, in these texts, this is the result of the continual elaboration and reworking of multiple subjects or interpreters throughout the *institution* of this kind of rationality, whose interaction, for Merleau-Ponty, is also ensured by the tools they operate with, such as painting for artists and literature and, more in general, written texts for writers or *geometricians* of all ages¹³. I, therefore, argue for the diachronic

¹¹ See Id., *The Sensible World and the World of Expression*, cit., pp. 137, 147. I will explain more about this in the following paragraphs.

¹² On the contrary, as pointedly noted, Merleau-Ponty defends a "thought of the inseparable" (F. Colonna, *Merleau-Ponty et la simultanéité*, in "Chiasmi International. Trilingual Studies Concerning the Thought of Merleau-Ponty", n. 4, 2002, p. 211.

¹³ This reference to geometricians will become more apparent after reading some passages from Husserl's *The Origin of Geometry* (E. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, tr. D. Carr, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1970, pp. 353-378) which Merleau-Ponty comments on in the course *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*. I will tell more about this in the sixth paragraph of this essay. *The Origin of Geometry* is the third appendix of the ninth paragraph of the *Crisis* (Hua VI, 365-386). It was initially written in 1936. Here, Husserl actively engages in the problem of transcendental and scientific historicity. This appendix serves as a compendium for a dense paragraph in which Husserl criticises the idea of the mathematisation of nature as he thinks Galileo has perpetrated it from modernity onwards. Endorsing a 'bottom-up' strategy, Husserl tries to get to the origins of sense-making by showing how the process of

and sociogenetic nature of this kind of knowledge Merleau-Ponty supports in his courses and most significant works. To do this, I will mainly focus on two of the texts I mentioned above – i.e., *Institution in Personal and Public History* and *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology* – and additional two, which are instead situated in the current edition of *Signs*, i.e., *Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence*¹⁴ and *The Prose of the World*, i.e., *The Indirect Language*¹⁵.

As I said, in this paper, I will focus primarily on the third meaning of expression I mentioned above, which, for Merleau-Ponty, mainly pertains to artistic and cultural production. This particular yet crucial application domain is appropriate to what I will primarily explore in this paragraph, i.e., the notable and programmatic concept of the “rationality of investigation”¹⁶, which becomes specifically relevant in analysing the latter part of Merleau-Ponty’s scientific work. However, why this idea is so vital for Merleau-Ponty? What does it represent, and what is this opposed to? What theoretical targets does Merleau-Ponty have in mind when he defines it, and which authors does he aim to approximate? And finally, what perhaps remains latent, or better to say *unexpressed*, in this definition? To preliminarily answer these questions and then introduce the theses I seek to argue in this paper, I must briefly introduce the notion of institution. Indeed, in the course on the *Institution*, Merleau-Ponty claims that truth contents, i.e., what we believe in, what we think is right and representing the reality of things themselves, are not eternal but evolve historically through the continuous interaction and eventual “substitution”¹⁷ of what he explicitly calls *institutions*. In this context, the term *institution* is critical to accepting the significant paradigm shift that Merleau-Ponty seeks to bring about in his conception of rationality and the suitable realisation of truth itself or epistemology he has in mind. This becomes immediately apparent when reading the course notes on *Institution*.

idealisation originally roots itself in *Lebenwelt*’s coordinates. *The Origin of Geometry* precisely discusses how geometry may be an excellent example to prove his point. This text has aroused lively interest since the very beginning. In 1939, Eugen Fink first edited *Die Frage nach dem Ursprung der Geometrie als Intentional-Historisches Problem*. Thanks to Derrida’s text translation, the *Origin* later became well-known in France. However, Merleau-Ponty commented on this text between 1959 and 1960, when he taught at Collège de France, a few years before Derrida’s version was published.

¹⁴ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, cit., pp. 39-83.

¹⁵ Id., *The Prose of the World*, tr. J. O’Neill, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1973, pp. 47-113.

¹⁶ Id., *Institution and Passivity*, cit., p. 48.

¹⁷ Id., *Signs*, cit., pp. 188-189. I will retrieve this quotation in the fourth paragraph of this essay.

In the following paragraph, I will outline why this change in the notional register is so noteworthy and what it aims polemically to replace. To do so, I will offer textual references to frame the issue in more detail. Accordingly, for Merleau-Ponty, an institution represents a mode of practical and intellectual making which has "time"¹⁸ as its fundamental model and that opposes what he groups as the *constituent* theoretical framework which he recognises as proper to the subjectivity of Cartesian "intelligible and identifiable structure"¹⁹, Kantian and Neo-Kantian interpretation of transcendental idealism and early Husserl's definition of *Sinngebung*²⁰. Let me explain how these claims are textually confirmed and justified before offering some definitions of institution in his works.

2. Institution Against Constitution. Reviewing Descartes, Kant and Husserl

In this paragraph, I will clarify how Merleau-Ponty envisions this scientific revolution he endorses from the *Phenomenology of Perception* onwards. To begin with, Cartesian *cogito* is supposed to "draw me out of the event", from my practical situation, i.e., from my being as incarnate subject, because it establishes me in

eternity, and it frees me simultaneously from all the limiting attributes and, in fact, from that fundamental event, which is my private existence. Hence, for the same reasoning which necessarily leads from the event to the act, from thoughts to the I, equally necessarily leads from the multiplicity of *I*'s to one sole constituting consciousness and prevents me from entertaining any vain hope of salvaging the finiteness of the subject by defining it as a 'monad'.²¹

For Merleau-Ponty, these results can only be detrimental to the genuine comprehension of the natural unfolding of our aesthetic experience, i.e., its human finitude and natural denseness, which is indeed the core of the institutional outline he defends. Instead, to understand the latter, it becomes necessary for him to "find a middle course between eternity and the atomistic time of empiricism" and "to resume the interpretation of the *cogito*", the good one he holds, though, "and of time"²² as an equally foundational and essential character. Again, Merleau-Ponty

¹⁸ Id., *Institution and Passivity*, cit., p. 7.

¹⁹ Id., *Phenomenology of Perception*, cit., pp. 434-435.

²⁰ Ivi, pp. xii-xiii.

²¹ Ivi, pp. 434-435.

²² Ivi, p. 435.

is hostile towards neo-Kantism and its more expressly idealist version circulating at that time in French universities. In particular, he criticises the works of Léon Brunschvicg, a highly influential author, Pierre Lachière-Rey and Ferdinand Alquié, as he mainly does in the course notes on *Institution*²³. Finally, Merleau-Ponty rejects Husserl's former definition of consciousness, too²⁴. In his reading, this would be characterised by the fundamental activity of centrifugal *Sinngebung*, i.e., the "active meaning-giving operation" actually ridding "the world of its opacity and transcendence"²⁵. Such an understanding is said to resolve in principle all problems, such as that of the other, that is, of intersubjective evidence, language, or the world itself, because "it insists that with the first glimmer of consciousness, there appears in me theoretically the power of reaching some universal truth", which is also the actual mirroring of Merleau-Ponty's former lecture of Descartes I just quoted²⁶. Husserl's transcendental idealism thus would tend to the world "as the mere correlative of our knowledge, with the result that it becomes immanent in consciousness and the aseity of things is thereby done away with"²⁷. To summarise here, since the early days of his career, Merleau-Ponty imputes idealism, intellectualism or "rationalism"²⁸ here broadly

²³ See *ivi*, pp. 283, 431-435, 450; *Id.*, *Institution and Passivity*, cit., pp. 117, 122-126. See also on this R. Bernet, *La conscience sans la perspective d'un transcendantalisme structuraliste*, in "Alter. Revue de phénoménologie", n. 16, 2008, p. 45; T. Garaets, *Vers une nouvelle philosophie transcendante. La genèse de la philosophie de Maurice Merleau-Ponty jusqu'à la Phénoménologie de la Perception*, Martinus Nihoff, La Haye 1971, pp. 87-92; J. Pechar, *La phénoménologie de Merleau-Ponty*, in K. Novotny, A. Schnell (a cura di), *La phénoménologie comme philosophie première*, Association pour la Promotion de la Phénoménologie, Amiens 2016, pp. 90-91; A. Scotti, *Il mondo del silenzio. Natura e vita in Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa 2016, pp. 28-29; P. Vibert, *Merleau-Ponty*, Ellipses, Paris 2018, p. 27.

²⁴ As I will argue in the following, this interpretation is only partial since Merleau-Ponty also praises Husserl's version of *fungierende Intentionalität*, for instance, which he states as an excellent attempt to overcome what he fundamentally blames, i.e., the intentionality of the act (see *ivi*, cit., p. 486) or the theory of *Stiftung* or Husserlean latest account of historical *a priori*, as it becomes apparent in *The Origin of Geometry*, which I will comment on later.

²⁵ *Ivi*, pp. xii-xiii.

²⁶ *Ivi*, p. xiii. From this point of view, it is impossible to ignore the critique of *Kosmotheoros'* great argument, which can be found in several of Merleau-Ponty's texts (see, for instance, M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, cit., pp. 113, 227). About this, Merleau-Ponty writes in *The Problems of the Philosophy of History* that "one should not imagine a world spirit that places in the form of ends those who will come after. There is no spirit of the world hoped for and overcoming time" (*Id.*, *Conférences en Amérique, notes de cours et autres textes. Inédites II (1947-1949)*, a cura di M. Dalissier, Mimésis, Paris 2023, p. 185, translation of the author).

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. xvii.

²⁸ *Id.*, *The Prose of the World*, cit., p. 49.

defined, for accepting "as completely valid the idea of truth", i.e., the fact that this idea was given once for all, "and the idea of being in which the formative work of consciousness culminates and is embodied, and its alleged reflection consists in positing as powers of the subject all that is required to arrive at these ideas"²⁹.

Instead, Merleau-Ponty embraces a deponent and defective version of transcendental subjectivity and consciousness, which retains the character of fundamental "opening"³⁰ and embraces experiential evenementiality and the concurrence of relevant historical modifications. Indeed, it is not up to transcendental subjectivity or consciousness, in its singularity or isolation, to attribute a unitive meaning to other subjects, objects, or to the world in general, in which it is instead already forever immersed and practically implicated, as the theme of body schema mainly proves in the *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Sensible World and the World of Expression*. For this reason, the perception that subjectivity uses to recognise this sort of primal unity with the surrounding world does not coincide with an operation of *Sinngebung*. Moreover, as I will try to clarify later, the subject does not primarily have the tools to construct or reconstruct knowledge and the underlying idea of rationality on its own, as Descartes and early Husserl believed it could, according to Merleau-Ponty's possibly ungenerous rebuilding of their claims. Finally, as the lecture on the *Institution* makes clear, as well as those on the *Research* and *The Problem of the Word*, truth is composed in the path that leads progressively to its attainment and that contemplates the becoming of time as its ineliminable mean, as well as the help of other subjects in unwavering support of this collective yet generationally discontinuous enterprise suggesting the curious "genealogy of the sentiment of eternity"³¹, as Fabrice Colonna stated. Let us now see how this aspect is treated in the course on the *Institution* before considering other readings in this regard.

3. Institution(s). On Making Sense Without Me

Indeed, as stated, Merleau-Ponty contests the institution model of subjectivity to the paradigm of constituent consciousness, the Husserlean later definition of *Stiftung*³² to the inadequate doctrine of *Sinngebung*.

²⁹ Id., *Phenomenology of Perception*, cit., p. 45.

³⁰ Id., *The Sensible World and the World of Expression*, cit., pp. 21, 28.

³¹ F. Colonna, *L'éternité selon Merleau-Ponty*, in "Alter. Revue de Phénoménologie", n. 16, 2008, p. 142.

³² This term can be precisely translated as *institution* – although McCleary seems to think otherwise – and is a key to understanding the axiological reversal that Merleau-Ponty

While the former is said to genuinely belong to “history”, the latter appears to be fundamentally “outside of time”³³. For Merleau-Ponty, this explanation causes negative consequences from a theoretical viewpoint, for it constitutes the world and its objects as “a series of ‘instantaneous moments’”³⁴ without any inner connection nor possible holding of autonomous meaning. Indeed, the latter are brought together solely by the intellectual acts of this supposed universal consciousness, as is apparent in the Cartesian and *Sinngebung* accounts. However, what does Merleau-Ponty precisely mean by institution? Why and how did an institution become a thing in the phenomenological debate? To how many domains or shades of meaning can it be applied? I can count at least three definitions of this important term in the course notes on *Institution*. Let me briefly outline them.

As Merleau-Ponty holds in the *Introduction* of this course, institution primarily means the “establishment in an experience [...] of dimensions [...] in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will make sense and make a *sequel*, a history”³⁵ even without the former consciousness sempiternal and intellectual, active confirmation³⁶. An institution is the always deferred initiation and continuation of a complex unity of experiences that refer to each other and are common to multiple subjects. In this precise feature, I think the historical reference is made explicit. Again, the institution is what “makes possible [a] series of events, [a] historicity: in principle event-ness”³⁷. Finally, the

intends to propose in his work. As he writes in *Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence*, *Stiftung*, as “foundation or establishment”, designates “first of all the unlimited fecundity of each present which, precisely because it is singular and passes, can never stop having been and thus being universally” but above all denotes “that fecundity of the products of a culture which continue to have value after their appearance and which open a field of investigation in which they perpetually come to life again” (M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, cit., p. 59; see also M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, cit., p. 68). I will tell more about this in the following paragraph.

³³ J. Slatman, *L'expression au-delà de la représentation. Sur l'aïsthésis et l'esthétique chez Merleau-Ponty*, Vrin, Paris 2001, p. 141.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, cit., pp. 7-8.

³⁶ According to Dufourcq, an institution, in Merleau-Ponty's sense, may be defined as an “impersonal and intersubjective [...] structure”, which is “the fruit of a historically situated act” and which “endures with its own inertia as a tradition that transcends and conditions each individual” (A. Dufourcq, “*Sous les masques il n'y a pas de visages*”: l'éthique merleau-pontyenne entre problème de l'altérité radicale, foi et institution, in “Chiasmi International. Trilingual Studies Concerning the Thought of Merleau-Ponty”, n. 17, 2015, p. 356).

³⁷ Ivi, p. 13. The french text reads “*événementialité de principe*” (M. Merleau-Ponty, *L'institution dans l'histoire personnelle et publique. Le problème de la passivité. Le sommeil, l'inconscient, la mémoire. Notes de cours au Collège de France (1954-1955)*, a cura

institution is defined as an "elaboration of an 'inherent' possibility"³⁸, "a transformation which preserves"³⁹ what is transformed, "a truth that becomes" truth, in a certain sense, one that "condenses and opens up a future"⁴⁰ without uprooting from the lessons of the past. Indeed, the institution represents the volume of a historical and constantly changing context in which the subject makes her debut and enters, so to speak, in *medias res*.

For Merleau-Ponty, the institutional model equally pertains to every juncture of our lives as incarnated subjects. As he states in the following, institution uniformly applies to the formation of feelings, as well as to human phylogenetical development or different animal species, or – here analysing the aspects that interest me most in this essay – to the possible relations with other subjects, to the production of works of art, the domain of any possible knowledge, culture and all eras historical facts. From this point of view, the whole world, in its course, is made up of instituting events that overcome, deny or confirm others made the same way and whose overcoming does not mark the sharp caesura with a past which would be lost forever⁴¹. In a certain sense, instituting and instituted are the lowest denominators of every human action, the one realising that "lateral penetration"⁴² of every conceivable deed and corroborating

di D. Darmaillaq, C. Lefort, S. Ménasé, Éditions Belin, Paris 2003, p. 44). I believe this conception is somehow retrieved from Charles Péguy and his main yet unfinished work, *Clio*, as also stated by Anne Gléonec (*Institution et passivité. Lectures de Merleau-Ponty*, Millon, Grenoble 2017, pp. 167, 440) and Fabrice Colonna. In this text, Péguy focuses on the notion of "work" as praxis and of the latter's connection with that of "event", as the minimal dimension and unity of the happening of things in time. Human work, as an event, is described here in the terms of irremediable "incompleteness" (F. Colonna, *Merleau-Ponty et le renouvellement de la métaphysique*, Hermann, Paris 2013, p. 417) and impermanence. This condition of impossible ultimacy causes the meaning of this enterprise "to be the object of incessant resumption, which also exposes it to the risk of abandonment" (*ibid.*), as Husserl also makes clear in *The Origin of Geometry*. According to Colonna, for Péguy – and for Merleau-Ponty too, I can here assume – "the very condition of meaning lies in this promise of fruitfulness that is, inseparably, risk of degradation. There is no sense given, and there is only a sense taken up, the result of the cooperation we bring, a sense therefore fragile and demanding a responsibility to it" (*ibid.*; see also S. Prinzi, *Scrivere le cose stesse. Merleau-Ponty. Il letterario, il politico*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2017, p. 267).

³⁸ Ivi, p. 22.

³⁹ Ivi, p. 23.

⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 24.

⁴¹ Institution is also depicted as the "reactivation and transformation of a preceding institution," as it happens to be in the case of human puberty when a human being dramatically changes without losing the previous functional configurations (ivi, p. 9). See F. Robert, *Phénoménologie et ontologie. Merleau-Ponty lecteur de Husserl et Heidegger*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2005, p. 331 on this.

⁴² Ivi, p. 78; see M. Merleau-Ponty, *Recherches sur l'usage littéraire du langage*, cit., p. 75.

any eventual intersubjective immediate or subsequent validation. The institution is what unites, both in its naturalness and historicity, every event with which we can come into contact as subjects endowed with a body and a history, as the example of the *perspective* pictorial and representational model introduction and actual choice during the Renaissance precisely proves⁴³. Moreover, contrary to the constituent model, quickly referred to above, the institution does not require the confirmation of absolute subjectivity or consciousness to have or maintain its historical value for a given community of practice, i.e., for those who still believe in its truth. Indeed, quoting Merleau-Ponty, “the instituted”, i.e., what is left for good and what is there for others to come, “makes sense without me”; it persists in doing so, while “the constituted”, i.e., the result of the intellectual act of the traditional consciousness, “makes sense only for me and for the ‘me’ of this instant”⁴⁴, thus *de jure* disqualifying any possible temporal contamination(s) and eventual intersubjective and transgenerational encroachment⁴⁵.

On the contrary, the openness of a given register and the continued enlargement of its practice or frequentation, as in the case of pictorial art, as I will discuss in more detail in the following paragraph, ratifies the primordial communion and communication with otherness, i.e., with other subjects, the latter equally endowed with a body and placed within the everlasting history of the living culture. In this sense, their acts make sense without me, as mine will do for them, even when I am or will be gone, as replicas or answers to my previous questions, i.e., to my former attempts to reach the truth in the history of science (here broadly and epistemologically conceived). Indeed, these individual yet communal efforts do not relate to eternal “essences” but “praxis”⁴⁶, i.e., concrete actions that concur in establishing or instituting what materially counts in world history. Furthermore, as a creative disequilibrium, every institution contains the germ of its overcoming within itself. An institution is always beyond itself in the congenicity that will sanction its expiration as a fundamental yet partial moment of “Permanent Revolution”⁴⁷ continually going on. Let us now consider some relevant cases in which those features are apparent.

⁴³ Ivi, pp. 45-49.

⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 8. As Merleau-Ponty states in the following, “[C]onstitution [means] continuous institution, i.e., never done. The instituted straddles its future, has its future, its temporality, the constituted depends entirely on the ‘me’ who constitutes” (*ibid.*).

⁴⁵ According to this interpretation, nothing makes sense if the subject does not immediately grasp its action and its possible consequences.

⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 11.

⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 7.

4. The Cruel Law ... The Case of Painting

In light of these considerations, I believe it is easy to see why Merleau-Ponty intends painting as a "single"⁴⁸ and intrinsically unitary "task", yet, something deeply felt as naturally "infinite"⁴⁹ and, most importantly, "inherited" and collected from the always incomplete appreciation of a "collective institution"⁵⁰ that is eventually and individually subsumed when the auspicious moment comes. Indeed, in this example, the painter here at stake does not create her own art by herself *ex nihilo*, nor does she master the criteria for its success from thin air. Instead, she learns her art, according to Merleau-Ponty, actually "by visiting the predecessors" and their related "Universe" of the "Field of painting"⁵¹ itself, making out her *praxis* of their theory. Indeed, she or her successors cannot overcome this field of practice altogether since the works that make up this field constitute the field itself, nor its attendance to the retroactive effect that new things have on all past productions. Indeed, here, instituted or to-be-instituted sense is said to be somehow convicted to "perpetual rereading" in the course of which truth and its historical "sublimation"⁵² would be nothing without the path that led to their formation.

I think this probing yet implicit idea of conviction is also present in *Bergson in the Making*, i.e., the tribute speech given by Merleau-Ponty on the centenary of Bergson's birth, where he ratifies the existence of a "public duration"⁵³ linking numerous suppliers in memory and culture. Accordingly, for him and here reading Charles Péguy, those "who write" and "*live publicly*" are condemned to a "cruel law", which is "to expect from others or successors a different fulfilment than the one they are achieving" now, because "others or successors are also men" and "by this substitution, they make themselves fellow men of the initiator"⁵⁴. However, I believe the most stimulating texts that prove this point are *The Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence (Signs)* and *The Indirect Language (The Prose of the World)*. Here, Merleau-Ponty also confronts with

⁴⁸ (*ibid.*; see M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, cit., p. 70). I will tell more about this in this paragraph.

⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 57.

⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 41.

⁵¹ Ivi, p. 47.

⁵² Ivi, p. 51.

⁵³ Id., *Signs*, cit., pp. 188-189

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* This feature is connected to the writing craft and the institution of a content of knowledge that is durable through time and perpetual confirmation by other subjects. As a matter of different but complementary *durations*, providers in the field of culture thus defined intertwine and reflect in each other's initiative via a cumulative process of never-ending *substitutions*.

André Malraux's works to prove his points⁵⁵. In *The Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence*, Merleau-Ponty claims that "the writer's act of expression is not very different from the painter's"⁵⁶, for they both are to be considered *modern*. Accordingly, those are said to be *modern* because both refuse the idea of a *toute faite* and detached idea of truth, which would only unravel in time but whose contents would already be established by eternity⁵⁷. Instead, the concurrence of multiple authors, according to Merleau-Ponty, and their historical confirmation or conceivable disavowal specifies the track that marks the establishment of truth and its progressive, albeit fragile, achievements⁵⁸. Indeed, truth involves the attainment of instituted stations, primarily identifiable in *styles*⁵⁹, especially in the case of figurative or pictorial art, but not of the ideal conclusion of its course. Indeed, there is no perfect content to achieve, attempt to coincide with, or imitate⁶⁰. This is one of the most significant successes of modernity, according to Merleau-Ponty, which is finally proven to understand the historical and transient significance or depth of artistic message and thus to see in the admittable incompleteness of work the prefiguration – or the retroaction – of its possible references rather than the sign of its constitutive deficiency⁶¹. Instead, the incompleteness of the works

⁵⁵ For a review of Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Malraux and his works, see E. Bimbenet, *Nature et Humanité. Le problème anthropologique dans l'œuvre de Merleau-Ponty*, Vrin, Paris 2004, pp. 210-222; Id., *Après Merleau-Ponty. Études sur la fécondité d'une pensée*, Vrin, Paris 2011, p. 101; A.C. Dalmasso, *L'œil et l'histoire. Merleau-Ponty et l'historicité de la perception*, Edition Mimésis, Milan 2019, pp. 25, 123; E. de Saint Aubert, *Du lien des êtres aux éléments de l'être. Merleau-Ponty au tournant des années*, Vrin, Paris 2004, p. 213; R. Kaushik, *Art and Institution. Aesthetics in the Late works of Merleau-Ponty*, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York 2011, pp. 30-31, 40-43.

⁵⁶ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, cit., p. 45; see R. Couderc, *Au travers de la phénoménologie: l'expression et les traces du sens chez Merleau-Ponty*, in "Philosophie", a. 157, n. 2, 2023, pp. 56-58. Indeed, their comparison is possible "only because of an idea of creative expression which is modern" (M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, cit., p. 89).

⁵⁷ See F. Robert, *L'Écriture sensible. Proust et Merleau-Ponty*, Classiques Garnier, Paris 2021, p. 13.

⁵⁸ I will tell more about this fragility in the conclusion of this paper.

⁵⁹ A. Delcò, *Phénoménologie et peinture. Merleau-Ponty à l'école de Klee*, in "Archives de Philosophie", a. 65, n. 4, 2002, p. 614.

⁶⁰ See I. Matos Dias, *Merleau-Ponty. Une poétique du sensible*, Presses Universitaires de Mirail, Toulouse-Le Mirail 2001, pp. 130-141; F. Robert, *Merleau-Ponty, L'origine de la géométrie et la littérature*, in "Chiasmi International. Trilingual Studies Concerning the Thought of Merleau-Ponty", n. 21, 2020, p. 151.

⁶¹ M. Dalissier, *La métaphysique chez Merleau-Ponty. Phénoménologie et Métaphysique*, Peeters, Louvain-La-Neuve 2017, pp. 729-734. As Merleau-Ponty argues, the "tolerance for the incomplete shown by those moderns who present sketches as paintings, and whose every canvas, as the signature of a moment of life, demands to be seen on 'show' in a series of successive canvases" (M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, cit., p. 51; see Id., *The Prose of the World*, cit., p. 55).

of art refers to each other in the unity of a great representative enterprise that, at the same time, coincides with the actual germination of brand-new meaning⁶². In these purely historical yet transcendental dimensions, pictorial or linguistic action is always a reaction or an "answer"⁶³ or "response"⁶⁴ to a previously posed question, even implicitly. For Merleau-Ponty, indeed, the provisionally "accomplished work is thus not the work which exists in itself like a thing, but the work which reaches its viewer and invites him to take up the gesture which created it and, skipping the intermediaries, to rejoin [...] the silent world of the painter"⁶⁵, in this context. For this very reason, it is "in others that expression takes on its relief and becomes signification", thus concretely realising an "institution whose efficacy" others "will never stop experiencing"⁶⁶ in the substitution of its endless *metamorphoses*⁶⁷.

⁶² It is in this sense, I believe, that Merleau-Ponty speaks of "coherent deformation" (Id., *Signs*, cit., p. 54; see also E. Alloa, *La résistance du sensible. Merleau-Ponty critique de la transparence*, Éditions Kimé, Paris 2014, p. 70; B. Andrieu, *Le langage entre chair [leib] et corps [korper]*, in F. Heidsieck (a cura di), *Merleau-Ponty. Le philosophe et son langage*, Université PMF, Grenoble 1993, pp. 43-44; G.A. Johnson, *On the Poetic and the True*, in G.A. Johnson, M. Carbone, E. de Saint Aubert (a cura di), *Merleau-Ponty's Poetic of the World. Philosophy and Literature*, Fordham University, New York 2020, p. 171. Moreover, as Toadvine states, "it is through expression that a relation of distance can paradoxically be a proximity" (T. Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2009, p. 126).

⁶³ S. Ménasé, *Passivité et création. Merleau-Ponty et l'art moderne*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 2003, p. 76.

⁶⁴ In these terms, Merleau-Ponty even speaks of a sense of "brotherhood" expected of all contributors, painters in this case, who are united in the perception of a "provisory eternity" (M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, cit., p. 59) but no less significant for that. I will explain this later.

⁶⁵ Ivi, p. 51.

⁶⁶ Ivi, p. 52-53.

⁶⁷ The term metamorphosis is crucial because it helps us understand how this intergenerational joint venture may happen. As I will say in the following, the tools change. Still, the feeling of fraternity or sisterhood that unites the contributors in building this complex artistic or knowledge edifice does not, as we will also clarify in the next section. As Merleau-Ponty clarifies, "productions of the past, [...] once went beyond anterior productions towards a future which we are, and in this sense called for (among others) the metamorphosis which we impose upon them" (ivi, p. 59). Moreover, in the history of pictorial representation, "the first sketches on the walls of caves set forth the world as 'to be painted' [...] and called forth an indefinite future of painting, so that they speak to us and we answer them by metamorphoses in which they collaborate with us" (ivi, 60). Merleau-Ponty also finds this ideal collaboration in Proust's *Research*, as he proves in *The Problem of the World*. Here, he writes "the participation of a past and a present will be a special case of the multiple's participation in my life" (Id., *Le problème de la parole*, cit., p. 152). See also F. Robert, *Merleau-Ponty, L'origine de la géométrie et la littérature*, cit., p. 155, on how writing is implied in this process of perpetual transformation.

5. And the *Cruel History* ... Embracing the *Historicity of Life*

This said, the artistic institution's effectiveness or continuation is primarily collected by its interpreters rather than by the artists themselves, who often fail to be aware of their work's concrete offspring or potential fallout⁶⁸. However, from this viewpoint, Merleau-Ponty warns about the meaning we should give to pictorial history and its cumulative and comprehensive gathering, the latter occurring in cultural institutions actually in charge, such as museums, galleries or pinacothecas. Indeed, although the "styles which escape the view of the creator and become visible only when the Museum gathers [them] together"⁶⁹, as it does at a certain point in human history, we must carefully introduce a further distinction here. According to Merleau-Ponty, as he claims, we must acknowledge "two historicities", i.e., one of "death" and one of "life"⁷⁰. Indeed, the first, the assemblage of the "cruel history"⁷¹, as Malraux defines it, theoretically struggles to understand the real meaning, affinity and deep harmony of the historical evolution that the institution model envisions because it conceives works of art only once they are made without indulging the very process by which they were created⁷². Conversely, the other history, without which the first would be impossible, is constituted and reconstituted step by step by the *interest* which bears us toward that which is not us and by that life which the past, in a continuous exchange, brings to us and finds in us, and which continues to lead in each painter who revives, and renews the entire undertaking of painting in each new work⁷³.

Indeed, for Merleau-Ponty, the institutional "unity of painting does not exist in the Museum alone" but primarily "exists in that single task which all painters are confronted with and which makes the situation such that one day they *will be* comparable in the Museum, and such that these fires answer one another in the night"⁷⁴. The possibility of this profound and diachronic – i.e., not synchronic nor simultaneous – intersubjective collaboration is granted by the feeling of a sort of "fraternity" between "painters", i.e., a fundamental sentiment which is not

⁶⁸ See M. Merleau-Ponty, *Recherches sur l'usage littéraire du langage*, cit., pp. 77, 82.

⁶⁹ Ivi, p. 59.

⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 63.

⁷¹ Ivi, p. 60.

⁷² In this context, as Ramírez Cobián observed, there is no longer "any opposition between beginning and development, between tradition and actuality, between time and truth" (M.T. Ramírez Cobián, *Le concept de tradition chez Merleau-Ponty. A partir des Notes de cours sur L'origine de la géométrie de Husserl*, in "Chiasmi International. Trilingual Studies Concerning the Thought of Merleau-Ponty", n. 3, 2001, pp. 345-354.

⁷³ *Ibid.*; see Id., *The Prose of the World*, cit., p. 72.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*; see Ivi, pp. 67-70.

purely nor mainly intellectual or purposeful, but that "makes a history of painting possible"⁷⁵ as the intimate coherence of all their imaginable experiences and multiple pictorial devices or questionable artistic choices. Another passage in this text also hints at the everlasting span of this ideal or spiritual unity and the singularity of this assignment, which I believe is essential to argue for the subsistence of this deep, historical and intergenerational expressive willingness Merleau-Ponty supports⁷⁶. Indeed, as Merleau-Ponty points out, every work of art generally pertains to the universe of conceived painting as a single task stretching from the first sketches on the walls of caves up to our 'conscious' paintings. No doubt one reason why our painting finds something to recapture in art which are linked to an experience very different from our own is that it transfigures them. But it also does so because they transfigure it, because they at least have something to say to it, and because their artists, believing that they were continuing primitive terrors or those in Asia and Egypt, secretly inaugurated another history which is still ours and which makes them present to us"⁷⁷.

In the transfiguration process that Merleau-Ponty mentions, I reckon we can appreciate the retroactive and projective action and passion of every artistic production, which, united by the same feeling and expressive desire since the dawn of time, has unceasingly answered the same questions while also providing very different answers, in the unity of a story that is not the one told by museum exhibitions or *vernissages*, but by the subterranean impetus that resurrects to the heart of the artist of all times. In the next section, I will clarify how this diachronic and sociogenetic collaboration also applies, according to Merleau-Ponty, to literature and how, despite this, for him, the tools remain the empirical yet inevitable realisation of something more foundational and essential, as I will claim in the conclusion of this essay.

6. Other's Institutional Co-implication. Merleau-Ponty on Literature and *The Origin of Geometry*

Indeed, Merleau-Ponty also dealt with this issue regarding literature broadly, considering the actual possibility of generating meaning from

⁷⁵ Ivi, p. 62.

⁷⁶ I will tell more about this spiritual feature in the conclusion, also considering the works of Dufourcq, Ramírez Cobián, and Robert.

⁷⁷ Ivi, p. 60.

written expression, i.e., its possible sedimentation and eventual retrieving, thus also not neglecting the means, including physical or external ones, by which such production and conservation are made possible in writing⁷⁸. In the course notes on *The Problem of the World* – which precedes by one year that on *Institution* – Merleau-Ponty directly associates language with an “institution”⁷⁹, also on the footsteps of the works of Ferdinand de Saussure, emphasising its character of constant modification and permanently provisional order⁸⁰. In this sense, language [*langue*] provided for development through the indefatigable exercise of speech [*parole*] by numerous speakers and thought or ideality which is vehiculated by the latter is here nothing but a “promise”⁸¹, i.e., a wish, which unravels as a “*Gestalt*” which is constitutively “time-determined”⁸². Moreover, in *Research on the Literary Use of Language*, i.e., the course which was taught at the Collège de France in 1953, Merleau-Ponty underlies, as this was evident in the case of painting, that words or *paroles* have no meaning in themselves, but sprout negatively and solely in dialogue, even deferred one, with other subjects, as “germs” or “promises”⁸³ of additional and more promising communication.

However, there is another text that I intend to focus on here, namely the collection of Merleau-Ponty’s lecture notes on Husserl’s text, *The Origin of Geometry*. Here, as Robert pointed out, Merleau-Ponty precisely envisions Husserl as a “writer”⁸⁴, thus sublimating literature beyond the traditional artistic dimension to the heights of the constitution or phenomenologically transcendental institution of ideality, as is the case for Husserlian geometry. In this text, language is supposed to have a “foundational role in the transition” of evidence or intuitions to “essences”⁸⁵, which occurs practically when we consider the establishment of a geo-

⁷⁸ As Robert has pointed out, for Merleau-Ponty, the written word is the medium in which an ideal, timeless [*intemporel*] meaning is made available to all” (F. Robert, *L’Écriture sensible. Proust et Merleau-Ponty*, cit., p. 428). In this sense, writing is not an “accidental” feature; on the contrary, writing is “essential to ideal objectivity” (Id., *Merleau-Ponty, L’origine de la géométrie et la littérature*, cit., p. 149), as we shall see in the case of Husserl’s *The Origin of Geometry*.

⁷⁹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le problème de la parole*, cit., p. 40.

⁸⁰ Again, in *Research on the Literary Use of Language*, Merleau-Ponty admits that literature does not have a “preliminary truth”, as he claims from reading Stendhal (ivi, p. 193) and commenting on its *conquérant* function.

⁸¹ Ivi, pp. 49-50. In the exact text, Merleau-Ponty argues that “ideality is presumptive, on the horizon” (ivi, p. 82; and that the institutional being of a language consists precisely in this constant “call to the word” (ivi, p. 202) that edifies and reinforces its meaning.

⁸² Ivi, p. 57.

⁸³ Id., *Research on the Literary Use of Language*, cit., pp. 229-230.

⁸⁴ F. Robert, *L’Écriture sensible. Proust et Merleau-Ponty*, cit., p. 425.

⁸⁵ A. Dufourcq, *Merleau-Ponty: une ontologie de la chair*, Springer, Dordrecht 2012, p. 48.

metric theorem, given by common observation and the historical expression of its truths. Indeed, geometry, like any scientific discipline understood as a transfinite perpetuation of an instituting practice, as seen in the case of painting, needs its results to be communicated or expressed in writing, in this case, to become evident and be entirely historical, in a sense, i.e., handed down to a "tradition"⁸⁶ that enables its intergenerational and integrative validation and coherent development⁸⁷. In *The Origin of Geometry*, again, Husserl is believed to have opened himself "to the themes of historicity, language, human community and, ultimately, the sensible world"⁸⁸, thus bringing to full fruition the genetic turning point of his doctrine. I think this is why Merleau-Ponty finds this little paper so attractive, so much so that he even partly dedicates a course to it. In his commentary, Merleau-Ponty aligns with Husserl's definition of tradition or historicity as the fundamental opening of an institutional register that may not be closed. Indeed, traditional consequentiality grants the collection of "materials" that corroborate the assembly of an "open chain of researchers"⁸⁹, the latter of which is attentive to its conceptual recovery and enrichment.

In this context, language is crucial because it is a cultural production passivised that becomes mediately usable by a diachronic and endless community of interpreters. For Merleau-Ponty, the latter can recognise themselves as such, in their brotherhood, as in the case of painters, under the "relationship"⁹⁰ of all their activities that are kept in the geometry history record. Writing also contributes to this mutual encroachment, as a possible presentation or re-presentation of what is intuitively no longer offered, in the past of retention, as the possibility of the "permanence of the ideal" content "outside of all conversation" and even most importantly, "when the interlocutors are dead"⁹¹. Here, "the texts", i.e., written

⁸⁶ Indeed, following Ramírez Cobián, for Merleau-Ponty, "ideality" (M.T. Ramírez Cobián, *Le concept de tradition chez Merleau-Ponty. A partir des Notes de cours sur L'origine de la géométrie de Husserl*, cit., p. 347) would be the latter's outcome.

⁸⁷ Once again, it is imperative to remember what an institution is, for Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, and by what it is maintained, i.e., the "uninterrupted communication and knowledge [reconnaissance] of others", in their equally genetic and generative role (A. Dufourcq, "*Sous les masques il n'y a pas de visages*": l'éthique merleau-pontyenne entre problème de l'altérité radicale, foi et institution, cit., p. 359).

⁸⁸ M.T. Ramírez Cobián, *Le concept de tradition chez Merleau-Ponty. A partir des Notes de cours sur L'origine de la géométrie de Husserl*, cit., p. 346.

⁸⁹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology. Including Texts by Edmund Husserl*, cit., p. 21.

⁹⁰ Ivi, p. 23. The French text says "parenté" (Id., *Notes de cours sur L'origine de la géométrie de Husserl. Suivi de Recherches sur la phénoménologie de Merleau-Ponty*, a cura di R. Barbaras, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1998, p. 26).

⁹¹ Ivi, p. 24.

expressions, “convey their sense as an activity which has fallen into obscurity but which is reawoken and which can again be transformed into activity”⁹² by fellow geometricians, and that is never completely lost. Geometry, as history this made, thus corresponds, in Merleau-Ponty’s terms, to a fundamental “presence that is richer than what is visible of it”, as the fires of painters’ suggestive image also proved, in my account, because this transgenerational unity calls forth an ideal continuation granted by a “subterranean communication across time”⁹³. In this sense, current geometrical research “supports itself on the landmark of inherited geometry and its oldest forms”, profiting from a “sense” which is spiritually “undivided between us and the past”⁹⁴. Here, the objectivity of geometry is both the result of the empirical grouping of “the integral series of cumulative advances” of its discoveries and the intrinsic, *lively* “mobility of the geometrical horizon”⁹⁵, i.e., its eventual advancement made available to future geometricians by geometricians of the past.

Indeed, as the most outstanding result of “transcendental intersubjectivity”⁹⁶ Husserl mainly speaks of in the *Cartesian Meditations*, the exercise of the word, its consistent metamorphosis or transformation, here borrowing once again *Signs*’ lexicon, enables the realisation of an “intemporal being of second order”⁹⁷, as well as, in practice, that of an “ideality that no one has ever thought”⁹⁸ in her intimate or immediate loneliness. In conclusion, I will highlight what I think this ultimate possibility of sense generation is founded on.

Conclusion. Introducing the “Museum of the future”⁹⁹. What is Tradition Truly Made of?

As previously stated, for Merleau-Ponty, written expression is the genuine “transporter of meaning”¹⁰⁰, i.e., the one granting its broadcast

⁹² Ivi, p. 25.

⁹³ Ivi, p. 27.

⁹⁴ Ivi, p. 28.

⁹⁵ Ivi, p. 30.

⁹⁶ Ivi, p. 47.

⁹⁷ Ivi, p. 55.

⁹⁸ Ivi, p. 57. I wish to draw attention here to a recent study of mine that has been published, which addresses these specific questions in greater detail: R. Valenti, The Truth “No One Has Ever Thought”: Merleau-Ponty Reader And Inheritor Of Husserl’s Origin Of Geometry, “Geltung. Revista de Estudos das Origens da Filosofia Contemporânea”, 3, n. 2, 2024, pp. 1-35.

⁹⁹ Id., *Signs*, cit., p. 61.

¹⁰⁰ Id., *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology. Including Texts by Edmund Husserl*, cit., p. 64.

and eventual subsequent retrieval. However, as seen in the case of museums and their possibilities, I think it is important to emphasise here the truly *vital* conditions that enable such perspectives to be distinguished rather than the inauthentic, *deadly*, or second-order ones (if possible). In other words, an attempt must be made to determine whether it is the techniques that foster this diachronic and sociogenetic development of the becoming of expression, i.e., painting and writing, in these cases, or whether it is instead the primitive and transcendental community formation that makes use of these channels to make its way through history and find its echo within. In this respect, I do not feel the critics agree entirely when commenting on Merleau-Ponty's quotations on Husserl and his opinion on sense institution. Let me briefly consider their conclusions before offering a possible solution to the theoretical ambiguity I just exposed. Indeed, Dufourcq claims that "institution enables the establishment of community and communication beneath a fundamental discontinuity"¹⁰¹, i.e., that of the multiplicity of durations and interpreters lifespans implicitly considered here. It seems to me that Ramírez Cobián's interpretation aligns with hers when he says that thanks to the institution and the spiritual world to which it trans-temporally comes together, "an objectivity, a culture and a community become possible"¹⁰². This said, Robert's position seems more controversial and challenging to me. If, indeed, in *Merleau-Ponty, L'origine de la géométrie et la littérature*, he argues that, in Merleau-Ponty's commentary of *The Origin of Geometry*, language produces "objectivity" and that, once established, the expression acquires an "intersubjective dimension" it is equally valid that to be right about this fact "a community of language" must also "be assumed"¹⁰³, i.e., a distributed yet epistemologically coherent universe of readers and speakers who recognise a given truth content as trustworthy.

Again, in *Phenomenology and Ontology*, a text from 2005, Robert says that "others are virtually present in every *Stiftung*", i.e., institution, and, most notably for my claim, that "the unity of meaning of geometry, as of all spiritual meaning, rests first of all on the discovery of a common field between thoughts, on a community [*communauté*] of meaning"¹⁰⁴. This

¹⁰¹ A. Dufourcq, "Sous les masques il n'y a pas de visages": l'éthique merleau-pontyenne entre problème de l'altérité radicale, foi et institution, cit., p. 358.

¹⁰² M.T. Ramírez Cobián, *Le concept de tradition chez Merleau-Ponty. A partir des Notes de cours sur L'origine de la géométrie de Husserl*, cit., p. 350. Indeed, Ramírez Cobián's paper precedes by a few years the publication of Dufourcq's, which was reported first only for reasons of exposition.

¹⁰³ F. Robert, *Merleau-Ponty, L'origine de la géométrie et la littérature*, cit., p. 154.

¹⁰⁴ Id., *Phénoménologie et ontologie. Merleau-Ponty lecteur de Husserl et Heidegger*, cit., p. 301.

claim also introduces one last yet fundamental aspect of this theory in my reading. As Ramírez Cobiàn also pointed out, Merleau-Ponty here argues for the distinction between an “empirical” and a “spiritual tradition”¹⁰⁵, which is not subject to the laws of the former, however much in the former it shows itself in its historical becoming. Where the first temporality of tradition flows linearly, according to the succession and diversity of its instituted instants or moments, the second proper to “productive acts” is fundamentally “intensive” and “simultaneous”¹⁰⁶ to the different and maybe temporally distant acts themselves. For Merleau-Ponty, according to Ramírez Cobiàn, the time of true and vital tradition is an “enveloping” and “involving”¹⁰⁷ time, i.e., the one of *chiasm*. Again, as Robert clarifies this time, the ideality that is the always provisional outcome of this spiritual tradition is the “hinge”¹⁰⁸ offered between the sensible and the intelligible, the fragile but unequivocal union between all human productions. Finally, Dufourcq also contemplated text this inner fragility of sense, suggesting, however, that this feature has to be intended as nothing more than the “counterpart of its intersubjective reality and its ability to endure as a tradition”¹⁰⁹ and thus, in its undeniable power and full brightness, just like that of the fires that answer one another in the mists of time.

For this reason, in my opinion, *spirituality* here at stake represents the innermost core of this diachronic and sociogenetic account of meaning of institution and preservation in Merleau-Ponty’s theory of expression. Nevertheless, much remains to be said on this point, and this paper is only the beginning of further research on this issue.

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¹⁰⁵ M.T. Ramírez Cobiàn, *Le concept de tradition chez Merleau-Ponty. A partir des Notes de cours sur L’origine de la géométrie de Husserl*, cit., p. 348.

¹⁰⁶ Ivi, p. 348.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* What Ramírez Cobiàn says in the following is also noteworthy. However, I do not wholly agree with him because I consider this idea of spirituality the most fundamental one when he argues that “it is thanks to tradition that there is a temporality: that is our interpretation” (ivi, p. 34) suggesting institutional continuity, which I, however, rests on other foundations.

¹⁰⁸ F. Robert, *Merleau-Ponty, L’origine de la géométrie et la littérature*, cit., p. 152.

¹⁰⁹ A. Dufourcq, *Merleau-Ponty: une ontologie de la chair*, cit., p. 277.

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